

# THEY DESIRE A BETTER COUNTRY

by Steve Zeisler

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A battle is being fought today in our public schools system over the merits of the conflicting viewpoints of creationism and evolution. Many important issues are at stake in this debate. First and foremost, which world view we will adopt is at stake. Christians are asserting that our view of humanity has a critical impact on all kinds of decisions which we are called upon to make almost daily.

The world view which holds that humanity evolved from something small and unimportant, and is on the track of evolving into something more important, offers one set of answers to the problem of human decay, wickedness and death. Thus, the problems of sin and death are answered for those who believe that God has not broken into our experience; that humanity essentially has grown up from sub-human particles banging together and eventually creating life. If that is your world view, then you are apt to believe that evolution, or some non-thoughtful force or other, may lead us to eventually find answers to the problem of human wickedness and death.

If, however, you believe what Scripture teaches, if you think biblically, the insistence of the word of God is that men and women were created better than they are now; that we began with a right relationship to God and that our destiny was life, not death. Once we were commanded by righteousness, not sin, but we have fallen from a higher to a lower place. We were never intended to die, nor were we ever intended to serve sin as our master. Death and sin are invaders. We live in a God-centered universe. We are created beings through whom God intended to express himself. Sin and death are therefore invaders, enemies which can and must be overcome. We should recognize that we started out better, and that God is determined to save us from the place to which we have fallen. The fact that we are subject to sin and death is a tragedy that can be overcome. Thus, we look to the Lord God to act on our behalf.

Think about the beginning of Genesis, the entry by sin into the world by our choice to rebel against God, and what it means to be in bondage to sin. Immediately after they had rebelled, Adam and Eve found their intimacy with one another broken. They covered up in each other's presence. Their freedom and delight in each other was lost; they felt naked and ashamed. Within one generation, a man would murder his own brother. Human history had begun a downward spiral. Sin is a powerful force. All of us have felt its power compelling us to act in ways that we know are wrong. That is the universal human experience. Then there is the certainty of death. We observe our own bodies in the process of decay. Our friends die. We know that death too is in our future. But neither sin nor death were part of God's original plan for mankind.

So we find these twin problems in the book of Genesis. But as the book unfolds, we discover that God does act on our behalf and does something to reverse the tide that subjected us to sin and death. The story of salvation begins with one man, Abraham, whom God called. In our studies in the lives of the patriarchs we find that the family of that one man has now grown to seventy members. This is the family through whom God will bless the world. From it will come a Savior, One who will dispel the darkness of sin and death.

This morning we will focus on Jacob and Joseph as they come to the end of their lives. What did these men see with regard to sin and death, and how might these things be broken?

Genesis 49:28:

All these are the twelve tribes of Israel and this is what their father said to them when he blessed them. He blessed them, every one with the blessing appropriate to him. The he charged them and said to them, "I am about to be gathered to my people; bury me with my

fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, in the cave that is in the field of Macpelah, which is before Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought along with the field from Ephron the Hittite for a burial site. "There they buried Abraham and his wife Sarah, there they buried Isaac and his wife Rebekah, and there I buried Leah--the field in the cave that is in it, purchased from the sons of Heth." When Jacob finished charging his sons, he drew his feet into the bed and breathed his last, and was gathered to his people.

Then Joseph fell on his father's face, and wept over him and kissed him. And Joseph commanded his servants the physicians to enbalm his father. So the physicians embalmed Israel. Now forty days were required for it, for such is the period required for embalming. And the Egyptians wept for him seventy days. And when the days of mourning for him were past, Joseph spoke to the household of Pharaoh, saying, "If now I have found favor in your sight, please speak to Pharaoh, saying, , 'My father made me swear, saying, "Behold, I am about to die; in my grave which I dug for myself in the land of Canaan, there you shall bury me." Now therefore, please let me go up and bury my father; then I will return.'" And Pharaoh said, "Go up and bury your father, as he made you swear." So Joseph went up to bury his father, and with him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his household and all the elders of the land of Egypt, and all the household of Joseph and his brothers and his father's household; they left only their little ones and their flocks and their herds in the land of Goshen. There also went up with him both chariots and horsemen; and it was a very great company.

