

Living in the Shadow of death

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[0 : 00] Well, I don't know about the rest of you, but most of the time we go about life oblivious to the prospect of our death. And that's probably good, since it stops us being morbid, and it's otherwise debilitating, isn't it?

But then from time to time, something happens that jolts us. It makes me realize that life, including my very own, is fragile. Yeah. Sometimes it occurs when someone close to us dies, or you yourself may have a close brush with death, you know, while you're driving, let's say, and you're just a near miss.

And then we realize the nearness of death, that life is lived in its shadow, that none of us really can guarantee the years in our life.

Well, for the past two or three weeks now, we've seen Jacob's family live in the shadow of his death. Way back in Genesis 47 and verse 29 is when we're told that the time for Jacob to die was drawing near.

And ever since then, Jacob's been putting his affairs in order, in the form of making blessings and curses and extracting oaths from his sons.

[1 : 19] But now, finally, in this chapter, chapter 49 and then 50, Jacob dies and the book of Genesis concludes. And so tonight, we'll run through the final scenes of Genesis, and then try and draw some lessons together, not just for this series from chapter 37 onwards, but also from the entire book.

So look with me at verse 29, which Katie just read, chapter 49. Jacob dies, and both at the start and end of this first scene, the phrase, gathered to his people, is used.

So follow with me. He gave them these instructions, Jacob did. I'm about to be gathered to my people. Bury me with my fathers in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite, the cave in the field of Machpelah, near Mamre in Canaan, which Abraham bought along with the field as a burial place from Ephron the Hittite.

There Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried. There Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried.

And there I buried Leah. The field and the cave in it were bought from the Hittites.

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.

[2 : 43] And so the point, I think, isn't just that Jacob returns to the land promised to him by God, to his forefathers as well. It's also that he is returning to the people he belongs to.

Abraham, Sarah, Jacob's grandparents, Isaac, Rebecca, his parents, and then Leah, his wife. Now sadly, Rachel, his second wife, his favorite wife, is actually buried, she's actually buried somewhere else in Bethlehem.

But the point still stands. Jacob is about to return to those he belongs. He's with the ones to whom God has made his promises.

And so with his death, Joseph weeps for him, and then proceeds to make good the oath which he gave to his father.

And that is to bring him back to this promised land. Now this second scene is rather lengthy, but here we see the Egyptians get involved to give an elaborate funeral for Jacob.

[3 : 47] Let me just make a couple of observations with this. First, Jacob is afforded this honor because of Joseph's status. He was after all the father of the second in charge in Egypt.

But while this honor is afforded to Joseph, what we see really is that he's not free to leave Egypt. Joseph actually needs Pharaoh's permission to leave, and he's only allowed to do that because he promises to return.

So in verse 5 of chapter 50, let me go up and bury my father, then I will return. And here's where we realize that the people of Israel are really in captivity in Egypt.

Yes, they are being treated well, they even own land, but Joseph isn't allowed to just resign and leave. He's actually a high-ranking slave.

And actually, he's been that since he was sold into slavery, first in Potiphar's household, then in prison, and then finally now as Pharaoh's right-hand man.

[4 : 54] And so while this large Egyptian entourage is going with Jacob as a thing of honor, I suspect it's also to keep an eye on Joseph to make sure that he and his brothers would return.

But remember that in spite of all this, we know that God is still in control. God, after all, had told Jacob earlier on not to be afraid to go to Egypt because he will bring his people back.

And so Joseph, in verse 14, buries his father, and so Jacob returns to Canaan, as was promised, but Joseph himself has to return to Egypt.

And he does so in verse 14, together with his brothers and all the others who had gone with him to bury his father. Now I'm sure that Joseph would have loved to have stayed.

But as we shall soon see, he is assured of God's promise that God will bring him back eventually.

So that's scene two. Scene three is the one between Joseph and his brothers who, seeing that their father was dead, in verse 15, says, What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?

