

SERIES: Joseph: From Pit to Prominence

SERMON: **Dying Well**

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 48-50

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Dying well and dying with dignity are topics of much discussion in the medical and psychological communities today. But in choosing to talk about *Dying Well* today I am not principally addressing medical or psychological aspects of death, but rather spiritual ones.

An ancient Roman emperor once said that the greatest difference between Christians and pagans is that “Christians die well.” He should have known, because he put many of them to death. When our brother Randall Rice died a few months ago, I often heard the comment, “He died well.” What do people mean when they say that? Well, some probably simply mean that he lived a long, full life. In that sense Randall certainly died well—he was almost 96? More often, however, we probably mean that the person died with no unfinished business. His life was in order, relationships with family and friends were all solid, and any forgiveness that needed to happen had been taken care of. In that sense, too, Randall died well.

But the most important thing *I* mean when I say about someone, “He died well” is that the person is ready to meet God, that he or she knew the Savior personally, and will be there to meet me when my time comes. Once again, Randall fit the definition of “dying well” to the tee. In today’s Scripture text I find two biblical examples of dying well—one even better than the other. I think we can learn from them both.

We’ve come to the end of our two-month series on the life of Joseph much too quickly. What an experience it has been to walk with him from his privileged status as a young boy tending sheep to a frightening pit, to slavery in a foreign country, then on a roller-coaster of success and tragedy, culminating in becoming Prime Minister of the greatest nation in ancient history—all by the time he is 30 years old.

The story of how he was reunited with his family is one of the most amazing stories ever written. It tells about how a providential God watches over His children and rewards those who are faithful. And the account of Joseph’s brilliant administration over Egypt during what was undoubtedly its greatest crisis, reminds us that a wise leader refuses to sit back and wait for God to perform miracles. Instead he seizes opportunity by the throat, uses the brains God gave him, and makes wise decisions based upon the information he has, all the while acknowledging God’s providence and giving Him gratitude and glory.

Interestingly, the last 75 years of Joseph’s life are skipped over by the author of Genesis with only brief references to his father Jacob’s death at age 147 and then his own death about 50 years later at the age of 110. Why we aren’t told more about his career or his family I don’t know, but what we learn about how these two men died is profound. First, the death of Jacob:

Jacob dies well.

Look at the opening words of chapter 48 of Genesis:

Some time later Joseph was told, "Your father is ill." So he took his two sons Manasseh and Ephraim along with him. When Jacob was told, "Your son Joseph has come to you," Israel rallied his strength and sat up on the bed. The first thing we see

here is that . . .

Jacob blesses Joseph's two sons. (48:1-20) In fact, according to verses 5 and 6 he adopts Joseph's two sons as his own. (That, by the way, is why the land was still divided between twelve tribes of Israel, even though no land was given to the tribe of Levi. In the place of Levi and Joseph there was the half tribe of Ephraim and the half tribe of Manasseh). In verse 9 he says to Joseph,

“Bring them to me so I may bless them.”

“Now Israel's (Jacob's) eyes were failing because of old age, and he could hardly see. So Joseph brought his sons close to him, and his father kissed them and embraced them.

Israel said to Joseph, ‘I never expected to see your face again, and now God has allowed me to see your children too.’”

Then something strange occurs. Joseph stands his two boys in front of his father for the blessing. Manasseh is on Joseph's left and Ephraim on his right, because he wants them to be respectively on Jacob's right and left. In other words, when Jacob reaches out his hand to bless the boys, his right hand will be on Manasseh and his left on Ephraim. After all, Manasseh is the older son and the right hand signifies the hand of greater blessing. But Jacob reaches out and crosses his arms so that his right hand is on Ephraim and his left on Manasseh, and he gives his blessing to them (15-16):

*“May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked,
the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day,
the Angel who has delivered me from all harm—may he bless these
boys.*

*May they be called by my name
and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac,
and may they increase greatly upon the earth.”*

But Joseph was upset. He took his father's hands and tried to move them to the opposite child's head. He said (verse 18), “No, my father, this one is the firstborn (pointing to Manasseh); put your right hand on his head.” But Jacob refused. He said, “I know, my son, I know. He too will become a people, and he too will become great. Nevertheless, his younger brother will be greater than he, and his descendants will become a group of nations.”

