

GENESIS

49:1-33

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Taught by Simeon Forder on Sunday morning, 11th August 2024 @ Deal Christian Fellowship

Reading: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Introduction

This morning we're going to study Genesis chapter 49, the penultimate chapter in this magnificent book. And that means we will finally reach the *end* of Jacob's life, who we first *read* about as he was born, back in chapter 25. Now, throughout his life, as we've seen, he had many faults and failures, but at the end of his life we find Jacob a man of faith, fully trusting in God. And we would do well to remember that we ourselves should have that same direction — that we would grow in our walk with the Lord until the day we die. Not forgetting our first love, but running our race well to the end.

Overview of chapter forty nine

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- **v1-28** — Jacob's prophecy regarding his sons
- **v29-33** — Jacob's instruction regarding his burial

Now, breaking this chapter down, as Jacob reaches his final moments, we first see he gives a prophecy regarding his sons and their descendants, blessing them too. And then in the final 4 verses he gives clear instructions regarding his own burial — something he had *already* made *Joseph* promise about — ensuring there would be no dispute among the brothers after he was gone.

And as we look at this chapter, we should watch for two things. First, we should look for what Jacob was telling his sons — that is, what he was saying about their future as tribes and as a nation. But second, we should look for what we can learn from the character of these men, and how we might apply that to *our* lives.

Chapter forty nine

So, starting in verse 1, we read:

Genesis 49:1

And Jacob called his sons and said, "Gather together, that I may tell you what shall befall you in the last days:

So then, Jacob wants his sons to listen carefully to all he is going to tell them. And he is going to give prophetic insight as to what would happen to each of them, both to the tribes of people that would follow after them, and to Israel nationally. And as we read through this chapter today, we'll see that some of what he prophesied has *already* come to pass, but some of it has still yet to be fulfilled. And it is important to note that what he is speaking of is what will indeed happen to the *nation of Israel*.

Obviously, we should pay attention to that as Christians. But we shouldn't make the mistake of confusing what the Bible says about Israel, with that which it says about the church. There is a distinction to make between those two groups, and we can't apply prophecies that are specific to Israel to the church. So let me be clear: God loves both Israel and the church. And He has a plan and purpose for both. But especially when we look at our day, and the days ahead of us, we shouldn't confuse the two.

Now, there are two things we should note from Jacob's example. First is his incredible faith, for as we read through this chapter we'll see that he has no doubt that his descendants will become their own distinct nation, in their own land. That is, he is trusting God's promise made to Abraham, Isaac and himself, that God would give them the land of Canaan as their earthly home forever.

And second, Jacob, in his final moments, feels the most important thing he can talk about to his children is what will happen in the last days. And I suggest we pay attention to that, for today, not only fathers, and families, but even some ministers of churches don't want to talk about what will happen in the last days. That is, they don't want to talk about our blessed hope that Jesus will return for His church, taking it out of this world to ever more be with Him. Foolishly, some churches have decided not to talk about these things because they believe doing so upsets people.

Let me be frank; the only people it will really upset are those that don't know the Lord, or those whom have lost their first love, and instead love the things of this world more than the things of God. For those who know Christ as their Saviour, who love Him and walk with Him, should-surely desire to meet Him. That — as the apostle Paul said — *to live is Christ, to die is gain!*

So let us not fail to talk about our blessed hope, nor the days ahead of us — from this pulpit, and in our times of fellowship, and in our homes. Of course, we must not become obsessed with doing so, focussing more on the anti-Christ rather than Christ as some do. But let us not fail to talk about the very thing we should look forward to, which is being with our Lord.

Now, here, having called his sons together, Jacob underlines that he wants them to listen to him. We read in verse 2:

Genesis 49:2

“Gather together and hear, you sons of Jacob, And listen to Israel your father.

And likewise, we should pay attention to our fathers, indeed to our parents, remembering that honouring our father and mother is the only of the ten commandments that comes with specific promise. And fathers, parents, remember that we are to treat our children with such love, that they will *still* listen to us at the end of our lives, as much they do at the beginning of theirs.

Here, Jacob, leaning on the top of his staff (a detail we find out from Hebrews 11:21), starts with his eldest son — and while he’ll address the first few of his children in age order, he’ll jump around between the others, pointing to the history and future of the nation of Israel in a more or less chronological order. He says:

Genesis 49:3

“Reuben, you are my firstborn, My might and the beginning of my strength, The excellency of dignity and the excellency of power.

