

Chapter 17: God Meant it for Good

Genesis 50:1–26

Since the book of Genesis is the first book of the Bible, Christians understand how important the stories of creation, fall, and covenant are for understanding God’s work of redemption in the world. Many times, however, we narrow our focus on Genesis’s foundational nature to the first three chapters exclusively, as well as to the major stories of the flood, the call and covenants with Abraham, and perhaps a few other interesting narratives along the way. We should not overlook, however, the critical role of the conclusion to the book in Genesis 50. While, on the surface, this last chapter of Genesis seems only to tie up loose ends as it narrates the burial of Jacob and the death of Joseph, this narrative is written to give a suitable conclusion to the book as a whole. Genesis began with the story of God’s creation of the world and the blessing, that he gave, but, very quickly, sin ripped that blessing from the world. The rest of the book of Genesis, then, has been about how God will re-establish that blessing in the world. Although Genesis 50 does not give the final word on how God will restore his blessing to the world, the book of Genesis does end with an important word to give a provisional conclusion to the conflict introduced at the Fall: *God is working all things together for our good.*

Walking in our Grief (Gen. 50:1–14)

After the death of Jacob at the end of Genesis 49, Joseph mourns for his father. We read that Joseph falls on Jacob’s face to weep over him, and to kiss him (v. 1). Jacob had wept with great grief when he believed that Joseph had died (Gen. 37:35), and now Joseph weeps when his father does die. We should also remember that God had promised Jacob that Joseph would be at his side when he died: “Joseph’s hand shall close your eyes” (Gen. 46:4).¹ Although Jacob was estranged from Joseph for over two decades, God graciously permits Jacob to die in Joseph’s presence.

After this, Joseph commands his servants to embalm his father, Israel (v. 2). The embalming that happens for Jacob is unique (although Joseph too will be embalmed; v. 26), but it serves an important practical purpose to preserve Jacob’s body for transportation back to Canaan for burial. Embalming bodies after death was a special skill of the Egyptians, but, in this context, it sits in contrast to the insistence of Jacob for being buried in Canaan. The focus of the Egyptians was on preservation of the body from decay, while Jacob’s focus was for his body to decay in the land of promise. The practice of the Egyptians, then, seeks to hold on to the body for this life, while the faith of Jacob looked forward to the day when his body would be raised from the dead, in fulfillment of all God’s promises to him.²

¹ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 488.

² Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:477–78.

The rest of this first section goes to great length to demonstrate the magnitude of mourning for Jacob.³ Even the Egyptians mourned for Jacob for seventy days, which was the standard period of mourning (v. 3–4). Then, when Joseph travels through Canaan to bury his father, the lamentation was so “very great and grievous” over seven days (v. 10) that the Canaanites rename the place, Abel-Mizraim (“the mourning of the Egyptians”) to commemorate the event (v. 11). These descriptions are striking in themselves, but they are all the more pronounced when we compare the mourning for Jacob against the minimalistic accounts of the burials and mournings for Abraham and Isaac. Why, then, does the text go so far out of its way to underscore the mourning for Jacob, after the patriarch had lived such a long and full life? John Sailhamer suggests that the mourning for Jacob as they bury him in Canaan resonates with and underscores the theme of an eventual return of *all* Israel to the land. The book of Genesis may end with the nation of Israel in exile in Egypt, but Israel’s burial is a demonstration in advance of the way God will bring all his people out of Egypt again back to the land.⁴

We see this the theme of exodus also foreshadowed in Joseph’s prior request to Pharaoh to go to Canaan at all. Joseph possesses high standing only slightly under Pharaoh (cf. Gen. 41:40), but he does not act as though he does. Instead, he makes his request timidly, through intermediaries, with great deference and a long explanation of the promise he had made, and with an emphatic promise to return (v. 4–5).⁵ The meek request of Joseph perhaps foreshadows the change in standing that Moses will experience when he approaches Pharaoh not as the adopted son of an Egyptian princess, but as a prophet for Israel (Ex. 5:1). Here, though, Pharaoh immediately lets Joseph go, and not only Joseph, but also “all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his household, and all the elders of the land of Egypt, as well as the household of Joseph, his brothers, and his father’s household. Only the their children, their flocks, and their herds were left in the land of Goshen. And they went up with him both chariots and horsemen. It was a very great company” (v. 7–9). The terms describing this great, mixed multitude will appear again to describe the company of people leaving Egypt at the Exodus (Ex. 10:7, 9–10; 11:3; 12:38; 14:9, 17–20).⁶ All of this, then, describes a preview of the Exodus to come. Next time, the Pharaoh will not be as friendly, and the Israelites will not intend to return.

