



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Hope

Genesis 49:29-50:26

Fr. William Klock

November 17, 2013 – Trinity 25

Jacob's death is given a very large place in the closing chapters of Genesis. As we've seen, Chapter 48 is taken up with his adoption and blessing of Joseph's sons. Chapter 49, which we looked at last week, is Jacob's last testament. And now as we come to the end of Chapter 49 and to Chapter 50, we see Jacob's death and burial given much more attention than we've seen given to any of the other patriarchs. Even Joseph's death gets only five verses at the end of the chapter. The storyteller does all of this for a reason. As we come to the end of Genesis, Jacob's death and all the blessings and activities that surround it sum up the covenant promises that God has made so far. And then with those promises very firmly in hand, Jacob gives his sons hope as he points to the future fulfilment of those promises.

In his death, Jacob passes on his faith to his sons and gives them a reason to hope. But Jacob does more than that; his story also strengthened the faith of later generations and gave them reason to hope in God's faithfulness. As we read these verses, imagine yourself with the Israelites four centuries later, telling this story around campfires in the wilderness during the Exodus. Think of the Jews living in exile in Babylon, away from the land of promise and away from the temple and hearing the story of Jacob's faith. Think of the Jews still living in an exile of sorts even after they returned from Babylon—living in the land of

promise, but still dominated by foreign, pagan rule. Consider how the hope that Jacob gave to his sons in death exhorted those later generation in their faith—giving them reason to trust God and his promises, and reason to hope that one day they *would* be fulfilled.

We'll pick-up where we left off last week, with verse 29 of Chapter 49. Jacob's sons have gathered at his bedside and he's just finished blessing them.

Then he commanded 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, in the cave that is in the field at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess as a burying place. There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife. There they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife, and there I buried Leah—the field and the cave that is in it were bought from the Hittites." When Jacob finished commanding his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed and breathed his last and was gathered to his people. (Genesis 49:29-33)

Jacob had just finished blessing his sons in a poetic testament that described a future life of abundant blessing in the land God had promised their forefathers. Now, for the third time, he expresses his wish to be buried in that land. As he was preparing to leave Canaan, Jacob had looked for confirmation that resettling his family in Egypt was the right thing to do. In response, in Genesis 46:4, God has assured him: "I will also bring you up again, and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes." Joseph is about to fulfil the second part of that promise, but before he dies Jacob insists that his sons carry out the first part. And in his

instructions, Jacob gives the details of that little plot of land that Abraham had purchased from Ephron the Hittite. The point of those details is to stress Israel's legal title to that land. Just as Abraham had, Jacob saw it as a down-payment and an earnest on God's future gift of the entire land of Canaan. His burial there with his family was a declaration to his sons and to future generations of his faith in God and his covenant.

Then Joseph fell on his father's face and wept over him and kissed him. And Joseph commanded his servants the physicians to embalm his father. So the physicians embalmed Israel. Forty days were required for it, for that is how many are required for embalming. And the Egyptians wept for him seventy days. (Genesis 50:1-3)

Joseph sees to Jacob's preparation for burial in the Egyptian style. Mummification was a lengthy process that involved removing the internal organs and soaking the body in nitre or saltpetre in order to preserve it.¹ Mummification wasn't the practise of Joseph's people, but neither was a seventy-day period of mourning. Mummification allowed for the seventy days, it allowed for the transport of Jacob's body back to Canaan, and probably most importantly, it was the Egyptians' way of showing him honour. Jacob's "funeral" wasn't limited to his own family; this became an Egyptian state funeral.

And when the days of weeping for him were past, Joseph spoke to the household of Pharaoh, saying, "If now I have found favor in your eyes, please speak in the ears of Pharaoh, saying, 'My father made me swear, saying, "I am about to

¹ Joseph Vergote, *Joseph en Égypte* (Louvain: Publications universitaires, 1959), pages 197-200.

die: in my tomb that I hewed out for myself in the land of Canaan, there shall you bury me.” Now therefore, let me please go up and bury my father. Then I will return.” And Pharaoh answered, “Go up, and bury your father, as he made you swear.” So Joseph went up to bury his father. With him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his household, and all the elders of the land of Egypt, as well as all the household of Joseph, his brothers, and his father’s household. Only their children, their flocks, and their herds were left in the land of Goshen. And there went up with him both chariots and horsemen. It was a very great company. When they came to the threshing floor of Atad, which is beyond the Jordan, they lamented there with a very great and grievous lamentation, and he made a mourning for his father seven days. When the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, saw the mourning on the threshing floor of Atad, they said, “This is a grievous mourning by the Egyptians.” Therefore the place was named Abel-mizraim; it is beyond the Jordan. Thus his sons did for him as he had commanded them, for his sons carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave of the field at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess as a burying place. After he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt with his brothers and all who had gone up with him to bury his father. (Genesis 50:4-14)