And so it starts well, right? But Jacob continues:

Genesis 49:4

Unstable as water, you shall not excel, Because you went up to your father’s bed; Then you defiled it— He went up to my couch.

As the firstborn, Reuben would have received such honour, but like his uncle Esau, he prioritised the instant over the eternal, and slept with Bilhah, Leah’s handmaid, the woman through whom Jacob had fathered his brothers Dan and Naphtali. Now, this had occurred some 40 years before, as we *read* in chapter 35:

Genesis 35:22a

And it happened, when Israel dwelt in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father’s concubine; and Israel heard about it...

And we never saw a reaction from Jacob recorded at the time. Perhaps Reuben even thought he had gotten away with it. But his father had indeed noted what had happened, and as a result not only would the line through to Christ come through one of his brothers, but another would also receive the double blessing that he had been due.

Prophetically, this would speak of Israel as they left Egypt as a nation. Miraculously saved and enormously blessed as they left, it didn't take long before they started complaining. And then, while Moses was receiving the 10 commandments on top of Mount Sinai in Arabia, they made themselves a golden calf to worship. And such was the pattern of unbelief and sin that followed (leading to 38 more years in the wilderness than they would have had, during which each one of them that left Egypt died, before the nation finally entered the promised land — such was the cost of their sin).

As for us, what will our sin cost us? We understand in part what it cost *Christ* on the cross for us. But what impact will it have on our lives? Well, like Reuben now knew, our sin will find us out, as Jesus promised. And though our sin is paid for, it will still have earthly consequences. And this is why sexual sin, such as that of Reuben and others, is to be wholeheartedly avoided. That like Joseph, we would flee youthful lusts. That we would run away from opportunity to sin. That we would keep ourselves pure. That we would heed the warning of 1 Corinthians 5, and other such passages.

As I said back in our study of chapter 35, there is no place whatsoever for sexual sin the life a Christian. We are to deal with it urgently as we would cancer, for sin has consequences, especially if left untreated. And so, let us never make the mistake of tolerating it merely because the world deems some of it acceptable.

Next, Jacob turns to his next two children, still in order of age at the moment, and says:

Genesis 49:5-7

"Simeon and Levi are brothers; Instruments of cruelty are in their dwelling place. Let not my soul enter their council; Let not my honour be united to their assembly; For in their anger they slew a man, And in their self-will they hamstrung an ox. 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.

So, like Reuben, these two sons had acted wickedly. In their case, it was back at a place called Shechem, and we *read* in chapter 34 how, justifiably upset at their sister being raped, they *unjustifiably* murdered not only the the man who did that, but his father, and *every man in that city*. And as a result of this wicked act, the line through to Christ would not proceed through their descendants either.

Prophetically, Jacob says here that *he will divide them in Jacob And scatter them in Israel*. And that's exactly what happened, for the tribe of Simeon didn't receive his own portion of land, but rather was given an inheritance within the inheritance of the children of Judah, as recorded in Joshua chapter 19. And the tribe Levi was scattered amongst the other tribes, receiving *no* inheritance, as recorded in Joshua chapter 13.

Once again, we see the very real consequences to sin. While they weren't disowned, they lost their inheritance. And we should take that as a warning. For while nothing can cost us our salvation, our sin can cost us our closeness to the Lord now, and lose us our inheritance *in* the Lord then. We must not play with sin.

Now, furthermore, prophetically, this speaks of the dispersal of the nation of Israel too, as first the Assyrians, and then the Babylonians, took the nation of Israel captive. But, next, turning to his fourth son, Jacob says:

Genesis 49:8-12

"Judah, you are he whom your brothers shall praise; Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; Your father's children shall bow down before you. Judah is a lion's whelp; From the prey, my son, you have gone up. He bows down, he lies down as a lion; And as a lion, who shall rouse him? The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, Nor a lawgiver from between his feet, Until Shiloh comes; And to Him shall be the obedience of the people. Binding his donkey to the vine, And his donkey's colt to the choice vine, He washed his garments in wine, And his clothes in the blood of grapes. His eyes are darker than wine, And his teeth whiter than milk.

And it should not be surprising to us that much is made of Judah, for he was the one through whom the line to Christ would come. And we read that Judah would be praised by his brethren, that he would be the victor over his enemies, that his brethren would bow down to him, that he would be like a young lion starting to kill prey, and like a lion roused from sleep. Fitting descriptions for Christ.

