

# The End Of The Beginning

Genesis 50:1-26 March 15, 2023

Funerals are starting to go away. *The Washington Post* reported, "Death is a given, but not the time-honored rituals. An increasingly secular, nomadic and casual America is shredding the rules about how to commemorate death...Somber, embalmed-body funerals...are, for many families, a relic."<sup>1</sup> Between 2009 and 2019, the number of funeral homes in the United States shrunk by 1,500.<sup>2</sup> Researchers at the University of Bath concluded, "A funeral service is sometimes neither wanted nor needed, and families of the deceased should be encouraged to reject the convention if it's unlikely to ease their grief."<sup>3</sup>

Something tells me this is not a good trend. Ignoring the passing of members of our community and abandoning one of the fundamental observances of every generation is not going to improve our society or our cultural well-being. The modern mind may not *want* to face grief and death, but death remains a reality and a constant presence.

We know why. Genesis explained it to us. God designed a cosmos full of thriving life. Man traded it for thorns and death. The book closes with two funerals, one extravagant, one much more plain. But as the passage adjourns, we are left with the hope that death is not the end. There's still life ahead because God is not willing to let His creation be claimed by sin. He intends to take it back.

## **Genesis 50:1 - Then Joseph, leaning over his father's face, wept and kissed him.**

Jacob has just died. God promised that Joseph would be there to close his eyes and it was so. We see Joseph cry a lot - seven separate times in his saga - but he wasn't defined by sorrow. He is consistently hopeful and trusts that God is present and accomplishing good things.

## **Genesis 50:2-3 - <sup>2</sup>He commanded his servants who were physicians to embalm his father. So they embalmed Israel. <sup>3</sup>They took forty days to complete this, for embalming takes that long, and the Egyptians mourned for him seventy days.**

This was *not* the normal process for the family of Abraham. Was Joseph more Egyptian than Hebrew? The truth is, he spent 93 of his 110 years in Egypt. There are some who accuse him of trying to live simultaneously in both worlds.<sup>4</sup> But that's not really the portrait that Genesis gives us.

There's an interesting hint in verse 2: Joseph commanded his *physicians* to embalm his father, *not* the mortuary priests who were normally involved.<sup>5</sup> So, it appears that Joseph was separating the Egyptian religious aspect from the embalming process.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-funeral-as-we-know-it-is-becoming-a-relic--just-in-time-for-a-death-boom/2019/04/14/a49003c4-50c2-11e9-8d28-f5149e5a2fda\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-funeral-as-we-know-it-is-becoming-a-relic--just-in-time-for-a-death-boom/2019/04/14/a49003c4-50c2-11e9-8d28-f5149e5a2fda_story.html)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cremationsolutions.com/blog/americans-avoiding-funerals-and-not-leaving-their-mark/2020/02/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bath.ac.uk/announcements/a-growing-number-of-people-are-rejecting-formal-funerals-why/>

<sup>4</sup> Joshua Berman *Identity Politics And The Burial Of Jacob (Genesis 50:1-14)*

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth A Mathews *Genesis 11:27-50:26*

The Egyptians were deep into death ritual. Mummification was a real thing. The embalming process originated in *“the belief that the ghostly double of the man might at any time return to take possession of the body.”*<sup>6</sup> Depending on how wealthy you were, you’d get more embalming done. The poor might just be washed and dried in the sun.<sup>7</sup> Pay a little more and you might be packed in salt. Go all the way up to the *Cadillac* option, and your brain and organs would be removed and replaced with spices, your body soaked in potassium nitrate and wrapped in linen dipped in resin.<sup>8</sup>

Joseph had promised his father that he would take him back to Canaan and bury him in the cave owned by their family. But Joseph also knew that the death of the Prime Minister’s father would be a big deal, politically. Indeed, we’ll see it was - the whole country goes into mourning. Plus, servants of Pharaoh couldn’t just leave the country whenever they wanted. There would be a significant amount of time between Jacob’s death and burial, so the body would need to be preserved. David Livingstone’s body was famously preserved so it could be shipped from Africa to Britain. His body was packed in salt, dried in the sun, then wrapped in calico and bark. They doused his face with brandy to preserve his features. His remains were then sealed with tar before being walked 1,000 miles to an outpost then put on a ship.<sup>9</sup>

All of chapter 50 stands in stark contrast to Genesis 1 and 2. Look at what earth has come to. Look at what sin does. There’s a tragic irony here: Joseph gives Jacob’s body to the physicians, but the word is “healers.” Why did humanity need healers? Now that they had them, what help were they once a man had died? Mankind is so quick to proliferate sin and yet so powerless against it.

