

Messages from Genesis “Setting Your House in Order”

I began this series from Genesis way back on July 23rd. Today is the last message in this series. Toward the end of the Book of Genesis the death of Jacob (also called Israel) is recorded. Jacob is now in Egypt. He is ill, and his son Joseph is called in. Joseph takes his 2 sons with him. Jacob talks to Joseph, then the aged father blesses Joseph's boys. Then Jacob gathers his other 11 sons. "Then Jacob called his sons, and said: 'Gather around, that I may tell you what will happen to you in days to come'" (Genesis 49:1). Shortly afterwards, he dies: "When Jacob ended his charge to his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed, breathed his last, and was gathered to his people" (Genesis 49:33).

After a number of years, Joseph dies. The last verse in Genesis tells us that: "And Joseph died, being one hundred ten years old; he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt" (Genesis 50:26).

Death is something we all face. You know the old saying, "There are only 2 certainties in life: death and taxes." I guess you don't even have to pay taxes if you don't mind sitting in jail! So the only thing certain in life is that each of us someday will die.

As I read in Genesis about the deaths of Jacob and Joseph, what seems to seep through is a sense of *maturity* and *dignity* as these two Old Testament heroes close out their lives. I'd like to highlight 2 things in *their* deaths that might speak to us: first, *they accepted death as part of life*; and second, *they were prepared to die*.

They accepted death as a part of life. "When the time of Israel's death drew near, he called his son Joseph and said to him, 'If I have found favor with you, put your hand under my thigh and promise to deal loyally and truly with me. Do not bury me in Egypt. When I lie down with my ancestors, carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burial place.'" (Genesis 47:29-30a).

After Jacob speaks to all his sons, it says this: "Then he charged them, saying to them, 'I am about to be gathered to my people. Bury me with my ancestors in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite, in the cave in the field at Machpelah, near Mamre, in the land of Canaan, in the field that Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite as a burial site'" (Genesis 49:29-30). Jacob is able to speak quite openly of his approaching death, and where he wants to be buried.

What about Joseph? "Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am about to die, but God will surely come to you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.' So Joseph made the Israelites swear, saying, 'When God comes to you, you shall carry up my bones from here.'" (Genesis 50:24-25). He too is able to speak in a simple, straightforward manner about his approaching death.

A lot has been written about us Americans being a "death-denying" culture, that we tend to evade or avoid facing the reality of death. For instance, some people just don't want to talk about it or think about it. Some people never make out a will because they don't think about dying. I had a young adult in one of my congregations who suggested that I not preach on

death, because we were a growing church, and he thought that might keep people away. In some ways we try to soften the harsh finality of death. We prefer using more pleasant sounding words: instead of the “undertaker” we have a “Director of Funerals”; people don’t “die”, they “pass away” or “pass on”.

Of course, our culture tends to glorify youthfulness, and looking young. Like if you’re 70 years old, and look like you’re 70, something’s wrong with you! Now, to be honest, I want to try to stay young in my thinking, and try to be active. But part of a mature acceptance of death is acknowledge that aging is a part of life. We get old and wrinkly. Our physical body does wear out. Someday we will die. Someday, I will die. And that’s a natural part of life.

Jacob and Joseph got old and died. They were open and accepting of that reality.

Some of us live as though we are permanent residents of this world instead of just passing through. The Bible says we are “strangers and immigrants” on this earth (Hebrews 11:13 and 1 Peter 2:11). Think about that! Strangers on this earth. Immigrants in this world. Not permanent residents. Not citizens. Philippians 3:20 says, "Our citizenship is in heaven."

Life is fragile, and uncertain. Times goes quickly. We get old. We die. But even young people die. We know that. This is not to be morbid, just realistic.

Peter Marshall was a great preacher of the past. One Sunday he and his wife Catherine drove to the Naval Academy in Annapolis, where Peter was to preach. At the last moment he had this overwhelming feeling that he should change his announced topic and preach a sermon on death and eternal life – even though those in the audience were young naval cadets. So he changed his message. Driving back home after the service he heard that chilling radio announcement that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor – for it was December 7th, 1941. Within a matter of days many of the young men who heard his message on death and eternal life would be at war on the high seas. Some of them would not return.

We are mortal. We die. Jacob, and Joseph, accepted death as a part of life!

But also, *they were prepared to die*. There is no hint in Scripture of panic or fear on their part. No scampering about to get “quick religion”. There was this elderly man who never bothered going to church until he got way up in his 80’s. Suddenly he started to go every Sunday and became very religious. One of his teen-aged grandchildren quipped, “Well, I guess grandpa’s cramming for the final”. No last minute “cramming for the final” for Jacob or Joseph!

