

Genesis 49: 29 – 50: 1; “How Should We Understand Death”, Sermon # 119
in the series – “Beginnings”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall
on August 14th, 2022, in the Morning Worship Service.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, Chapter 3, verses 1 and 2 it says, “To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven: A time to be born and a time to die.” It is no doubt true that for many of us the time to die is something that we would rather put off. Death is such an unpleasant thought to many people that they choose to remain in ignorance about it. They think that somehow they will deal with it when it comes to them. They will be very surprised. But for the Christian it ought not to be so. Jacob knew that it was his time to die. He was given time to set his house in order, and to give instructions to his son Joseph of what should be done in regard to his funeral. What a blessing this was to him.

We as Christians ought to see death as a time in which both the person who is dying, and those who love him, can think deeply about what death will mean for them. If you are a Christian, it will mean that you are going home to God. But everyone else who is living will remain here. What are the implications of these things? Well, I believe that the death of Jacob teaches us some clear lessons about how death is to be understood. These verses teach us that death is a time of gathering, a time of mourning, and a time of sympathizing. Let’s think about each of these subjects so that we will be better prepared when death comes to others, or to ourselves.

1st of all – Death is to be understood as a gathering to your people.

In chapter 49, verse 29 this was how Jacob specifically described his own death. “Then he charged them”, it says in verse 29, “and said to them: ‘I am to be gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, in the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, which is before Mamre in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field of Ephron the Hittite as a possession for a burial place.’” So, what I want you to see is that death for all believers, those who have believed in the promise of eternal life in Jesus Christ, is a gathering to our own people.

Who were Jacob’s people? Jacob’s people were all of God’s elect among his relatives; Abraham and Isaac, and their wives. Jacob’s people were not simply all the relatives of Jacob. They were all the believing relatives of Jacob; Abraham and Isaac and others. Jacob’s dead body was going to the place where some of his believing relative’s bodies had been placed. But this word “gathering” does not relate only to the body of Jacob. It has a more direct and immediate reference to his soul. It was his soul that was being gathered to his people.

This word “gathering” has a greater meaning than simply that he would, after he died, be buried with Abraham and Isaac. His spirit was going to go to be with all of the righteous dead who had died before him. So Jacob was going to be gathered to Adam and Eve, and Abel and Seth. He was going to be gathered to all those saints in the godly line of Seth. He was being gathered to Methuselah and Enoch and Noah, and no doubt many others who believed, but whose profession is not recorded in the Word of God. This was the place to which Jacob was being gathered. It was to the place of the spirits of righteous men made perfect.

It is now known to us in New Testament times as the New Jerusalem. Turn over to Hebrews Chapter 12, verses 14-17. It is very important that each of us, in this life come to repentance of all known sins in ourselves. Because at the time of our death it will be too late. The writer of Hebrews is drawing a contrast between Esau and all those who lived by faith. He is exhorting those to whom he is writing that they would have right relationships with all men. For if they don’t, when it comes their time to die, they will not be able to enter into the heavenly Jerusalem. Verse 14 says, “Pursue peace with all people and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright.” “For you know that afterward when he wanted to inherit the

blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears.”

Let me stop here just for a moment and make comment. Esau was Jacob’s brother. Jacob stole the birthright and the blessing from his brother; both of which were sinful actions. And yet he found grace in the eyes of the Lord. Esau was a man who wanted to inherit the first-born’s blessing from his father, it says here. But he was rejected by God because he found no place for repentance. It even says that he sought the blessing diligently with tears. But it is evident that they were tears of self-pity, because he did not want repentance. He did not want to serve and honor God. He wanted himself to be served and honored, himself.

He was an angry man. He was a violent man; he was a fornicator and a profane person. He was pleased with himself as regards these things of sin which he held to. He actually stood spiritually in the line of Cain. You remember Cain. He killed his brother Abel because Abel’s offering to the Lord was accepted and his was not. He had a separate genealogy devoted to him in Genesis 4: 16 and following. After he killed Abel it says, “Then Cain went out from the presence of the Lord and dwelt in the land of Nod on the east of Eden.” Many of Cain’s descendants were great men of the earth, their fame was in all the earth; but they too were gathered to their own people when they died.

