

## **The Final Blessing**

Genesis 49:1-28

The line between a blessing and a prophecy can sometimes become very blurry. Surely Genesis 49 is in the form of a blessing, for we have an elderly man quite literally lying upon his death bed, bestowing upon his twelve sons his final personal words of blessing. We're told that explicitly.

v.28

Each blessing was personal and appropriate. Each son received a blessing which fit his own particular life and character. And Jacob had solemnly called his family together for that occasion.

v.1-2

But this isn't just a blessing. Jacob is not just any ordinary father. He is Israel, the father of the nation of God's people Israel. And in this case, he is God's prophet, for the words of blessing he speaks are prophetic. They are predictive. So this chapter is one of prophetic blessing.

None of us could speak as Jacob did, for he speaks infallibly of the future. He speaks under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, words of prediction directly from God for the benefit of his people. To say it simply, this is inspired revelation! This is a prophecy of the future of the nation of Israel, a prophecy that prepares the way for the coming of Jesus Christ, a prophecy which speaks clearly of him.

So let's go through the list of the sons. Let me bunch some of the names together, so that you won't be overburdened trying to remember a list of twelve blessings. There is a pretty clear order as Jacob speaks. First, the sons of Leah, the woman he married

only as a consequence of Laban's deceitfulness. Then the sons of the two handmaids, Zilpah and Bilhah. Then, lastly, the two sons of his beloved wife Rachel. Let's begin with,

### **I. THE FIRST SONS OF LEAH.**

Naturally, he starts with the firstborn.

#### **A. Reuben.**

v.3-4

Such a contrast in those two verses, for verse 3 speaks of Reuben as a typical firstborn son. The firstborn son is the representation of the father's might and strength, a living testimony of his father's honor and power. That is as it should be.

But Reuben doesn't live up to his promise. His father's high hopes are dashed. His downfall is so clearly described by the sharp contrast of verse 4. His major fault is that he is as turbulent as the waters. Uncontrollable, boiling over. He was weak and unstable, given to lust. At his worst, you should remember his act of adultery and incest with Bilhah, his father's wife, recorded in Gen. 35:21. Nothing more is said of it then, but Jacob never forgot.

The firstborn had a privileged position, he deserved more honor and accepted more responsibility, then even more so than now. Reuben forfeits that position by his own sinfulness. And in the history of Israel, the tribe of Reuben never furnished a leader of any kind for the nation as a whole. Jacob's prophecy concerning Reuben has continued to be fulfilled ever since. Never has Reuben excelled in anything. His close brothers are likewise rebuked,

#### **B. Simeon and Levi.**

The main reference there is the account of Genesis 34, where Simeon and Levi brutally avenged the rape of their sister Dinah. With hot-tempered cruelty, they killed all the inhabitants of Shechem. And though they may have justified their actions on the basis of righteous retribution, no room is left for such a defense here in Jacob's rebuke. The implication is that the events in Shechem were but one example of their violent natures. That is their rebuke as you read verse 5 in the ESV. "...weapons of violence are their swords," which is much clearer than the NKJV.

For that reason, their weapons of violence, their instruments of cruelty, Jacob distanced himself from them. With great wisdom. For Jacob followed the wise counsel of,

Prov. 16:29 "A violent man entices his neighbor, And leads him in a way that is not good."

v.6a "Let not my soul enter their council; Let not my honor be united to their assembly."

The reason is well stated,

v.6b "For in their anger they slew a man, And in their self-will they hamstrung an ox.

"In their self-will," "as they pleased." So they had no restraints upon them, but considered themselves sovereign to choose to do whatever they wanted. But only God has such a sovereign will. Only God can do what he pleases, in any absolute way. All of us, all mankind, live under authority. All of us, all mankind, live us restraint. We are not free to do as we please. We must do and act as we are required to do. Such is the great danger of men given to violence.

Jacob speaks a prophetic curse unto them in no uncertain terms.

v.7

But what a contrast with,

### **C. Judah.**

Judah, along with Joseph, receives the richest of prophetic blessings. And Judah, most clearly of all, receives the prophecy of Jesus Christ, for Jesus was, of course, born in the line of Judah. Notice what Jacob says to him,

v.8-12

Judah would be the leader among the tribes. His brothers would praise him. He would defeat their enemies, and receive the honor from his brothers.

v.8

He would become as the lion, the king of beasts.

v.9

Not only would he be strong and courageous, but his land would be productive and fruitful. Vines would grow so abundantly that even the donkeys could be tied to them.

v.11a

His wine presses would be so full that whoever trod in them would appear to have actually bathed in the juice of the grapes, and his eyes would be fiery with wine. There would be an abundance of milk, so that even the people's teeth would become white with milk, corresponding to acceptable dental standards of our day.

v.11b-12

As one commentator puts it, “every line of these verses speaks of exuberant, intoxicating abundance. It is the golden age of the Coming One, whose universal rule was glimpsed in verse 10.” And that verse is, without question, the key verse. It is the high point of this chapter, the exalted climax of this great blessing.

v.10

The scepter is the symbol of a king’s authority. The presence of the scepter means the presence of a king and the security of his kingdom.

v.10

In other words, the tribe of Judah would be in leadership over Israel, ruling as king, until the ultimate king finally comes, he to whom it belongs. That final king is, of course, Jesus Christ. Judah would have a king on the throne until Jesus comes.

