

The Life of Joseph

(25) The Burial of Jacob (2)

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Last week we looked at the death and burial of both Jacob and Joseph, but I did not cover everything that is recorded about the burial of Jacob. And since the section that I did not cover has some important themes in it, I figured it was worthy of a sermon all on its own. So, this evening we will consider what we are told in the first 14 verses of Genesis chapter 50 – mostly. I will be reaching back a little bit into the last part of chapter 49.

The overall theme of the whole section dealing with the death and burial of Jacob is death in the light of the hope that comes from God's promises. This is also a major theme in the Bible. The Bible tells us about the entrance of death in the world at the beginning of the story it tells, and the rest of the Bible is about how God overcomes death and so, the people who are on God's side in the story die in hope because of what God has done and has promised yet to do. And so, this is an important theme in our lives as well. We all are heading towards death. But in the light of the biblical story, we who believe, can live hopefully in the light of our coming demise. And it is that hope that makes life worth living.

I want to begin by pointing out a few more things about Jacob's concerns and priorities as he approached his death. We saw last time that his concern to be buried in that specific plot of land in Canaan was an expression of his faith in the promise that God was going to give the land of Canaan to the offspring of Abraham. We saw that his hope included some kind of expectation that he would participate in the ultimate fulfillment of that promise even though that hope would have been quite indistinct at this stage of the history of salvation.

There are a few more fruitful observations that we can make about Jacob's concerns and his priorities as he approached his death. It is significant that Jacob insisted on being buried in the plot of land that

was the firstfruits of the fulfillment of God's promises rather than being buried next to Rachel, the woman he had loved more than any other woman. Rachel had been Jacob's true love. She was the one he had loved from the moment he laid eyes on her. She is the one he had worked 14 years to be able to marry. She had been the most important person in his world.

But Jacob did not choose to be buried next to Rachel who was buried somewhere in the vicinity of Bethlehem and not in the burial plot that Abraham had purchased. Given his love for Rachel you might have expected Jacob to ask to be buried next to Rachel, but he chose instead to be buried next to Leah in the burial plot that was the beginning of the fulfillment of the promise of God. This is significant because it shows that, as Jacob was dying, it was more important for him to be buried in the place that represented God's promise than to be buried next to the women who had meant more to him than another other person in the world.

This speaks to the fact that our relationship with God is more important than our relationship with the most beloved people in our lives. Jacob had matured as a child of God to the point where he understood that. The fact that Jacob chose to be buried in the place that represented the future with God rather than in the place that represented his love for Rachel shows that Jacob, approaching death, was looking ahead to the fulfillment of God's promises rather than backward to his love for Rachel.

There is an important lesson here about dying well. The lesson is not that, if we have the opportunity to think of these things when we are dying, we should not be thinking about our loved ones and treasuring the wonderful relationships we have had. It is not saying that if we are dying we should not dread the separation from the love of our life or other loved ones who have been so precious to us. The loved ones that God has given us are justly precious to us and thinking of them while dying is a reflection of how precious they are.

But Jacob's insistence on being buried in the place associated with the future with God rather than his past with Rachel shows us that Jacob's

ultimate treasure was the God of the promise rather than the precious loved ones in this life.

Jesus teaches that we are to love him more than our precious family members. In Luke 14:26 he says, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." Jesus does not mean that we are to literally hate our wives or our husbands or our parents or our siblings. This was a Jewish way of saying that we are to love Jesus more than anyone else in our lives. In another place Jesus tells us that we are to love God with all our heart and soul and mind (Matthew 22:37).

It is this principle that must be reflected in our dying and, if in our dying, also in our living. So, a good death in biblical perspective is death where the focus is on the future with God rather than the past with our loved ones. And again, I do not mean that we should not treasure our loved ones to the very end, but Jacob's example in the light of the rest of the Bible is telling us that the greatest preoccupation at death, for God's people, should be God's promises concerning the future. And if that is how we should die, it is also how we should live.