Working out our Good (Gen. 50:15–21)

After Jacob is buried, suspicions surface quickly among Jacob’s sons. The language of Genesis 50:15 is interesting: “When Joseph’s brothers *saw* that their father was dead....” This cannot mean that they only just learned about their father’s death, since they journey to Canaan to take part in burying him there (v. 8, 12–13). Instead, this must rather describe how the full implications of their father’s death settled on them.⁷ Specifically, they are concerned that Joseph will “hate” them, just as Esau “hated” Jacob for stealing the blessing (Gen. 27:41), which led him to seek to kill Jacob.⁸ With

³ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 238.

⁴ Sailhamer, 238–39.

⁵ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 693.

⁶ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 489.

⁷ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 701–02.

⁸ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 489.

good reason, the consciences of the brothers are pricked to remember what they had done to Joseph. Their concern is whether, up to that point, their father's life had prevented Joseph from taking the full revenge they deserved.⁹

So, to protect themselves, they send Joseph a message, telling Joseph that Jacob had told them that Joseph should forgive them after Jacob died (v. 16–17). Now, it is legitimate to translate the phrase to say that the brothers “sent” this message, since this verb sometimes does mean “send” (cf. Ps. 68:28 [MT 29]).¹⁰ Nevertheless, this is the same word that shows up later in this same word, translated “command.” Thus, the most literal translation of this verse is, “And they commanded Joseph, saying, ‘Your father commanded before he died...’” (my translation). The sending of this message begins on something of an aggressive, pushy note.

But if the sending of the message errs on the side of aggression, the rest of the message swings in the opposite direction as overly deferential. So, they call Jacob “your father,” not “their father,” to strengthen the appeal to Joseph's sense of filial duty as the beloved son of Jacob (v. 15).¹¹ Then, they say “please” three times in their letter, although the ESV hides one of them: “*Please* forgive [*please*] the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.’ And now, *please* forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father” (v. 17; my emphasis). Further, they use three of the four major terms for sin: “transgression” (2x), “sin,” and “evil,” excluding only the word “iniquity,” which largely describes the corruption that precedes and breaks out into sinful actions.¹² In other words, all their words dramatically emphasize the evil of their *actions* against Joseph. Finally, even the manner of sending a message, rather than speaking to Joseph directly, “avoids direct confrontation.”¹³ Although it is impossible to prove that Jacob didn't say this in a private conversation with Joseph's brothers, the manner of this message strongly suggests that they are making it up to protect themselves.¹⁴

Joseph's threefold response is noteworthy. First, his weeping probably summarizes the sorrow over everything that his broken relationship with his brothers has entailed. After the depths of his compassion that he has proved toward his brothers, they dishonor Joseph by thinking that they needed to manipulate him into forgiving them after their father has died.¹⁵ How sorrowful Joseph must be that they still fear him and do not trust him.¹⁶ His sorrow may not be entirely from hurts associated with what they think of him, as he may also well up with even more compassion to discern something of the troubled consciences his brothers continue to wrestle against in sending this.¹⁷

Second, Joseph assures them not to fear by asking an important question: “Do not fear, for am I

⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:483.

¹⁰ Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., Richardson, M. E. J., & Stamm, J. J., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, electronic ed., (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 1011.

¹¹ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 702–03.

¹² Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 490.

¹³ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 702.

¹⁴ Kidner, *Genesis*, 235.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:482.

¹⁶ Kidner, *Genesis*, 235.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:485.

in the place of God?” (v. 19). This rhetorical question at the end of Genesis is more important than it may seem at first glance, since it is a direct rejection of the promise the serpent made to Adam and Eve at the beginning of Genesis: “you will be like God” (Gen. 3:5).¹⁸ Victor Hamilton draws out the significance of the contrast: “Genesis begins by telling us about a primeval couple who tried to become like God, and ends by telling us about a man who denied he was in God’s place. Adam and Eve attempted to wipe out the dividing line between humanity and deity. Joseph refuses to try to cross that line. Joseph will only be God’s instrument, never his substitute.”¹⁹

The third part of Joseph’s response is connected with the second. Joseph continues, observing that while his brothers meant evil against him, “God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (v. 20). Once again, this marks a great reversal of the serpent’s deceitful promises to Eve, when he stated, “You will not surely die” (Gen. 3:4). Both God and the serpent promised life. Adam and Eve trusted the word of the serpent in spite of the overwhelming goodness of God toward them in the garden, while Joseph trusted the word of God in spite of the overwhelming evil he had faced during his lifetime.²⁰ As Calvin paraphrases, Joseph is confessing his faith that, “whatever poison Satan produces, God turns it into medicine for his elect.”²¹

