

Why funerals?

Genesis 50

WHEN I FIRST STARTED in ministry I hated doing funerals. It wasn't that they made me uncomfortable, I just thought they were unchristian. They were too expensive, too emotional, and too morbid. I reasoned that Christians should not be mourning and wailing, but joyful and hopeful when a loved one dies.

But over the years I've changed my mind about funerals for two reasons. First, I've seen how funerals meet very real emotional needs. The Bible says there's a time to laugh and a time to weep. A funeral provides an opportunity to express grief, to receive comfort, to give thanks, and to testify to our hope in Christ. I've observed that the people who mourn appropriately are able to adjust and return to life more quickly.

The second reason I've changed my mind is that I've taken a closer look at funerals in the Bible. When God's people died, the survivors were not instructed to bury them and go on the next day as though nothing had happened. On the contrary, the deceased were honored, their bodies treated with respect, and their families given ample opportunity to express love. Only after a prolonged period of mourning did the families return to normal activities as people of hope.

The burial of the patriarch Jacob serves as an example of a meaningful

funeral. When Jacob died, his son Joseph unashamedly expressed grief. Even though Jacob was 147 years old and in failing health, when he died Joseph threw himself on his father, wept over him, and kissed him. When your parents die, regardless of their age, it hurts.

Joseph honored his father's last request. Jacob had made advance funeral arrangements and requested his body be buried in Canaan. Even though it was inconvenient and time-consuming, "Joseph directed the physicians in his service to embalm his father . . . taking a full forty days" (Genesis 50:2,3). After a 70-day period of mourning for Jacob in Egypt, Joseph secured permission from Pharaoh to take his father's body back to Canaan.

It was an elaborate funeral procession. "All Pharaoh's officials accompanied him—the dignitaries of his court and all the dignitaries of Egypt—besides all the members of Joseph's household and his brothers and those belonging to his father's household" (Genesis 50:7). Although a funeral shouldn't be a display of wealth or importance, there's a sense in which the burial of a loved one should be a significant event. However, it's important to remember it's not the cost of the casket or the length of the procession that determines a person's worth in God's eyes.

Joseph continued to mourn for an

extended period. "When they reached the threshing floor of Atad, near the Jordan, they lamented loudly and bitterly; and there Joseph observed a seven-day period of mourning for his father" (Genesis 50:10). He hadn't been there since he was 17 years old. The memories must have overwhelmed him as he returned to the place where his parents and grandparents were buried. Eventually the time of mourning was over, so Joseph returned to life, ready to get back into the routine of every day because there's a time to mourn and a time to live again.

William Gladstone, Prime Minister of Great Britain in the early 1800s, said, "Show me the manner in which a nation or community cares for its dead and I will measure with mechanical exactness the tender mercies of its people, their respect for the laws of the land, and their loyalty in high ideals." A funeral can be a wonderful opportunity to share your faith in Jesus Christ in a way that may leave a lasting impact on those who don't know the Lord. And they, in return, may be eternally grateful. ■

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Day by Day With the Bible

Use this guide to read through the Bible in 12 months. Follow Bob Russell's comments on the highlighted text in every issue of THE LOOKOUT.

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What Do You Think?

1. Why is it appropriate for Christians to honor deceased loved ones?
2. How can the death of a believer serve as a Christian testimony to others?