

**Poetry, Praise and Promise: Jacob's Last Words**  
**Genesis 49**  
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church  
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**On Last Words and First Observations**

Then Jacob called his sons and said, “Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you what shall happen to you in days to come. <sup>2</sup>“Assemble and listen, O sons of Jacob, listen to Israel your father.

Genesis 49 tells us Jacob's last words to his sons. His words are surprising. There is power in them. His words are based in part on his sons' character and past actions. We see the family tension. Some of his words represent the settling of scores. His words give blessing and instruction. Jacob's words capture each son's identity. And, there is an element of prophesy. Each of his twelve sons will in turn found one of the twelve tribes of Israel. Each tribe will reflect its ancestors' character and personality. Jacob moves, for the most part, from the oldest to the youngest. His words are in the form of poetry. For this reason, his meaning is sometimes difficult to interpret. He uses wordplay and many of the Hebrew words in this chapter are found only here. One unmistakable message in Jacob's words is that sons Joseph and Judah will outshine the others.

We will look, very briefly, at Jacob's words to each son. But before we do so, I want to make three general observations. First, God's covenant people are a mixed bag.

**God's Covenant People are a Mixed Bag**

This sermon will be a bit all over the map. The reason for that is that God's people are all over the map. I will illustrate this in a way that you may find surprising: but it is a truth we must remember.

Every four years, in September, in anticipation of the coming presidential election in November, I find myself longing for the good old days when the nations of our world were governed by a hereditary monarchy. ☺ Note the following observation regarding our current election choice: both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump affirm the Christian faith. Both are members of their respective churches. And, for both, there is evidence supporting their respective claims to the Christian faith. In saying this, I am not making a political statement. I am not telling you whom you should vote for. I am saying that God's people are a mixed bag. And that is okay. The differences between the twelve sons of Jacob illustrate this truth. God uses all kinds of people.

Related to this, God relates to his covenant people individually.

**God relates to his Covenant People Individually**

In Jacob's testimony, each son is named. Each tribe is distinctive. Each is unique. Some are leaders. Some are strong. Others are weak. Some of the tribes eventually disappear. I will talk about two of the disappearances later in this sermon.

The same observations can be made regarding the church. Some churches are small; others are large. Some Christians are strong; others are weak. Over time, the story of the church changes. It was Christianity that shaped and formed modern Europe. Yet when the constitution of the European Union was approved, it made no mention of Jesus Christ, or even of God. The power and vitality of the church in our day is shifting to the global south: Africa, Asia and South America.

Nonetheless, for all the changes happening in our world among the people of the covenant, God still relates to his people individually. Jacob names each son individually. Together, they make up the covenant community. They have different backgrounds, different characters, and different temperaments. Each brother is given his own prophesy. Each is named individually. Each has a role to play: some for good, others less so. And, God himself is only mentioned in relationship to Joseph's prophesy.

This leads to another important general observation: God works through blended, broken, intact and dysfunctional families.

### **God works through blended, broken, intact, and dysfunctional families**

In the modern world we have watched the breakup of the Christian consensus that shaped the cultures of Europe, North and South America. The New Testament teaching is that the norm, the standard, for family relations is one man, one woman, married, together with their children. We believe this vision still has worth and validity. But the world around us rejects it.

The world is broken. The good news is that God works through brokenness. God works through dysfunctional families. Jacob had two wives: Rachel and Leah. He clearly preferred Rachel over Leah, to Leah's heartbreak. He also had two concubines: Bilhah (Rachel's maid) and Zilpah (Leah's maid). The twelve sons, the twelve tribes, are the product of different mothers and the same father. This was not an ideal family. But God was at work in and through it nonetheless.

Let us look at Jacob's prophesy for his sons. We will make twelve quick observations: one from each son.

### **Twelve Quick Observations (One each from each of the twelve sons of Jacob)**

First, Reuben, do not be your own worst enemy.

#### **Rueben – Do not be your own worst enemy**

Unstable as water, you shall not have preeminence, because you went up to your father's bed;

Reuben is the oldest of Jacob's sons and, given the rules of primogeniture, should have inherited privileges of rank and authority over his brothers. However, Reuben was also guilty of a grave sin, having seduced one of his father's concubines. He lost his privileges as eldest son. Jacob names Reuben's sin plainly. [Indeed, Jacob offers only negative judgment upon his three oldest sons.] Jacob describes Reuben as *watery*. He lacks substance and backbone. Reuben's fall is a consequence of his own choice. He brought this upon himself. Reuben's message, to all of us, but especially the young people among us is this: "Do not do things that will mess up and risk your future." Reuben has only himself to blame for his fall.

Next among the sons of Jacob is Simeon. He teaches us to get our anger under control or be destroyed.

### **Simeon – Get your anger under control or be destroyed**

"Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords.

