

“SEEING AND GREETING THE PROMISES FROM AFAR”

**I. Introduction**

- A. This passage contains Jacob’s vision for the future of God’s covenant people.
  - 1. This is set forth in testamentary form as Jacob pronounces his blessings upon his sons.
  - 2. It is important to understand that the things that Jacob says here are not the product of his imagination.
  - 3. He is not being a sentimentalist or an ideologue, someone who wars against reality by projecting the reality that he would like to see in the world.
  - 4. Jacob’s words are prophetic in nature, foretelling the future of Israel, and ultimately of the church.
  - 5. One of the ways this is made evident is by his use of the phrase “in days to come” in Genesis 49:1, which is literally “in the latter days.”
  - 6. As the cross-references listed in the ESV show, all of the other Old Testament uses of this phrase occur in prophetic contexts.
- B. In addition to being prophetic, Jacob’s words were shaped by his faith in God’s promises.
  - 1. The author of Hebrews points this out when he notes that Jacob and the other patriarchs “all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.” (Heb. 11:13)

2. Jacob pronounced these blessings while he was living as a sojourner in Egypt, and when he knew that the day of his death was at hand.
3. Nevertheless, this passage shows us how his faith saw God's promises and greeted them from afar.

## II. Passing on the Birthright

- A. We begin by looking at chapter 48, where we see that before Jacob pronounced his blessings upon his twelve sons, he pronounced a special blessing upon Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh.
  1. To understand what is going on here, we have to remember the dreams that Joseph had back in chapter 37.
  2. Those dreams revealed that, although Joseph was the second-youngest of Jacob's twelve sons, he would be exalted above all the others.
  3. Here in chapter 48, Jacob legally adopts Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh, making them full heirs alongside his other sons.
  4. This results in Joseph receiving a double-portion of the inheritance, supplanting Reuben in the place of the firstborn.
  5. Because of this, when the Lord eventually brings his people into the Promised Land, the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh will be given their own allotments within the land.
- B. We should note the significance of the fact that Joseph brings his sons with him when he goes to see his ailing father.
  1. Joseph was in a position of great power in Egypt.
  2. His sons would have had everything they could have asked for.

3. But the thing that Joseph wanted most for his sons was not that they would be heirs of the riches of Egypt, but that they would be heirs of the covenant.
  4. This is evident in the fact that Joseph tells his father that these are the sons whom *God* has given him.
  5. Joseph acknowledges that they are a gift from God, and he wants them to be a part of the people of God.
  6. This should be the desire of every Christian parent.
  7. While we all want good things for our children, the thing that we should want more than anything else is that they will be heirs of the covenant and lay hold of Jesus Christ by faith.
  8. So let us be diligent in teaching our children God's ways, in setting a godly example for them, and in praying for them.
- C. As Jacob pronounced his blessings upon Joseph's sons, he purposely placed Ephraim before Manasseh.
1. Here is another example of the younger being placed over the older in the book of Genesis.
  2. Just as Jacob was chosen over Esau, and just as Joseph was placed above his brothers, Ephraim is placed ahead of Manasseh.
  3. Meredith Kline says that the Lord worked in this way in order to lay an emphasis upon the fact that "the covenant blessings are not secured by the course of nature but as sovereign gifts of God."  
[*Eerdmans Bible Commentary*, 112]
  4. God is free to distribute his gifts of grace as he pleases.
- D. In pronouncing these blessings upon his descendants, Jacob is declaring that the things that had been promised to him and his fathers will now be

passed on to his offspring.

1. This is a bit perplexing when we consider that God told Jacob and the other patriarchs that they would have the land of Canaan as their possession.
2. Jacob does not have possession of Canaan.
3. He isn't even living there.
4. How then can he confer it upon his sons?
5. He can do so because he is reaching out to God's promise from afar and laying hold of it by faith.
6. Though he does not yet possess it, he firmly believes that it will be his.
7. What was true for Jacob is also true for you.
8. Many of the things that God has promised you will not be fulfilled in your lifetime.
9. But this should not make your faith in those promises waver.
10. Like Jacob, you can be so certain of what God has promised that you can already consider it to be yours.

