

Genesis 49:1-33

The Future of the Sons of Israel

Some of you are history buffs

- You know many important dates, events, and locations where historical milestones were made
- You are familiar with how these historical tidbits fit together in the flow of life

My Dad was like that

- He could quote many facts about the Civil War, for example
- I remember him recounting numerous stories, in vivid detail

But history can be subjective

- It can be interpreted in different ways

Not to overstate the obvious, but history is what has taken place in the past

- We look back at what has happened in the lives of others

This is why history can be subjective

- For example, someone who has a hatred of war will have a different perspective of the Civil War than someone who does not have a hatred of war

But what about the future?

- We can't look ahead and predict what will happen
- We can't know with certainty the nuances of future events

We are very limited in our knowledge of the past, present, and future

- But God is unlimited in His knowledge
- Hebrews 13:8 says, "**Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever**"

God has the ability to know with certainty what will happen in the future

- To Him, the future is as clear as the past

To God, all of time is history

- That's because it is His-story

This morning, we will see an example of how God revealed important aspects about the future to some individuals

Let's read Genesis 49:1-33

The book of Genesis is nearing its end

- This is the second to last chapter in this great book of beginnings

Jacob is literally on his deathbed

- His last words are these blessings which he bestows on his twelve children

What a privilege it was for Israel to have all 12 of his sons with him at his death

- What a privilege it was for the 12 sons to hear what their father had to say to them

Even though there is a blessing for each son, not every blessing is equal

- For some of the sons, not much is said
- For others, more detail is given

The order in which Israel blesses his children does not always reflect birth order

- The first six sons are the sons of Leah
- The next four sons are the sons of the concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah
- The last two sons are the sons of Rachel, Israel's beloved wife

So let's gather around and hear what father Israel says to his twelve children

¹ Then Jacob summoned his sons and said, "Assemble yourselves that I may tell you what shall befall you in the days to come. ² Gather together and hear, O sons of Jacob; and listen to Israel your father.

Jacob knows that his time on earth is limited

- He calls his sons to be near him

He wants to tell his sons "**what shall befall you in the days to come**"

- This is a phrase that is used in a number of prophetic passages¹
- It clearly has a futuristic sense here in Genesis 49

As Jacob blesses his sons, his words act as a type of prophecy

- There is no way that Jacob would know the future, unless God Himself had personally revealed this information to him

God used prophecy to sustain His people during times of disappointment and discouragement

- Prophecy encourages us to hope in God²

Israel knows the character of his sons

- His prophecies bear out this intimate knowledge

The Old Testament bears out the truth of these statements

- This gives validity to the prophetic statements of Jacob for his children

I. Reuben (49:3-4)

³ Reuben, you are my first-born; my might and the beginning of my strength, preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power.

Reuben is Jacob's first-born son

- Therefore, he is listed first in this series of blessings

¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 2*, 471.

² Allen P. Ross, *Creation & Blessing*, 698.

Jacob brags on his son with various terminology

- “my might”
- “the beginning of my strength”
- “preeminent in dignity”
- “preeminent in power”

Dad is really bragging on his first-born, isn't he?

- The first-born son was entitled to a double portion of the inheritance³

But Jacob has some other things to note about his first-born son

- Look at verse 4

⁴ Uncontrolled 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.

As lofty and exalted as the language was in verse 3, there is a dramatic contrast in verse 4

- Jacob's hopes and desires for his first-born are deflated

In Jacob's mind, Reuben is “uncontrolled as water”

- This is not a positive term

Reuben is compared to the instability of water

- Water is fine when it is confined
- But when water is out of confinement, it is out of control

Reuben displays this turbulent, reckless behavior⁴

- Impulsive
- Undisciplined
- Presumptuous

Why is Reuben compared to the instability of water?

- Verse 4 highlights a critical, moral lapse on the part of Reuben

Genesis 35 told us about this event

- While Jacob was away from home, Reuben had an illicit relationship with Bilhah, Jacob's concubine
- The only comment that was given at the time was, “Israel heard of it” (35:22)

Perhaps Reuben thought that this wasn't that big of a deal

- After all, it doesn't seem that his father did much in the way of reprimanding him
- If he did, we are not told of it in Scripture

But here is Reuben at the time of his father's blessing

- His sin is brought to the forefront
- He is stripped of leadership privileges

Biblical history shows that there was no judge or prophet who came from the tribe of Reuben⁵

³ Wenham, 471.