What did Jacob and Joseph do to prepare for death? *They experienced God and gave their lives over to His purposes*. "After this Joseph was told, 'Your father is ill.' So he took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. When Jacob was told, 'Your son Joseph has come to you,' he summoned his strength and sat up in bed. And Jacob said to Joseph, 'God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and he blessed me and said to me, "I am going to make you

fruitful and increase your numbers; I will make of you a company of peoples and will give this land to your offspring after you for a perpetual holding"" (Genesis 48:1-4). Jacob reminded Joseph of how God had appeared to him, and blessed him, and renewed with him the promises God first gave to Abraham.

A little later, when Joseph brings his two sons in to the aged patriarch, Jacob says may "the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day" bless the boys (Genesis 48:15).

Remember, in the last message, how I said Joseph was able to see even the violent treatment at the hands of his brothers as God's intervention – to get him to Egypt, and to eventually save his family from starvation. Both Jacob and Joseph had experienced God and the hand of God in their lives!

We prepare for death by experiencing God and yielding to His purposes! There's no way we can be prepared to die if we leave God out of the picture! We came from God. We're going back to God. How can we simply ignore God? How many people are born... grow up... perhaps get married and raise a family...earn a living...buy a home...get old and die...and give little thought to God or eternity! How sad is that! Jacob and Joseph knew God, and He was an integral part of their life and plans!

Remember, they lived in the period of the Old Testament, under the Old Covenant. They didn't have Jesus, or His words about heaven, or eternal life. But they trusted God and obeyed God to the extent of people's understand of God at that time.

Today, we have the life and words of Jesus, and what Jesus taught us about God. We have the way of salvation and eternal life made clear to us in Christ! "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:14-16). We have eternal life through Him. But also remember this: "Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (John 3:18). "Believing" in Jesus means more than just believing He existed, or nodding our heads in agreement with certain doctrines. It is *trusting Him, surrendering to Him*.

1 John 5:11-13 tells us this: "And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life." "Life" here is life with God now and life with God forever.

What happens to us after death depends on what we do with Jesus now, and whether or not we receive the gift of forgiveness and eternal life He offers. Have you ever received Christ as your Savior? Moved beyond just being a decent person and a church-goer – to being a *true follower of Jesus?*

It's very easy when preaching on this subject to get everybody depressed! "You need to get ready to die, you need to give your life to Jesus". Grit your teeth, be miserable, get saved! My first church was in Halifax, PA. I was still in college, and I would commute from my home in Lancaster to Halifax. To get there I would go up Peter's Mountain, a steep, windy road. As you reach the top and start down over the other side, there was a sign: "Prepare to meet thy God." Amos 4:12. It would be easy to have an accident on that road, especially in winter, when it was snowy or icy. So buckle up – prepare to meet God! I figured this was not a very positive or pleasant appeal for anyone to become a Christian!

Preparing to die and preparing to meet God doesn't have to be a miserable task! I still remember a sermon my pastor Rocky Riedel preached when I was a teenager. It was from this text, Amos 5:12, "Prepare to Meet Thy God". One of the points he made in that sermon was that *preparation can be pleasant!*

Being a Christian isn't a constant drag, a life that sucks all the joy out of living! You can have fun being a Christian! Serving the Lord can be a satisfying life! In fact, the more we seek God, the more we try to serve Him and bless others, the more we will find a deep, deep joy and satisfaction in life.

If we're followers of Jesus, preparing for death can be a delight, not a drag! An older man I didn't know one day showed up in a worship service in a church I was serving. He started to attend every Sunday. I figured he was one of our inactive members who had decided to come back. But I found out he wasn't a member, but he was interested in joining. He did, and became very active in the life of that congregation.

As I got to know him better, different times he would say to me: "Harry, you know, I just never bothered to come to church, never made it a priority. I don't know why. I so regret all those wasted years. It's such a joy to know Jesus. I've come to love this church. I realize now all I missed all those years." I'll never forget one cold January night, when we had decided to start the first week of the New Year with a week of prayer, people were gathered in the sanctuary. I gave those present an opportunity to pray. My friend was there, and he prayed a brief prayer, and ended it with, "I love you Jesus." *My friend was preparing for death by living whatever time he has left for the Lord! And for him it's bringing a whole ton of joy!*

The Book of Genesis ends with the death of Jacob and Joseph. But it's not just a story about the death of these two Bible characters. Their life and their death is part of the larger story of a God who keeps His promises – in spite of all they, and others, may have done to mess things up!

God began a work in Abraham to save humankind, and He kept those promises all through Genesis, all through the Old Testament, and finally He fulfilled those promises in the coming of Jesus, to be our Savior.

God has promised us heaven, and eternal life with Himself, when we trust Christ as our Savior and surrender our lives and will to Him. And one thing is sure: *God always keeps His promises!*

