

Then Jesus answered and said to them... “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life;”

“And These Are They Which Testify of Me”

Sermons on Genesis

A Coffin in Egypt

Genesis 50

With Study Questions

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A Coffin in Egypt

Genesis 50

Mourning for Jacob

Then 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 him, for such are the days required for those who are embalmed; and the Egyptians mourned for him seventy days (Genesis 50:1-3).

Joseph's faith in God and love for his father cultivated a heart-felt remorse at Jacob's death. Some are geared, as it were, for the flowing of tears; others are quite dry. Intemperance and dispassion both have their faults. The gushing friend or relative who hasn't the presence of mind to step down from the podium when he's making a spectacle of himself is no more, or less, guilty than one with the heart of granite. We are to invest our hearts in others and then temperately mourn their passing lest we find ourselves murmuring against God.

The embalming and the seventy days were the traditions of the Egyptians. It has been suggested that the Egyptians, since they lacked any hope in a resurrection, immoderately indulge in pomp beyond reason, giving merely a show of mourning for Jacob. I rather think Jacob had won the respect of all people—perhaps there was a bit of both.

Permission from Pharaoh

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.'" ⁶And Pharaoh said, "Go up and bury your father, as he made you swear" (Genesis 50:4-6).

Joseph never got too big for his britches. He makes no assumption that it is permissible for him to leave Egypt. Perhaps he asks Pharaoh by way of Pharaoh's household so that it might not appear that they wish to leave Egypt because the land is detestable. This may have been an Egyptian custom or even a Hebrew custom. Be that as it may, Joseph asks permission based upon an oath his father made him swear by. Even Pharaoh honors the value of an oath.

Oaths and vows

It is wrong to interpret the Sermon on the Mount as prohibition against all oaths and vows. Proper oaths are godly and carry with them more weight than a simple promise. There are mitigating circumstances that need to be considered. For example, if I make a promise to my children to go to Disneyland and it rains I can postpone or even cancel the promise (say we lived in Alaska and were leaving that night). On the other hand, if I make a vow to stay with my wife as long as we live I can't cancel the promise on account of weather.

A very great gathering

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. ⁹And there went up with him both chariots and horsemen, and it was a very great gathering (Genesis 50:7-9).

All but the little ones and animals journey from Goshen to Canaan for the memorial service. This included the servants and elders of Pharaoh as well. Certain people become symbols of certain truths and ideals. When a king or a president dies the memorial seeks to establish as sacred those things for which the king stood. Sadly, many of these ideals, throughout history and today, are either charades of the person's true heart or as timeless as a flickering candle. Jacob's death would symbolize the everlasting covenant of God with His children.

Deep mourning of the Egyptians

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. ¹¹And 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 (Genesis 50:10, 11).

It is difficult to separate the personal affection all must have had with Jacob from that which Jacob signified—the covenant promise of God. And although we recognize that the gospel is the power of salvation, our lives and speech matter. A good meal poorly seasoned is often unnecessarily resisted.

Strong testimony lies here regarding the next generation of Egyptians who oppressed the children of Jacob.

Burying Jacob

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 (Genesis 50:12-14).

A time would come when Canaan would belong to the Hebrews. Until then they settled for a cave bought by Abraham to bury Sarah. This little cave served as a sort of down payment. Little doubt the sons of Jacob, as they proceeded by Egypt, contemplated ownership of the Promised Land. But the Promised Land would be theirs in God's timing.

Whether we're seeking to hasten the growth of Christ's church or our own presence in heaven, it is God's timing we must bow before and resist taking matters into our own hands; even if it seems most expeditious.

The brother's fear

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "Perhaps Joseph will hate us, and may actually repay us for all the evil which we did to him." ¹⁶ So they sent *messengers* to Joseph, saying, "Before your father died he commanded, saying, ¹⁷ "Thus you shall say to Joseph: "I beg you, please forgive the trespass of your brothers and their sin; for they did evil to you." Now, please, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of your father." And Joseph wept when they spoke to him (Genesis 50:15-17).

Solomon writes, "**The wicked flee when no one pursues**" (**Proverbs 28:1**). Though the brothers, no doubt, had been repentant for many years, there was no escaping the fear of possibly having to face the consequences for their actions. Since I dealt with the issue of consequences for action in detail last week, I won't do so here. Let us take to heart, however, the words of Solomon, "**A tranquil heart is life to the body but passion is rotteness to the bones**" (**Proverbs 14:30**).

Small view of grace

But what is even more pathetic is their paltry understanding of the gratuitous nature of Joseph. They think they must make up a lie to force Jacob's continued mercy. If there is anything that surfaces in the Reformed doctrines of grace, it is this; God's mercy is everlasting. It can't be won or earned by human power, wisdom, invention or will—nor can it be vanquished, for it is God who justifies (Romans 8:33). Are there any of us who haven't come to realize that the favor enjoyed by the guilty brothers is a result of Joseph's heart and nothing they have done? Is Christ less than Joseph?

