
Blessing and Destiny

Genesis 49

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In our culture, a last will and testament is usually read after the person dies and is buried. The stories of surprises at their reading are legendary. My favorite is, "Being of sound mind and body, I spent it all." Warren Buffet and Bill Gates are in the enviable position of being able to give most of their fortunes away and still leave their children wealth beyond imagining. Yet, to their very great credit, they have measured out in their own lifetimes for the good of their heirs and many others.

What we will be reading today is the last will and testament of Jacob, the Patriarch. But it is being given, not through the sealed writing in a lawyer's office, but directly from the person in the final hours of life. Jacob's impending death is not unexpected. While still able, he prepares and delivers his last will and testament.

Two major ideas characterize this will and testament: it is a bequest and a blessing. It is the giving of an inheritance. It is the giving of a blessing. Through it, prophecy is being made. It is prophetic poetry or what would later become known as an oracle. The choices these brothers have made and the character those choices flow from will have dramatic impact on the destiny of their descendants. The blessing pouring through the prism of their character and their choices emerges as a brilliant rainbow of variegated results.

49 Then Jacob called his sons and said, "Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you what shall happen to you in days to come. ² "Assemble and listen, O sons of Jacob, listen to Israel your father.

As Jacob lay on his death bed, he had summoned his son, Joseph. He had made him swear to take his body back to Canaan and bury him there. He had then blessed Joseph's two sons, Ephraim, and Manasseh. In that blessing he had given Joseph a double portion by adopting Ephraim and Manasseh as his own. Now it is time to gather the family. Listen to how Kent Hughes described this scene.

Confined to his bed, old Jacob had become accustomed to a new angle of sight, looking at his tent's ceiling and the distorted faces that swam in and out of his fading vision overhead, peering down at him like big, gawking fish. Now his twelve sons all gathered above him, walleyed and expectant. There were Leah's six oldest: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, and Issachar. There were the sons of Rachel's handmaid Bilhah: Dan and Naphtali. There were the sons of Leah's handmaid Zilpah: Gad and Asher. And there were his beloved Rachel's late-in-life sons: Joseph, in his regal attire, and Benjamin, the youngest. All of this swam undulating before Jacob's fading eyes. (*Genesis*, Hughes, p. 549)

Then, rising up, he speaks the words of blessing and destiny.

The Disqualified (v.1-7)

All three of these brothers are disqualified by spiritual impatience, by not being willing to wait on God. Their hearts wanted something so badly, they craved for it and were mastered by it causing them to act sinfully. Those sinful choices had long-reaching affect beyond themselves.

By Impatience and Immorality (v.3-4)

Reuben is the first born of Jacob.

³ “Reuben, you are my firstborn,
my might, and the firstfruits of my strength,
preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power.
⁴ Unstable as water, you shall not have preeminence,
because you went up to your father’s bed;
then you defiled it—he went up to my couch!

Reuben should have the place of preeminence. The mantle of family, tribal and national leadership should have been transferred to his shoulders. But it will not. He will not receive the first portion, the double inheritance.

Why? Because Reuben is unstable. He will not provide the leadership that will be needed. Just as he did in all of the brother’s difficulties with Joseph, both at home and in Egypt, he waffled. But then, his greater condemnation is in his taking advantage of his father by bedding his concubine in a grab for power and position. In other words, instead of being willing to wait for God’s timing in becoming the tribal patriarch, he craved that place and position so much that he committed immorality. In a shocking display and grab for power, he showed his instability, his impatience, and his immorality.

How often we are prone to something like this. We are driven by a desire, a craving, a legitimate want that becomes a bad master. We sin to get what we want. And in the very reaching out to get it we disqualify ourselves from attaining it or keeping it.

By Anger and Vengeance (v.5-7)

The next in line to lead the family would be Simeon.

⁵ “Simeon and Levi are brothers;
weapons of violence are their swords.
⁶ Let my soul come not into their council;
O my glory, be not joined to their company.
For in their anger they killed men,
and in their willfulness they hamstringed oxen.
⁷ Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce,
and their wrath, for it is cruel!
I will divide them in Jacob
and scatter them in Israel.

