

A Coffin in Egypt

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[0 : 00] Now, could you turn with me back to that passage, or we'll see it on the screen, Genesis chapter 50 and verse 26 particularly. So, Joseph died at the age of 110, and after they embalmed him, he was placed in a coffin in Egypt, and especially these last words, a coffin in Egypt. We've become uncomfortably familiar with coffins over the past 18 months.

The World Health Organization estimates there have been over 4 million deaths worldwide due to COVID, and 10,000 here in Scotland. Perhaps death has visited your own family or friends, but whether due to COVID or not, the majority of us perhaps have followed a coffin to the commitment of the mortal remains of a friend or loved one to the earth or to the ashes.

I suppose that there's nothing that symbolizes death more to us than the coffin. It speaks of the finality of death. The person has gone beyond recall, at least by any power known to man. Of course, not all cultures use a coffin, and not all bury their dead, and that's been true down through history. But burial of the dead goes back to the earliest of times. Neanderthal man, they buried their dead 100,000 years ago, even in flower petals. And the ancient Chinese buried their dead in coffins, 5,000 BC. And of course, the Egyptians are famous for burying their dead in a coffin or stone sarcophagus. So, when Joseph died, he was laid in a coffin in Egypt. So, what does that tell us?

Why is it mentioned here at the end of the first book of the Bible? Is it just telling us that the Israelites practiced the same rituals as the Egyptians, the same futile attempt to prolong the life of the dead into the afterlife? No, a thousand times no. That's not what's been told us here. So, what is God telling us here at the end of this amazing revolutionary book, the book of Genesis? I think the first thing it's telling us is the awful reality of death. Many people think that the Bible is a book of kind of wishful thinking, of fairy tales, where everyone lives happily ever after. It is not. It faces up to the harsh realities of life time and time again. After all Joseph's achievements, rising from slavery and prison to being Pharaoh's second-in-command and living to the great age of 110, his story ends in a coffin in Egypt. And you know, throughout the book of Genesis, it stressed time and again, no matter how long someone lived. And someone lived, some of these people lived extraordinary long lives. But at the end of each one, apart from one exception, it says, he died. So, is that it? Is that the message of the book of Genesis? Is it the message of the whole of the Bible? Will Money in Clint Eastwood's film, *Unforgiven*, says, we all have it coming, kid. And that's the way a lot of people think. Well, this is it. We live our life here and now, and we die. We all have it coming, and that's just it. Tom Stoppard, the playwright in his play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, said, death is not anything. It's the absence of presence, the endless time of never coming back, a gap you can't see, and when the wind blows through it, it makes no sound. But for others, these words are very cold comfort, and they don't take away the fear of death, the fear of the unknown. Woody Allen is more real, as he famously said, it's not that I'm afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens, in his own inimitable humorous style. He's basically saying he is afraid to die. In the 1980s, hardcore punk rocker Henry Rollins, in a song,

[5 : 01] I Want So Much More, said, life is a hurdle and you'll never clear it. Death is the end of the ride and you fear it. Going back in history to William Shakespeare in the 16th century, in his great play *Hamlet*, there are these words, the dread of something after death, the undiscovered country from whose born no traveler returns, puzzles the will and makes us rather bear these ills we have than fly to others that we know not of. And in the 20th century, the Irish poet W.B. Yeats said, Nor dread nor hope attend a dying animal. A man awaits his end dreading and hoping all.

So how do people cope with this fear of death? Well, some people cope with it with humor, as we've seen already with Woody Allen. It's said that a samurai warrior once asked a Zen master where he would go after he died. And the Zen master answered, How am I supposed to know? You're a Zen

master, replied the samurai. Yes, but not a dead one, he said. In other words, no one has come back to tell us. No one knows.

It's we're facing the unknown. Also, some people try to deal with it by a kind of stoic resignation. Bertrand Russell, the great philosopher and atheist, said, Brief and powerless is man's life. On him and all his race, the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way. For man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness. It remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow fall, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day. So with a flourish of language, he tries to engender this kind of stoic resignation. This is the way things are. It doesn't make any sense. There's no hope, but we've just got to try to live noble lives. Others face the reality of death with rage. Dylan Thomas, in one of his poems, famously said, Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light. And you can see that makes sense to a lot of people. The idea of why should my life come to an end and be sort of rebellious against that whole idea. But then Dylan Thomas also exhibited another reaction to the reality of death, and that is despair. In a very beautiful poem that is believed was about the death of his father, he said, Here among the light of the lording sky, an old blind man is with me where I go, walking in the meadow of his son's eye, on whom a world of ills came down like snow.

[8 : 18] He cried as he died, fearing at last the sphere's last sound, the world going out without a breath, too proud to cry, too frail to check the tears, and caught between two nights blindness and death.

