

Prayer

Wonderful Lord; when our hearts are low and we struggle to complete the things You have given us to do, raise our spirits by granting us a vision of the greater things which lie ahead of us. Show us the power of love, the victory of the Cross and the wonder of Your Glory, and therefore strengthen our faith and our resolve; through Jesus Christ our Lord; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Human Spirit

Pray today for the church you attend. Each person you come across has a spirit which has been breathed into them and has given them unique and individual life. Pray and give thanks for the different gifts and abilities which God has given each human spirit, and pray that we may recognise the spirit in each other, and the spiritual gifts we use and express.

Meditation

Where is truth to be found? In books and through study,
After searching and researching, in the past, in the present,
In the future, or in the minds of the great and learned?
Rather, look to a child, and start from there.

Watch how a child explores its surroundings,
And challenge yourself to do the same.
Watch how a child engages with anyone present,
And challenge yourself to be open, like this.
Watch how a child moves with singular purpose,
And challenge yourself to consider your priorities.
Watch how a child draws the attention of all,
And challenge yourself to want to do the same.
Watch how a child expresses its emotions,
And challenge yourself to be unafraid of your own.

Now, how does this 'watching a child' help find truth?
It reminds us of truth's basic human perspective,
The place we all start from, our Saviour Christ as well,
For God, who made all things, felt it right to start there!

Bible Study - Genesis 49:28 - 50:13

²⁸ *All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father said to them as he blessed them, blessing each of them with an appropriate blessing.*

²⁹ *Then he gave them these instructions, saying 'I am about to be gathered to my people. Bury me with my ancestors in the cave which lies in the field of Ephron the Hittite, ³⁰ in the cave in the field at Machpelah, close by to Mamre, in the land of Canaan; in the field Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite as a burial site. ³¹ Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried there, as were Isaac and his wife Rebekah. I also buried Leah there, ³² as the field and the cave within it had been purchased from the Hittites.'* ³³ *When Jacob finished giving these instructions to his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed, breathed his last, and was gathered to his people.*

^{50:1} *Then Joseph threw himself on his father's face, wept over him and kissed him. ² He ordered physicians who were his servants to embalm his father; and when they embalmed Israel ³ they spent forty days in doing it, for that is the time required for*

embalming. The Egyptians mourned for him for seventy days. ⁴ Now when the days of mourning were over, Joseph spoke to Pharaoh's courtiers, 'If I have found favour with you, please make this request to Pharaoh for me: ⁵ My father made me swear an oath. He said, "I am about to die. You must bury me in the tomb that I hewed out for myself in the land of Canaan." So please let me go and bury my father, and then I will return.' ⁶ Pharaoh gave the reply, 'Go and bury your father, as he made you swear to do.'

⁷ So Joseph went to bury his father, and with him went all Pharaoh's officials, the senior figures of his household, and all the dignitaries of Egypt, ⁸ and also the whole household of Joseph, his brothers, and his father's household. Only the children and their flocks and herds were left in the land of Goshen. ⁹ Chariots and horsemen (charioteers) went with him as well; it was a very large retinue. ¹⁰ When they came to the threshing floor of Atad, which is beyond the Jordan, they had a considerable time of loud and sorrowful lamentation, observing seven days of mourning for his father's death. ¹¹ When the Canaanite who lived there saw the mourning coming from the threshing floor of Atad, they said, 'This is a solemn mourning for the Egyptians.' Hence the name of the place near the Jordan; Abel-mizraim. ¹² So Jacob's sons did what he had instructed them to do. ¹³ They carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave of the field at Machpelah, the field near Mamre, which Abraham bought as a burial site from Ephron the Hittite.

Review

The great story of Jacob's life now draws to a close with the record of his death. Apart from the last few verses of Chapter 50, the story of Joseph is also draws to a conclusion. Jacob first appeared in Genesis 25, so the story of the founding father of Israel, the man who bore this very name, has taken half of the book of Genesis! In addition, the last quarter of the book of Genesis has also been about Joseph, together with his father Jacob (since chapter 37). We are left with the impression that although many people think of Abraham as the founding father of the people of Israel, it is really the story of Jacob (Israel) which provided the rock upon which the future nation of Israel was built.

Certainly, all the sections of this passage of Scripture are grand and well emphasised. To start with, Jacob concluded his blessing (and cursing) of his sons. It is hard to imagine what the brothers might have been feeling. The whole story tells us that the whole family unit of Jacob's sons was riven with difficulty, and yet they had stayed together. Jacob had spoken great blessings upon some of his sons, but on others he had pronounced what sounded like curses (Reuben, Simeon and Levi). Their unity held out as they undertook to bury their father in this passage, but some cracks in their fellowship will appear in the final reading from Genesis, tomorrow.

