

Jacob's view of life and attitude to death
Genesis 47-49

Introduction

This is the final look at Jacob's life. He is in his later years leading up to death. We will look at the events of this later period – often sorrowful and sad. It is helpful to see how he interprets and sees his life as a whole. In the final scene we see his attitude to death. These things take us to the very basic issues of existence. Increasingly we reflect – what does my life mean? What is behind it all? How will I face it? And the next step – death. We may want to thrust it to the back of our mind and never mention it, but it keeps coming back. How do we face this one certain fact of the future?

Jacob's view of his life

How true Jacob's life is to common human experience. We can readily identify with him. He had high spots, times of joy and happiness. He also made mistakes, compromises, and did things that he looked back on in shame and embarrassment – his trickery, deceit, selfishness and greed.

Jacob also knew sorrows through the actions of others -the rape of his daughter, Dinah, was a vicious revenge taken by his sons Simeon and Levi (Genesis 34); Reuben's act of immorality with his father's concubine Bilhah (Genesis 35:22); Judah's adultery with his own daughter-in-law Tamar (Genesis 38); the family jealousy of Joseph, his favourite son, which led to Joseph being sold, presumed dead for many years (Genesis 37); the fear of losing Simeon and Benjamin when held prisoner in Egypt (Genesis 42:24,36).

He also suffered the usual crop of bereavement – Deborah, mother of Rebekah's servant, whose death broke the link with past generations and his early years (Genesis 35:8); Rachel, his beloved and favourite wife, who died tragically giving birth to Benjamin (Genesis 35:16). Jacob spoke of Benjamin as "the son of my right hand" (Genesis 35:18). His love for Rachael was deep and constant. He outlived her for years, but he still felt her death at the end of his own life (Genesis 48:7).

Beyond that, there were other troubles in Jacob's life – the devastating famine which threatened for a while his own life and the rest of his family (Genesis 42:1ff; 43:2). Towards the end he had a deepening conviction that his strength was failing and his own life was ebbing away (Genesis 48:10,21). Shades of death were closing round him.

His had been a typical human life. Not one can say we have not been there. We all regret the follies and mistakes of the past, our own follies and those of our loved ones, the sorrow caused by others and to others. We all know things said and done within our families that we would rather not remember. And we may still grieve over those who have died in the past. We can think of adversities, set backs and disappointments, savage and inexplicable blows for which there is no real answer at all.

At times Jacob had been in total despair. He had expected to be killed after the Dinah incident (Genesis 38:30). He had refused to be comforted after he was led to believe Joseph was dead (Genesis 37:35). He told Pharaoh his days had been few and evil (Genesis 47:9).

Yet despite sorrows and mistakes and disappointments and despair – two clear convictions about his life came to the surface – they were convictions which every man and woman called by God can make. Important to look at them especially when we wonder what life is all about. It helps us see how our lives make sense and are worthwhile. The first was that his life was the outworking of a divine plan. And secondly, that all the time God had been there caring, providing and sustaining.

(1) His life as an outworking of a divine plan

Jacob was well aware of the times throughout his life when God had met him, made promises to him, spoken to him, blessed him, helped him in distress, guided his movements (Genesis 28:15; 31:13; 32:26; 35:3; 46:2,3; 48:3). He was also aware of God's promises regarding the land of Canaan, so he planned to be buried, not in Egypt, but in Canaan (Genesis 47:29,30). He knew he was a link between past and future, and that **a nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will come from your body** (Genesis 35:11).

He had no easy answers for all the suffering he had endured. Sometimes it had been because of his own sin, but not always. It is amazing how God transformed the suffering of Christ on the Cross to be the means of salvation for the world, and so he has transformed lesser tragedies in the lives of men. These occasions have drawn us closer to God, deepened our faith, made us more able to sympathize and comfort and advise others, and helped us to bare a more significant testimony than otherwise.

These things, together with all the things we are able to do for the cause of the Gospel with the talents God has given us, have meant that life has been guided and purposeful, and the hidden hand of God behind it all. Though we may not have all the answers at present (we have to wait till we get to heaven for some of the answers) yet the depth of the love of God in the Cross is our ground of assurance that God has permitted nothing to happen to us by accident. All part of His loving purpose for our lives and those of many others.

