

Jacob Blesses the Less Prominent Sons

Genesis 49:13-21, 27

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This evening we will look at Jacob's blessings on the 7 of his less prominent sons. They each get a verse or two in this chapter of blessings. Their lives have not been outstandingly good or bad. The names of the tribes that descended from them are not mentioned very often in the story as it unfolds. Mostly they are just the rest of the tribes. They are part of the story of Israel. They make up a large part of the people of Israel. For the most part they are not particularly noteworthy. But they belong to the chosen people. They are significant in that they are part of the people through whom God is going to save the world. The 7 brothers whose blessings we will consider this evening, are the patriarchs of 7 of the twelve tribes of Israel. And their names will be inscribed on the 12 gates of the heavenly Jerusalem.

What we will do in this sermon is first look briefly at each of the blessings of these 7 less prominent sons and then I will point out some implications and applications of what we see in these verses. So, first Zebulun. Genesis 49:13, "Zebulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea; he shall become a haven for ships, and his border shall be at Sidon."

This is a prophecy. God has revealed to Jacob these few facts about the tribe that will descend from Zebulun some 500 years in the future. After Israel grows into great nation in Egypt and after they are taken into slavery and after they are set free during the Exodus and after they travel to the land of promise and after they take the land of promise, the tribe that descends from Zebulun will dwell on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Part of their territory will be the port city of Sidon and many in that tribe will be involved in trade with the ships that come to Sidon. Now the maps that show the territories of the tribes immediately after the conquest of Canaan show the territory of Zebulun as landlocked, but they were not far from the sea and it is thought that by the time of Solomon, their territory had reached to the sea.

Furthermore, they were situated on trade routes and, so they may have been involved in trade with traders who traveled the sea.

There is a similar list of blessings given by Moses on the 12 tribes of Israel in Deuteronomy 33 and Moses says of Zebulun that he will draw from the abundance of the seas. So, it looks like the tribe of Zebulun will be a tribe of merchants and traders and that a significant part of that trade will be with traders who move their cargo over the sea on ships.

Issachar is next. Genesis 49:14–15, "Issachar is a strong donkey, crouching between the sheepfolds. 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." Issachar must have been a strong man. He is compared to a strong donkey. The prophecy says that his tribe will inherit a good and pleasant part of Canaan, but that they will become servants of forced labor. It is thought that perhaps the tribe of Issachar did not drive all the Canaanites from their land and may have ended up working for them. In many of these prophecies there are things that are puzzling for we who live so long after they were fulfilled that would have been clear to those who first saw their fulfillment.

Then we come to Dan. Genesis 49:16–17, "Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel. 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." There is not much information on how Dan was a judge. The prophecy could refer to justice within the tribe. The comparison with a serpent is not complementary. A snake biting the horse's heels is sneaky and vicious. There is an incident recorded in Judges 18 in which the tribe of Dan destroyed the city of Laish in a way that was sneaky and vicious. The author of the book of Judges portrays the tribe of Dan as ruthless and devious.

Gad gets only one verse, but what Jacob prophesies concerning this tribe is clear. Genesis 49:19, "Raiders shall raid Gad, but he shall raid at their heels." Gad settled on the east side of the Jordan river and, so they were vulnerable to attacks by raiders. They were on the eastern edge of the territory taken by Israel. They were often attacked and, so they became good at responding to those attacks and chasing the raiders away. They became known for their fighting ability.

Asher is going to be prosperous. Genesis 49:20, "Asher's food shall be rich, and he shall yield royal delicacies." The territory given to the tribe of Asher would be fertile and so this tribe would do well as far as material gain was concerned.

Naphtali is the sixth of the less prominent sons to hear his blessing and prophecy. Genesis 49:21, "Naphtali is a doe let loose that bears beautiful fawns." This suggests fruitfulness and prosperity. Naphtali also inherited a fertile territory and so this tribe was able to prosper and produce many offspring. Moses says of the tribe of Naphtali in Deuteronomy 33:23, 'O Naphtali, sated with favor, and full of the blessing of the LORD, possess the lake and the south.'

And finally, there is the tribe of Benjamin. Genesis 49:27, "Benjamin is a ravenous wolf, in the morning devouring the prey and at evening dividing the spoil." The Benjaminites were known as men of war. 1 Chronicles 12:2 says, "They were bowmen and could shoot arrows and sling stones with either the right or the left hand; they were Benjaminites, Saul's kinsmen."

So, we see how Jacob, as God's prophet, looks into the future and sees a little of how the tribes that descended from each of his sons will fare. He is looking ahead at least 500 years – at least a half century. What he sees and what he speaks comes from the Lord. God reveals to him just a few significant facts about how the descendants of these men will fare - 500 years into the future. In some cases, we are not sure what these prophecies mean or how exactly they were fulfilled, but in many cases the prophecies are clear and the accounts of the history of Israel bear them out.

