

Genesis 49:1-28
Psalm 133
Revelation 7

“The Benediction”

January 17, 2010

At the beginning of chapter 49 Jacob says that he will tell them
“what shall happen to you in the days to come.”
So one could read chapter 49 as a prophecy.

But then at the end we are told that this is the blessing of his sons –
with the blessing that was suitable to them.
So in another sense this is a blessing.

But if you think about what a “blessing” is,
you start realizing that blessing and prophecy are very closely related.

Think back to God’s blessing of Adam and Eve:
Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.
It is certainly a blessing (land and seed)
But it is also a prediction.

Or think of God’s blessing on Noah in 9:1ff:
Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.
The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth...

Or think of Isaac’s blessing of Jacob in 27:27ff:
*May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth
and plenty of grain and wine.*
Let people serve you, and nations bow down to you...

The idea of a blessing has a future aspect to it.
And as we have seen throughout Genesis,
the blessing is not merely a wish, but it is a proclamation.
Remember Isaac’s comment to Esau,
“I have blessed him. And yes, he shall be blessed.” (27:33)

A blessing is not merely a wish.
When I bless you, I am not merely saying “Hopefully God will be with you!”
No, when I bless you, I am predicting the future!

And that’s why I use the biblical blessings.
Because I don’t want to be a false prophet!
I am proclaiming that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God our Father,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit *will* be with you,
both now and forever.

The blessing of the Triune God is upon you.
He has promised that he will be with you,
and so I am confident that he will do as he promised.
And so I prophecy every week as I bless you
that he will continue to be with you.

We see this also in our Psalm of response – Psalm 133.

Psalm 133 speaks of how good and pleasant it is for brothers to dwell in unity.
If we think back over the history of Israel,
it was rather rare for the sons of Israel to dwell in unity.
There was contention in the wilderness for 40 years.
After a generation of cooperation in the days of Joshua
there was strife and bickering during the centuries of the Judges.
All Israel only dwelt in unity again in the days of Saul,
and especially David and Solomon –
before the confederation split apart again.

In other words, in the 30-40 generations from Moses to Christ,
there were only 3-4 generations that saw the brethren dwelling together in unity.

But Psalm 133 looks past the bickering and quarreling of everyday life in Israel
to see the unity of the church as it is found in its high priest.

“It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron,
running down on the collar of his robes!”

You can almost see the oil pouring down on his head,
running down his beard,
and soaking into the fabric of his robes.

What’s he talking about?

The consecration of the high priest.
In the consecration of the high priest
you have a picture of the unity of Israel – the unity of the church.

The high priest was the one who wore the breastplate
containing the 12 stones that represented the 12 tribes.
When the high priest entered the holy of holies,
the whole of Israel entered the holy of holies symbolically.

All of Israel’s follies and foibles –
all their sin and iniquity –
was carried by the high priest into the holy of holies.
He was the sin-bearer of Israel,
who brought the sins of God’s people before the heavenly altar.

And through the atoning sacrifice that he brought,
God would look upon Israel through the blood of the sacrifice
and God would forgive their sins.

There, on Mount Zion, in the Holy of Holies,
you saw Israel as it was supposed to be.

And so when the people of God *actually* do what they are supposed to do –
when you see the momentary glimpses of the church
living the way that the church is supposed to live –

“It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion!
For there the LORD has commanded the blessing,
life forevermore.”

Because when the high priest came out of the Holy of Holies,
after making atonement for the people,
he would bless the people:

“The LORD bless you and keep you.
The LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.
The LORD lift up the light of his countenance upon you
and give you peace.”

And truly, when the face of the LORD shines upon you,
that is life forevermore!

Sing Psalm 133
Read Revelation 7

In Genesis 49 Jacob is giving a benediction to his sons.
It is a prophetic blessing – indeed, an eschatological blessing!
And this is an important point for us to remember –
Because otherwise the blessings of Jacob can seem rather strange!

Introduction (v1-2)

*49:1 Then Jacob called his sons and said,
“Gather yourselves together,
that I may tell you what shall happen to you in days to come.*

The phrase “in days to come” is translated “in the latter days”
in Isaiah 2:2.

This is an eschatological prophecy.
It is oriented toward the end – the goal – the fulfillment of all the blessings.

2 *“Assemble and listen, O sons of Jacob,
listen to Israel your father.*

As we go through this poem,

Note that the structure of the poem does not follow their birth order –
but their mother-order.

The six sons of Leah come first,
and then Dan (of Bilhah)
Gad and Asher (of Zilpah)
and then Naphtali (of Bilhah)
before concluding with the two sons of Rachel.

Jacob speaks with prophetic vision of what will happen in the future.

In order to understand why Jacob says what he says
you need to see the big picture of what he is saying about all his sons.

And he starts with some rather hard words for the eldest three!

1. The Disinheritance of the Three (v3-7)

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!*

This may sound like a strange blessing.

According to his birth order, Reuben is the firstborn –
Reuben is preeminent in dignity and power.

But Reuben is unstable as water.

He slept with his father's concubine.

In the ancient world the only way that you could lose the right of the firstborn
was through some heinous crime against the family.

