

“Joseph: Dealing With Death”

GENESIS 50:22-26

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If you have been with us over the past month or so, then you know that we have been looking very carefully at the life of Joseph from the Old Testament book of Genesis. We started by learning that even though Joseph grew up in an incredibly messed up family, he did not allow his very unusual and extremely dysfunctional family situation to keep him from serving God. Following that lesson, we went on to learn that once Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt, he faced a powerful and ongoing temptation. He turned away, though, because he knew that to give in to Potiphar's wife would have been a sin against God. Three weeks ago, we looked together at how Joseph dealt with disappointment. For 13 years, Joseph suffered, even though he was completely innocent. We talked about our own "waiting room" experiences, and we learned from Joseph that we can sometimes use those experiences to help others, and we also learned from Joseph that he did not allow the dream to die. He held onto his belief that God is good. Two weeks ago, we studied some basic ideas concerning how Joseph dealt with some very rapid success in his life. We learned that he gave God the credit, he served the nation of Egypt with God's wisdom, and he used his tremendous talent and ability as a blessing to others – not only to the nation of Egypt, but to the entire world as well. And then last week, we looked together at how Joseph managed to eventually reconcile with his own brothers. We learned that even before he met his brothers again, he refused to give in to bitterness; in fact, he named his children Ephraim and Manasseh, ***“God has made me forget,”*** and ***“God has made me fruitful.”*** And then, when it came to meeting his brothers, he handled the situation with the utmost of restraint, he put his brothers through a series of tests to see whether they had truly changed, and then he extended forgiveness and grace.

With all of this as background, we now come to the end of Joseph's life, and I think we would agree that it has certainly been a long and interesting life! In fact, you might be interested in knowing that the account of Joseph's life takes up more space in the book of Genesis than any other single individual in that book. There is more space dedicated to Joseph than to Adam, or Noah, or Abraham, or Isaac, or even to his own father Jacob. So, we have been learning from a rather significant Bible character. There is something else that has set Joseph apart, and that is: Joseph is rather unique in that he is one of very few Bible heroes about whom nothing bad is ever written. In other words, unlike Abraham, and Moses, and David, and even the apostle Paul, the Bible does not reveal any major character flaws in the life of Joseph. We have no less than 14 chapters describing his life, and in those 14 chapters we have a series of powerful lessons. And as we learned when we started this series just over a month ago, these lessons are here for a reason. As Paul said in Romans 15:4, these things that were written in ***“earlier times”*** were ***“written for our instruction, so that through***

perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” The story of Joseph, then, gives us hope and encouragement, and that is certainly also true when it comes to the last few moments of Joseph’s life. So much has happened, but this morning we rejoin the story as Joseph is about to die at the age of 110. The account is found in the very last paragraph of Genesis – the last few verses of the first book of the entire Bible – Genesis 50:22-26, and the account of Joseph’s life ends where it began, with his brothers, with his family. If you will, please look with me at Genesis 50:22-26,

22 Now Joseph stayed in Egypt, he and his father’s household, and Joseph lived one hundred and ten years. 23 Joseph saw the third generation of Ephraim’s sons; also the sons of Machir, the son of Manasseh, were born on Joseph’s knees. 24 Joseph said to his brothers, I am about to die, but God will surely 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. 25 Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, God will surely take care of you, and you shall carry my bones up from here. 26 So Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

As we look back at these five verses, I would like for us to consider just a few very simple lessons based on Joseph’s death. And in the back of our minds, I’d like for us to be asking ourselves the question, “How do we personally want to be remembered when this life is over?” But as we ask that question, and as we look at the end of Joseph’s life, let us learn something from his death.