In Genesis 34 we are told of how Jacob's daughter, Dinah, is seduced (raped?) by a Canaanite prince named Shechem. We are told that Shechem loved Dinah and desired her as his wife. Negotiations are entered into between Jacob and Shechem's father, Hamor; and an agreement is reached. Among the terms of the agreement was that the men of Hamor's town agreed to be circumcised. Three days after the men of the town are circumcised, Simeon and Levi come to town with their swords drawn, massacring Hamor, Shechem and all the men of the town. Jacob is ashamed. He curses his two sons for their use of violence saying, 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. Jacob's words are fulfilled, literally. The tribe of Simeon was small. Its allotment of land was surrounded by the much larger land of Judah. The tribe quickly disappears. Jesus said to Peter at the time of Jesus' arrest (Matthew 26:52), "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Anger and violence breed their own destruction.

Another of the twelve tribes will disappear spiritually. We will look at that when we turn our attention to the tribe of Dan.

Simeon was joined in the atrocity against Hamor and his city by his brother Levi. Jacob's curse on Levi is different. Get your anger under control or be dispersed.

### **Levi – Get your anger under control or be dispersed**

I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel.

The tribe of Levi does not disappear. Many modern Jews can trace their ancestry to Levi and his tribe. How is it that the Levites survive as a tribe and the descendants of Simeon do not? The answer to that question is very interesting.

During the age of wind driven man-o-war sailing ships, a captain and his ship might be at sea for months, perhaps even years. Keeping a happy ship was a challenging task. If dissatisfaction were to set in, the crew became unhappy, the possibility of mutiny would arise. Hearing reports of an unhappy, potentially mutinous and violent crew, an admiral might order a ship's company dispersed, reassigned. The men of the unhappy ship would be sent out in groups of twenty to sixty, reassigned to other vessels. In this way their mutinous and violent impulses would be dispersed and lessened.

In his providence, God disperses the tribe of Levi. When the people of Israel enter the Promised Land under Joshua, the Levites are not given an allotment of land for their own. The Levites are the pastors of the ancient people of Israel. As pastors, God spreads them out among the people. The tribe of Levi is divided up and assigned to forty-eight cities spread throughout the Promised Land. Like manure, if the tribe of Levi had been put in one place, they would have caused more trouble: spread out across the land, they did much good.

Jacob begins now to address some sons who provide happier prospects. For Zebulun the message is: work hard and be a blessing to others.

### **Zebulun – Work hard and be a blessing to others**

“Zebulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea; he shall become a haven for ships,

Jacob's words on Zebulun are in reference to business and trade: ships and the sea shore. Business and trade is how wealth is created. Zebulun is an illustration of an ordinary person engaged in his craft, discharging his duty, buying and selling and so making the economy move along. Zebulun might be today an illustration of what we might call the middle class. If you are blessed by God, seek to be a blessing to others. When the Apostle Paul is about to leave Ephesus, he gives a speech to the elders of the church, telling them (Acts 20:35): In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’ ”

To his son Issachar, Jacob says, “Starting well is good; ending well is better.”

### **Issachar – Starting well is Good: Ending well is better**

“Issachar is a strong donkey,

Issachar starts out as a strong donkey. However, Jacob goes on saying, 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. He starts as a strong donkey but ends as a lazy sod. How you end matters. Start well, but also seek to end well.

To his son Gad, Jacob tells him that enemies may abound, but God will uphold you.

## **Gad – Enemies may abound but God will uphold you**

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

Jacob prophesies a challenging time ahead for Gad and his descendants: “Raiders shall raid Gad.” But God will give as good as he gets: “but [Gad] shall raid at their heels.” Jacob is saying to Gad (and to us): “Do you feel like you are surrounded by enemies?” If so, look to God. He will help you to stand. The prophet Isaiah speaks a further word of encouragement to God’s people as they face the challenge of God’s enemies: “no weapon that is fashioned against you shall succeed, and you shall refute every tongue that rises against you in judgment. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD and their vindication from me, declares the LORD.” The message to Gad is to be strong in the Lord.

The next two sons point to enjoying the pleasures of life. We meet Asher, the first foodie.

## **Asher – The first foodie**

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

There is a place for royal delicacies and rich food in life. God blessed Asher in this regard. It is all right to be a foodie. There is nothing wrong with, properly, pursuing the finer things of life.

If we could transport Jacob’s sons to the present day, we would find son Naphtali as a celebrity contestant on Dancing with the Stars.

## **Naphtali – Dancing with the Stars**

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

Remember, Jacob’s words are poetry. They are suggestive. Jacob’s words are of a doe, a fawn: Bambi dancing in the woods. Naphtali is what we today might call “a free spirit.” He sings. He dances to his own drumbeat. The image beautiful fawns for Naphtali might be the suggestion of *beautiful words*. Naphtali is a poet. He speaks well.