Meanwhile, God has been constantly busying Himself with dealing with it *for* us. He says, *“I will become your Great Physician.”* We read in Isaiah 19: *“Then they will turn to the Lord, and He will be receptive to their prayers and heal them.”*<sup>10</sup> He has the plan, He has the power, He has promised to roll back sin, clear away our guilt, defeat death, and restore us to immortality if we will believe in Him and receive the free gift of His salvation.

**Genesis 50:4-5 - <sup>4</sup>When the days of mourning were over, Joseph said to Pharaoh’s household, “If I have found favor with you, please tell Pharaoh that <sup>5</sup>my father made me take an oath, saying, ‘I am about to die. You must bury me there in the tomb that I made for myself in the land of Canaan.’ Now let me go and bury my father. Then I will return.”**

It’s hard to get a feel for Joseph’s relationship with Pharaoh. At one point he says that “he’s like a father to Pharaoh.” On the other hand, he seems very anxious when making requests of him.

Joseph didn’t even ask Pharaoh, personally. He uses members of the household as a go-between. It could be that he was ceremonially unclean since he had come into contact with a dead body. Or

<sup>6</sup> John Skinner *Genesis (The International Critical Commentary)*

<sup>7</sup> R. Kent Hughes *Genesis: Beginning And Blessing*

<sup>8</sup> Gordon Wenham *Word Biblical Commentary Volume 2: Genesis 16-50*

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/diary-livingstones-intrepid-african-attendant-now-online-180972045/>

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 19:22

it could be that he was unshaven in his grief and therefore couldn't be in Pharaoh's presence.<sup>11</sup> But he's very careful in the way he brings this request. This is a big ask. If Pharaoh was paranoid, he might think his Prime Minister was defecting to Canaan. So, Joseph assures him "I will return."

**Genesis 50:6 - <sup>6</sup>So Pharaoh said, "Go and bury your father in keeping with your oath."**

For his part, Pharaoh is gracious and understanding. He not only allows Joseph to go, we'll see that the whole affair becomes a state-sponsored funeral with Pharaoh's approval. The whole nation was in mourning. The 70 days they observed for Jacob was just 2 days shy of what Egyptians would normally do for a *king*!<sup>12</sup> The presence of God's people made a big difference in this society. They didn't come with a *strategy* to make a difference, but, as they walked by faith, the Lord was able to do what He wanted to do through them, which was make them a blessing to the nations.

**Genesis 50:7-9 - <sup>7</sup>Then Joseph went to bury his father, and all Pharaoh's servants, the elders of his household, and all the elders of the land of Egypt went with him, <sup>8</sup>along with all Joseph's family, his brothers, and his father's family. Only their dependents, their flocks, and their herds were left in the land of Goshen. <sup>9</sup>Horses and chariots went up with him; it was a very impressive procession.**

This is a huge deal. In fact, it's safe to say that the Egyptians had totally hijacked this funeral. You've got palace officials and cultural leaders, you've got the military, and all the who's-who of the kingdom. As one commentator puts it, there were no no-shows - everybody was there.<sup>13</sup> And, there, tossed in the middle, were Jacob's sons. It was probably a strange feeling.

**Genesis 50:10-11 - <sup>10</sup>When they reached the threshing floor of Atad, which is across the Jordan, they lamented and wept loudly, and Joseph mourned seven days for his father. <sup>11</sup>When the Canaanite inhabitants of the land saw the mourning at the threshing floor of Atad, they said, "This is a solemn mourning on the part of the Egyptians." Therefore the place is named Abel-mizraim. It is across the Jordan.**

This whole scene was so Egyptian that the local Canaanites mistook who was being lamented over. According to ancient custom, the Egyptian portion of the entourage probably took leave of the body here "amid an elaborate set of ceremonies that would include divine mourners, incantations of protection for the deceased, female lamenters, ritual dancers, and a full-scale banquet."<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, the Hebrews are just waiting for all of that to be done so they can carry out *their* custom together.

**Genesis 50:12-13 - <sup>12</sup>So Jacob's sons did for him what he had commanded them. <sup>13</sup>They carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave at Machpelah in the field near Mamre, which Abraham had purchased as burial property from Ephron the Hethite.**

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<sup>11</sup> See Hughes, Robert Davidson *Genesis 12-50*

<sup>12</sup> Skinner

<sup>13</sup> Hughes

<sup>14</sup> Berman

Generally, scholars believe that the family left the Egyptian crowd behind here.<sup>15</sup> This scene continues the pattern in Genesis of strained or estranged sons coming together for funerals.

