

Intro:

Illust: Does the name Howard Rutledge mean anything to you? Something happened on November 28, 1965 that changed his life forever. Rutledge was the Executive Officer of Fighter Squadron 191 in the Vietnam war. On that particular day he flew his F-8 Crusader jet on a mission to destroy a strategic bridge in North Vietnam. His aircraft was shot and seconds later exploded. He evacuated just in time, and was survived. While dangling from a parachute 1000 feet above North Vietnam, Rutledge said, "Thank You, God!" In his own admission, it was the first time he had prayed in 20 years.

His struggle was not over. Rutledge was captured by the enemy. He was taken as a POW to the notorious Hanoi Hilton. For the next 7 long years, he would live in the shadow of death. His imprisonment which consisted of unimaginable physical and mental abuse lasted from 1965 until 1972. Five of those years he spent in solitary confinement.

Just before Christmas I read with great fascination, Rutledge's own account of his ordeal, in his book entitled, In the Presence of Mine Enemies. When Rutledge was shot down he left behind a wife and 4 children. Sadly he admitted that since he was a child, he never had time for spiritual things. He ignored the pleas of his wife and children, and was too busy to go to church with them. He had no room for God in his life. He had his own agenda.

That all changed when he was locked in a dark, cold, filthy 6x6 cell, all alone, with nothing but rotting pumpkin or seaweed soup, and a small loaf of stale french bread to eat. Please listen to Rutledge's own testimony:

Quote: "During those long periods of enforced reflection it became so much easier to separate the important from the trivial..." (see p 39).

Howard Rutledge looked into death's eye for 7 years. By God's gracious working, he not only survived, but he prospered spiritually. He learned to separate the important from the trivial in life. He left prison with a true sense of dignity.

Q: How does a person die with dignity?

One day, should our Lord not return first, each of us will die. What can we do now to make sure we don't come to that day with regrets? Is it possible to face death with dignity? Today, we're going to see the biblical example of a man who did.

Key: The person who dies with dignity is the person who lives in such a way that when he is gone, he leaves his family something that will live on after he is gone.

That's exactly what we see happen in Genesis 48-49. Would you turn there?

For the past 3 months, we have been marveling at God's man Joseph. We began in Genesis 37 when Joseph as a mere 17 year old teenager was betrayed by his own jealous brothers, and sold into slavery. His life bottomed out when he was framed by Potiphar's seductive wife, and sent to prison for 2 years.

But God's hand was upon Joseph! God promoted Joseph from prison to Prime Minister of Egypt. The story of Joseph is a picture of God's Sovereignty. God sovereignly placed Joseph at the right place at the right time to accomplish His purpose with His people.

In Gen 48-49, Joseph moves to the sidelight again. His father Jacob takes center stage. In Gen 48, the aged and dying Jacob blesses Joseph. In Gen 49, Jacob gives his final blessing to all 12 of his sons. It's a moving account.

Q: How does a person die with dignity?

Proposition: Let's look at 3 scenes from Genesis 48 to see how Jacob faced death with dignity.

- I. The Background (1-2)
- II. The Blessing (3-20)
- III. The Benefits (21-22)

I. The Background (1-2)

V 1 "And it came to pass..."

When Jacob was 130 years old, he moved to Egypt and settled in Goshen. He would live there 17 years (by the way, it's interesting that Jacob enjoyed the first 17 years of his son Joseph's life, before losing him, and then enjoyed another 17 years in Egypt). The text says that aged Jacob grew ill. In fact, he was about to die. He sent word to the executor of his estate, Joseph. Joseph took his 2 sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, and went to see the patriarch.

Q: How old are the boys? **In their 20's

V 2 "And one told Jacob...and Israel strengthened himself, and sat upon the bed."

Here's the scene. Jacob knows he's on his final leg of life. He rallies one last time when his delightful son Joseph comes. This could be the last moments they'll enjoy together.

Observation: Think with me. What condition is Jacob in?

The text says he's "sick" (Hebrew word can mean "to be weak"; used of "lame" animals; can mean "wounded" or even "diseased"; in II Chr 21:18, a related word is used to describe King Jehoram who had an "incurable disease."). V 2 indicates that Jacob is bedfast.

Q: What's the point?

The point is this. We hear a lot these days about people having the right to "die with dignity." We have men like Dr. Kevorkian's who assist people in suicide.

I want to pose a couple of questions. Is there any reason for a person who is terminally ill have to go on living? Can a person who is bedfast and immobile have a reason for living?

