

THE MINISTRY OF THE BONES **GENESIS 50:22-26**

The life of Joseph came to a fitting conclusion. He still stands on the pages of Scripture as one of the outstanding human beings who ever lived. His life was remarkable in every way. But like all men his life came to an end in death.

We are informed that Joseph lived to be one hundred and ten years old. It is of interest that among the Egyptians one hundred and ten years were considered to be the ideal life. This was what every Egyptian aspired to do – to live to be one hundred and ten years old. We also discover that he lived long enough to see his great grandchildren or maybe his great, great grandchildren. It depends on how we understand the statement that he “saw the third generation of Ephraim’s children.” If Ephraim is not included in the third generation, it was his great, great grandchildren that he lived to see. This would have been considered in the ancient world a remarkable achievement.

Like his father Jacob before him he made careful preparations for his death. He informed his family that they were to preserve his bones and to take them back to Canaan whenever God visited his people. So we read the closing words in Genesis: “And after they embalmed him he was placed in a coffin in Egypt.” So for the next three hundred years the sons and grandsons of Jacob became the stewards or the keepers of the bones of this remarkable servant of God, Joseph.

We learn later that when Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt that they took the bones of Joseph with them. And we learn yet later that when Joshua settled the people in the land of Canaan that they buried the bones of Joseph at Shekem (Joshua 24:32). The writer of Hebrews refers to this request on the part of Joseph that they preserve his bones as being a remarkable act of faith. He indeed did believe that God would take the sons of Jacob back to Canaan so that the promises given to Abraham might be fulfilled.

As we come to this first Sunday of a new year and think about the troubled times in which we live, it should be helpful to us to consider the ministry of the bones. The bones of Joseph were kept by the people of God in fulfillment of a promise that they made to him, but those bones symbolized something to the people throughout those difficult days. The bones had a silent ministry among the people of God. In a real sense the cross of Jesus and his empty tomb have the same kind of ministry among us. Just to look at a cross or to see a picture of the empty tomb is to receive a silent reminder about some significant spiritual realities. So consider with me the ministry of the bones.

I. THE BONES ARE A REMINDER OF THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD IN THE PAST.

You must wonder where and who kept the bones of Joseph. Could it have been Ephraim or his children? Ephraim was the son of Joseph to whom Jacob made a special prophetic promise. Or could it have been Judah or his descendents to whom God made even greater promises? We are not told who became the keeper of the bones. Can you

imagine though an Israeli family taking their young children by the tent where the bones were kept and allowing them to look on the coffin and sharing with them some of the history of Israel? I can imagine a little boy saying to his father, “Dad, who was this man Joseph? Why are we keeping his bones?” And then I can imagine the dad recounting to his son the exploits of the life of Joseph. He might well go back to the days of Abraham and tell of how his people came to be in Canaan in the first place. There was a constant but silent reminder to the people of Israel as they lived out their days in Egypt that God had been faithful to his people in the past.

1. God’s preservation of His people.

The father would likely share with the boy how God preserved the life of Joseph. He would tell about him being sold into slavery by his brothers, being imprisoned by Potiphar because of the deceit of his wife, being taken out of prison to answer the mysterious dream of the pharaoh, finally being put in a place of great prominence and great power in the land of Egypt. And he would likely say to the boy, “Son, this is the kind of God that we serve. He is able to bring His people through great difficulty and bring them at last to the fulfillment of His promise.”

2. His preservation of Israel.

The father in all likelihood would share with the boy as they looked at the coffin about how God used Joseph to preserve His people in a time of great famine. He would describe for the boy the 70 descendants of Jacob putting everything they had into wagons and making the long, dry trip down into the land of Egypt. He would tell how Joseph

was used of God to provide everything that Jacob and his descendants needed to preserve their lives. He would talk about the beneficial influence of Joseph on the Egyptians and how God used it for the good of the people of Israel. This would really be significant in the latter part of those three hundred long years the descendants of Israel spent in Egypt. When there was a pharaoh on the throne who did not remember Joseph, it would be helpful for the young man to know about the God who had brought Israel down into Egypt and had preserved him through difficult times. Those bones gave a silent witness to the faithfulness of God for three hundred long years in the land of Egypt.

For two thousand years we've had the cross and the empty tomb as a silent witness to us of the faithfulness of our God. In the past God demonstrated His love and faithfulness through the death of His son upon the cross. He demonstrated His overcoming power by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. All of this becomes an encouragement to us to remain steadfast and faithful in the midst of difficult circumstances.

