

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2026, Term II.1

Death in Biblical Israel

1. The Origin of Death in Eden

Genesis 2:⁴ In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens,⁵ when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no vegetation of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground,⁶ but a stream would rise from the earth and water the whole face of the ground—⁷ then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.⁸ And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed.⁹ Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden,¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

Genesis 3:¹ Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’”² The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden,³ but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’”⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die,⁵ for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.⁷ Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

²² Then the LORD God said, “See, the humans have become like one of us, knowing good and evil, and now they might reach out their hands and take also from the tree of life and eat and live forever”—²³ therefore the LORD God sent them forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which they were taken.²⁴ He drove out the humans, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

Genesis 6:⁶ When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them,² the sons of God saw that they were fair, and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose.³ Then the LORD said, “My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred twenty years.”

2. Die in peace at a good old age, go to ancestors, be buried with ancestors

Genesis 15:¹³ Then the LORD said to Abram, ‘Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; ¹⁴but I will bring judgement on the nation that they serve, and afterwards they shall come out with great possessions. ¹⁵As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age.

Genesis 25:⁷ This is the length of Abraham’s life, one hundred and seventy-five years. ⁸Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. ⁹His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre, ¹⁰the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried, with his wife Sarah.

Genesis 49:²⁹ Then Jacob charged them, saying to them, ‘I am about to be gathered to my people. Bury me with my ancestors—in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite, ³⁰in the cave in the field at Machpelah, near Mamre, in the land of Canaan, in the field that Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite as a burial site. ³¹There Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried; there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried; and there I buried Leah—³²the field and the cave that is in it were purchased from the Hittites.’ ³³When Jacob ended his charge to his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed, breathed his last, and was gathered to his people.

2 Kings 22:¹⁸ But as to the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the LORD, thus shall you say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I will gather you to your ancestors, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace; your eyes shall not see all the disaster that I will bring on this place.’

Jeremiah 34:⁴ Yet hear the word of the LORD, O King Zedekiah of Judah! Thus says the Lord the LORD concerning you: You shall not die by the sword; ⁵you shall die in peace. And as spices were burned for your ancestors, the earlier kings who preceded you, so they shall burn spices for you and lament for you, saying, ‘Alas, lord!’ For I have spoken the word, says the LORD.

Deuteronomy 34:⁵ Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the LORD’s command. ⁶He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. ⁷Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigour had not abated. ⁸The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab for thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.

3. Die violently by the sword and remain unburied

1 Samuel 31:² The Philistines overtook Saul and his sons; and the Philistines killed Jonathan and Abinadab and Malchishua, the sons of Saul. ³The battle pressed hard upon Saul; the archers found him, and he was badly wounded by them. ⁴Then Saul said to his armour-bearer, ‘Draw your sword and thrust me through with it, so that these uncircumcised may not come and thrust me through, and make sport of me.’ But his armour-bearer was unwilling; for he was terrified. So Saul took his own sword and fell upon it. ⁵When his armour-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell upon his sword and died with him. ⁸The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the dead, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. ⁹They cut off his head, stripped off his armour, and sent messengers throughout the

land of the Philistines to carry the good news to the houses of their idols and to the people. ¹⁰They put his armour in the temple of Astarte; and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan.

2 Kings 9:³⁰ When Jehu came to Jezreel, Jezebel heard of it; she painted her eyes, and adorned her head, and looked out of the window. ³¹As Jehu entered the gate, she said, ‘Is it peace, Zimri, murderer of your master?’ ³²He looked up to the window and said, ‘Who is on my side? Who?’ Two or three eunuchs looked out at him. ³³He said, ‘Throw her down.’ So they threw her down; some of her blood spattered on the wall and on the horses, which trampled on her. ³⁴Then he went in and ate and drank; he said, ‘See to that cursed woman and bury her; for she is a king’s daughter.’ ³⁵But when they went to bury her, they found no more of her than the skull and the feet and the palms of her hands. ³⁶When they came back and told him, he said, ‘This is the word of the LORD, which he spoke by his servant Elijah the Tishbite, “In the territory of Jezreel the dogs shall eat the flesh of Jezebel; ³⁷the corpse of Jezebel shall be like dung on the field in the territory of Jezreel, so that no one can say, This is Jezebel.”’

