

Week 12 – Jacob Nears the End – Genesis 47:28-48:22

Scripture Reading: Psalm 100:1-5

Introduction

Benjamin Franklin is credited with saying: “I wake up every morning at nine and grab for the morning paper. Then I look at the obituary page. If my name is not on it, I get up. “

My research informs me that the average modern obituary is 200-300 words in length

But some run much longer

In fact, the longest obituary to date to run in the New York Times was the one for Pope John Paul II which weighed in at 13,870 words

Next in line was President Richard M Nixon’s which totaled 13,155 words

Commonly, obituaries not only announce the death of the person but also share some biographical details and list the significant accomplishments of the deceased – typically, the more important the person the longer the obituary

That’s why popes, presidents, and other dignitaries have significantly longer obituaries than most other folks

Given that’s true, it’s kind of interesting just how briefly most deaths are mentioned in the Bible – it they are even mentioned at all

The report of Abraham’s death in Genesis 25 is quite short in spite of his stature – it’s contained in 5 verses

The death of his son Isaac is told very briefly in just one verse, Genesis 35:29

King David has his death recorded in four different books of the Bible but each mention is quite short with the longest found in 1Kings 2 where it takes up the first 9 verses

But most of the people in the Bible don’t even have their deaths recorded at all – even if they were major characters

Take for example the apostle Paul who wrote most of the New Testament – his death isn’t even mentioned

The way the Bible handles death announcements makes its treatment of Jacob’s death remarkable

When Jacob was reunited with Joseph he declared that he was prepared to die now that he had once again seen his son

When he met Pharaoh Jacob suggested that he believed he was at the end of his life and that his death was imminent

But we see in **Genesis 47:28** that Jacob lived another 17 years in Egypt before dying at the age of 147 years

Probably much to his surprise, God preserved his life far longer than he imagined but now death is truly getting close and Jacob must face his appointment with death just as **Hebrews 9:27** tells us men are destined to do

But in stark contrast to how most deaths are handled in Scripture, the account of Jacob’s death takes up **73 verses** and spans at least **part of 4 chapters** and it contains **3 distinct deathbed scenes**

We will be looking at two of those deathbed scenes this morning: when Jacob first meets with Joseph and then with Joseph and his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh

Then we will take up the third when Jacob calls all of his sons to gather around him next week

And as we look at each of these deathbed scenes we are going to uncover some important truths about Jacob, his faith, and the future of Israel

So let’s start with the first scene that takes place between Jacob and Joseph in **Genesis 47:29-31** where we will see Jacob’s request

And when the time drew near that Israel must die, he called his son Joseph and said to him, “If now I have found favor in your sight, put your hand under my thigh and promise to deal kindly and truly with me. Do not bury me in Egypt, but let me lie with my fathers. Carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burying place.” He answered, “I will do as you have said.” And he said, “Swear to me”; and he swore to him. Then Israel bowed himself upon the head of his bed.

I. Jacob's Request of Joseph

The primary concern that was on Jacob's mind as he neared the end of his life was that he not be buried in Egypt

So he called Joseph to his bedside and asked him to make sure to have his body returned to Canaan for burial

It's interesting to me that Jacob makes his request to Joseph in a very formal, formulaic manner and he is diligent to extract a solemn vow from Joseph that his wish would be fulfilled

Perhaps Jacob was unsure how someone in Joseph's position might take such a request even though Joseph was his son

But for whatever reason, Jacob addressed Joseph by using an expression of respect, "*If now I have found favor in your sight*"

Imagine what must have been going through Joseph's mind at that moment as he stood beside the deathbed of his aged father in whose care he had lived for the first 17 years of his life and who had then lived in his care for the last 17 years

It had to be a very tender moment but it was also a moment of utmost solemnity because of the gesture that was connected with the request

Jacob continued, "*...put your hand under my thigh and promise to deal kindly and truly with me*"

Without question, that sounds like an odd request and we only see it one other time in Scripture back in **Genesis 24:2-4** when Abraham extracted the promise from his most trusted servant regarding his selection of a bride for Isaac

And the two usages together help us understand what the gesture meant

The thigh or the loins were regarded as the seat of procreative powers so grasping the back of the thigh while making a vow took into consideration all the descendants of the person to whom the vow was being made