But in verse 10 we read a significant prophecy, that "*The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, Nor a lawgiver from between his feet, Until Shiloh comes;*"

What does this mean? Well, it referred to the decision making power of Israel to administer capital punishment, and that the authority to do that would not be removed from Israel until Shiloh, speaking of the Messiah, had come (shiloh meaning rest and tranquility). Which is why, when the Roman authorities removed this power from them in AD12, Josephus (the Jewish historian) recorded that Rabbis were running through the streets of Jerusalem screaming in anguish. Why? Because they thought scripture was somehow broken. But little did they realise that growing up in Nazareth was a young boy by the name of Jesus, who was their Messiah. Prophecy, and indeed scripture, had not been broken at all.

The remainder of this prophecy is yet to be fulfilled, as it speaks about the time where Jesus will come for a second time as Israel turn in obedience to Him, and He returns in judgement.

Now, if following birth order, we would read about the tribe of Dan next, however, Jacob first speaks of Zebulun, who was his tenth born, the youngest of Leah's children. We read:

Genesis 49:13

"Zebulun shall dwell by the haven of the sea; He shall become a haven for ships, And his border shall adjoin Sidon.

So then, less is said of many of Jacob's sons, starting with Zebulun, but there does seem to be a pattern that continues, mapping out Israel's history, and even future. And here, Zebulun is the one whose land would be a coastal gateway to the world, *perhaps* speaking of how, following the early days of Israel's disobedience (noted under Reuben), then their dispersal through captivity (noted under Simeon and Levi), and then the arrival of their Messiah (noted under Judah), they would be exiled and dispersed around the world, as happened following the destruction of the temple in AD70.

Next, we read:

Genesis 49:14-15

"Issachar is a strong donkey, Lying down between two burdens; He saw that rest was good, And that the land was pleasant; He bowed his shoulder to bear a burden, And became a band of slaves.

And so, Jacob speaks of the hard work that the tribe of Issachar would demonstrate, reckoned by some to be the backbone of the early Jewish nation, living in an area that included the Jezreel Valley. But second, a later fulfilment of this was as Israel as a nation became persecuted, and enslaved to some extent, the pinnacle of which was seen in the labour camps of the Nazi led Holocaust.

Next, Jacob moves to the first of Bilhah's sons:

Genesis 49:16-18

"Dan shall judge his people As one of the tribes of Israel. Dan shall be a serpent by the way, A viper by the path, That bites the horse's heels So that its rider shall fall backward. I have waited for your salvation, O LORD!

And first we read that Dan would judge his people, likely pointing to the time of Samson, who would come from the tribe of Dan. But we also see this comment that "*Dan shall be a serpent by the way*" — and one suggestion is that this refers to how they were loose in their morals and the actions they took against those that invaded their land. But another possibility is that this points far further forward, beyond today, for even now rabbis believe a false Messiah will appear from the tribe of Dan. Who could that be? Well, we would call them the Antichrist, the serpent being symbolic of Satan, of course.

But soon after the point that the antichrist is revealed, we will see Israel turn to God — who alone can save them. And in Him, they shall be victorious. Now, verse 16, talking of Zilpah's firstborn, says:

Genesis 49:19

"Gad, a troop shall tramp upon him, But he shall triumph at last.

This of course refers to how Leah said "A troop comes!" as he was born, but also points forward to that ultimate triumph, as the armies of the world gather against Israel at Armageddon.

Next, Jacob talks about the second of Zilpah's sons:

Genesis 49:20

"Bread from Asher shall be rich, And he shall yield royal dainties.

And in case you're wondering, this is where Asher's bakery that was in the news in recent years takes its name from. But what does this say about the future of Israel? Well, in honesty I'm uncertain — but the suggestion Jon Courson makes here is that it refers to how in the last days, as the Jews are persecuted, the Jews will be protected as they flee to the rock city of Petra, where — in Courson's words — they will be cared for royally. As I say, I'm unsure, and certainly the order of this would not fit the exact chronology of all that we know will happen in the Great Tribulation. But if it's something that interests you, there's a couple of books I can point you towards.

As we reach the final 3 of Jacob's sons, he first comes back to Bilhah's other son, Naphtali, saying:

Genesis 49:21

"Naphtali is a deer let loose; He uses beautiful words.