Jeremiah 7:³⁰ For the people of Judah have done evil in my sight, says the LORD; they have set their abominations in the house that is called by my name, defiling it. ³³The corpses of this people will be food for the birds of the air, and for the animals of the earth; and no one will frighten them away.

4. Descend to Sheol in death

Genesis 37:³³ He recognized it, and said, ‘It is my son’s robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.’ ³⁴Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son for many days. ³⁵All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, ‘No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.’ Thus his father bewailed him.

1 Kings 2:¹ When David’s time to die drew near, he charged his son Solomon, saying: ²‘I am about to go the way of all the earth. ⁶Act therefore according to your wisdom, but do not let Joab’s grey head go down to Sheol in peace. ⁹Do not hold Shimei guiltless, for you are a wise man; you will know what you ought to do to him, and you must bring his grey head down with blood to Sheol.’ ¹⁰ Then David slept with his ancestors, and was buried in the city of David.

5. No remembrance or praise of God in Sheol

Job 10:¹⁸ ‘Why did you bring me forth from the womb?
 Would that I had died before any eye had seen me,
¹⁹ and were as though I had not been,
 carried from the womb to the grave.
²⁰ Are not the days of my life few?
 Let me alone, that I may find a little comfort
²¹ before I go, never to return,
 to the land of gloom and deep darkness,
²² the land of gloom and chaos,
 where light is like darkness.’

Ecclesiastes 9:¹⁰ Whatever your hand finds to do, do with all your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going. ⁵The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost. ⁶Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished; never again will they have any share in all that happens under the sun.

Psalm 30:⁸ To you, O LORD, I cried,
and to the LORD I made supplication:
⁹ ‘What profit is there in my death,
if I go down to the Pit?
Will the dust praise you?
Will it tell of your faithfulness?
¹⁰ Hear, O LORD, and be gracious to me!
O LORD, be my helper!’

Psalm 6:⁴ Turn, O LORD, save my life;
deliver me for the sake of your steadfast love.
⁵ For in death there is no remembrance of you;
in Sheol who can give you praise?

Isaiah 38:¹⁸ For Sheol cannot thank you,
death cannot praise you;
those who go down to the Pit cannot hope
for your faithfulness.
¹⁹ The living, the living, they thank you,
as I do this day;
fathers make known to children
your faithfulness.

6. No one escapes death or Sheol

Psalm 89:⁴⁶ How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever?
How long will your wrath burn like fire?
⁴⁷ Remember how short my time is—
for what vanity you have created all mortals!
⁴⁸ Who can live and never see death?
Who can escape the power of Sheol?

Psalm 39:⁴ ‘LORD, let me know my end,
and what is the measure of my days;
let me know how fleeting my life is.
⁵ You have made my days a few handbreadths,
and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight.
Surely everyone stands as a mere breath.
⁶ Surely everyone goes about like a shadow.

Psalm 90:³ You turn us back to dust,
 and say, ‘Turn back, you mortals.’
⁴ For a thousand years in your sight
 are like yesterday when it is past,
 or like a watch in the night.
⁵ You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
 like grass that is renewed in the morning;
⁶ in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
 in the evening it fades and withers.
¹⁰ The days of our life are seventy years,
 or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;
 even then their span is only toil and trouble;
 they are soon gone, and we fly away.
¹² So teach us to count our days
 that we may gain a wise heart.

7. The same fate awaits the good and the evil, the wise and the foolish

Psalm 49:¹⁰ When we look at the wise, they die;
 fool and dolt perish together
 and leave their wealth to others.
¹¹ Their graves are their homes for ever,
 their dwelling-places to all generations,
 though they named lands their own.
¹² Mortals cannot abide in their pomp;
 they are like the animals that perish.

Ecclesiastes 3:¹⁹ For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. ²⁰All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again.

Ecclesiastes 9:¹ Everything that confronts them ²is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. As are the good, so are the sinners; those who swear are like those who shun an oath. ³This is an evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone.