

## UNDERSTANDING MANASSEH

Jeremiah 31:7-14

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Second Sunday after Christmas, January 4, 2009, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

### Focus Text

*For thus says the LORD:*

*Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob,  
and raise shouts for the chief of the nations;  
proclaim, give praise, and say,  
'Save, O LORD, your people,  
the remnant of Israel.'*

*See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north,  
and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,  
among them the blind and the lame,  
those with child and those in labour, together;  
a great company, they shall return here.*

*With weeping they shall come,  
and with consolations I will lead them back,  
I will let them walk by brooks of water,  
in a straight path in which they shall not stumble;  
for I have become a father to Israel,  
and Ephraim is my firstborn.*

*Hear the word of the LORD, O nations,  
and declare it in the coastlands far away;  
say, 'He who scattered Israel will gather him,  
and will keep him as a shepherd a flock.'*  
*For the LORD has ransomed Jacob,  
and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.  
They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion,  
and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD,  
over the grain, the wine, and the oil,  
and over the young of the flock and the herd;  
their life shall become like a watered garden,  
and they shall never languish again.  
Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance,  
and the young men and the old shall be merry.  
I will turn their mourning into joy,  
I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.  
I will give the priests their fill of fatness,  
and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty,  
says the LORD.*

Doug King, one of my friends from the Moveable Feast Preaching Seminar, to which I am headed this evening, has an apt description of what many of us have just come through.

It is a ritual under countless Christmas trees for generations [Doug writes], the counting of the gifts. Siblings jockey around the tree and begin to count out the booty to ascertain who has the most gifts.

Such comparative counting can afflict us when we are children, adults feeling and acting like children, or parents observing the feelings and actions of our own children.

My guess [Doug continues], is that more than one parent has run out to Wal-Mart on Christmas Eve for no other reason than to even out the piles.

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Doug sees such sibling rivalry as symptomatic of something larger.

Most of us at one time or another have looked upon others and wondered why their present pile was larger than ours; wondered why God's blessings appear to be more abundantly obvious in their lives than in ours. Those feelings of exile can creep into any and all of our lives.<sup>1</sup>

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For probably the first time in my life, I am preaching a sermon today about a character who doesn't appear in the text. His name is Manasseh. He is the older of two sons of Joseph by Asenath, a woman given to Joseph by Pharaoh when Joseph was a slave – albeit an important slave – within Pharaoh's court,<sup>2</sup> having been sold into slavery by his own older brothers.<sup>3</sup> When his first child was born, Joseph chose the name Manasseh, which means "Making to forget," because, Joseph said, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house."<sup>4</sup>

The reason Manasseh, the namesake of this sermon, does not appear in the text is that, like several other Biblical characters, Manasseh is bypassed when the blessings of his grandfather Jacob are passed out – bypassed in favor of his younger brother Ephraim.<sup>5</sup> Ephraim's name means "to be fruitful," and when he was born after Manasseh, his father Joseph said, "God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes."<sup>6</sup>

At the outset, Joseph seems to favor neither son: He is grateful to God for leading him to forget his hardships; and he is grateful at having become fruitful in the land where the hardships occur.

The rift between Joseph's two sons – Manasseh and Ephraim – occurs not under their first Christmas tree. Rather, the rivalry breaks out into the open when their father Joseph presents them to his father Jacob, on Jacob's deathbed, for Jacob to bless them. Against established social tradition and against Joseph's wishes, Jacob intentionally blesses the younger son, Ephraim, instead of the older son Manasseh.<sup>7</sup> From this point on, things are never the same between the brothers.

Centuries later, in the passage we read today, the prophet Jeremiah celebrates God's promise of return for the people of Israel from exile. Jeremiah quotes God as saying:

With weeping they shall come,  
And with consolations I will lead them back.  
I will let them walk by brooks of water,  
In a straight path in which they shall not stumble;  
For I have become a father to Israel,  
*And Ephraim is my firstborn.*

God does not even mention Manasseh. It is apparent from this passage that not only did *Jacob* choose to bless the younger Ephraim over the older Manasseh, but also centuries later *God* has given his stamp approval to such choice. Not only has Manasseh lost his place of blessing in the family line, but also God does not even mention his name when he celebrates Israel's return from exile. "Ephraim is my firstborn," says the Lord. With no mention of Manasseh.

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This is not the first time in the Bible the younger child has supplanted the older to become the favored.

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<sup>1</sup> Doug King, paper on Jeremiah 31:7-14 for the Moveable Feast Preaching Seminar, January 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 41:50-52.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 37:12-26.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 41:50-52.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 48:8-20.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 41:50-52.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 48:8-20.

