

The Lion's Cub and the King

- Genesis 49:1-12
- You will have noticed as Jenell read that Jacob has called his sons together a final time for a blessing over each one. Look at the verbs he uses. Gather. Assemble. Listen. Sons of Jacob, listen. Don't miss this. He says it again: Listen. Listen to Israel your father. What Jacob will speak to his sons, each in turn, will have two characteristics. On the one hand, his words are based on their previous actions and his observation of their character. On the other hand, he goes beyond that into prophecy, in some cases to warn of consequences for sins passed on from generation to generation. Or in others, to give encouragement and strength to carry on, so they might finish well. Some of you who have run longer races have no doubt seen people who were NOT running holding up signs as you passed by to, ummm, encourage you. Like these. Or the one at a marathon that said, "The Kenyans finished an hour ago." Some signs are meant to be funny, but just are not. When I was in the most pain of a long race, I passed a guy standing on the side of the road whose sign read, "Is that all you've got?" The most encouraging sign I read said, "You are exactly .3 miles from the finish line." That was a sight for sore legs. The only sign that was better than that was the one I ran under that said, "Finish." Let's look at the signs Jacob holds up in this passage for Reuben, Simeon and Levi, serious signs of sadness and rebuke and finally for Judah, encouraging signs of hope and victory.
- **Reuben (verses 3-4)**
- Jacob starts with praise for his firstborn, but it is praise for what was supposed to be. Reuben, you are my might, my strength, first in dignity and first in power. But what an ignominious end to such a promising beginning! Derek Kidner wrote, "It would be hard to find a more withering contrast between a man and his calling." Reuben, you are unstable as water, Jacob says, and will no longer have the rights of a firstborn. Why? What happened? You remember the story we looked at in chapter 35. Reuben, in what was possibly a power play to usurp his father's leadership of the family, spent time with Bilhah, one of Jacob's wives and Rachel's servant, right after Rachel had died. Though Moses did not comment on it in chapter 35, it is clear that this sin was not overlooked by Jacob or by God. The leadership that could have been Reuben's was lost because of his sinful actions. Again Kidner writes, "Reuben was a man of ungoverned impulse." If you follow the people who came from Reuben down the Old Testament trail, you will see failure of his people to act when Deborah and Barak led the armies against Sisera. Judges 5 records this sentence twice: "Among the clans of Reuben there were great searchings of heart." They were indecisive about helping in the fight to save Israel, and judgment followed. I've heard it said that the roads are littered with flat squirrels that could not make a decision. No prophet, judge, or king that we know of came from the tribe of Reuben. That leads to...
- **Simeon and Levi (verses 5-7)**
- At least Reuben's oracle started with praise for being the firstborn. Simeon and Levi were given none. Why are these sons mentioned together? Jacob makes it clear in his words that these two acted together to commit perhaps one of the most heinous sins of all the sons of Israel. You remember the story from chapter 34. Dinah, sister to the 12, had been defiled by Shechem and then taken into his house. When Simeon and Levi found out, they schemed to pay back Shechem and the whole city of Shechem, of which his father Hamor was the leader. They deceived the men of the city to believe that if they would be circumcised, from the youngest to the oldest, then that would make them acceptable to the sons of Jacob and they would gladly give their daughters to them for marriage, including Dinah to Shechem. On the third day after the men of Shechem had been circumcised, Simeon and Levi went into the city and killed every male there. They justified the massacre to their father as vengeance for Dinah being treated like a prostitute by Shechem. Jacob makes no comment then, and neither does Moses in telling the story. But years later, on his deathbed, Jacob makes his judgment clear, and they are cursed because of their uncontrolled anger and acts of vengeance. Allen Ross sums it up: "Anarchy and

violence are incompatible with spiritual leadership.” Simeon’s tribe will be later be swallowed up partly into Judah’s tribe, and partly into northern tribes. In fact, Simeon’s tribe shrunk during the wilderness wanderings, instead of growing. According to Numbers 1 and 26, they were the third largest tribe when they left Egypt and the smallest tribe, having lost 63% of their population 35 years later. Levi will also be scattered but will be given an “honorable dispersion as the priestly tribe.” (Ross) That leads us to...

