

Text: Genesis 48

Title: "Our Shepherd of the Valley of Death"

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Introduction: The day we die will be unlike any other day we have ever lived. Some of us will die due to sudden tragedy or catastrophe. Some will die after a prolonged sickness or in old age. The day I die will be different from the day you die in many respects, but they will be the same in that both your death and my death will involve walking through a shadowy valley.

In Genesis 48 Jacob prepares himself for walking through that valley, and as he does so he professes great confidence in the Shepherd that was going to see him through this experience (vv. 15-16). Mr. Peaslee's funeral was a blessing in part because of his love for Psalm 23 and his faith in the Shepherd that Psalm celebrates. Notice with me four truths about our Shepherd of the valley of the shadow of death.

I. Our Shepherd is the Almighty God of eternal promises, which death cannot take away (vv. 1-4).

Illustration: We lose a lot when someone we love passes away. Death is a great thief in this sense. I can remember that when my grandfather was living, he, my dad, my brother and I would go on annual golf outings. We called them the Swiss Open, and these excursions normally involved going to some golf place that was affordable, staying for three or four days, playing golf during the day, and playing a Swiss card game called Jassen late into the night.

My Grandpa and I were always partners against my dad and my brother. They normally won the golf, and we normally won the cards, so we always argued about who truly had bragging rights. After Grandpa died, our attempts at having

another Swiss Open have just not been the same. I lost a dear friend when I lost my grandfather. Death is a merciless thief in this sense. Some of you have experienced the pain of this loss in worse ways than I have with the loss of a spouse or a parent or a child.

Application: Joseph and Jacob had spent 17 great years rejoicing in the way that God had brought them together again. Jacob had been in poor health for much of this time, and now it became clear that the end had come. Joseph had once been stolen away from Jacob; Jacob thought that Joseph had died. Jacob rejoices in how this was reversed (v. 11).

Now the time was coming when Joseph would no longer see his father's face. Death is a tremendous thief, but Jacob makes clear as he anticipates his coming death, that death cannot take away the eternal promises of the Almighty God who was his Shepherd in the valley of the shadow of death (vv. 3-4). The land was an everlasting possession. Not even death could take it from Jacob.

This was the promise of Gen. 35:11: "And God said unto him, I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of thee, and kings shall come out of thy loins." Israel became this great nation; the church became this assembly of nations/peoples (28:3; 48:4). God's plan for Israel and the church are eternal, and death can never touch the promises related to those plans. There are some things even death cannot take away (John 10:27-28, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand").

II. Our Shepherd is the Provider of physical life, so death is never arbitrary (vv. 5-9, 15, 21-22; Acts 17:28; Heb. 9:27, Ps. 139:16).

Illustration: We witnessed this past week what life is like when man believes that there is no God who has the sole authority and right to give and take life. I am referring, of course, to the senseless butchering of a mother and her daughter by four young men, the attack on the Cates family as they slept in their Mount Vernon home.

Words cannot describe the depth of this tragedy for that family. It is also a tragic commentary on the godless paganism of our society as a whole. We have become a culture that has produced a generation of young people who have become convinced that Jacob's Shepherd, the God of the Bible, is neither real nor relevant. These results of paganism are not new.

Application: As Jacob and Joseph discuss their own lives, the births of Ephraim and Manasseh, and the death of Rachel, it is clear that they understand that the God of the Bible is the Provider of life (vv. 5-9, 15, 21-22). Only God has the right to take life, because He is the Provider of life.

Paul told the Athenians this when he said on Mars Hill, "for in him [the God of the Bible] we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). In addition, when a person dies, no matter how tragic that death was, God is ultimately the One who has made the appointment for the deceased to face the valley of the shadow of death. Hebrews 9:27 says plainly, "It is appointed for man once to die, and after this the judgment" (see also Ps. 139:16, "Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them").

God has made the death-appointment for you and me, and we are not going to live in this life a single moment beyond that appointment. Then will come the judgment. The question is whether we are ready for the appointment. Are you? Jacob was, and we will see why in the final two truths about our

Shepherd.

III. Our Shepherd is the Benefactor of unmerited grace, so death has lost its victory (vv. 8-14, 17-20; “who gives us the victory,” 1 Cor. 15:57).

Illustration: I am the oldest sibling in my family. I learned that my younger brother Kent is going to be at the ACCC conference in Toronto in a week or so, which I will be attending, so I am looking forward to seeing him there. I mentioned earlier that I was always my grandfather’s partner, and Kent was always my dad’s. At times growing up, it sometimes bothered me that my dad always seemed to be competing with me and pulling for my younger brother.

Now in my own home, we have an older and a younger brother, and if you were to ask the older of the two, he would tell you that there is a pecking order here too. He would be clear that he is to be preferred as the firstborn, as I felt I should have been growing up.

Application: That is how Joseph felt about Manasseh and Ephraim, but Jacob disagreed. As we have studied Genesis, we have become accustomed to the principle related to the descendant promise, that the older shall serve the younger. It was emphasized especially in Jacob’s own life in relation to his older brother Esau.