Now this allows us to make some interesting observations about God and his relationship to history. The claim of these verses is that these prophecies come from God. The claim of these verses is that God knows what is going to happen to the tribes that come from these men in 500 years or more and that he revealed these little snippets of the future of their offspring to each of these sons of Jacob. Then in later parts of the Bible we have confirmation for most of these prophecies that they were fulfilled exactly as God had said they would be.

This is what these verses are claiming about God. This is how God is revealing himself to us in the Bible. As Jacob lay dying God revealed to him what was going to happen to the posterity of each of his sons in 500 years. This is a claim that God knows the future.

And God makes much of this ability in other places in his word. For instance, in Isaiah God often compares himself to idols and one of the things that he points out is that idols are not able to predict the future, while he is able to tell his people about the future. Isaiah 42:8–9, ⁸"I am the Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols. ⁹Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them."

This is how the Lord proves to his people that he is God. He tells when certain things that are going to happen in the future and then when those things happen, the people should realize that God is real. Only God knows what is going to happen in the future. Idols can't do that. The false god's that Israel was so inclined to worship were not even real and, so they were useless. So, in our text we hear Jacob, speaking for God, tell his sons what the future holds for their offspring some 500 years ahead. God is claiming to know the future.

Now this is pretty amazing if you think of it. Just think. If you have children, God knows everything about the generations that will follow you as long as those generations will last. It is possible that some of our children will not have children and at one point that our line will end. But imagine that our posterity continues 500 years into the future. God knows their names. God knows where they will live. God knows what they will do for work. God knows everything about them. This is what it was like for the sons of Jacob to hear about their offspring 500 years later. It is like God telling your ancestor at the time of the Reformation that you would live in southern Ontario and what kind of work you would be doing.

Now the Joseph story itself tells us how God knows the future because the Joseph story is itself an illustration of the fact that God controls the future. One of the key texts that explains the significance of the Joseph story is Genesis 50:20 where Joseph says to his brothers, ²⁰"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about

that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." This verse shows how God was working in all the history that the story tells to bring about a certain purpose. The brothers did their thing. The other actors in the story did their thing, but through it all God was working out his plan to save his people from the famine. The Joseph story is an important part of the biblical teaching that God has a plan for history and that everything happens according to that plan.

So, this passage in Genesis 49 where Jacob is telling his sons something about the distant future of their offspring reveals the same truth about God. God knows the future because it is the outworking of his plan for the history of the world. This is the claim about God that the Joseph story makes. The God of whom the book of Genesis speaks is not only the creator of all things, he is also in control of all things. The history of the world is the unfolding of God's plan.

But these prophecies concerning the sons of Jacob show us something else that is very significant. There is a relationship between what kind of people each of these men were and how they lived their lives and what kind of people their offspring would be and how they lived their lives – including offspring in the distant future, in this case 500 years. We do not see it in every case, but we do see in several of the blessings that there is a relationship between the kind of person each man was and what kind of people their offspring would be. So, for instance, verse 14 says that Issachar is a strong donkey. And 500 years later his offspring would be like strong donkeys working at forced labor. And verse 27 tells us that "Benjamin is a ravenous wolf" and 500 years later his offspring would be known for their fighting ability.

We see this even more clearly in connection with some of the other sons how their offspring 500 years down the road were affected by the kind of people that they were and the kind of lives they have lived. Think of Simeon and Levi. They were cruel men and vindictive men. They had killed all the men of a town to avenge the rape of their sister and because of that their posterity would be scattered in Israel.

Now this is a very sobering thought for those of us who have children. Our offspring, including our posterity far into the future, will be affected by our genes, but also by the way in which we have lived our lives for

good or for ill. Our children have some of the same strengths and weakness that we do. Anyone who has kids knows this. Some of that is genetics. But some of it is also the influence of our example and teaching. How people turn out is partly genetics, partly teaching and example, and partly their own responsibility. There is a highly complex interaction between these different factors as well as other factors. We inherit certain strengths and weakness. We are shaped to some extent by our parents teaching and example. And the decisions that we make play a role in the kind of people we become and what our lives will be like.

But what we see in this passage is that the genes we pass on and the example and training that we give our children impacts our posterity far into the future. In our text we see how this impact travelled 500 years through the generations. These blessings show us how these men and the lives they lived were an influence in the lives of their offspring, 500 years into the future.

This idea is also expressed in the in the second commandment which forbids idolatry. The second commandment reads as follows: Exodus 20:4–6, ⁴“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

God visits “the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and forth generation.” The ESV Study Bible has a good note on this. “Human experience confirms that immoral behavior on the part of parents often results in suffering for their children and grandchildren. This is one of the grievous aspects of sin, that it harms others besides the sinner himself.” But God’s steadfast love is shown to a thousand generations to those who love God and keep his commandments. Deuteronomy 7:9 says, ⁹“Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations,” The text

emphasizes that the grace of God travels through the generations much further than the judgment of God – three or four generations verses a thousand generations.