⁴ Kenneth A. Mathews, *NAC, Vol 1B*, 886.

- This tribe never significantly influenced the nation of Israel⁶

How sad to see such responsibility and privilege wasted

Dear church, let's learn a lesson from Reuben

- You may seem to get away with something for a while
- However, you didn't slip it past the ever-watching eye of God

I think that the day of future accountability will show many similar situations like Reuben

- Some of our good works will be burned up in the fire of God's evaluation
- Some of our works will endure

How Reuben serves as an example of the need to lead lives of integrity, honesty, holiness, and humility

- What is done in secret may very well be exposed in public!

II. Simeon and Levi (49:5-7)

⁵ Simeon and Levi are brothers; their swords are implements of violence. ⁶ Let my soul not enter into their council; let not my glory be united with their assembly; because in their anger they slew men, and in their self-will they lamed oxen.

Simeon and Levi are Jacob's next two sons, given in birth order

- This is the only time in this chapter where two brothers are given the same blessing

We learn from this that Simeon and Levi must have had similar character and conduct

- They undoubtedly acted with similar intentions and motivations

Reuben has disqualified himself from serving as the leader

- We would expect Simeon or Levi to be appointed to this leadership function
- But not so

Simeon and Levi were "partners in crime"

- Israel says of them, "**their swords are implements of violence**"
- These two sons were violent men, filled with revenge and rage

These brothers are treacherous, violent men

- They are governed by their temper

We recall how these sons of Israel had a sister named Dinah

- Genesis 34 told how Shechem, a Hivite, raped Dinah
- This greatly upset the sons of Israel
- But Simeon and Levi took personal revenge and killed every male in the city of Shechem (34:25)

This fit of rage didn't escape Israel's notice, especially at the time of their blessing

- Just like Reuben, their actions disqualified themselves from any type of leadership role

⁵ W.H. Griffith-Thomas, *Genesis: A Devotional Commentary*, 470.

⁶ John J. Davis, *Paradise to Prison*, 296.

⁷ Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; and their wrath, for it is cruel. I will disperse them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel.

Instead of a positive blessing, Israel issued a curse upon their anger

- Verse 7 speaks of their future, “**I will disperse them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel**”

These two tribes would be separated from one another, lest they act out in revenge toward other people

- Yet, in the mercy of God, Levi would act as the priestly tribe of Israel
- But they would not own any permanent land in Canaan, thereby fulfilling this prophecy of Israel

III. Judah (49:8-12)

⁸ Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down to you.

So far, we have had three sons who have disqualified themselves because of their actions

- But not so with Judah

The blessing given to Judah is the second longest of the twelve sons

- Only the blessing given to Joseph is longer

There is much in this blessing that we won't be able to cover

- We will only hit the high spots

Judah's blessing would result in his brothers praising him

- Judah's very name means “praise”⁷
- What was given to Joseph will not be given to the lineage of Judah

Judah would experience success over his adversaries

- Israel told him that his hand would “**be on the neck of your enemies**”

⁹ Judah is a lion's whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He couches, he lies down as a lion, and as a lion, who dares rouse him up?

Israel compares Judah to a lion

- This is one of the most powerful animals on Earth
- It is strong, ferocious, agile, quick, and intimidating

Verse 9 describes a lion who has captured his prey and has returned to his lair

- Who would dare mess with such a fierce animal?

This rhetorical question highlights the type of victory and intimidation that Judah and his future lineage would enjoy

⁷ Derek Kidner, *Tyndale OT Commentaries, Genesis*, 219.

¹⁰ The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.

Israel also speaks of Judah as having kingly ancestors

- The “**scepter**” and “**the ruler’s staff**” were symbols of kingship⁸

We know that it is from the tribe of Judah that King David would emerge

- He was a great king

But there would be a greater King after David

- That is Jesus Christ

I don’t think that it is coincidental that when John sees a vision of heaven in Revelation 5, one of the elders tells him, “**Stop weeping; behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome so as to open the book and its seven seals**” (5:5)⁹

- Notice the reference to “**Lion,**” “**tribe of Judah,**” and “**the Root of David**”

The genealogy in Matthew 1 shows that Jesus Christ was from the tribe of Judah through Joseph

¹¹ He ties his foal to the vine, and his donkey's colt to the choice vine; He washes his garments in wine, and his robes in the blood of grapes. ¹² His eyes are dull from wine, and his teeth white from milk.