Joseph fulfils Jacob’s dying request, but all Egypt joins in, not only mourning the old patriarch, but as Pharaoh sends his household his elders or officials, and a military guard with Joseph and his family all

the way to Canaan. What’s interesting is that they don’t take the direct route from Egypt. Instead, they travel east and enter Canaan from the Transjordan—they follow the same route that the Israelites would take to Canaan after the Exodus. In that, Jacob becomes the first of his people to make that exodus journey to the land of promise. When they arrive the entire entourage stops at the threshing floor of Atad. Threshing floors were sort of ancient public places. When they weren’t being used to thresh grain, they were used for civic events and wedding celebrations. Here the Egyptians and sons of Israel mourn for seven days before Joseph and his brothers go on alone to bury Jacob in the family plot. And this enormous funeral procession didn’t go unnoticed by the Canaanites. We’re told that they named the place Abel-mizraim, meaning “The Mourning of Egypt”.

Now, imagine what this vivid description of Jacob’s funeral communicated to later generations. It spoke to the Israelites as they endured their slavery in Egypt, giving them assurance and reason to hope for a return to the land God had promised. To the Israelites during the Exodus, it gave that same hope. Despite the hardships of the wilderness and the ferocity of the Canaanites, this was a reminder that God would see them home. But consider even later generations as they lived in exile. The prophets, like Isaiah, told the people of a time when “all the nations shall flow” to Jerusalem and “many peoples shall come, and say: ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob’” (Isaiah 2:2-3). Zechariah described it very dramatically saying, “In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, ‘Let us go with you,

for we have heard that God is with you” (Zechariah 8:23). Jacob’s sons, accompanied by this royal Egyptian entourage pointed to that future hope in which the Jewish exiles trusted. Jacob’s burial in the promised land, accompanied by his Egyptian entourage foreshadows the day of which the Lord says, according to Ezekiel, “I will now bring Jacob back from captivity and will have compassion on all the people of Israel” (Ezekiel 39:25 NIV). Here at the end of Genesis is the hope of a day when the Messiah would come to rescue his people from their long exile and establish his kingdom by drawing the nations to himself.

After returning to Egypt and with their father gone, Joseph’s brothers are again afraid that he might now take his revenge on them. Look at verses 15-18:

When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him.” So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, “Your father gave this command before he died: ‘Say to Joseph, “Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.”’ And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, “Behold, we are your servants.”

Joseph’s brothers might have made up this message from Jacob, but it’s entirely possible that on his deathbed Jacob could have said something like this for their sake. The text doesn’t really help us discern what might have happened one way or the other. The point is that the brothers were

afraid and made an emotional appeal to Joseph. They present a deathbed wish from their father, they bow down before Joseph, and—for the first time—they finally apologise for selling him into slavery. They had shown fear and remorse when they had first come to Egypt, but, again, this is the first time they've truly owned their sin and apologized. And yet look at Joseph's response:

But Joseph said to them, “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.” Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. (Genesis 50:19-21)

In these verses Joseph sums up the whole message of Genesis for us. Joseph's brothers were afraid that he would pay evil back with evil, but Joseph responds: “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God?” Brothers and sisters, that's the problem. Genesis describes God creating the cosmos as a temple for himself. It shows him creating human beings to be his worshipers. And then it shows us attempting to turn the temple upside-down as we try to take God's role on ourselves. Our usurpation of God's place in the temple is the root cause of our sin problem. We stopped trusting God to provide what was good and decided to get it for ourselves. But we failed. We proved that we're unable to determine good from evil for ourselves. Our knowledge, our vision, and our wisdom are too limited. God created us to rely on him for that knowledge. And so in assuring his brother with these words, Joseph shows not only his own wisdom, but he points us to the way of salvation. He calls us all to

step back from our rebellion, to stop trying to throw God from his throne, and to trust him to govern and care for his temple and his worshipers.

And Joseph gives us reason to trust him. He tells his brothers, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.” We may run riot in God's temple; we may even do our best to try to topple him from his throne, but God is always there, the immovable and sovereign master of his Creation. Why did God create when he knew his creation would rebel? Why did he allow humanity to be tempted? Why did he allow sin to continue? Why does he allow trials and tribulations? Joseph gives us the answer: “What we mean for evil, God means for good.”

This may not “click” for us until Joseph speaks here at the end of the story, but if we stand back and look at the whole book of Genesis, it should all fall into place. Despite humanity's sin, God has sovereignly continued to see that his original blessing on his creation is restored. In response to sin we see God's holiness, his justice, and his wrath, but we also see his mercy, his love, his goodness and, ultimately, his faithfulness. In the beginning we saw that for God to see a need is for God to also perfectly provide, and throughout the storyline of Genesis we see him doing just that. From a limited human perspective his provision sometimes seems odd, sometimes it seems cruel, sometimes it seems to be missing completely. Consider Abraham remaining childless for a century. Consider Joseph sold into slavery and then languishing in prison. But then in the end we see that God has been faithfully working behind the scenes, outmanoeuvring human attempts to upset his throne and restoring order to his temple once again. Genesis gives us reason to hope for that

