

Genesis 50:1-26

The Last of the Patriarchs

As a matter of curiosity, you might want to know that this final talk on the book of Genesis is number 86. It seems we began back in May of 2018, which seems like another age. Since we did 118 talks on the gospel of Luke, I hope we did not do Genesis an injustice. Of course, we can always come back to it again later, if necessary.

As we enter the final scene in this magisterial narrative of the patriarchs, Jacob had just “breathed his last, and was gathered to his people” (Genesis 49:33). Knowing that he was dying, Jacob had gathered his sons about him, and given to each a prophetic blessing according to the word of the Lord. For some of them, past wrongs had undermined their position and preeminence. For others, the future would be blessed and fruitful. For all, Jacob trusted that God would provide and care for them, and that His promises of land, seed, and blessing would one day be fulfilled.

Jacob is Mourned and Buried

The room was certainly silent after Jacob finished speaking. Despite what some of his sons had heard, no one had stepped forward to challenge his words. What Jacob had spoken, God had intended, and what God had intended, He would bring to pass. All of the men in the room knew that. They had all seen God work and all of them had experienced both His blessing and His judgment.

As Jacob died, the attention of the narrator focused on Joseph. We do not know what the other sons of Jacob were doing as he died, but Scripture states that “Joseph fell on his father’s face, and wept over him and kissed him” (v. 1). This need not be read as a disparagement on the other sons. They, too, were no doubt deeply moved by the death of their father. Turbulent as some of their relationships had been, these men fully understood and appreciated the scene. Joseph was likely the focus of the sacred historian because he was the favorite of his father, and because as the chief administrator of Egypt, his was the responsibility to fulfill his father’s wish that his body be buried in the family cave back in Canaan.

The words used to describe the scene evoke the deepest of emotions. Joseph “fell on,” ‘wept,’ and ‘kissed’ his father. No doubt, it was at this moment that he also closed his father’s eyes, as God had promised Jacob when he left the homeland of Canaan for Egypt (Genesis 46:4).

Then “²Joseph commanded his servants the physicians to embalm his father. So the physicians embalmed Israel. ³Now forty days were required for it, for such is the period required for embalming. And the Egyptians wept for him seventy days” (v. 2-3). These ‘physicians’ were not what we might think of as healers, but rather those who prepared the body for burial. That is not to say that physicians were not present as the body was embalmed. In fact, it was an excellent opportunity to increase their knowledge of physiology. But the embalming was, first and foremost, a religious ritual with specific rites and incantations (originally to the god Anubis, but later to the god Osiris).

The details of traditional Egyptian embalming are simple enough. First, the brain was removed by carefully inserting special hooked instruments up through the nostrils in order to pull out bits of brain tissue. It was a delicate operation, one which could easily disfigure the face if not performed carefully.

The embalmers then removed the organs of the abdomen and chest through a cut usually made on the left side of the abdomen. They left only the heart in place, believing it to be the center of a person's being and intelligence. The other organs were preserved separately, with the stomach, liver, lungs, and intestines placed in special boxes or jars called canopic jars. These jars were later buried with the mummified corpse.

The embalmers next removed all moisture from the body. This was accomplished by covering the body with natron, a type of salt which had great drying properties, and by placing additional natron packets inside the body. When the body had dried out completely, the embalmers then removed the internal packets and lightly washed the natron off the body. The result was a very dried-out but recognizable human form. To make the mummy seem even more life-like, sunken areas of the body were then filled out with linen and other materials, and false eyes were added.

Next the wrapping of the corpse began. Each mummy needed hundreds of yards of linen. The priests carefully wound the long strips of linen around the body, sometimes even wrapping each finger and toe separately before wrapping the entire hand or foot. Since this was primarily a cultic ritual, in order to protect the dead from mishap, amulets were placed among the wrappings and prayers and magical words written on some of the linen strips. Often, the priests placed a mask of the person's face between the layers of bandages. At several stages the form was coated with warm resin and the wrapping resumed once again. At last, the priests wrapped the final cloth or shroud in place and secured it with linen strips.