And indeed, David, in the line of Judah, reigned over Israel. And he himself was promised that his dynasty would not end. For his descendant would be the promised messiah. Jesus, the son of David, the lion of Judah. And so we read of Jesus in,

Rev. 5:1 “And I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a scroll written inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals. 2 Then I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seals?” 3 And no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll, or to look at it. 4 So I wept much, because no one was found worthy to open and read the scroll, or to look at it. 5 But one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals.”

Micah also seems to refer to this prophecy in,

Micah 5:2 “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Though you are

little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, From everlasting.” 3 Therefore He shall give them up, Until the time that she who is in labor has given birth; Then the remnant of His brethren Shall return to the children of Israel. 4 And He shall stand and feed His flock In the strength of the LORD, In the majesty of the name of the LORD His God; And they shall abide, For now He shall be great To the ends of the earth; 5 And this One shall be peace.”

That word “peace” is very similar to the Hebrew word here “to whom it belongs.” A word sometimes translated “Shiloh.” Jesus would come, and the obedience of the nations will be his. And until that time, until the time when Jesus’ work is finished and he returns in glory, the scepter will not depart from Judah.

The scepter has not yet departed from Judah. That is, the Lion of Judah still reigns on the throne of God, ruling the nations as a great and mighty king. In Psalm 2, God says, “I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill.” In that Psalm, he says to his King, the Messiah, “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule them with an iron scepter; you will dash them to pieces like pottery.” And the day will come when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord.

This is one of the greatest of all the OT prophecies of Jesus, the King whom God has placed on the throne. This is one of the high points of the whole OT. A prophetic blessing given by Jacob upon his deathbed. After Judah, he moves to,

## **II. THE LAST SONS OF LEAH AND THE SONS OF THE HANDMAIDS.**

Here, we have a sequence of the lessor important sons of

Jacob, and we'll move through them somewhat quickly. The last two sons of Leah were born later, after the handmaids bore their children. In the overall scheme of things, they are of lessor importance, but they are certainly not overlooked. Those two sons are,

#### **A. Zebulun and Issachar.**

v.13-15

There isn't too much here, but there is still continued prophecy. Zebulun would live near the seashore, or toward the shore, though not necessarily at it. His land and people would become a great haven for ships, extending toward the great seaport of Sidon. Geographically, Zebulun is usually assumed to be between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea, a region in which much of Christ's public ministry took place. And very early in his ministry, Matthew's gospel records the words of Jesus, when he quotes from the prophet Isaiah,

Isa. 9:1 "Nevertheless the gloom will not be upon her who is distressed, As when at first He lightly esteemed The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, And afterward more heavily oppressed her, By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, In Galilee of the Gentiles. 2 The people who walked in darkness Have seen a great light; Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, Upon them a light has shined."

Then Issachar is described more personally, seeming a strong man, but rather lazy and uninspired, lacking any noble ambition. He would enjoy the good land assigned him but would not strive for it, too willing to trade even his own freedom for the material things of life.

v.14-15

Next come the four sons of the handmaids,

#### **B. Dan, Gad, Asher and Naphtali.**

They are not listed in order, with Zilpah's two sons, Gad and Asher, being listed in between the two sons of Bilhah, Dan and Naphtali. It would seem likely that Jacob addresses them in the order in which they happened to be standing around the bedside. As a whole, they are rather unimportant. In fact, in the case of Zebulun and Issachar, nothing specific is mentioned about any of them in the narratives of Genesis, so that the only clues to their individual characters are here in Jacob's prophecies.

There is encouragement to them, however. They would share in the inheritance. Specifically mentioned to Dan is the promise,  
v.16

But then something horrible is mentioned about Dan, as he is given the identification of a serpent, no doubt a reference to the violence and idolatry which came to Israel through Dan.  
v.17

From Judges 18:30-31, we know that it was the Danites who introduced idolatry into the land of Israel on a regular official basis. And it was also in Dan that Jeroboam, who led the rebellion that culminated in the divided kingdom, set up one of his two golden calves. It may be that this is why Dan is not listed among the tribes in Revelation 7.

Such a prophecy causes Jacob to utter an astounding wish.  
v.18

The Hebrew word for "salvation" is the word yeshua, which in Greek becomes the personal name, Jesus. "Salvation" could also be translated "deliverance." This is the first direct use of that word in the Bible. And of course, Jacob's wish would come, as he looked for it by faith.

