

## Exodus 13:18b-19

### Introduction

Last week, we saw how Moses is picking up the flow of the “story” once again as we move into life “post-Egypt.” Very significantly, chapter thirteen verse seventeen begins, “When Pharaoh let the people go...” So in a way, verses 17-22 are the introduction to this new chapter in Israel’s life. In the first chapter we saw the story of God’s almighty, infinite power to defeat the king of Egypt and call out a people for His own name. In the second chapter, among other things we’re going to see God’s faithfulness to lead, and protect, and feed His people as a shepherd tends his flock.

So here in the introduction to life “post-Egypt” we have three distinct sections that all work together to emphasize a single theme.

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not *lead* [*naha*] them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, “Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt.” But God led the people around by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. (13:17-18a)

And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle. Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones with you from here.” (13:18b-19)

And they moved on from Succoth and encamped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to *lead* [*naha*] them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people. (13:20-22)

By now, you may be able to recognize this as yet another “sandwich.” You can see how in the two bookends, or in the two slices of bread, we have the theme of God *leading* His people as they set out on the way to the land of promise. We saw last week how the first couple of verses emphasize God’s faithfulness in the specific way or road that God chose to lead His people. The “way of the Philistines” would have seemed like the obvious road to take because it was by far the fastest and most direct route to Canaan. But God knew that this route would bring Israel prematurely to the “final” test of their faith, and so He chose to lead them by the long, roundabout way through the desert. God knew that the “way of the wilderness” would give His people the time and the experiences that they needed to grow in their faith – in their understanding of the faithfulness and the infinite sufficiency of Yahweh. And so what we’re going to see in Israel’s experiences “post Egypt” is God’s *patience* with us and His *faithfulness* to us as—in His infinite wisdom—He leads us on the road that comes out in the end at our promised inheritance.

Well, it’s easy to see how the two slices of bread could easily fit together without anything in the middle. Verse 20 naturally follows after the first half of verse 18 as it describes the road that

Israel took and emphasizes again God's leading of His people. So then, what is it that we have in the middle? What is the filling in this sandwich?

**I. Exodus 13:18b** — And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle.

The more literal translation would seem to be something like this: “And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt by fifties,” (cf. YLT; Stuart) although even here there's no real agreement. (cf. Enns; Hamilton; LXX) Most Bible *translations* interpret these words as an emphasis on Israel's being prepared and equipped for battle. (NRSV; NET; NIV; ESV; NCV; cf. Durham's explanation) But it seems that most *commentators* see the emphasis not so much on Israel being *armed* as on Israel going up out of Egypt in orderly, organized manner. (cf. Currid; Stuart; Calvin; Enns; Keil)

The New Living Translation says: “Thus the Israelites left Egypt *like* an army ready for battle.” This translation reminds us of what we've already read in Exodus chapter twelve:

✓ Exodus 12:41, 51 — At the end of 430 years, on that very day, all the *hosts of the LORD* went out from the land of Egypt... on that very day the LORD brought the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt *by their hosts*.

One thing we can all agree on: Whether Israel is actually armed at this point, or not, they are the army of the Lord, and they're going up out of Egypt not “fleeing in disorder like fugitives” (Keil), but rather triumphantly, in battle formation (cf. HCSB; NASB), with Yahweh their Shepherd-King *leading* the way.

Now, to the *human* eye it may not have looked like all that. After all, this is a nation of slaves. This is a people *tiny* in number compared to both the Egyptian nation that they're leaving and the Canaanite nation where they're going. If they are actually armed, they're certainly not a formidable fighting force by any human standards. And yet for all those who have eyes to see—eyes of faith—we're easily able to see, as if looking down from above, all the hosts of Yahweh leaving Egypt like an army ready for battle.

So just this short little sentence is packed with promise, and hope, and triumph, and joy. And so it truly *sets us up* for verse nineteen. As the hosts of Yahweh are going up out of Egypt like an army ready for battle, what is it that they carry up with them? The next words we read are these:

**II. Exodus 13:19a** — Moses took the bones of Joseph with him...

Now maybe bones are not something we generally associate with hope, and triumph, and joy. But then again, maybe they *should be*. *Why is it* that the bones of Joseph are being carried up from Egypt by the triumphant hosts of the Lord? And why should this fact have been so carefully remembered and recorded right here in these verses?

**III. Exodus 13:19** — Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones with you from here.”

We know now why Moses took the bones of Joseph with him — it’s because Joseph made the Israelites promise that they would. Exodus 13:19 quotes almost word for word from the very last words of the book of Genesis:

- ✓ Genesis 50:22–26 — So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father’s house. Joseph lived 110 years... And Joseph said to his brothers, “I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.” Then *Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here.”* So Joseph died, being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.

That’s how the book of Genesis *ends*. So obviously, this whole topic of the bones of Joseph was already a pretty big deal. But we find ourselves still asking, “**Why?**” Why does Joseph care what happens to his bones after he’s been dead for four hundred years?