Now we can argue about the full meaning of this blessing and why it was done this way, but this is no unique event. There are countless times in Scripture when God chose differently than man chooses. In fact, that's the main point of 1 Cor. 1:26-29 about how God chooses in salvation. The older, the wiser, the richer, and the more powerful have no special advantages in the plan of salvation.

Jacob blesses Joseph. (48:21-22) He says to Joseph in verse 22: “And to you, as one who is over your brothers, I give the ridge of land I took from the Amorites with my sword and my bow.” There is something here not obvious in our English Bibles. The Hebrew word for

“ridge of land” is *shechem*, which is also the name of the place where Joseph would eventually be buried. Jacob is promising Joseph his inheritance in the land, actually a double portion since the land given to the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh was larger than that given to any of the other tribes.

Jacob blesses his other sons. (49:1-28) In chapter 49 Jacob goes through the names of his other 11 sons and blesses them. But he gives more than a blessing. He cites characteristics of these brothers, some good and some bad, plus predictions about what was going to happen to them, some positive and some negative. I almost feel guilty for not examining these blessings in detail, but I’m going to leave most of this chapter for you to study on your own.

But we must not skip over what Jacob says about his son Judah beginning in verse 8. Remember that Jesus came from the tribe of Judah. In light of that, listen to what Jacob says in 49:8-12:

"Judah, your brothers will praise you; your hand will be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons will bow down to you.

You are a lion's cub, O Judah;

you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down, like a lioness—who dares to rouse him?

The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his.

He will tether his donkey to a vine, his colt to the choicest branch; he will wash his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes.

His eyes will be darker than wine, his teeth whiter than milk.

There is clearly a wealth of imagery here—prophecies, if you will—regarding the life and death of Christ some 18 centuries later.

Jacob gives final instructions, and then dies. (49:29-33) It’s not unusual for dying people to make last requests. Jacob’s is that he doesn’t want to be buried in Egypt but to have his body returned to the Cave of Machpelah in Canaan to be buried with his father and grandfather. We commented several weeks ago about how this was an expression on Jacob’s part of the promise of God that Israel’s sojourn in Egypt would be temporary and that God would raise up a great nation to occupy the land He gave them as an everlasting possession.

Then we read in verse 33, “When Jacob had finished giving instructions to his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed, breathed his last and was gathered to his people.”

Jacob is mourned. (50:1-3)

Joseph threw himself upon his father and wept over him and kissed him. Then Joseph directed the physicians in his service to embalm his father Israel. So the physicians embalmed him, taking a full forty days, for that was the time required for embalming. And the Egyptians mourned for him seventy days.

If you know anything about Jewish burial practices you know that they do not embalm bodies but rather bury them within 24 hours. But they are in Egypt now, and Joseph has his father embalmed according to Egyptian practices. Besides, if he is going to fulfill his father’s last wish

and carry him back to Canaan for burial, it will be essential to prepare the body for the journey.

Jacob has not lived an entirely godly life, but as he comes to the end of it he is walking with the Lord, his family is reunited in faith and love, and he is the patriarch of a large and growing nation. For the most part he dies well. But I would suggest to you that . . .

Joseph dies even better.

I think the primary reason is that he lived better. It's not impossible for one who lives poorly to die well, but it's rare. One of the amazing things about the grace of God is that He will accept a despicable sinner even on his deathbed. In a sense the thief on the Cross died well because Jesus said, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." But how much better when one's death is the culmination of his life, rather than a contradiction to it!

Part of dying well, as we stated earlier, is making sure we have no unfinished business. Joseph makes sure he has none.