Maybe hope sprang up in Simeon’s heart when he heard the disqualification of Reuben. But, more likely, he and Levi looked at one another with and hung their heads. They had come under the immediate and unending censure of their father. And rightly so. They had no sense for a rich and patient mix of mercy and justice. When their sister had been forcibly taken, they had responded with cruel and overreaching vengeance. They did so because they were violent men in their hearts. They had no regard for justice of God, His limits on what can be done and His patience for when it can be done.

So, Jacob disqualifies them as well. The double blessing and familial leadership will not pass to either of them. They will become scattered within Israel. We are reminded again about the justice of God. We must be willing to be patient and wait for God to move. We must leave room for God's wrath. We can cry out to God for Him to act while we, aware of His mercy to us, wait for Him to act.

Now this raises an important question: how can the disqualification of these three brothers be a blessing? It sounds more like a curse. Ah, here is an important theme in Genesis and throughout the whole Bible. Sin turns many opportunities for blessing into obstacles of judgment. But through the very application of the judgment, blessing will eventually come. Levi will not inherit its own land. Yet, they will become the priests to the Lord. They will mediate the blessing of access to God through the Old Covenant. The shadows of the cross lie across the death bed of Jacob. For in becoming a curse for us, bearing the curse of the Law and the penalty for our sin, Jesus has secured our reconciliation. At the cross, He mediates the blessing of access to God through the New Covenant.

The Exalted (v.8-12)

Now Jacob turns to the one to whom the leadership will be given.

- ⁸ "Judah, your brothers shall praise you;
your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies;
your father's sons shall bow down before you.
⁹ Judah is a lion's cub;
from the prey, my son, you have gone up.
He stooped down; he crouched as a lion
and as a lioness; who dares rouse him?
¹⁰ The scepter shall not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
until tribute comes to him;
and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.
¹¹ Binding his foal to the vine
and his donkey's colt to the choice vine,
he has washed his garments in wine
and his vesture in the blood of grapes.
¹² His eyes are darker than wine,
and his teeth whiter than milk.

Judah is exalted as the monarchical tribe. This elevation brings a deep sense of humbleness as well as satisfaction. His journey has been from sordid sin through sacrificial repentance arriving at sovereign blessedness. Now he is humbled before his father and his God and is elevated in sight of all.

In his Praise (v.8)

His brothers shall do what Judah's name means – they shall praise him. They will honor him as he defends them and overcomes their enemies. They will humble themselves before him as they bow to his regency. What had been Joseph's portion now in Egypt will become Judah's place in the future.

In his Power (v.9)

In a wonderful and enduring image, Judah is a lion. This became his symbol. Judah is the lion of Israel, great and mighty in his power. Even as a cub, he takes down and rises up from prey.

When he becomes mature, he will sit on a throne against which none would dare to rise with power; none would dare to rouse against him.

In his Position (v.10)

Judah will be the ruler forever, for the scepter and staff, his position, will never depart from between his feet. The enduring symbol of the governance of God's people will be a shepherd's staff. In Judah's line will be the long line of Shepherd-Kings over God's people.

But there is more here – he will rule over God's people until he rules over all the peoples, all the nations. It is possible for the phrase “until tribute comes” to be rendered “until him to whom it is due comes” or “until Shiloh comes.” There is a phrase much like this with the same ambiguity in Ezekiel 21:26. Is there in the subtlety of the Hebrew here a shadowy look into a shining future? Is redemptive history here? Will the Kings of Israel rule until the last great shepherd-king comes? When Shiloh comes, then tribute, obedience, fealty will stream to His honor and He will reign over all.

In his Person (v.11-12)

In language picked up all over the prophetic books in both the Old and New Testaments, this blessing in his person is applied to the Messiah, to the Lord Jesus Christ. Here is language of both personal humility and personal victory. He will come on a donkey's colt one day, bringing redemption for His people. He will come on a white horse one day, bringing justice and wrath against those who reject Him. And he will be beautiful and desirable to His people, more than we can imagine.

Judah's blessing and destiny is the kingship. From him will come the great lion and shepherd king. The last king in the line will be the greatest of all. He, King Jesus, will rule and reign as King and all the peoples, all the nations will bow to Him.

