

Genesis 50:1-26, No. 76

“The Final Scene”

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Text Comment

- v.1 Remember, God had promised Jacob, when he left Canaan for Egypt that his long-lost son Joseph would “close his eyes.” Now we are reading the fulfillment of that promise. The strong bond between Joseph and Jacob is expressed once more in this dramatic deathbed scene, unparalleled anywhere else in the OT.
- v.3 That he was embalmed was, of course, a matter of necessity given that he was to be buried weeks later in another land. In Egypt embalming had a religious meaning; not here, a fact subtly indicated by the fact that the embalming was done by the physicians in Joseph’s service, not by mortuary priests. [Sarna, 347] The length of time Jacob was mourned by the Egyptians suggests that he was given virtually royal honor.
- v.5 That Joseph did not speak directly to Pharaoh was due probably to the fact that as a mourner he was unclean. With a deference that may seem at first strange for the second most powerful man in Egypt, Joseph humbly requested permission to fulfill the promise he made to his father. He tactfully omitted his father’s request not to be buried in Egypt (47:29) and, instead, stressed his duty to fulfill an oath his father had made him swear, that his father had already prepared a grave for himself in Canaan, and that, upon burying his father there, he would return to Egypt. Joseph recognized that Pharaoh might be apprehensive about a plan for the entire clan to go up to Canaan fearing the loss of his trusted viceroy, and so he assured him on that point. [Alter, 303]

We have pointed out several times in our studies in Genesis that the narrator frequently makes use of key words – the narrative interpreters use the German term “leitwort” – to indicate his own interpretation of the significance of the events he records. In chapter 50, such a key word is the Hebrew word “*alah*” ‘to go up’ which occurs 7 times in this chapter – vv. 5,6,7,9,14 – and in both v. 24 and v. 25 at the climax of the chapter. When seminarians learn Hebrew the most difficult part of the language, besides just learning the vocabulary – almost none of which mirrored in English – is the verbal system. Unlike the verbal system in any of the Romance languages or in English, a verb can be put in any number of different modes and therefore is translated in any number of different ways. You will not find it translated “go up” in all the seven instances of “*alah*” in Hebrew in Genesis 50. It is the word that in the next book will often be used for the exodus! – a *going up* from Egypt into the Promised Land. It is a way of indicating where Israel really belongs – in the Promised Land – and makes of this funeral procession a prefiguring or enacted prophecy of the exodus.

- v.9 The large Egyptian entourage served to honor Jacob as the father of Joseph, but, perhaps, also to ensure the return of Joseph and his family. This is the grandest state funeral

recorded in the Bible. Its detailed record is thus some demonstration of the importance of Jacob in the history of salvation.

- v.13 Apparently the Egyptian funeral cortege was left at Abel-Mizraim and only Jacob's sons went on with their father's body into Canaan to bury him in the ancestral tomb.
- v.17 There is no record of Jacob having left these instructions and some have thought the brothers, in their desperation, resorted to a fabrication. But, psychologically, there is nothing improbable about such a concern on Jacob's part or his taking a step to protect the family harmony after he was gone. After not having that unity in the family for so long, Jacob would have been jealous for it to continue after his death.
- v.18 Their prostrating themselves before their brother is again the fulfillment of the dreams that God had given Joseph years before in which all his brothers bowed down to him.
- v.20 The divine sovereignty that takes up human decisions and deeds into its plan, even sinful human decisions and deeds, is here confessed, as it is often confessed in the Bible. How God exercises that sovereign rule, how the holy God remains himself unsullied by his use of human sin, how he uses sin sinlessly, is never explained in the Bible.
- v.22 110 years was regarded as the ideal life span in Egypt. Whether we are to understand Joseph as having lived literally 110 years or whether 110 is a metaphor for a good long life is hard to say. You may remember that Joshua also reached this age (Josh. 24:29).
- v.23 To live to a ripe old age and see your children's children is, all through the Bible, a mark of God's blessing and favor. "Joseph's own" means that they were adopted by Joseph as Ephraim and Manasseh had been by Jacob in chapter 48.
- v.24 "Brothers" here means more generally "kinsmen," since it is highly unlikely that all of Joseph's older brothers outlived him. This is confirmed in the next verse when the oath is taken by "the sons of Israel," again a general reference to the men of Israel.
- v.25 As with his father before him, Joseph's dying concern was with the promise of God and he had faith that the promise would be fulfilled. In token of that faith he made his kinsmen swear to take his bones to Canaan when they up from Egypt. In his concern for the promise and its fulfillment here at the very end of the book the great themes of the Book of Genesis are sent forward into the next book of the Bible and anticipate the exodus of Israel from Egypt.

