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GRIEF AND HOPE

Genesis 49:29-50:14

By

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Genesis Lesson 83

GRIEF AND HOPE Genesis 49:29-50:14

The novelist, Somerset Maugham, said, "Death is a very dull, dreary affair, and my advice to you is to have nothing whatsoever to do with it." We all wish we could follow such advice. Death is a subject we would rather not think about.

In light of that, it may seem odd that Winston Churchill planned his own funeral. It included many of the great hymns of the church and used the eloquent Anglican liturgy. At his direction, a bugler, positioned high in the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, played "Taps," the universal signal that day is done.

But then came the most dramatic turn. As Churchill had instructed, as soon as "Taps" was finished, another bugler, placed on the other side of the great dome, played "Reveille": "It's time to get up, it's time to get up, it's time to get up in the morning."

I don't know if Churchill was a true believer in Jesus Christ, but by following "Taps" with "Reveille," he seemed to be testifying that death is not the final note in history. There will be that "great gittin' up morning," when the dead in Christ shall rise. When a loved one dies, there is the sorrow and grief of loss, but for the believer, there is also the hope of eternal life that overcomes the grief.

Genesis 49:29-50:14 records the death of Jacob. More space is given to his death than to any other person in Genesis, and probably to any other person in the Bible, except for Jesus Christ. Moses' reason for this lengthy treatment seems to be to renew for his readers the covenant promises of God concerning the Promised Land. Although Jacob only possessed a small burial plot in Canaan, he wanted to be buried there rather than to stay in Egypt, because God had promised Canaan to Abraham and his descendents. When Jacob died, his son Joseph grieved over his father, but also he had hope and faith in God's promises, pictured here in Jacob's burial in Canaan. From this account of Jacob's death and funeral, we can learn how we, as believers, can face the death of a loved one.

Though we grieve at the death of a loved one,
we have hope by faith in God's promises.

Some Christians have the mistaken notion that it is not spiritual to grieve at the death of a loved one. They reason that Christ has defeated death, that the loved one is in heaven, and so we should be joyful. I was consoling a weeping young widow at her husband's funeral when another pastor came up smiling and said, "Well, praise the Lord! Scott's in glory!" In my opinion, that was an insensitive and unbiblical denial of our humanity. Our text shows that

1. It is proper to grieve at the death of a loved one.

Joseph was a godly man. His father's death was not unexpected. Yet when Jacob died, Joseph fell on his father's face and wept (50:1). Then he observed 70 days of mourning (50:3), plus seven more days after the funeral procession arrived at the borders of Canaan. There is no hint in the text that Joseph was unspiritual or excessive in his grief.

Although it is possible to grieve excessively, the Bible teaches that normal grief is a proper human emotion and that tears are the normal response in grief. Jesus Christ entered into Mary and Martha's grief by weeping at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11:33, 35). In fact, God the Holy Spirit is capable of grief, as seen in the admonition, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God" (Eph 4:30). One of the most difficult commandments God has given anybody was when He told the prophet Ezekiel that He was going to take his wife and, as a sign to the disobedient nation, he was not allowed to mourn outwardly or weep for her (Ezek. 24:16-17). But that was clearly an exception. Grief is normal and proper when we lose loved ones in death. You're not more spiritual if you don't grieve.

A. We grieve because death is our enemy.

Death is not a natural part of life, as some would have us believe. Death is our enemy! Death entered the human race as God's curse against our sin. As we saw in our study of Genesis 5, the history of the human race has been marked by the grim notice, he lived so many years, "and he died; ... and he died; etc." As the infidel playwright, George Bernard Shaw, pungently noted, "The statistics on death are quite impressive; one out of one people die."

That death is a curse may be hinted at in the name "Atad" (50:10): In Hebrew it means "thorn bush." It is a flashback to chapter 3, where God declared that as a result of man's sin, the earth would yield thorns. Here, as the funeral procession comes to this threshing floor of the thorn bush, it is a reminder of the curse of death stemming from man's sin.

