

Full Circle

The End of the Beginning

²⁹ 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,
³⁰ 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.
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 in it were bought from the Hittites."
³³ When Jacob finished commanding his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed and breathed his last and was gathered to his people.

50:1 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 it, for that is how many are required for embalming. And the Egyptians wept for him seventy days.

⁴ 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,

⁵ "My father made me swear, saying, "I am about to 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."

⁶ And Pharaoh answered, "Go up, and bury your father, as he made you swear."

- ⁷ 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,
- ⁸ 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.
- ⁹ And there went up with him both chariots and horsemen. It was a very great company.
- ¹⁰ 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.
- ¹¹ 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.
- ¹² Thus his sons did for him 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 at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess as a burying place.
- ¹⁴ 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.
- ¹⁵ 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."
- ¹⁶ So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died:
- ¹⁷ '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.
- ¹⁸ His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants."

- ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God?
²⁰ 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.
²¹ So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.
²² So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father's house. Joseph lived 110 years.
²³ 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.
²⁴ 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."
²⁵ Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here."
²⁶ So Joseph died, being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.

Genesis 49:29-50:26

Full Circle

The Byrds, who are famous for their song on Ecclesiastes which begins, “**To everything turn, turn, turn...**” wrote another song called “Full Circle.” It begins, “**Funny how the circle turns around, First you’re up and then your down again. Though the circle takes what it may give, Each time around it makes it live again.**” Up and down, turning turning turning, always returning to the place it

began. There are plenty of interesting metaphors to be had here. Here is one example.

Good stories are often like the circle. They begin somewhere, meander through a whole range of settings, characters, and plot twists, only to finally return to the place where it all began. The Bible is like this. It starts at **creation** and ends in the **new creation**. It begins in a **garden-mountain** and ends in a **garden-city**. humanity is planted at the foot of a **tree**, is kicked out from its midst, only to finally see God's people return to the **tree of life** with its healing fruit for the nations.

Ancient Jewish teachers understood the helpful teaching nature of telling stories like this. Thus, the Genesis 50 opens in the Targums with a rather lengthy expansion for the sake of teaching and returning to the beginning.

Joseph laid his father in a bed of ivory overlaid with pure gold, inlaid with precious stones, and reinforced with linen cords. There they poured out foaming wines, and there they burned the best of spices; there stood the heroes of those of the house of Esau, and the heroes of those of the house of Ishmael; there stood Judah the lion—the hero among his brothers. He spoke up and said to

his brothers, “[Come, let us plant for our father]¹ a tall cedar whose top will reach towards the heavens and whose branches cover all the inhabitants of the earth; and its roots reach to the bottom of the deep.² From him there arose twelve tribes, and from him there are destined to arise kings and rulers, as well as the priests in their divisions to offer sacrifices; and from him there shall arise the Levites in their groupings to sing.” Behold, then Joseph inclined upon his father’s face and wept over him and kissed him [for Jacob had expired and had been gathered up to his people].³

(Genesis 50:1 with 49:33, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan)

Though it was long ago, let us remember where we came from in Genesis. God created the heavens and the earth as the spirit was hovering over the deep (Gen 1:1-2). There soon sprang forth a river flowing out of Eden that divided into four branches. Downstream of one branch

¹ This is from Targum Neofiti. Pseudo-Jonathan, “Come, let us weep over our father.” The note here reads, “Come let us plant (*nbn*’, lit. “build”) for our father a tall cedar (*’rz*).” Since the use of *nbny* (generally used in the sense of “build”) for planting a tree is quite unusual, B. Barry Levy (1, 1986, 309f.) is of the opinion that it seems that Judah wanted to build an *’rz*’, i.e., ‘a chest for collecting bones, a sarcophagus,’ possibly a pyramid.” Thus, at least, with regard to the original form of the paraphrase, which would have been elaborated later when *’rz*’ was believed to have denoted to a cedar.

² Neofiti, “... its roots reaching to the generations of the world.”

³ *Italics* are the expansion. Regular type is the Scripture quoted in the Targum.

there was gold and precious stones (Gen 2:11-12). The source of these rivers was the Garden of God wherein he had planted two mighty trees (8-9). But they were kicked out of the Garden (3:23) and at some point died (5:5). Generations past and great giant heroes rose up (6:1-4), only to be a major source of the mass-death called the Flood (6:7).

