



## How Will You Be Remembered?

## Genesis 50

Can you think of an example of when the timing of two or more different things coincided perfectly? Once you realize it, there is little doubt that God has divinely planned something and wants you to notice. You can't brush it off as a coincidence – it is clearly a God-incident. It is a GEM – a God Encounter Moment.

Today is that for me. As we wrap up our series on the life of Joseph with today's theme chosen over three months ago, I admit I did not notice that this Sunday is November 1, also All Saints Day. The convergence of Joseph's final theme, "How Will You Be Remembered" with a "A Time of Remembrance" of our loved ones who have passed away in the last year is striking. God is speaking!

Today's text has two deaths. The first is Joseph's father Jacob, who passes away at the age of 147 in the verse before chapter 50 begins: *"When Jacob ended his charge to his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed, breathed his last, and was gathered to his people."* (Gen. 49:33). On his deathbed he had given all 12 sons a verbal blessing of both vision and destiny as their offspring developed into the 12 tribes of Israel. I encourage you to read Genesis 49 – it deals with harsh reality more than mushy sentimentality. For instance, his blessing sounds more like a curse to Simeon and Levi: *"Weapons of violence are their swords. May I never come into their council; may I not be joined to their company – for in their anger they killed men, and at their whim they hamstringed oxen"*. (Gen. 49:6). Despite "blessings" like this, it concludes in vs. 28 *"All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father said to them when he blessed them, blessing each one of them with a suitable blessing."*

Despite not all the brothers feeling happily "blessed" by their dad, Joseph ensured that Jacob was remembered and his wishes to be buried in Canaan were honored. In the tradition of the Egyptians, his body was embalmed (a 40-day process) and continued with the Egyptian custom of an additional 30 days of mourning for a total of 70 days of tear-filled grieving. It is important to note that none of this was a Hebrew custom but ended up being very beneficial to Jacob's sons. Were it not for the embalming, taking Jacob's body back to Canaan for burial would have been quite a horrific experience. After they arrived back in Canaan to grieve another week on the threshing floor of Atad (a common place to commemorate legal and life pacts), they then buried him in Abraham's cave with their ancestors.

After Jacob is properly memorialized, Joseph's brothers start realizing that they no longer have their father around to protect them from any revenge Joseph may still harbor in his heart. *"What if Joseph bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?"* (Gen. 50:15) Though we find no evidence that Jacob ever said this, they come to Joseph with the plea, *"Your father gave this instruction before he died, "Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.""* (Gen. 50:16-17).

It is easy to be more cynical and less than gracious responding to this. But Joseph's reaction to his brothers' sin and their likely deception to avoid consequences is more akin to the kind of grace God shows each of us. *'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.'* In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them. (Gen. 50:19-21)

Perhaps Joseph's response to his brothers is the best way he could have honored both the faith of his father Jacob and his own faith in the goodness and graciousness of God. He chose to remember in a way that we might also need to learn to remember.

When we think of the word "remember" we think of recalling an event in a particular way. We try to recollect an experience and the focus is on the details. However, the Biblical way of remembering has a focus on the big picture of God's faithfulness. It is intentionally stepping back to integrate faith and life so that we can understand and respond with grace.

The opposite of Biblical remembrance is forgetfulness. This is not forgetting where you left your phone or keys – it is forgetting to love and obey God. A major theme of Scripture is reminding us to remember God's faithfulness so that we do not forget and wander away from God. When the 12 tribes of Jacob are delivered out of Egypt to return to Canaan about 400 years after Joseph dies, God establishes the remembrance of Passover in Exodus 13:9: *"It shall serve for you as a sign on your hand (behavior) and as reminder on your forehead (thoughts), so that the teaching of the Lord may be on your lips (obedience); for with a strong hand the Lord brought you out of Egypt."* Remembrance focuses on God's faithfulness so that we can be faithful to God.

When we share in Holy Communion we are reminded of Jesus and his disciples gathered for the Last Supper – very notably on Passover – when Jesus commands his disciples, including us, to eat and drink together “in remembrance of me”. It is not simply about remembering facts. It is about our behaviors and thoughts being shaped by God’s faithfulness and grace. It is confessing the ways we have “forgotten” and sinned against God. It is receiving forgiveness from God and one another even though we don’t deserve it. It is remembering the mighty works of God throughout history and our lives. And it is sharing as God’s people – as broken and drama-filled as Joseph and his brothers – in the redeeming grace of God.

In addition to today’s long-ago chosen theme of “How Will You Be Remembered?” and the All Saints Day Remembrance, there is yet a third and very relevant connection that we remember this weekend. On October 31 our focus is usually on Halloween, but the more spiritually significant thing we can remember about October 31 is that it is Reformation Day. 503 years ago, Martin Luther nailed a list of 95 ways that God’s people – particularly their leaders – had forgotten and needed to remember God. Interestingly, he nailed this list on the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg, Germany.

“Forgetting” God is not simply losing track or not thinking of God. The Reformation happened because church leaders “forgot” and distorted God. For instance, the practice of indulgences that Martin Luther fought against was the opposite of God’s grace. As we remember the Reformation, let’s pray that God will now reform and renew our lives and our church to clearly reflect God’s grace.

As we remember those who have gone on before us, we also remember the fact that each one of us is both a sinner and a saint. As you grieve, some of you may have mostly memories of happy times. Sometimes there are also painful remembrances of feeling hurt or betrayed, much like Joseph experienced. Whatever our memories are, we are called to remember the faithfulness of God, whose grace and comfort is there to remind us who we are to be. If there is someone, either dead or yet living, who has hurt you, I invite you to remember and respond as Joseph did to his brothers: “*Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good.*” Then we will live now and forever as those who truly remember and live like Joseph – and Jesus. I’m pretty sure that is how all of us want to be remembered.