

The Death and Burial of Jacob

Genesis 49:28 – 50:14

Genesis 49:28-31 - *“All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father spoke to them. And he blessed them; he blessed each one according to his own blessing.”*²⁹ *“Then he charged them 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,³⁰ in the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, which is before Mamre in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field of Ephron the Hittite as a possession for a burial place.³¹ There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife, there they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife, and there I buried Leah.³² The field and the cave that is there were purchased from the sons of Heth.”*³³ *And when Jacob had finished commanding his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed and breathed his last, and was gathered to his people.”*

Genesis 50:1-14 - *“Then Joseph fell on his father’s face and wept over him, and kissed him.”*² *And Joseph commanded his servants the physicians to embalm his father. So the physicians embalmed Israel.³ Forty days were required for him, for such are the days required for those who are embalmed; and the Egyptians mourned for him seventy days.⁴ Now when the days of his mourning were past, Joseph spoke to the household of Pharaoh, saying, “If now I have found favor in your eyes, please speak in the hearing of Pharaoh, saying,⁵ ‘My father made me swear, saying, “Behold, I am dying; in my grave which I dug for myself in the land of Canaan, there you shall bury me.” Now therefore, please let me go up and bury my father, and I will come back.”*

⁶ *And Pharaoh said, “Go up and bury your father, as he made you swear.”*⁷ *So Joseph went up to bury his father; and with him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his house, and all the elders of the land of Egypt,⁸ as well as all the house of Joseph, his brothers, and his father’s house. Only their little ones, their flocks, and their herds they left in the land of Goshen.⁹ And there went up with him both chariots and horsemen, and it was a very great gathering.¹⁰ Then they came to the threshing floor of Atad, which is beyond the Jordan, and they mourned there with a great and very solemn lamentation. He observed seven days of mourning for his father.¹¹ And when the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, saw the mourning at the threshing floor of Atad, they said, “This is a deep mourning of the Egyptians.” Therefore its name was called Abel Mizraim, which is beyond the Jordan.*

¹² *So his sons did for him just as he had commanded them.¹³ For his sons carried him to the land of Canaan, and buried him in the cave of the field of Machpelah, before Mamre, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite as property for a burial place.¹⁴ And after he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt, he and his brothers and all who went up with him to bury his father.”*

Background Notes

Jacob's life was coming to an end, but before he died, he blessed each of his twelve sons. Those prophetic blessings are found in Genesis 49. Verse 28 summarizes this last event in Jacob's life: *"All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father spoke to them. And he blessed them; he blessed each one according to his own blessing."*

In the last few verses of Genesis 49, Jacob requested to be buried in Canaan. Back in Genesis 47:29-30 Jacob had said, *"Please do not bury me in Egypt, but let me lie with my fathers; you shall carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burial place."* Now once again Jacob charged all his sons to bury him in Canaan, in the cave at Hebron where his grandparents, Abraham and Sarah, his parents, Isaac and Rebekah, and his wife Leah were buried. (Rachel was not buried there; she died and was buried near Bethlehem.)

This burial cave of the Patriarchs is known as the "Cave of Machpelah." When his wife Sarah died, Abraham purchased the Cave of Machpelah from Ephron the Hittite as a burial place for Sarah (Genesis 23). It is possible to visit that cave today in Hebron. It has a sizable and ancient shrine built over it. The Jewish, Muslim, and Christian faiths all consider the Cave of Machpelah a holy place.

Genesis 50:2-3 says that Jacob's body was embalmed, or mummified. This elaborate Egyptian process took forty days. It normally involved pagan religious associations – but not for Jacob's body! That's why Joseph commanded his servants, the physicians, to embalm his father (v2). Joseph did not allow the pagan professional embalmers of Egypt to touch his father's body, but used his own physicians under his personal supervision.

All Egypt mourned for Jacob for seventy days (v3). This shows that even the Egyptians held Jacob in high honor and respect; only Pharaohs would have a longer mourning period of seventy-two days.

Verses 7-9 reveal that a great company of people made up the funeral cortège for Jacob's burial. By now, after seventeen years in Egypt, Jacob's family would have grown in number. They were accompanied by Egyptian officials and dignitaries, servants, and chariots and horsemen for protection. So a very impressive company made its way from Egypt to Hebron.

The funeral procession stopped at the threshing floor of Atad (v10-11). We don't know where this place is, or why they stopped there – perhaps for a time of rest on the long journey. It may have been located along the King's Highway, which runs up the east side of the Dead Sea, if they took that route. In any case, they mourned for Jacob there for another seven days, and then proceeded on to Hebron to bury Jacob.