In the Targum we find that Jacob is laid in a bed of gold and precious stones and a mighty tree is planted from the deep to the heavens in his name as his sons weep over his dead body. The symbolism returns us to these early parts of Genesis as the story comes now comes full circle. Funny how the circle turns around. First you're up and then you're down again.

The Last Chapter

Genesis 50 is the last chapter of this first book of the Bible. It ends like so many other stories in Genesis have: with death. Yet, like so much of the rest of the book, it looks forward beyond itself to a hope unseen yet believed. But I wonder. Have you seen this hope here?

Hope unseen is what we call *eschatology*. Eschatology is the study of “last things.” Normally, we think of the last

book of the Bible as being full of eschatology. Yet, the first book actually begins with an eschatological hope. Indeed, as Geerhardus Vos has noticed, **eschatology precedes soteriology**. The very pattern of creation causes us to look forward, even before there is sin and death. **Michael Horton** explains what this means:

The goal of redemption is not simply restoration, ‘paradise restored,’ but the consummation; and for this not only forgiveness but the perfect fulfillment of the law was required. Jesus recapitulated in himself the history of Adam ... in order to bring us not only out of ruin into a state of innocence, or guilt into forgiveness, but to bring the whole creation into the everlasting Sabbath ... What God is after in redemptive history is not merely the forgiveness of humanity and restoration to an original state but the fulfillment of the original commission for humanity and, through a successful outcome to its trial, entrance into God’s own glory.⁴

⁴ Michael Horton, *Lord and Servant* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 220.

If from the beginning Genesis has been about causing us to look forward beyond death, then in a chapter that is mostly about death, a chapter that completes the same book that began this way, it is our duty to see and understand how something beyond death might be present here. If we can do this, then we will move beyond the physical world of the Patriarchs to the hope that they themselves had and instilled in their children who, by the grace of God, believed it too. Indeed, we will move into the spiritual world of Holy Scripture where our souls can be nourished and fed by the Word of God. This is how I want to end our time in Genesis.

Bury Me In Beulah Land

We will actually begin today in **Genesis 49:29**. Then we will go all the way through the end of the book. The material here is part of the broader story that began when Jacob began to bless his grandsons (**ch. 48**) and then moved on to blessing his twelve sons (**49:1-28**). Now, Jacob—the last of the three great Patriarchs of Israel—dies.

The scene begins with Jacob's very last words. He gives his sons instructions for his burial. Believe it or not, this

section is filled with the eschatological hope we just discussed. The hope precedes the death.

Now, Jacob knows that he is going to die. He says, “**I am to be gathered to my people**” (**Gen 49:29**). His hope is not that he can somehow cheat death. He knows he is going to die. His **hope lies beyond death**. This is the meaning of his words: **I am to be gathered to my people**.

He does not say, “**I am going to die**,” though that is language often used in the Bible of both unbelievers and believers. Death is real. Each of us really is going to die in the body. But Jacob says, “**I am to be gathered to my people**.” This assumes a soul. It assumes that his people *still exist*. “**His people**,” of course, are Isaac and Rebekah, Abraham and Sarah, Rachel and Leah—each of whom preceded Jacob in death. This is the same kind of a point that Jesus made about the resurrection when he told the Pharisees “**I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him**” (**Mark 22:32; Luke 20:37-38**).

Jacob expresses his hope in the future not only through this statement, but through what comes after it. “**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” (49:29-31). Why was it so important for Jacob that he be buried back in Canaan? He knew he was going to die in Egypt. Why not just be content to be buried in Egypt?

It is because of [the Promise](#). Jacob was promised Canaan, not Egypt. It is because of his hope. Canaan signifies the eternal country, Salem the eternal city with foundations, whose builder is God. “Beulah land. I’m longing for you and someday on thee I’ll stand. There my home shall be eternal. Beulah land. Sweet Beulah land.” “A wonderful land is waiting, just over Jordan’s tide. Remember victory is on the other side.” “Deep River, My home is over Jordan. Deep River, Lord. I want to cross over into campground.” “Roll, Jordan, roll. I want to go to heaven when I die to hear Jordan roll.”