The message that we're hearing in increasing volume from our humanistic society is "No." If a person can't contribute to society (whether the person is elderly or unborn), there's no need to go on living. Is that right?

Listen. Jacob was terminally ill. He would eventually die. He was bedfast. He could contribute nothing to society. Or could he? What good was there for Jacob to go on living?

Challenge: We're going to see in the scene that follows that even an immobilized, bedfast parent like Jacob can impact his children.

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Tran: How can a person die with real dignity? Watch Jacob. Scene 1--The Background.

II. The Blessing (3-20)

What does a person talk about when he comes to the end of his life? Notice what Jacob had to say. He reflected on God's Person and God's Promises. Specifically, he shared 2 things with his son Joseph:

V 3 "And Jacob said to Joseph, God Almighty appeared to me..."

1. He shared with Joseph about the moment God changed his life.

V 3--"God Almighty appeared to me." A spiritual transformation took place in Jacob's life, years earlier at "Luz" (Bethel). It was there that God got a hold of Jacob's life (Gen 28:19). True, he'd blown it many times in his life since then. But when he came to the end, all that mattered was his relationship with God.

2. He shared with Joseph the promises God had made to him.

V 4 "And said unto me, Behold I will make thee fruitful..."

Jacob's body was deteriorating. But his soul was filled with hope and joy. Do you know why? Because he knew that God had blessed him richly. That's what he told Joseph (3). God blessed me!

Q: So what does a father who has been blessed by God do?

A: Pass that blessing on to his offspring! That's what Jacob did...

Beginning in v 5, down to v 20, Jacob blessed Joseph and his sons. Actually, he called on THE LORD to do the blessing. The blessing continued into ch 49 for the other 11 sons. The concept of "blessing" is foreign to us. But I want you to see how Jacob blessed his family from his deathbed.

Vv 5-6 "And thy two sons...are mine...their inheritance."

Jacob informs Joseph that his 2 sons will be treated as his own. It's as if Jacob adopts Joseph's boys. That is significant. When the descendants of Israel reach the Promised Land, and when the land is divided up, that will mean that Joseph's tribe will receive a double portion of land. What an amazing honor Jacob gives his son, a double inheritance.

Jacob continued to reminisce in v 7. Then watch what happened...

v 8 Poorsighted Jacob doesn't recognize Joseph's sons

v 9 Joseph introduces the young men

v 9b Jacob announces his desire to "bless" the sons

Watch the ironic reversal that follows. What a touching scene...
Vv 10-14 "...and Israel stretched out his right hand upon Ephraim..."

Stop there. Here's the picture. Manasseh is the firstborn. Joseph positions him in front of Jacob's right hand. Ephraim was secondborn, and is placed before his grandfather's left hand. As firstborn, Manasseh is entitled to the greatest blessing.

But Jacob pulled a switch. He crossed his arms. Listen to the blessing.

Vv 15-16 "And he blessed Joseph..."

In the blessing, Jacob reflects. He reiterates events in his life where he saw God at work, namely the time he encountered the Angel of the Lord. The climax came in v 16 when Jacob asked God to bless the boys.

Just then Joseph lifted his bowed head, evidently, and saw what appeared to him as a glaring mistake. His dad's arms were crossed! Watch what he did...

Vv 17-18 "And when Joseph saw...Not so my father..."

Had there been a mixup in the blessing? Jacob replied...

Vv 19-20 "And his father refused..."

Q: Why did Jacob reverse the blessing?

This is not the first time a blessing was reversed in the Bible. Others?

--Joseph himself was #11, but was elevated above his 10 older brothers.

--Jacob was younger, yet stole the blessing from Essau (Gen 27).

--David and his brothers

Illust: I Sam 16--God told Samuel to anoint David as king.

Why? Not because he was the oldest (as culturally accepted), in fact, he was the youngest of 8 boys. Not because he had the most natural charm or ability. Why did God chose David?

I Sam 16:6-7 "...the LORD sees not as man sees; for man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."

Q: Why did Jacob reverse the blessing on Joseph's sons?

A: Acc to Heb 11:21, it was an act of faith.

He was not confused or mistaken. By prophetic inspiration he knew that God would bless the younger son in the greater way.

The historical record verified that. After the Kingdom was divided, the tribe of Ephraim became the leading force in the northern kingdom of ten tribes. In fact, many times God refers to the northern kingdom as "Ephraim" (II Chr 25:7; Is 7:5).

Q: How can a person die with dignity?

