

## Deaths, Funerals, and Burials – Genesis 49:29-50:26

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### Funerals Today

Death is always a tragedy, but at this time of COVID-19 we have the added tragedy of not being able to mourn over the loss of a loved one in the way we would normally do. Right now, funerals in Australia are being conducted with no more than 10 people present. Which means that lots of people, including family, miss out on being able to mourn and grieve together and to respectfully say goodbye to a loved one. We are not able to remember our loved one by attending the ceremony together. We cannot comfort each other by being together, hugging each other, grieving together in the way we normally would. We are unable to say goodbye with the same kind of respect we would normally be able to show through a special ceremony or service. It is a terribly painful time for those who have lost loved ones and we need to keep them in our thoughts and prayers.

I personally know people who have had family members die recently. Those deaths were in other countries. One person lost a brother in America, another person lost a mother in Zimbabwe. Because there is no international travel at this time, those people were not able to attend the funerals of the people they loved so much. Even if they were able to find a way into those countries to meet up with family and friends for a time of mutual grief and comfort, they would have to be in quarantine for 2 or 3 weeks before they got to be with those people. Then there would be quarantine when they returned. They could be in isolation for 4 to 6 weeks for just a few days visit to see family.

Death is a tragedy, but living in isolation means that we cannot properly bury our dead, not with the same kind of solemn ceremony where people show courtesy, respect, comfort, and grief simply by attending a funeral. Today, at the end of our Genesis series, we will be looking at 2 deaths, 2 burials, 2 ceremonies, which are very different but have similar messages.

### Promises

Genesis 12-50 contain the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, though Jacob's son, Joseph, also plays a big part. To understand their stories, you need to understand the promises God made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God had promised them that they would have so many children that they would become a nation. He promised them the land of Canaan, a place for that nation to live. God made promises about blessing. Not only that they would be blessed but that they would also be a blessing to others. Lastly, God promised Abraham that his name would be great, that he would become famous. Part of the tension in the stories about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph is whether God would keep his promises. It makes us ask the questions, "Is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob a promise keeping God? Is God someone we can put our trust in?"

What we have found is that despite the many challenges, when it looked impossible for the promises to be kept, God did keep his promises in one way or another. Or at the very least, God made sure that those promises were not broken. By the time we get to the end of Genesis, we find that the promises of blessing, fame, and children are being fulfilled, but the promise of the land of Canaan being owned by the Israelites was

still yet to happen. What we see at the end of Genesis are the deaths and burials of Jacob and Joseph, which both point to the expectation that God will fulfil his promises completely.

## **Jacob's Funeral**

When Jacob was coming to the end of his life, he called Joseph to him and gave a blessing to Joseph's 2 sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. In this way, Jacob practically adopted them as his own. Then Jacob called the rest of his sons in and blessed them. He then gave them his final instructions. He was to be buried in the family tomb, where his parents, grandparents, and his first wife were buried. It may have been that he just wanted to be buried in the family tomb, but I believe that Jacob remembered God's promises about the Promised Land (which was where the family tomb was) and asked Joseph and his brothers to bury him there in the expectation that one day all the Israelite people would be with him in the Promised Land.

Well, Jacob died, and this brought Joseph great grief. We are told that Joseph wept over his father and kissed him. He then organised for his father to be embalmed in a royal way. The Egyptians took 40 days to mummify Jacob and there were 70 days of mourning. But the honour and respect that Egypt paid to Jacob and Joseph went even further. Joseph spoke to Pharaoh through his officials and said...

**Genesis 50:5-6** *Now let me go up and bury my father; then I will return.*"<sup>6</sup> Pharaoh said, "Go up and bury your father, as he made you swear to do."

If you read this carefully, it sounds very similar to what Moses asked another Pharaoh 400 years later – to let God's people go. In fact, Jacob's burial story foretells the idea of the exodus. That a people would leave Egypt, and take the best of Egypt with them and go to the Promised Land. In Genesis 50, Pharaoh knew Joseph and told him to go and bury his father. But have a look at how grand this burial procession was!