Oh, deepest wound of all that he should die on that darkest day. Oh, he could hide the tears out of his eyes, too proud to cry. Until I die, he will not leave my side. A very beautiful poem, but yet very despairing, although at the end of it there, that last line shows that he cannot live with this utter despair. In some sense, his father's going to live on. And you know, I don't know about yourselves, but I've been to several humanist funerals where basically the humanist philosophy is that death is the end and that's it. But so many of these funerals try to give some sort of hope of something beyond death. It's very strange, but it's in our hearts. It's in our very natures. God has created us in his own image. And that means from the moment that we are conceived, we will exist eternally. The Oxford professor Henry Scott Holland, in a sermon in 1910, following the death of King Edward VII, said, Death is nothing at all. It does not count. I have only slipped away into the next room. Everything remains exactly as it was. I am I, and you are you, and the old life that we lived so fondly together is untouched, unchanged. I can't really get my head round how empty those words are to someone who is bereaved. The reality is the person has gone, and you no longer have a living relationship with them.

And yet so many people put some kind of hope in those kinds of words. Is this the kind of comfort that the Bible offers in the face of the fear of death? No. And if not, what does it offer?

[10 : 40] Well, first, it offers an explanation of death. And here, we think first of the contrast between the beginning of Genesis and the end of the book of Genesis. Genesis begins with a sublime literary account of the beginning of all things. This is not what today we would call a scientific account.

It's a literary account. But that does not mean that it's not true. We say the sun rises, and that's just as true as the scientific statement that the sun becomes visible to us because the earth is spinning on its axis.

They're both true. They're looking at it from different points of view. Genesis tells us what we need to know about God's dealings with the human race.

It tells us that he created and ordered an environment suitable for us to live. And all the powers that we see in this world, whether the sun or the moon or the stars, he created them. And they are under his authority and control. It tells us also that he created us as unique beings, the only creatures made in his own image to look after and care for the creation. What a glorious beginning of this book of Genesis!

What a hopeful beginning! What beauty and what hope! And yet the story ends with a coffin in Egypt.

[12 : 16] How have such glorious creatures come to such an ignominious end? Well, right near the beginning of the book, it tells us that in Genesis chapter 3.

And in doing so, it explains the fear of death. Human death originated in not loving and trusting God, but instead disobeying Him. It's when Adam and Eve disobeyed Him that suddenly they were

afraid, afraid. The language that's kind of used there is that God was in the habit of coming and walking with them in the garden in the cool of the day. But when they heard the sound of the Lord God coming, now they were afraid, because they knew that a great separation had come between them.

In Genesis chapter 4, Cain says, after God is sending him out, sending away from other people because he had killed his brother, he says, my punishment is more than I can bear. I will be hidden from your presence, a restless wanderer on the earth. The principle of death has entered in, not just physical death at the end of life, but that separation from God that destroys everything that's good and beautiful.

T.S. Eliot in his play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, says, Behind the face of death, the judgment, and behind the judgment, the void, more horrid than active shapes of hell, emptiness, absence, separation from God, the horror of the effortless journey to the empty land, which is no land, only emptiness, absence, the void, where those who were men can no longer turn the mind to distraction, delusion, escape into dream, pretense. Powerful words, reflecting some of the words that Jesus uses to describe that lostness of hell, when he describes it as outer darkness, where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth. And this is the reality you see in Isaiah 59, verse 2. It's put like this, your sins have separated you from God. That's the primary thing.

It's because of our rebellion against God we're separate. And death, physical death, and then hell and judgment is all part of that process of us separating ourselves from God. But is that all that Genesis has to say then? If so, it's a pretty depressing message. And that's what a lot of people think the message of the Bible is. They're turned away from it because they think it's just all about sin and death and judgment, and they just can't stand it. But of course, that's not what the book of Genesis is all about. It's not what the whole Bible is about. Because the second thing we have to notice here, after noticing the reality of death, is the glorious hope of God's grace. The clue to hope lies in the reason Joseph wanted his body placed in a coffin. What's the reason given? Verse 25, he says, God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place. What does that mean?

[15 : 53] Well, it's based on the promise of God. Back in chapter 15 of Genesis, God had promised Joseph's great-grandfather, Abraham, that his descendants would inherit the land of Canaan. But first, they would have to be strangers in a country not their own, and will be enslaved and ill-treated 400 years.

But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterwards they will come out with great possessions. This is part of God's gracious covenant that he made with Abraham. The word covenant, as used in the Bible, refers to God's sovereign and gracious contract that he makes with mankind. It's sovereign.

It's not something that human beings initiate. If left to ourselves, we would run from God. People talk a lot sometimes about the search for God, which often is just another way of running away from him.

The Bible is not really about our search for God. It's about God's search for us, and his establishing a relationship with him. It's also gracious, this covenant. It's not based on the merit or worthiness of the recipient. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, and all the others, as we can read in Genesis, they were no better in themselves than their contemporaries. They were all sinners. But God freely chose them and saved them and promised them an inheritance. The covenant with Abraham included the promised land, the land of Canaan. They were not entitled to it in themselves. The land at that time belonged to the Amorites, and they had to wait, as is said in that chapter 15, they had to wait until the sin of the Amorites had reached full measure. In other words, when the time came for God's judgment on the Amorites. But the covenant also included the promise to Abraham that God would make his descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore.