And that certainly seems a nice thing to say, right? But what is it referring to? Well, again, if we assume that Jacob has been prophesying the future of not only these individual tribes, but the whole nation of Israel through the ages, then it becomes clearer. For in the Great Tribulation we will see 144,000 Jews not only sealed, but preach the gospel to the world. And there can be nothing more beautiful for anyone's lips to proclaim than "*Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*", as John the Baptist did. There is nothing more wonderful to tell people about than our glorious Saviour, who has paid for all our sin.

Next, from verse 22 on, Jacob concludes this prophecy by talking about Rachel's two children, Joseph and Benjamin. And of Joseph first he says:

Genesis 49:22-24

"Joseph is a fruitful bough, A fruitful bough by a well; His branches run over the wall. The archers have bitterly grieved him, Shot at him and hated him. But his bow remained in strength, And the arms of his hands were made strong By the hands of the Mighty God of Jacob (From there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel),

All that is mostly all in the past tense. And, oh, how we have seen how his own brothers had turned against him, even hurt him, yet he remained of good and strong character despite that, for God had strengthened him. But, now, looking ahead, the next two verse we read are in the future tense:

Genesis 49:25-26

By the God of your father who will help you, And by the Almighty who will bless you With blessings of heaven above, Blessings of the deep that lies beneath, Blessings of the breasts and of the womb. The blessings of your father Have excelled the blessings of my ancestors, Up to the utmost bound of the everlasting hills. They shall be on the head of Joseph, And on the crown of the head of him who was separate from his brothers.

And so what do these point to? Well, Joseph, through Jacob's blessing of his sons received a double blessing compared to his brothers. And Ephraim, who took priority in Jacob's blessing of them, became one of the strongest tribes in the nation of Israel, even contending with Judah for sovereignty of the land.

But furthermore, when we look at the nation of Israel, we see another One who was rejected by his brethren, who was hated by them, but did not sin. And verse 24 tells us who this is, talking of the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel. And that man was Jesus, which unsurprisingly is where this prophecy of Israel leads us to, as all scripture does. But chronologically this is not talking about his first coming, but his second coming, when Israel will finally realise that Jesus is their Messiah.

So, where to go after that? Well, there is one brother left, and so we read:

Genesis 49:27

"Benjamin is a ravenous wolf; In the morning he shall devour the prey, And at night he shall divide the spoil."

Which is not a lot to say of this one brother, given how much Jacob cared for him. But what we read *first* points to Benjamin as a tribe, who were, in Finnis Dake's words "*distinguished for courage, cunning, and fierce determination. Their position among the tribes afforded them full opportunity to display their warlike traits.*"

As for how it points to Israel nationally, one parallel I can see is that after the nations of the world rise against them, and are defeated, Israel will benefit from their weapons and spoil, as we read in Ezekiel chapter 39:

Ezekiel 39:9-10

Then those who dwell in the cities of Israel will go out and set on fire and burn the weapons, both the shields and bucklers, the bows and arrows, the javelins and spears; and they will make fires with them for seven years. They will not take wood from the field nor cut down any from the forests, because they will make fires with the weapons; and they will plunder those who plundered them, and pillage those who pillaged them," says the Lord GOD.

And so, with all of Jacob's sons spoken for, what do we have? Well, if we were to put our understanding of those prophecies together, we would see in...

- Reuben - Israel will be disobedient, and will reap the consequences
- Simeon & Levi - Israel will be dispersed because of their sin
- Judah - The Messiah will come through Judah to Israel
- Zebulun - But Israel will then be dispersed among the nations
- Issachar - They will be persecuted, and treated like slaves
- Dan - A false Messiah will arise through the tribe of Dan
- Gad - The nations will rise against Israel, but Israel will prevail
- Asher - Israel will be protected as royalty
- Naphtali - They will preach the beautiful gospel
- Joseph - Having rejected their Messiah, they will finally accept Him
- Benjamin - And they will divide the spoils of their enemies among them

This isn't as precise as our understanding of chapters such as Genesis chapter 5, where we have a very clear understand of the meaning of the names in that genealogy, but I think we can be sure enough that Jacob wasn't only prophesying about the future of the individual tribes, but of the nation as a whole.

Again, there are those that have studied this more, that I can point you in the direction of should it have sparked your interest. But as I said earlier, we need to watch not only for the details of what Jacob was saying to his sons about their future, but what we can learn from the character of these men, and how we might apply that to our own lives. And there are some clear examples to take note of there. But we're not done yet with application for us, for there is more this chapter records.