The Prosperous (v.13-21)

Next, the bequest and blessing prophesies a prosperous future and greatness of this group of brothers and tribes. That blessing will come through difficulty and diligence. Some will become successful by human measure, yet are being censured by God. Most of the way the initial bequest is stated is a play on the name.

¹³ “Zebulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea;
he shall become a haven for ships,
and his border shall be at Sidon.

¹⁴ “Issachar is a strong donkey,
crouching between the sheepfolds.

¹⁵ He saw that a resting place was good,
and that the land was pleasant,
so he bowed his shoulder to bear,
and became a servant at forced labor.

¹⁶ “Dan shall judge his people
as one of the tribes of Israel.

¹⁷ Dan shall be a serpent in the way,
a viper by the path,
that bites the horse's heels
so that his rider falls backward.

¹⁸ I wait for your salvation, O LORD.

¹⁹ "Raiders shall raid Gad,
but he shall raid at their heels.

²⁰ "Asher's food shall be rich,
and he shall yield royal delicacies.

²¹ "Naphtali is a doe let loose
that bears beautiful fawns.

In their Strategic Location (v.13)

Where Zebulun eventually settled placed them astride the most important trade routes to both the Mediterranean Sea and the Sea of Galilee. Isaiah prophesied of a coming day of glory for Zebulun (Isaiah 9:1) which was fulfilled as Jesus crisscrossed their region during his ministry (Matthew 4:13-15).

In their Vigorous Work (v.14-15)

Issachar were a hardworking and industrious people who settled in a fertile area. Yet, rather than overcome those who lived there, they initially became serfs whose labor brought them early success. Later, they shrugged off their slavery, gaining prosperity and prestige. At a time when Israel needed guidance, Issachar had men who understood the times and helped Israel to know what to do (1 Chronicles 12:32).

In their Eroding Judgeship (v.16-18)

Dan, whose name means judge, did become the judges of Israel. But they were morally and spiritually bankrupt. The first great outbreak of idolatry began in Dan. This led to their decline. They abandoned the land they were assigned and moved to the northernmost part of Canaan. The city at the northern most tip of Israel became the way one referred to all of Israel, "from Dan to Beersheba". They are not listed as one of the tribes in Revelation 7:4-8.

In their Valiant Warriors (v.19)

Gad, whose name sounds like the Hebrew word for raid(er), settled in the Trans-Jordan region. Raiding armies trying to reach the rich agricultural regions had to cross their land, often ravaging their villages and towns. Gad became skilled and valiant warriors, learning to fight on the run. They often attacked and destroyed enemy armies attempting to return across their lands.

In their Skilled Farming (v.20)

Asher were granted and settled into a region of Canaan whose land was rich and rainfall plentiful. They worked the coastal lands north of Mt. Carmel. The tribe became skillful and productive farmers providing many of the staples and delicacies Israel was known for.

In their Military and Verbal Prowess (v.21)

Naphtali was to become known for two things: their fast attack troops and their eloquence. They are often praised for their ability to move quickly and fight well. They were a tribe of singer soldiers. The second phrase here evidently is difficult: it can be translated either as we have it in the ESV or as "he gives beautiful words." Deborah and Barak, both of the tribe of Naphtali, are great examples of both soldier and poet (Judges 4:6).

This is the way to leave and launch sons. How often what is left to children ends up ruining and destroying them. Not so this man with his boys. From his example, you give your children a bequest and a blessing that causes them and motivates them to hard work and diligence.

The Valiant (v.27)

Before we consider the Joseph the blessed, let us consider Benjamin, the valiant.

²⁷ “Benjamin is a ravenous wolf,
in the morning devouring the prey
and at evening dividing the spoil.”

To us this hardly sounds like a blessing. We are not impressed by ravening wolves. But before there can come everlasting blessing there must be a hard-fought victory. This is the blessing of Benjamin. He, this seeming mildest of youngest brothers, will bring victory in battle. He will bring down the prey. He will divide the spoil. But he will be fierce and sometimes cruel (Judges 20). But there came a day whenever Israel marched forth to do battle they cried out, “After you, O Benjamin.”