Jacob charges Reuben with such a crime.

And so Reuben will not have preeminence among his brothers.

You might be inclined to say that this sounds more like a curse than a blessing!

But Jacob is concerned for the future of his family.

If Jacob blesses unstable Reuben,

if Jacob gives over the leadership of his family to Reuben,
then Israel has an unstable future.

And so even Jacob's disinheritance of Reuben
is a blessing for Israel!

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 hamstrung oxen.*

Simeon and Levi are joined together in their fate.
They had slaughtered the men of Shechem
and here we are told that they apparently hamstrung the oxen as well.
And so Jacob curses their anger
and declares that Simeon and Levi will be scattered among their brethren.

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.*

We have already seen that Israel is not safe in Reuben’s hands –
he is too unstable.
Now we see that if Jacob hands over the leadership of his sons to Simeon and Levi,
then they will be in the hands of firebrands and hotheads.

And so, in order that God’s blessing might rest upon his sons,
Jacob curses the anger of Simeon and Levi.

So yes, even the curse of verse 7 is part of Jacob’s blessing of his sons.

Also, we see in Genesis 49 that sexual misconduct and violent anger
have no place among the people of God.
Those who practice such things will be disowned.
Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6 that those who practice such things
have no place in the kingdom of God.

And yet, such were some of you.

God has mercy on the penitent.
While there are consequences for the sins of Reuben and Simeon and Levi,
and all of them will lose their original places of honor,
yet God does not cut them off entirely.
He restores them in his great steadfast love.

Later in the scriptures we will hear more of the rehabilitation of Levi and Simeon:
Moses and Aaron will come from the tribe of Levi,
and because of the faithfulness of the Levites,

Levi will receive a special place among the tribes:
Levi will be scattered among all Israel – as priests and Levites.

And how exactly did this happen?

It was when the Levites rallied around Moses and killed the idolaters
in Exodus 32.

It was when Phinehas, a Levite, killed the Simeonite who was thumbing his nose
at God's law against fornicating with Moabite women.

When Judah goes up into their inheritance,
Judah invites Simeon to go with him.
Judah's leadership will draw Simeon with him
and so Simeon will be given an inheritance with the tribe of Judah,
but in the process they will be folded into Judah
so that Simeon is no more.
They are brought into their inheritance only because they are joined to Judah.

2. The Scepter of Judah (v8-12)

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.*

Judah is the first to receive the praise of his father –
and indeed, his brothers will bow down before him –
but he does not receive the blessing of the firstborn.

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?*

There are *lots* of animal images in Jacob's blessing.
Genesis began with Adam naming the animals in the garden.
The animal images here cannot help but remind us of Jacob
as a new Adam of sorts, blessing his sons with these animal pictures.

Here we have the root of the image of “the lion of Judah.”
Because the lion is one of the largest and strongest of the carnivores in the ancient world,
it was often used as a symbol of kingship and power.

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.*

The phrase “until tribute comes to him” literally reads, “until Shiloh comes”
But what does Shiloh mean?

Some have said that it refers to the city of Shiloh
and is speaking of the time of the Judges,

when Shiloh was the center of Israel's worship.
This is implausible, because Judah has very little to do with Shiloh.

The ESV translation "until tribute comes" is actually a different word than Shiloh.

The ancient translations all understood this as "until he comes whose right it is."
In other words, the scepter shall not depart from Judah
until the one comes who will wield it aright.

But however you translate it,
the point is essentially the same:
the blessing of Judah is all about a future coming –
and therefore points us forward to the coming of the Christ.

And indeed, when the promised Lion of Judah comes
the nations will all obey him.

*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.*

Only a very wealthy man would tie his donkey's colt to a choice vine –
because the donkey will then be eating not only the grapes,
but also the vine!

But this Lion of Judah will wash his garments in wine.
This suggests the extravagant luxury of his kingdom –
but also the "blood of grapes" suggests the imagery of judgment as well.

Throughout the scripture, wine is a symbol of both rejoicing and judgment.
Rejoicing for those who love him –
judgment for those who do not!

When Jesus turns the water to wine in John 2,
he is claiming to be the host of the great wedding feast
who has the finest wine to give to all his guests.

Likewise, when he rides upon the donkey he shows us again that he is the heir of Judah.

3. The Other Brothers (v13-21)

The "other brothers" are dealt with very quickly.

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

Zebulun is actually younger than Issachar – he is the youngest of Leah’s sons –
but he named before his older brother, Issachar,
perhaps because Jacob foresees that Zebulun will be greater.

Zebulun will be given priority over Issachar in the inheritance of the land (Joshua 19)
and will be known throughout the OT for his faithful and loyal troops.

The prediction that Zebulun would dwell at the shore
is rather difficult to square with the landlocked inheritance of Zebulun.
But later, in Solomon’s day,
Zebulun’s territory seems to have gone all the way to the sea.

14 *“Issachar is a strong donkey,
crouching between the sheepfolds [or more likely, “saddlebags”].
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.*

The book of Judges doesn’t have much good to say about Issachar.
And apparently the reason is because Issachar was willing
to bow the knee to the Canaanites in order to have a good land
(Issachar’s inheritance is one of the best in terms of farm land).