So, there is both warning and comfort here. The warning is that if we live careless and worldly lives, our children and their children will be negatively affected for many generations. But the encouragement is that if we are faithful that will be a blessing upon our posterity for many generations as well. That does mean that this is an absolute rule. Sometimes a person who has had a poor upbringing turns out to be a solid Christian and sometimes a child who has had a great upbringing turns away from the Lord. But our text does show how offspring 500 years later are positively or negatively affected by an ancestor.

This is just one more reason to be diligent in living for God. I remind you that this can only happen through grace and the power of God, but the way we live has a tremendous impact on our children and their children through the generations. And clearly God cares about this. God is a God who works through the generations. God thinks in terms of many generations. And he cares very much about the spiritual legacy we leave for the generations that follow us.

So, we have noticed two things from the perspective of the verses we are considering. God knows the future because he controls the future. But at the same time the way that we live and the choices that we make impact our offspring for many generations. And it is very interesting to consider how these two perspectives fit together. On the one hand you have the fact that God knows exactly what is going to happen in the future because it is part of his plan and on the other hand you have the actions of human beings being a significant factor in what the future for their offspring will be like.

These two realities are true at the same time. And these verses allow us to see how God works towards certain goals that he has ordained for each of the tribes using the free actions of human beings to accomplish those goals. What we see in these verses in which God predicts the future and in which the lives and characters of each of these sons affects the future of their offspring is how God is able to work out his purposes using the choices and decisions of human beings.

This is the God that these verses are revealing to us. God knows exactly what our offspring 500 years from now will be like and how they will live because it is all part of his plan. And yet the decisions that we make today will affect of those who come after us and so how we live matters a great deal. This is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This God is the God of the people of promise – not only way back in the time of Jacob and his family, but also today.

It is because of this that we can have hope. One of the wonderful things that these verses show us is how God preserves his people through the generations. 500 years after Jacob uttered these prophecies, the offspring of these men still made up the people of God. God was in control of all of that history. And even though this was a sinful people, God preserved them through the centuries. And finally, from this people, Jesus Christ was born who was and is the heart of God's plan for his kingdom and for the world. The death of Jesus by which we are saved was an act of wicked men, but it was also "according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). Just as God fulfilled these prophecies of our text through the free actions of many people, so God accomplished his plan for the death of Jesus through the free actions of many people.

When Israel was in exile because of their sin, God prophesied through Jeremiah that after 70 years he was going to bring them back to the land of Canaan. And in connection with that promise, he spoke these wonderful words. Jeremiah 29:11, "¹¹For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." These words were spoken first to Israel, but they apply to all of God's people. God does not tell us the details, but he does have plans for each of us and if we are followers of Christ we can be sure that God's plan is for our "welfare and not for evil, to give [us] a future and hope."

God says the same thing in Psalm 139. David there is speaking of himself in his mother's womb and he says in verse 16, "¹⁶Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them." "[I]n your book were written, everyone of them, the days that were

formed for me, when as yet there was none of them." God has a plan for each one of our lives. And if we belong to Jesus Christ we can be sure that both the hard things and the pleasant things are all part of God's plan and are all working together for our spiritual and eternal wellbeing.

As Christians we understand these wonderful truths that we find in the OT in the light of Jesus Christ and the salvation that is in him. The God who made the promises through Jacob to his sons concerning their future was working out his plan for the salvation of his people through Jesus Christ. For those of us who belong to a later part of this story, God is still the same and he continues to work out his purposes for the blessing and wellbeing of his people. But what we now understand so much more clearly is that God's plan has Jesus at the very center of it. It is because of Jesus and the salvation that he accomplished that we can be confident that God's plan for us is a glorious future.

That plan includes an inheritance. One of the aspects of God's plan for the offspring of the sons of Jacob was the inheritance of the land of Canaan. The NT picks up that language of inheritance and applies it to the new heavens and the new earth. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "5" "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). Something very similar is said in Psalm 37:11, "11" "But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace." Psalm 37:11 refers to the land of Canaan, the promised land. Matthew 5:5 refers to the whole earth which is the fulfillment of the promised land.

The land of Canaan was a place where Israel dwelt with her God. It was a physical place where God dwelt with his people. The fulfillment of that in Jesus is the new heavens and the new earth. That is our inheritance. That is the goal of God's plan for all who are in Christ.

The sons of Jacob heard God's prophecy that God was going to bring their descendants to the inheritance in the land that God had promised to them. In Jesus Christ we are promised that the meek shall inherit the earth. That is the inheritance of all who belong to Jesus Christ.

Our God knows the future. He has a plan and he has told us some parts of it. Not many details but all that we need to know to encourage us and

sustain us as we live through joys and the burdens of this life. As we have seen, how we live matters. God's plan never means that we can coast. The Christian life is a life of depending on Christ and working out our salvation with fear and trembling. But if we are trusting in Christ and if we are seeking to become more like Jesus we can go through the ups and downs of life knowing that God has a plan for us – a plan for our welfare and not for evil – to give us a future and a hope. And knowing that we can live our lives confident that no matter how many uncertainties there may be from our human perspective, there are no uncertainties for our God and he will bring us to the place that he has planned for us.