[6 : 06] So they went 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. Now whether Jacob actually said this or not, we don't know. But we see here the brothers having a mix of fear and contrition. They're sorry for the harm that they've done to Joseph, but they're afraid as well of the revenge that he might exact. But as we now see, revenge was furthest from Joseph's mind.

Instead, he weeps. They were not his enemies. No, they were his brothers, and that's what he considers them. Fellow inheritors of God's blessings.

His brothers were willing to be his slaves, but in verse 19, he says this, 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.

[7 : 13] So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children. And so Joseph, with these words, he reconciles and he reassures them.

And he gives us the summary sentence, as I said at the very start, for this whole series. That what humans may intend for harm, God intends for good to accomplish His will.

And in this case, in the case of Joseph and his brothers, the saving of many lives. As I've said before, had Joseph not been sold to slavery, they and the rest of Egypt and Canaan would have all perished in the famine.

So Joseph knows that God will always accomplish good. But in our final scene, Joseph dies without knowing how God will bring them back or bring them out of Egypt, back to Canaan.

And yet, in verse 24, he says this, I am about to die, but God will surely come to your aid and make you, and take you up out of this land to the land He promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

[8 : 28] And Joseph made the Israelites swear on oath and said, God will surely come to your aid and then you must carry my bones up from this place. I think Joseph here realizes his sons and the other Israelites don't have the same clout that he has with Pharaoh so as to be able to ask him to release Joseph, to take him back to Canaan.

And yet, he remained confident of God's promises. Twice, he says, God will surely come to your aid. And then, they are to take his bones out of Egypt back to Canaan.

Now, when he finally dies, the Egyptians embalm him and place him in a coffin. Now, when we see the word coffin, we may think, you know, it's just a simple casket, like, you know, Tobin Brothers or something.

But I think being where he was in Egypt, Joseph would have been buried with pomp. And so, probably put in a sarcophagus like this in the photo here.

Maybe even like the pharaohs lying in state somewhere. I think that's the significance of that final verse there, that he was laid in a coffin. In other words, my guess is that the Egyptians tried to claim

him as their very own.

[9 : 48] And so, what we've got is Genesis actually ending in a bit of a note of suspense. How will God rescue Israel out of Egypt? That is the question.

That is the thing that's left hanging. And of course, we'll find that out next year when we get to Exodus. Or you can read yourself, you know, go home tonight and read the first chapter. Or maybe not just the first, maybe the first 15. But if you can wait, it'll be next year. In the meantime, Israel increases in number, don't they?

Because back in verse 23, we read that Joseph's children have children who in turn have their own to the third generation. That's Ephraim's son and then another generation.

And Manasseh's son, Micaiah, has a son as well which Joseph sits on his knees at birth. So, Joseph lives to be a great-grandfather.

[10 : 42] I think that's right, isn't it? Great-grandfather for generations. Which means that the 70 Israelites that left Canaan, plus their wives and maybe husbands, their numbers have now swelled, haven't they?

Perhaps hundreds, maybe even to the thousands. And so, God has fulfilled His promise to Abraham in part. Remember that promise back in Genesis chapter 12 which I've got up here. Halfway down. Yeah. I will make you a great nation. Well, Abraham is now indeed a great nation. God is beginning to fulfill His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Well, that's how Genesis comes to a close. But I just want to spend the rest of our time tonight to just think through what are some of the final applications we can draw from Genesis.

So, if you look down on your outline, I've put three things down which we'll reflect on tonight. Some of you may have outlines that have numberings that have gone all haywire.

[11 : 53] I don't know what's happening. It's meant to say one, two, three, four, then one, two, three. But there are four, five, sixes all down there as well. Anyway, it's in the second section, Insights for Christian Living.

Three bullet points under there. First, we learn something about the certainty of God's promises. Now, often when we ask the question, what has God promised, we often think in terms of our own personal situation, don't we?

What has God promised me in terms of my job, in terms of my family, in terms of my finances, in terms of my health? But Genesis encourages us to look at God's promises for His people.