We do not know if Joseph permitted all of this to be done, or if some compromise was made that allowed Jacob the honor that mummification intended without the religious rites that would be offensive to Hebrews. We do know that the Egyptians mourned Jacob for seventy days. This must have been a mandate by Pharaoh, done out of respect both for the aged patriarch he had once met, but clearly also out of affection for Joseph. In Egyptian custom, a Pharaoh was mourned for seventy-two days, so this was a very significant gesture on Pharaoh's part.

Finally, the time set aside by Pharaoh for mourning Jacob ended. Then,

“⁴when the days of mourning for him were past, Joseph spoke to the household of Pharaoh, saying, ‘if now I have found favor in your sight, please speak to Pharaoh, saying, “⁵my father made me swear, saying, ‘behold, I am about to die; in my grave which I dug for myself in the land of Canaan, there you shall bury me.’ Now then, please let me go up and bury my father; then I will return.”’” ⁶Pharaoh said, ‘go up and bury your father, as he made you swear’” (v. 4-6).

Joseph followed the appropriate palace protocols. He did not approach Pharaoh directly, but went through the proper channels. This may have been because, with the famine many years in the past, Joseph's prestige at court had lessened, but it may also have been related to cultic taboos. For example, Mordecai could not enter the Persian king's palace in sackcloth (Esther 4:2). And Joseph may have considered himself unclean since he had likely overseen the mummification of his father (Numbers 19:11, 14, 16).

In any case, Joseph began formally, “if now I have found favor in your sight” (v. 4). Joseph mentioned that his father had dug for himself the grave in which he hoped to be buried. Though Scripture does not record Jacob digging his own tomb, what may be inferred is that he (or more likely his servants) had

helped enlarge the burial cave as additional generations were buried there. And we can also see that Joseph focused on the details that Jacob had put into his own funeral arrangements. This argument had a twofold purpose. First, it was to assure Pharaoh that Jacob, and the Hebrews in general, had no personal distaste of the land of Egypt. Egypt was a great place to live. It was just not the place where they wanted to be buried. Second, since most Pharaohs spent their own lives planning the elaborate ceremonies that would circumscribe their own deaths, such an appeal to the details Jacob put into his own funeral arrangements would make sense to Pharaoh. Still, we can see that Pharaoh's reply to Joseph seems to hinge on the promise that Joseph had made to his father, "go up and bury your father, as he made you swear" (v. 6). Even this pagan king understood and appreciated the promise of a son to a dying father.

So, with the permission of Pharaoh, the family of Jacob, and others, made their way to Canaan.

"⁷So Joseph went up to bury his father, and with him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his household and all the elders of the land of Egypt, ⁸and all the household of Joseph and his brothers and his father's household; they left only their little ones and their flocks and their herds in the land of Goshen. ⁹Chariots with teams of horses also went up with him; and it was a very great company" (v. 7-9).

It seems Scripture describes three distinct groups in the party. First, ranking members of Pharaoh's own household and others of notoriety in Egypt (v. 7). These may have been friends of Joseph and others with whom he had served Pharaoh these many years. Of course, some had likely been ordered to attend the ceremony by Pharaoh as representatives of the throne.

The second group included the surviving members of Jacob's family (v. 8). It seems, though, that this company was made up primarily of males. The text does not explicitly state that there were no women included, but since "their little ones" (v. 8) remained at home, no doubt most of the women stayed to care for them. In addition to their domestic duties, the women also had to care for "their flocks and their herds in the land of Goshen" (v. 8) that had also remained behind. A further practical benefit of having the women and children remain was that this allowed the group to move at a faster pace. Despite the elaborate process of embalming, Jacob's body would decay if not interred promptly.

