

Sin and Death

HN 23/05/04pm

Reading: Genesis 35, 2 Corinthians 4:1-5:11

Study: Genesis 35:16-29

Psalms: 30:1-5, 51:6-10, 71:14-17, 71:18-19

Therefore just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, thus death spread to all men because all sinned. (Romans 5:12). Our text today reminds us that death comes to all, death cannot be avoided. We are also reminded of sin, sin which brought death into the world, the world which God created, and the world he created as very good.

The deaths of Jacob's beloved wife, Rachel, and of his father Isaac are recorded here. We looked at these briefly last time in the context of God appearing to Jacob. Now we will look a little more closely at this passage, noting how they died.

Rachel was barren for some time after marriage – she was the second of Jacob's two wives. She envied Leah his other wife who was bearing sons to Jacob. One day Rachel screamed at Jacob *Give me children or else I die* (30:1). God remembered Rachel and listened to her. He opened her womb and she had a son (30:22-23). She called him Joseph, meaning 'the Lord will add to me another son'. As we look at this passage before us we see that both statements from Rachel turn out to be strangely prophetic – she died as she gave birth to another son.

Rachel was very beautiful and Jacob loved her greatly, but we find little in her life or here in her death to commend her as a God fearing woman. When she left her father's house she stole his idols, his household gods. She managed to hide them from him when he came searching her tent. She kept the idols as they entered Canaan. We presume she handed them over to Jacob to be buried when he went up to Bethel.

Rachel died in childbirth as they were traveling south from Bethel to Hebron. Jacob worshipped the Lord at Bethel and then set out for his family home at Hebron. They had not gone far – probably just a little north of Jerusalem – when Rachel started to have labour pains. It was a hard labour and led to her death in childbirth.

As she died she called her son *Ben Oni* which means 'son of my sorrow'. Jacob did not accept that name but called his son Benjamin, 'son of my right hand' or 'son of the south'. There is not much here to indicate a victorious death. Rather we see sorrow tinged with some bitterness, as *her soul departed and she died*.

Rachel was buried on the way to Bethlehem. Jacob buried her where she died in this land of Canaan. He set up a pillar on her grave which is there to this day wrote Moses. Indeed Rachel's tomb was also known in Samuel's day (I Samuel 10:2).

Rachel's sorrow and weeping becomes somewhat proverbial in Scripture. Jeremiah (31:15) spoke in prophecy; *A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children*. This prophecy was fulfilled at the birth of Jesus when Herod put to death all the male children in the vicinity of Bethlehem. Rachel's tomb was a perpetual reminder of bitterness and weeping in Israel.

It is interesting to compare the burial of Rachel with that of Sarah. Abraham went to great lengths to buy a

burial plot in the land of Canaan for his wife. He bought land at Hebron with a cave on it called Machpelah. Abraham was later buried in this cave, as were Isaac, Rebekah and Leah (49:31). Jacob himself charged his sons to carry him up out of Egypt when he died and to bury him at Machpelah. Why Jacob did not bury Rachel there we are not told.

Isaac was still alive down at Hebron when Jacob finally returned. But then after a few years he died. He lived to the ripe old age of 180, slightly more than his father Abraham. His death is recorded in words very similar to those used of Abraham (25:8). He was *old and full of days when he breathed his last and died*.

This must be where our Indian friends get the term 'expired' to describe death. It carries a peacefulness about it does it not. He expired.

Note that Esau and Jacob buried him, again like Abraham and his two sons. The sons who had had very little to do with each other during his lifetime, came together to bury him.

There is a strange beauty about the death of Isaac don't you think. We see here a man who was *full of days*, a man who was ready to die. We see a peaceful death. Now you do not have to be old to be full of days. It has the sense of having completed the task which the Lord has given you to do.

Some of God's servants die young and full of days, having completed the will of God for their life. Others may be old and still be crying out for more time, more days to get right before God. They are not ready for death. They are not ready to stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

In death Isaac was *gathered to his people/ancestors*. This means more than the fact that he was buried in the same cave at Machpelah. He like Abraham before him *died in faith...having seen the promises afar off (Heb 11:13)*. They died looking to the heavenly homeland in Christ Jesus. So this gathering to his people, points to that heavenly gathering, gathering around the throne of God and the Lamb in heaven – the same place, the same throne to which you look forward to as a child of God, as one of his chosen people.

Paul looked forward to being gathered to his people. He looked forward to being with the representative of the people of God, the head of the church, even Jesus Christ our Lord. *For me to live is Christ and to die is gain*. He desired to be with the Lord in heaven if the work the Lord called him to do on earth was completed. *We are confident, yes well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8)*.

Let us remember we must all face death. Observation as well as Scripture makes that abundantly clear. What Scripture also makes abundantly clear is after death comes the judgment. *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10, Hebrews 9:27)*. And our text reminds us that death can come at any moment. We do not see so many die in childbirth these days – at least in our country. But we dare not take it for granted that we will have a long life here on earth.

Death came to all men because all sinned is what we read in Romans 5. All have sinned. We are born in sin because we are children of Adam. We are reminded of the sinful nature of man, the sinful nature of our own hearts as we consider for a brief moment this tragic record of incest with the family of Jacob.

Reuben, Jacob's eldest son *went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine, and Israel heard about*

it. Note the name Israel rather than Jacob is used in these two verses. We are still only a chapter away from the Dinah disaster, the rape of Jacob's daughter Dinah. Well might Jacob have confessed before Pharaoh *few and evil have been the days of my life* (47:9).

Was it lust that came upon Reuben? Was it pride and arrogance? Was he trying to supplant his father by lying with his concubine? Such behaviour was not unheard of in the ancient world – remember Absalom when he supplanted David as king (2 Samuel 16:22). Whatever the reason, it was wicked. Israel heard about it but did nothing at this time. He still did nothing to discipline his sons and they went on to cause him even more grief and sorrow.

Be sure your sins will find you out. You cannot sin against God with impunity. Reuben may have got away with it for now but the time for giving an account surely came. It came when Jacob was giving the father's blessing to his sons in Genesis 49. Reuben was his firstborn but did he get the birthright – did he get the firstborn's blessing?

No. Jacob remembered that *he went up to your father's bed and defiled it* (49:4). He was told he would not excel, that he was as unstable as water. Note Simeon and Levi also received a curse rather than a blessing at this time because of their anger and violence at Shechem. Judah his fourth son was blessed with the authority to rule – *the scepter shall not depart from Judah*. Judah was the son through whom God would, in the fullness of time send his Son, Jesus Christ, to be the blessing to all the nations.

Sin cannot be hidden from God. Too many people think that if they do not get caught then it is okay. Their heart becomes hard and calloused. They get bolder in their sin. But God remembers and will bring each one to account. *Remember not the sins of my youth* said the Psalmist (24). Why did he say that – because God does remember.

How could he get God not to remember? How must we deal with our sin? Again as David says in Psalm 51 *Cleanse me with hyssop and I shall be clean, wash me and I shall be whiter than snow*. David had sinned like Reuben. But the Lord brought him to confess his sin, to cry to the Lord for mercy and forgiveness. Time does not bring cleansing. Penance or sacrifice does not bring cleansing. Only the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from sin.

May we each one know the joy of the Lord in having our sins forgiven. May we be confident of meeting the Lord in death as his chosen child. Let us now be looking to Him, living in the fullness of the Lord and ready to hear those blessed words *well done good and faithful servant*.

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