The Blessed (v.22-26)

The super abundance of overflowing blessing is poured out on Joseph. I have chosen to call him, *the blessed*, because of it. In loving and lush eloquence, Jacob lavishes a cornucopia of blessing for Joseph and his descendants.

²² “Joseph is a fruitful bough,
a fruitful bough by a spring;
his branches run over the wall.
²³ The archers bitterly attacked him,
shot at him, and harassed him severely,
²⁴ yet his bow remained unmoved;
his arms were made agile
by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob
(from there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel),
²⁵ by the God of your father who will help you,
by the Almighty who will bless you
with blessings of heaven above,
blessings of the deep that crouches beneath,
blessings of the breasts and of the womb.
²⁶ The blessings of your father
are mighty beyond the blessings of my parents,
up to the bounties of the everlasting hills.
May they be on the head of Joseph,
and on the brow of him who was set apart from his brothers.

In his Fruitfulness (v.22)

In an image not easy for us to always see and feel, Jacob portrays the grand and glorious beauty of his blessing. He will become like a fruitful vine, growing up from springs of waters, growing and spreading with lush extravagance over the wall with fruit hanging massive, damp, plump and weighty. This image will be invoked in the words of Isaiah 4:2, referring to the Messiah, the Lord Jesus. “In that day, the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel.”

In his Faithfulness (v.23-24)

Joseph is blessed in his God-sustained faithfulness. He had already been faithful through enormous trial and difficult hardships. By the *Mighty One of Jacob*, the Shepherd and Stone of Israel, his descendants will remain steadfast and faithful under attack. When being sinned against, they will know God as their Sustainer, their Shepherd, and their Stone.

Jesus is ever faithful in Himself and for His people. Though sinned against often and wounded deeply, He bore it with grace and gladness. He suffered much from the hands of sinners and for those He would redeem. As such, the line from verse 24 will run through Isaiah 49:26, "Then all flesh shall know that I am the LORD your Savior, and your Redeemer, the *Mighty One of Jacob*."

And we must be faithful as well. When we are being attacked by the enemy or sinned against, even by our friends or family, our recourse and resource is in our God. He will be our Sustainer, enabling us by His grace. He will be our Shepherd, guiding and guarding us even at the table He has prepared for us in the presence of our enemies. He will be our Stone, our solid rock and foundation, on whom we will rest. Faithfulness abounds when God's people rely in and rest on Christ.

In his Favoredness (v.25-26)

Then there are the blessings that come to one who is crowned with favor. Like a mighty pyramid of bounty, blessing upon blessing are piled up as a mighty memorial to El Shaddai, to the Almighty. Here the language of blessing can barely sustain the lavish wonders poured out. Here are the blessings of heaven above, the deeps beneath, the womb and the breast. Here are blessings beyond his fathers, bounty springing up and running deep and strong out of the everlasting hills.

Instead of an Egyptian miter, all of these blessings are then gathered up into a gorgeous creation, a lavish headdress that sits on Joseph's brow. All that Egypt offered and gave him are nothing compared to the extravagant excess that the Almighty will sumptuously grace his brow with.

Reflect and Respond

In all of his blessing, this will hardly compare to the bounty and blessing of our Lord Jesus.

His righteousness and mercy will run out from the watered springs of His soul. His vine of the Spirit will droop low with grand clusters of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. All the wealth of heaven bejewels His arms and throat and head. All the richness of earth, all the sweet springs of waters, all the lush harvests, all the towering trees bubble and bend at the moment of his coming. From Him spring uncounted myriads of children in all the ages from all the peoples. His little ones are lovingly nourished at the breast of Word of God, fed, and nurtured until strong meat is taken. He is the blessed, the favored of His heavenly Father whose pleasure He serves, whose smile He receives, whose will He obeys, whose joy floods His soul. All this cascades like a rushing torrent from way back up in the everlasting hills of the heart of God Almighty.

And we, yes we, are blessed in His blessing.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. [Ephesians 1:3-14.]

This, O this is our true blessing and true destiny.