- Ishmael was born first to Abraham, but it was Isaac who became the child of blessing and promise.<sup>8</sup>
- Esau was born ahead of Jacob, but it was Jacob through whom God carried out his promises to Israel.<sup>9</sup>
- Even Joseph himself was eleventh-born of Jacob’s twelve sons, and yet he receives the most ink of any character in the seminal book of Genesis.<sup>10</sup>

It seems that sibling rivalry has been around since the beginning of God’s relationship with God’s people, bringing blessings and curses, creating winners and losers, inflicting resentments and scars, and often bringing reversals of fortune that contradict expectations and traditions of the day.

“Ephraim is my firstborn,” says the Lord. With no mention of Manasseh.

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What gives here?

- Why would God choose one person over another?
- Why would God order things so differently than they normally happen?
- And what are we to do if we are the rejected one, the child with the fewest presents under the tree, the adult who never feels fully a part of the family, the person who always feels left out when the gifts from God are distributed?

There is a lot here, so let me cut to the chase.

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In these early Biblical narratives, those not chosen actually fare pretty well.

- Despite not being the child of promise, Ishmael is “heard” by God, one of the meanings of his name; God blesses him and makes him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he becomes the father of twelve princes; and he becomes a great nation.<sup>11</sup> He is in fact the ancestor of the children of Islam.
- Esau, initially angry at his rejection, resolves to kill his brother Jacob, yet cools down, becomes the father of the people of Edom, has a mountain named after him, reconciles with his brother, and joins Jacob in burying their father Isaac.<sup>12</sup>
- While from Ephraim come two of Israel’s great leaders, Joshua and Samuel, it is from the “not-chosen” Manasseh that comes another of Israel’s great leaders, Gideon. In addition, Manasseh’s descendents become one of the important peoples of the day.<sup>13</sup>

The point is: in these strange tribal stories, which are about individuals and their grievances on the one hand and tribes and their origins on the other hand, even when the source of rivalry seems to be disproportionate treatment from the hand of God, most if not all emerge with plenty.

- Some are truly fortunate; some, less so, but fortunate still.
- Some are indeed chosen, though never for any apparent reason related to their merit.
- Traditions like birth order and inheritance law are often overturned by the God who seems to take delight in doing things his way rather than the way they have always been done.
- In addition, those on the “winning side” – like Isaac and Jacob and Joseph and Ephraim – never have it quite as easy or quite as good as it might appear to those who don’t win this seemingly divine lottery; and those on the “losing” side rarely have anything to be ashamed of in the way of their accomplishments, contributions, and blessings.

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<sup>8</sup> Genesis 16:1-7; 21:8-20.

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 25:19-34; 27:1-14.

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 35:22b-26.

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 16:1-17; 21:8-20.

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 27:41-28:9; 33:1-17; 35:27-29; 36:1-41.

<sup>13</sup> I Chronicles 7:14-19. For Gideon see Judges 6:11-8:35.

Indeed, in the prophecy we read earlier, from Jeremiah, even though Jeremiah does not mention Manasseh, the goodness of God he proclaims is sufficiently plentiful to address the needs of all:

- Geography does not limit who receives God's blessings: *"I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth."*
- Neither does health: *"Among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company they shall return here."*
- Neither does age: *"Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry."*
- Even nature begins to cooperate: *"Their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again."*

Why all this celebrating? Because the Lord promises to all:

*I will turn their mourning into joy,  
I will comfort them,  
And give them gladness for sorrow...  
My people shall be satisfied with their bounty.*

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Doug King concludes:

Feelings of exile can creep into any and all of our lives. But the path has been laid before us and the gathering will continue. The part [in life] for which we are headed is big enough and wild enough for us to dance off every last wounded part of ourselves.

"My people shall be satisfied with their bounty," says the Lord.

So good people of Westminster Presbyterian, as we enter a new year – in our own lives, in our families, in our nation and in our nation's place among the nations of the world – even if we have not received all the blessings we might wish for, even if those close to us have received more, even if we cannot quite figure out why the imbalance from the hand of God, let us remember:

- Ishmael who become the father of a great nation
- Esau who put his anger aside and welcomed his scheming but successful younger brother back into his life
- Joseph who managed to show magnanimity and compassion for his brothers who had tried to do him in
- And Manasseh, who became the father of a tribe which bears his name and of an ancestor named Gideon, one of the most colorful figures in the Bible.

On this day:

- Let us put aside our resentments, as justified as they might be.
- Let us reach out and claim the blessings of God, which, in reality, are plentiful enough to go around for all.
- Let us remember Manasseh, whose name doesn't even appear in our text, and be thankful for all we have received from God, even if our pile of presents under the tree wasn't quite as high as we had hoped.

Amen.