Jacob, in his final days, did something very specific. He blessed his sons.

Application: Is there an example for us to follow today? Obviously, we can't predict the future. We're not entitled to prophetic inspiration, as was the Patriarch Jacob. And obviously, there are cultural factors involved in the act of blessing we've examined (eg--bowing to the ground; placing hands on heads, elevating the firstborn son). But can we learn something from Jacob's blessing?

Quote: Gary Smalley and John Trent wrote a book, The Blessing. They point out that Jacob passed on something more than a theological promise when he blessed his sons in Gen 48-49... (see pp. 102-3 in Swindoll)

Challenge: Parents and grandparents, several questions...

Q: Is it a priority for you to pass on a spiritual heritage to your children?

Q: Do you pray specifically for your children? I'm not talking about praying that God will give them jobs so they can make big bucks. Do you pray and ask God to make your children godly? To give them godly friends? To provide them with mates that love Jesus Christ? That God will use them in a great way to advance the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, that He will use them however and wherever He sees fit?

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Q: Do you consciously and verbally affirm your children. Do you tell them you love them, that you accept them for who they are? How about with your grandchildren?

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Q: How does a person die with dignity?

Key: The person who dies with dignity is the person who lives in such a way that when he is gone, he leaves his family something that will live on after he is gone.

Tran: That's what Jacob did. Scene 1, the Background. Scene 2, the Blessing...

III. The Benefits (21-22)

Jacob knew God formed a special covenant with him and his descendants. He also knew that the Promise would not be fulfilled in Egypt, but that there was coming a day, long after his own death, when God would redeem His people from Egypt, and take them to the Promised Land of Canaan. Jacob's faith was strong. He challenged Joseph, and here's what he told him...

V 21 "And Israel said to Joseph..."

Jacob was so sure of God's Promise, he passed on a special benefit to Joseph.

V 22 "Moreover, I have given to thee one portion..."

The NIV is clearer, "And to you, as one who is over your brothers, I give the ridge of land that I took from the Amorites with my sword and my bow." Jacob read his will to Joseph and revealed that he was giving him a special inheritance, a special strip of land.

Q: Did Joseph ever enjoy this property?

A: Not personally. Over 400 years later, Josh 24:32 tells us that his bones were carried up out of Egypt, and buried on this plot of ground in Shechem.

What's the point? Why did God tell us this?

Jacob lived 147 years. That's a long time. There were some memorable moments in his life. God saw fit to devote more than 20 chapters to Jacob's life's story, from Gen 25 to Gen 50.

Q: What do you think was Jacob's finest moment? What was his most memorable deed in life?

A: According to Heb 11:21, Gen 48 is Jacob's greatest moment. Heb 11:21 "By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning upon the top of his staff."

Why was this act of blessing Jacob's greatest moment? Because after 147 of life, he had learned something, a vital lesson. He had learned to live, and to die, in the light of God's promises. Even in the face of death, Jacob held on to God's promises. He learned to "Trust and obey, for there's no other way."

Application: Let me be frank. There's more to life than meets the eye. There's more to life than CD's, 70 hour work weeks, impressive resumes, and an RV in the driveway. There's more to life than accumulating money, building costly castles, and impressing people with your image.

When you and I come to the end of our lives (which may be today), there are some promises with which we need to reckon. God says...

1. There's a heaven to gain, and a hell to avoid. (Jn 3:36)
2. There's a Savior who is coming again to rule. (Rev 22:20)
3. There's coming a day when we will all give an account of our lives.

(II Cor 5:10; Rev 20:13)

4. There's a question all of us will have to answer before God...

**What did you do with My Son, Jesus Christ?

Jn 3:36 "He that believeth on the Son has everlasting life; and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

Jacob finished the last leg of his life with his eyes firmly fixed by faith on God's eternal promises. He went to his grave knowing all was well between him and His Maker. He set his house in order. He died leaving a great spiritual heritage to his children and grandchildren. He died with dignity.

Q: What about you? Are you ready to meet the Lord? Do you have the assurance that your sins are forgiven, that your eternal destiny is secure?

You say, "You don't know me. I've blown it too many times. God can't help me, can He?" O friend, may I remind you that Jacob was no saint in his younger life. He was a conniver and deceiver. Later he struggled with doubts. But by God's grace, he learned to take God at His Word, to come to God on God's terms.

There is hope for all of us, if we're willing to admit our need, to confess our sin, to accept God's abundant provision in Jesus Christ.

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