First, concluding this record of Jacob's prophecy, we read in verse 28:

Genesis 49:28

All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father spoke to them. And he blessed them; he blessed each one according to his own blessing.

That is, beyond the prophecy regarding their futures, Jacob blessed each of his sons.

Genesis 49:29-32

Then he charged them and said to them: "I am to be gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, in the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, which is before Mamre in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field of Ephron the Hittite as a possession for a burial place. There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife, there they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife, and there I buried Leah. The field and the cave that is there were purchased from the sons of Heth."

And so, like he had made Joseph promise to bury him back in the land of Canaan, he now gives this specific instruction to all his sons, that there may be no dispute as to what to do with his body. And in that there is full confidence that one day his descendants will live in that land exactly as God had promised to Abraham, Isaac and himself.

But there's also a detail here that we might easily miss, for Rachel had been Jacob's favourite wife. Yet he didn't ask to be buried with her, but with Leah. Now, part of that, I'm sure, was because he wanted to be buried with his fathers. But remember how deeply he loved Rachel. And consider how we today would not normally choose to be buried with our parents, as much as we love them, but with our spouse, should we be married.

So why at this stage does he want to be buried with Leah? Well, it was through Leah's son, Judah, that the line through to Christ would come. Had Jacob recognised that? Well, given what he prophesied about the tribe of Judah, it would seem so. And so, rather than choose to be buried with the woman who had first drawn his eyes, he chose to be buried with the one through whom there would arise the Saviour of his soul. Now a man of faith, Jacob's priorities were different now.

Genesis 49:33

And when Jacob had finished commanding his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed and breathed his last, and was gathered to his people.

So, having been leaning on his staff, he pulls his feet into his bed, and dies a man full of years, but most importantly full of faith. It's not the last mention of Jacob in the Bible, but it's the last moment of his life recorded right here.

And, reflecting on this for a moment, may we consider what *our* priority will be at the end of *our* lives. Of course, we don't know *when* that moment will be. For some of us it will arrive altogether more suddenly than we might like. But should we recognise that moment is approaching, what will be dear to us? If you are parents, what will you say to your children? Will you be found to be a man or woman of faith, having full assurance of the good that is ahead of you, or will you be found full of dread because you had no faith at all? What will be the last words you utter?

I think at that moment, your thoughts and words will reflect very much the spiritual state you are in. Consider the last words of some who have gone before, some of whom were fearful at death, including Ludwig van Beethoven whose final words were *"Too bad, too bad! It's too late!"*, and Phillip III, King of France who said *"What an account I shall have to give to God! How I should like to live otherwise than I have lived."*

Then there was Socrates, the Greek philosopher whose last words were *"All of the wisdom of this world is but a tiny raft upon which we must set sail when we leave this earth. If only there was a firmer foundation upon which to sail, perhaps some divine word."*, and Voltaire, the French writer, who said *"I am abandoned by God and man! I will give you half of what I am worth if you will give me six months' life. Then I shall go to hell; and you will go with me."*

Contrast those words to that of Jonathan Edwards, the American preacher, whose last words were *"Trust in God and you shall have nothing to fear."*, and Patrick Henry, the American Politician, who at death said *"Doctor, I wish you to observe how real and beneficial the religion of Christ is to a man about to die..."*. Then there is Andrew Jackson, one of the former US Presidents who said *"My dear children, do not grieve for me...I am my God's. I belong to Him. I go but a short time before you, and...I hope and trust to meet you all in heaven."*, and Charles Dickens whose final words were *"I commit my soul to the mercy of God, through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and I exhort my dear children humbly to try and guide themselves by the teaching of the New Testament."*

What a difference between those two groups. Now, it is not necessary to utter many words on our death bed — we may not even get the chance — but if we get to say anything, may we make it perfectly clear where our hearts are. I like the simplicity of what David Livingstone, the British explorer, said: *"Build me a hut to die in. I am going home."*

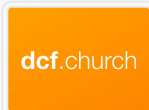

May we not be overwhelmed with sadness at our physical state, or our approaching death, but rather warmed and overjoyed by the knowledge of the glory that awaits us.

Application questions

As we close then, let me ask you some questions. And please — do think on these in the days and week ahead:

- Are you trusting in God's promises with the confidence Jacob had?
- What will your sin cost you?
- What is most dear to you today? What do you want to be most dear to you at your death?

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