They were gathered with the wicked and they were separated from the presence of the Lord to await the Judgment of the Great Day. And Esau was gathered with them. They were dead spiritually, and so when they died, they would die eternally. Not so, with Jacob and all the righteous. Listen to what it says in verses 18-24. “For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest...” (all fearful sights and sounds which cause fear and dread to guilty sinners.) “...and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore.”

“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.” This is where the spirit of Jacob was going to be gathered. And this the place where all of the spirits of righteous men made perfect from the foundation of the world have been gathered to await the day of the resurrection. Now, it was not as though the Incarnate Christ was there, yet. But yet, all the blessings of salvation were bestowed upon the spirits of these people in anticipation of what He would most certainly do and accomplish.

The spiritual benefits and blessings of the death of Christ were surely not withheld from them at the time of their death, even though they were born before Christ came; even thousands of years before. No, these Old Testament saints have been kept in the presence of God from the moment that they died until now. And they have greatly delighted in Him ever since. It is only the redemption of the body that awaits the day of the resurrection. And this should cause us to ask ourselves, most seriously, this question. Which people would I be gathered to, if I were to die this morning? Would I be gathered to the company of the wicked or the righteous? Would I be gathered with those separated from God, or the company of those who are forgiven and blessed forever?

It is a question not only worth pondering over, but a question to be answered and acted upon. If you do not believe in Jesus, the Mediator of the new covenant, you cannot enter heaven if you were to die this morning in that state. If you are more interested in an earthly inheritance, earthly fame, earthly and sensual pleasure; if you have no real interest in the things that are important to God and to Christ, and to all righteous people, then your portion at death is to be separated from God forever, and to suffer eternal torment. But, on the other hand, if you will embrace Christ with the arms of faith, then every good and righteous spiritual delight awaits you and you have nothing to fear from death. If you died, even this morning, you would be with him in Paradise immediately. It is faith in Christ that saves.

It is faith in Christ that receives the free gift. It is the Lord Jesus Christ who takes away your sins. It is the Father who clothes you in His righteousness, and it is the Spirit who gives you a new heart. It is Christ who gives you grace to repent and to believe and to obey the gospel. Jacob's death was as simple as "drawing his legs up into the bed and breathing his last." Not all the deaths of God's dear people are this simple. Some are painful and drawn out. But Christ is just as much there at the death beds of those believers as he was at Jacob's. This is because He is getting ready to gather you to Himself and to your people.

2nd – Death is to be understood as a time of mourning, but for all Christians it should be a joyful anticipation of our glorious future.

"Then Joseph fell on his father's face, and wept over him, and kissed him." Let us learn a lesson from Joseph this morning. All of you who are strong men, who might be tempted to think that crying and grief are not to be expressed by a strong masculine faith; think again. Joseph wept over the death of his father. Joseph, if you have read his life, was a man who felt deeply. He was a man who was affected emotionally by the changes which took place in other people. This was because he loved them deeply.

As we saw earlier, in the case of Cain, people can be brought to tears by self-pity or other selfish motives. But we see here, that the godly man will weep over others and he will weep with others. It is true that a godly person may weep because he feels his own loss of the person who has died. But it is a loss which was based upon their love for that person, knowing that there will never be another like them, and that this life with them, with all the joys and sorrows that it held, was the gift of God. This particular earthly life has ended, and things will not be the same again. It's not that things will not be much, much better in the future. Because of Christ they will be glorious.

But weeping is appropriate because of what a righteous man's life was; what it contributed to the showing forth of God's goodness in His giving us fathers to teach us, to love us, to raise us and to provide for us, in an earthly sense. And even more, what they gave to us and showed to us in a spiritual sense. In our loss we are thankful for the gift of this person. Weeping is appropriate because another man who loved truth and righteousness has left this earthly scene for the heavenly and eternal realms. He will be welcomed there, but he will be missed here. Only the Lord knows, how much even one godly man, means to keeping an increasingly pagan society from falling under the judgment of God.

How far should weeping and emotion be allowed by a righteous man, in himself, after the death of someone close to him? This is difficult to gauge. But our sorrow as a Christian is governed by what the Scriptures say, as everything else is in our experience. Turn with me to 1st Thessalonians 4: 13 and you will find the answer. "But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope." "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with him those who sleep in Jesus." "For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep." "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God." "And the dead in Christ will rise first."