- I. **One of the most basic ideas in this closing paragraph comes from the fact that JOSEPH WAS FULLY PREPARED TO DIE. In fact, he was so prepared that he was able to speak openly and freely of his own death.**

Often times today, of course, many people will do just about anything to avoid talking about death. Have you noticed today that people don’t “die” anymore? Instead, they “pass away.” They are not “dead,” they are “departed.” In fact, we don’t even “bury” people anymore, but instead, we “inter” them. And by the way, this “interment” takes place not in a “cemetery,” and certainly not in a “graveyard,” but in a “memorial park.” And so as a society, we do whatever we need to do to avoid talking about death. Perhaps that is why some of you might have been at least a little bit intrigued by the story that ran on the front page of the Business section of last Sunday’s *Wisconsin State Journal*. The story was about a man from Beaver Dam and what happened when his grandfather passed away several years ago. They knew grandpa didn’t want a big, expensive funeral, so the grandson offered to build his grandfather a casket, a very simple pine box, and the article explains how the family came together in the process. But as you know, that is rather unusual. In our society, we normally do not discuss death that openly, and we certainly do not make building a casket a family project. I have put a copy of the article in the cubbyholes this morning, and there are extras on top for our visitors. In the article, the man explains how the situation progressed to starting a small business and how you can now order your coffin beforehand and how you can even use it as a bookcase in your living room until the time comes when you really need to use it for its intended purpose. For most people, that would be just a little bit weird. And yet somehow it seems that Joseph would have approved! And I say that because Joseph was apparently so prepared for his own death that he was able to discuss it freely with his brothers. What a blessing! In a day when roughly 80% of all Americans die in institutions rather than at home, it is comforting for us to see how Joseph was surrounded by his family and to see how openly he discussed his own death.

Joseph’s attitude here certainly reminds us of how the apostle Paul faced his death. In some of the last words he wrote before he died, the apostle Paul referred to how the time of his departure had come, and with that,

Paul spoke about finishing the course and keeping the faith. Like Paul, then, Joseph was ready to go. He was prepared to die. He came to the end of his life with a clear conscience. Like Joseph, the apostle Paul faced death with confidence and peace. So this is at least one lesson we can learn from the death of Joseph: He was fully prepared to die, and that confidence allowed him to freely discuss his upcoming death with his own family. What a great example! May we also be able to discuss death with our families.

II. There is something else we can learn from this passage, and that is: Even in death, JOSEPH VERY CLEARLY EXPRESSED HIS FAITH IN GOD'S PROMISES.

Several weeks ago, one of our members turned in a sermon request asking for a lesson on ways we can increase our faith. I would say: Look at Joseph! Most of us are familiar with the "Hall of Fame" of God's faithful in Hebrews 11. In that chapter, we have a summary of some of the great acts of faith from the great heroes in the Old Testament. The author goes on and on about the great acts of Abraham and the others. And did you know that Joseph is mentioned in that chapter as well? Was he mentioned for staying faithful when being abused by his brothers? Was he praised for staying faithful in the face of temptation? Was he mentioned for faithfully saving the nation of Egypt? No, he was not! But rather, when the author of Hebrews thought back to the life of Joseph, one scene came to mind, ***"By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones"*** (Hebrews 11:22). By faith, Joseph knew without any doubt whatsoever that his people would at some point get up and would leave the land of Egypt. When looking back over Joseph's life, the author of Hebrews was saying: During his lifetime, Joseph did some amazing things, but the most amazing thing he ever did was to make this statement at the very end of his life. What was so amazing about this one little statement? What's amazing is that these last words of Joseph tell us without a doubt where his focus had been over the previous 110 years of his life!

Joseph believed in the promise made to Abraham, ***"Now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever"*** (Genesis 13:14-15). Joseph believed in the promise repeated to Isaac, ***"Sojourn in this land and I will be with you and bless you, for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath which I swore to your father Abraham"*** (Genesis 26:3). Joseph believed in the promise repeated to Jacob, ***"I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants"*** (Genesis 26:13). When he died, therefore, Joseph knew that his descendants would someday get up and leave the land of Egypt and would return to the Promised Land. He did not know exactly how it would happen, he did not know all of the details, but he knew it, and so on his deathbed he said to his family, ***"...God will surely 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."*** Joseph knew that even his own death would not keep God from keeping His promise.

In the same way, we also have a promise from God that those who obey God will have an eternal home in heaven. We have a promise from God that this world we are now in is only temporary. And so the question is: Do we have the faith of Joseph? If we do, that faith changes the way we live. It changes our priorities. It changes the way we look at money, and school, and work, and our families. Our faith in God's promises changes the way we live. It should change us so much, in fact, that this is what we are remembered for when we die, more than anything else – that we were focused on the life that is still to come.