He fulfills his promise to his father. (50:4-14) After his father's death Joseph appeals to Pharaoh to allow him to go and bury his father as per his request. Pharaoh continues to show immense confidence in Joseph as he tells him in verse 6, "Go up and bury your father, as he made you swear to do." And Joseph did so. When you read about the caravan of court officials and dignitaries from Egypt that went with him, besides family members, chariots and horsemen, one cannot help but compare it to the caravan that took Joseph to Egypt perhaps 40 years earlier. That was a caravan of Ishmaelite or Midianite traders, and Joseph was transported in leg irons, to be auctioned off in the slave trade to the highest bidder. This caravan is fit for a king. That shouldn't shock us, because one of the common themes of Scripture is that he who humbles himself under the mighty hand of God will, in due time, be exalted.

He reiterates his forgiveness to his brothers. (50:15-21) One of the common results of living a long time with a guilty conscience is paranoia, always looking over one's shoulder wondering if you are going to be exposed. Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers, as we spoke about three weeks ago, went a long way to relieving their guilty consciences, but when a habit is formed over time it is not easy to break over night. As soon as Jacob dies, the old patterns return and the brothers begin to look over their shoulder again. Follow the story with me in 50:15-21:

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept.

His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.

But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the

saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

In some ways this is a sad and pathetic scene. The brothers know that the sins Joseph forgave were dastardly deeds, and perhaps they can't quite believe his forgiveness was for real. Some of you who are movie buffs remember how Michael Corleone tolerated his older brother Fredo until his father died, only to make him sleep with the fishes, which is Mafia-speak for execution. I think that's what Joseph's brothers suspected might happen to them.

How many of us have come to a point in our lives when our own sins have loomed extra large and we have wondered whether God really meant it when He said that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. It must grieve God when we doubt His word, much as it grieved Joseph and caused him to weep when he learned that his brothers doubted his own forgiveness.

I wonder if the most important single statement out of Joseph's mouth is this one: "Am I in the place of God?" It's a rhetorical question demanding a resounding "no" for an answer. When we feel like taking revenge on someone or demanding restitution for some offense, it would be wise for us to ask this question, "Am I in the place of God?" Friends, He is infinitely more capable of disciplining the sinner than we are, and He is infinitely more merciful to the sinner than we are. In fact, I wonder if that isn't what we fear—that God will be merciful and we want them to pay. We are much like Jonah, who didn't want to preach to the Ninevites because he just knew God would forgive them if they repented, and he didn't want them forgiven.

The following statement is one of the clearest declarations of divine providence anywhere in Scripture: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good." It serves as an important reminder that while the evil of men may appear to be to the disadvantage of the godly, the purposes and plans of God will ultimately prevail.

Joseph completes his long life in Egypt but also asks to be returned to Canaan.

(50:22-26) Let's read the conclusion of Joseph's story, which is also the conclusion to the entire book of Genesis, 50:22-26:

Joseph stayed in Egypt, along with all his father's family. He lived a hundred and ten years and saw the third generation of Ephraim's children. Also the children of Makir son of Manasseh were placed at birth on Joseph's knees.

Then Joseph said to his brothersⁱ "I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." And Joseph made the sons of Israel swear an oath and said, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place."

Do you realize that this request of Joseph's about his body being returned to Canaan was the issue, above all others, that earned him a spot in the Hall of Faith? "By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones" (Hebrews 11:22). So fixed was he on the promises of God that the nation would return to the Holy Land that he, like his father Jacob, insisted on having his body buried there, and God honored that faith.

Yet the last verse of Genesis reads: “So Joseph died at the age of a hundred and ten. And after they embalmed him, he was placed in a coffin in Egypt.” There’s no mention of a caravan to take Joseph back to Canaan as there was for Jacob—because it didn’t happen. But also there is no mention of a grave. Joseph’s unburied coffin was a constant reminder to the Israelites that Egypt was not their final home. He remained in a coffin in Egypt for decades that turned into centuries. Had his request been ignored? Well, over 300 years later we read about the Exodus from Egypt. In Exodus 13:19 it says, “Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the sons of Israel swear an oath. He had said, ‘God will surely come to your aid, and *then* you must carry my bones up with you from this place.’” Well, God has come to the aid of the nation, He has raised up a leader like no other, and the people are finally on their way back to the Promised Land. Now is the time when they are to fulfill Joseph’s final request.