After gathering them, Jacob gave his sons the same instructions he had previously given, and emphasised, to Joseph (47:30,31); saying that he should be buried in Canaan. This time, and to emphasise the historic nature of what was happening, Jacob formally recalled in detail the 'title deeds' to the only property owned by God's people in the Promised Land; the cave in the field of Machpelah, originally purchased by Abraham (23:9f.) for the burial of Sarah (49:29-32). The cave then held not only Sarah, but Abraham, Isaac and Rebekah (Jacob's father and mother), and apparently, Leah as well. It is only in this text that we learn where Rebekah was buried, though we could surely assume that she was buried alongside Isaac. Also, we have heard nothing about the death of Leah, and we must assume that she died when the family were settled near Hebron, and the burial ground was not too far from there.. We already know that Rachel was buried by the side of the road to Bethlehem (Ephrath – 35:19,20) after her tragic death in childbirth.

Having made his intentions clear yet again and in the full hearing of all his sons, Jacob passed away. Significantly, the one emotional reaction recorded in Scripture was that of Joseph.

Despite being the consummate civil servant, Joseph was unafraid to show his emotions and embraced his departed father in a manner which reflected his previous greeting after years of separation (46:29). The first time, Josephs weeping and tears were of joy, but now they were of sorrow. Joseph was then able to command people in his own employment to embalm Jacob, and he used his own employees rather than the professional embalmers of the court of Pharaoh who would have taken longer to do the job (up to 72 days, as we know from records) and would have surrounded the process with religious rites very foreign to Jacob, the nomadic man who worshipped Almighty God. His embalming lasted forty days (50:4) and additional days of mourning (70) passed before it was right for Joseph to make his move to ensure his father's last will was respected.

Joseph apparently used the appropriate official channels to make a request to Pharaoh to leave the country temporarily in order to bury his father. It was a somewhat delicate issue. Joseph was still the Grand Vizier of Egypt; Pharaoh's senior civil servant and organiser, who had revolutionised the Egyptian Empire single-handedly during the previous drought (47:13f.). His presence was still needed in Egypt, but Pharaoh felt secure enough to let Joseph go as he requested, and he was able to take what amounted to a royal retinue of Egyptians courtiers, chariots and wagons, as well as his own family. The whole journey back to Canaan was intended (probably even by Jacob) to be a reminder of what his own family would one day have to do, which was to return to the Promised Land. As it was, it appears that no-one thought twice about what they were doing; they were simply burying their father in Canaan and then returning back to Egypt. That was clear from the fact that all the children and livestock were left behind in Goshen (50:8)!

The great funeral cortège made its way to Canaan, and although it is by no means clear which way they travelled. The place names mentioned are of places long since lost in history, though some scholars have tried to reconstruct what they can from the text. This is not a significant, however, for no-one has ever fully explained the later route of the Exodus under Moses, the only other parallel journey from Egypt to Canaan recorded with any detail in Scripture. The mourning was properly and extensively organised, and seems to have impressed the local Canaanites, who observed the mourning of the Egyptians rather than the family of the man being buried (50:11)! The naming of places according to events as in verse 11 was another formal sign of a significant event in the life of the forefathers as recorded in Genesis, and at that point, the work of the brothers in burying their father in Canaan was done.

Going Deeper

Application

The end of someone's life is always a powerful and significant event. It is sad that in many parts of modern secular society, the passing of an individual is something which is hardly celebrated; it is simply regarded as a sorrow which has to be endured by all concerned. But in God's world, and in the Kingdom of God, the end of an earthly life is something which cannot simply pass without significant events taking place. Each of us has our memories of loved ones who have died, some in recent times, and some, a long time ago; but we will not escape these events or their personal impact upon us. Thank God that through our faith we can have the knowledge that every human being has been created by God for a purpose, and God can make sense of this if we have faith in Jesus Christ, whatever has happened to us. Most of us would hope for a good number of people who will celebrate our death at our funeral service, like Jacob, and it would be a powerful witness if other peoples saw the passion and sincerity with which we are honoured by our loved ones and also others with whom we have worked (like Jacob, as well!)

As is also clear from this whole story, death ends one phase of life and begins another, for life on earth continues until God in His own Sovereignty decides to send Jesus for a second time to conclude His Creation. In the mean time, we can rejoice that in Christ, death is never the end for us who believe, and we can have the hope of finding out more of the story of a great man such as Jacob, as the Lord grants.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. The Israelites used the burial site of the cave in the field at Machpelah as a memorial, and a place of worship. Why do we keep away from many burial sites?
2. Discuss in your group whether Abraham or Jacob is a greater figure in the Old Testament.
3. In what ways does the journey to Canaan described in this passage remind us of the story of what would happen, years later, when the Israelites left Egypt?

Discipleship

I will ask a simple question. Have you made any preparations for what should happen when you die? If not, is it worth considering this? None of us know when this will come to us, but it helps people enormously to know what we want, just like Jacob and his sons. This is not something morbid, but practical and loving for those with whom we share our lives. We should always be prepared to ensure that if anything happened to us, our nearest and dearest would know what we wanted, and perhaps had the means provided to do it. Perhaps this could make our final days, when they come, a much easier time, with a quicker route to peace in the knowledge that all has been properly done.

Final Prayer

You have created the beginning and the ending of our days, Lord God, and we do not know them. In Your great and providential care, help us to face these realities of life in the certain hope that You are in control of our lives; and You will bring us home! AMEN