Verses 11-12 speak of a future day of great prosperity and abundance

- Wine would be as plentiful as water

There is some question about what “**Shiloh**” meant back in verse 10

- It is thought to be a personal reference to the future Messiah

When the King comes to rule His people, there will be a great abundance

- Some have seen this as a reference to the future Millennial Kingdom, when Jesus Christ will rule and reign on the Earth for 1000 years as spoken of in Revelation 20

Let’s think about these first four sons of Israel

- Reuben disqualified himself by sinning with Bilhah
- Simeon and Levi disqualified themselves by slaughtering the Shechemites

But what about Judah?¹⁰

- He was the one who came up with the plan to sell Joseph instead of killing him
- Judah also raped a Canaanite woman (38:1)
- He also sinned with his daughter-in-law, Tamar, by not allowing her to marry his son, Shelah (38:11)

Why should he be allowed to be the leader of the tribes of Israel?

- Why should his tribe be the one from whom the Messiah would come?

⁸ Ross, 703.

⁹ Kidner, 218.

¹⁰ Davis, 297.

The short answer is that God's grace abounds toward the unworthy

- None of the 12 sons of Israel was perfect
- None of the 12 sons of Israel was worthy

God chose to exalt Himself by choosing the tribe of Judah

We also notice that in later years, Judah does show some level of repentance

- Judah puts his own life on the line when he asks his father to send Benjamin with them on their return trip to Egypt (43:9)

IV. Zebulun (49:13)

¹³ Zebulun shall dwell at the seashore; and he shall be a haven for ships, and his flank shall be toward Sidon.

Not much is said about the next six (6) sons

- Therefore, our exposition of these verses will be more of a summary

Zebulun would dwell near the commercial shoreline

- He would be enriched by trade by the sea

V. Issachar (49:14-15)

¹⁴ Issachar is a strong donkey, lying down between the sheepfolds. ¹⁵ When he saw that a resting place was good and that the land was pleasant, he bowed his shoulder to bear burdens, and became a slave at forced labor.

Issachar is also compared to an animal

- “a strong donkey”

When we think of a donkey, we oftentimes think of their stubbornness

- But in the case of Issachar, the strength of a donkey is in view

Donkeys can carry an extremely large amount of weight

- They are frequently used to carry supplies

While Issachar was strong like a donkey, they were also complacent

- This tribe would not always exhibit maximum energy and effort

As a result of this, this tribe would become “a slave at forced labor”

- He would choose the easier way of living¹¹
- They would willingly trade freedom for luxury¹²

¹¹ Leon J. Wood, *A Shorter Commentary on Genesis*, 146.

¹² Ross, 705.

VI. Dan (49:16-18)

¹⁶ Dan shall judge his people, as one of the tribes of Israel. ¹⁷ Dan shall be a serpent in the way, a horned snake in the path, that bites the horse's heels, so that his rider falls backward.

The name “Dan” literally means “judge”

- This tribe would judge the people of God

The tribe of Dan is compared to an animal, “a serpent”

- More specifically, “a horned snake in the path”

This snake would seem small and insignificant

- Yet, it would be capable of making a strategic attack
- In the example of Israel, the snake could bite a horse’s heel and cause the rider to fall backward

When we hear reference to “heel,” we think of Jacob, who grabbed his brother’s heel during birth¹³

Israel was judged for 20 years by Samson

- Samson was from the tribe of Dan¹⁴

The tribe of Dan was small

- But it would a powerful tribe¹⁵

It is significant that in Revelation 7, when the tribes of Israel are mentioned, Dan is absent¹⁶

¹⁸ For Thy salvation I wait, O LORD.

It seems that verse 18 is out of place, doesn’t it?

- But it is in place if you look at the context

This statement about waiting for God’s salvation seems very pertinent after a comment about a serpent

- This same word for serpent was used back in Genesis 3 of Satan

What did God tell the serpent after the Fall of man?

- “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel” (Gen 3:15)

The beginning of Genesis speaks of this promise of redemption in reference to a serpent

- The close of Genesis ends by speaking of redemption in reference to a serpent

Israel fully trusted in the LORD to provide this redemption

- But he expresses his desire for the tribes of Israel to have this same attitude of expectancy and hope

This is the first and only time in Genesis that this word for “salvation” is used¹⁷

- This is the Hebrew word *Yeshuah*

¹³ Victor P. Hamilton, NICOT, *Genesis 18-50*, 670.