Yes, God's promises to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph may appear to be all about the family and about land and private wealth, but actually, they're not the focus.

because if we look carefully again at Genesis chapter 12, His promise to bless Abraham is for him to in turn be a blessing to the nations.

[12 : 58] And in particular, it's about how God will fulfill His blessing through Abraham's seed or offspring. That's singular. If you look down, and I don't have it on the screen, but if you look down to verse 7, for instance, it talks about offspring or seed in the singular.

And that's not a new thing in Genesis. All the way back to Genesis 3, we've already heard God say, even when Adam and Eve sinned, that God promised that Eve's seed or offspring will eventually strike the serpent's head and defeat sin and death forever.

And so, God's promises to Israel are part of God's unfolding plan for all humanity, not just exclusively for that family or for that nation. And we all know, don't we, that with the coming of this seed in Jesus, God's Son, God opens the way for all humans to be part of God's people, not just the descendants of Abraham.

All of us, through faith in Jesus, now belong to the promises and blessings of Abraham. Now, when we believe in God's promises in Christ, we are gathered into God's people, into the church, into Christ's body.

And as God's people, we are now also gathered around God's throne. We are now in God's presence, as it were, just like Adam and Eve were way back in Genesis 1 and 2.

[14 : 31] And so God's promises for us, even as they look forward to the new creation, harks back, doesn't it, all the way back to Genesis 1 and 2, to the original creation, before sin entered this world.

And so as Christians, we are encouraged to hold firmly to these promises, just like Jacob and Joseph, both in life and in the shadow of death.

These big promises for us are the ones that really matter for us in life. They're actually much more important than all the other material blessings that we may receive along the way.

Those are given to us by God, actually, as sort of added bonuses to encourage us to know that God's promises for His people are certain.

And so with that certainty, we come to the second point, and that is like Jacob and Joseph, we need to see that our ultimate hope lies beyond death.

[15:38] Brothers and sisters, I just want to pause for a moment and I ask you to imagine what the best possible life in this world for you might be. What would it look like? What do you think you'd be doing if you had this life?

How would you be living? What kind of friends will you have? Now, perhaps your dream may be something like those of the crazy rich Asians.

We went and saw it last night. Not because we want to live like that. It's only because it's shot in Singapore. And actually, one of my high school friends is one of the actors in the show as well. So, I'm famous now. But whatever your dream, and I hope, you know, maybe it's not like that, the Bible promises us that life beyond death for God's people is actually way, way better than what we can imagine for our life now.

And all the patriarchs in Genesis actually knew this. That's why in our second reading from Hebrews tonight, the writer commended the ancients for their faith. Hebrews 11, verse 9, Abraham and Isaac were happy to live in tents because they were looking forward to a heavenly city.

[16:52] Jacob, then Joseph, gave instructions regarding their bones because they knew of God's promises. And so, the writer is able to conclude at the end of the section in verse 39, these were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

They all knew that they didn't have to get everything in this life. They could go without in this life because they knew God had something better planned for them.

And that's sort of a truth that I think, you know, we, I easily forget that when God actually makes His promises to us, did you realize that His intention was never to fulfill all of them in this life?

Some of the things that He promises us and the ones that are most glorious, in fact, will only come in the new creation. Of course, the truly momentous promises in history like Jesus' coming and His death which rescues us from sin, yes, that's been done.

God has saved us as His people. We can take that off His bucket list as you were. Like the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, tick, He's done that as well.

[18:15] Like the fellowship that we can have as God's people, tick. But there are other promises on God's list that actually has to await the new creation.

Like a world without suffering. Like a church where everyone agrees theologically. Or church leaders who are perfect. Or Christians who never give in to temptation to steal, cheat, or lie. Or if they did, that they would confess quickly without trying to hide it. And then for others, we have a church where people are very easily forgiving of others.

Well, sadly, while we might try and work towards some of these things, absolute perfection will actually only come in the future. It is still part of that something better that God has planned for us. Which means, actually, we mustn't lose hope. especially as we look at the world around us and look at ourselves and we see things that we don't like, we mustn't be despondent as though God isn't acting because these promises are not yet to be fulfilled.

