

Parashah Forty-Five

Genesis 49:28–50:26; Zechariah 14:1–11; Luke 23:13–34

Notes by Tim Hegg

The Hope of Resurrection

We come now to the final *parashah* of this first book of the Torah, and to the conclusion of the lives of Jacob and Joseph. Surely they will live on in the memory and lives of their children, but their earthly existence now comes to an end.

There is always something wrong with death. It is not what should be. God is the God of life, not of death, for death is the result of sin (Rom 5:12). God did not create man to die, but to live. Thus, it is proper to mourn in the face of death. Indeed, death brings into question the goodness of God, His faithfulness, and even His ability to control the universe as its sovereign. Death, in every way, is contrary to the nature of God. That is why the death of the Messiah is such an enigma—it is an oxymoron of the grandest sort. That the Creator and Source of life should Himself succumb to death is beyond our ability for explanation. It is the mystery that confounds all other mysteries.

Yet in this fallen world, death is an inevitability. Except for those who are alive at the coming of our Master Yeshua, all will pass through the veil of death. All of us carry within us the seeds of mortality—“it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment” (Heb 9:27).

Yet God is not subject to death—He endures forever. Moreover, He has determined to overcome death for all of His children through the power of resurrection. Resurrection renders death powerless, and deprives it of its “sting” (Hos 13:14, cf. 1Cor 15:55). While we properly mourn the passing of those who die, our sorrow is soon turned to joy when we reckon with the fact that they will once again live, never to die again!

This concept of resurrection is not the product of later, Hellenistic thought and religion. On the contrary, God revealed the truth of resurrection to the patriarchs. And we get a hint of that in our *parashah*.

Jacob had already required that Joseph take an oath to bury his remains in the cave of Machpelah (47:29f). Now, however, as he comes to the last hours of his life, he once again reiterates that request with detailed instruction. Notice how he repeats that notice that the cave, and the field in which it was located, was purchased by Abraham as a burial site for his family. Clearly, Jacob considers a proper burial to be in line with his hope of the future resurrection. Why else would he be so intent upon this request? After all, he knew that his remains would revert to dust. What is so important about the procedure of burial? Couldn't God resurrect him from Egypt just as easily as from the Cave of his ancestors?

Here we derive an important pattern: one's burial is a testimony to the living of one's hope in the future resurrection. Jacob, believing to the very end of his life that God's covenant promises are sure, desires to be buried with those who likewise hoped in the faithfulness of God. We do well to take note of this in our times as well, for it has become very fashionable to accept the pagan ways of burial which blatantly deny the hope of resurrection. I'm speaking, of course, of the increasing popularity of cremation as a means of burial. Cremation has no biblical basis, and on the contrary, is derived from pagan culture. Two instances of burning a corpse (Josh 7:24–26; 1Sam 31:8–13) found in the Tanach demonstrate how foreign cremation was to the principles and customs which universally obtained among God's people. Moreover, cremation is contrary to the biblical doctrine

that man is created in God's image. The Psalmist notes that he was fearfully and wonderfully made, showing that the image of God is found in both body and soul (Ps 139:3–15). It is entirely improper that we should destroy this masterwork of God by fire. Furthermore, the abiding importance of the body as God's handiwork is affirmed in the fact that this self-same body will be raised alive and transformed in the day of resurrection. When the biblical writers use the euphemism of "sleeping" to denote death (e.g., Deut 31:16; 1Thess 4:14; 1Cor 15:20), it is more than mere euphemism—it emphasizes the point that death is a temporary situation: resurrection always follows death, even as awakening follows sleep.

All too often, when cremation is defended as an acceptable means of burial, it is based upon a gnostic principle that elevates the value of the soul above the body. But this is not the biblical teaching. When God made man as body and soul, He declared that what He had made was good. The body is to be treated with the same high regard for God's creative work as is the soul.

Finally, the example given to us in the Scriptures, of burying the body with honor and solemnity, speaks to those who remain alive. From a Jewish perspective, it is a great *mitzvah* to assist in burying the dead. As dirt is placed upon the casket of a loved one who has died, it is a vivid reminder for those who remain that the body, committed to ground, will once again live by the power of God's command. God created our bodies with tender care, Messiah suffered and died to redeem them, the Spirit of God inhabits them, and they will be brought to life again when Messiah returns. Cremation is an affront to each one of these facts. We do well to follow in the long Torah tradition of burial, and in so doing, to affirm our unflinching faith in the goodness of God and the coming resurrection.

Thus, Jacob and Joseph both request that they be buried in the Land promised to them by God Himself. They both anticipate the future resurrection in such a request. And Joseph even anticipates the exodus promised to Abraham (Gen 15:13–14), for he requests that his bones be carried with his descendants when they leave Egypt (Gen 50:24ff). In the face of death, Jacob and Joseph display an unwavering faith in God's promises!

We may wonder at the notice that both Jacob and Joseph were embalmed (50:2f, 26). Had they given in to the Egyptian notion that embalming the corpse was a means of preserving it for the future life? Had they forgotten that God had said that a corpse would return to dust? No, that was not the case. Rather, anticipating that their bodies would not be laid to rest immediately, but would need to be transported to the proper burial place, they were wrapped with spices in order to preserve the body for burial. They were not placed in elaborate tombs as was the custom of the Egyptians, but were simply preserved for the journey to Canaan and to the Cave of Machpelah. Had they been able to bury Jacob and Joseph immediately, there would have been no need for embalming.

The faith of Joseph is once again highlighted when his brothers come to him after the death of Jacob. Fearing that once their father had died, Joseph would be given over to revenge, they concoct a story in which Jacob had given a command to Joseph to forgive his brothers of their evil deeds. When they come to Joseph with this scenario, he weeps (50:17). Did he weep because he was reminded of his recently deceased father, or because once again, his brothers had failed to grasp the obvious fact that he had already forgiven them? In his response to his brothers, he reassures them twice with the loving command: "do no fear." And then we hear the clear message of his faith in God: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive." Here we understand a number of things about God's

sovereignty: 1) He is able to use even the evil intentions of men to bring about His own sovereign purpose; 2) even in the face of evil, God intends to bring about that which is good for His people. The only way that Joseph's statement can be true is if God is truly sovereign—if He, in a mysterious way, is able to overrule the intentions of men to bring about His own design. This does not sweep aside the culpability of those who do evil, but it does remind us that the evil actions of men cannot overturn the plans of God. He is in control, and He will bring about His sovereign will. But we must also marvel at Joseph's faith. Faith is the God-given ability to trust that He is good in the face of overwhelming evil. It was such a faith that enabled Joseph to remain steadfast even in dire circumstances. He believed in God's sovereign ability to bring about His intended purposes, and his trusting in God's sovereign control allowed him to maintain under the worst of conditions. If we learn nothing else from the grand story of Genesis, may we learn and live this lesson!