And also,

God said to Abraham, through your offspring or through your seed, and that word there is singular. It is a particular descendant of Abraham. Through him, all nations on earth will be blessed. The New Testament makes it very clear that this is referring to Jesus and the new covenant. Galatians 3, verse 16.

[18 : 36] The point is that Joseph believed God. He had faith that the promise of God would come true. He believed that the covenant was reliable. And so, in Hebrews 11, verse 22, it said, By faith, Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave

instructions about his bones. The faith not only included the reality of the exodus, that God would bring his people out of Egypt and back to the promised land. But also, it includes the promises of blessing to the world, and included in that was the belief that death was not the end.

That was the reason for the reverent treatment of the body after death. Not only that, but Joseph knew the language that was used of the death of his forebears. It's interesting that this expression is used of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They were gathered to their people. You can see it at the end of chapter 49 concerning Jacob. He was gathered to his people. In other words, death was not the end. He was going to live beyond that. But Joseph also had the prophecy of his father, Jacob, in chapter 49, verse 10, about the lion of the tribe of Judah. The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs, and the obedience of the nations is his.

Wrapped up with all of this, the covenant, was this promise of the lion of the tribe of Judah who would come. And of course, that's referring again to the Lord Jesus, as is made clear in the book of Revelation where he's called the lion of the tribe of Judah. The reason for hope lay in the promises of God. Joseph had hope because he believed what God had revealed. And it's exactly the same for us, for us today. The only reason we can hope in the face of death is faith in the promises of God.

And these New Testament promises are much fuller and more glorious. We have the revelation of God in the face of Jesus Christ, the true lion of the tribe of Judah. We have the knowledge that through the amazing, atoning death of Jesus, our sins are forgiven. And through His resurrection, we know that death is defeated, and we can look forward to the true promised land of the new heavens and the new earth, the restoration of creation that's described in Revelation 22, the very end of the Bible.

All you have to do is to realize that the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord, as it's said in Romans 6, the very last verse. To realize that and to trust in the completed work of Jesus Christ for you. This and this alone can take away the fear of death.

[22 : 03] And this is why this book of Genesis that began, you might think so optimistically, ends what seems on a pessimistic note, but it's not really. Because Joseph wanted his body placed in the coffin that his bones will be brought back to the promised land. He knew that the promises of God were reliable and true. But he also knew all these other layers of the covenant, that there was hope beyond death itself. And one day, there would be a descendant of Judah, his brother, who would come to be the savior of the world.

In 1968, Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber wrote a musical called Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.

They went on, of course, to write more famous musicals, but that musical was very interesting. It was an attempt to deal with a biblical story. But the musical ends with these words, the light is dimming and the dream is too. The world and I, we are still waiting, still hesitating. Any dream will do. Now, the emphasis on waiting is true to the historical facts. Joseph and Israel generally were waiting for the promises of God to be fulfilled. But the idea that any dream will do is utterly foreign to the narrative. It's a postmodern injection of individualistic relativism.

Any dream would not do for Joseph and any dream will not do for us. My good friend, Donnie Smith, who spent most of his life working as a missionary and theological educator in Peru, wrote a song back in the late 60s, early 70s called The Stranger. And it gives a much better representation of the truth. It's quite a long song and really recounts a good part of the history of the Old Testament. But the chorus goes like this, dreaming for the future, waiting for a very special man, waiting for the preacher, waiting for the man in daddy's dream. Stranger, stranger, stranger Jesus.

Jesus was the man in daddy's dream. Let's pray. Our loving Heavenly Father, Father, we pray that we might have faith in this one who came into the world as a stranger, that people didn't know him or recognize him as what he was. And yet he was and is the eternal Son of God, and he lived among us, walked in our shoes, walked our streets, knew all our temptations.

[24 : 59] And we praise you that his coming was in the fulfillment of prophecy of those things from so long ago, those things that Joseph also looked forward to as he trusted in the revelation of God.

Enable us today in the midst of all the noise that surrounds us to trust also in this revelation, to trust in the Lord Jesus personally, and to know him as the one who has fulfilled all those promises.

The covenant of God is true and reliable. And we pray that each one of us today would yield our lives to the Lord Jesus and commit ourselves to live for him in the midst of this world in the midst of

this world where there are so many struggles, where there's darkness, where there's evil, where there's also complacency and self-righteousness and self-satisfaction.

O Lord our God, enable us to seek to awaken this world with a sense of alarm to the danger in which it is. O Lord our God, enable us to seek to awaken this world with a sense of alarm to the Lord Jesus Christ.

O Lord our God, enable us to know the power and the love of the Lord Jesus Christ in our own lives that would point others to him. So, we ask these things in the precious name of Jesus and for his sake. Amen.