You may be wondering, "But didn't Christ conquer death through his resurrection? Doesn't the Bible say that He abolished death (2 Tim. 1:10)? Doesn't death usher us into the presence of Christ? Then how can you say that death is still our enemy?"

Yes, Christ conquered death, but that triumph will not be fully realized until He returns to give us resurrection bodies like His own. Yes, He abolished death, in the sense of breaking its ultimate victory over believers. But the Bible never teaches that He abolished death in the sense of making it nonexistent, as the Christian Science cult teaches. It was not until the Apostle John saw the new heavens and new earth that he stated, "and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain" (Rev. 21:1, 4). Until then, death is a painful reminder of God's curse upon our sin. We grieve because death is our enemy.

With regard to death ushering us into the presence of Christ, it's true: "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8). That's wonderful for the person who has died in the Lord. But that doesn't relieve all the pain for those who are left behind.

B. We grieve because death separates us from loved ones.

Joseph knew that he would never be able to talk with his father again in this life. Joseph lived for another 54 years. I'm sure that there were many times during those years that he longed to talk with his dad about something, but he wasn't there. It's that sense of loneliness, of missing the departed person, that makes grief linger, often for years. We have to work through our grief to the point where we establish a new "normal," without the deceased person in our lives. That process takes time.

In his booklet, "Grief" (Christian Medical Society, pp. 11-16), Dr. Haddon Robinson states that there are three stages of grief through which we normally must pass. First is the *crisis* stage, which lasts up through the funeral. During this stage, a person at

first feels shock and then numbness. Crying is a healthy sign of emotional release during this time. To help a person during these difficult hours, your presence is the most important thing. Sit with the person, listen a lot, and say very little. Let the person tell you the details of what happened. You can gently try to instill hope, but this isn't the time to give out familiar Bible verses with the implication, "If you'd just trust God, you wouldn't feel this way."

A funeral or memorial service is a helpful part of the grieving process for family and friends. It helps to give a sense of closure to the person's death. While we talk about paying our respects to the deceased person, funerals are for the living, not for the dead. This huge funeral procession up to Canaan, with all of Pharaoh's court officials, wasn't for Jacob; it was for Joseph and his brothers. The Egyptians were showing their respect for Joseph by entering into his grief. The 70 days of mourning were just two short of the time of mourning for a Pharaoh, which shows how highly Joseph was regarded.

Joseph had his father embalmed in accordance with the Egyptian custom, partly so that he could transport his body to Canaan, as Jacob had made him swear. (So Joseph's daddy became a mummy.) The Bible does not prescribe a method of burial, although the most common practice was to place the corpse in a cave or hewn out tomb. Some Bible teachers argue that cremation dishonors the body, but it seems to me that it is permissible if a family decides for it. When Christ returns, He can resurrect a cremated body just as easily as a decomposed, buried body.

The main consideration should be the way a family will feel about it later. While putting flowers on a grave seems pointless to me, I think it can be helpful for a grieving person to go to the gravesite as a place of remembrance and mourning. You can't do that if the ashes are scattered at sea. Visiting the gravesite of godly family members can help us to recall their example and spur us on to follow in their way of life.

Regarding the cost of the funeral, I urge moderation. For a family member of someone of Joseph's rank, it was obviously a huge affair. That's not improper. A family should do what they feel proper within their means as stewards of the Lord's resources. They should think about what they want the funeral to say to friends and relatives. I'm bothered when people spend needless thousands of dollars for caskets and flowers. Often the motive for

such extravagance is either pride or guilt. Why not give testimony to the person's values by having a simple service with a single bouquet and by giving a large donation to a Christian work? There is freedom in the Lord on these matters, but a family should think it through in light of the biblical principles of stewardship and witness.