Next is Gad.

v.19

At least there is given a promise of survival. Gad's realm was east of the Jordan, on the edge of the kingdom of the Ammonites and other desert peoples, and thus was especially open to attack. However, the Gadites were well able to fight.

His brother Asher was to have and enjoy rich food and royal delicacies.

v.20

As it would happen, the tribe eventually failed to take possession of the region, and the tribe soon became insignificant, possibly deteriorating because of their love of ease and proximity to the Phoenicians.

Naphtali, the brother of Dan, is described as "a doe set free." That is, his descendants would be known for swiftness, as warriors fleet of foot. They would also be known as composers of eloquent speech and beautiful literature, "beautiful words."

v.21

As I pass over those brothers quickly, note that they lived with little or no reference to God. Note that Jacob has nothing to say about their spiritual lives. When it came to their relationship with God, they drifted. And thus they faded away into insignificance. Such a lesson for us, a lesson of what will become of those who live in the absence of God. Ultimately, nothing will come of them.

Finally, Jacob gets to

### **III. THE SONS OF RACHEL.**

Joseph and Benjamin. Let me start with Benjamin just so I

can end with Joseph.

#### **A. Benjamin.**

v.27

This seems like a strange forecast for a son whom Jacob specially loved. It was both a promise and a warning. The tribe of Benjamin would be bold and strong, successful in warfare, but at the same time it might become cruel and voracious. Both attributes were later evident in the tribe, as is demonstrated by the strange story in Judges 20, which almost cost the Benjaminites their very identity as one of the twelve tribes. Moreover, the first king of Israel was Saul, a Benjaminite, whose character quite precisely corresponded to Jacob's prophecy. Then, finally,

#### **B. Joseph.**

Warm and eloquent words are reserved for this godly seed, through whom the whole family had been so abundantly blessed. The well-watered, far-spreading fruit tree delightfully pictures Joseph's depth of character and width of influence.

v.22

He was as well, surely beset by enemy soldiers who had tried to destroy him as a hated foe.

v.23

Nevertheless, God was his strength.

v.24

Surely those words describe what had already happened to Joseph, in his triumph over the enmity of his brothers, but it was also prophetic of the experience of Joseph's descendants. Notice how God is described here. The Mighty God of Jacob. The

Strong One. That Hebrew word Shaddai, so often in the Bible used as a name for God. The Strong One who can do anything.

Similarly, he is called the Stone of Israel, the rock of Israel, the Mighty Fortress upon which we can firmly stand. And God is here explicitly called, The Shepherd. The one who would nourish and protect the flock of his people.

Such great and magnificent blessings would come, because of God's sovereign and omnipotent goodness.

v.25

Blessings would come in greater abundance than words can describe. And Joseph is honored above his brothers with such graceful eloquence.

v.26

And again, the conclusion to Jacob's blessings,  
v.28

So how shall I end? The same way I often end. With a call to worship. A call to worship the God who blesses us with the richness of the blessings we see here promised particularly to Judah and Joseph. The promise of the King, the Lion of Judah, the Messiah who would come and who still now reigns at the right hand of God the Father.

And the promise of the shepherd of Israel, the good shepherd who would come and lay down his life for the sheep. So let me end by reading Psalm 80, a Psalm which speaks of these promises and blessings, a Psalm of worship to the God who grants them.

Psalm 80:1 "Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, You who lead

Joseph like a flock; You who dwell between the cherubim, shine forth! 2 Before Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh, Stir up Your strength, And come and save us! 3 Restore us, O God; Cause Your face to shine, And we shall be saved! 4 O LORD God of hosts, How long will You be angry Against the prayer of Your people? 5 You have fed them with the bread of tears, And given them tears to drink in great measure. 6 You have made us a strife to our neighbors, And our enemies laugh among themselves. 7 Restore us, O God of hosts; Cause Your face to shine, And we shall be saved! 8 You have brought a vine out of Egypt; You have cast out the nations, and planted it. 9 You prepared room for it, And caused it to take deep root, And it filled the land. 10 The hills were covered with its shadow, And the mighty cedars with its boughs. 11 She sent out her boughs to the Sea, And her branches to the River. 12 Why have You broken down her hedges, So that all who pass by the way pluck her fruit? 13 The boar out of the woods uproots it, And the wild beast of the field devours it. 14 Return, we beseech You, O God of hosts; Look down from heaven and see, And visit this vine 15 And the vineyard which Your right hand has planted, And the branch that You made strong for Yourself. 16 It is burned with fire, it is cut down; They perish at the rebuke of Your countenance. 17 Let Your hand be upon the man of Your right hand, Upon the son of man whom You made strong for Yourself. 18 Then we will not turn back from You; Revive us, and we will call upon Your name. 19 Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; Cause Your face to shine, And we shall be saved!"

So should we continue to pray, with great hope, "Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; Cause Your face to shine, And we shall be saved!"