Finally, the group was accompanied by a military escort. This was both a sign of respect, and an offer of protection against brigands and robbers along the way. It was very unlikely that some petty highwayman would take his chances against even a small portion of Pharaoh's army. This description of Jacob's funeral procession is in distinction to the modest funerals of Abraham and Isaac, where each of these noble patriarchs was buried by only his own sons (Genesis 25:9; 35:29).

The journey from Egypt to Canaan is passed over without comment. However,

"¹⁰When they came to the threshing floor of Atad, which is beyond the Jordan, they mourned there with a very great and sorrowful lamentation; and he observed seven days of mourning for his father. ¹¹Now when the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, saw the mourning at the threshing floor of Atad, they said, 'this is a grievous mourning for the Egyptians.' Therefore it was named Abel-mizraim, which is beyond the Jordan. ¹²And so 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 of Machpelah opposite Mamre, which Abraham had bought along with the field as a

burial site from Ephron the Hittite” (v. 10-13).

The location of the “threshing floor of Atad” (v. 10) is unknown. The words can also be translated as ‘bramble’ or ‘thornbush,’ though this offers the reader little clue. Generally, scholars have proposed two possible options. The company could have traveled along the Plain of the Philistines following the coastal route. This was the most direct way to the western side of the Jordan River. Another option is that the party stopped along the eastern side of the Jordan River having taken the more circuitous route around the southern end of the Dead Sea (essentially the same route that would be taken during the exodus).

The seven days of mourning were clearly genuine, and not a routine performed as part of a burial ritual. Scripture describes it as a “very great and sorrowful lamentation” (v. 10). Seven days eventually became customary in Hebrew culture (1 Samuel 31:13; Job 2:13; Ezekiel 3:15-16), and it remains the appropriate time for Jewish mourning in modern times. This mourning was so intense that it attracted the notice of the local population, who recognized the mourners as Egyptian. This may have been from their appearance (recall that many Egyptians were among the mourners) or perhaps the characteristics of the mourning itself (fasting, sackcloth, ashes, self-flagellation) which were seen as alien to the local Canaanite population.

After the seven days of mourning, the group continued on to Hebron. There, the sons of Jacob “did for him as he had commanded them” (v. 12). Whatever dissension may have existed among them was set aside as they buried their father as he had wished. “And after he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt, he and his brothers, and all who had gone up with him to bury his father” (v. 14). Joseph had promised Pharaoh that he would return, and so he did (v. 5). Unlike the majority of his siblings, and even his father, Joseph seems always to have been a man of his word. The Hebrews were back in Egypt, a land of prosperity and refuge during the famine, but also a land they would not leave again for four hundred years.

Joseph and His Brothers

With Jacob buried in Canaan and the family returned to Egypt, the final sections of the narrative focus on the restoration of the relationship among the remaining members of the patriarchal family. Though Joseph had tearfully revealed himself to his brothers and forgiven them (Genesis 45:4-15), they, it seems, were uncertain of the extent and authenticity of that forgiveness. Perhaps, they remembered the stories of their uncle Esau, who had only promised to restrain his vengeance against his brother Jacob until their father had died (Genesis 27:41). Now, with Jacob buried, perhaps they believed that Joseph might reveal his true feelings and, with all the power available to the second in command of all Egypt, destroy them and their families.

It may have been that they had talked about such an eventuality on their return trip from Canaan. In any case,

“¹⁵When Joseph’s brothers had seen that their father was dead, they said, ‘what if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong which we did to him!’ ¹⁶So they sent instructions to Joseph, saying, ‘your father commanded us before he died, saying, “¹⁷this is what you shall say to Joseph: ‘please forgive, I beg you, the offense of your brothers and their sin, for

they did you wrong.” And now, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father” (v. 15-17).