The second stage of grieving is the *crucible* stage. This lasts 12 weeks or more and is most intense during the first six weeks. The extended family and friends have left to return to their routines and the grieving one is left alone. During this time, he must work through the fact that the dead person will not be a part of his life again. He has to deal with emotional ties from the past and with expectations for the future which were bound up with the one who died. Edna St. Vincent Millay captures the feelings of grief during this phase in her poem "Lament" (quoted in Robinson, p. 14):

Life must go on,
And the dead be forgotten.
Life must go on,
Though good men die.

Anne, eat your breakfast;
Dan, take your medicine;
Life must go on,
I forget just why.

It's not uncommon for a person to have periodic bouts of depression and crying for two or three years after an "expected" death, let alone after a sudden, unexpected loss. As a friend, being there and listening is again the most helpful thing you can do. You won't open wounds to mention the person who has died. The grieving person probably feels a need to talk about him.

The final stage is the *construction* stage, when the grieving person creates new patterns for living that are not tied to the past. This is implied in verse 14, which reports that Joseph and his brothers returned to Egypt, where they had left their children and jobs (50:8). At this stage, the person accepts reality and is ready to move on with what God has given him to do with his life.

So, as Christians, it is proper to grieve at the death of a loved one. But as Paul says, we do not grieve as those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13).

2. Though we grieve, we have hope by faith in God's promises.

Jacob mentions that he is about "to be gathered to his people" (49:29; see also verse 33). While some argue that this phrase is just a Hebrew euphemism for death or for burial in the ancestral burial plot, I think it implies more. Jacob wasn't reunited with his ancestors when his body was carried into the cave of Machpelah, where their bodies lay. His soul was gathered to the souls of his ancestors in heaven the moment he expired. So the expression is an early statement of the hope of life after death.

Two thoughts about our hope:

A. We must exercise hope in God's promises by faith.

The author of Hebrews makes the point that the greats of the faith died without receiving the promises (Heb. 11:39). God had promised Jacob the land of Canaan, but here he was, dying in Egypt, with no claim on Canaan except a burial plot. God had promised to make him a great nation, but he was only a company of 70 strong when he entered Egypt.

But by faith, he blessed his sons and predicted their future as the 12 tribes of the nation Israel. By faith he made Joseph promise to take his body back to Canaan. He could have been buried in the finest of Egyptian tombs, but he chose to make a statement in his death about his resolute trust in what God had promised. So he said, "Bury me in the cave ... in the land of Canaan" (49:30). Jacob's faith gave him hope in God's promises, hope that sustained him as he faced death.

How do we know that our hope in God's promise of eternal life is not just wishful thinking? What if we die and there is nothing else? How do we know that our loved ones who have died in Christ are in heaven, and that we will be with them someday?

The Apostle Paul deals with all these questions. In 1 Corinthians 15 he argues that the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the basis for our future resurrection. He shows that Christ's resurrection has solid evidence supporting it and argues that if Christ hasn't been raised, then our faith is worthless. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Paul argues that the resurrection of Christ is the basis for our hope of being reunited with our loved ones who have died in Christ.

But even though we have that solid evidence, we must exercise faith in God's promises when we are faced with death, simply because we haven't gone beyond the grave and returned. But Jesus has, and we can take Him at His word. When we do, He gives us genuine hope in the face of our greatest enemy.

B. We must extend our hope to those who are without God and have no hope.

Both the Canaanites (50:11) and the Egyptians observed Joseph during his grief. No doubt the Egyptians wondered why Jacob wanted to be buried in some cave in Canaan, when he could have had a beautiful tomb in Egypt. James Boice (*Genesis* [Zondervan, 2:322]) observes, "If Joseph had not expressed grief over the death of his beloved father, the Egyptians would have concluded merely that he had not cared for him, that perhaps he was even glad to have the old man out of the way. If he had expressed nothing but grief, the Egyptians may have concluded that the hope of an afterlife by these Semitic people was no better than their own dark hopes and may even have been inferior to theirs." I agree with Boice as he goes on to argue that Joseph undoubtedly used the occasion of the funeral and the trip back to Canaan to tell his Egyptian friends about his hope in the living God.