And when we consider that Abraham knew and believed that the Savior would come from his line we come to the conclusion that the oath so administered was made in view of the Savior to come

These were godly oaths entered into by godly men in light of their greatest hope and in both cases they demonstrated supreme faith in God's promises

Jacob's request was no trivial thing nor was it the result of superstition or sentimentality

His request to be buried with his fathers was a striking testimony to his supreme confidence in God's promise regarding the possession of the land and the coming Messiah

He wanted his body to lie in the land where God would one day return his people and where the Messiah would one day be born

And we see that Joseph readily said he would do what Jacob asked

But Jacob wanted to make absolutely certain that he hadn't simply received a promise of convenience so he commanded Joseph, "*Swear to me*" to make unmistakable the oath that was being entered into

And when Joseph so swore Jacob's first response was to worship God as we see in the final phrase of the account

Jacob bowed his head in prayer as he lay in his bed and praised God as he was dying

Expressions of faith and praise directed to God are very valuable at any point in someone's life but they are especially precious and meaningful as death draws near

It's a great thing when one is able to look back at the end of life and to recognize how God has always been there with them and to praise him for it

It would be wonderful if every believer – regardless of whether they have been saved for a long time or a short time – would have that same posture at the end of life and leave such a vital testimony to those who are left behind

As Chapter 48 begins we see that some amount of time has passed since his meeting with Joseph and Jacob is still alive. Apparently, Joseph had at some point gone back to his considerable responsibilities leaving instructions to call him if his father worsened and the day came when he was once again summoned to his father's bedside.

Only this time Joseph brought along his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.

I doubt that this was according to some whim on Joseph's part because that would make Jacob's blessing of the boys a rather arbitrary thing which seems highly unlikely for such a significant occasion.

It seems more likely that Jacob and Joseph had discussed what Jacob planned to do and when Joseph was told that his father was failing he brought his sons to his father.

After all, it doesn't seem that Jacob is overly surprised to hear that Joseph has come which seems to show he expected it. Jacob is very near the end of his life but when those who were with him tell him Joseph has come he rallies his strength enough to sit up in bed to meet with him.

What he was about to do was significant and he wanted to do it well – Jacob was the patriarch and he would act accordingly as long as he was able.

It's telling that this is the account that the author of Hebrews chose to represent Jacob in **Hebrews 11:21**.

Jacob rallied to the moment and demonstrated his true faith in God as he summoned his strength to sit up and carry out the mission that God had for him.

And the meeting begins with Jacob speaking to Joseph in verses 3-7 (**Genesis 48:3-7**)

And Jacob said to Joseph, "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me, and said to me, 'Behold, I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will make of you a company of peoples and will give this land to your offspring after you for an everlasting possession.' And now your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, as Reuben and Simeon are. And the children that you fathered after them shall be yours. They shall be called by the name of their brothers in their inheritance. As for me, when I came from Paddan, to my sorrow Rachel died in the land of Canaan on the way, when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath, and I buried her there on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)."

II. Jacob's Speech to Joseph

Jacob begins by remembering what God had revealed to him about great posterity and permanent possession of the land by his people at some point in the future.

When God promised to make Jacob the father of "a company of peoples" he was, of course, referring to the fact that Jacob's progeny would form the tribes of Israel.

So Jacob is justified in what he does next which is to announce his formal adoption of Joseph's two sons as if they were his own children.

Manasseh and Ephraim were at this time at least 18 to 20 years old and Jacob said they were to be on par with his natural sons and he mentions his two eldest by way of example.

And as his sons, Manasseh and Ephraim would share fully in the inheritance alongside Joseph's brothers with any other sons Joseph might have being counted as Joseph's and subordinate to these two.

We don't have any indication that Joseph had any more sons so this may well have been an idle provision but that's the meaning of what we have here.

Then Jacob seems to let his thoughts wander as old men are prone to do and he begins to talk about his beloved Rachel. But there may well be more to his remembrance of Rachel than simply the ramblings of an old man.

Jacob intended for Rachel to be his only wife; she was his beloved who he loved at first sight.

He had been willing to work 7 years to earn her hand and after being tricked into marrying her sister, he agreed to work an additional 7 years if he could also marry Rachel and he said the time was like a few days because of his love for her.