We have spoken at length in our morning sermons on Genesis of the artfulness of its narrative, how beautifully and powerfully it teaches its theology and ethics by the way the history is recounted and how rich that narrative is in lessons of every kind: both what we are to believe about God and ourselves and what God requires of us. We have spoken from time to time of the variety of techniques the narrator employs to provide his interpretation of the history he records

or to emphasize its lessons. We already mentioned the use of key-words, such as the Hebrew verb “go up” in this chapter.

Or we could speak of foreshadowing, which is another technique frequently employed in Genesis. By foreshadowing is meant that the narrator reports events that serve to anticipate events still to come and in this way he establishes an historical pattern. No early reader of Genesis, for example, would fail to note that when Abraham went down to Egypt in chapter 12 and came back from there to Canaan a wealthy man, he had, as it were, traced beforehand the steps that Israel would later take. She would go down to Egypt with only what belonged to her, but at the Exodus come out of there loaded down with Egypt’s wealth. So here in chapter 50, as we’ve already said, the funeral procession was a foreshadowing of the exodus. And it may be even more explicitly than at first appears. For in v. 10 the Hebrew literally reads, “the threshing floor of Atad, which is over the Jordan.” Scholars argue about this but perhaps the most likely sense of “over the Jordan” for an early reader of the Pentateuch would be the “trans-Jordan”, that is, east of the Jordan River, across the river from the Promised Land. That would mean that when Joseph and his brothers took their father’s body from “over the Jordan” into Canaan, they would have crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land. What that means, of course, is that they would have entered the Promised Land near where Israel would later enter it under Joshua and, therefore, that the route the entourage took from Egypt was broadly similar to the route Israel would later take after the exodus! That is the more striking because the simplest and, one would have thought, the most logical route would have taken them along the Mediterranean coast, not south of the Dead Sea and up its eastern shore. [Alter, 304; Wenham, 489]

Or, there is what the narrative critics call “Janus material” after the Roman god Janus who had two faces, one which looked backward and the other which looked forward. Janus material is a narrative transition that links what came before with what comes after. We have that here in the last verses of the book, which take us back to all that has been said about and done in regard to the Promised Land from chapter 12 to chapter 50, and to God’s covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and, at the same time, looks forward to Israel’s “going up” from Egypt to the Promised Land, which is the subject of the opening chapters of the next book.

And, there is also, as we have seen on a number of occasions previously, what the narrative critics call “the evaluative viewpoint” in an account. In his own voice, or the voice of one or several of the characters in his history, the narrator tells us how to evaluate the material, what to think about it, what judgment ought to be pronounced on what has been said or done. And you have that “evaluative viewpoint” here in Genesis 50. You have it actually at several points in the narrative.

I suppose, through the ages, most sermons preached on Genesis 50 have expounded verse 20 and the theme of God’s over-ruling providence. “You meant it for evil; but God meant it for good.” And, no wonder. It is a memorable and revealing description of God’s providential rule of human life. It is itself, by the way, an example of another narrative technique in Genesis, that of repetition. For Joseph had already said virtually the same thing in 45:4-7.

But, now it is clear to me that verse 20 is not the burden of the chapter, important as it is. Indeed, that great statement about divine providence is really just support for the demonstration of

something else that is in the front of the narrator's mind. The narrator is concerned about something else in chapter 50 than divine providence. He wants to impress us with something else in this closing scene of the book. He tells us what that is with his evaluative viewpoint.

The evaluative viewpoint surfaces first in v. 12 where the narrator interrupts the flow of the historical account of Jacob's burial procession itself to remind us, *in his own words*, that, in doing what they did, *Jacob's sons were obeying their father*. Not Joseph only, but all of the sons of Jacob are now set before us as dutiful, devout, loyal, and faithful. Their unity is emphasized again in v. 14 where a special point is made of saying that Joseph returned to Egypt *with all his brothers...who had gone with him to bury his father*.

