

The Life of Joseph

(24) Death and Burial: Jacob and Joseph

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This evening we will consider the death and burial of both Jacob and Joseph. I'm taking them together because the meaning is the same for both. These deaths and burials are recorded because they contribute to the overall message of the book of Genesis. In particular they are about faith in the promise of God to give the land of Canaan to the descendants of Abraham. Both Jacob and Joseph request that they be buried in the promised land – Jacob shortly after his death – Joseph, after Israel as a whole returns to the promised land. The desire to be buried in the promised land is an expression of faith that God would keep his promise and give that land to the offspring of Abraham.

These passages give us some important perspectives on death and on funerals. There is the fact of death in the first place. The book of Genesis has given us the biblical explanation for the reality of death. God had told Adam and Eve that if they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they would surely die. They did eat, and while they did not die immediately, they did die eventually and so has every other person who has ever lived with the exception of Enoch and Elijah who were both taken into heaven while they were still alive. But everyone else dies. We must all die. We live in the shadow of death. Like Jacob and like Joseph we will come to the end of our lives here on earth.

There is something very sad about that. Death is part of the curse upon sin. Death is the greatest negative of life. Life is precious and the thought that it is temporary is a painful one. It is common in our world to avoid facing up to death and to avoid facing the terrible sadness of death when it comes. People tend not to think of the fact that they will one-day die, and they tend not to face the awfulness of death when they lose loved ones. Of course, they cannot avoid it altogether, but many today prefer to celebrate the life that has ended rather than face the terrible loss that death is.

The biblical perspective is different. There is nothing wrong with celebrating the life that had ended and there is a Christian way to do that, but the Bible would also have us face the reality of the horrible nature of death. We know that because the Bible has lots of teaching about death. The Bible is about facing reality even when that reality is painful. And the Bible would have us find comfort in the face of death not by avoiding the horror that death is but by celebrating the defeat of death by our Lord Jesus Christ.

But death is awful. It is a greatest enemy of all. We were not created to die and so there is something about it that is not natural. It is the result of sin. And it causes terrible loss in the lives of loved ones who remain behind. A funeral is about grieving. It is about facing the terrible reality of death. For Christians there is hope in the face of death, but it there is an important place for sorrow.

Well Jacob knew that he was dying. He had called his sons to his bedside and had blessed them “blessing each with the blessing suitable to him” (Genesis 49:28). And then he said to them, “I am to be gathered to my people....” Jacob is saying that he will be joining his ancestors in death. It is not known for certain what this phrase means, but it probably has to do with the practice of being buried with family members who have died. So, it is just a way of speaking about death - although it does suggest a greater sense of family identity than we are used to. In our more individualistic age we do not think in terms of being with our ancestors in death.

What Jacob goes on to ask, however, is very significant. He asks to be buried in a specific place in Canaan. The next verses give the reason that this place is significant. “[B]ury 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.”

What is remarkable here is all the detail that Jacob gives and that Moses records. That is a signal that this burial plot in Canaan and the desire of

Jacob to be buried there is very significant for the message of the book of Genesis.

God had promised Abraham that he would give the land of Canaan to his offspring. In Genesis 12:7 we read, "Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.'" Abraham himself never owned much of the land of Canaan – just this burial plot that he bought when his wife, Sarah died. The book of Genesis devotes a whole chapter, chapter 23, to describe how Abraham bought this piece of land as a burial site. In 23:4, Abraham says to the Hittites, "I am a sojourner and foreigner among you..." and he asks if he can buy a small property to bury his wife Sarah. We are told that the Hittites offer to allow Abraham to bury his dead in one of their tombs, but Abraham insists on buying a burial site for whatever it was worth. Abraham pays 400 shekels of silver. And so, we read in 23:17, "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 the city."

Clearly this is significant for Moses who is the author of Genesis. God promises the land of Canaan to Abraham. Abraham describes himself as a sojourner and a foreigner in Canaan. And then Moses makes a big deal of the fact that Abraham buys this burial site when his wife Sarah dies. This is what Abraham possesses of the land which God had promised to his offspring. He is a sojourner and a foreigner in the land and he possesses a burial site. And then when Abraham died and was buried, Moses retells the story of how Abraham bought that piece of land from the Hittites. And now when Jacob is dying he tells the whole story again and mentions who all have been buried there and commands that he be buried there as well. This burial site is an important part of the story that Moses is telling.

This desire of Jacob to be buried in the land of Canaan is an expression of his faith that God would one-day fulfill the promise that had he made to Abraham that his offspring would possess the land of Canaan. So far, the family only possessed the burial plot that Abraham had purchased from the Hittites. But that burial plot was seen as the beginning of God's

fulfillment of his promise to give the land of Canaan to the seed of Abraham. And it is in the light of the expectation that God would one day fulfill that promise that Jacob commanded his sons to bury him in that specific place in the land of Canaan.

And the same is the case for Joseph although he says nothing about this burial plot in Canaan. He also asked his surviving relatives to bury him in the land of Canaan – only in his case he asked that his bones be carried there when God brought the people of Israel back to the land of Canaan. His words are recorded in Genesis 50:25, “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 is expressing faith that God will one-day bring the offspring of Jacob back to the promised land.