### **III. Foretelling What Shall Happen in Days to Come**

- A. We turn now to consider the blessings that Jacob pronounced upon his twelve sons.
  1. He begins with Reuben.

2. As Jacob's firstborn, Reuben held the position that would have made him first among all the heirs of the covenant promises.
  3. But Reuben forfeited this when he slept with his father's concubine.
  4. Reuben's ungoverned impulses cost him his status as firstborn.
  5. In fact, the things that his father says to him here sound more like curses than blessings.
  6. Nevertheless, Reuben is still a recipient of blessing, because he is still part of the covenant people.
  7. He is reprovved for his sin, but in the Lord's grace his sin has not disqualified him from the saving plan.
  8. This leads John Calvin to observe that "the Lord daily proves, in his own people, that the [chastisements] he lays upon them, although they occasion shame and disgrace, are so far from opposing their happiness, that they rather promote it... [T]he Lord blesses us more by [chastising] us, than he would have done by sparing us."
- B. Next, Jacob speaks to Simeon and Levi, his second and third sons.
1. The reason why Jacob addresses them together is because of their solidarity in the slaughter that they enacted upon the Shechemites in response to one man's rape of their sister Dinah.
  2. Because of that unjust act of vengeance, Jacob says that Simeon and Levi will be scattered in Israel.
  3. This is indeed what came to pass for both tribes, though in different ways.
  4. The tribe of Simeon was given its allotment of land within the region given to Judah, with the result that the Simeonites were

eventually assimilated into Judah.

5. As for the Levites, instead of being given their own tribal allotment they were scattered throughout the land in order that they might serve as the priestly tribe.
- C. After calling attention to how his first three sons had forfeited their right to the status of firstborn, Jacob turns to the next in line, Judah.
1. Judah's blessing is longer than any of the others, except for the blessing that is pronounced upon Joseph.
  2. Judah's blessing is also the greatest of the blessings, as it reveals that the Messiah will come from his line.
  3. This is surprising given that Joseph was Jacob's favorite.
  4. Joseph was also the most upright among the twelve, and his life was in many ways typological of Christ.
  5. Yet the Lord chose to bring the Messiah into the world through the tribe of Judah, the same Judah who had committed such a grievous sin with his daughter-in-law Tamar.
  6. In choosing Judah, the Lord underscored that salvation comes from him, and not from us.
- D. Jacob gives Judah the place of leadership within Israel, ascribing to him the scepter and the ruler's staff.
1. This became a reality when Judah's descendant David ascended to the throne and was promised an everlasting dynasty by God.
  2. Judah is also described by Jacob as a mighty and fearsome ruler, a lion crouching to leap upon his prey.

3. This too found fulfillment in the life of David, who led Israel to many victories over her enemies.
  4. But the ultimate victory would be secured by Jesus, the descendant of David who would accomplish the salvation of his people and rule over his enemies with a rod of iron.
- E. Jacob also says that the scepter will not depart from Judah “until tribute comes to him.”
1. An alternate translation is given in the ESV footnote, where the phrase is rendered, “until Shiloh comes.”
  2. While it is difficult to translate and interpret this phrase, the context indicates that it is a messianic prophecy.
  3. The name Shiloh is related to the Hebrew term for peace, so Jacob may be pointing to the fact that the Messiah will be the “Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6), ushering in the final and complete expression of the Davidic dynasty.
  4. The one thing that Jacob makes clear is that the Christ will come from the tribe of Judah.
  5. This is why the Gospel writers are so careful to point out that Jesus was descended from Judah.
- F. Jacob’s words about Judah also point to the universal extent of the Messiah’s kingdom.
1. He will not just be Israel’s Messiah.
  2. His dominion will be worldwide, as he will be the Savior and Lord of a people drawn from all over the earth.