The brothers still feared the consequences of their disobedience. They also, perhaps, remembered all of the trickery and subterfuge Joseph had used before, and wondered if he still might be merely acting a role. We see here the fear that sin produces, and how difficult it can be, sometimes to accept forgiveness. The brothers were so concerned, in fact, that they did not address Joseph themselves. Instead, “they sent instructions to Joseph” (v. 16) with a carefully worded message designed to play on Joseph’s emotions. After all, Joseph had attended to his father’s last request to be buried in Canaan. Now, here was yet another last request of his dying father for reconciliation among the brothers. We can remember that Jacob had done much the same thing when forced to return to Canaan from Paddan-Aram and face his estranged brother Esau (Genesis 32:4).

The brothers acknowledged their guilt, and they also acknowledged that their father fully understood “the offense of your brothers and their sin” (v. 17). In addition to the plea from beyond the grave by their father, the brothers added their own, “and now, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your Father” (v. 17). Notice that this last request was framed in the language of the covenant. The brothers were reminding Joseph that they, too, were servants of the “God of your Father” (v. 17).

Clearly, there is some question about the authenticity of this message. It is curious that no such speech by Jacob is recorded in Scripture. And we must acknowledge that these brothers had not always been reliable with the truth, as Joseph, himself, well knew. Also, if Jacob had harbored such feelings, it seems likely that he would have made them known to Joseph personally, rather than simply leave it to his other sons to convince Joseph of his wishes. He did request that Joseph swear an oath to have his body buried in Canaan. Therefore, it seems sensible that if Jacob had been concerned about how Joseph might treat his other sons after his death, he would have made Joseph swear an oath on that topic as well.

We cannot know for certain if Jacob ever made such a request, and it is not important that we do. The point of this narrative is not the integrity of the brothers, but the integrity of Joseph. He had chosen to forgive them. And his response was immediate. “Joseph wept when they spoke to him” (v. 17). Joseph wept because his brothers lived in fear of him. After all he had done in the intervening years after he revealed himself to them, they still were uncertain of his true feelings. Also, it may be that he wept because, perhaps, his father had not trusted that he would be forgiving and not take vengeance. To be told to be kind to your brothers from beyond the grave was painful, indeed, for a son to hear from a beloved father.

His brothers saw his tearful outburst, and in what I am certain was a combination of relief and penitence, “¹⁸his brothers also came and fell down before him and said, ‘behold, we are your servants.’¹⁹But Joseph said to them, ‘do not be afraid, for am I in God’s place? ²⁰As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to keep many people alive. ²¹So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.’ So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them” (v. 18-21).

Apparently, the brothers had wasted little time in approaching Joseph after sending their message. He had not had time to respond with a message of his own. Instead his brothers stood before him, and he wept. Once again, in fulfillment of Joseph's adolescent dreams, the brothers bowed before him. But this seems to have been unnoticed by Joseph. He no longer needed that affirmation. Instead, he was more intent on assuring that reconciliation took place. To do so, first he tried to calm them. His words, "do not be afraid" (v. 19), indicated that the fear of Joseph's brothers was evident in their faces as well as their words. Joseph again reminded his brothers that these events had transpired according to God's sovereign plan, and that God's plan prohibited him from taking any vengeance.

As an aside, we began Genesis with the study of two individuals who brought great punishment upon themselves for trying to be like God (Genesis 3:5). Here, at the end of the narrative, we find a man who refused to cross the line between the mortal and the divine. Joseph would be God's instrument, but not His substitute.

In fact, this had all been for the best, Joseph explained. To be sure, he had suffered, and suffered greatly, but that was not to be compared with the "present result" (v. 20) that God had intended. As with Judas Isacariot, God had used evil intentions for good, not only to the chosen line, but in this case to pagan Egyptians as well. Such actions by God need not cause us either complaint or concern. "He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). Tens of thousands of people, perhaps, had been saved from starvation because one young man was enslaved and imprisoned for thirteen years. Joseph saw that, in terms of God's eternal plan, it had been a small price to pay.

