

When God Says, “However . . .”

By James McAllister

A curious event in Genesis 48 demonstrates how God’s work in us is never really over.

Joseph was about 60 years old, and his father, Jacob, was dying. As was the custom, Jacob called for Joseph’s two sons so he could bestow the patriarchal blessing upon them. Joseph carefully placed the young men in front of his father expecting him to simply extend his right hand to the elder son and impart the blessings and prerogatives of the firstborn. But that’s not what happened.

Jacob purposely crossed his arms in order to lay his right hand upon the younger boy. This unexpected turn of events greatly displeased Joseph.

Joseph said to his father, “Not so, my father, for this one is the firstborn. Place your right hand on his head” (Genesis 48:18).

As Joseph learned, God’s ways and thoughts are not naturally aligned with ours. He learned that it is God’s prerogative to set one up and put another down. And He is under no obligation to explain why.

When requested to correct his “mistake,” Jacob did not falter. Once again—even as He had done years before with Jacob himself (choosing him over his older twin, Esau) and then with Joseph (placing him as ruler over his older brothers)—God promoted a younger son above an elder brother.

But his father refused and said, “I know, my son, I know; he also shall become a people and he also shall be great. However . . .” (Genesis 48:19).

However. Upon the turn of that dreaded word our perceptions of hopes and dreams and fortunes tend to rise and fall. And we sometimes equate “however” to second best. But it need not be.

Over the years, I have earnestly cried out to God with my longings for health and housing and relationships and finances. I have prayed for opportunities and wisdom and calm circumstances and relief from difficult trials. And I’ve repeatedly heard the reply, “I know, my son, I know. However. . .”

When our son was small, I often took his hand when I sensed he was in danger of impulsively stepping into traffic. If he pulled away and continued his own course, I could do nothing. But if he let me lead him with my “however,” even though the route might seem unnecessarily long, he would be safe.

Someone once said that the path of least resistance makes both men

and rivers run crooked. Like every set of parents I’ve known, we prayed for the birth of a healthy baby. But God said “however” and gave us a child with multiple, extensive physical and mental limitations. Then she died unexpectedly at age 22. Nevertheless, a backward glance of 34 years confirms that God’s “however” led us down a far better path than we would have chosen for ourselves.

Though I still pour out to God a steady flow of longings and desires punctuated with urgency, I expect that He will insert “however” in the proper places to work the best for me in the end.

I TOLD HIM MY LONGING

I told Him my longing for pleasant green pastures,
For stillness of waters restoring my soul.
He said, “I had rather you learn how the Shepherd
Can lead you through turmoil and maintain control.”

I told Him my longing for freedom from trouble,
For days full of sunshine and nights without storm.
He said, “I had rather you taste of affliction
And learn how I comfort the weary and worn.”

I told Him my longing for family and friendships,
For those who would lift me whenever I’m low.
He said, “I had rather you learn to be lonely,
Discovering Friendship that few ever know.”

I told Him my longing for heavenly treasures,
All gained without conflict and struggle and strife.
He said, “I had rather you learn of endurance
And win crowns of glory and honor and life.”

Though my thoughts aren’t His thoughts,
And His thoughts aren’t mine,
Delighting in Him will produce the sublime:
By changing my thoughts both in whole and in part,
He’s able to give me—abundantly give me—
He’s able to give the desires of my heart.