No doubt he had thought he would have more sons with Rachel than just Joseph and Benjamin and likely would have if Rachel hadn't died giving birth to Benjamin

And so, adopting Manasseh and Ephraim seemed to be a proper course of action designed, at least in part, to make up for that loss and put the matter of inheritance in proper balance

If Jacob had been able to marry Rachel as he wanted to do Joseph would have been his first-born and entitled to a double portion of the inheritance

So adopting his two sons and giving them equal shares in the inheritance allowed for that double portion to be given to Joseph's line

Jacob continued speaking to Joseph in **verse 8** and we are reminded of Jacob's advanced age as he finally notices but doesn't recognize his grandsons and he has to ask Joseph who they are

And when Joseph replies that they are his sons of whom Jacob had just been speaking Jacob asks for them to be brought nearer so that he might bless them

Joseph led the boys to his father and Jacob warmly and lovingly embraced them and kissed them as he prepared to bless them

We'll look at that blessing in a moment but first notice what Jacob says first in verse 11 (**Genesis 48:11**)

And Israel said to Joseph, "I never expected to see your face; and behold, God has let me see your offspring also."

Jacob had not always thought so highly of God as he does at the end of his life

In fact, the first time we see Jacob mention the name of God he was lying to his father and stealing Esau's blessing Isaac had determined to give Esau his blessing privately and, sensing he was near the end of his life, he sent Esau to hunt wild game to prepare the food he liked and his plan was to bless him when he returned with it

His wife, Rebekah, overheard and since she wanted Jacob to get the blessing she disguised Jacob with goat skins on his hands and neck and sent him in with the food that she had prepared before Esau could return

But Isaac was suspicious about how quickly he had been able to find and kill the game and prepare the food

Look quickly with me at **Genesis 27:20**

But Isaac said to his son, "How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?" [Jacob] answered, "Because the Lord your God granted me success."

Plainly Jacob had no problem with invoking the name of God to carry out his deception

We see Jacob mention God from time to time throughout the rest of his life which showed he had an acquaintance with God and he seems to have relied on God's promises that he received at Bethel at least at some level

But we don't really get the sense that Jacob was close to God

He seems to rely mostly on his own intelligence and cleverness and he never seems to pray for guidance as he rushes into one scheme after another

For most of his life, Jacob seems like a lot of nominal Christians today who will occasionally mention God's name and who demonstrate a nodding acquaintance with God but who lack any kind of intimacy or depth of relationship with him

But here, at the end of his life, that seems to have changed

Jacob begins and ends his speech to Joseph with God as he expresses how God has always been with him in good times and in bad – how God has blessed him and consoled him and even now is strengthening him for these final tasks

Looking ahead we see Jacob state in verse 15 that God *"has been my shepherd all my life long to this day"*

Jacob didn't always see or recognize God's shepherding but now he sees it in retrospect and finally appreciates it

Jacob was well aware of how difficult it is to shepherd and that it's significantly harder to shepherd a wandering sheep

In an earlier message I mentioned how often we see the switching back and forth between use of the names Jacob and Israel and how that was because Israel so often reverted to being the spiritually immature Jacob

But now, at the end of his life, we notice that we hardly see the name Jacob used as Israel seems to have taken over
Jacob now sees things from God's perspective and so Israel has dominance over Jacob

And Jacob, as Israel, is ready to confer his blessing upon Joseph's sons

III. Jacob's Blessing of Joseph's Sons

Arguably, the most interesting part of the blessing is that Israel puts Ephraim, the younger brother, over the firstborn Manasseh and we aren't told why

We know that Reuben had forfeited his rights as Jacob's firstborn son when he slept with his father's concubine, Bilhah as recorded in **Genesis 35:22**

And **1Chronicles 5:1** informs us that his birthright had been given to Joseph's sons and it seems we see that happen in our passage today

Joseph takes his sons by the hand and did what was only natural since the greater blessing was considered to be conferred by the right hand he put his elder son on his left so he would be on his father's right and he put his younger son on his right so he would be on his father's left

But then Israel did the unexpected and instead of reaching straight out to place his right hand on the head of Manasseh and his left on the head of Ephraim, he crossed his arms and did the opposite thereby giving the greater blessing to Ephraim