But Moses dies toward the end of wilderness wanderings. Do we know whether Joseph’s embalmed body actually makes it back to Canaan? At the very end of the book of Joshua, after the Crossing of the Jordan, after the Conquest, when Israel is largely in possession of the Promised Land, we read in Joshua 24:31-32:

Israel served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had experienced everything the LORD had done for Israel.

And Joseph’s bones, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem in the tract of land that Jacob bought for a hundred pieces of silver from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem. This became the inheritance of Joseph’s descendants.

Joseph is finally home.

You know, it’s one thing to see Jacob die well and then observe how Joseph died even better. But the message I want each one to take home today is that . . .

You, too, can die well.

Joseph doesn’t have to be an exception; he can be the rule. Randall Rice doesn’t have to be an exception; he can be the rule. Many of us in this room will finish our earthly sojourn within the next decade. I’m not talking *just* about those in their 80’s and 90’s either. Some of the rest of us, perhaps even some young people, will end our lives prematurely. (I don’t believe there actually are any premature deaths in God’s reckoning, but there surely are some in ours). When God calls your name will it be said that you died well? I think there are four things we can do that will make it much more likely that friends and family will say that about us:

1. Trust in God, not in circumstances. If there’s any lesson we should learn from the life of Joseph, this is it. Some of the circumstances of his life were downright tragic: betrayed by family, sold like a piece of meat, framed and imprisoned, forgotten by one he saved. But Joseph never seemed to wallow in circumstances. Instead he saw through the evil circumstances to the good that God was intending. He constantly put his trust in the Lord. He is probably the greatest human example of the description of Christ given in 1 Peter 2:23: “When

they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” Of course, Joseph didn’t perfectly resemble Jesus because the next verse adds, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.” No ordinary human being could do that for any other. But Jesus did.

2. Keep short accounts with God and people. There’s nothing like bitterness to shorten your life, or at least make you wish it were shorter. Joseph teaches us that forgiveness is possible—even forgiveness of those who treat us in dastardly ways. Forgiveness shouldn’t be treated lightly; it is not something we verbalize without thought. In fact, Joseph tested his brothers extensively before he verbalized his forgiveness to them. But though at times it may come slowly and hesitatingly, we must forgive.

3. Make sure you have no unfinished business. Do you owe unsecured debts? Then you have unfinished business and you are not ready to die well. Do you have unforgiven family members? Then you have unfinished business and are not ready to die well. Do you have unconfessed sin in your life? Then you have unfinished business and are not ready to die well.

4. Be sure you’re ready for the journey to the Promised Land. Jacob and Joseph were ready for the trip, one immediately, the other long-delayed, because they were embalmed and mummified just like the ancient Pharaohs. You have no idea whether your trip will be soon or delayed long into the future, but I can tell you that your readiness has nothing to do with the state of your body and everything to do with the state of your soul.

Are you ready? Do you know for sure that if you died tonight you would spend eternity with God? Suppose you did die tonight and God asked you, “Why should I let you spend eternity with me?”, what would you tell Him? Don’t even think about telling him how good you are, because He knows better. Don’t appeal to your church membership or your baptism or your confirmation because there are countless thousands who have all those assets and are going to spend eternity in hell. There’s only one thing that you can plead that will avail you anything, and that’s the blood of Jesus shed for you.

Charitie Bancroft has written a song, *Before the Throne*. Listen to the words:

*Before the throne of God above
I have a strong and perfect plea,
A great High Priest whose name is love,
Who ever lives and pleads for me.
My name is graven on His hands,
My name is written on His heart,
I know that while in heav’n He stands
No tongue can bid me thence depart.*

i. I don't know if this means his original 11 brothers or if it's a synonym for "family". I'm inclined to think the latter because only Benjamin was younger than he. Most of the other brothers must have died by this time.