Each of these songs express the hope of Canaan as the eternal home for which Jacob longed. This isn’t reading

back our context into the passage, since Hebrews tells us they were looking forward to this (**Heb 11:10**). To be buried in Canaan was to tell his children that this is where your hope lies. Not in the glories, beauty, and wealth of Egypt; your hope lies in the Lord's Delight. "You shall no longer be termed Forsaken, Nor shall your land any more be termed Desolate; But you shall be called Hephzibah, and your land Beulah; For the LORD delights in you, And your land shall be married" (**Isa 62:4 NKJ**). Isaiah is signifying something more than land. To be buried in the Promised Land was typologically to be in heaven.

With so much death in Genesis (at an absolute *bare* minimum we have seen over 2,000 years worth), the land is the one constant hope set forth from the days of Abram.⁵ Without such a hope, Genesis becomes just another history book: people live and people die. But with this hope, God sets before your eyes an expectation that you are to cling to with your own dying breath. The hope is that one day this world and you will be made new, resurrected and brought

⁵ Some have argued that "land" or "earth" as far back as Genesis 1-3 would have been closely tied in the minds of Jews to the Promised Land. Cf. John Sailhamer, *Genesis Unbound*.

to consummation. For this the glorious freedom of the children of God who die in Christ.

Nevertheless, we are still confronted with death. “When Jacob finished commanding his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed and breathed his last and was gathered to his people” (Gen 49:33). The breath of life given by the Spirit of God, returns to its Maker as the body of Jacob expires. The picture is one of an old man sitting up, who finally loses all his strength, lays up flat in his bed and enters into that long sleeping posture that will be his until the Lord returns in Glory.

It is terribly sad. Where the Targum took the opportunity to help the Jews of much later days understand the story, Genesis simply says, “Then Joseph fell on his father’s face and wept over him and kissed him” (50:1). This will be Joseph’s second to last moment of weeping. When he first saw his brothers and they confessed to him, he wept (42:24). When he laid eyes upon Benjamin, he wept (43:30). When his brothers return and repent, he made himself known and he wept (45:2). After forgiving his brothers, he wept (45:14-15). When he finally saw his father alive, he wept (46:29).

Each of those were tears of joy and wonder at the amazing Providence of a Sovereign and Good God. These are his first **tears of sorrow** and grief. **Like our Lord Jesus**, he wept when a beloved died. Jesus was no stoic unmoved mover in the face of such horror. The dreadfulness of death is its finality in this life. The lesson of death is that if you do not know the Lord Jesus who alone calls dead men out of the grave, the Second Death awaits, an eternity of weeping and gnashing the teeth, or hot fire and outer darkness.

Death is the great curse of Genesis. It is a curse that resulted from one man's sin. Because of this sin, all men die. Not even by reaching the end of the Genesis can we escape its powerful jaws. But Genesis is not the end.

Where O Death is thy victory? Where O Death is they sting? (1 Cor 15:55). Jesus called his friend out of the grave with nothing but a command and his name: **“Lazarus, come out”** (John 11:43). How? Because Jesus is Life and all in Christ have the eternal promise of everlasting life given to them even before they die, so that the Second Death should have no hold on them.

How Then Shall We Die?

But of course, Lazarus died again, and the hope of resurrection still resides in our own future, even as it did for Joseph. “And Joseph commanded his servants the physicians to embalm his father. So the physicians embalmed Israel” (50:2). Because I get asked about a related topic so often, I want to make a brief comment. Jacob is the first person in the Bible that was not laid to rest within hours of dying. Instead, his body was embalmed. This was the pagan way, the Egyptian way. As one dictionary says, “The idea behind this is based on the Egyptian belief that the body had to be preserved as a repository for the soul after death. The bodies of Jacob and Joseph are embalmed, and while this may have been done to soothe the feelings of the Egyptians, it also served the purpose of preserving their bodies for later burial in Canaan.”⁶

I had a professor who told a tearful story of his wife who took ill with a long and ravaging disease. He took it upon himself to take complete care of his wife, until alas, she went to be with her fathers. He refused to give her the

⁶ Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Ge 50:3.

standard American embalming, believing that the human body was too precious for such horrific treatment as what goes into this. Thus, like days gone by, he had her remains buried within hours of her death.