When they came to the threshing floor of Atad, which is beyond the Jordan, they lamented there with a very great and sorrowful lamentation; and he observed seven days mourning for his father. Now when the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, saw the mourning at the threshing floor of Atad, they said, "This is a grievous mourning for the Egyptians." Therefore it was named Abel-mizraim, which is beyond the Jordan. And thus his sons did for him as he had charged them; for his sons carried him to the land of Canaan, and buried him in the cave of the field of Macpelah before Mamre, which Abraham had bought along with the field for a burial site from Ephron the Hittite. And after he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt, he and his brothers, and all who had gone up with him to bury his father.

It is very clear that death and burial is the subject of this passage. Jacob has been preparing himself for his death. He addressed his last remarks to his sons, and then, as our text says, "he drew his feet into the bed and breathed his last, and was gathered to his people." Death, the invader, has taken the patriarch. But death does not speak the final word. One striking thing about this passage is the repeated reference to a gravesite--a particular cave which was purchased from a particular man, and which was located in a particular place. We must ask ourselves why this is so.

However, I would first like to comment briefly on two details mentioned here: Leah's burial and Joseph's grief. In verse 31 we find listed the couples through whom the nation Israel would come into being: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and, surprisingly, Leah. Jacob had two wives, the sisters Rachel and Leah. Rachel was the favorite wife. She was beautiful, but Leah was plain. Rachel's beauty was what attracted her to Jacob in the first place. Isn't it remarkable that God arranged events to honor the sister who had played second all her life because she was less loved than her sister? Have you ever felt like Leah? Have you ever been bypassed in favor of someone more attractive, intelligent or wittier? Many present this morning can identify with Leah. Yet here we find that she is granted an honor which is denied her sister. As the years went by, Jacob himself increasingly grew to love and respect the less-favored Leah. She bore more children than her sister, and for that she praised God. Now, as Jacob is about to die, Leah, not Rachel, is the one who takes her place among the matriarchs of the family. The apostle Paul writes in Corinthians that the seemly and attractive members of the body are much noticed, but that God at times goes to great lengths to grant honor to those who are less noticeable (1 Cor.12:24). We see the same principle at work here in this mention of Leah.

Secondly, notice Joseph's distress and mourning over his father's death (Gen.50:1). This is not a faithless act. We have all felt the loss of a loved one through death. Some would hold that if we really believe, then we will

not experience sorrow. But I don't subscribe to that. Joseph was a true believer, yet he experienced extreme sorrow over his father's death. The apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "We would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as those who have no hope." Grief over death is entirely appropriate. It is grief that is without hope that is less than Christian. When we lose someone we love it is all right to grieve, but then we must do as Joseph did--get on with life and allow the Lord to transform our feelings of grief to confidence in him.

Now we come to the question of why Jacob was so detailed in his instructions regarding the location of his tomb. He left no doubt where he wanted to be buried. Joseph clearly had no doubt about his father's instructions. He responded by organizing a massive funeral cortege that traveled from Egypt to Canaan. Because of Joseph's stature as prime minister of Egypt, his father Jacob also had come to be regarded as great in that kingdom. Thus, the great entourage was organized, with elders of Pharaoh's household and elders of Egypt, horsemen, etc., accompanying the embalmed body of Jacob. The Canaanites were so impressed with the grief they saw expressed that they renamed a local region where the party paused to mourn.

Could it be that nostalgia was the reason Jacob wanted to be buried in that cave? I doubt it. Many are influenced by nostalgia as they face their final days. Perhaps they left home as young people and went to work in a city. Now their approaching death reawakens dreams of returning home. While there may be some of that sentiment involved in Jacob's decision to return home, I am convinced that his reason was much more than nostalgia. Jacob had already made Joseph take a solemn vow to return his remains to Canaan following his death. Here in 50:5 we discover that Jacob had himself even dug the hole in the cave in which he wanted to be buried. There in an intensity about his directions that sentiment would not demand.