Now, Joseph’s response does not immediately make right all the wrong that has arisen from the original sin. (The story of how God accomplishes all that will take the rest of the Bible to tell.) Nevertheless Joseph’s response is a fitting conclusion to the book of Genesis, as we see Joseph reject any claim to be like God, and as he acknowledges his faith that God is working out good, even through the evil that happens in the world. Indeed, Genesis began with a sevenfold affirmation that everything God created was “good”—indeed, even “very good” (Gen. 1:4–31).²² The great theological question that arises from Genesis 3 onward, then, has to do with whether God can make his creation good *again*, or whether all hope of goodness was lost forever when Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree. Again, Joseph’s response does not represent the final answer to the problem of evil in the world, but this final word at the end of Genesis establishes a foundational principle that the rest of the Bible will develop: what we intend for evil, God intends for good.²³

As Joseph reassures his brothers twice not to fear (v. 19, 21), promising them that he will continue to provide for them, so God reassures us not to fear, and promises that he will provide for us even outside the perfection of the garden of Eden. God is working out a grand plan of turning all evil toward good. That plan will take much time to unfold; however, along the way, God will continue to provide for his people every step of the way.

Waiting for our God (Gen. 50:22–26)

The final few verses narrate the conclusion of Joseph’s life. Although Joseph does not live as long as his father, he lives to the ripe old age of 110 years. In this, the Lord blesses Joseph by allowing him

¹⁸ Bruce T. Dahlberg, “On Recognizing the Unity of Genesis,” *Theology Digest* 24, no. 4 (1976): 363.

¹⁹ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 705.

²⁰ Dahlberg, “On Recognizing the Unity of Genesis,” 363–64.

²¹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:488.

²² Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 239.

²³ Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*, 723.

to see his son Ephraim’s children to the third generation, and to treasure Manasseh’s children as his own (v. 23). Then, when Joseph informs his brothers that he is about to die, he twice promises that God will *surely* visit them.²⁴ To say that God will visit someone, Allen Ross explains, “signifies divine intervention for the sake of blessing or cursing—both, in the case of the exodus, in which Israel was delivered at the expense of the Egyptians. The word usually carries the connotation that destinies would be changed by the visitation from on high.”²⁵

The book of Genesis ends with God’s people in exile, away from the land he has promised to give to the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Nevertheless, the book of Genesis ends with a view forward, with the promise that God will indeed bring them out of exile, and back into their own land. Furthermore, when God does, Joseph insists that his Israelite descendants take his bones with him for burial in that land. In many ways, then, the end of Genesis mirrors the end of Deuteronomy, and the end of 2 Chronicles. In both cases, God’s people are outside of the land, awaiting the fulfillment of the promise that God will bring them into the land he promised to give them. Indeed, as Derek Kidner points out, this is the final word of the New Testament, when Christ promises, “Surely I am coming soon” (Rev. 22:20). The Scriptures, then, teach us how to wait for the visitation of the Lord with expectant hope.²⁶

Discussion Questions

- 1) How does Genesis 50:1–14 highlight the extensive grief and mourning for Jacob’s death? How many people are drawn into this grief for the death of the patriarch? Beyond the grief of losing a father, or an elder statesman, what other factors might lead to this level of grief and mourning? How should we finally evaluate Jacob, after the life he has lived, and the burial he receives in Canaan? What does Jacob’s legacy teach us for our own lives today?
- 2) How does Joseph’s question, “Am I in the place of God?” (v. 19), reject the false promise of the serpent to Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:5)? How have we seen Joseph entrust himself to God’s wisdom and goodness throughout this story? How should we understand Joseph’s statement that, what his brothers meant for evil, God meant for good (v. 20)? If the “good” is tied up in keeping many people alive, how is Joseph once again rejecting the lies of the serpent to Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:4)?
- 3) What does Joseph mean when he tells his brothers twice that God “will surely visit you” (v. 24–25)? What does it mean for God to “visit” his people? What does it mean for God to “visit” his enemies? How do these final words of Joseph look forward to the events that we will read about in the book of Exodus? How important would this promise have been for the Israelites as they waited in exile in Egypt—especially when a future Pharaoh treated them so cruelly (Ex. 1:8–14)?

²⁴ The ESV leaves out the word *surely* from the translation of v. 24 for some reason, although the phrase in both v. 24 and v. 25 have the same construction of an infinitive absolute plus an imperfect of the same verb:

יִפְקֹד יִפְקֹד (pāqōd yiphqōd).

²⁵ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 716.

²⁶ Kidner, *Genesis*, 236.

4) The book of Genesis ends with God's people in exile, awaiting the visitation of their God. How does this ending foreshadow the end of the Old Testament, especially when we remember that the last book of the Hebrew Old Testament ends with 2 Chronicles (cf. 2 Chron. 36:17–23)? How does this ending foreshadow the end of the New Testament (cf. Rev. 22:20)? How, then, does the end of Genesis inform the way that we should live our lives until Christ returns?