The NT describes the people of God looking forward to the fulfillment of God's promises and viewing the blessings of life in this world as temporary and secondary. The clearest example of this is what Paul writes in Philippians 2. He says in verse 21 of that chapter, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." In verse 23 of the same chapter he says, "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better." There are other examples of this attitude in the NT. Hebrews 11 says that the patriarchs "acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth" and that "they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one."

So, Jacob's desire to be buried in the burial plot that represented the future with the God of the promise rather than his past with his beloved Rachel is an example for us of that attitude that we all should have towards our future in the presence of God. We are to hold on to the most precious blessings of this life loosely, realizing that they are temporary and that what awaits us beyond this life is much more precious.

There is another point to be made on the basis of Jacob's instructions for his burial. This desire to be buried in Canaan and particularly in that place that represented the promise of God for the future was also a witness to his children and grandchildren, as well as the Egyptians, to the promise that God made to Israel. Jacob wanted his burial to witness to the great promises that God had made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and to their offspring. Jacob's instructions concerning the burial of his body spoke of his desire that his burial would focus the attention of those left behind on God and the gospel. For the promises that drive the story of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are the gospel as it had been revealed up to that time.

This should shape our thinking about Christian funerals and about our desires concerning our own funerals. For many of us, our funerals are not imminent as far as we know. For others they are not that far off. But whether they will be soon or a long way down the road, it's worth thinking about what our desires should be concerning our own funerals.

A funeral can be all about the person who has died. And for the funeral of a non-believer there is not much else that it can be about. But Christians should want their funeral to be about the hope of the gospel in the face of death. There is a place for thanksgiving for the life that is now over. But if our goal in life must be to glorify God and not ourselves, our goal in death should be the same. And if our life should witness to the gospel, our death should do the same. Jacob gives us a good example. His desire to be buried in that burial plot that represented God's promise was a powerful witness to all who witnessed his burial, or even heard about it, of the good news of God's promises for God's people of a future with God. I like to think of what Hebrews 11:4 says about Abel in connection with funerals of Christians. "And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks." That is what Christians should sense at the funeral of a fellow believer.

Jacob, by the way that he planned his funeral, was still speaking after he had died. And in this he is a powerful example for us.

One more point on this whole area of death and dying and funerals that we can make from this account of Jacob's death and burial is the legitimacy of grieving. There was an awful lot of grieving and weeping

that went on when Jacob died and for weeks afterward. We read in 50:1 that Joseph fell on his father's face and wept over him and kissed him." We are told in verse 3 that the Egyptians wept for seventy days. During the journey to Canaan, the procession stopped for a week and verse 10 tells us that "they lamented there with a very great and grievous lamentation."

Now all this weeping happened in spite of the hope that is such a prominent part of the story. Jacob testified, by his funeral arrangements, of his hope in the promises of God that were real and meaningful in spite of the reality of death. There was some expectation of a future for Jacob with God. There was a lot of hope surrounding the dying and burial of Jacob and rightly so. And yet there was a lot of weeping as well.

One of the key gospel truths is that Jesus has overcome death and that for the Christian physical death is the passageway to glory. When we lose loved-ones who die in the Lord, we are certain that they are in a better place. Unlike the world which often believes this without a basis for their hope, the Christian hope is based on the sure Word of the living God. It is a well-founded certainty. For the person who has died, death is not a bad thing. Believers who have died and are with the Lord are not wishing they were back on earth. Because of Jesus' triumph over death, there are a lot of positives associated with the death of a believer.

And yet the Bible gives us permission to grieve. This passage is one of the places that it does so. But there are others. The most important is the example of Jesus. We all know this because we all know the shortest verse in the Bible, don't we? John 11:35, "Jesus wept." Every covenant child who has reached the age of discretion knows the shortest verse in the Bible. There is also Ecclesiastes 3:4 which tells us that there is "a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance." The Bible gives us permission to grieve.