¹⁴ Davis, 300.

¹⁵ Ross, 705.

¹⁶ Kidner, 220.

¹⁷ Henry M. Morris, *The Genesis Record*, 658.

God would ultimately come and provide this salvation by sending His Son, Jesus Christ

- He would be born of a virgin
- He would live a perfect life
- He would die, offering His life a ransom for the sins of those who would believe
- He would be raised on the third day, signifying His victory over death, hell, and the grave

Here is Israel, on his deathbed, desiring that the tribes of Israel experience this same trust in God

VII. Gad (49:19)

¹⁹ As for Gad, raiders shall raid him, but he shall raid *at* their heels.

The tribe of Gad would be constantly attacked by his enemies, the Ammonites and the desert intruders¹⁸

- However, the tribe would fight back and ultimately triumph

In the Hebrew, these sentence consists of six words

- Four of these six words are a wordplay on the name of Gad

We remember from Genesis 30:11 that Gad means “fortune”

- The tribe of Gad would be blessed by military victories¹⁹

The fact that Gad is known for attacking his enemies’ heels tells us that he was strategic in military encounters

- He would use the surprise attack from behind to gain victory²⁰

VIII. Asher (49:20)

²⁰ As for Asher, his food shall be rich, and he shall yield royal dainties.

Asher settled in a very fertile area

- This tribe had access to trade routes to the sea

Therefore, this tribe enjoyed rich delicacies

- They enjoyed great abundance and prosperity

IX. Naphtali (49:21)

²¹ Naphtali is a doe let loose, he gives beautiful words.

This could be a veiled reference to the military triumphs that this tribe would enjoy in the future

- They would be able to maneuver like a deer, evading the attacks of their enemies²¹

¹⁸ Hamilton, 672.

¹⁹ Ross, 705-06.

²⁰ Mathews, 901.

²¹ Wood, 147.

X. Joseph (49:22-26)

²² Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring; its branches run over a wall.

The blessing for Joseph is the longest of the twelve sons

- We have known that Joseph was Jacob's favorite
- So this doesn't come as a complete surprise

Israel compares Joseph to a "fruitful bough"

- You could substitute "vine" for "bough"

Notice that Joseph and his tribe will be "fruitful"

- They will prosper
- They will be abundant

Israel portrays Joseph as a vine whose "branches run over a wall"

- This vine is growing so that it can't be contained by a wall

²³ The archers bitterly attacked him, and shot at him and harassed him; ²⁴ but his bow remained firm, and his arms were agile.

As we have seen throughout the second half of Genesis, Joseph's life has not been the smoothest

- There have been many bumps along his path

Israel speaks of Joseph's "archers" who "shot at him and harassed him"

- Obviously, this is metaphorical language

Israel could be speaking about Joseph's own brothers who hated him so much that they sold him for pocket change

- Or Israel could have had some future enemies of Joseph in mind

Regardless of who his enemies are, Joseph would be resilient

- "his bow remained firm, and his arms were agile"

from the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob (from there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel), ²⁵ from the God of your father who helps you, and by the Almighty who blesses you with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that lies beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb.

It is in the blessing of Joseph that Israel makes the most allusions to God

- "the Mighty One of Jacob"
- "the Shepherd"
- "the Stone of Israel"

Israel has already spoken of God as his Shepherd when he spoke to Joseph in 48:15

- Now he repeats that same imagery as he blesses Joseph in front of his brothers

These three images of God speak of His character and dependability

- “**the Mighty One of Jacob**” – speaks of God’s power
- “**the Shepherd**” – speaks of God’s protection and provision
- “**the Stone of Israel**” – speaks of God’s stability and strength

Joseph’s blessings would come about through supernatural provision and assistance²²

- Not through his personal effort, talents, abilities, and charisma

²⁶ The blessings of your father have surpassed the blessings of my ancestors up to the utmost bound of the everlasting hills; may they be on the head of Joseph, and on the crown of the head of the one distinguished among his brothers.

Joseph was given a double blessing

- This is because Ephraim and Manasseh were both adopted by Israel so that they were on equal terms with the other sons of Israel
- Thus, Ephraim and Manasseh each received ½ of the double blessing²³

Verses 25-26 contain six (6) references to the root word “**ble**ss**”²⁴**

- This repetition acts like the finale of a fireworks display
- We can’t miss the significance of this repetition of “ble**ss**,” which is one of the key thoughts and themes of the book of Genesis²⁵

XI. Benjamin (49:27)

²⁷ Benjamin is a ravenous wolf; in the morning he devours the prey, and in the evening he divides the spoil.