The scene that follows – the brothers, now with their father gone, fearful that Joseph may not have forgotten their terrible mistreatment of him years before, pleading with him for forgiveness – only further serves to accentuate the spiritual life and harmony that had overtaken the family that once was so wracked with evils of all kinds. See how humble the brothers were before their younger and once hated sibling. With no excuses, mitigations, or extenuations they confess their sin and wrong – three of the four principle OT words for sin are used in v. 17. [Wenham, 490] They didn't hesitate to prostrate themselves before Joseph and plead for a forgiveness they openly confessed they did not deserve. How far these men had come from where they were years before. And how important the family unity was to the narrator. *Why this paragraph, why this scene in the midst of a narrative of death and burial?* To show us the unity of the family, the people of God! Nothing really had changed, in actual fact. Joseph had planned no revenge. There is no particular need for us to know about this conversation between his brothers and Joseph. So why do we need to listen in on this conversation between Joseph and his brothers *except for the fact that it revealed something of extraordinary importance!*

But also take note of how Joseph responded. His affection and the generosity of his spirit toward his brothers was so deeply felt that it produced weeping even *then*, seventeen long years after their initial reconciliation. Just as Joseph wept over his dead father, now he wept over his worried brothers. What's the significance of that? *The family is whole!* The great statement concerning divine providence in v. 20 was made for the sake of putting his brothers' fears to rest. And that scene concluded with Joseph speaking kind and reassuring words to his brothers.

Then, in vv. 22-23, we have a summary of the same evaluative viewpoint. The family was together in Egypt, living under the blessing of God. *Joseph and his father's house*; that is, Joseph and his brothers!

As one commentator summarizes:

“With [this scene] the goal not merely of the Joseph story, but of the whole patriarchal history is reached: the ideal unity of the sons of Israel has been created.

Abraham had two sons but they did not get on together. Isaac had two sons, but they parted forever. Not until Jacob's twelve sons was the future firmly established. But precisely because they were a large number was there a danger of disunity and division. In the event there was dissension among them, so that they hated and persecuted the best

of them. But eventually there was a complete reconciliation, not through the arbitration of a third party, but through the inner transformation of those who hated, for which the sufferer had waited and now in brotherly love acknowledges.” [Jacob in Wenham, 491]

In other words, Genesis ends with the nation of Israel, in its nascent form, its original form, just on the verge of being no longer a family and instead a people, standing before the Lord in faithfulness and humility and loving one another. The first act in the history of salvation thus comes to an end with the covenant people of God – from whom the gospel will be taken to the ends of the earth and reach all the nations of the earth – finally in harmony with the God of the covenant and with one another in the life of the covenant. And though she will not reach it for another 400 years, Israel was also pointed toward the Promised Land.

We conclude our studies of the Genesis narrative by reminding ourselves of the reason why the Bible teaches so much of its theology and ethics in this narrative form. Both in the OT and the NT a significant part of the biblical text is narrative, the recounting of history. And all of that story-telling – story-telling in truest sense of the word – all of that recounting of what happened is done with a view to teaching us what to believe and how to live. Narrative teaches theology in a way that is more personally engaging, which is why there is so much of it in the Bible. By imagination, the reader can enter into the history and is able to identify with it, see his or her own life and circumstances in it, and come to understand how he or she should practice the faith.

For example, after David’s terrible sins, Nathan the prophet came to him to bring him to repentance. But to do so, Nathan first told King David a story. David, who had been a shepherd, was easily able to identify with that story. He found himself and saw himself in the story of the wealthy man with many sheep, who, nevertheless, stole the only sheep a poor family had, and through that story his conscience was awakened and he was brought to repentance. Well, so with this story, the history of Genesis. Narrative not only tells the story, it provides the meaning with special force and power. We were there emotionally when Abraham almost sacrificed his son Isaac, for whom he had waited so many years, and we immediately understand both what we are being summoned to do in that history and what God himself is promising us in that story. At another place, we understood why Isaac was gapped, and why, therefore there was no *toledot* of Abraham in the book of Genesis, and we parents in the church realize in a living way how sacred is our responsibility to raise our children to love and serve the Lord. And we see Judah’s transformation from a cruel, selfish, and sensual man to a man of self-sacrificing love and we can’t help but admire and desire such a life and spirit ourselves. And we understand that we are being called to that same love and sacrifice in imitation of Judah’s greatest descendant, who gave himself for us, the just for the unjust, to bring us to God.

And just so here in Genesis 50. We find ourselves and our own lives so naturally, so easily, in this narrative. We know what it is like to be at odds with others, even other Christians. We know what it is like to have sinned against others, and we know very well what it is like to have been sinned against. We know that all too well. So this final and emphatic account of forgiveness and reconciliation speaks powerfully to us, or, at least, it should, that God should show us his ideal people at the ideal moment, seeking forgiveness and being forgiven, loving one another as members of the same family. You remember our Savior’s words:

“As I have loved you, you also are to love one another.” [John 13:34]

Genesis 50 describes in narrative form precisely that same view of the Christian life the Lord Jesus described so memorably when he washed his disciples’ feet and told them that in doing so he had set an example for them, so that they should do as he had done.