And we're told that this displeased Joseph and maybe he thought his father was mistaken as to which boy was the older so he went to move his father's hand and corrected him verbally

But Israel was resolute and stated that although Manasseh would also become a great people; his intention was to bless Ephraim with the greater blessing

We have to understand that although we aren't told why this happened it wasn't merely a quirk of old age or some capricious or arbitrary act on Israel's part

He was inspired by God to do what he did and he was obedient to God's leading

The custom among the Jewish people was always to confer the greater blessing on the firstborn

So, it's amazing for us to realize just how often this is reversed in the pages of Scripture

Ishmael was Abraham's firstborn making Isaac the younger son and still God established his promises through Isaac

Jacob was the younger son but God blessed him over his brother Esau

Joseph was a younger son but God exalted him over his 10 older brothers

Now we see that Ephraim received the greater blessing over his older brother Manasseh

Moses was also a younger son, as was Gideon, and as was David

In God's economy, the first are often last and the last first and God will exalt whom he will exalt for his own reasons

The Tribes

The blessing of Joseph's sons was significant for several reasons not the least of which it formalized the adoption of the two young men by Jacob

By this action they became the fathers of two of Israel's tribes who would one day inherit a portion of the Land

And that raises questions that can cause us no small amount of confusion – How many tribes were there and who were their patriarchs?

The usual answer that we would give is that there were twelve tribes each named after one of Jacob's twelve sons

But that's not exactly true – there were really thirteen tribes because, rather than there being a tribe named Joseph, Joseph's two sons each became tribal patriarchs

Joseph wasn't the father of a tribe but in a technical sense he was doubly blessed because two tribes descended from him

The confusion is facilitated in part because only twelve tribes received an allotment in the Land – the tribes of Ephraim, Manasseh and ten of Joseph's brothers –

The tribes descended from Reuben, Simeon, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin all received an allotment in the Land

However, Levi was the tribe of priests and they didn't possess any of the land because Levi's portion was the Lord as we see in **Deuteronomy 10:9** and Joshua 18:7

Final word to Joseph

In the next chapter we are going to see Jacob call all of his sons to gather around him to receive a blessing from him

But before he does that he has a final word to give to Joseph in chapter 48

It's difficult to know what exactly to make of verse 22 where Jacob makes Joseph a gift of a mountain slope other than to say it is mentioned in the New Testament in **John 4:5** so it must have significance which hasn't been revealed to us

But in verse 21 (**Genesis 48:21**) we see Jacob exhibit a supreme amount of faith in God's promises as he tells Joseph that Egypt isn't the land of their destiny but that God would see him returned to the land of his fathers

And he tells Joseph that God will be with him

Jacob had come to the point in his life where he could look back and speak with certainty about God's abiding presence

God had told him at Bethel, "I am with you" in **Genesis 28:15** as he fled from Esau

Then God told him, "I will be with you" in **Genesis 31:3** as he fled from Laban

Then Jacob was able to testify on two separate occasions, "God has been with me" in Genesis 31:5 and **Genesis 35:3**

Now he is able to say to Joseph, "God will be with you" in **Genesis 48:21**

That's a testimony every believer should aspire to

It should be our desire to be able to look back over our lives and testify to the fact that we know that God has been with us every step of the way on our journey just as he promised us he would be and to be able to assure others by our experience that God will also be with them

Conclusion

We began this morning by talking about obituaries

And obituaries are strange things

We all have the sense that we would like our obituary to be a good one that tells people good things about us

But we tend to forget that in order for that to be true, our lives must be worthy of accolade

The newscaster Walter Cronkite said the following of the former Prime Minister of England Winston Churchill:

“The death of Churchill at 90 was one of those watershed moments in which the obituary rises to a special calling beyond the sharing of remembered times. It gave an older generation a rare opportunity to explain something of itself to its children.”

Much the same can be said of Jacob as his obituary provides us with the opportunity to see how a man of God faced death

He may not have always been the picture of godliness but in the end he was able to say that in spite of his failures and oftentimes faithlessness that God had always been faithful to him

And that’s a message that is worth passing on and we should give thanks that God saw fit to preserve Jacob’s obituary for us

Let’s pray