The time of death and funerals can be a great opportunity for witness to those who otherwise put death and eternity out of their minds. We should always be sensitive, but also we must be bold, in telling others of the hope of the gospel at such times.

The late Joseph Bayly was a godly man who knew grief through the death of three of his children, but who also knew the hope that is in Christ. The day after he and his wife buried their five-year-old boy, who died of leukemia, Bayly went to thank the doctor who had been so kind to them through their ordeal. As he sat in the waiting room, the receptionist beckoned to him and whispered that a little boy playing in the waiting room had the same problem as his son had.

Bayly sat down next to the boy's mother. They were far enough away from the boy so they could talk. "It's hard bringing him in here every two weeks for these tests, isn't it." Bayly didn't ask a question; he stated a fact.

“Hard?” She was silent for a moment. “I die every time. And now he’s beginning to sense that something’s wrong ...” Her voice trailed off.

“It’s good to know, isn’t it,” Bayly spoke slowly, choosing his words with unusual care, “that even though the medical outlook is hopeless, we can have hope for our children in such a situation. We can be sure that after our child dies, he’ll be completely removed from sickness and suffering and everything like that, and be completely well and happy.”

“If I could only believe that,” the woman replied. “But I don’t. When he dies, I’ll just have to cover him up with dirt and forget I ever had him.” She turned back to watching her little boy push a toy auto on the floor.

“I’m glad I don’t feel that way.” Bayly didn’t want to say it, but he felt compelled.

“Why?” This time the woman didn’t turn toward Bayly, but kept watching her child.

“Because we covered our little boy up with dirt yesterday afternoon. I’m in here to thank the doctor for his kindness today.”

“You look like a rational person.” (Bayly was glad she didn’t say, “I’m sorry.”) She was looking straight at him now. “How can you possibly believe that the death of a man, or a little boy, is any different from the death of an animal?” (*The Last Thing We Talk About* [David C. Cook Publishing], pp. 12-13.) Although Bayly ends the story there, I’m sure that he went on to tell her the basis for his hope in Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Years ago I answered the phone and someone said, “Father Cole?” I said, “I am a father, but I’m probably not the guy you’re looking for.” He wanted the Catholic priest, but when he found out I was an official minister, that was good enough, so he asked me to conduct the funeral for his father. A son, a daughter, and her husband came in to see me before the funeral. After we had talked a while, I said, “At a time like this, you probably would like to know what the Bible says about what happens after we die. As I talked about the gospel, they got upset and said, “Are you saying our dad is not in heaven?” I had not said anything about their father. I replied, “I didn’t know your father, and I know nothing

of what took place between him and God. I was simply telling you, not what I think, but what the Bible says, about how a person can go to heaven. I thought that you would want to know that important information."

That's the most important thing I can share with you today. The most crucial question you can settle is, "Am I ready to die?" Many people have a false hope for heaven. They think that God is loving and good, so He won't judge sin or send anybody, except the very worst of sinners, to hell. They assume that if you've lived a good life, that's going to be good enough when they stand before God.

An Indiana cemetery has a tombstone, over 100 years old, which bears the words, "Pause, Stranger, when you pass me by, as you are now, so once was I. As I am now, so you will be, so prepare for death and follow me."

Some unknown passerby scratched this reply: "To follow you, I'm not content, until I know which way you went."

Jesus plainly taught that there are two ways to go. He spoke often of both heaven and hell. The Bible says, "It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27). It also promises that if you will repent of your sin and trust in Jesus as your Savior, you will not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). That's the only solid hope in the face of death!

Discussion Questions

1. What are some ways Christians communicate the mistaken notion that "to show grief is not spiritual"? When does grief become excessive?
2. How would you defend, biblically, that it is possible to be grieving deeply and yet be trusting God fully?
3. What has helped you most and least when you were grieving? Why?
4. What do you say to someone whose loved one has just died without knowing Christ? How do you share hope in that situation?

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