



Israel's Last Words to His Sons Genesis 49:1-28

Introduction

Jacob, whose name God had changed to Israel, lived with his family in the fertile land of Goshen and was cared for by his beloved son, Joseph, for the last seventeen years of his life. His prior life had been filled with suffering, sorrow and sin, but he had finally surrender to the sovereignty of God. Jacob's life is a comfort and great encouragement to those who love God as it shows His persistent love, protection and faithfulness to His promises.

As Jacob anticipated the end of his life, he called his twelve sons together to bestow blessings upon them. These blessings were based upon the character of each son and looked ahead to the future fulfillment of the potential of each one. The words of Jacob contain not only blessings, but curses, judgments and promises as well.

"The Spirit of God revealed to the dying patriarch, Israel, the future history of his seed, so that he discovered in the character of his sons the future development of the tribes proceeding from them, and with prophetic clearness assigned to each of them its position and importance in the nation into which they were to expand in the promised inheritance" (Keil and Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament).

Jacob's blessing marks the end of the patriarchal era and the beginning of the development of the nation of Israel, giving a glimpse into the future of the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

OUTLINE of GENESIS 49:1-28

I. Summoning the Sons - Genesis 49:1-2

II. Blessing the Twelve Tribes of Israel - Genesis 49:3-28

I. Summoning the Sons - Genesis 49:1-2

Jacob called his twelve sons to "*gather*", "*hear*" and "*listen*" to his last words about what would happen to them and their descendants in the last days.

A. "*The Last Days*" - Genesis 49:1

In the context of Jacob's blessings, "*the last days*" include the history of Israel from the conquest and distribution of the land of Canaan to the reign of the Messiah.

B. "*Sons of Jacob Listen to Israel Your Father*" - Genesis 49:2

The nation which emerged from those assembled for the blessing was later known as both Jacob and Israel, as in Genesis 49:7b. (This is also evident in Balaam's prophecies in Numbers 23 and frequently in the Psalms). Jacob was the patriarch's natural name given at birth. Israel was the name given by God and is connected with his spiritual struggles and victories.

The patriarch's blessings are expressed as poetry which extols the sovereignty of God. It is filled with metaphor, wordplay and parallelism (repeating the same thought in two different ways, for example: "*Reuben, you are my firstborn, / My might and the beginning of my strength*" (49:3).

II. Blessing the Twelve Tribes of Israel - Genesis 49:3-28

The blessings of the sons are arranged according to their mothers: Leah's six sons in verses 3-15, the handmaids' four sons in verses 16-21 and Rachel's two sons in verses 22-27,

A. The Sons of Leah - Genesis 49:3-15

1. Reuben - 49:3-4

Jacob praised Reuben as his "*firstborn*", "*the beginning of his strength*". Reuben possessed excellence, but would not excel because of his instability. "*Unstable as water*" presents a word picture of boiling water changing into steam. Reuben lost his birthright because he "*went up to (his) father's bed*" (Genesis 35:22). His instability was due to sin. He was morally unstable and unable to do what was right. According to the custom of the time, a father could not arbitrarily revoke the birthright of the firstborn. However, in cases of serious sexual offense (such as Reuben's) against the family, it was allowed.

Whatever "*dignity*" and "*power*" Reuben might have had were lost because of his sin. Scripture records no major accomplishments by his tribe nor any important leaders such as prophets, kings, judges or military men.

2. Simeon and Levi - 49:5-7

These "*brothers*", Jacob's second and third sons, are named together, not only as brothers by blood but

also brothers in character. They had demonstrated their “*cruelty*” and fierce “*anger*” when they vengefully slaughtered the men of Shechem (Genesis 34:25-26). They committed violence in the name of moral righteousness, doing evil in the name of good.

Both tribes were divided and scattered in the Promised Land as foretold. When Moses took his second census (Numbers 26), Simeon was the smallest tribe. Simeon was not even mentioned in Moses’ final blessing in Deuteronomy 33 and the tribe’s inheritance in the Promised Land was disintegrated within the tribe of Judah (Joshua 19:1-9).

Levi received no inheritance in the land, but was scattered in cities among the other tribes. However, the Levites received a special blessing by God’s grace and because they had stood with Moses against the worship of the golden calf (Exodus 32:26). God appointed the Levites to the priesthood of Israel and the service of the tabernacle (Numbers 3:5-13 & 18:6-7). They became a spiritual sprinkling throughout the land.

3. Judah - 49:8-12

Judah was Jacob's fourth son, but received the birthright due to the sin of his three older brothers. Judah's name means “praise” and he was to possess a lion-like dominance over his brothers who would “*bow down before you*”. These words concerning Judah were fulfilled through the reign of the kings of Israel. David, Solomon and their dynasty came from the tribe of Judah, as did the Messiah, “*the Lion of the tribe of Judah*” (Revelation 5:5).