Death is still a great trial for those who are left behind. The greatest pain and loss that most of us ever experience is the death of a loved one. The biblical hope for a Christian who has died is unspeakably comforting, but God does not expect us to focus on that hope to the

exclusion of our loss. There is comfort for believers who have lost believing loved ones. But that comfort does not swallow up the grief.

What the Bible does is to instruct us to grieve, but to grieve differently from the world. Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13 tells us “not [to] grieve as others do who have no hope.” There is a huge difference between grieving in despair and grieving in hope. Part of the reason that Christians grieve in hope when believing relatives die is that they know that their loved ones are with the Lord. But there is another reason as well and that is that our most important relationship of all is not threatened by death and that is our relationship with God. Without minimizing the pain of losing a loved one, it is a great comfort that we can never lose the LOVED ONE of all loved ones – the Lord himself. The Bible give us permission to grieve, but we are called “not [to] grieve as others who have no hope.”

OK. I want now to deal with what is the main point of Genesis 50:1-14, the story of the burial of Jacob. The observations I have made so far, are legitimate observations and they line up with the thrust of the message of Genesis and the message of the Bible. But the focus in this part of the story is the royal treatment that the body of Jacob receives by the Egyptians.

The treatment of Jacob’s body and the involvement of the Egyptians tells us that Jacob is treated like a king in death. This is not so much the embalming. Let me first say something about that. Egyptian Pharaohs were embalmed when they died, but that embalming was closely connected with the pagan religions of the Egyptians. Verse 2 shows us how Joseph managed to have Jacob’s body embalmed without all the pagan religious aspects that went with it. Embalming was normally done by priests. Joseph had his own physicians embalm his father. That would result in the preservation of Jacob’s body, so it could be transported to Canaan, without the Egyptian religious rites that normally accompanied embalming.

But it is very significant that the rest of the activities surrounding Jacob’s death and burial were similar to the honor shown to a Pharaoh upon his death. Verse 3 says that “the Egyptians wept for him seventy days.” Apparently, the time of weeping for a Pharaoh was seventy-two days.

So, the morning for Jacob by the Egyptians was almost as long as the traditional period of mourning for a Pharaoh.

Then you have the large number of Egyptians who were part of the funeral procession that travelled all the way to Canaan. Verse 7 says, "So Joseph went up to bury his father. With him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his household, and all the elders of the land of Egypt." Verse 9 says, "And there went up with him both chariots and horsemen. It was a very great company."

The body of Jacob was treated like the body of a king. This is a royal funeral. Jacob is being honored as a king by the Egyptians. No doubt this had something to do with the status of Joseph in Egypt. But there is a much more important reason that has to do with God's plan concerning the status of his people vis-a-vis the nations. We have noticed a number of times how the book of Genesis is largely about the promises that God makes to Abraham and the way in which those promises begin to be fulfilled in the first three generations of the people of the promise. We saw that last week with respect to the promise that Abraham's offspring would inherit the land of Canaan. That promise begins to be fulfilled with the possession of that burial plot in Canaan.

Here we have something similar in the royal treatment that Jacob's body receives from the Egyptians. It was part of God's promise to Abram that his offspring would be honored by the nations. Back in Genesis 12:2, God had promised to Abram, "And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." In the honor shown to Jacob in death we have an initial fulfillment of that promise to make Abram's name great and it serves as a foreshadowing of what is to come for the people that God has chosen for his own. God is going to make them a great nation and their name will be great.

Now this promise is meaningful in the light of the fact that the people of God receive a lot of dishonor from the nations in the Bible and in the history beyond the Bible. A few hundred years after Jacob's death, his offspring would end up being slaves in Egypt. There are some periods between Moses and Solomon in which the people of Israel are honored. Then there is the exile in which they are again dishonored. And then in

the NT you have persecution as an important part of the experience of God's people. Sometimes it has been because of their unfaithfulness. Sometimes because of their faithfulness. But the people of the promise have known a great deal of hatred and contempt and scorn from the world.