Doctrinal Points

1. The death and burial of a believer can be a testimony to God's truth.

Jacob's death and burial were a testimony to the truth that God had revealed. *"I am to be gathered to my people"* (Genesis 49:29). In verse 33, the phrase "gathered to his people" is not just a figurative expression or a euphemism for death – it conveys an important truth. This phrase is used a number of times in the Old Testament for the **death of believers**, particularly the Patriarchs. It conveys God's truth that there is life after death, and that there is a place for the company of believers after death.

Now that we have the New Testament and the completed Scriptures, we know much more than Jacob did. But Jacob's statements about death were certainly a testimony to the truth that God had revealed at that time.

Jacob's burial was also a testimony to the truth of the one true God. I'm sure many of the Egyptians who honored Jacob would have asked, "Why did this man want to be buried in a cave in Canaan? What's wrong with Egypt?" or, "We have the greatest tombs in the world in Egypt! Just look at the pyramids!" These questions would have given Jacob's family an opportunity to tell the Egyptians about the one true God of Israel!

By the way, the pyramids were in existence at Jacob's time – in fact, the pyramids were there when Abraham went down to Egypt. The pyramids go all the way back to the Old Kingdom of Egypt, and they are massive tombs. Jacob, however, believed the promises of God. God had promised Jacob and his descendants that they would return to Canaan. Jacob believed that promise, and his burial in the land that God had promised to his descendants was a testimony to his faith in that promise. What an opportunity Jacob's family had a great opportunity to share their faith in the true God with the Egyptians who were present at Jacob's burial!

The death and burial of a believer can be a wonderful testimony to God's truth. It was true in Jacob's case, and it can be true in ours as well. You don't have to die as a martyr for your death to be a testimony to God's truth. The way that you face your death and the way that you (or your family) plan your memorial service can be a wonderful testimony to God's truth.

In a previous talk I mentioned a young woman who had terminal cancer, who asked me to speak at her funeral. She specifically asked me to preach the gospel at her funeral because she had a number of non-Christian relatives. What an opportunity! People definitely do listen at funerals. The death and burial of a believer can be a testimony to God's truth.

2. The grief and sorrow of a believer is not a denial of God's truth.

When Jacob died, *"Joseph fell on his father's face and wept over him, and kissed him"* (Genesis 50:1). Joseph mourned the loss of his father for quite some time.

Was Joseph's sorrow and grief a denial of God's promises of a life after death for believers? Was it wrong for him to grieve? Should someone have said, "Joseph, you should be ashamed of yourself, you'll see your father again. Why all

this grief and sorrow?” Should we reprimand Joseph for such behavior? No – certainly not – because a believer’s grief and sorrow at the death of a loved one is **not** a denial of God’s truth.

In fact, we need to go through a time of grieving and sorrow when we experience the loss of someone we love. And the dearer and richer our relationship with that person, the more difficult the separation will be. The absence of a loved one causes a great sense of loss and emptiness, and grief is normal. In fact, bottling up our grief is not good. God created us as emotional people, and grief is normal and natural and necessary.

Our Lord Jesus wept at the grave of his dear friend, Lazarus. It is not wrong to grieve. Grieving does not demonstrate a lack of faith or trust in God, and a believer’s grief and sorrow is not a denial of His truth. Let that be an encouragement to you, if you have ever felt guilty for experiencing overwhelming pain and grief at the death of a dearly loved one. The grief and sorrow of a believer is **not** a denial of God’s truth.

Believers should remember 1 Thessalonians 4:13, however. *“I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.”* As Christians we don’t grieve with the despair of people who have no hope for a future in Heaven, or of seeing that loved one again. But we do grieve - and grief is a good thing, because that is the way God made us.

Practical Application

Facing the future is not always easy.

In Genesis 50:14 we read, *“After he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt, he and his brothers and all who went up with him to bury his father.”* Do you think it was easy for Joseph to go back to pagan Egypt, back to responsibilities in the courts of the Pharaoh, back to life without his beloved father who had been such a joy to him for the last seventeen years? No, it wasn’t easy. Life must go on, but facing the future is not always easy.

I wonder if Joseph and his brothers thought it might be easier to stay in their homeland of Canaan rather than go back to Egypt? However, God’s time for the children of Israel’s exodus from Egypt had not yet arrived, so they had to return to Egypt and face the future without the presence of their beloved father.

A time of great loss will come to all of us. It has come already for some of us through the loss of loved ones, or some other great sorrow. Our gracious Lord promises to give us the needed strength, and the ability to get through the difficult weeks and months. *“Let us come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).*

During times of great loss and sorrow we can depend on the Lord for His promised help, and for His strength to adjust and go on. But - facing the future is not always easy.