Now it is interesting to consider the faith of these two men as they died. Clearly, they believed that God was going to keep his promise to give the land of Canaan to the descendants of Abraham in the line of Isaac and Jacob. They wanted to be buried in Canaan as an expression of their faith that God would keep that promise. But did they believe more than that? Did they have any idea of the ultimate significance of the promised land as a type of life with God in eternity? Did they have any hope that they themselves would live beyond death and participate in life with God beyond the grave?

Clearly this is not explicit in this passage and the OT as a whole does not have full-blown teaching concerning the resurrection of the body like we have in the NT. The clarity concerning the future resurrection comes with the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. But I think that we can legitimately believe that this desire on the part of Jacob and Joseph to be buried in Canaan implies some kind of expectation that they would participate in the fulfillment of God’s promises. Their desire to be buried in Canaan expressed faith that God was going to fulfill the promises made to Abraham and that God was going to work through the offspring of Abraham to bless all the nations. They also would have known of God’s promise to crush the head of the serpent by means of the seed of the woman. I think it is fair to say that the desire of Jacob and Joseph to be buried in Canaan expressed a hope that they

themselves would participate in the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises.

That is the perspective of the writer of the letter to the Hebrews in the NT in chapter 11. That wonderful passage describes the faith and the hope of the OT believers. It speaks of the faith of Jacob and the faith of Joseph in verses 21-22. ²¹"By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. ²²By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones." Now these verses speak of the faith of Jacob and Joseph concerning the future for Israel in the promised land. But in earlier verses, the chapter speaks of the patriarchs together and it says of them: Hebrews 11:13-16, ¹³"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. ¹⁴For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But as it is, 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."

So, it is sound biblical interpretation to understand the desire of Jacob and Joseph to be buried in the promised land as an expression of faith that God would keep his promises and that that faith would have included some kind of hope that they would participate in the fulfillment of those promises. There is evidence in other passages in the OT that the OT saints had some kind of expectation of life beyond the grave. For instance, we have Job 19:25-26 where Job says, "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God...."

This is implied in the very idea of hope. Jacob and Joseph are expressing hope for the future by requiring that their bodies will be buried in Canaan. But for that hope to really be hope it must have included some expectation that God is going to undo what Adam and Eve did by their fall into sin. If there is no final defeat of sin and the curse – if these is no

defeat of death, there can not be much hope for the future. The hope that the patriarchs had for the fulfillment of God's promises had to include something greater than a this-worldly kingdom of Israel in the promised land. If death is truly the end, how can there be any hope concerning the future.

It is significant that when the land of Canaan is described as a land flowing with milk and honey, that is bringing to mind a memory of the garden of Eden and that implies a hope that goes beyond simply a this-worldly kingdom. Describing the promised land in language that recalls the garden of Eden implies that the promises of God are ultimately about the defeat of sin and the renewal of all things.

This becomes more clear as the history of salvation unfolds in the Bible, but there is no doubt that the patriarchs died with the hope that in some way God was going to undo the curse of sin and that they would participate in the ultimate fulfillment of the promises.

The main application for us, of course, is that, if we are followers of Jesus Christ, we have this hope as we face the prospect of our own deaths. None of us knows when we will die. For some of us it is years in the future. For others of us the time is much shorter. But for all of us it is part of our future. We will all die. But the whole Bible is about a glorious future for the people of God and a glorious place where believers will spend eternity with God. Jacob and Joseph had only a dim awareness of a hope beyond the grave. We have a much better understanding because of the resurrection of Jesus and the New Testament revelation of what God is working towards in the history of his saving purposes. We do not have a lot of detail, but we do have a very clear outline of what God is working towards: a world without sin – a sinless life in the presence of God in a renewed creation. We know enough to have a very solid hope for our future beyond death.

Jacob and Joseph died expressing their faith in the promises of God. They believed in what God had promised for their offspring beyond their own lives. But they also believed that they would participate in the ultimate fulfillment of those promises. We have this same hope although we have a clearer picture of it than they did. This hope is the most precious thing in the world. Think of this in the light of what Paul

wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:32: “If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.’ Without the resurrection, life is meaningless – eating and drinking and then death. If death is the end, life is miserable, short and futile.

But Jesus has conquered sin and therefore also death. The curse has been overturned. The future is the resurrection of our bodies in a renewed creation where we will delight in the presence of God forever. There is a sense in which we all live in the shadow of death. But there is an even more profound sense in which the followers of Jesus live in the light of the wonderful future that is God’s goal for his creation. Because of that death takes on a different meaning. Apart from the gospel, death can only bring resignation and despair. If death is the end – we descend into nothingness and that is the ultimate hopelessness. But for believers, while death is still an enemy, the sting has been removed so that it can be faced with hope. That is what we see in the deaths of Jacob and Joseph. And that is how we may face death as well.

The Heidelberg Catechism expresses this hope in Q/A 42. “Q. Since Christ has died for us, why do we still have to die? A. Our death does not pay the debt of our sins. Rather, it puts an end to our sinning and is our entrance into eternal life.”

