

Genesis 50 – Jacob’s Burial & Joseph’s Death

Review

Last time we looked in detail at Jacob’s dying blessings of his sons. We saw that most of them contained prophecies about his sons’ descendants and some contained chastisements of his sons’ past behaviors. After giving these “blessings,” Jacob commanded his sons not to bury him in Egypt but to bring his body up to Canaan and bury it in the Cave of Machpelah which Abraham had purchased as a burial place for his family. Having given these “final wishes,” Jacob died at the age of 147.

Jacob’s Burial

¹Then Joseph fell on his father’s face and wept over him and kissed him. ²And Joseph commanded his servants the physicians to embalm his father. So the physicians embalmed Israel. ³Forty days were required for it, for that is how many are required for embalming. And the Egyptians wept for him seventy days. Genesis 50:1-3 (ESV)

The ancient Egyptians had perfected the art of preserving the bodies of the dead. They believed that the deceased still needed their physical bodies in the afterlife, and they buried their dead (at least the wealthy and powerful) in elaborate tombs containing not only the bodily remains, but also food and other items that the dead person might need in the afterlife.

Conversely, the Hebrew and Canaanite traditions, then and now, are to get the body buried as quickly as possible – preferably the day the person died. This is why the Jewish leadership asked Pilate to have the legs of those who were crucified on Good Friday broken so that they would die quickly and could be buried before sunset which marked the beginning of the Passover sabbath (John 19:31-32).

But since Jacob had made Joseph swear not to bury him in Egypt, Joseph had his father’s body preserved in the Egyptian manner. This was the only practical option, since it would have taken many days at the minimum to carry Jacob’s remains up to Canaan. As it was, the burial party didn’t set out from Egypt until ten weeks after Jacob died.

⁴And when the days of weeping for him were past, Joseph spoke to the household of Pharaoh, saying, “If now I have found favor in your eyes, please speak in the ears of Pharaoh, saying, ⁵‘My father made me swear, saying, “I am about to die: in my tomb that I hewed out for myself in the land of Canaan, there shall you bury me.” Now therefore, let me please go up and bury my father. Then I will return.’” ⁶And Pharaoh answered, “Go up, and bury your father, as he made you swear.” ⁷So 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, ⁸as well as all the household of Joseph, his brothers, and his father’s household. Only their children, their flocks, and their herds were left in the land of Goshen. ⁹And there went up with him both chariots and horsemen. It was a very great company. ¹⁰When they came to the threshing floor of Atad, which is beyond the Jordan, they lamented there with a very great and grievous lamentation, and he made a mourning for his father seven days. Genesis 50:4-10 (ESV)

It is heartwarming that the Egyptians also mourned for Jacob even though he was one of the shepherds that they universally abhorred. Their mourning for Joseph’s father was really a show of

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their respect, honor, and love for his son Joseph who had been instrumental in rescuing Egypt from the seven-year famine over a decade before.

“When the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, saw the mourning on the threshing floor of Atad, they said, “This is a grievous mourning by the Egyptians.” Therefore the place was named Abel-mizraim; it is beyond the Jordan. 12Thus his sons did for him as he had commanded them, 13for his sons carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave of the field at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess as a burying place. 14After he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt with his brothers and all who had gone up with him to bury his father. Genesis 50:11-14 (ESV)

This passage contains the only mention of the threshing floor of Atad in God’s Word. The name for this place of mourning אָבֶל מִצְרַיִם 'ābel miṣrayim combines two words אָבֶל 'ābel – mourning, and מִצְרַיִם miṣrayim – the name of Noah’s grandson whose descendants settled in Egypt (Genesis 10:6). Some English translations render this name as Egypt. Of course, the Canaanites who named this place didn’t speak Hebrew, so the name given in the Hebrew text of Genesis 50:11 must be a Hebrew translation of the compound Canaanite name.

We looked at Abraham’s purchase of the Cave of Machpelah when we studied Genesis 23.

Joseph Reassures His Brothers

15When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him.” 16So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, “Your father gave this command before he died: 17‘Say to Joseph, “Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.”’ And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Genesis 50:15-17 (ESV)

How sad it is that Joseph’s brothers couldn’t simply accept his benevolence and loving kindness without suspecting him of some hidden agenda. In this, we see Joseph once more modeling our LORD Jesus. The Gospel of Jesus Christ can be completely summarized in one single verse of scripture.

