

“Hope in Hard Places”
Genesis 49:29-50:14
August 27th, 2017

April 19th, 1865 was the date of President Abraham Lincoln’s funeral in the East Wing of the White House. It was attended by 600 mourners. After the funeral, 100,000 mourners lined the route to the US Capitol where the president’s body was put on view for the public. Two days later, a train dubbed “The Lincoln Special” left Washington, D.C. carrying the President back to his home in Springfield, Illinois. The train passed through 444 communities in 7 states, stopping at 12 major cities, traveling 1,654 miles.

At each stop, Lincoln’s coffin was taken off the train, placed on an elaborately decorated horse-drawn hearse and led by solemn processions to a public building for viewing. In cities as large as Columbus, Ohio, and as small as Herkimer, New York, thousands of mourners flocked to pay tribute to the slain president. Newspapers reported that people waited more than five hours to pass by the president’s coffin in some cities.

In what is called “The greatest funeral in the history of the United States,” 30 million people likewise bid farewell to their President.

Similarly, a great funeral procession traveled a long distance from Egypt to the Promised Land to lay Old Testament patriarch Jacob to rest.

We’re rapidly nearing the end of our lengthy study of the Bible’s opening book. I expect this will be the second to last message in the series I’ve entitled, *The Book of Beginnings: God’s Grace in Genesis*. The last two Sundays we studied Jacob’s charge to his 12 sons recorded for us in the 49th chapter of Genesis. Today, we close out chapter 49 as we read of Jacob’s last words and his death. The opening half of Chapter 50 covers Jacob’s processional and burial.

Genesis 49:29-50:14:

²⁹Then he (Jacob) 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.

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.”

MP 1 – Jacob’s Last Words and Death (49:29-33);

MP 2 – Jacob’s Processional and Burial (50:1-14).

Since the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (**Genesis Chapter 3**), death is universal. All people must die (unless Jesus returns to earth first!) According to **Hebrews 9:27**, death is an appointment set by God – “...it is appointed for men to die once,” Nobody has yet figured out how to peek into God’s appointment book and erase the date of their death.

That we will die is an undisputed fact. But, how we die is the matter of real importance. “In Jacob’s case, we (see) a man determined to take charge of his death and bear a witness to the end.” (Boice, 1231) Verses 29-32 of **Genesis 49** contain Jacob’s last words - his burial instructions to return his body to Canaan. He’d already given such instructions to Joseph (**Genesis 47:27-31**), now all of the family is privy to his funeral plans.

Jacob’s death and the manner of his burial represent the belief that Egypt was not his home. Similarly, fellow Christian, this present world is not our home!

No one imagined that Charles Dutton would have achieved anything, for he spent many years imprisoned for manslaughter. But when someone asked this now-successful Broadway star of *The Piano Lesson* how he managed to make such a remarkable transition he replied, “Unlike the other prisoners, I never decorated my cell.”

Dutton had resolved to never regard his cell as home. Likewise, Christians we mustn’t accommodate ourselves to this world. Instead, we are to “desire a better, that is, a heavenly *country*.” (**Hebrews 11:16**)

The last word Jacob uttered is in verse 32 – “Heth.” Heth was the father of the Hittites; a Canaanite. Having spoken his piece, Jacob lay back in his bed, and he died.

Application: The perpetual question of many Christians today is “*to bury or to cremate?*” *Does it matter?* I believe it does. Our final words, our death, and our burial can be vivid opportunities to testify to our family and friends of their need for God’s mercy and grace.

You may remember my uncle Monty died a couple of years ago (my deceased father’s last surviving sibling). His desire was to be cremated and to have his ashes spread over the fields near where he grew up (the farm where I lived much of my childhood). A rather private man, Uncle Monty didn’t want a visitation, memorial, or funeral. He died, his remains were burned, and they were scattered. That’s it. Speaking for myself, I felt very empty; there was no time of gathering with my cousins and our extended family to provide comfort to one another, or closure.

I understand this was his decision to make, but such a decision has corporate impact! Dear ones, I plead with you to leave instructions to your family (and me) instructing them you'd like a visitation, funeral service, and graveside service. Your death may be the only opportunity for some of your family and dearest friends to be confronted with their own need to trust in Jesus Christ! Further, I encourage you to consider choosing burial instead of cremation. I realize such a decision is often motivated by expense – it's often cheaper to be cremated than to be buried. But, you don't have to have an expensive funeral – much money is often spent on an ornate coffin that will only be seen a couple of days.