I'm often asked about whether it is "Christian" to **cremate** a body, because this is the ancient pagan practice of burning the body and such an idea is hardly becoming of Christianity which cares deeply about it. With the rising cost of funerals and the increase of the popularity of cremation, this question is not going away. Yet, not once have I been asked about whether it is "Christian" to embalm a body, even though that too is a pagan practice and almost everyone in America does it.

I will admit that cremation and embalming seemingly point to different views of the afterlife. The former can certainly give the rather **Gnostic** impression that the body is simply a husk, easily discarded because the spirit is what matters. Is it a coincidence that Hinduism actually mandates cremation while Christianity, Judaism, and Islam have traditionally frowned upon it? And is it a coincidence that as paganism returns with a vengeance to the West that

cremation is becoming the preferred way to take care of someone's "remains"?

But at the same time, it has to be admitted that Judaism used to frown on embalming as well, even though Jacob was embalmed and Joseph had no problem with it. Also, it clearly can be a greater burden on living relatives in our day and age to bury rather than to cremate. Given the fact that plenty of Christians have been incinerated over the years (anything from accidents to martyrdom), and that God is quite powerful enough to raise every human being from the dead regardless of what happens to their body, my take is that each person should make their own choice using wisdom as a guide.

Why would you want to cremate, or for that matter, to embalm? Do you think one choice or another says anything to people about your view of the afterlife? What kind of a theology of the body ought Christians to have? Any? Which passages of the Bible inform your view of such things? Do other passages that you are not considering have anything to add to your decision? These are the kinds of questions Christians should be asking themselves, and if you have a preference one way or the other it would be

best to make it known to people before you go the route of Jacob. My family knows that I would like to be buried with my fathers in Western Colorado in the cemetery they helped to found. Unless I actually die while I'm over there, odds are my body wouldn't make it without being embalmed.

Such are the curious questions we like to think about, even though the Scripture isn't necessarily concerned with them. Instead, I see the Scripture's take on this pagan [practice of embalming as neutral](#). Yet, as Scripture is wont to do, it uses the circumstances of Jacob's embalming to remind us of other things in Genesis. One of the ways it does it is through [numbers](#). "[Forty days were required for it, for that is how many are required for embalming. And the Egyptians wept for him seventy days](#)" ([Gen 50:3](#)). A little later, "[They lamented there with a very great and grievous lamentation, and he made a mourning for his father seven days](#)" ([10](#)).

While it is true that these were the general periods of time given for embalming and for mourning great heroes, those numbers remind us of things we've seen in Genesis: [Forty](#) reminds us of the Flood and the deaths of most

people on earth. Isaac was forty when he took Rebekah (25:20); Esau was forty when he took Judith (26:34). In this way, the number reminds us of both life and death. **Seventy** was the number of nations in Genesis 10 (correspondingly the number of the sons of God in the Targums of Genesis 6), and the number of children Jacob brought into Egypt (46:27). Thus, the number reminds us of the nations and therefore the covenant promise. **Seven** is the number of creation. For Joseph to mourn a full seven days means that his mourning ended on the eighth day, the day of newness, and as we have seen, the day of resurrection (see sermon on **Genesis 17:12**). All three ideas are wrapped up in Jacob's death—as he is now dead, as he is in Egypt, as the promise to bless the nations is still in our minds, and as his embalming will allow his body to one day go to Canaan in hopes of future life.

Hope Passed Down

At this point, the story moves us from hope hoped for to hope realized. This happens through the actions of **Joseph**. After the time of mourning was over, Joseph went to Pharaoh's household and told them, “**If now I have found favor in your eyes, please speak in the ears of Phar-**

aoh, saying, ‘My father made me swear, saying, 'I am about to 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’” (Gen 50:4-5). Joseph is a God-fearing man. He knows the covenant. He knows about Jacob’s desire. He believes in Jacob’s Hope.

Pharaoh answered, “Go up, and bury your father, as he made you swear” (6). “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 leaders 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” (7-9).