16“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16 (ESV)

Yet, most people simply can’t accept this Gospel at face value. We’ve been taught our whole lives that “there’s no such thing as a free lunch.” When we consider Jesus’ sacrifice of his own life on the cross in our place, we tend to suspect that God might be playing a game of bait and switch. Thus, we miss out on the greatest gift ever offered – pardon from our sins and eternal life in the glorious presence of Him who gave Himself for us. Instead of simply accepting His offer, we wonder when He’ll send us the bill for services rendered.

There is no Biblical record of Jacob ever commanding Joseph to forgive his brothers for the evil they had done to him. More than likely, they simply made it up, conspiring together to approach Joseph with a plausible argument to convince him to let them off the hook, not believing he had already forgiven them long before they even came to Egypt seeking grain during the famine.

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Small wonder then that Joseph wept when they approached him this way. It is reminiscent of the heart wrenching words of Jesus just a few short days before He sacrificed His own life for His children.

37“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! Matthew 23:37 (ESV)

18His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, “Behold, we are your servants.” 19But Joseph said to them, “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? 20As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. 21So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.” Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. Genesis 50:18-21 (ESV)

In Genesis 50:18 we see yet another reiteration of the fulfillment of Joseph’s dream about the grain sheaves (Genesis 37:5-7).

As we’ve mentioned before, Joseph clearly realized what his brothers apparently had missed – God’s hand of provision and protection for His chosen people Israel throughout all the things that had taken place in their lives. We can take a powerful lesson of trust in God’s love and obedience to His sovereign will from Joseph’s approach to life.

Joseph’s Final Wishes and Death

22So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father’s house. Joseph lived 110 years. 23And Joseph saw Ephraim’s children of the third generation. The children also of Machir the son of Manasseh were counted as Joseph’s own. Genesis 50:22-23 (ESV)

Recall from Genesis 41:46 that Joseph was 30 years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh. Thus, he remained in Egypt for another 80 years before he died. Joseph’s father Jacob died aged 147 when Joseph was 46 years old. The reunited family of Israel remained in Egypt living in the land of Goshen for 64 years after Jacob’s burial before Joseph himself died.

24And 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.” 25Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here.” 26So Joseph died, being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt. Genesis 50:24-26 (ESV)

Genesis 50:24 is intriguing. Recall that all of Joseph’s brothers except Benjamin were older than him. Jacob’s eldest son Reuben was at least 12 years older than Joseph. Every one of them would have been well advanced in years if not already dead by the time Joseph’s “turn” to die came around. It makes me wonder which of Joseph’s brothers were still alive to be called to his death bed.

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ASIDE – This reminds me of the death of my own father over thirty years ago. Pondering his death, I was talking to a friend and said something like, “In the grand scheme of things my father’s death means that I’m next.” She responded with a profound word of wisdom that has stuck in my mind ever since. She said, “Don’t kid yourself. There *is* no such order.”

How true that is. I should have known it then without her reminder. Throughout my childhood, I had been acutely aware of the seeming fickleness of death as quite a few of my father’s young, virile test pilot friends died in the very prime of life due to aircraft accidents. Even this year, a dear friend had to do what no father ever should – bury his own son. My own grandmother had to witness the death of her son – my dad.

Certainly, we expect young, healthy people to die by accident or natural disaster or criminal violence or war. But when they die of disease or so-called “natural causes,” we wonder why God has ordained things the way He has. Nevertheless, we continue to trust Him knowing that He always works all things for the good of His children even and especially when we don’t understand His purposes.

Recall that God spoke to Jacob in a vision at Beersheba while Jacob’s family was going to Egypt from the land of Canaan saying,

3b... “I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. 4I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again, and Joseph’s hand shall close your eyes.” Genesis 46:3b-4 (ESV)

That prophecy had already been fulfilled when Joseph and his brothers carried Jacob up to Canaan and buried him in the Cave of Machpelah.

God had apparently given Joseph a further vision saying that He would one day bring the children of Israel back up out of Egypt to the land of Canaan. The writer of Hebrews mentioned Joseph’s faith in this matter.

22By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones. Hebrews 11:22 (ESV)

That’s All Folks

With Joseph’s death, we come at last to the end of our study in Genesis. It’s been a long haul, and I must admit I’m a little relieved to have made it all the way through. Next time, we’ll make a brief summary of our study and the life lessons we’ve gleaned from it.