Yet, that's beside the main point. Whether to be buried or burned is addressed by the Scripture. Burial—sowing the seed of the body—is the Biblical picture of belief in the resurrection of the body. In the worship bulletin, I've included an Internet link to an article John Piper wrote for *World Magazine* recently. It's the most helpful article on this topic I've read. (*Please fight the temptation to go there now on your mobile device or phone!* 😊) I'll have printed copies of that article as you leave the building today.

One of the helpful points in the article is to encourage churches to assist those in their membership who don't have life insurance to cover the cost of their funeral. I think that's a great ministry possibility, and yet another benefit of holding membership in God's Church.

Jacob's last words and his death bring Genesis 49 to a close. Chapter 50 opens on a sad note. We see Joseph's grief and a lengthy period of national mourning. Joseph "fell on his father's face, and wept over him, and kissed him." Even if the death of a loved one is long expected, it's still a profoundly sorrowful occasion. The reality of life without the deceased is often hard and sad.

One recent Saturday morning, I led a devotion on grief for the guy's group. It contained a piece written by a man whose brother had died unexpectedly. I think you'll find it helpful:

Grief. My unwelcome companion. You have invaded my life, uninvited, unwanted, in the shadows you have waited, until this moment to ambush me.

My wounds are deep, they are beyond repair by bandages and ointment. Dream and gloom greet me each morning. Desperately I try to escape your grip, to tear you away from my heart.

There is nowhere to get away. If I shove you aside or try to push you away, you only conceal yourself within me, eventually expressing your displeasure in ugly and destructive ways.

So it is I surrender to you. Come now, sit here beside me. You will be my companion. We will walk together. I will bathe myself in the tears and let despair purge me. I will wrap my arms around you and hold you close. You will become part of who I am.

We will become friends, you and I. But know this, you are not my master. I will not make my home in despair and hopelessness. Together, we will journey the path, a path that will once again lead to delight and gladness.

I know this to be true because of the One who traveled with you long before me. I trust the journey will lead to new hopes, to new dreams, just as He promised. You mustn't leave, for in you my memories and pleasures of yesterday reside. But together, we will press on. The path may be difficult. I will fall to my knees many times. But we will once again arise and move forward. Ever so slowly to the hope that lies ahead.

With verses 10 & 11, the funeral procession reaches its destination. And, for a week, Jacob's family and friends mourn his death. "How different from our culture, where death is denied so strenuously, that it is considered improper to grieve a loved one's death! Undertakers report that the trend in funeral arrangements is to "get it over with" as quickly as possible and that the survivors often prefer the arrangements to be made by some impersonal third party." (Boice, 1240)

Look, too, at the language used to soften the reality. Instead of Johnny died, we have Johnny left us; Johnny passed on; Johnny is no longer with us. It's not a funeral service anymore, but is instead a "celebration of life." Hopefully, we're celebrating our loved ones when they're still alive, not only after they've died! Yes, we remember our deceased loved ones at their funerals, but more importantly, we remember the comfort God brings to His people, even in death.

So, when a family member or friend dies, we rightly grieve their death! But, fellow Christian, we don't grieve as those who have no hope (**I Thess. 4:13**). We believe that Jesus rose and that because He rose, those who have died in faith in Him will also live again. Death is defeated. The grave is robbed of spoil. Therefore, we "encourage each other with these words." (**I Thess 4:18**).

Christian friend, our hope is in the Lord Who gave Himself for us! Our hope is not in the passing fancies of this world. Humanity is fallen – this place is *not* our home!

We can learn something about biblical hope from fishermen. In *Pavlov's Trout*, Paul Quinnett writes:

"Fishing is hope experienced. To be optimistic in a slow bite is to thrive on hope alone. When asked, 'How can you fish all day without a hit?' the true fisherman replies, 'Hold it! I think I felt something.' If the line goes slack, he says, 'He'll be back!'"

When it comes to the human spirit, hope is all. Without hope, there is no yearning, no desire for a better tomorrow, and no belief that the next cast will bring the big strike. According to God's Word, the Christian life is also experienced. A hopeless Christian is a contradiction.

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One of the books I read this summer is entitled, *Dodge City: Wyatt Earp, Bat Masterson, and the Wickedest Town in the American West* by Tom Clavin. The gunfighter Bat Masterson is reported to have said these words just prior to his death, "We all get the same amount of ice. The rich get it in the summer. The poor get it in the winter."

Jesus' last words from the cross, "Father, into Your hands, I commit my spirit." (**Luke 23:46**) Oh Lord, give *me* the boldness to say something profoundly God-centered when I die!