

Bethel Bible-Presbyterian Church

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DHW

LESSON 38

THE BOOK OF GENESIS

CHAPTER 50

INTRODUCTION

The death of Jacob closes the history of the Patriarchs, Abraham and Isaac. The closing chapter of Genesis speaks of death. In the beginning, Adam and Eve disobeyed God and subsequently all their descendants are punished with death as God had said. But at the very outset, God revealed His love and compassion for man. He had intimated: *I will put enmity between thee and the woman and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head and thou shalt bruise his heel* (Genesis 3:15). The seed of the woman would bruise the head of “the serpent.” This is a veiled prediction of the coming of the Conqueror, who would render a triumphant blow upon the “serpent” – the enemy. This seed of the woman had been narrowed at first to the family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Of the twelve sons of Jacob, the seed would emerge from Judah who would

eventually rule over Israel.¹ This seed from Judah would be called *Shiloh*, which means “the rest-bringer.” This Rest-Bringer will gather all the peoples of the earth unto Him.² It is God’s plan and purpose of redeeming and reconciling the nation Israel and the other nations to Himself. It would be progressively unveiled.

In the book of Genesis, God had said that He remembered His covenant promises, which He had made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He would keep these promises. Hence, Jacob and Joseph exercised their faith and trust in God that He would bring them all out of Egypt and back to the Promised Land.

A major theme in Genesis 50 is death – the deaths of Jacob and Joseph. The inevitability of death upon all mankind is never played down in Scripture. It is a reality which all mankind will do well to accept and learn from it.³ Our attitude towards death and especially the death of one, whom we love very much, will affect our well-being for bad or for good.

Another theme is God’s providential dealings with His chosen

¹In Revelation 5:5, John was alluding to Genesis 49:8-11. He was referring to the Lord Jesus Christ.

²Leupold, pp. 1178-1183. Leupold discusses the meaning of “Shiloh.”

³Ecclesiastes 7:2-3 *It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart. Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better.*

people. It is reiterated here in the words of Joseph to his brothers, *ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good* (v.20). It illustrates perfectly Paul's words to the Romans, which is so familiar with many of us - *And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose* (Romans 8:28).

A further interesting point is that the book ends with a question posed by Joseph (v.19) - *for am I in the place of God?* Joseph denied all thoughts on his part to be God or to play God. By comparison, in the opening chapters of the book man aspired to be like God (3:5, 6). It caused his downfall. And today many still aspire to be like God.

The chapter can be outlined as follows:

- 1) Joseph asked Pharaoh for leave to bury Jacob his father in the land of Canaan (vv. 1-6);
- 2) Joseph led the burial procession to the land of Canaan to bury Jacob (vv. 7-13);
- 3) Joseph allayed the fear of his brothers reassuring them that he would continue to provide and protect them (vv. 14-21);

- 4) Joseph passed away at the age of one hundred and ten (vv. 22-16).

STUDY THE WORD

Joseph Mourns the Death of Jacob

Joseph fell upon his father's face and wept upon him and kissed him (v.1). How Joseph loved his father. He uncontrollably showed his feelings for his father. He would have prayed and wished that his father could live for another seventeen years in Egypt to compensate for the loss of those years of separation from him. But the day will come when the frail outward shell of our body can no longer house the inward man. Separation of body and soul (or spirit) is inevitable and unavoidable. Death is the outcome.

But what should be the Christian's attitude towards death? We can learn from Joseph. Weeping over the death of someone we love is a natural part of life. However, this weeping and grieving should not prolong more than necessary. Joseph immediately took control of himself and instructed the preparation of Jacob's body for burial. He ordered his servant-physicians to embalm the body. One can be sure that the body of Jacob was properly and expertly done. In accordance with Egyptian custom

Jacob's body was prepared for burial as instructed by Joseph.⁴ It was the proper thing to do. It was not cremated or burned – to cremate and burn the body of a loved one is to treat it like an animal or a criminal. Jacob's body was embalmed which included a proper washing of the body.

