

By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones (Hebrews 11:22)

I first met Gordon in September 2001 – he was assisting with the music at a wedding at my new church

- It was an unusual arrangement – the organist, because of work commitments, was always last-minute
- And so Gordon would play pre-recorded music until about two or three minutes before the ceremony
- The organist, an omni-competent musician, would then join in with whatever was playing at the time
- And Gordon would fade the pre-recorded music out – hoping that no one would see the join
- Until he retired, Gordon had worked in Devonport Dockyard – he knew my Dad through work
- In later life, as a widower, he retained a typically droll dockyard sense of humour
- When he attended my Bible study, Gordon became the page-meister (looking up references quickly)
- When I encouraged him to take an extra biscuit for the journey home, Gordon often took one
- He attended church every Sunday, morning and evening, and the weekly Bible study
- But then he was diagnosed with a terminal illness – I went to see him in his little house
- His bed was downstairs in the lounge, he looked at me and said, ‘It’s going alright so far’

The early Methodists would have related to that – so many of them were ordinary people with real faith

- And ordinary people with real faith are, by their very nature, extraordinary, exceptional people
- In their living, suffering and dying, these men and women were exceptional people
- A doctor, who had watched a number of the Methodists die, told Charles Wesley
- ‘I never met with people such as yours ... they are ... calm, and patient, and resigned to the last.’
- Causing John Wesley to state, ‘Our people die well’
- For faith must work in good times and bad, in living and dying – faith is nothing if not practical
- John Wesley used the word ‘experimental’ – it should come to our aid at every stress point of life

The writer to the Hebrews has mentioned each of the patriarchs, adding some detail to each reference

- He does not mention the death of Abraham which the writer of Genesis records in this way:
- ‘Abraham breathed his last and died in a ripe old age, an old man and satisfied with life;
- and he was gathered to his people’ (Gen. 25:8), but Isaac, whom Abraham received back from death,
- blessed Jacob and Esau with regard to their future (Heb. 11:20)
- and Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph’s sons, and Joseph, when his end was near
- spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt
- and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones (Hebrews 11:22)

In the wider world, ‘dying well’ often results in a discussion about palliative care or euthanasia

- an important discussion where my personal sympathies are with those opposed to changing the law
- but for the Christian, ‘dying well’ means facing the last enemy with peace and hope
- I am aware that facing up to issues such as these is liable to being described as ‘morbid’
- But the dictionary definition of ‘morbid’ describes it as an abnormal or unhealthy interest in death
- But, unless the Lord should surprise us by returning first in glory, we will all die some day
- And in Joseph we have someone who, as far as we can see, did it well

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So this is not morbid but it is about dying well, dying well be being:

- Ready for God to come for you, relying on God coming for you, resting in God coming for you
- In short we need to be: ready, relying, resting – in the promises of God

I READY

Sermon-preparation these days can take you to interesting places on the internet – searching for a hymn

- I found a website about wedding planning that had a page ‘popular wedding hymn suggestions’

A bit of hearty singing can make your wedding ceremony extra memorable for all involved - that’s when familiar hymns come into their own. So here’s our guide to well-known wedding hymn choices that make for a great sing-a-long!

Not quite how I might have put it – but suggestions included: Amazing grace, Guide me O thou great Jehovah

- Love Divine, all loves excelling, The King of Love my Shepherd is – in one way all good choices
- Amazing grace is about being ready to die, v. 3 of Guide me O thou great Jehovah is about dying
- Love Divine, all loves excelling is a prayer for Jesus to come again in glory, even the King of Love
- has the final verse which is about praising God in heaven – in ‘10,000 reasons’ Matt Redman spoke of it
- ‘And on that day when my strength is failing/The end draws near and my time has come’
- From African-American spirituals, ‘Swing Low sweet chariot’, ‘People get ready’ to classical hymns
- ‘Ten thousand to their endless home this solemn moment fly,
- and we are to the margin come, and we expect to die,’ as Charles Wesley put it

By faith, Joseph, when his end was near – he said, ‘I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid’

- my Father died suddenly (aged 60) one Wednesday morning, but he died with an open Bible on his bed
- in his testimony, he described how, in his early twenties, he had been critically ill with tuberculosis
- and in the night had haemorrhaged very badly – he describes the suffering but added, ‘then Jesus came’
- just as Joseph was ready, so faithful Christians are ready

II RELYING

‘I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.’ And Joseph made the Israelites swear an oath and said, ‘God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place.’