This is certainly the case with present day Christians. There is the huge reality of persecution in the world today. And while we in the West do not face that result of hatred, we certainly do experience the scorn and contempt of the world. One recent example is the remark made by the governor general of Canada expressing scorn for those who believe that life comes from God, which was seconded by our prime minister who applauded her support for "science and the truth." It used to be that there was a certain respectability that went with identifying as a Christian. That is no longer the case.

But Jacob's royal funeral is a foreshadowing of what God has promised to his people. He will make their name great. In Deuteronomy 26:19, Moses told that people of Israel that if they kept God's commands, "he will set you in praise and in fame and in honor high above all nations that he has made." In Zephaniah 3:20, God promises his people in exile, "'At that time I will bring you in, at the time when I gather you together; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the people of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes,' says the LORD."

Now this is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ. In Philippians 2 Paul speaks of a day when "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Jesus, of course, is the ultimate offspring of Abraham and the great fulfillment of God's promise to make the name of the seed of Abraham great will be the coming glorification of our Lord Jesus Christ. The honor shown to Jacob in death by the Egyptians is a foreshadowing of the honor that will one day be shown to the greatest son of Jacob our Lord Jesus Christ.

But the honor of Christ will be shared by the people of Christ. That is a wonderful part of the biblical teaching concerning the glorification of Christ and the glorification of God as well. There is a relationship between the glorification of God and the glorification of the people of

God. One of the things that we are promised in the gospel is that we will one-day share in the glory of Christ which is the glory of God. In Romans 8:17 we are told that if we suffer with Christ we will also be glorified with him. Romans 2:10 speaks of “glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek.” In Revelation 2:21, Jesus says, “The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.”

So, you see how the honor shown to Jacob by the Egyptians as they buried him with royal honors is an early fulfillment and thus a foreshadowing of the honor that God has promised first of all to the ultimate Son of Jacob which is Jesus, but also through him to all the people of God.

Now this promise is also fulfilled in a penultimate way in the inclusion of the Gentiles in the Christian church. The Gentiles coming to Jesus Christ for salvation and to the Christian church for belonging and nurture is a fulfillment of this promise that the nations would one-day show honor to the people of God. Isaiah speaks of a day when “many peoples shall come and say: ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths’” (Isaiah 2:3).

This is in fulfillment of God’s promise to make the name of his people great. When unbelievers are saved they recognize the greatness and glory of Christ, but also, they recognize the reflected glory of Christ in the followers of Christ. Anytime anyone becomes a member of the church they are showing honor to Christ, but also to the people of Christ.

Now this matter of honor for followers of God is something that has to be parsed carefully because we are sinners and there is a sinful way of seeking to be honored. We are to be humble. We are not to be obsessed with the praise of men. We are especially not to seek the honor that belongs to Jesus and to the Father. And yet the Bible is not completely against honor for human beings. In Proverbs 22:1 we are told that “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor I better than silver or gold.” And Proverbs 21:21 says, “Whoever

pursues righteousness and kindness will find life, righteousness and honor.” And as we have seen the gospel itself promises that believers will share in the glory of Christ.

The key is that honor for Christians is always a reflection of the glory of God. It is sinful to seek to be honored as the real focus of the honor. It is right to desire to be honored in such a way that the ultimate honor is directed at God. The only reason that we are ever worthy of honor is when we reflect in our lives the character of God and then the real honor belongs to God.

God’s destiny for believers is glory and honor as they reflect the glory of God. That will include vindication before the world which now hates and despises us. One day it will be clear who was wise and who was the fool. The wisdom of God’s way will be vindicated before all men who have ever lived and the foolishness and willful blindness of the despisers of God will be exposed for what it is. The reality and the glory of God will be acknowledged by all men and we who have shared in the scorn and abuse from the world will be vindicated and we will share in the glory of God.