

JACOB IS GATHERED TO HIS PEOPLE

(Genesis 49:29—50:14)

The time had come for Jacob to make his final journey. After a full and circuitous life, “Israel” passed from this life into the next. In his words Jacob was “gathered to his people.” Death is a reality for everyone. We all have observed the death of others. We all will experience death ourselves. Death is the inevitable and just consequence of sin (Genesis 2:16-17). Physical death is merely an indication of spiritual death, separation from the God who created us. That separation is eternal apart from the grace of God and our reception of that grace through faith, faith in the God who raises the dead, faith in Jesus Christ. Through faith in the God of grace we have confident hope of life after death. We, too, can be “gathered to our people” in the presence of God forever. Jacob’s death reminds us about sorrow, hope, and life.

**Death reminds us that
there is an afterlife (49:29-33).**

Like Jacob, we can look with peaceful anticipation toward life after this life, a life in which there is reunion with God and others.

Jacob acknowledged that he was about to die and instructed his sons to bury him in the land of promise (49:29-32).

Having blessed his twelve sons, Jacob now instructed them to bury him in the land of promise. He first stated that he was about to die, to be “gathered to my people” in his words (compare Genesis 25:8, 17; 35:29). This phrase is pregnant with meaning. In it Jacob states his belief in an afterlife. His people, his ancestors—Abraham and Isaac, had gone ahead of him into the afterlife. Now it was his turn to pass from this life into the next, to be gathered with them. Since his soul would soon pass into eternity, Jacob gave instructions to his sons about the final resting place of his body. He insisted, as he had told Joseph earlier (Genesis 47:28-31), that his body not be buried in Egypt but in Canaan, at the grave of his forefathers. Abraham had purchased this burial site, including a cave called Machpelah, from a Hittite named Ephron (Genesis 23:3-18). There Abraham buried Sarah. There Isaac buried Abraham. There Jacob and Esau buried Isaac. There Jacob buried Leah. There and only there would Jacob allow his body to be buried. This demand reflected much more than mere sentimentality. Jacob knew that God’s grand covenant included possession of the Promised Land. Jacob’s desire to be buried in that land was an indication of his faith in the covenant keeping God.

Jacob finished instructing his sons and passed from this world into the next (49:33).

Having told his sons to bury him in Canaan, Jacob “gathered” his feet into his bed and was “gathered” to his people. Plainly stated, Jacob died. His long life of struggle with God was over. He completed his life as a man of faith. He passed from this life into

the next as one who had learned over a lifetime to trust in the God who keeps His promises. His death reminds us that there is life after death.

**Death reminds us that
separation produces deep sorrow (50:1-11).**

While people of faith in God's saving grace face death with confident hope, there is still sorrow in death. The separation of death is a painful experience for those who are left behind to await their own gathering to their people.

Joseph wept over his father and ordered to have him embalmed according to the customs of the Egyptians (50:1-3).

While Jacob's other sons certainly mourned the death of their father, Joseph in particular expressed great sorrow. He threw himself on his father's deathbed, kissed him, and wept. Being in a position of authority, Joseph was able to order the physicians to embalm his father's body, his father "Israel," the man who had wrestled with God and become victorious in faith. The physicians obeyed Joseph's orders and embalmed Jacob's body according to the procedures of mummification that were current in that day. Ancient Egyptian records indicate that forty days was the normal timeframe required for this process, and that seventy days of mourning was the appropriate length of time for someone of great significance.

Joseph requested permission to return to Canaan to bury his father (50:4-6).

At the end of the seventy days of mourning for Jacob, Joseph sought permission to leave his responsibilities temporarily so that he could bury his father in Canaan. He passed this request to Pharaoh through trusted servants, stating that this was his father's deathbed request. Pharaoh willingly released Joseph from his duties as vizier to fulfill his sworn vow to his father.

Joseph led an entourage of Egyptians along with his brothers to bury Jacob (50:7-9).

Someone of Joseph's stature in Egypt would, of course, warrant a large entourage to share in the burial of his father. Pharaoh's "servants" and "elders" as well as the broader representation of the "elders of Egypt" accompanied Joseph on his journey. In addition, Joseph's own family, as well as his brothers and their families, took part in this burial procession from Egypt to Canaan. Only the children, the flocks, and the cattle stayed behind—an indication that Jacob's family had prospered greatly during their time in Goshen. This large entourage was accompanied by chariots and horsemen, a truly impressive procession giving honor to Jacob, a man of faith.

The mourning over Jacob's death profoundly impressed the local Canaanites (50:10-11).

The burial attendants arrived in Canaan at the threshing floor of Atad, possibly the proper name of the owner of the threshing floor or a descriptive name for that area, a word meaning "thorny." Its location isn't certain, but seems to have been on the east side of the Jordan River. Joseph's entourage had apparently taken a route that bypassed the Philistine region and Edom, possibly for security reasons, and traveled around the Dead Sea to Transjordan. At that site Joseph and the procession lingered for seven days to express their grief over Jacob's death. So impressive was this entourage and the expressions of sorrow that the local Canaanites named the place "mourning of the Egyptians"—Abel Mizraim. Death brings sorrow, deep sorrow over personal loss. Even people of faith must grieve, but our grief is not the grief of those who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Death reminds us that separation produces deep sorrow, but faith reminds us that our sorrow is temporary and hope-filled.

**Death reminds us that
life continues even after a loss (50:12-14).**

Finally, Joseph and his brothers completed the task of burying their father. They then returned to Egypt where life continued under the gracious hand of God.

Jacob's sons fulfilled their promise by burying their father in Canaan (50:12-13).

At this point Jacob's family reentered the land of promise and went to the family's burial site. It must have been reflective for them to see again these familiar scenes. There they buried Jacob according to his expressed wishes. The story of Jacob came to an end, but his legacy continues today through his countless descendants, the children of Israel, God's chosen people.

Joseph and his brothers returned to Egypt (50:14).

Having buried Jacob at the family gravesite, Joseph, his brothers, and the burial procession returned to Egypt. Life would carry on. There were jobs to perform, families to rear, joys to celebrate, and further sorrows to grieve. Life continues even after a loss. God would continue to bless His people, the children of Israel, during their long sojourn in Egypt. This brief return to the Promised Land to bury their father would be reenacted generations later when the Israelites, a large nation by that time, would escape from Egypt and make the Promised Land their lasting home. In the mean time life continued in Egypt. Life continues even after a loss. Even in death we know there's hope and life. Through faith in the God of grace we have confident hope of life after death.