(Genesis 50:24-25)

At least from the time he was sold into slavery in Egypt, Joseph had learned what it was to rely on God

- when falsely accused and imprisoned, he relied upon God
- He cherished the promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob
- he believed that the destiny of his people was not captivity in Egypt but freedom in the Promised Land
- in Old Testament, the Exodus is one of the two significant events beginning with E, the other is the Exile
- and in both cases, triumphant deliverance, by the hand of God is the dominant idea

The New Testament uses the word ‘exodus’ very sparingly – on the Mount of Transfiguration (Lk. 9:31)

- when Jesus spoke of his ‘departure’ (literally ‘exodus’) and when Peter referred to his death (2 Pet. 1:15)
- but when, relying on God’s promises, we see death as ‘exodus’ from Egypt to the Promised Land
- our whole perspective on death is transformed – yes, there is the reality of loss (we must not deny that)
- but there is the hope of faith – ‘bring us safe through Jordan, to thy home above’
- it is said that Swiss pastor and hymn-writer Edmond Louis Budry wrote his famous hymn, as a 30 year old
- after the death of his wife in 1884 –
- Thine be the glory, risen conquering Son, Endless is the vict'ry, thou o'er death hast won.

III RESTING

Joseph's faith, looked beyond death, though his words referred to nothing more than his burial arrangements

- The instructions about the burial of his bones in Canaan are evidence of his faith in God's promises
- Like his father, Jacob, before him, he wanted his bones to be taken and buried in the Promised Land
- He believed that God would restore his people to that land – for that is what God had promised
- 'God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land
- to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob' (Gen. 50:24)

When Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, were blessed by his father, Jacob

- Jacob told Joseph that God would be with him and bring him to the land of his fathers
- By expressing his wish that his mortal remains should be buried in the Promised Land
- Joseph was effectively encouraging the Hebrew people that they would be restored to the land
- And, in so far as he could be restored to the land, he wanted to go with them

Bible commentator, Baptist minister, Raymond Brown has this to say:

- First, when faith is tested, believe in God's word
- Second, when faith is tested, rejoice in God's power
- In the face of death, Joseph continued in faith – his last concern was the fulfilment of God's promise

What the patriarchs, Moses, the Israelites, King David, Elijah, the prophets and others experienced in part

- The people of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, will know fully
- For the earthly Promised Land (Canaan) is a sign of a greater Promised Land (heaven)

However, despite Joseph's words only appearing to be about his burial arrangements, more is implied

- The writer to the Hebrews (4:13) has already made reference to the 'Sabbath rest for the people of God'
- The origin of the Sabbath (or day of rest) goes back to the creation and the seventh day when God rested
- This doesn't mean that God was tired and needed a rest. He never tires, so what does 'rested' mean?
- Only that the work in which he had been engaged was complete – the work of creation was over
- The various elements of the Sabbath symbolized the Messiah' coming and permanent rest for his people
- this, of course, is not doing nothing – it is rest either from doing that which is futile (cf. Matt. 11:28)
- or from that which, though perhaps not unworthy in itself, cannot in any way make us right with God
- the ultimate work is the work of Jesus, who by his death on the cross has done all that needs to be done
- to make us right with God and who, bearing the blood of his sacrifice, has entered the heavenly sanctuary
- and who having done that, 'sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven' (Heb. 8:1)
- 'seated' implying that there is no more work to be done – our great high priest has finished his work
- Hence there is no more need for priests, or sacrifices or indeed sanctuaries (holy places)

Karla Faye Tucker was just 23 years old when in a frenzy, she brutally murdered two people with a pickaxe

- Not knowing they were gifts, she stole a Bible from a puppet ministry team in prison and was converted
- She wrote, 'the full and overwhelming weight and reality of what I had done hit me'
- Karla Faye did not deny the crime, but testified to the freedom and grace she received in Christ
- The governor of the prison said that she was a model prisoner and reformed woman
- Nevertheless, on 3 February 1998 Karla Faye Tucker was executed by lethal injection at Huntsville Prison
- Among her last words were these, 'Everybody has been so good to me. I love all of you very much.
- I am going to be face to face with Jesus now. I will see you all when you get there. I will wait for you.'
- It is a matter of being ready for God to come for you, relying on God coming for you,
- resting in God coming for you – and it is not morbid, for it is faith, hope, love, joy, peace in Jesus