3. As Jacob puts it, “the obedience of the peoples” will be rendered to him.
  4. This describes the reality that has been taking place ever since the day of Pentecost, as the Spirit of God is making the proclamation of the gospel bear fruit to the ends of the earth.
  5. And this will eventuate in the dawning of the age to come.
  6. This is envisioned in verse 11, where Jacob describes a world that will be so bountiful that people will use the best vines as tethers for their donkeys and will wash their clothes in wine instead of water.
- G. Compared to the blessings given to Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, and Joseph, the things that Jacob says about his other sons are quite brief.
1. Some of those blessings sound fairly positive, but some do not.
  2. Issachar will be enslaved by his neighbors.
  3. Gad will be raided.
  4. Benjamin will be like a ravenous wolf.
  5. The variation in the blessings that Jacob bestows upon his sons points to the history that lies ahead for the nation of Israel.
  6. While there will certainly be high points, there will be numerous low points as well.
- H. The blessing pronounced upon Joseph reflects Jacob’s great love for him.
1. Its imagery also recounts what happened to Joseph.
  2. He was like a defenseless man assaulted by a whole host of archers, but he was delivered by the hand of God.



3. As Jacob remembers the wondrous way in which the Lord helped Joseph and raised him up, he declares that the Lord has added blessing upon blessing to Joseph.
  4. The word “bless” is used by Jacob six times in the last two verses of Joseph’s blessing.
  5. There may be a play on Joseph’s name here, as the Hebrew word for his name means “to add” and the repetition of the word “bless” conveys the idea of blessings being added to blessings.
- I. We should also take note of the fact that in the midst of the blessing that he pronounces upon Joseph, Jacob acknowledges that the Lord has greatly blessed him.
1. He says to Joseph, “The blessings of your father are mighty beyond the blessings of my parents.”
  2. This should catch our attention.
  3. Seventeen years earlier, Jacob told Pharaoh that his days had not attained to the days of his fathers.
  4. At that time, he felt that his life did not measure up very well to the lives of his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham.
  5. But now, at the end of his life, he is able to see that the Lord has richly blessed him, and he is grateful for this.

#### IV. Waiting for God’s Salvation

- A. One final thing to point out in our consideration of this text is the statement that Jacob makes in between the blessings that he pronounces upon Dan and Gad.

1. In verse 18, the blessings are briefly paused, and Jacob speaks these words: "I wait for your salvation, O LORD."
  2. Amid his long litany of blessings, Jacob pauses to make this statement of faith.
  3. As he looks upon his sons and speaks these prophetic words concerning the future of God's kingdom, he realizes that there is only one way this is going to happen.
  4. Jacob knows his sons very well.
  5. Though we can see signs of progress in their sanctification, their lives were marked by a great deal of scandal and failure.
  6. This causes Jacob to realize that the only way God's plan is going to be carried out is if God is the one who carries it out.
- B. This is every bit as true today as it was then.
1. The salvation history prophesied in this passage is a salvation that is worked out in the lives of a wide array of persons.
  2. It began to unfold in the lives of Jacob's twelve sons.
  3. It continued to unfold in the lives of the people who belonged to the twelve tribes that came from those men.
  4. It continues to unfold today in the lives of those whom Christ incorporates into his body.
  5. And there is one thing that all of the individuals who share in this salvation have in common with each other.
  6. We are all sinners.

7. And because of this, we too have to look to the Lord and wait upon him to bring his saving work to completion.

**V. Conclusion**

- A. As far as the things of this life are concerned, no one knows what the future holds.
- B. But no matter what it holds, Christians always have a solid basis for hope.
- C. And our hope is not mere optimism.
- D. It is rooted in the unshakeable promises of our God.
- E. So let us see with the eyes of faith what we cannot see with our physical eyes.
- F. Let us greet it with faith.
- G. And let us wait for it with patience.