future day when God will set *all* to rights once and for all. We've seen his plan unfold bit by bit, we've seen the manifestations of his goodness and his good provision, and so we have every reason to trust that his plan will continue to unfold. And that's an important message for the Bible to establish here at the beginning. It becomes the guiding principle of faith from here on out, through the history of Israel, through the preaching of the Prophets, and taking us right through the fulfilment of the covenant promises in the person of Jesus. And yet the need to trust doesn't end at the cross. Jesus drew Jew and Gentile together and established his kingdom, and then sent the Apostles to proclaim its coming and its presence to the world. He sent the apostles to proclaim his incarnation, his death, his resurrection, and his ascension and to call men and women into his kingdom by trusting him for the forgiveness of their sins as they passed through the waters of baptism. At the cross, Jesus defeated sin and death. In our baptism he extends his victory to us. And yet we must still live in faith as we await the ultimate destruction of those enemies—of sin and death—and for all to be made right in his temple once and for all.

This is the pattern we're called to follow: God acts and proves his faithfulness; we then respond in faith, trusting in his continuing faithfulness. And Joseph illustrates this beautifully in his own death. Look at the final verses of Chapter 50:

So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father's house. Joseph lived 110 years. And Joseph saw Ephraim's children of the third generation. The children also of Machir the son of Manasseh were counted as Joseph's own. And

Joseph said to his brothers, “I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.” Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here.” So Joseph died, being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt. (Genesis 50:22-26)

That Joseph is said to have lived 110 years is significant. 110 was considered by the Egyptian to be the ideal age at which to die. It also points to Joseph as the last of the patriarchs. The ages of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all follow a mathematical pattern. That pattern is summed up in and concludes at 110. Joseph’s death is the conclusion of the age of the patriarchs² But most importantly, Joseph’s final words to his family express the faith and hope that come from submission to God’s sovereignty. Following after the example of his father, Jacob, and sure in faith as a result of having seen God at work in history and in his own life, Joseph expressed his wish to one day be buried in Canaan. And yet while God had promised to Jacob that he would return to Canaan himself, Joseph died with faith in the promise that his people would return on a future day. And so Joseph was embalmed, his body preserved for that day, four centuries away, when he would be carried out of Egypt at the Exodus and buried in the promised land.

² Abraham: $175 = 7 \times 5^2$
Isaac: $180 = 5 \times 6^2$
Jacob: $147 = 3 \times 7^2$
Joseph: $110 = 1 \times 5^2 + 6^2 + 7^2$

This strongly implies that the great ages of the patriarchs should be taken symbolically, rather than literally. Doing so resolves a number of problems, not least of which is the timeline of the story and, for example, Jacob’s great physical strength at the age of eighty.

You see, Joseph lived his life with the conviction that God is sovereign, that God is good, and that God is faithful to fulfil his promises. The faith we see in Joseph is the practical outworking of his statement to his brothers that what they meant for evil, God meant for good. And so Joseph calls us to faith in this sovereign, good, and faithful God. Joseph calls us to live in hope of the fulfilment of his sure and certain promises—that what God has promised, what God has begun and set in motion, God is sure to bring to completion. And yet, brothers and sisters, we have not only the witness of Joseph; we have the witness of the rest of Scripture. We have seen the fulfilment of God’s promises to Abraham in Jesus Christ. In Jesus we have seen the seed of the woman whom God promised would crush the serpent’s head. In Jesus we have seen the great king whom Jacob trusted would arise from the line of Judah. In Jesus we have not only seen the coming of the kingdom of God, but we’ve also received his invitation to enter into that kingdom. And as people of his kingdom, we are offered each week at his Table, signs and seals of his goodness and his faithfulness. As Abraham received that little cave at Mechpelah as a down-payment on the land God had promised, here at the Lord’s Table we receive a down-payment—a foretaste—of the great feast that awaits us on that final day when all is set to rights in God’s temple and the way will once again be open to the tree of life. And so, brothers and sisters, consider that to us, whose vision of God’s faithfulness includes not only the stories of the patriarchs, but the witness of all of Holy Scripture and the ministry of Jesus the Messiah himself, Joseph speaks his final words to us: “God will surely visit

you and bring you to the land which he has promised.”

Let us pray: Sovereign Lord, thank you for the witness to your faithful goodness that we have in the book of Genesis. Thank you that even as we rebelled against you, our Creator, you have not left us slaves to sin and death. Thank you that as Christians we can see the fulfilment of your redemptive plans, set in motion here in Genesis, fulfilled in Jesus. Thank you for the continuing assurance of your faithfulness that you give us in your Word as we read it in Scripture and as we receive him incarnate in the Sacrament. Give us grace to live our lives in faithful hope that what you have begun you will bring to completion. Give us grace to live in submission and obedience to your good will. And as we experience your blessing in our own lives, show us how to carry that blessing to the world around us in fulfilment of your promise to Abraham. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.