

Jacob Blesses Judah

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Our text this evening is the blessing that the dying Jacob pronounces on his fourth son, Judah. Like the others this blessing is also a prophecy. Jacob is speaking as the mouth-piece of God concerning the future of each of his sons and more significantly of their posterity. The reason that this is significant for us is that the offspring of these sons will make up the people of Israel who are the people through whom God was going to fulfill his promise to undo the curse of sin which had been unleashed into the world as a result of the disobedience of Adam and Eve in paradise.

This is the reason for all that is wrong with the world. The world in which we live, and of which we are a part, is very wonderful, but it is also a place of sorrow and pain and suffering and death. Adam and Eve had turned away from obeying God and life in a state of alienation from God is filled with brokenness and sadness and hopelessness. There are still many good things about life, but the shadow of death looms over it and so there is something empty and futile about it all. This is the result of sin which is the reason for death and the sadness that comes with it.

The story of the Bible is the story of how God is working in history to deliver his world from sin and its great consequence which is death. Sin came into the world at the instigation of the serpent who is the devil. The first word of hope came in God's words of curse to the serpent. The curse on the serpent is hope for mankind. Genesis 3:15. God said to the serpent, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel." It was through the instigation of the serpent that sin and all its consequences entered the world. In cursing the devil, God said that some future offspring of the woman was going to bruise the head of the serpent.

The bruising here is not a little purple spot. It is a crushed head. God is saying that the future offspring of the woman is going to defeat the

serpent. Hebrews 2:14 speaks of the fulfillment of this when it says of Jesus that he partook of flesh and blood “that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.” This is what God means when he says that the offspring of the woman was going to bruise the head of the serpent.

This bruising of the serpent is what the rest of the book of Genesis is about and what the rest of the Bible is about. The Bible is the story of the unfolding of God’s plan to win the victory over Satan which is at the same time the victory over sin and death. As the story unfolds in Genesis, God reveals that he is going to accomplish this through the offspring of Abraham and much of the book of Genesis is concerned with how God preserves this family who are the bearers of the promise of salvation for the world. God had promised Abraham that he was going to make a great nation of his offspring. In the text that we are going to look at this evening, God through Jacob reveals another significant part of his plan. It comes in Jacob’s prophecy concerning Judah and what is revealed here is that Judah and his offspring were going to provide the leadership for the people through whom God would bring salvation to the world.

These words that Jacob speaks to and about Judah point ahead to Jesus Christ and the salvation that he came to bring. They give some early hints at what God was working towards in his plan of salvation. As we see how these various aspects of this prophecy are fulfilled we get insights into our salvation and what it involved and what it continues to involve.

One thing that these verses made clear is that God’s plan of salvation is going to require and involve strong leadership. Judah and his offspring are going to emerge as leaders in Israel and the result of their leadership will be great prosperity and blessing.

This is a fact of life, isn’t it? Not much good happens without good leadership. Human beings are designed by God to need leaders. Without leaders you have chaos and confusion and nothing much gets accomplished. But with good leaders, people are mobilized and organized and protected and the result is wellbeing and blessing. That is why God has established leaders in the home, and in the church and in

the state and in many other places. Leadership is an important part of life and not much good can come without it. It makes for order and organization so that people can live together fruitfully.

In these verses we see God providing leadership over the people of promise – the people through whom he is going to bring salvation to the world. The offspring of Judah is going to provide that leadership.

Why Judah? This is a surprise from a number of angles. It's a surprise because Judah was just as sinful as the older brothers who had been rejected from the position of leadership because of their sins.

Remember Judah was the fourth-born son. Reuben was the first-born, but he had been rejected from the role of first-born son because he had slept with one of his father's wives. Simeon and Levi were next in line, but they were both rejected from the role of first-born son because they had cruelly murdered a whole town of freshly circumcised men to avenge the rape of their sister, Dinah. But Judah had not been much better as a younger man. He had married a Canaanite woman. He had had a household of wicked sons. He had slept with his daughter-in-law thinking that he was sleeping with a prostitute and had produced twin sons by her. He had lived a wicked life as a younger man.

And it looks like Jacob had been thinking of Joseph as the one who would take the lead in the family. He had given him the double portion of the inheritance by adopting Joseph's oldest two sons and including them as equal sharers in the inheritance. In many ways Joseph was the obvious candidate to take the lead in the family. Morally he was far ahead of the rest of his brothers and he had proven leadership ability. It looks like Jacob was thinking along these lines. But no. God chooses Judah to be the leader among his brothers. This is another instance of God's sovereign grace. By God's grace Judah had grown and matured spiritually. He had been willing to sacrifice himself to ensure the safety of his brother Benjamin. But God had just as much reason to reject Judah as he had had to reject Reuben and Simeon and Levi. This is another instance of God magnifying his prerogative to choose whomever he wants to choose.

So, Judah was going to be preeminent among his brothers. The text says that his other brothers would praise him and bow down before him.