[19:24] He's already said so. So, I know, since people have been posting this week on social media about the dire state of politics in Australia and the US, well, at one level, it's right to be grieved by things that are happening.

But at another level, that shouldn't surprise us at all, should it? Because this is, after all, still a sinful world. So, there will still be conflict and mudslinging despite the fact that, you know, the Liberal Party wants to put whatever behind them.

There will still be backstabbing, not just in politics, but in our offices, at our schools, even at home. have we pinned our hopes on everything in this life?

Then, yes, we will despair. But if, together with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, we look to beyond this life, to something better that God has planned, then we don't lose heart, do we?

But we remember that God is in control. Which brings me to the final reflection for tonight, and that is, if we get the second point right, if we, that is, fix our hope ultimately in what lies beyond death, then it gives us great comfort and strength for this life.

[20 : 45] Joseph could die with the assurance that God will come to his aid, or the aid of his people in the future. He could live assuring his brothers that whatever the harm that others may intend, God will accomplish it for good.

Twice he says to them, in verses 19 and 21, don't be afraid. God will provide for them and protect them even through Joseph himself. And that's the same assurance that God gives us.

If God has planned something better for us beyond death, then why would he not provide for us in this life? Why would he not sustain us according to what we need until that day?

He will. And that's why the writer in Hebrews in chapter 12 goes on to say, Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, that is, people like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.

And here, I think in this context, the sin that entangles is actually the sin of unbelief, of lack of faith, of failing to believe in God's promises. Instead, let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

[22 : 10] Friends, I know that for many of you, particularly those of you who are still young and healthy, the thought of death is probably far from your mind. For most of you, most of your life is probably still ahead of you.

You know, you want to go places, people to meet, things to achieve. It's great being young, isn't it? And I don't want to pour any cold water on that. You know, I'm still young myself.

I have to... So I still have dreams and goals. I don't want to paint myself as though I'm sort of nearly half a foot in my grave. But at the same time, it's also good to realize, isn't it, that no matter our age or health, all of us do live in the shadow of death, whether it's just over the horizon or it's a long way down the track, one day this life will end.

And so with that in mind, I want to urge you all not to waste the life that you have now. That is, I want to urge you to live it in preparation for the life to come.

Hold fast, for instance, to the promises of God and His Word about the hope that lies beyond death. And so if there's anyone here tonight who have not yet put your faith in Jesus, then can I urge you, please, to consider the promises of God that has been given to us and to put your faith in Jesus and to start living with the certainty of God's promises.

[23 : 42] If, however, you're a Christian, then can I urge you to keep investing in the life to come. Be like Abraham and Jacob and Joseph willing to live like a stranger in a foreign country because you're looking forward to a heavenly city.

You're looking forward to the city that is built by God. And so if that means giving up a lucrative career to serve God in paid ministry, do it. If it means, as a parent, your adult children wish to do the same, support them in it.

If it means forgoing luxury in life in order to support gospel workers like AFES staff workers, then sacrifice that cheerfully. If it means investing more time in discipling other Christians and if needs be defer your further studies which will advance your career, then go for it.

Because certainly in God's promises means you're willing to commit time and energy and money into it. It means doing it without a sense of regret because you know that what you are doing is what God himself is doing in this world, gathering his people to himself through his son Jesus and preparing them for a life of glory and riches.

And friends, I know we can get easily distracted, but I want to encourage you again tonight. Keep that true reward and prize in life fixed.

[25 : 12] Keep your eyes fixed on that. Be like Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith who for the joy set before him endured the cross scorning its shame and therefore received the rewards he was fully entitled to and that is to sit down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Let's pray. Father, thank you that your promises to us are sure. You've shown that in the promise and gift of your son Jesus for us. Thank you for the hope of a wonderful and glorious future in the new creation beyond this life.

Help us to fix our hope firmly in this so that it may give us the comfort and the courage to live like strangers in a foreign country looking forward to the city built by God.

We pray and ask this in the name of your son Jesus. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.