(2) In all circumstances, God has been displaying His love, care and grace

Then he blessed Joseph and said, "May the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the Angel who has delivered me from all harm..." (Genesis 48:15,16). **I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord** (Romans 8:38,39). He does not always keep us *from* harm and danger, but He does keep us *through* harm and danger.

Bishop Henry Moule recalled a bookmark that he treasured. It once belonged to his mother. It was made of card pierced with holes, and a text worked in blue silk. On one side was a tangle of confused and crossing threads. On the other side, the words "God

is love” – produced by the tangled stitches. On earth we look at the “tangled” side. God’s work in our lives at times seems strange and meaningless. But on the “other side” we shall wonder at the loving purposes of God. In February 1909, Moule took that bookmark into the pulpit, and used it as he preached a sermon to stricken hearts. It was the Sunday after an awful pit disaster in that area (West Stanley, Co. Durham) in which 169 men and boys had died. Moule held up his mother’s card, and it brought more light and help to the mourners that night than the rest of the sermon had done.

The love of God is no empty pious phrase. He could not have demonstrated His love more plainly. **While we were still sinners, Christ died for us** (Romans 5:8). **He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all** (Romans 8:32). He has been with us, in Christ, through all our experiences. **Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted** (Hebrews 2:18). **Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need** (Hebrews 4:16). **My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness** (2 Corinthians 12:9).

*“He giveth more grace when burdens grow greater,
He sendeth more strength when labours increase,
To added affliction He addeth more mercy,
To multiplied trials, His multiplied peace”*

When we cast all our burdens on the Lord, when we lay it all at His feet, when we stay our minds in Him, then we find peace, and we are kept, held and sustained.

*“He knows, He loves, He cares.
Nothing this truth can dim.
He always keeps the best for those
Who leave the choice to Him.”*

Jacob’s attitude to death

So the end came at last. Jacob teaches us how to look at life, and also how to face death. In death he speaks of being **gathered to my people** (Genesis 49:29,33). He met death quietly and bravely, and was joined to the people of God who had gone before him. Jacob was one of the great number of Old Testament saints who **were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them** (Hebrews 11:16).

He did not have full knowledge of life after death that we have in light of the Resurrection, but it is a very significant phrase “Gathered to my people”. He knew there would be reunion. He knew there would be consciousness and recognition there. He knew God was God of the living (c.f. the Lord’s comment in Mark 12:27). Those who have died are alive in God’s presence. They were living then, and they are living now. They are not merely unconscious or asleep. They are alive – and enjoying a better existence than this one. Death is gain (Philippians 1:21). **This is far better** (Philippians 1:23). **Absent from the body, present with the Lord** (2 Corinthians 5:8). **With me in Paradise** (Luke 23:43).

How we can make these affirmations with more confidence and strength than Jacob ever could. We have seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. We know of His conquest of death, and the glorious future beyond death, demonstrated beyond all doubt in the glorious resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

One thing which is certain in life is that we are all going to die. We may delay it by good health and medicine, but we cannot put it off indefinitely. For many it may be a dreaded experience – the loss of much that is dear, final separation from those we love, going into the unknown. How do we face this thing which we cannot escape, and which we do not know when it will call?

To ignore this certain inevitability is foolishness and madness. How will life look five minutes after death? The things we lived for, the people we were anxious to please, the matters we pinned our hopes on, our ambitions for our lives and careers – they will all be gone. We will be face to face with our maker. How will our lives look then?

It is supremely important to belong to Christ, living for Him, and dying with Him.

*“The loss of gold is much,
The loss of health is more,
But losing Christ is such a loss
As no man can restore.”*

Life without Him after death will be a never-ending misery and sorrow and pain. This is urgent. Get right with God before it is too late. Be sure of His forgiveness and eternal life. Then live the rest of your days for Him. Trust Him, cleave to Him, love Him, confess Him and follow Him. Then you cannot be lost. **My sheep shall never perish** (John 10:28). Face the future without fear.

Conclusion

Eternal happiness or eternal misery? That will depend on where we are now. You will not be able to choose after death. Are you ready to die? Do you know where you will spend eternity? Are you safe? **Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies"** (John 11:25).