

“WHEN BROTHERS DWELL IN UNITY”

We have come to the end of our long study of the book of Genesis. And as we consider this last passage tonight, it may be helpful to review some of the overarching themes in Genesis. These themes can be identified by paying careful attention to the language and structure that Moses employed in writing this book. We have noted that the phrase “These are the generations of” occurs ten times in these fifty chapters, serving as an important structural marker. This tells us that Genesis records the historical outworking of God’s plan of redemption from generation to generation. We have also seen the repeated use of the terms “seed” (or “offspring,” depending on the translation), “bless,” and “land.” And it is significant that these terms point back to the purposes that God had for man when he first created him. You remember the passage from Genesis 1, where God created man in his own image, which reads as follows:

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’ [1:27-28]

Notice how the themes that I just mentioned are present in these verses. When God first made man, he pronounced his *blessing* over him, declaring that mankind was made to

live under the benediction of the divine presence. God then commanded the man and the woman to be fruitful, to have *offspring*, or *seed*, in order that the earth might be filled and ruled by creatures who bear the divine image and live under the divine blessing. And then God gave man a particular piece of *land*, the earth, in which he was to serve God and enjoy the blessing of his presence. As you can see, the themes that dominate the book of Genesis are present right there at the beginning: blessing, seed, and land. And when we put these things together, we can get a picture of what the book of Genesis is all about. Genesis is about the outworking of God's plan for man to live under his blessing in the land that he has given him, producing godly offspring and bearing fruit for God's glory. It shows us how God worked this plan out across the generations of human history. And the one thing that is made clear again and again is that God is the one who is bringing this plan about. Though man was originally commissioned to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, the fall has made it impossible for man to carry out this purpose. Whenever people in Genesis try to fulfill it on their own, the results are disastrous. Thus, the book of Genesis shows us how God begins to fulfill his original purpose for man through his promises to the patriarchs and their seed.

The themes of blessing, seed, and land also stand out in the closing chapters of Genesis. We have seen the emphasis upon the bestowal of the patriarchal blessing in chapters 48 and 49, and in the passage we have just read we see a continued emphasis upon the importance of the Promised Land. And as the book of Genesis comes to a close, we see an already-not yet tension in relation to the promises that God has made to the

covenant people. On the one hand, there are signs of the promise already beginning to be fulfilled. The covenant family has grown to a sizable number of people, they have been made an instrument of blessing to the nations, and they finally begin to live at peace with each other. But on the other hand, there is one factor that makes it very clear that God's people are still waiting for the fulfillment of the covenant promises. They are not yet in the Promised Land. The words and actions of Jacob and Joseph demonstrate their continued faith in God's promise, but they also make it abundantly clear that it is something that remains a future hope.

Our passage picks up right after Jacob's blessing of his twelve sons. Jacob knows that his time on this earth is coming to a close, and now he gives his final instructions to his twelve sons. And what are those instructions? They are a repetition of what he said to Joseph back in chapter 47: he wants to be buried back in the land of Canaan, in the tomb of his ancestors. Once again we see Jacob's faith in God's promise. He believes that the future of the covenant family is in Canaan, not in Egypt. And he sees his own future in the Promised Land as well. Remember what the Lord said to him back in chapter 46, when he commanded him to go to Egypt. God said, "I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again." [46:4] Jacob took that promise seriously, so seriously that he wanted to make sure that his body was not left in Egypt. He demonstrated his faith in God's promise by the instructions that he gave concerning his burial.

This is an excellent example of how the death and burial of a believer provides a great opportunity to bear witness to our future hope. What happened to Jacob is something that will happen to every Christian, with the exception of that generation of believers who are still alive on the day when Christ returns. But the rest of us will die in exile, just as Jacob did. We will die in a land that is not our own. We will die still waiting to enter into the inheritance that the Lord has promised us. But we will not die without hope. Jacob did not see death as an insurmountable obstacle to the fulfillment of God's promises, and neither should we. In fact, we believe that death is a necessary step in bringing us to the point where we will be able to enter into our eternal rest. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable." [v. 50] We have to be given new bodies, imperishable bodies, in order to inherit God's kingdom. This mortal body needs to put on immortality. Christians die with the belief that that is what will happen to us on the day of Christ's return. And as we approach death, we have the opportunity to bear witness to this hope. We have the opportunity to display the same faith that Jacob displayed when he instructed his sons to bury him in the tomb of his fathers. This was Jacob's way of confessing his belief that the Lord would not abandon him to the grave, but that he would be raised up, along with Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac and Rebekah, and Leah, and brought into the land that God had promised to give them.

Of course, there is not a full blown doctrine of the resurrection of the dead in this passage, nor should we expect that there would be. For just as God's plan of redemption

is worked out progressively across time, so also is his truth revealed progressively. It was not until the New Testament and the climactic revelation that arrived in the person and work of Jesus Christ that the doctrine of resurrection was fully disclosed. However, there are hints of this doctrine in this text in Genesis. One of these, as we have said, is the importance that Jacob and Joseph place upon being buried in the land of Canaan. Why would it matter where they were buried unless they had the hope that their bodies were not going to remain in their tombs forever? And then there is the statement that is made in verse 33, describing what happened to Jacob when he died. Moses writes, “When Jacob finished commanding his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed and breathed his last and *was gathered to his people.*” It is that last phrase, “was gathered to his people,” that I want to point out to you. What does this phrase tell us? It reflects the belief that death is not the end. It indicates that the soul keeps on living after death. Jacob’s soul was reunited with the souls of his fathers when he died. And he waits together with them, while their bodies sleep in the earth, for the day when they will be called forth from their graves to enter into their eternal rest.