Beware the fate of Issachar!
For we live in a pleasant land.
And we face the temptation to submit to the culture of our day.

Think about the way that we face temptation and sin:
we claim that we hate sin and we love God.
But too often we secretly love what sin offers –
and so because we delight in the pleasures of this age,
we willingly return to our old patterns of selfishness and sin.

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.*

Note that Dan receives two (generally positive) blessings:
Dan will execute justice (v16)
and Dan will strike back against his enemies (v17).

Of course, the image of a serpent is not so good.

To this day there are at least 33 different species of snake
in Palestine and the surrounding region.
Of these, 20 are poisonous.

This may suggest that Dan will have tendencies to drift toward the seed of the serpent.

18 I wait for your salvation, O LORD.

Here in the middle of his blessing,
Jacob interjects a prayer for deliverance.

Jacob also reminds his sons that he is speaking about “the latter days.”
Israel’s hope is an eschatological hope.
When Jacob first spoke to his sons that was true:
They had 400 years of slavery in Egypt ahead of them.
And throughout Israel’s history
they are reminded of the importance of waiting for the LORD –
waiting for his salvation.

And this is important for us as well.

Our God has heard Jesus –
he has raised up Jesus from the dead and seated him at his right hand.
Therefore, we wait for the salvation of the LORD.

When you are tempted to think that you have to have your way *now*,
When you get frustrated with how things are not the way they should be,
When you are tempted to think that what matters *now* is the most important thing,
remember that we wait for the salvation of the LORD.

We wait for the LORD himself.
He is our portion – our inheritance – our very life.

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

Gad will have trouble and difficulty –
settled as he was in the east near Ammon and Moab –
but he will strike back against his foes.
There are echoes here of the promise that the seed of the woman
would crush the head of the serpent.

*20 “Asher’s food shall be rich,
and he shall yield royal delicacies.*

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

Asher would receive the land south of Tyre – a rich and fertile land –

while Naphtali was in the pleasant country in the far north around Galilee.

4. The Blessing of Joseph (v22-26)

22 *“Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring; his branches run over the wall.*

As the footnotes show, there are a lot of questions about the meanings of this blessing!
The blessing of Jacob is one of the oldest poems in the Bible,
and so much of the vocabulary is difficult.

But the general point is quite clear.
Joseph is fruitful.
His mother, Rachel, had been barren,
but now her son has fathered two tribes in Israel.

And not only has he been fruitful,
he has also become mighty in battle:

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,*

God is with Joseph – and will deliver him in battle –
so that even as the God of Abraham and Isaac has been with Jacob,
so also the God of Jacob will be with Joseph.

And so Jacob very clearly gives to Joseph not only the double portion
(since his two sons each have one portion),
but also he gives him the blessing of the firstborn:

*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.*

The blessings of heaven above and of the deep that crouches beneath
draw our minds back to Genesis 1.

There it was the Spirit of God that hovered over the face of the deep –
but now the blessings of heaven and the blessings of the deep
come together in the ultimate blessing of the land
and the blessings of the breasts and of the womb
come together in the ultimate blessing of the seed.

And then Jacob adds:

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.

These glorious blessings have been set upon Joseph
Remember that Isaac had only one blessing.
And he gave his one blessing to Jacob (by accident) –
which meant that he had no blessing for Esau.
In the same way Jacob has only one blessing –
which he gives to Joseph.

There is one covenant blessing –
and this blessing comes to Joseph –
the one who had been set apart for a particular task –
the task of saving his brothers from the famine.

And because Joseph is blessed –
therefore all Israel will be blessed in him.

5. P.S., And Benjamin (v27)

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

The wolf kills more than he can eat –
and so leaves the carcass for others.
The wolf is a powerful and dangerous animal –
not nearly so glorious as a lion,
but dangerous enough!

Perhaps there is no accident that Benjamin is compared to a wolf,
while Judah is compared with a lion.
Both are dangerous creatures,
but the lion of Judah is regal and majestic
while the wolf of Benjamin is nasty and cruel.

Conclusion (v28)

28 *All these are the twelve tribes of Israel.
This is what their father said to them as he blessed them,
blessing each with the blessing suitable to him.*

These prophetic blessings play a significant role in the development of the tribes of Israel.
There are obvious exceptions in Israel’s history.
It is not as though every individual Benjamite was a ravenous wolf.

But you may wonder, if Jacob only has one blessing,
then how come we have 12 blessings given here?!

Jacob's point has to do with Israel as a whole.

So even as he blesses Joseph with *the* blessing,
he is blessing each one with the blessing suitable to him.

Think about this:

After all, God the Father has only one blessing!

And he has given that one blessing to Jesus.

He has raised up Jesus and brought *him* into glory.

God has but one inheritance – and he has given *the whole* inheritance to him.

It is not that we receive a part of the inheritance –

rather, we receive *Jesus* – and all the inheritance in him!

That is the point of Jacob's blessing of Joseph –

and that is the point of the benediction in our worship.

It is not that we get a bunch of stuff.

We get Jesus!