

Introduction

1. Do you ever find yourself reading a passage and asking yourself questions like “What in the world does this mean?” or “What do I do with this?”
2. That was me with our passage for this morning, Genesis 49, which involves Jacob blessing his sons before he dies
3. It’s been probably the most challenging passage for me in all of Genesis—it has quite a few exegetical challenges, but even more of an issue for me was trying to figure out what practical application(s) we could draw from the passage
4. I normally takes me about a week to finish one lesson, but I spent over two weeks on this and MOST of that time was spent just trying to figure out the practical applications and to be honest I’m really sure I did a good job of that with this passage; we’ll see
5. I never want a lesson to simply be informational; I want it to be practical, but some passages don’t always naturally lend themselves to practical application so you have to work really, really hard at figuring that part out (think genealogies)
6. So, today, I’m going to break our passage down into two parts—Jacob’s blessing of his sons and his death—which are mostly informational, and then end with a few observations and takeaways

A. Jacob prepared his sons for his departure and their future (49:1-27)

1. Reuben, Simeon and Levi would face the consequences of their sin (49:1-7):
 - a. Reuben (READ 49:1-4):
 - 1) He was Jacob’s firstborn, and this position normally would have afforded him the preeminent place of dignity and strength in the family
 - 2) But, Jacob stripped him of this because he was “**uncontrolled as water**” (e.g. like boiling water) and defiled Jacob’s bed by sleeping with his concubine (READ Genesis 35:22)
 - 3) Ultimately, the honor of the first born went to Ephraim, Joseph’s son which is recorded in chapter 48 but stated specifically in 1 Chronicles 5:1 (READ)
 - b. Simeon and Levi (READ 49:5-7):
 - 1) Much like Reuben, Simeon and Levi also received more of a curse than a blessing because they were “**angry**”, “**violent**”, and “**self-willed**” which was evidenced by their vengeful killing of all the men of Shechem after their sister was violated (Genesis 34)
 - 2) As a result, they would be scattered among the other tribes of Israel:
 - a) While Simeon originally received an allotment of land after the conquest, it was located within the land of Judah, and they were ultimately integrated into the tribe of Judah

- b) The Levites weren't given their own land, but rather cities located throughout Israel
2. Judah would become an everlasting royal line and avenue through which God's redemptive plan would be fulfilled (READ 49:8-12):
 - a. This is the second longest section in Jacob's address to his sons (second only to Joseph) and focuses on his leadership role in Israel
 - b. In v. 9 Jacob describes him as a lion which likely relates to the tribe of Judah's role as a defender of Israel, while vs. 11-12 suggests Judah would also be a wealthy tribe (as seen in David and Solomon)
 - c. Most interesting, however, is v. 10 which foreshadows both the Davidic and Messianic kingdoms:
 - 1) The "**scepter**" and "**ruler's staff**", both symbols of kingship and royal rule, would not depart from Judah until a specific king would arrive—this clearly foreshadows the line of Davidic kings from David through the Babylonian exile
 - 2) Some translations like the NASB read, "**until Shiloh comes**" but this is a challenge:
 - a) The word Shiloh appears over 30 times in the OT and in almost every instance refers to city where the temple resided for almost 300 years; however, Shiloh here in v. 10 doesn't really make sense if it refers to the city of Shiloh
 - b) Most other translations and scholars interpret the Hebrew word shiloh here not as a name but more literally: "**until he comes to whom it belongs**"—in other words, the scepter and ruler's staff would continue from Judah until the one, future king to whom they ultimately belong finally arrives (e.g. Messiah)
 - c) This is supported by what Jacob said next, "**and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.**"
 - Psalm 72:8: "May he also rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth."
 - Psalm 108:8: "Gilead is Mine, Manasseh is Mine; Ephraim also is the helmet of My head; Judah is My scepter."
 - Jeremiah 23:5: "**'Behold, the days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch; and He will reign as king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land.'**"
3. The next six, plus Benjamin, are a mix of various blessings and fates: Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali and Benjamin would face various blessings and fates (48:13-21, 27):
 - a. Zebulun (READ 49:13):
 - 1) This implies the tribe of Zebulun would be along the shore, but it wasn't; it was bordered all the way around by other tribes
 - 2) However, it was smack-dab in the middle between the Mediterranean Sea and the Sea of Galilee and the trade routes for the ships ran straight through its territory