In the first half of chapter 50, we are told how Joseph and his brothers carried out their father’s request. Joseph had his father’s body embalmed so that the corpse could be preserved for the journey to Canaan. Embalming was a common practice among the ancient Egyptians, as we know from the fact that some of their mummified corpses have been preserved even to this day. But embalming was normally done by Egyptian priests, because there were particular religious beliefs associated with this practice in Egypt.

Notice, though, that Joseph had physicians do the embalming, not priests. He had to have Jacob embalmed so that his body could be taken to Canaan, but he wanted to be sure to maintain the religious distinctiveness of the covenant people. He did not want Jacob to be embalmed by pagan priests, so he entrusted this work to the physicians instead.

After obtaining permission from Pharaoh to leave, Joseph leads his brothers and their families to Canaan to bury Jacob. The covenant family would return to Egypt after this journey, but it pointed forward to another journey from which their descendants would not return: the exodus from Egypt. There are several indications in the text that suggest this. First of all, the journey is repeatedly described by the verb “to go up,” which is the same verb used in the book of Exodus to describe Israel’s deliverance from Egypt.

Second, the route that Joseph and his brothers took was essentially the same route that would be followed by the exodus generation over four hundred years later. This is made clear by the mention of the land of “Atad, which is beyond the Jordan.” The phrase “beyond the Jordan” tells us that this land was either on the eastern shore of the Jordan River or just across it, indicating that Joseph and the mourners entered Canaan by going around the Dead Sea and crossing over the Jordan. This is significant, because it was an indirect route. The most logical and direct route from Egypt would have been the one that followed along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea and entered Canaan from the west. The fact that Joseph took essentially the same route that the Israelites would take to get to Canaan after the exodus tells us that this was an enacted prophecy of the exodus.

One of the things that is easy to overlook in this passage but is actually quite important is the fact that it shows Joseph and his brothers acting in a unified way in carrying out their father's request. This is explicitly stated in verse 12, where it says, "Thus his *sons* did for him as he had commanded *them*." All the sons of Israel did this together, not just Joseph. The covenant family is finally whole. Though there have been many conflicts between the sons of Jacob up to this point, the book of Genesis ends with them living at peace with each other.

This point is emphasized even further by what takes place when Joseph and his brothers return back to Egypt after burying their father. It had been seventeen years since Jacob and his sons arrived in Egypt, yet now that Jacob is gone, Joseph's brothers are worried that he might seek revenge against them for what they had done to him. Their consciences were still tormenting them after all of those years. This suggests that, though Joseph had forgiven them long ago, they had never fully confessed their sin to him and sought reconciliation with him. They seemed to have let things remain unspoken for the seventeen years they lived in Egypt. While their father was still alive they were not very worried about Joseph. They knew that he would never do anything to harm them as long as their father was alive. But now that Jacob was gone, what would Joseph do? Had he truly forgiven them? Here is a good example of why it is so important for us to be direct in seeking reconciliation with those whom we have wronged.

And Joseph's response reiterates something that we heard him say when he first revealed himself to his brothers. What they intended for evil, God intended for good. As

we have repeatedly said in our study of this section of Genesis, this is the dominant theme of the Joseph story. Joseph believed that the Lord's providential hand had guided everything that happened in his life, both the good and the bad. And because of this belief, he was able to extend true forgiveness to his brothers.

As we come to the last paragraph in Genesis, the paragraph describing the death of Joseph, we can see an emphasis upon the great blessings that the Lord bestowed upon Joseph in his lifetime. He lived to be 110 years old, an age which, though not as old as his fathers, was considered by the Egyptians to be the ideal age. It is referenced as such in a number of ancient Egyptians writings. Also, Joseph lived to see his great-grandchildren, a blessing that is not experienced by many. But as great as the blessings were that Joseph received in this life, he still died as his father died, trusting that even greater blessings lay ahead for him, and for his people. From his deathbed he told his brothers, or his family, that God would surely visit them. That word "visit" is used in the Old Testament to refer to an encounter with the Lord that changes a person's fortunes forever, whether it is visiting them in judgment or visiting them to save them. Joseph is telling the covenant people that they will not remain sojourners in a foreign land forever. They will be brought into their own land, the land that God promised to give them.

God did visit the people of Israel, though they had to wait four hundred years before he did so. But that visitation was only a picture, a foretaste, of a much greater visitation, the visitation for which we wait, that great day when "the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the sound of the

trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.” [1 Thes. 4:16-17] That is what Jacob and Joseph were ultimately waiting for, and it is what every Christian continues to wait for. We are waiting to be brought into Immanuel’s land, as we sing in the hymn based upon the writings of Samuel Rutherford:

*The sands of time are sinking, the dawn of heaven breaks,
The summer morn I’ve sighed for, the fair sweet morn awakes;
Dark, dark hath been the midnight, but dayspring is at hand,
And glory, glory dwelleth in Emmanuel’s land.*

*The King there in his beauty without a veil is seen;
It were a well-spent journey though sev’n deaths lay between:
The Lamb with his fair army doth on Mount Zion stand,
And glory, glory dwelleth in Emmanuel’s land.*

*O Christ, he is the fountain, the deep sweet well of love!
The streams on earth I’ve tasted more deep I’ll drink above:
There to an ocean fullness his mercy doth expand,
And glory, glory dwelleth in Emmanuel’s land.*

The bride eyes not her garment, but her dear bride-groom's face;

I will not gaze at glory, but on my King of grace;

Not at the crown he gifteth, but on his pierced hand:

The Lamb is all the glory of Emmanuel's land.