- **Judah (verses 8-12)**

- How many remember that Judah was not a good man early on? He orchestrated the sale of his brother Joseph to the Ismaelites. Even worse, perhaps, was how he treated his daughter-in-law, Tamar. But we have seen God show his grace to all of the sons of Jacob, none receiving and acting on that grace more than Judah and Joseph, the latter in the text for next week. These two brothers, Joseph and Judah, have blessings that are much longer and eloquent than any of the others. But the prophecy for Judah will far outdistance that of Joseph. Look at the ways Jacob describes Judah.
- First, in verse 8 he says, “Your brothers will praise you.” This of course is a play on Judah’s name, which literally means, “He will be praised.” You remember when Leah was trying to win Jacob’s heart and had three sons, Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, and each time she saw no change in Jacob’s love for her. Finally she has a fourth son and names him Judah and says, “This time I will praise the Lord.” Jacob says to Judah that his brothers will praise him and even bow down to him, because he will triumph over his enemies. We know that prophecy will first be seen in David, who came from Judah, as he will become the king who conquers the enemies of Israel and is a man after God’s own heart. But the final and greatest king from the tribe of Judah will far exceed David’s life and legacy.
- Second, in verse 9 he says, “Judah is a lion’s cub.” Judah is mighty. You know that the Spirit of God is speaking through Jacob here! Judah is the lion of the tribes. Balaam will use this imagery when prophesying about Israel in Numbers. “God brings him out of Egypt and is for him like the horns of the wild ox; he shall eat up the nations, his adversaries, and shall break their bones in pieces and pierce them through with his arrows. He crouched, he lay down like a lion and like a lioness; who will rouse him up? Blessed are those who bless you and cursed are those who curse you.” (Numbers 24:8-9) The lion cub seizes its prey, brings it back to the den, and crouches over it to devour it. Judah will be mighty in battle, and again, the king in the Old Testament who best fits that image is David. If Judah is the lion of the tribes, who is the lion of the tribe of Judah? Yes, Jesus. Revelation 5:5, “And one of the elders said to me, ‘Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.’” But, what is even more powerful than a lion? A lamb. Derek Kidner writes, “The noblest son of the tribe of Judah is fitly styled the Lion of that tribe, but the New Testament sees him displaying a finer strength than that of a lion’s. ‘I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain...’” (Rev. 5:6) Yes! Jesus’ greatest act was to lay down his life.
- Third, in verse 10 he says, “The scepter shall not depart from Judah.” Though Ephraim took the birthright that belonged to Reuben, God chose Judah to carry the greatest blessing. Asaph wrote in Psalm 78, “He (God) rejected the tent of Joseph; he did not choose the tribe of Ephraim, but he chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which he loves. He built his sanctuary like the high heavens, like the earth, which he has founded forever. He chose David his servant and took him from the sheepfolds; from following the nursing ewes he brought him to shepherd Jacob his people, Israel his inheritance.”
- Again we see it. David was Judah’s king, but Jesus is the King of kings. The prophecy for Judah is for the time to come in the establishment of Israel as a nation. The people will have their earthly king through Judah until the time that an earthly king is no longer needed or wanted. It is believed that Ezekiel says this to the last king of Judah, Zedekiah, a puppet king put in place by the Babylonians: “Thus says the Lord God: Remove the turban and take off the crown. Things shall not remain as they are. Exalt that which is low, and bring low that which is exalted.” (Ezekiel 21:26) In other words, until the one to whom the crown belongs appears, the King of kings, Israel will have no king.

- Finally, this prophecy over Judah goes beyond the earthly ministry of Jesus to the time of his return! The language used reminds us of the first miracle Jesus performed, at a wedding in Cana. Remember? The wedding party had run out of wine and Jesus' mother asked him to do something about it. Jesus said, "What does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." But out of love for his mother and to save the wedding party from disgrace, he turns more than 120 gallons of water into wine! The finest wine anyone that day had ever tasted. What happened when his hour did come? Gloria in excelsis deo, we see Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey's colt. We see him washing his garments in the wine of his blood, as Jacob prophesies here. We see the King become the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. **Then**, we see his future return, that glorious day we long for. The imagery of wine and milk are used to describe the age that will never end and be marked by abundance and joy and peace and the glory of God. That's what we long for. That's why Jesus died and was raised again for our sake, that we might be with him forever. Let's pray.
- Prayer
- Greet One Another