So, the desire expressed by both Jacob and Joseph at the time of their death expressed their faith that God would keep the promises that he had made to Abraham and reaffirmed various times in the years that followed. Their instructions concerning the final resting place of their bodies also expressed a hope that they would participate in the ultimate fulfillment of the promises of God. Their hope expressed at the time of their deaths is part of the biblical story of hope beyond this life which is ultimately the good news that Jesus Christ has conquered death. We have here an early hint of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the victory of God over death.

This is one of the ways the hope of the gospel is presented in the New Testament especially in the Gospel according to John. “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” That is what is promised to believers in the gospel – eternal life. Eternal life is possible because death had

been overcome by Jesus on the cross and through his resurrection from the dead. Mankind has always had a longing for eternal life. And it has always been common for people to have some kind of hope for life beyond the grave. Really the only people who deny this are atheists and materialists that believe that there nothing besides the material world. But most people have lived with the hope that this life is not the end of existence – that death is not the end.

The message of the Bible is a revelation from God that brings clarity and certainty to our knowledge of the afterlife. The reason that most people believe in some sort of an afterlife is that God has created us with the innate knowledge that there is more to this life than this life.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God “has put eternity into man’s heart....”

That is why most people have always believed in life beyond the grave. But in the Bible, we have the sure word from God concerning what lies beyond our earthly lives. And it is both similar and very different from most people’s expectations. It is similar in that the Bible speaks of life beyond this life. But it is different in that the Bible makes it clear that many people will not go to a better place when they die, but will suffer the torments of hell. But still the message of the Bible is good news because God has provided a way through Jesus Christ to live with a certain hope of eternal life. The hope of eternal life in Jesus is the gospel message that is to be proclaimed to the ends of the earth. It is a call to follow Jesus. It is a call to repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ. It is a called to renewal of life by the power of the Holy Spirit. And it comes with the promise that through faith in Jesus Christ we receive eternal life.

There are a few more things to notice from the requests of Jacob and Joseph concerning the final resting place of their bodies. The first has more to do with Jacob than with Joseph. It is really fascinating how specific Jacob is about where he wants to be buried and how much attention that Moses gives to that little plot of land in the book of Genesis. I’ve already reviewed how Moses gives a whole chapter to describe how Abraham bought that burial plot and how in connection with Abraham’s death and burial the whole story is rehearsed again and once again in the account of the death and burial of Jacob. The point of all this is that God had promised the whole land to the descendants of

Abraham, but during the time of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the family actually possessed only a small part of that land. The stress is on the fact that they were strangers and pilgrims in the land and that all that they actually owned was this burial plot.

But clearly owning that little piece of the land of Canaan was very significant. That is what I find so fascinating about this. It meant a lot to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and to Moses in telling their story that the patriarchs actually owned a little piece of Canaan – a place to be buried. God had promised the whole land to their descendant, but during the story described in Genesis, Abraham and his descendants owned a little piece of the land which was really an initial fulfillment of the promise that would later be fulfilled in its fullness.

But that initial fulfillment was very important to them and it was the focus of their faith that God would one-day fulfill the promise of the land in its fullness.

What is so wonderful about this for us is that God has given us similar encouragements that he will one-day fulfill his promises to us in their fullness. We live with the promise from God that he is going to raise us from the dead and God has given us an initial fulfillment of that promise in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul speaks of the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the first-fruits of the resurrection of his people. In verse 20, he writes, “Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” And in verses 22-23 he writes “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.”

For Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that little burial plot that they owned in Canaan was the firstfruits of the fullness of God’s promise which would be fulfilled in the future and that partial fulfillment was a great encouragement for their faith that God would eventually follow through and bring about the fullness of what he had promised. And this is what the resurrection of Jesus is for us. The fullness of the fulfillment of the promise that God made to Abraham is the renewal of the whole creation. And the firstfruits of the fulfillment of that promise for us is

the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrection of Jesus is the firstfruits of our bodily resurrection; but it is more than that. It is the firstfruits of the renewal of all things – the first fruits of the new creation.

The resurrection of Jesus is the beginning of the new creation. Just as the fall of man resulted in the curse upon the whole creation, so the renewal of man in Jesus Christ will result in the renewal of the whole creation. The resurrection of Jesus is the firstfruits of that.

Jacob wanted to be buried in that plot of land because it represented the firstfruits of the fulfillment of the promise. We are buried in Christ. Listen to what the shorter Catechism says concerning the benefits that believers receive from Christ at death. “The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness and immediately pass into glory and their bodies, being still united to Christ, rest in the graves until the resurrection.” 1 Thessalonians 4:16 says, “[T]he dead **in Christ** will rise first.”

Jacob was buried in the little piece of the promised land that was the firstfruits of the promise that would later be fulfilled in all its fullness. When we die we die in the resurrected Christ and our bodies remain in him until the resurrection. And so we can die in hope with our faith strengthened by the firstfruits of our resurrection and by the firstfruits of the complete fulfillment of the promises of God which is Jesus Christ risen from the dead.

What the little burial plot was for Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the risen Lord Jesus is for us. And the wonderful thing is that just as they were buried in it, so we are buried in him.