“*The scepter*” (verse 10) was a symbol of royal command and the right to rule. Judah would rule among the tribes “*until Shiloh comes*”. Both Jewish and Christian scholars see this as a remarkable prophecy of the coming of the Messiah. The Jewish Targums give the paraphrase, “until the time when the King Messiah comes to whom it belongeth.” Christian scholars connect verse ten with similar wording found in Ezekiel 21:27, “*until He comes whose right it is*”: words addressed to the last king of Judah whose throne would be “*established forever*”, according to God’s promise to David (2 Samuel 7:13-14). With these things in mind, it seems that Jacob's words in Genesis 49:10 foretell that Judah would maintain authority among the tribes until the coming of the rightful ruler, the Messiah, to whom all people would gather in obedience.

The reign of “*Shiloh*”, or Messiah, is portrayed in verse eleven as a time of such abundance that donkeys will be tethered to choice vines with no concern of their eating the produce. Wine, the symbol of prosperity and blessing, will be as abundant as water and people will glow with good health. Verse twelve may refer to

the King (Messiah) Himself having eyes darker than wine and teeth whiter than milk (verse 12), a picture of strength and power.

Application

Judah had sinned with (and against) Tamar, his daughter-in-law (Genesis 38). But that sin was not mentioned in Jacob’s description of Judah’s character. Judah had recognized that he had sinned. He had repented, turned from his sin and exercised his power to do what was right. Consequently, unlike his three elder brothers, Judah’s sin was not remembered in the blessing. Just as the prophet Micah would write later, God “*delights in mercy*”, He will “*have compassion on us, and will subdue all our iniquities*” and all our sins will be cast “*into the depths of the sea*” (Micah 7:19).

We all have sins which we wish did not mar our lives. Judah’s story is a testimony to the grace and mercy of God who promises, “*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:9). What sin do you need to confess today so that it may be forgotten? If, like Judah, you confess and repent of your sin, you may be certain that it is cast into the depths of the sea and remembered no more! See also 2 Corinthians 7:10.

5. Zebulun - 49:13

Zebulun’s territory in the Promised Land was located on a major caravan route between the Mediterranean Sea and the Sea of Galilee (“*by the haven of the sea*”). It is interesting that the largest city and only natural harbor in northern Israel today is Haifa, located directly west of the territory which was allotted to Zebulun. The word Haifa may come from the Hebrew root “hafa” meaning “to cover or shield”, thus designating Haifa as a “*haven of the sea*”.

6. Issachar - 49:14-15

Issachar was described as a “*strong donkey*”. The tribe succumbed to the easy life and found its “*resting place*” (NASB) on the “*pleasant*” plain of Esdraelon where they were open to raids by invading armies. However, in the days of the Judges, under the leadership of Deborah and Barak, the tribe of Issachar fought valiantly to obtain forty years of peace in their territory (Judges 5).

B. The Sons of the Handmaids - Genesis 49:13-21

1. Dan - 49:16-17

Dan’s name means “judge” and Jacob prophesied that he would “*judge his people*”. Although Samson, who was from the tribe of Dan, judged Israel for twenty years

(Judges 13:2-3, 24 and 16:31), Dan became a “*serpent*” and a “*viper*” by leading Israel into idolatry (Judges 18). Curiously, Dan is not mentioned in the list of the tribes of Israel recorded in Revelation 7:5-8.

Note on Genesis 49:18

Genesis 49:18 is not a part of Jacob’s blessings but an exclamatory interjection and an earnest appeal for God’s salvation. “Jacob’s heartfelt aside in verse 18 is enigmatic: it could arise from a father’s prayer, like Abraham’s for Ishmael (Genesis 17:18), or possibly from the sudden memory of his own treachery, long renounced, called up by the acts described and the word “*heel*” associated with his own name” (Derek Kidner, Genesis).

2. Gad - 49:19

The name “*Gad*” means “attack”, and in the Hebrew, this verse consists of a play on the name Gad, using the word “attack” three times. Gad will be “attacked” by a raid of “attackers”, but he will “attack”. The tribe of Gad settled to the east of the Jordan River where attacks by local tribes were quite common.

Application

Jacob foretold that in spite of the attacks, Gad would “triumph at last”. This provokes thoughts of the promise of the Christian life. In 2 Corinthians 2:14, the apostle Paul gave thanks “to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place.” As believers, we suffer attacks in this world and must wrestle “against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). But we have the promise that through Christ we will **triumph** and be witnesses for him in this world. This will be accomplished as we trust in Him and let Him lead.