That would happen as the tribe of Judah rose to prominence within Israel. And so, it did. The tribe of Judah did rise to prominence in Israel. It became the most powerful and most influential tribe. Listen to the way in which this is reflected in the first couple of verses of the book of Judges. Judges 1:1–2, "¹After the death of Joshua, the people of Israel inquired of the Lord, 'Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?' ²The Lord said, 'Judah shall go up; behold, I have given the land into his hand.'"

Here we have one example of the fulfillment of this prophecy that Judah will be preeminent among his brothers. Another example is when David, who was from the tribe of Judah, becomes king over Israel. We read of this in 2 Samuel 5:1-2, "¹Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said, 'Behold, we are your bone and flesh. ²In times past, when Saul was king over us, it was you who led out and brought in Israel. And the Lord said to you, 'You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel.'"

³So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron, and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the Lord, and they anointed David king over Israel."

Jacob had said to Judah that his brothers would praise him and his father's sons would bow down to him. This is fulfilled in various ways through the history that followed, but a high point of that fulfillment is when all the tribes together make David king of Israel.

This is fulfilled in an even more important way in Jesus Christ. He is the Son of David who will rule over his people forever. The opening verses of the gospel according to Matthew make these connections. "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar...."

This connects Jesus Christ to Judah and Jesus' kingship is the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy in Genesis 49. Jesus is the ultimate leader over the people of God. I have noted the importance of good leadership for human blessing and wellbeing. We cannot flourish as human beings without good leadership. Well in Jesus Christ God has provided us with the greatest possible leader of all. He is the son of Judah who way back

in Genesis 49 was promised that from his line the leadership over the people of promise would come. Because this is leadership over the people of promise, it has to do with God's plan of salvation for the world. Jesus Christ is the ultimate King and Lord over the people of God.

And he is the fulfillment of the prophecy made to Judah that his brothers would praise him and that his father's sons would bow down to him. That was fulfilled in various ways as the tribe of Judah and then David rise to positions of prominence in Israel. But it is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus as he is our divine-human King who is worthy not only of the kind of honor and submission we might give to a worthy human leader, but he is worthy of the kind of honor and submission that we are to give to God himself. We see this beginning when after the resurrection, Thomas says to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" We see its further fulfillment in what Paul writes in Philippians 2:9–11, "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." We see it in that Jesus is given the title, "King of kings and Lord of lords."

So, we must see this blessing upon Judah in the light of its fulfillment in Jesus Christ and in the light of the way that God has worked through history to bring salvation to the world. Any plan or purpose that involves human beings needs good leadership. Here we see how God provides for leadership over the people through whom he is going to defeat the devil and evil and sin. That culminates in Jesus Christ who even now sits at God's right hand where he rules over the nations, but especially over his people.

Now when we look again at Jacob's prophecy concerning Judah and his offspring, we learn a few more details about God's great plan of salvation and the role of leaders in it. They lead in battle. They lead in fighting. Notice that Jacob says to Judah, "[Y]our hand shall be on the neck of your enemies." And then he compares Judah to a lion. Verse 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?" Lions are strong and ferocious. A lion is a fighting machine.

According to one article on the significance of “lion imagery” in the Bible, “Strong and brave fighters were likened to lions.” We see this in 2 Samuel 1:23, where David, in his lament over the death of Saul and Jonathan, sang, “[T]hey were swifter than eagles and stronger than lions.”

Behind this imagery is the fact that God’s plan of salvation is a battle. We see that from the very beginning where God curses the serpent and says that the offspring of the woman was going to crush his head. The meaning of history is the conflict between God and his followers and Satan and his followers. The meaning of salvation is that God is at work to defeat Satan and sin and evil and death. Salvation has to do with fighting.

In Jacob’s blessing over Judah, God is promising that the tribe of Judah will be a tribe of strong fighters and they will produce leaders who are mighty in battle. We saw already how the tribe of Judah took the lead in the fighting the enemies of God’s people in the time of the Judges. We see that further in David who was a great warrior. And we see it in its greatest fulfillment in Jesus Christ who is the ultimate warrior in the battle against evil and the prince of evil.

When Jesus came to earth, he came on a conquest. His message was that the kingdom of God was at hand. Those were fighting words. And his message of the gospel of the kingdom was a call for men and women and children to become part of his kingdom in the conflict with sin and evil and all who promote them in the world. We see evidence of that conquest in the fact that Jesus cast out demons. He was on the war path against Satan and his followers. We see this in the teaching in the NT that on the cross Jesus won the victory over Satan. Just before he went to the cross Jesus said, “Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out.”

We see this in 1 Corinthians 15 where Paul says of Jesus in verse 25, “For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.” The book of Revelation ties this all back to this prophecy concerning Judah when in Revelation 5:5 Jesus is referred to as the “Lion of the tribe of Judah.” This is an important part of the meaning of salvation and the meaning of the whole Bible. It is about this conflict between God and all

that is evil. God is on the march throughout his history as a warrior who is going to defeat sin and evil in the world. And that is what he does through Jesus. By his life and by his death, Jesus defeated sin and Satan by paying the penalty for the sins of his people. By doing this Jesus defeated death. Once sin is atoned, death has lost its power and so Satan has lost his power. That is why Hebrews 2:14 says that Jesus became a man “that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.”