What were the Egyptians of that era noted for, as indeed they are today? Monuments to the dead, of course. Just think of the pyramids, which were built to honor dead leaders. The great pyramids were hundreds of years old by the time of Joseph's arrival in Egypt. The Egyptian mummification process is marveled at even today. If you wanted to be remembered after your death, Egypt was the place to die. Through a promise made to Abraham (Gen.15:13,14), Jacob knew that his family would remain on in Egypt for hundreds of years. Thus, he could have chosen to have his remains rest in Egypt, perhaps even to have a monument erected to his memory. But, as the text illustrates, he was quite explicit in his choosing his own grave site.

Again, we must ask, why? The reason is that when God promised Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their families a particular land, that promise was only one element of a bigger promise, which was God's commitment to save the human race; to do something about the thrall and power of sin and death. God had a plan to defeat what Paul calls "the final enemy." Death itself would be dealt a death-blow by God. The promise of Canaan was part of that greater promise. Jacob's clear directions for his burial were saying, in effect, "my burial in Canaan is a statement that I believe in the whole promise of God to me and my ancestors; that God is going to win us back to himself. Death will be defeated." Jacob was declaring his preference to be buried in a hole in the ground in a cave in Canaan, which he himself had dug, than to be remembered by means of an Egyptian monument. He was stating his belief in the promises of God.

Hebrews 11 is a commentary on much of Genesis. What insight the writer had into the story of the life and death of the patriarchs! Listen to these words:

All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them. (Heb.11:13-16)

The writer is pointing out that the history of the wanderings of the Jews, the promise that one day they would inherit a land, communicated to the patriarchs that they were not citizens of this earth, but rather that their destination was heaven. The source of their hope was God who would receive them to himself. They came to

that realization precisely because of their own history of wanderings. Thus, we find Jacob on his deathbed saying, "Yes! Amen. I trust the God who has made those promises to my ancestors and to me."

One of the questions that should arise for us at this point is, when we are confronted by thoughts of our own death, are we more inclined to believe the things that Jacob believed, or are we inclined to face death in the way the Egyptians did? Are we seeking ways to attach ourselves to this world, leaving behind monuments, with the hope that one day mankind will have evolved to something greater? Are we seeking to answer the fact of our own death by relying upon what this world has to offer, or do we long for God's presence as citizens of heaven? Are we acting in a way that betrays our confidence in God?

I was at a dinner party last week with friends, and the conversation turned to some people we all knew. We spoke of a mutual friend who once was excited about the Scriptures and had influence for Christ in a ministry, concerns no longer evident today. He has become more interested in, as Jesus said (Luke 12:15), building bigger barns and having influence in the world. Are you building bigger barns? Perhaps your tastes for worldly things are more refined than formerly. Are you increasingly enamored with the things of this world? If you are going to deal with the invader, you really have only two options: something in this world will solve your problem, or the Lord God is going to save you.

In Psalm 49, the psalmist makes reference to the folly of trusting in riches,

For he sees that even wise men die;  
The stupid and the senseless alike perish,  
They leave their wealth to others.  
Their inner thought is, that their houses are forever,  
And their dwelling places to all generations;  
They have called their lands after their own names.  
But man in his pomp will not endure;  
He is like the beasts that perish.

Such men feel that they will succeed in leaving behind something of themselves by naming lands, companies, even universities, after themselves. That is how they deal with the spectre of death.

Genesis opens with the story of how death invaded the race of man; it closes with the story that Jacob, and, as we will see, Joseph also, placed their hope for the defeat of death in the promise of God. Jacob chose a hole in the ground in a cave for his grave, in the land God had given his people, because he trusted God to keep his promise. Where do we place our hope?

Death enters our experience because sin has made its prior claim on us. Thus, sin, like death, exerts tremendous authority over us. At times we have but a dim memory of its power. Then one day, to our utter surprise, we find ourselves lusting for something, acting in anger, whatever. We are amazed that the power of things which we thought were part of our past suddenly spring to life. We are surprised at what we can be made to do by sin. We can be overwhelmed, fooled and shamed by the power of sin and guilt. These too are invaders; they were not meant to be part of the human experience.