America is the land of individuality, but we need to keep unity and community close to heart. We're not just Americans, we're members of a Body that is meant to be knit together and growing and mindful of the other parts. We're meant to work together to strengthen weak knees and tired hands, watching out for each other and celebrating with each other and weeping with each other. Don't withdraw into individuality. Unify with your spiritual community, *even* when there's tension to work through.

**Genesis 50:14 - <sup>14</sup>After Joseph buried his father, he returned to Egypt with his brothers and all who had gone with him to bury his father.**

Why return when God wanted this family in Canaan? Well, God was also dealing with other people like the Amorites. He was giving *them* time to repent and turn to Him. As He said in Genesis 15, "the iniquity of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure." His long-suffering was waiting for four more generations. Sadly, they chose sin and judgement instead of repentance and grace.

**Genesis 50:15 - <sup>15</sup>When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said to one another, "If Joseph is holding a grudge against us, he will certainly repay us for all the suffering we caused him."**

"If he has a grudge." *Did* Joseph have a grudge? They had no reason to think so. This was a totally unfair notion. Joseph had not only promised to help them, he had spent *seventeen years* taking care of them. He set them up in the best part of the land. He extended every ounce of grace he could to them. He had wept with them and embraced them and provided all they needed to live and thrive in the midst of the worst famine in history. He had already explained to them in chapter 45, "I'm here to save. I'm here to preserve life." But the brothers' guilt gnawed on. He couldn't *really* forgive them, could he? What they had done was too awful. So they hatch a plan.

**Genesis 50:16-17 - <sup>16</sup>So they sent this message to Joseph, "Before he died your father gave a command: <sup>17</sup>'Say this to Joseph: Please forgive your brothers' transgression and their sin—the suffering they caused you.' Therefore, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when their message came to him.**

In many ways, it feels like we're back where we started. Genesis has covered thousands of years of history, it has revealed an astounding amount of God's power and operations and His victories in grace. There has been a great deal of progress in the Lord's redemptive plan. A clear choice has developed between believing God and following Him or just going the way of the world. But, after all this time, after all these chapters, we're right back in Genesis 3. Human beings, crushed by guilt, trying desperately to parlay their way into forgiveness they know they don't deserve. The brothers

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<sup>15</sup> See Wenham, Skinner, though Waltke proposes the Egyptians followed to Macpelah

sew themselves some fig leaves here. They send this message, almost assuredly a lie,<sup>16</sup> hoping to get mercy. They hide in the shadows from their brother because they're afraid. And it broke Joseph's heart. He knew Jacob didn't really say this because *he was the one* Jacob delivered his last will and testament to.

More importantly, Joseph had already forgiven them. He had already done the work to reconcile them. The only thing that was stopping the brothers from receiving grace and mercy and freedom from guilt was their own unbelief. It wasn't that Joseph was withholding, it was that they didn't believe he would forgive them. This is exactly the problem today. God does not have to be convinced or cajoled to forgive your sin. *He has already paid the debt!* The only barrier is *your* heart. Will you believe God has forgiven you and then embrace Him and trust Him?

The brothers, out of fear, tried to obligate Joseph into *not* taking revenge on them. Meanwhile, Joseph is there saying, "I forgive you because of my *hesed* love for you. I don't have to be restrained. I'd rather be embraced."

**Genesis 50:18 - <sup>18</sup>His brothers also came to him, bowed down before him, and said, "We are your slaves!"**

Poor Joseph has to be thinking, "What do I have to do to show these guys I love them and will provide for them???" The truth is, they *weren't* slaves, they were *brothers!* Joseph recognized them as family, not foes. As one commentator points out, Joseph *could've* enslaved them back when he was "enslaving" the rest of Egypt for Pharaoh, but he purposefully didn't!<sup>17</sup>

What a sad scene - especially when we remember the dream Joseph had close to a century before, where the brothers came to bow before him. Back then it was such a contentious thing. If you would've told Joseph how it would play out here, he would've said, "That's not what I want." Maybe as a teenager he had been taunting his brothers with the dream, we don't know. But he certainly wasn't interested in holding his position over them now.

It can be so hard for us to believe that God actually loves us and that He actually wants to shower His grace on us. But it's true. How many times does the Lord have to say it and prove it and repeat it? He *loves* you! Make Psalm 119:132 your prayer: "*Turn to me and be gracious to me, as is your practice toward those who love your name.*" Let's not grieve our Savior by failing to believe in His goodness, His forgiveness, and His grace.