**Genesis 50:7-9** *All Pharaoh's officials accompanied him-- the dignitaries of his court and all the dignitaries of Egypt--<sup>8</sup> besides all the members of Joseph's household and his brothers and those belonging to his father's household. Only their children and their flocks and herds were left in Goshen.<sup>9</sup> Chariots and horsemen also went up with him. It was a very large company.*

Imagine seeing this very large group of people travelling from Egypt to Canaan. They may well have been wearing official robes or special ceremonial clothing. It was as if the best of Egypt was on show out of respect for Jacob and Joseph. This would be the only time that Joseph returned to his homeland. He had not been there since he was 17. Now, he was there to bury his father. Once again, we read about how much people mourned over Jacob. When they got to the threshing floor of Atad, near where they would bury Jacob, they mourned for another 7 days. It was such a big event that it left a lasting impression on the Canaanites who were living nearby. They said...

**Genesis 50:11** *"The Egyptians are holding a solemn ceremony of mourning." That is why that place near the Jordan is called Abel Mizraim.*

Abel Mizraim means "mourning of the Egyptians". The place was named in honour of Jacob's funeral. But there is a problem here. The point of Jacob returning to his family tomb was to show that he trusted in the promises of God. The Promised Land was Canaan, his family tomb was in Canaan, Jacob was returning to Canaan in the expectation that his descendants would return to the Promised Land as the nation of Israel.

Then they would all be together once more. But this was not an Israelite funeral, this was an Egyptian funeral, with Egyptian officials, and the Canaanites recognised it as an Egyptian ceremony. This journey to the Promised Land may have said something about what would happen 400 years later, but it was not the exodus that was to come.

## Joseph's Funeral

Only a few verses later, we read of Joseph's death and burial. I believe they are so close together that you are meant to compare the 2 stories and see how some things are similar and some things are very different. A similarity is that Joseph got to see the birth of his great grandchildren just like his father Jacob did. A big difference is the detail of the 2 burial stories. Jacob had a massive funeral, with a grand procession of important people. The event was so big that the place was named after the event. And we are told about the mourning which happened in Egypt and Canaan. All we are told about Joseph's funeral was...

**Genesis 50:26** *So Joseph died at the age of a hundred and ten. And after they embalmed him, he was placed in a coffin in Egypt.*

Joseph was the saviour of Egypt but we do not hear of grand ceremonies and long processions to foreign lands. We do not hear of extended times of mourning. Joseph just died, was embalmed and placed in a coffin. To understand that massive difference, we need to go back to another similarity. Both Jacob and Joseph left instructions about being buried in the Promised Land. They both knew that God would come to the aid of their people and take them out of Egypt to the Promised Land. The last big difference between the 2 burial stories is the timing of their final resting place. Jacob looked back to the promises and wanted to return home immediately, to be buried with his fathers. Joseph looked forward to the fulfilment of the promises and wanted to wait until he could be taken with his descendants to the Promised Land. You see, Joseph knew there was something more to come, something better, and he wanted to be part of that, even if it was just his bones which got to be a part of it.

## Looking Forward

In his letter to the Hebrews, the writer wrote about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, as well as other heroes of the faith. He said...

**Hebrews 11:13-16** *All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. <sup>14</sup> People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. <sup>15</sup> If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. <sup>16</sup> Instead, they were longing for a better country-- a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.*

Joseph saw how some of God's promises were being fulfilled, but he also saw that the promise of land was still in the distance – something he had to wait for. We need to be like Joseph, trusting in God's promises of forgiveness and eternal life. We need to be like foreigners and strangers on the earth like Joseph was a foreigner and stranger in Egypt. We need to be longing for a better country, a better home. We need to be longing for a heavenly country, a heavenly city, for that is what Jesus has prepared for us.

Joseph recognised that his bones needed to go with God's people to the Promised Land. We need to recognise that our spirits, and indeed our resurrected bodies, need to be with God in the new creation. Yes, we need to live in this world, and like Joseph, we can make a big difference in this world. But we also need to remember that this is not our home, this is not our final resting place. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews finished his chapter about the heroes of the faith this way...

*Hebrews 11:39-40* These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, <sup>40</sup> since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

Joseph looked forward to the Promised Land, we look forward to heaven. Together, with Joseph, we will be able to enter God's rest. That is the great hope we look forward to.

## **Supporting Each Other**

In the meantime, we need to support each other in our grief, especially during COVID-19. We may not want to have funerals as big as Jacob's, but we may not want it to be as small as Joseph's. In many ways, what we might want for a funeral for our loved one is out of our hands. Therefore, if you know someone who has to face such a difficult time as not being able to conduct or attend a funeral, then please comfort them and pray with them. You might not be able to do anything more than to talk with them over the phone or send them a card, but make sure they know that they are not in complete isolation from your love or the love of God.