On the one hand, there’s this: Joseph was giving to his people a physical, and very visible symbol of their hope. Joseph’s preserved and yet unburied remains would be a constant reminder to Israel of God’s promise to one day bring them up out of the land of Egypt and into the land of Canaan. (cf. Heb. 11:22; Calvin) And so now, as the hosts of Israel go up, Moses brings the bones of Joseph with him as a triumphant testimony to the faithfulness of a promise-keeping, covenant-keeping God.

But there has to be more than this. This is all fine and good as an encouragement and a reminder for the generation that actually gets to leave Egypt, or the generation that actually gets to enter the promised land. But what about Joseph? What about the generations of Israelites that live and die in Egypt?

Joseph’s point wasn’t *just* that his bones should be carried up from Egypt, but that they should then be *buried* and laid to rest *in the land of Canaan*. So when the people of Israel finally do take possession of the promised land, we read in Joshua twenty-four:

- ✓ Joshua 24:32 (cf. Acts 7:15-16) — As for the bones of Joseph, which the people of Israel brought up from Egypt, they buried them at Shechem, in the piece of land that Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for a hundred pieces of money.

Joseph isn’t the only one who was concerned that his remains be buried in Canaan. We read in Genesis forty-nine:

- ✓ Genesis 49:29–33 (cf. 49:28-50:14) — Then [Jacob] commanded [his sons] and said to them, “I am to be gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, in the cave that is in the field at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess as a

burying place. There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife. There they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife, and there I buried Leah—the field and the cave that is in it were bought from the Hittites.” When Jacob finished commanding his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed and breathed his last and was gathered to his people.

If you read further in these verses, you’ll find that the burial of Jacob in Canaan is described in great detail and was obviously meant to be remembered by all God’s people for all generations to come. But as we asked of Joseph, so we might ask of Jacob: What’s the big deal about being buried in a land that was never yours? Why does Jacob care what happens to his body after he’s already died? Notice how Jacob mentions the cave “which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess as a burying place.” That’s an obvious reminder of Genesis twenty-three – an entire chapter devoted to Abraham’s purchase of a burial plot for Sarah, his wife. So we read at the beginning of Genesis twenty-three:

- ✓ Genesis 23:2–4 — And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. And Abraham rose up from before his dead and said to the Hittites, “I am a *sojourner and foreigner* among you; give me property among you for a burying place, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.”

See how important it was to Abraham that he have a burial plot in the land of his *sojourning* – the land in which he wandered about as a *foreigner*! And so after twelve verses of negotiating, we come to the conclusion in verses 17-20:

- ✓ Genesis 23:17–20 — So the field of Ephron in Machpelah, which was to the east of Mamre, the field with the cave that was in it and all the trees that were in the field, throughout its whole area, was made over to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the Hittites, before all who went in at the gate of his city. After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah east of Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. The field and the cave that is in it were made over to Abraham as property for a burying place by the Hittites.

What’s the big deal!!! **Why** does all of this matter *so much* to Abraham, and to Jacob, and to Joseph? Well, put yourself in Abraham’s shoes as he listens to this promise from God in Genesis seventeen:

- ✓ Genesis 17:8 (cf. 13:14-15) — I will give *to you* [Abraham] *and* to your offspring after you the land of your *sojournings*, all the land of Canaan, for an *everlasting possession*, and I will be their God.”

What, exactly, are you to make of this? What does this mean *for you*? The land of Abraham’s “*sojournings*” as a wandering foreigner, is to be somehow in the end his “*everlasting possession*.” And remember, this isn’t just any land. This is the land where God will put His temple, and set up His chosen king. This is the land where the holy God will come to dwell among His people. Now put yourself in Isaac’s shoes as God repeats the same promise in Genesis twenty-six:

- ✓ Genesis 26:3 — *Sojourn* in this land, and I will be with you... for *to you* [Isaac] *and* to your offspring I will give all these lands.

The land in which Isaac *sojourns* as a wandering foreigner will one day be *given to him* as his very own inheritance. And now, finally, put yourself in Jacob's shoes as the promise is passed on to him in Genesis twenty-eight:

- ✓ Genesis 28:13 (cf. 35:12; 1 Chron. 16:14-22) — I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give *to you* [Jacob] *and* to your offspring.

Now at this precise moment, Jacob is fleeing from his brother Esau across land and territory that he'll certainly never possess in his lifetime. In fact, Jacob will end up spending the last seventeen years of his life in Egypt, and in Egypt he will die.

So how can we not feel this very strong *tension*? Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all *died* without ever receiving what *they* had been promised. And so also did Joseph, and all of his brothers, and at least the next four generations of the people of Israel. (cf. Gen. 15:12-16) And then, finally, we read in Exodus six, when God is speaking to Moses from the burning bush:

- ✓ Exodus 6:2–4, 6, 8 — I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob... I also established my covenant with them *to give them* the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as *sojourners*... Say therefore to the people of Israel, "I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians... *I will bring you* into the land that I swore to give *to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob*. I will give it *to you* for a possession. I am the LORD."

So what are we all asking? – Is *this* to be the fulfillment of God's promises? Yes! Yes, it is! (cf. Genesis 15) We read in Joshua twenty-one:

- ✓ Joshua 21:43–45 (cf. 23:14) — Thus the LORD gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers. And they took possession of it, and they settled there... Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.