With these words, we get a foretaste of things to come. Not only do all of Jacob’s children return to Canaan, so also the Egyptians come and pay homage to the great man of God. Someone calls it, “The grandest state funeral recorded in the Bible ... on befitting the father of a na-

tion.”⁷ It was a royal procession to the border of Israel, near to the place where God had met so many times with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In this, we begin to get a foretaste of redemption to come. The covenantal promises of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are coming true. The nations are being blessed through Israel. Indeed, in a sense, the nations are coming to God.

But they have also come to weep for a great dead man and to weep with a great living man. Joseph has won their favor through his righteousness. Curiously, many of those mentioned here (“servants of Pharaoh,” “young children,” “flocks,” “herds,” “chariots,” “horsemen,” “encampment,” “very powerful”) next recur in the book of Exodus. Thus, our minds press forward to that great day of liberation.

Two verses speak of the “threshing floor of Atad, which is beyond the Jordan” (10, 11). This is curious. Here we have the entourage approaching the Jordan, which is completely out of the way from the King’s Highway that went along the Mediterranean. From Eusebius and Jerome to modern commentaries (Jewish Encyclopedia, Wenham,

⁷ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, vol. 2, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 488.

etc.), the idea seems to have been that they took a route south of the Dead Sea, around the eastern side, and then crossed over the Jordan on the north from the east, perhaps someplace like Jericho. In other words, this is the same basic route that Moses and Joshua took centuries later. To put it yet another way, this is a picture that later tells us of taking the Promised Land. It is redemption. So the whole language here pushes you forward, out of Genesis to the Great Beyond.

Then it says that the inhabitants of Canaan saw this huge party of Egyptians. They probably thought at first that a war was coming. But then they saw them weeping and lamenting (10-11). Great relief rushed over them and they named the site “Abel-Mizraim” or “Weeping of Egyptians.” Then we learn that only the sons of Israel went into Canaan, for the land was promised to them. The other stayed put, while Joseph and his brothers went and buried their father across the Jordan in the cave and field at Machpelah (12-13). Do you see how the text is pointing you back and yet also forward, from the past into the future, teaching you through the ritual great theology of redemption and salvation? It is a microcosm of redemptive

history in just a very few verses. It isn't only about death, but also life to come, as Joseph and his sons carried the hope of Israel to Canaan.

Sin and Sovereignty

But Genesis does not end in Canaan. It ends back in Egypt. This is its peculiarity. It must be so in order for God to display his great power in the days of Moses. History is just beginning. Thus, Joseph and his brothers return to Egypt (14). It is at this point that **his brothers begin to fear**. They have sinned greatly against their brother, and perhaps now that father is dead, he will take revenge on them all (15). Maybe Joseph has been lying all these years and for the sake of their father, pretended not to be angry. The mind of a sinner cannot help but feel insecure and fearful about what it has done, especially when protection is taken away and all is laid bare. They feel naked, ashamed, and utterly terrified. They are Adam in the Garden.

Because Joseph is so powerful and they are completely at his mercy, they send a message to their brother. It purports to be a message from their father (16): **“Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.”** **“Please forgive the transgression of**

the servants of the God of your father” (17). Then, perhaps the most profound few verses in all of Genesis rise up to speak to us.

Joseph weeps his seventh and final time.⁸ This is one of the most important sections in the Bible for what it says about God and for what it says to us. Listen well. Joseph has already forgiven them, but they do not believe him. Lack of faith in past forgiveness is the cause of no small amount of self-inflicted torment and needless burden. It is also the source of many strained relationships, not on the part of the one forgiving, but the one who has been forgiven. And frankly, this lack of faith comes at perhaps the most important point that faith is needed most. For the soul that has sinned feels itself in dire need of forgiveness, at least, if it is willingly admitting its guilt. But souls have this strange ability to not seek what they need most.