Finally, Joseph assured his brothers that they would be provided for (v. 21). Egypt was enslaved, but not his family. Instead they would continue to live off the best of the land of Egypt, at least as long as Joseph was in charge.

The Death of Joseph

And so they did. In fact, Scripture passes over the next fifty years or so without much comment. We remember that Joseph was born when Jacob was about 91 years old. Since Jacob died at the age of 147 (Genesis 47:28), Joseph had been about 56 years old at his father's death. Now we are at Joseph's death at the age of 110 (v. 22). For the engineers and others who enjoy mathematics, it has been pointed out that:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Abraham lived 175 years} &= 7 \times 5^2 \\ \text{Isaac lived 180 years} &= 5 \times 6^2 \\ \text{Jacob lived 147 years} &= 3 \times 7^2 \\ \text{Joseph lived 110 years} &= 1 \times 5^2 + 6^2 + 7^2 \end{aligned}$$

This aside, the one detail that we are offered is that Joseph had enjoyed his family. ²²Now Joseph stayed in Egypt, he and his father's household, and Joseph lived 110 years. ²³Joseph saw the third generation of Ephraim's sons; also the sons of Machir, the son of Manasseh, were born on Joseph's knees" (v. 22-23).

Recall that to live to 110 years was seen as a sign of special blessing by the gods in Egyptian culture. As Joseph grew older, his adopted countrymen must have continued to venerate the man who had saved them

from a famine that had, almost, passed out of memory. But in his own culture, to see “the third generation of Ephraim’s sons; also the sons of Machir, the son of Manasseh” (v. 23) was more significant. Joseph held his great-great-grandchildren, a moment of great joy for any aging person. Joseph had the privilege of seeing his family prosper and flourish in the remaining half-century of his life. And at the end, he was surrounded by his family.

As his own time to be reunited with his ancestors came near, Joseph, like his father, had a special request. He wanted the reconciliation to continue as he hoped to be buried alongside his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. So,

“²⁴Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am about to die, but God will assuredly take care of you and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.’ ²⁵Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, ‘God will assuredly take care of you, and you shall carry my bones up from here.’ ²⁶So Joseph died at the age of 110 years; and they embalmed him and placed him in a coffin in Egypt” (v. 24-26).

There is no reason to think that all of his brothers had survived to witness Joseph’s death. After all, he was the second youngest of thirteen children. The language is not that specific, and it is not intended to be. The point is that, at the end, the family had reunited. Like his father, Joseph died knowing that God would fulfill His promises. “God will assuredly take care of you” (v. 25) is the most comforting thought a parent can have on their deathbed. The solemnity of the occasion was matched by Joseph’s faith. He, too, knew that God would restore the family to the land that had been promised to Abraham centuries before. And although Joseph had no way of knowing that the fulfillment of that promise lay another few centuries in the future, he still trusted that it would come to pass.

When Joseph died, there was no rush to have him taken back to Canaan. Joseph’s faith enabled him to wait. Perhaps there were other circumstances that prohibited his body from being taken immediately to Canaan, he was after all a chief Egyptian official and was certainly mourned and buried with the customs appropriate to his station, but more likely Joseph was content to be buried in Egypt and to wait for God to work His will. It is a lesson for us all.

Takeaways

As we finish our look at Genesis, I am impressed with the serenity and confidence of the patriarchs. This faithfulness and trust in God was a direct result of having walked with God for years, and having seen God both bless them and chastise them. Through it all, these men began to understand that God’s plan and promises of land, seed, and blessing were certain and that He would bring it all to fruition in His own perfect timing. As Joseph matured in his understanding of God and His ways, he was able to forgive his brothers. He understood that God is eternal, and therefore that His plans are eternal. That is not to say that God does not care about each individual moment in our lives, but rather that

“⁸My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways,” declares the Lord” (Isaiah 55:8).

We would do well to practice the faith of these patriarchs in our own daily walk with God.