- b. Issachar (READ 49:14-15):
- 1) There's no real agreement on how to interpret Jacob's words here
 - 2) Some interpret the donkey as a positive symbol, but others suggest an element of laziness because Jacob depicts it as lying down between its burdens and looking for a pleasant resting place
 - 3) Likewise, v. 15 is a challenge because it's not clear how to interpret the last phrase, "**and became a slave at forced labor**", because there's nothing in the OT to suggest they had ever become slaves; the LXX reads, "**became a tiller of the ground**" (e.g. farmer):
- c. Dan (READ 49:16-17): this appears to be both a blessing and a curse
- 1) Dan would "**render justice to his people**"—Sampson the judge was from the tribe of Dan
 - 2) The tribe would also be a "**serpent in the way, a horned snake in the path**"—this suggests he would be a cause of stumbling for others, which was certainly true considering Dan's history of idolatry; in fact, they were one of the first tribes to involve themselves in idolatry
- d. Gad (READ 49:19):
- 1) Jacob described the future tribe of Gad as being plagued by raids, which is fitting because they settled in the Transjordan east of the Jordan river away from the safety of the other tribes of Israel and put them at risk from their enemies
 - 2) However, they were known as valiant fighters who often came to the aid and rescue of other tribes
- e. Asher (READ 49:20): described as being rich in food and providing royal delicacies; this is fitting because they were allotted land in northern Israel which was some of the most agriculturally rich because it was situated along the coast
- f. Naphtali (READ 49:21):
- 1) "**a doe let loose**" might suggest speed and agility from a military perspective
 - 2) Giving "**beautiful words**" could be a reference to prophesy
 - 3) We see both of these in the judge Deborah who was from the tribe of Naphtali; she was an incredible military leader and Judges 4:4-5 says she was a prophetess and we have one of her prophetic songs recorded in Judges 5
- g. Benjamin (READ 49:27):
- 1) Jacob's description of him as a "ravenous wolf" is generally interpreted to mean that even as one of the smaller tribes, he was a military force to be reckoned with being known for their excellence in archery and slings
 - 2) King Saul, and Paul the Apostle, were from the tribe of Benjamin

4. The longest blessing was reserved for Joseph and it was essentially a promise that God would continue to bless his faithfulness (READ 49:22-26):
 - a. Joseph had proven himself to be a “fruitful son” (literal rendering) that Jacob likens to a fruitful vine growing over a wall
 - b. He has been “**bitterly attacked**” and “**harassed**” (a reference to the hardship he faced from his brothers, prison, etc.), but he remained firm like a steady bow and skillful hands
 - c. Jacob attributed this to God’s work in Joseph’s life: it was “**From the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob...the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel**”
 - d. Jacob prayed for God’s blessings to continue on Joseph (RE-READ 49:26)

B. Jacob prepared his sons for his death and final wishes (READ 49:28-33)

1. Joseph knew his death was imminent and much like he had already done with Joseph, he instructed his remaining sons not to bury him in Egypt but back in the land of Canaan:
 - a. SEE Genesis 47:29-31
 - b. Here Jacob repeats the same demand with many of the same details:
 - 1) Instead of being buried back home in Mesopotamia when he died, Abraham bought a cave and field in the land of Canaan in which to be buried
 - 2) This was a declaration by Abraham that the land of Canaan, not Mesopotamia, was his new home and an expression of his faith and trust in the Lord’s promises that one day his descendants would inherit the land
 - 3) In 47:30 and here in chapter 49, Jacob made it clear that he wanted to be buried with his parents, grandparents, and wife Leah, but as I proposed when we studied chapter 47, I believe there was more to it than that
 - 4) The land represented God’s promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob so for Jacob to be buried there was more than simply being buried with his ancestors:
 - a) It was about God’s promises—there was no reason to be buried in Egypt because his descendants wouldn’t stay there
 - b) God repeatedly promised Jacob that He would bring his descendants back to the land of Canaan:
 - He promised Jacob this when He first appeared to him at Luz when he was fleeing Esau: “**Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go. And I will bring you back to this land; for I will not forsake you until I have done what I have promised you.**”
 - He promised Jacob this when He told him to return from Mesopotamia and head back home to the land of Canaan (Genesis 31:3): “**Return to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you.**”
 - He assured Jacob of it one more time when he was forced to leave home and head to Egypt because of the famine (Genesis 46:4): “**I Myself will do down with you to Egypt, and I Myself will also bring you up again...**”

- c) Jacob was so convinced of this, that he not only reminded Joseph of it back in 48:21 saying, **“But God will be with you and will bring you back to the land of your fathers”**, but he demanded to be taken back there after his death and buried there

C. Observations/Takeaways

1. Jacob’s ultimately hope wasn’t in his sons becoming a great nation, but rather the LORD’s salvation:
 - a. According to Hebrew 11:21, when Jacob blessed Joseph’s sons in chapter 48 it was an act of faith: **“By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshipped, leaning on the top of his staff.”**:
 - b. I would propose that when he blessed the rest of his sons it was also an act of faith, especially because right in the middle of it he says, **“For Your salvation I wait, O LORD”** (49:18)
 - c. The author of Hebrews tells us that the OT saints like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Gideon, Samson, David and others placed their ultimate hope not in the earthly promises God made but the heavenly ones and we see that reflected here in Jacob’s words
 - d. When he blessed his sons, it was an act of faith not simply because he was blessing them in accordance to what God had promised regarding them becoming a great nation, but what God had promised in regard to salvation
 - e. The same should be true of us—our hope shouldn’t be in the earthly promises or blessings God has made but the salvation found in Him
2. Jacob’s sons weren’t perfect, and neither would their descendants be, but God still used them to accomplish His redemptive plan:
 - a. The same is true of the Church, isn’t it?
 - b. You often hear me rail against the many issues with the Evangelical Church in America, and there are PLENTY of issues
 - c. But, God still uses the Church here in spite of these issues
 - d. Now here’s the thing--Jacob’s sons Rueben, Simeon, and Levi forfeited their blessings because of their sin, but Judah and Joseph were both blessed because of God’s work in their lives (Judah through his repentance and Joseph through his faithfulness)
 - e. This will also be the case with the Church because we’ll all have to stand before Christ and give account of our deeds, good or bad, and we’ll either receive or forfeit the blessings promised by Him