III. There is another very simple idea we need to consider in this passage, and that is: Even in death, JOSEPH CHOSE TO IDENTIFY WITH GOD'S PEOPLE.

In other words, we might say that even after 93 years of living in Egypt, Joseph was still separate – he was different. He was not an Egyptian, and he would not be buried like an Egyptian! Most of us here this morning have studied ancient Egypt in school, and one of the things all of us know about Egypt is that of all people in world history, the Egyptians knew how to bury people! I remember going to the Field Museum in Chicago on a school field trip, and one thing that really stuck with me was the mummy exhibit. As a kid, I remember how they used to bury the organs separate from the body. I remember seeing the tool they stuck up through the nose to liquefy the brain. I remember how they used to stuff the body with various chemicals and how they used to wrap the body so carefully. I remember learning about the pyramids with all of their various tunnels and hidden passageways. Of all people in world history, the Egyptians knew how to bury each other. Of all people, the Egyptians knew how to build a monument. And if anyone should have been honored with a monument and a fancy burial, it was Joseph. Joseph, of course, had lived in Egypt for pretty much his entire life, he grew up with Egyptian culture, he spoke their language, he wore Egyptian clothing, and but in his death, Joseph decided that it was much more important to identify with God’s people. Yes, he could have been buried in the most elaborate of tombs, because of what he had done, Joseph could have been enshrined among the greatest in Egypt, but Joseph knew that his home was not in Egypt. Joseph, therefore, decided to be identified with the people of God, even in his death. With all of their faults, his brothers (the Israelites) were the people of God. And in his death, Joseph wanted to be with his people.

I am thinking of those sailors who survived the sinking of the USS Arizona during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. On the ship itself, 1,177 sailors were killed, and 945 of those are still entombed on the ship. There were a total of 334 men assigned to the Arizona who survived the attack that day, and so far, 32 of these men have decided to have their cremated remains returned to the hull of the ship. The two most recent were added in 2008. Some of these men have felt a sense of guilt that they survived, others still feel the camaraderie of serving together, and in their death many decades later, some have decided that their remains belong on the ship, and the Navy sees the importance and allows that to happen. Perhaps in a slightly similar way, Joseph could have been buried in Egypt, but instead, he chose to be identified with God’s people, even in his death.

As we apply this to our situation today, we need to ask ourselves: Are we facing death like Joseph did, or are we more like the Egyptians? Do we identify more with God’s people, or would we rather leave behind some kind of monument when this life is over? Are we tying ourselves down to this world, or do we realize that our citizenship is really in heaven? Are we building bigger barns, or are we trusting in God to take care of us in the next world?

When it comes to the wealth and honor of this world we know what the Word says in Psalm 49,

¹⁶ ***Do not be afraid when a man becomes rich, when the glory of his house is increased;***

¹⁷ ***For when he dies he will carry nothing away; his glory will not descend after him.***

¹⁸ ***Though while he lives he congratulates himself —***

and though men praise you when you do well for yourself—

¹⁹ ***He shall go to the generation of his fathers; they will never see the light.***

²⁰ ***Man in his pomp, yet without understanding, is like the beasts that perish.***

Even in death, Joseph, then, kept these things in mind and chose to identify himself with God’s people rather than with the riches and honor of Egypt.

IV. **Before we close, there is one other idea we need to consider in this paragraph, the fact that in death, JOSEPH GAVE HIS FAMILY (AND MANY GENERATIONS TO FOLLOW) A CONCRETE REMINDER THAT THEY WERE NOT HOME YET!**

As the Bible says in verse 25, ***“Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, God will surely take care of you, and you shall carry my bones up from here.”*** In his death, Joseph inspired a constant reminder, a reminder that would last for hundreds of years. The coffin was a constant reminder that Egypt was just a temporary stop along the way. The coffin was a constant reminder of Joseph’s optimism. It was a constant reminder of Joseph’s faith. Just as Abel’s blood cried out from the ground, just as Abel, though being dead, continued to speak, so also Joseph continued to speak for hundreds of years after his death. He spoke through a coffin that God’s people carried out of Egypt.