But, as we will see in this next section, there is an answer. Genesis 50:15:

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph should bear a grudge against us and pay us back in full for all the wrong which we did to him!" So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father charged before he died, saying, 'Thus you shall say to Joseph, "Please forgive, I beg you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, for they did you wrong.'" And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.'" And Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people

alive. So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones." So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

Shortly following the outpouring of grief over Jacob's death, his sons begin to discuss the notion that Joseph would take his revenge on them now that their father was no longer around. Joseph had done nothing to make them suspect that this was even a possibility. He had provided for them since that first day when he met them again. He rejoiced at the knowledge that the family would be reunited.

Here, the brothers are indicating that they know something of the nature of sin. "What if," they are asking, "sin is more powerful than mercy, and it overcomes Joseph's good intentions toward us? What if he remembers his slavery and imprisonment? He may decide to revenge himself." They are testifying to the power of sin to raise its ugly head and upset their whole world, destroying their dreams for the future. The guilt that has never quite been stilled begins to surface among them. We did it, they admit. We are deserving of punishment. That is why they come groveling before Joseph, begging his indulgence.

Joseph weeps at the sight of his own brothers, the heads of the tribes of Israel, whom he had already forgiven, once more overcome by the power of sin. They feared that wickedness was more powerful than righteousness in the long run; that their brother would fail them. Thus they resorted to groveling, lying and whimpering, diminishing themselves in the process. That was what caused Joseph to weep. His response to them was to say, "Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive." Joseph reminds his brothers that God, who had chosen their family, could take whatever evil and violence they had been involved in in the past and bring good out of it. Evil could be stopped. The power of sin could be broken. Forgiveness was possible. Not only death, but sin which resulted in death also would be swallowed up in victory. Neither sin nor death were the end of the story.

We have heard on many occasions that it is those who themselves have suffered abuse in their childhood who go on to abuse their children. Violence and pain beget violence and pain, down through the generations. Children of alcoholics are not only susceptible to alcohol but also other forms of psychological turmoil. Is there any hope that will break the cycle of sin? Joseph's brothers think that their violence towards him will beget violence from him in return. That is what their appeal to Joseph is all about.

Donald Grey Barnhouse writes this about Genesis 50:20:

Here is one of the strongest rocks in the foundation of God, one of the softest pillows on which faith may lay her head. It does not matter what the world means towards us. We know that God means good. He himself tells us in Jeremiah, "I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." It does not make any difference what event comes into the life of a believer. God means it for good. We can face death, life, angels, principalities, powers, things present, things to come, height, depth, or any other creation, and know that nothing can separate us from His love. He means all for our good.

The final paragraph of Genesis records:

Now Joseph stayed in Egypt, he and his father's household, and Joseph lived one hundred and ten years. And Joseph saw the third generation of Ephraim's sons; also the sons of Machir, the son of Manasseh, were born on Joseph's knees. And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die, but God will surely take care of you, and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob." Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "God will surely take care of you, and you shall carry my bones up from here." So Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

The closing verses of Genesis describe Joseph's last days. He has had a rich and rewarding life. He has seen born the third generation of Ephraim's sons. His final words to his brothers are, "Take my bones back to Canaan." Like his father, Joseph had based his life squarely on the promises of God, not on the fleeting glories of Egypt.

Thus we come to the end of Genesis. The book began with a description of the invasion of sin and death into man's experience. These things ensured the certainty of death. We have also seen that sin is an irresistible force which will command us and ruin us. Sin will play on our weaknesses. But, as Genesis comes to a close, we read of Jacob's confidence that God would one day conquer death. And we hear in Joseph's words to his brothers that mercy is greater than violence; forgiveness is greater than guilt; and that God can break the chain of sin and revenge, pain and suffering. The rest of the Bible looks forward to the One who is going to accomplish all of these things. He would be born in a stable, and would die on a cross. We, as his servants, await his return, when He will finally bring about the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham.

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