Joseph now asked Pharaoh for permission to leave Egypt to go to the land of Canaan to bury his father. In this regard, Joseph never acted presumptuously in spite of his exalted position and power. Pharaoh was very kind and permitted him to do so (v.6). The interesting part is that Joseph made the request through an intermediary of *the house of Pharaoh* (v. 4). The custom then was that it was not proper for Joseph who was in bereavement to approach Pharaoh when his late father had not been interred.⁵

Joseph Leads the Hearse to the Burial Ground in the Land of Canaan

In fulfilling the wish of his father, Joseph led his brothers in a procession to take the body to be buried in the cave of Machpelah in Canaan. All the men went, but the women and children

remained in Egypt. Jacob was buried with great honour. The entire cortege was a great one. Joseph led in the procession. He was followed by Pharaoh's court officials. Following behind were the man-folks of his family, and then all the dignitaries of Egypt. At the rear of the cortege was a military contingent of chariots and horsemen. Nearing the burial site, they stopped at a place where a public mourning ceremony was held. It lasted for a week (v.10). Then only Joseph and his brothers carried the body to the cave of Machpelah where it was interred (v.13). While we may not follow all that were done by Joseph, the important lesson is that the preparation for burial of our departed loved ones should be carried out in a proper and respectful manner.

Joseph Puts to Rest the Fear of His Brothers

Having buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt with all his family members and the others. His brothers were now afraid that with the death of their father, Joseph might take revenge on them for the evil deed, which they did to him. They still had not got over their guilty conscience. This teaches us never to sin against God, our spouses, our brothers and sisters, or others. It is a terrible struggle to deal with the guilty

⁴ Jewish custom is to bury the dead within 24 hours.

⁵ Such as the case with Mordecai. When learned of Haman who conspired to kill all the Jews (Esther 4:2), he grieved in sackcloth and ashes. He could not enter the King's Gate, i.e. the palace door. He was allowed only to come as far as the King's Gate.

conscience in our mind and heart, even though we are comforted by the fact that all have been forgiven. But it is not easy to forget. We tend to dwell on the matter and feel fearful and self-condemning.

Joseph's brothers were so afraid that they sent a messenger to speak to Joseph on their behalf. They were even fearful to meet him personally. Their appeal for mercy and forgiveness was based on Joseph's deep affection and love for his father. They addressed Jacob not as "our father" but as *thy father* before Joseph (v. 16). However, they did appeal to him based on the fact that they were his brothers. They told him that before Jacob died, their father had told them to tell Joseph to forgive them for their sin against him. We also observe that they considered themselves as *servants of the God of thy father* (v.17). This they hoped to gain more weight to their plea for mercy. They even prostrated themselves before Joseph (v.18).

Joseph wept on hearing what they said to him. This is very sad indeed. But Joseph's response is marvellous and magnanimous. Joseph's opening words to them was *Fear not, for am I in the place of God?* (v.19). Joseph's theology was that God is the Avenger, and Judge. Vengeance belongs to God,

not him.⁶ To take revenge or vengeance against another who has done evil towards another is to play God.

It is better to understand what the purpose and will of God is in such situations. It is better to forgive and pray for the evil doer than to take revenge. This was precisely what Joseph did. He said to them (v.20): *But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.* Joseph was a kind-hearted man. He had a big heart that had much room for many kinds of people.

Joseph Passes Away

It is one's ultimate desire to live a fulfilling and fruitful life all the days of his earthly existence. However, minus our days as an infant, the years we are able to spend on earth is further shortened. It seems that Joseph did not outlive his brothers (v.24). He died at the age of one hundred and ten. This when compared with his forefathers was short.⁷ But he lived to see his great grand-children (v.23). Is this not the

⁶Deuteronomy 32:35 *To me belongeth vengeance, and recompence; their foot shall slide in due time: for the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things that shall come upon them make haste.*