But always, there was this tension: What about Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob? What about Joseph and all his brothers? *How* is the promise fulfilled *for them*? And then there's this, too: What about the fact that what was to be an "*everlasting* inheritance" could only *ever* be a temporary possession because of the constant realities of sin and death? There was a sense in which even those Israelites who would one day inherit the land and live in their own cities and houses were still just temporarily living in the land as sojourners – no different from Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob. Speaking of a day when Israel has inherited the land, we hear God say:

- ✓ Leviticus 25:23 — The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are *strangers* and *sojourners* with me.

And King David prayed with these words after Israel was living in the Promised Land:

- ✓ 1 Chronicles 29:15 — We are *strangers* before you and *sojourners, as all our fathers were*. Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding.

And so we begin to see, as all believing Israelites in every generation *had* to see, that the *ultimate*, and *real* fulfillment of God's promise could only come—*How?* It could only come if their bodies were *resurrected* to live eternally, everlastingly, in the land of promise.

Maybe now we can begin to guess why an entire chapter in Genesis is devoted to the burial of Sarah's body, and why it was so important to Abraham that he purchase a burial plot for his wife in the land of Canaan. Are you seeing, now, why it was so very important to Jacob that his bones be carried up from Egypt to be buried in the land of Canaan? This wasn't superstition. These men were simply expressing their faith and their confidence in the promises that God had made to them. They were saying that they believed God was able to keep His promises to them even *after* they had died. They were confessing that their hope was not to temporarily inherit a destructible land where there was still sin and death, but to inherit everlastingly an indestructible land where there was no death, but only, always the peaceful fruits of righteousness. So listen to what the writer of Hebrews says of Abraham:

- ✓ Hebrews 11:9–10 — By faith [Abraham] went to live in the land of promise, *as in a foreign land*, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

Can you see it? Abraham understood that the land in which he sojourned, the land that his descendants would one day inherit was the shadow, or the shell of the true land of promise that was his hope. And so when Sarah died, Abraham buried her body in the land of promise – *by faith*; “for he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.” Jacob understood that the land in which he sojourned, the land that his descendants would one day inherit was the shadow, or the shell of the true land of promise that was his hope. And so before Jacob died, he commanded that his body should be carried up from Egypt and buried in the land of Canaan – *by faith*; “for he [too] was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

## Conclusion

And what about Joseph? When *Jacob* died, his body was taken immediately to Canaan for burial. But when Joseph died, he ordered that his bones should be carried up to Canaan only when God visited His people to bring them all up together to the land of promise. What was the point?

Can you imagine if you were one of those travelling to Canaan, assigned the task of carrying the coffin in which were the bones of Joseph? As you carry on the road to the promised land the bones of Joseph, you're reminded—vividly—that God's promise was for *Joseph*, too. And so as you carry on the road to the promised land the bones of Joseph, you understand that the land you're going up to inherit *now* is but a shadow and a symbol of the heavenly country where God is leading all His children. You understand that one day, the very bones that you're carrying will be raised to life, and Joseph himself will live forever, and ever, and ever in the land that he had been looking for all his life. The writer of Hebrews says:

- ✓ Hebrews 11:13–16 — These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were *strangers* and *exiles* on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland... they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

If this was the hope of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and Joseph, and all the believing saints of the Old Testament, *how much more* should it be the hope of all of us who live now after Jesus has already been raised from the dead – “the *firstfruits*,” as Paul says, “of [all] those who have fallen asleep”? (1 Cor. 15:20) Why didn’t Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and Joseph receive in their lifetime what they had been promised? Why didn’t *any* of the saints of the Old Testament receive in their lifetime what they had been promised? The writer of Hebrews answers:

- ✓ Hebrews 11:39–40 — And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better *for us*, that apart *from us* they should not be made perfect.

You see, now that Christ has come, the shadow and the shell of the destructible land of Canaan has been laid aside, and now *together with* Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and Joseph, and all the believing saints of the Old Testament, we are looking for the promised land of a new heavens and a new earth in which there’s only righteousness, and where we will all live everlastingly in the presence of our God. That’s the destination. That’s what all the hosts of Yahweh were reminded of as they were leaving Egypt like an army ready for battle, carrying up with them the bones of Joseph – now to be buried in the land of Canaan, *by faith*.

What is the *destination*? Where does the road *lead*? Where is our *home*? What is the city that we spend all our lives looking for? May the simple faith of Joseph, also be *our* faith. May the land and the country that Joseph was looking for also be our hope as we travel on the way.

The bones of Joseph are meant to remind us that in this life *all of us* are sojourners and foreigners – we’re all strangers and exiles on the earth. We’re *all* waiting for the resurrection when God will keep the promise that He first made to Abraham so long ago. So Peter writes:

- ✓ 1 Peter 2:11–12 — Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

And the writer of Hebrews concludes:

- ✓ Hebrews 13:13–14 — Therefore let us go to [Jesus] outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.

Are you looking each day for the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God? Are you living each day as a sojourner that God is faithfully leading to the land of promise?