For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. ⁴ But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, ⁵ not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life (Titus 3:3-7).

A Christian who seeks tranquility and peace with God in anything less than the accomplished work of Christ alone is fodder for fear and insecurity of faith. His brothers' lack of understanding causes Joseph to weep.

Words of comfort

Then his brothers also went and fell down before his face, and they said, "Behold, we *are* your servants." ¹⁹ Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid, for *am* I in the place of God? ²⁰ But as for you, you meant evil against me; *but* God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as *it is* this day, to save many people alive. ²¹ Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones." And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them (Genesis 50:18-21).

Joseph's patience

This could have been the last straw but Joseph is truly a type of Christ. There is a sad humor in many cultic thoughts toward the Christian's disposition in reconciliation with brothers. Joseph could have pointed to any number of errors in his brothers' appeal. Surely they admitted their old sin; there was no denying it. But what about their new sin—their sin of deceit!?

Playing God

Jacob had already pronounced his judgments on the sons; Joseph didn't view that as his office. It is not as if those who inflict justice are playing God. They are only playing God if it is not their post. Joseph offers words of comfort.

The joy of God's sovereignty

Joseph's own steady mind—a mind that proved quite beneficial to his brothers—proceeded from his grasp of God's sovereignty. He does not dismiss the evil of his brothers, but lays it under the providence of God. Joseph understood what most modern evangelicals arrogantly resist, that he, as Calvin writes, **“was sold by the wicked consent of his brethren, and by the secret providence of God.”**¹

In words better than mine, Calvin explains,

This truly must be generally agreed, that nothing is done without his will; because he both governs the counsels of men, and sways their wills and turns their efforts at his pleasure, and regulates all events; but if men undertake anything right and just, he so actuates and moves them inwardly by his Spirit, that whatever is good in them, may justly be said to be received from him; but if Satan and ungodly men rage, he acts by their hands in such an inexpressible manner, that the wickedness of the deed belongs to them, and the blame of it is imputed to them. For they are not induced to sin, as the faithful are to act aright, by the impulse of the Spirit, but they are the authors of their own evil and follow Satan as their leader...if human minds cannot reach these depths, let them rather suppliantly adore the mysteries they do not comprehend, than, as vessels of clay, proudly exalt themselves against their Maker.²

God ordains whatsoever comes to pass.

A coffin in Egypt

So Joseph dwelt in Egypt, he and his father's household. And Joseph lived one hundred and ten years. ²³ Joseph saw Ephraim's children to the third *generation*. The children of Machir, the son

¹ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, Vol. I*. (Baker Book House, reprint 1993), p. 487.

² John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, Vol. I*. (Baker Book House, reprint 1993), p. 488.

of Manasseh, were also brought up on Joseph's knees. ²⁴And Joseph said to his brethren, "I am dying; but God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land to the land of which He swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." ²⁵ Then Joseph took an oath from the children of Israel, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here." ²⁶ So Joseph died, *being one hundred and ten years old; and they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt (Genesis 50:22-26).*

Joseph enjoys many years with his family. Significant it is that the closing words are not Joseph enjoying his Fortune 500 status in Egypt but rather enjoying his family. Joseph assures his people that God will visit and bring them out of Egypt to the Promised Land. He then proceeds to take an oath from the children of Israel that, when that day comes, they bring his bones out as well. For hundreds of years the decaying bones and flesh of Joseph would serve as a reminder of deliverance. Of course we have a Savior whose body saw no decay or corruption; a body that ascended to the right hand of the Father. We are reminded of deliverance when we partake in remembrance of His broken body.

Questions for Study

1. Memorial services are tender situations. What are some dispositions to be pursued/avoided (page 1)?
2. When are oaths and vows proper/improper (pages 1, 2)?
3. What did Jacob's memorial symbolize (page 2)?
4. Why is it important that evangelism be accompanied by proper behavior (page 2)?
5. The Israelites went back to Egypt. Why wouldn't they have sought to remain in Canaan (page 3)?
6. Why did the brothers fear Joseph may decide to repay them for their evil (page 3)?
7. Discuss the brothers' view of Joseph's grace and our view of God's grace (pages 3, 4).
8. How did Joseph comfort his brothers (page 4)?
9. How was Joseph able to go through all his trials and remain tender-hearted toward his brothers (page 5)?
10. Discuss the providence of God (page 5)?
11. Why did Joseph take an oath from the children of Israel (page 6)?
12. What would Joseph's bones signify (page 6)?