Romans 12:19 *Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.*

Leviticus 19:18 *Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD.*

⁷ Abraham died at the age of 175 (25:6,7); Isaac, 180 (35:28, 29); Jacob, 147 (47:28, 29).

promise of God that those who honour their father and their mother live longer in life on earth?⁸

However, the measure of one's life on earth is not evaluated on the basis of the number of years but by the quality of his living throughout his life on earth. Our Lord Jesus Christ died at the age of about thirty-four. His ministerial life was only about three years! But what an impact He made in the world and in the lives of the people! He is an example for us to emulate. This truth is both comforting and encouraging. If one is already old, it is still not too late to offer one's life to serve the Lord Jesus Christ. And if one is young, do not squander the time, talent and toil in amassing temporal treasures, but invest them in the work of the Lord.

Before his death, Joseph declared to the children of Israel (v.24): *God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land unto the land which He swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.* He made them swear that when they leave Egypt, they were to take his bones with them back to land of Canaan. He showed great faith and trust in God's

promises. The bones of Joseph were later buried by the children of Israel in Shechem, in a plot of land, which Jacob had bought from the Shechemites.⁹

Joseph had done a lot for his people. The divine inspired writer of Hebrew singles out his faith in God (Hebrews 11:22): *By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones.* Joseph's faith indeed was strong and steadfast. It was not easy for him. His faith in God had been severely tested. Moreover, he did not have the spiritual advantage, which even his brothers had. They had their father to share with them how God had provided, preserved, and prospered them. Joseph was living in a spiritual vacuum, or worse, the spiritual environment he was in was adverse to his religious heritage. But, as we have seen, Joseph's faith in God did not waver under the most trying circumstances. He did not capitulate. When he was poor and destitute, he did not blame or blaspheme the name of God. When he became rich and

⁸ Exodus 20:12 *Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.*

Deuteronomy 5:16 *Honour thy father and thy mother, as the LORD thy God hath commanded thee; that thy days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with thee, in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.*

⁹ Joshua 24:32 *And the bones of Joseph, which the children of Israel brought up out of Egypt, buried they in Shechem, in a parcel of ground which Jacob bought of the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for an hundred pieces of silver: and it became the inheritance of the children of Joseph.*

powerful, and surrounded by opulence and luxury, he did not forget God. He remained faithful to God to the end. In fact, all these circumstances made his faith stronger. He saw and understood God's purpose and will in his life!

PRACTICAL VALUE

Man's attitudes towards death can be reduced to the following: (1) a death-accepting attitude; (2) a death-defying attitude; or (3) a death-denying attitude.¹⁰ Many submissively accept the reality of death because everyone must die. Others would defy death by shouting that they are not afraid to die. They have this "die-die, so-what" kind of attitude. Yet there are others who would try not to think or speak about it or to lessen the shock of death by various euphemistic expressions. But the Christian has the right attitude, provided he knows the Word of God and has been walking close to Him. He has faith and trust in God that He will do what He has promised in His Word. Those who exercise faith and trust in Jesus Christ and His atoning work on the Cross, receiving Him into their heart shall not perish but have everlasting life. When they die, they shall be ushered into the presence of God and the Lord Jesus

¹⁰ Boice, p.319.

Christ. Absent from the body but present with the Lord! They may be sad when a loved one dies. But like Joseph mourning and crying would be for a moment. He returned to Egypt not to continue to mourn and grieve over the death of his father. Life had to go on and that was what Joseph did. This Christian attitude is best expressed by Paul. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul comforted them with the truth of the resurrection of Christ and of all Christians. In his masterful exposition on the resurrection and the question of death, Paul exclaimed at the end of his treatise (1 Corinthians 15:54, 56): *Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?* Christians too would rise from the dead as promised by God.¹¹

Forgiving others who have wronged you is difficult, but it is not easy to forget. But anyone who has a sound knowledge of God, His plan and purpose according to His Word will find it easier to forgive others who have wronged him. Joseph was such man and he is our example. AMEN.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 15:51 *Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 52 In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. 53 For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.*