The apostle Paul tells us exactly what God sought to teach us by doing it this way (Rom. 9:8-13, “That is, they which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed. For this is the word of promise, At this time will I come, and Sarah shall have a son. And not only this; but when Rebecca also had conceived by one, even by our father Isaac; (For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of

works, but of him that calleth;) it was said unto her, 'The elder shall serve the younger.' As it is written, 'Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated').

God wanted to teach us that salvation in the promised descendant is not achieved by our birthright to it, worthiness of it, or working for it. Salvation is a gracious gift of a loving and sovereign God. Death has lost its victory, not because we have won a war, but rather because we have received a gift. Paul says in 1 Cor. 15:57, "Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." Have you received this gift of victory over death?

IV. Our Shepherd is the Redeemer of miserable sinners, so death has lost its sting (vv. 16-19; Jer. 7:15, 31:6-7, 15-20).

Application: Where you have redemption, you first have slavery. Redemption is a purchase that brings freedom to someone who was previously enslaved. The price of redemption is called a *ransom*.

Jacob's confession was that he had a Redeemer (v. 16). He refers to the angel of the Lord, the preincarnate appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as the angel who redeemed him. This means that previously he had been a slave.

I believe the sense in which Jacob was a slave in need of redemption, as well as the sense in which we all are slaves with the same need, is explained by the promise concerning Ephraim's descendants in v. 19. The phrase *multitude of nations* is very literally *the fullness of the nations*. It is a phrase that says that Ephraim would be a source of rich blessing for all the nations of the earth. How would this occur? What does Jacob's prophecy refer to?

Seed-promises in Genesis have typically referred to the line of the Messiah or the Messiah Himself. The seed of Ephraim is

an exception to this rule. The descendants of Ephraim become, by virtue of metonymy, a name for the entire northern nation of Israel, which eventually rebels and is destroyed under the judgment of God (see Jer. 7:15 for the term “seed of Ephraim” referring to the entire northern ten tribes of Israel).

Psalm 78 recounts the rebellion of Ephraim (vv. 9-11, “The children of Ephraim, being armed, and carrying bows, turned back in the day of battle. They kept not the covenant of God, and refused to walk in his law; and forgot his works, and his wonders that he had shewed them”). It also describes God’s judgment and rejection of them (vv. 65-68, “Then the Lord awaked as one out of sleep, and like a mighty man that shouteth by reason of wine. And he smote his enemies in the hinder parts: he put them to a perpetual reproach. Moreover he refused the tabernacle of Joseph, and chose not the tribe of Ephraim, but chose the tribe of Judah, the mount Zion which he loved”).

Yet the prophecy of Jeremiah is not done with the seed of Ephraim until it speaks of Ephraim’s redemption from sin, and the future ministry of Ephraim as the fullness of the nations (31:6-7, “For there shall be a day, that the watchmen upon the mount Ephraim shall cry, Arise ye, and let us go up to Zion unto the Lord our God. For thus saith the Lord, ‘Sing with gladness for Jacob, and shout among the chief of the nations: publish ye, praise ye, and say, “O Lord, save thy people, the remnant of Israel””).

This restoration is accomplished first through the weeping in Ramah, the town in Mt. Ephraim where Samuel was born (31:15-17), a reference to the redemptive ministry of Christ (Matt. 2:18). Restoration of Ephraim is accomplished through Ephraim’s repentance (31:18-20, “I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself thus, ‘Thou hast chastised me, and I was chastised, as a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke: turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for thou art the Lord my God.

Surely after that I was turned, I repented; and after that I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh: I was ashamed, yea, even confounded, because I did bear the reproach of my youth.' 'Is Ephraim my dear son? is he a pleasant child? for since I spake against him, I do earnestly remember him still: therefore my bowels are troubled for him; I will surely have mercy upon him,' saith the Lord").

Jacob's prophecy regarding the descendants of Ephraim explains the nature of the redemption that he spoke of as his own. We are the slaves of sin. The Bible says that slavery to sin is the sting of death. But God has worked so that sinners like the descendants of Ephraim, sinners like you and I, can be redeemed.

He has done this work in Christ, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Have you ever asked God to redeem you from your sin believing that Jesus died to set you free? Or do you find yourself still in desperate bondage to this sting of death. Unless we are redeemed, we have no Shepherd to lead us through the valley of the shadow of death that is coming.

Conclusion: Of course, it is David, the shepherd of sheep, who taught us in Psalm 23 to trust our Shepherd: "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want" (v. 1). And it is David, a warrior well acquainted with the valley of the shadow of death, which we all must traverse someday should the Lord tarry, who assures us that our Shepherd is the Shepherd who can take us safely through the valley of the shadow of death.

Jacob was there, and as he looked into this valley he knew that the one who had provided life for each day would be with him through this last of his journeys. His Shepherd's eternal promises could not fail, His Shepherd's grace need not be merited, and His Shepherd's redemption can free the most

desperate slave of sin. Jacob's faith in his Shepherd prepared him well.

Has our faith done the same for us? Do we know whom we have believed, and are we persuaded that He is able to keep that which we have committed to Him against that day we enter the valley of the shadow of death? I hope you can say, "I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me."

"A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction—the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*