**Genesis 50:19-21 - <sup>19</sup>But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup>You planned evil against me; God planned it for good to bring about the present result—the survival of many people. <sup>21</sup>Therefore don't be afraid. I will take care of you and your children." And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.**

<sup>16</sup> Derek Kidner *Genesis*

<sup>17</sup> Mathews

Even though Joseph is the one with the broken heart, he still takes the time to comfort his fearful brothers. It reminds us of Jesus' tender compassion in the hours before and during His crucifixion.

Here Joseph delivers one of the most famous lines in Genesis. "You meant it for evil, God meant it for good." Some extrapolate from that that God causes all occurrences in history - no rogue molecules. That is not the teaching of Genesis or any other book of the Bible. Instead, what we see is that God is so powerful He is able to accomplish His gracious purposes *even though men actively rebel against Him*. What Genesis shows us is that God is able to *clean* the mess of sin, no matter how bad of a stain it is. His providence cannot be overwhelmed by our awfulness. But we cannot jump from there to saying God *caused* these men to do an evil thing. To do so would mean God is the author of evil - that God generates sin. That is blasphemy. The Bible reveals that God's will *will* be done and that man is a being with free will. Despite our wickedness and rebellion, God still accomplishes His will, and we are invited to join Him.

Joseph "spoke kindly to them." The Hebrew literally means, "He spoke to their heart."<sup>18</sup> And instead of saying, "Ok, listen, this isn't working out, You still don't trust me. You still don't believe me. I'm not gonna take revenge on you, but let's just go our separate ways," Joseph instead *doubles down* on grace. He says, "I'm going to take care of you and your children." That's a taste of God's grace.

**Genesis 50:22-23 - <sup>22</sup> Joseph and his father's family remained in Egypt. Joseph lived 110 years. <sup>23</sup> He saw Ephraim's sons to the third generation; the sons of Manasseh's son Machir were recognized by Joseph.**

Joseph never had any face-to-face talks with God the way Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did. But Joseph *knew* God in a life-changing way. He's constantly telling people, "This is what God is like, this is what God is doing, this is what I know about the character and nature of God." We can know God that way, too, and we can trust Him through all circumstances just as Joseph did.

**Genesis 50:24-26 - <sup>24</sup> Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die, but God will certainly come to your aid and bring you up from this land to the land he swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." <sup>25</sup> So Joseph made the sons of Israel take an oath: "When God comes to your aid, you are to carry my bones up from here." <sup>26</sup> Joseph died at the age of 110. They embalmed him and placed him in a coffin in Egypt.**

Verse 24 doesn't mean that he was the first of the brothers to die, it is speaking generally.<sup>19</sup> Joseph leaves this world full of faith. So much faith that he probably had to pull some strings to *not* have the Egyptians do what they wanted to do with his body after they died. He was embalmed and put in a sarcophagus,<sup>20</sup> but he said, "Save me for Canaan."

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<sup>18</sup> Waltke

<sup>19</sup> John Goldingay *Genesis*

<sup>20</sup> Hughes

Imagine a sitting president dying in office but refusing to have a state funeral! Now, it's possible there was a state funeral for Joseph, but Genesis doesn't want us to end with that image. Instead, it ends with God's people waiting for what's next. The Lord wasn't done. He had been coming to man's aid since Genesis 3 and He was going to keep coming to their aid until the work of redemption was complete. Joseph knew it and wanted to be a part of it. "Don't leave me in a temple or a pyramid. Get me to the Promised Land."

And so the book closes with all of us waiting. When will God finish His mission of coming to our aid? When will things be back the way they started? Genesis opened in Eden. One of the last places mentioned there is the "threshing floor of Atad," which can be translated, "the threshing floor of the bramble."<sup>21</sup> Such a wide gulf between what *could've* been and what we settled for.

Man sure has made a mess of things. From sin came thorns and sweat and sorrow and death and bloodshed and quarreling and famines and floods and hatred and anxiety and every other terrible thing. It was all the opposite of what God wanted and offered. But, even after trading Eden for brambles, the Lord *still* offers men rescue. He *still* holds out everlasting life and the hope of glory to anyone who will go His way - anyone who will believe Him and trust His Word and His leading. Because of sin, there's a life-long wait for us, with sorrows along the way, but, in the end, there will be life the way it was meant to be. In the end God's children will be fully restored, fully free, in full communion with the Lord our Maker and Father and Savior and Friend. When the chapters of our mortal lives close, the next book is opened, the Lamb's Book of Life, and we will experience a *new* beginning of the life God has always wanted for us, one that will never end.

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*