The practical application of this is that when we are saved by God through what Jesus has done for us we are transferred from Satan’s kingdom to Jesus’s kingdom. This is exactly what Paul writes in Colossians 1:13, “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” Salvation is about the forgiveness of sins. But this is part of a much larger story of God’s vast conquest against evil in the world. And so being saved means following Jesus in this conquest against all that is evil. That beings in our own hearts and in our own lives. We follow Jesus in the fight against evil when we fight against sin in our own lives. We follow the “Lion of the tribe of Judah.”

But we also follow him in fighting against the kingdom of the devil in the world. The primary weapon here is the gospel. Listen to how Paul speaks of this in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, ³“For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. ⁴For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. ⁵We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ,”

It is important that we understand this and evaluate our lives in the light of it. Salvation is not about having our sins forgiven and then living a cushy life until we are transferred to heaven at death. Salvation is about having our sins forgiven and following the ultimate Warrior of warriors, the “Lion of the tribe of Judah.” Our text says that the tribe of Judah would provide warrior leaders in God’s conquest to crush the head of the serpent. Jesus Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of that. He has struck the decisive blow against sin and evil by his life and death and

resurrection. But when we become Christians we enlist in the army of the “Lion of the tribe of Judah.” We are at war against evil in our own hearts and lives and also in the world. The ultimate leader that God has provided from the tribe of Judah is the greatest warrior King of all.

And it is a good question to ask whether we are really following this kind of King. Do our inner and outer lives testify that we are following the King who has enlisted us to follow him in the fight of good against evil. Do we attack sin in our own lives? And are we participating in the great conquest of the kingdom of evil in the world? Do our lives and our thoughts and our priorities testify to the fact that following Jesus means following the captain of our salvation into battle? Listen to the part of the final benediction with which Paul ends his letter to the Romans, ¹²⁰“The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” Does that benediction make any sense when you think of your life?

That is the significance for us of this prophecy that in and through the tribe of Judah God was providing leaders in the spiritual battle against the serpent and his seed. That is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus who has won the victory, but who also calls his followers to take part in the battle as that victory is implemented throughout the world.

We can look at the rest of this prophecy more quickly as we have covered the main ideas. Verse 10 predicts that the kingship associated with the tribe of Judah will last forever and it will eventually include kingship over all the nations. “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.” The phrase “until tribute comes to him” is very unclear in the original Hebrew and it has been interpreted in many ways. We can leave that debate to the scholars.

The ultimate fulfillment of this verse is clear enough. Listen again to 1 Corinthians 15:25, “For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.” Jesus reigns until he has completely won the victory over sin and evil and Satan. And then he hands over the kingdom to his Father. Verse 24, “Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and

power.” “The scepter shall not depart from Judah..., until...” Satan and all who follow him are completely and utterly vanquished and then Jesus hands over the victorious kingdom of God to his Father.

And at that point all nations shall be in obedience to him. There will be no more opposition. Every knee shall have bowed. Every tongue will have confessed that Jesus is Lord. He shall “have dominion from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth!” (Psalm 72:8). The dying Jacob looked into the future by revelation of God and saw that the serpent’s head would be crushed and the king from the line of Judah would reign over all the peoples of the world.

And you see, to the extent that God reigns, to that extent there is human flourishing and wellbeing. Verse 11 predicts incredible wealth and prosperity for the coming king and by implication for his people. “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.” This is describing someone who is crazy rich. People did not tie their donkeys to their vines because the donkey would eat the grapes. This king will have so many vines that he won’t care if his donkey eats his grapes. And he will have so much wine that he could do his laundry in wine if he wanted to. This verse is speaking about unspeakable abundance and it is a picture of what conditions on earth will be like when evil is overcome and Satan is defeated. This corresponds with what the later prophets prophesied concerning the renewed earth.

Isaiah 35:1-3, “¹The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; ²it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. ³Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.”

And the one who will bring all this about will be seen as beautiful. Verse 12 of our text, “His eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk.” The king shall be beautiful. Isaiah 33:17 says “Your eyes will behold the king in his beauty.” Psalm 27:4 says, “One thing have I asked of the LORD, that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of

my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.”

This is what Jacob predicts of the king who would come from the line of Judah whom we know as Jesus Christ. He is beautiful to his people. And the beauty is not a physical beauty, but the beauty of holiness and the beauty of the glory of God and the beauty of the victory that he has won.

This is what Jacob sees dimly as he looks into the future of the line of Judah. The hints in this ancient prophecy are elaborated upon as it is gradually fulfilled until it was fulfilled in Jesus. And this ancient word was a word of hope for the ancient people of God as they looked ahead to what God was going to do to fulfill his prophecy to crush the head of the serpent. We know a great deal more. But it still gives us a wonderful perspective on the significance of Jesus as the Lion of the tribe of Judah and the meaning of our salvation. Like the ancient people of God we still look into the future in hope because of the ancient word of God as we look forward to the final fulfillment of the crushing of the head of the serpent by the ultimate Seed of the woman and the world that will ensue when sin and evil are completely vanquished and we will see the king in all his beauty.