So we see from these verses that excessive grief in a Christian is due to two factors at work in their life. The first is ignorance, and the second is having no hope of seeing their Christian relatives again. Paul takes steps to alleviate the first, and he warns against the second. The truth is, that all of the righteous dead shall be raised together at the last Day. All of the righteous dead, both Old and New, will be raised on the same Day. Those who are alive and remain will not "precede", or go before those who are in the graves or who have died before Christ's return. The dead in Christ shall rise first. Then those who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. (The Rapture of the Church) And thus we shall always be with the Lord.

Needless to say, this means that there will not be a secret rapture with a 7 year tribulation to follow, and a Millennium to follow that. Eternity will set in from this Day that is being talked about, the Day of Christ's return. The sure hope of everyone who has Christian relatives is, that they shall see them again. They will be transformed. They will be more beautiful and powerful than we have ever seen them before, but we will be able to recognize them. I say this because if we were not to be able to recognize them, it would be very hard not to sorrow as those who have no hope. It would be very hard to "comfort one another with these words". So the Christian is to be one who sorrows; yes he is, but he is not to be one who sorrows as a person who has no hope.

The sorrow of one who has no hope is the sorrow of one who does not believe in the promises of God; that there will be a resurrection from the dead, and there will be the comfort of seeing those again who have fallen asleep in Jesus. We should weep over the loss of our loved ones who have died in Christ, but as we weep, we should remember that we shall someday be reunited with them again. And this time it will be for all of eternity. Marriage shall not exist in that day, but the marriage of the Lamb with His bride, the Church, shall last. That relationship of Christ and His Church will continue through all of eternity. The spiritual delights of eternity shall far outstrip the legitimate joys of marriage in this present day. There will be no need to fear that they shall not.

But the truth that I want most to apply from this passage is in relation to grief. It is right to grieve and cry over unbelieving people while they live, greatly desiring for their salvation, and praying that God would be merciful. When they die, if they have not died believing, we need to recognize the fact that God was indeed good to them while they lived. They had received many good things, but still they rejected Christ. We should also recognize that God has had mercy upon whom He will have mercy, and He has had compassion upon those whom He has had compassion. Why should I question this, and grieve excessively? I cannot change God's mind. I must submit to His ordering of things.

Are you willing to do this if you lose someone who is in your family, someone you are close to, who does not know Christ? There is a tendency in funerals in our day; perhaps it has been a tendency in all generations, to try and make people who have never really shown evidence that they know the Lord, to be those who were really Christians. It is a spiritually dangerous practice. Let us leave it with the Lord, if we are not sure of the state of our loved one. Let us say – The Lord knows. I will be very glad if, when I come to heaven, I look and I see them numbered among God's dear children on the Last Day. But let us leave it there, knowing that God will know what to do.

3rd – A Godly Death for a Christian is a voluntary submission to the will of God, to leave this world for the next, in His time.

Chapter 49, verse 33 and chapter 50, verse 1 – "And when Jacob had finished commanding his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed and breathed his last, and was gathered to his people." "Then Joseph fell on his father's face and wept over him, and kissed him." It is wonderful to see the Providence of God in giving Jacob the strength to simply draw up his feet into the bed and breathe his last. He had finished giving commands to his sons. There was nothing more for him to do but leave them and go to God. His death was very beautifully decisive, even as our Lord Jesus' was, on the cross. "Into Thy hands I commit my spirit", He said. May the Lord give each of us this kind of grace when it comes our time to die, that it will be this simple for us.

Joseph was right there when his father died. And it says that he fell on his father's face and wept. He wept for the joy of having had such a father. He wept for the joy of knowing that his father's earthly pilgrimage was ended. He wept as he thought of the Lord's care over his father's life, and how he had led him all the way. He knew the Lord's timing was perfect. My brethren, when we come to end of our life, may we remember the words of Romans 14: 7 and 8. "For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself." "For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord." "Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's." May the Lord give us grace to live and die in just this way – to Him who loved us and gave Himself for us.