Benjamin is the fifth son to be compared to an animal

- Judah is compared to a lion
- Issachar is compared to a donkey
- Dan is compared to a serpent
- Naphtali is compared to a doe
- Benjamin is compared to a wolf

Benjamin was the last son born to Israel

- As you remember, Rachel died during the birth of Benjamin

But Israel predicts that the tribe of Benjamin would be like a “**ravenous wolf**”

- He would be an aggressive people
- He would devour his prey

The tribe of Benjamin was known for being mighty warriors

- They were some of the finest archers in their time (Jdg 20:16)²⁶

²² Ross, 707.

²³ Ross, 708-09.

²⁴ Mathews, 907.

²⁵ Wenham, 486.

²⁶ Davis, 301.

We know some of the more famous individuals from this tribe²⁷

- Ehud
- King Saul
- Jonathan
- The apostle Paul

²⁸ All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father said to them when he blessed them. He blessed them, every one with the blessing appropriate to him.

Verse 28 is more like a summary statement

- This entire chapter is Israel speaking
- No one else speaks

The end of verse 28 records the words, “**He blessed them, every one with the blessing appropriate to him**”

- For some of these sons, what Israel said didn’t appear to be a blessing

Yet, he had something to say for every single son

- No one was left out²⁸

The blessing was appropriate to each one

- Israel knew their character
- God knew their future

²⁹ Then he charged them and said to them, “I am about to be gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, ³⁰ in the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, which is before Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought along with the field from Ephron the Hittite for a burial site. ³¹ There they buried Abraham and his wife Sarah, there they buried Isaac and his wife Rebekah, and there I buried Leah – ³² the field and the cave that is in it, purchased from the sons of Heth.”

Israel has already received a binding promise from Joseph that Israel’s body would be returned to Canaan after his death

- Joseph had the authority and resources to make sure that this was taken care of

But Israel repeats this statement before all twelve of his sons

- He wanted to make sure that everyone knew what his desires were

Israel tells his sons that he wants to be buried “**in the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, which is before Mamre, in the land of Canaan**” (49:30)

- We were told about this purchase back in Genesis 23
- This is where Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, and Leah were buried

Once again, we are reminded of Israel’s faith in the covenant-keeping God

- He was sure that God would return His people back to the Promised Land
- Even in his burial, Israel desired to be in the land of Canaan, the land of promise²⁹

²⁷ Davis, 301.

²⁸ Mathews, 910.

²⁹ Mathews, 914.

It is significant that Rachel is not mentioned at all in chapter 49

- Israel would not be buried with his beloved wife
- Rather, he would be buried with Leah, his lesser loved wife

³³ When Jacob finished charging his sons, he drew his feet into the bed and breathed his last, and was gathered to his people.

As soon as Israel finished speaking these words, “**he drew his feet into the bed and breathed his last**”

- He died immediately after blessing his sons

The last verse of chapter 49 gives closure to this patriarch

- Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have all died and were “**gathered to his people**”

Only God knows the future

- He has infinite, perfect knowledge of what will take place in our lives
- If we have such knowledge, it would be self-destructive

The series of movies entitled *Back to the Future* give real evidence to this fact

- If we knew what would happen to a friend or a loved one, we could literally alter history forever

Thankfully, God has not given that knowledge to mankind

- That is a right reserved exclusively for God alone

In the Bible, God has given us certainty about some future events

- When God speaks about these matters, we can be sure that they will come true

For those individuals who refuse to submit to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, the Bible speaks clearly about their future

- They will be cast into a literal lake of fire
- They will spend eternity separated from the presence of God

For those individuals who have submitted to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, the Bible speaks clearly about their future

- They will enjoy fellowship with God forever
- They will worship and exalt God in heaven – along with the angels, believers from all ages, and other created beings

Eternity is for forever

- God has told us plainly what will happen

Friend, God knows your heart

- He knows everything about you

I would ask and exhort you to submit your life to Jesus Christ today

- Turn to Him in obedience, asking Him to change your life
- Confess Him as the Source of salvation, just as Israel did
- Repent of your sinful lifestyle and trust that He will enable you to do that