3. Asher - 49:20

Asher would be rich. Settling on the lowlands of Mount Carmel by the Mediterranean Sea, this tribe enjoyed some of the most fruitful soil in the Promised Land.

4. Naphtali - 49:21

“A deer let loose” refers to Naphtali’s superior military ability, “on the heights of the battlefield” (Judges 5:18). “Beautiful words” are evident in the song of Deborah and Barak, the son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali (Judges 4 and 5).

Naphtali settled in a portion of the Promised Land north and west of the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan

River. Most of Jesus’ Galilean ministry took place in this area. Matthew 4:12-17 records that after Jesus heard that John the Baptist was in prison, “*He departed to Galilee. And leaving Nazareth, He came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying:*

*“The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,
By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles:
The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light,
And upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death
Light has dawned” (Isaiah 9:1-2)*
*From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, Repent,
for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*

Perhaps these “beautiful words” of our Savior, first spoken in the land of the inheritance of Naphtali, were in the mind of God as the prophecy was spoken.

C. The Sons of Rachel - Genesis 29:22-27

1. Joseph - 49:22-26

Joseph, described as a “fruitful bough”, received an especially abundant double blessing which was applicable to his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh,

Verses 23 and 24 seem to tell the story of Joseph’s life. His brothers “bitterly grieved” him and “hated him” but he “remained in strength”, trusting in God, and he was “made strong by the hands of the Mighty God of Jacob”. Joseph trusted God and bore much fruit.

In his blessing upon Joseph, Jacob reflected upon the sovereignty of God as “the Mighty God of Jacob the Shepherd the Stone of Israel the God of your father who will help you the Almighty who will bless you”. The blessings conferred included “blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep which lies beneath, blessings of the breast and the womb and the blessings of your father”. Looking back on his life, Jacob saw his own blessings as excelling the blessings of his ancestors “up to the utmost bound of the everlasting hills.” And these blessings he proclaimed “shall be on the head of Joseph”.

2. Benjamin - 49:27

Benjamin was the youngest son and the smallest tribe. Jacob depicted him as a wolf, always ready to devour his prey. Judges 20:15-16 mentions twenty-six thousand men of Benjamin who “drew the sword” along with “seven hundred select men who were left-handed; every one could sling a stone at a hair’s breadth and

not miss.” Ehud, the courageous deliverer of Judges 3:15-31, gave Israel rest from their enemies for eighty years. Other references to valiant men from the tribe of Benjamin may be found in I Chronicles 8:40 & 12:2 and 2 Chronicles 14:8 & 17:17. Both king Saul and Saul (Paul), the apostle, were also from the tribe of Benjamin.

Application

Jacob’s blessing of his sons was predominantly based upon the character of each and how that would influence each one’s individual tribe in the future. It has been said that character makes the man, but as W. H. Griffith Thomas points out in his devotional commentary, Genesis, “It is equally true that Christ makes the Character.” Moral and spiritual character requires much care and effort, but as the apostle Paul reminds us, “*Our sufficiency is of God*” (2 Corinthians 3:5).

How is your character influencing your children and others around you? How can you rely more upon the Spirit of Christ within you to direct your will into alignment with the will of God? In what ways will you humbly submit your life to God to be molded into the image of His Son?

D. Summary Verse - Genesis 49:28

These have been the blessings upon the twelve tribes of Israel. The blessings were spoken by their father, Jacob (Israel) and each blessing given was appropriate to the individual who received it. In addition to the blessings mentioned in chapter 49, all of the tribes were blessed with the privilege of living under the promises made to their fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. These were the blessings which came with being in the family of God’s chosen people.

As believers, it is true that God blesses each of us

individually. But we also have “family” blessings which are bestowed upon all who are a part of the family of God. The apostle Paul laid these out for us in Ephesians 1:1-14. Just like the faithful saints at Ephesus to whom Paul wrote, every faithful believer today is blessed “*with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.*” We have been chosen, predestined and adopted as children of God by Christ Jesus Himself. We are accepted in Christ, redeemed by His blood and forgiven according to the riches of His grace. God has made known to us the mystery of His will. He has given us an inheritance and sealed us with the Holy Spirit of promise so that we may be sure that all these promised blessings will be fulfilled “*to the praise of His glory.*”

Application

Even when your earthly circumstances are discouraging (as Joseph’s and Jacob’s often were) and you may not feel “blessed”, remember that your spiritual blessings are even more real than the worldly blessings which you may crave. Furthermore, your spiritual blessings cannot be shaken or taken away. Your spiritual blessings are forever. Would you commit to memorize the first fourteen verses of Ephesians Chapter One? Then every time you feel down or discouraged, recite your spiritual blessings to yourself and be lifted to know the “*exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe*” (Ephesians 1:19). Is not Joseph your grand example of this very thing?