II. THE BONES ARE A REMINDER OF OUR RELATIONSHIP TO GOD IN THE PRESENT.

I can still see in my mind that father and son standing close to the casket that held the body of Joseph and the father using it as a teaching opportunity for the young boy. When the pharaohs began to enslave the people and to take their freedoms away from them, it would have been easy to forget who they were and why they were in the land of Egypt. But the bones of Joseph were a constant reminder of these special spiritual realities.

1. Who we are.

I can hear an Israeli boy saying to his father, “Father, tell me again about Joseph. Who was he? What does that have to do with us?”

Then I can hear the father recounting to his listening son about the story of Joseph, Jacob, Isaac and Abraham. I can hear him saying to his inquisitive son, “Son, we are the descendants of Abraham. We are a people that God chose to have a special relationship with Himself. God gave a promise to Abraham that he would make of His descendants a great nation and that is who we are. We are a part of that great nation that God is making for Himself. And son, God also promised to make the descendants of Abraham a blessing to the whole world. We are the people who have that promise from God.”

I can hear the son asking, especially if he’d gotten into the teen years: “Dad, this doesn’t seem to fit. We do not look like a great nation and I can’t see many evidences of the blessings. Life is hard. You’re having to work every day like a slave making bricks.” But then the dad would say, “Son, God has given a promise and He will keep His promise. We are the sons of Abraham. God will make us a blessing.” He would probably then point to that casket that contained the bones of Joseph and say, “Son just remember who we are.”

2. Where we are.

The bones of Joseph were in Egypt but they were postmarked to be delivered to the land of Canaan. These bones were a constant reminder to the people of Israel in those dark dangerous days that their situation in Egypt was a temporary one. God had already promised that they would go back to the land of Canaan. Before he died Joseph had indicated that God was to visit His people. There was a promise known to the Israelites about Abraham having seen ahead of time these difficult years that they were to spend in Egypt. Egypt was not their home – they were just passing through Egypt. They were sojourners and pilgrims in the land of Egypt – their home was in Canaan. The bones of Joseph were a silent reminder that they had this special relationship with God and that Canaan was their home.

The cross and empty tomb of Jesus are silent reminders to us of who we are and where we are. We are the sons of Abraham through the cross of the Lord Jesus. This world is not our home, we are just passing through! Our home is Heaven. We now have citizenship in Heaven.

III. THE BONES ARE A REMINDER OF THE PROMISE OF GOD FOR THE FUTURE.

As an Israeli family stood under the tent and looked at that casket that held the bones of Joseph, they must have wondered about the future. The bones had not been buried because they were to be taken to the land of Canaan for burial when God kept His promise to His people.

1. He will visit His people.

Joseph had said to his brother: “I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you out of this land and take you out of this land to the land that He promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” And then as he made them promise to take his bones with them when they went he said, “God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place.”

A father might have reminded an inquisitive son about the promise that God made to Jacob when they were coming into Egypt. God had said to Jacob, “Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you and I will surely bring you back again” (Genesis 46:3,4). This was a remarkable promise that God made to Jacob. The father would doubtlessly say to the son, “Son, our God will visit us again. He will come to our rescue. The times may be tough, but just wait on God to come and do what he promised to do.

2. He will take His people home.

God was to do more than just come and visit, He was to come and to deliver his people. He would take them out of this land of oppression back into a land that flowed with milk and honey, the land he had promised to Abraham their grandfather.

I'm sure an Israeli teenage who saw the hard like his father endured day by day, who saw the stooped shoulder and tiredness of his mother as she labored day by day trying to keep the family together, must have been tempted to flee. He must have been tempted to run

away and get as far away from these descendents of Jacob as he could get. The thing that kept him with his family and with his people was the promise that God had given. He lived with an expectancy that God would finally come to the aid of His people. The coffin in which the bones of Joseph were kept was a constant but silent reminder of this promise. God will not fail. He will come to the aid of His people.

For the Christian, we don't have a coffin with the bones of a great leader of the past in it. Instead we have a cross and an empty tomb that are a constant reminder to us that God gave His son to die for our sins and then raised Him from the dead. That empty tomb is a constant reminder to us that in the end all of those who put their faith in Christ will live with Him forever. Life may be treacherous and difficult now but God has made a promise. He has said, "Fear not little flock for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." When you are tempted on every side to be afraid and to doubt, just remember the tomb at Jerusalem is empty. Jesus Christ has conquered death and the grave. He now has the keys of death and the realm of the dead in His hand. He is the sovereign over every realm – the King over kings and Lord over lords. This is a time to be steadfast and unmovable. This is a time to be patient and wait on the Lord. This is a time to stir up our expectancy and our redemption draws neigh.

Thank God for the ministry of the bones! Thank God for the ministry of the cross and the empty grave!