⁸ An eighth is implied:

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|---|-------------------------|
| 1. JOSEPH WEEPS AFTER HIS BROTHER'S CONFESSION | (GENESIS 42:24) |
| 2. JOSEPH WEEPS AFTER SEEING BENJAMIN | (GENESIS 43:30) |
| 3. JOSEPH WEEPS AFTER SEEING HIS BROTHER'S REPENTANCE | (GENESIS 45:2) |
| 4. JOSEPH WEEPS AFTER FORGIVING HIS BROTHERS | (GENESIS 45:14-15) |
| 5. JOSEPH WEEPS AFTER SEEING HIS FATHER | (GENESIS 46:29) |
| 6. JOSEPH WEEPS AFTER HIS FATHER'S DEATH | (GENESIS 50:1) |
| 7. JOSEPH WEEPS AFTER HIS BROTHERS LAPSE OF FAITH | (GENESIS 50:17) |
| 8. JOSEPH WEEPS AFTER HIS CAPTURE | (GENESIS 42:21 IMPLIED) |

Perhaps another question should be raised just here. How could Joseph actually forgive them? Forgiveness is, I believe, the single most important part of any lasting relationship. Why? Because people hurt each other. If there is no forgiveness, there can never be trust again. Forgiveness is the very heart of love. But how do you understand love? How could anyone forgive such wickedness as this? If you have ever seen evil up close, you know how hard this really is.

“His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, ‘Behold, we are your servants’” (18). Joseph knows this. It was his dream. His dream came at the hand of God himself. This last confirmation of the dreams fulfilled is the last confirmation that Joseph needs to help his brothers understand forgiveness. But it was not this act that allowed Joseph to forgive. Someone who has hurt you can never, no matter how humble they are, earn forgiveness. True forgiveness only comes because one understands and knows God ... and himself.

Behold. “Joseph said to them, ‘Do not fear, for am I in the place of God?’” (19). Joseph is not going to exact justice. That is God’s responsibility, not his. But this is not

necessarily good news. It could be that God doesn't care about humbling oneself, about humility, about repentance at all. That is why one must *know God*. What kind of God is this who judges and accepts the humble and contrite person?

“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” (Gen 50:20). This is one of the most profound yet difficult passages in the Bible for people to accept. Might I suggest that it is difficult to accept because people do not understand who God is?

To lay it out, it presents **one situation** with **two motivations**. Only the person who believes that God is in the midst of every situation could begin to see this. The situation is that the brothers wanted to kill him, changed their mind, sold him to their cousins into slavery, went back and lied to their father, and kept this hidden for many years. Their motivation was wicked, evil, horrible, sinful. Joseph does not coddle them by saying, “**There, there. I know you didn't mean to do it.**” No, they did mean to do it! They hated him. They couldn't hate anyone more. They meant

evil against him. He tells them so. They are rebuked. They are undone.

But there is another motivation behind the scenes. That motivation comes from God. Here then is one of the clearest passages of **God's sovereignty** in all the Bible. These many chapters of seeming minutia in the life of Joseph have worked themselves together so perfectly that here they stand now, having been saved from starvation and certain death which would have ended the nation and the promises of God. God meant these things **for good**. It couldn't say it any more clearly than this.

What this means is that **God purposed** for the brothers to sell Joseph. He determined that they should not kill him. He guided the slave traders to Egypt. He providentially let Joseph grow to a slave with some power. He allowed Potiphar's wife to trap them man, thus sending him to prison. He oversaw his time there, sending dreams to two men that eventually lead to Joseph's release and becoming a veritable prince of Egypt. Many of the things that happened here were evil. God did not *do* those evil things. Men did. Men desired evil in doing them. But God did not have a single moment of evil intent towards Joseph or anyone

else, all while sovereignly permitting, allowing, controlling, overseeing, orchestrating, and guiding the entire chain of events.

Why? Joseph tells you. You don't have to guess. "To bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (20). In any evil event that occurs on this earth, God never sins in his desires to let it happen. To say he did is blasphemous. That's why most people refuse to admit God's sovereignty when they can't work this out in their heads. But these evil events are not out of God's control, as if it just happens to him and he can do nothing about it. The problem of evil is solved not in a weak or stupid god, one who can't stop evil or one who didn't know it was coming. No, the problem of evil is solved in only in an all powerful, all knowing God ... but a God who is good, without sin, without evil, who does all things according to the purpose of his will.

Some want a loving God who is not sovereign. We must keep freewill intact. This is a pathetic god. And notice, there is no melding or denying of human wills in this verse. Some want a sovereign God who is not loving and good. We must preserve God's power above all things.