Joseph had no idea when the Israelites would make it back home, but he knew that it would happen. And when they left Egypt, he didn’t want them to have to dig up his bones, he wanted everything to be ready for the trip, he didn’t want to be the hang-up, and so he made sure that he was portable. We might even say that Joseph ordered up one coffin “to go.” And again, even for the Jews, this was rather unusual. Normally, Jewish people were wrapped in linen and were buried. Joseph, though, wanted to be kept ready.

Of course, at the time Joseph made his request, there was no reason to believe that they would ever leave Egypt. Joseph was a national hero, the famine was over, the Israelites were living in the best land of Egypt, but Joseph knew that God’s promise still stood, and so he asked to be kept in that coffin – he asked to be kept portable ... and he sat there for hundreds of years.

For hundreds of years, fathers passed those bones down to the next generation. For hundreds of years, we assume that fathers picked their most dependable heir and had the talk, “Son, the time has come for you to take responsibility for the skeleton in the family closet.” For hundreds of years, someone honored Joseph’s request. We know that the people were in Egypt for about 400 years. Think about that! That’s longer than the United States has been in existence! Let me ask: Do you where your relatives’ bones are? What about your ancestors who died in the mid 1600’s? Do you know where those bones are? I don’t. And yet somebody among Joseph’s descendants kept track of that casket and kept passing it down to the next generation. And as they continued handing off those bones, the situation in Egypt got worse and worse. In time, God’s people were enslaved and treated harshly. And yet even into those difficult times, somebody had the bones – all 206 of them!

The Bible record is silent for a while, but then we pick up hundreds of years later in Exodus 13. Moses comes on the scene and ushers in the Ten Plagues, and then it is finally time to go. They have the Passover meal, they are eating in a hurry on their way out of town, they are leaving for the Promised Land, they are packed up and ready to go, and we come to Exodus 13:19, and the Bible says, ***“Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for he had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, ‘God will surely take care of you, and you shall carry my bones from here with you.’”*** I can see the kid who’s been watching the bones, “Yes! I have made the handoff!” The Bible is then silent on this for quite some time, but the story is not done. As you know, the people whine and complain, and God causes them to wander in the wilderness for another 40 years. And we know they had the bones because of something that happens right at the very end of the book of Joshua. Joshua takes over, the bones are carried over the Jordan River, the land is conquered, and we come to the next-to-the-last verse in the book of Joshua. Right after the death of Joshua, please notice what happens in Joshua 24:32, ***“Now they buried the bones of Joseph, which the sons of Israel brought up from Egypt, at Shechem, in the piece of ground which Jacob had bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for***

one hundred pieces of money; and they became the inheritance of Joseph's sons.” Even in his death, Joseph managed to keep the dream alive. For hundreds of years, those bones inspired a nation to greater faithfulness.

Conclusion:

Earlier this morning, I asked all of us to be considering the question, “How do I personally want to be remembered when this life is over?” During the announcements, you were given something to take home, something that we can take with us, something we can think about this afternoon and during the week. You have been given a blank headstone. I would invite you to put your name at the top and then write down some things that you would like people to be able to say about you when this life is over. We might refer to it as a fill-in-the-blank funeral. Someone has said, “If you want to plan your life, think about what you would like to have said at your funeral, and then work backwards from there.” How do you want to be remembered? Joseph was remembered as a man of great faith. And when he came to the end of his life at the age of 110, he was prepared to die. He was prepared to die because he had faith in God’s promise. That faith wasn’t just, “Yes, I believe in God,” but it was the kind of faith that changed the way he lived. It was the kind of faith that caused him to turn down Potiphar’s wife, it was the kind of faith that allowed him to forgive his brothers, and it was the kind of faith that said: I don’t know how, and I don’t know when, but there is a day coming when God’s people will leave this place, and I want you to take me with you. Joseph might have lived in Egypt, but his heart was in the Promised Land.

Today, we also live in the Promised Land by faith. As we considered earlier, our citizenship is in heaven. We get to heaven by accepting God’s amazing grace. God sent His only Son to die on the cross in our place. We accept the free offer by turning away from sin and by allowing ourselves to be buried with Jesus in baptism. If you would like to learn more, please let us know, and we would be glad to study the Scriptures with you. If you have something we need to pray about as a congregation, we would invite you to write it down and bring it to the front, and we would be glad to go to God in prayer on your behalf. If we can help in any way or if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com