And we read about that loving unity of the family of God at the same time we hear in vv. 24 and 25 the same gospel message being spoken to them that we read repeatedly in the words of the Lord Jesus himself: “God will surely visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.” “Behold I go before you to prepare a place for you, so that where I am you may be also.” And we know exactly what that means. If we are Christians, we too have been transformed, made new creatures in Christ. This was God’s grace to us, his mercy. We did not deserve his kindness, but he has been extraordinarily kind to us. God has made many wonderful promises to us, many of which he has already kept, but many others of which remain still unfulfilled. Chief among those are the promises of the Promised Land, the place where Jesus said he would wait for us. As we wait in faith and hope for our exodus to the Promised Land, we are to live in harmony with one another, forgiving and being forgiven. All the while we are to be preparing our children after us to do the same. Upon all such who live this way God’s smile rests and will always rest.

As Genesis comes to its close it leaves us then with the challenge to find ourselves in these men and in their lives there in Egypt, remembering all that God had done for them and in them and waiting for that which was yet to come. And how do we find ourselves in them and our lives in their lives? Well supremely in this way, according to these final few paragraphs of the book: in forgiving and being forgiven; in seeking forgiveness and extending it. Doing this in the sure and certain confidence of God’s gracious gifts soon to be ours.

Do you realize – I’ve been made to realize this over the last few years – do you realize how rarely forgiveness is genuinely sought or genuinely given. Do you realize how determined even Christian people so often are to nourish and protect their sense of having been offended by others? How many marriages and families and erstwhile friendships are loaded down with offenses for which forgiveness has either never been sought, not really, or never been given? Do you know how few believers truly embrace forgiveness – especially the forgiveness of serious sins committed against them or others – as the true test of a genuinely believing heart? Do you realize how few Christians see their great challenge, their great opportunity, and their great calling in life to be extending forgiveness to others – ready, willing, heartfelt, unconditional forgiveness to others – as God has extended such forgiveness to them?

Jesus said, if you remember, that unless we forgive others our Father would not forgive us. That’s an extraordinary thing to say to a bunch of sinners. That is how fundamental forgiveness is to the Christian life. Paul, you remember, commanded us to forgive as we have been forgiven. This is what unbelievers do not do; but this is to be characteristic of Christians. A willingness to return blessing for a curse, to turn the other cheek, to forgive 70 times 7 times. Here is where Genesis ends, with forgiveness sought and forgiveness found! This is how the people of God maintain their unity: since they remain sinners ready and heartfelt forgiveness alone can make

them and keep them loving one another, keep them together in the family of God. *The humble don't demand forgiveness*, they beg for it, as the brothers did here; and *the righteous never withhold it*, never, ever withhold it. I've had Christian people many times in the course of my ministry assure me that they have forgiven this or that person, but it is as plain as the nose on their face they have done no such thing. No one would withhold forgiveness, full and free forgiveness who knows, who appreciates how much he or she has been forgiven and how readily that forgiveness was extended to him or to her.

That is what it means to be a Christian. It is what it meant in Joseph's day and what it meant in Paul's and what it means in our day. Anyone can hate and despise those who do wrong, especially those who wrong them, those who diminish them in some way – real or imagined. The world is chock full if *that*. But the mark of the Christian is a faith in God's grace that produces real humility and gratitude, a humility and gratitude that is expressed in genuine, profound forgiveness, sought and given. Someone who is looking for the heavenly country, the Promised Land, really, eagerly anticipating it, will never forget that he or she will get there by the grace and mercy of God alone. And such a person will, must extend a like grace and a similar mercy to others. To fail to do so would be the height of ingratitude; it would be to abuse God's free gift to us; it would be to behave as if we thought we deserved the Promised Land! It would be to fail to celebrate the greatest gift that has ever been given to us or to any other human being.

May God help us all to find ourselves in these 12 brothers and to aspire to live as they came eventually to live: expressing God's grace to them in the grace they so willingly extended to one another, loving as they had been loved. To mirror God's grace in our relationship to others – parents and children, husbands and wives, friends, even erstwhile enemies – I say, to mirror God's grace to us in our treatment of others is the first and the greatest calling of our lives.

The last thing the author of Genesis wanted us to know was that the twelve sons of Jacob finally loved one another, really loved one another, cared for one another, and washed one another's feet. God is love and we are to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect! This is a great thing, sometimes a very hard thing – to forgive so completely; to seek and receive such forgiveness – but what a wonderful thing to do. What a God-like thing to do! What a Christ-like thing to do! What a uniquely Christian thing to do! No, not for us only what everyone else manages to do, but the extraordinary thing: forgiveness without qualification and the love of someone who has been at least in some way our enemy. Do that, from the heart, and you will have done the greatest thing in the world!