This is a wicked god. And notice, there is no denying that God is sovereign here in saying that men also meant a thing for evil. Human wills and God's will are not in conflict as many want to make them. Nor does the former usurp the later in a biblical view of freewill. That only occurs in a non-biblical view of freewill that will not permit God to be sovereign, because it feels the necessity to raise its own sovereignty above God's.

A biblical view maintains that men do what they do freely, because they want to. Very often what they want to do is evil. God does what he does freely, because he wants to. He only does what he does because he is good and morally perfect. Both exist compatibly, together, side-by-side. Without confusion. Without perversion. Without philosophizing or denying one or the other or perverting what Scripture says about both.

Back to the Beginning

This, beloved, is Joseph's hope. This is what gives him the ability to forgive. Because he knows who God is, what kind of God he is—as both sovereign and good—he can forgive. But what Joseph saw dimly, we can see more

clearly, in Christ. Christ is the ultimate solution to the problem of evil, and to the book of Genesis as a whole.

Amazingly, we can use the Jewish Targum in a way that such Jews would have been flabbergasted to realize was being interpreted by Christians. Let's return to that for a moment and then consider something. It said, "There stood Judah the lion—the hero among his brothers. He spoke up and said to his brothers, 'Come, let us weep over our father, a tall cedar whose top will reach towards the heavens and whose branches cover all the inhabitants of the earth; and its roots reach to the bottom of the deep'" (PsJon Gen 50:1). The true heroes (*gibborim*, cf. Gen 6:4) of Genesis are not the Nephilim, but the chosen Semitic family of Abraham and his descendants, including one who will come from Judah (cf. Gen 49:10).

Now consider Revelation, "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals" (Rev 5:5). Not one (weep), not two (Judah), not three (lion), but FOUR (tree/roots) ideas in the same two short passages. Add to this, "Through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of

life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations” (Rev 22:2), and we come back to the beginning of Genesis, but now our vision is clear. The lion of Judah—King Jesus—has opened the way back to the tree of life, allowing all who enter by the Gate access to the celestial city and its glorious tree of life in the paradise of God (Rev 2:7).

How? Because he suffered. In a verse that reminds us very much of Joseph’s words, Luke records Peter, “Truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place” (Acts 4:27-28). This is the death of Christ—God who suffered in the human flesh he took upon himself so that we might live.

He is the God who taught Joseph about God, giving him the necessary perspective to understand his woeful circumstances. He is the God who turned a scoundrel named Jacob into the nation of Israel, as he wrestled with him that fateful night on his way into Canaan. He is the

God who found a bride for Isaac, Rebekah—that woman at the well who gave him twins. He is the God who called Abram out of Ur of the Chaldeans, gave him land, gave him the promise of a seed, and opened Sarah’s elderly womb to give birth to the only begotten son. He is the God who scattered the people of Babel who tried to make a name for themselves by contacting the gods and reaching up in to heaven. He is the God who made a name for himself by destroying that world that was, but saved Noah and his family, eight people in the Ark, from the flood of his wrath and then carried the promise of the Seed of Eve through Shem—the man of the name. He is the God who heard the cries of Abel and his blood that cried out from the ground for a better sacrifice. He is the God who clothed our parents, covering their sins before preventing them from eating of the tree of life and living forever in their horrid condition. He is the God who planted a garden in the midst of a world he created by the Word of his mouth, as the Spirit of God hovered, as they carried out the plans of the Father in Heaven.

Therefore, as you read the end of Genesis, let Joseph’s words be your own. “So do not fear; I will provide for

you and your little ones.’ Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them” (Gen 50:21). Joseph remained in Egypt (22), as we remain in the world—in the world but not of it. Joseph lived 110 years (22). He saw Ephraim’s children to the third generation and adopted his grandchildren as his father had adopted his own children (23).

As he neared his time of death, his father’s hope became his own. “I am about to die [my brothers], 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” (24). He made them swear that they would carry up his bones from Egypt to the land of his fathers (25). His hope was in the future. A future we know as the Exodus. A future we know as Eternal Life in Christ.

So Joseph died, being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt (26). Unless the Lord returns in glory first, each of us will face the same moment. Will you have faith in Christ on that day? To do so, you must be fed with the Word of God—who is the God of Jesus. He speaks to you now and bids you to come and eat of the tree of life that is in the paradise of God. Any who come he will most surely never cast away.