Next, Jacob addresses his most famous son, Joseph: make room for God in your life.

## **Joseph – Make room for God in your Life**

by the God of your father who will help you, by the Almighty who will bless you

All of Jacob’s words in Genesis 49 are intended to be understood against the backdrop of God’s covenantal promises to the Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God is present, but not explicitly so, except in the prophecy given to Joseph. Why is God explicitly mentioned in Jacob’s words to Joseph? I believe there are two reasons.

Beginning in Genesis 39:2, and repeated at several points in Joseph's story, we are told "The Lord was with Joseph." This is an important point in Joseph's story, for he faced various trials. He was sold into slavery by his brothers, falsely accused by Potiphar's wife, and the promise given to him by Pharaoh's cup bearer was soon forgotten. Even so, Joseph rises to become the number two man in the country of Egypt. This is a remarkable providence only explainable by the words "The Lord was with Joseph." God has been with Joseph throughout his life story and, Jacob tells him, the God of your father who will help you, by the Almighty who will bless you. Joseph's success and status is not due to his own cleverness or skill. It is the blessing of God. It was because of God that Joseph flourished. This is the first reason God is explicitly mentioned in the prophesy of Joseph.

Jacob also mentions God because, of the twelve brothers, Joseph is the one most tempted to walk away from the covenant between God and the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. You wonder, "Pastor Mark, how do you know that?" Recall, as we looked in past weeks, when Joseph is interacting with his brothers before they know who in fact he is, that Joseph is fully and completely an Egyptian. A key reason they do not recognize Joseph is because he has embraced the culture of Egypt. He is assimilated. It is easy to imagine Joseph forgetting the God of his father Jacob and accepting the idols and gods of Egypt. Jacob included references to God in his prophesy to Joseph in order to remind him not to forget the God of Abraham, Isaac and his father Jacob.

Next, Jacob tells Benjamin, his youngest son, stay hungry.

### **Benjamin – Stay Hungry**

in the morning devouring the prey and at evening dividing the spoil."

The imagery for Benjamin is that of a small tribe that is very aggressive, wolf-like, benefiting from its aggressive attitude – devouring prey in the morning, dividing spoil at night. Jacob could be saying to Benjamin: work hard. It pays off. In the evening enjoy the benefits of the effort you put in in the daytime.

Did you notice that I have skipped two of the sons as we moved through Jacob's blessing? I did so deliberately. These two sons offer contrasting spiritual lessons to us. The two I have skipped till now are Dan and Judah. Theirs is a message of warning and hope to us.

For Dan, the message is that the law alone is not enough.

### **Dan – The Law Alone is not Enough**

"Dan shall judge his people

Jacob declares "Dan shall judge his people." The tribe of Dan was associated with the law. Samson, the most flamboyant of the biblical judges was from Dan. Regrettably, in addition to being associated with the law, Dan is also associated with idolatry.

Visiting the region of Dan in the modern state of Israel today is fun. Dan is located in the north, where it is very green and there is lots of water – which is not the case in most of the rest of modern Israel. It is in the region of Dan that the Jordan River begins. You can see there a cliff wall where multiple niches have been carved in the past for the purpose of displaying pagan idols. The idols themselves are no longer present. They are probably on display in various museums. It does not take a trained archeologist to see the many niche's carved in the cliff wall. Thus, the message of the tribe of Dan is that the Law is not enough. If you worship anyone but God revealed through the Lord Jesus and you miss the mark.

In the Book of Revelation, chapter 7, John is given a vision of the covenant community worshipping God in heaven. John sees the twenty-four elders, symbolizing the twelve tribes of the Israel from the Old Covenant and the twelve disciples of Jesus from the New Covenant. These are God's people from the Old and new Covenants who worship at his throne in heaven. Chapter 7 names the twelve tribes of Israel. However, read the list carefully and you will see that the tribe of Dan is missing. (It names one of Joseph's sons instead.) Dan's absence underscores that those who rely upon the law will not stand in God's presence. What we need is grace, not law.

And that brings us to the last son of Jacob whom we will look at – Judah: serve king Jesus.

### **Judah – Serve King Jesus**

The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,

As we noted earlier, the two dominant sons of Jacob are Joseph and Judah. Will the leadership of the clan pass through Joseph – the second most powerful man in the world of his day? Or will it pass to Judah, Jacob's fourth born son? Where is the future of the clan? In Canaan or in Egypt? Jacob answers the question clearly: The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet." The future is with Judah and his descendants.

In past weeks we looked at the story of Judah in detail. We studied his conversion experience, told in Genesis 38. We noted how Judah's change of heart was revealed in his subsequent interactions with both his brothers and his, as yet unrevealed, brother Joseph. In this, the contrast between Judah and Joseph is emblematic of the choice given to all people in the search for salvation. On one hand, Joseph is a man of the world. He possesses great worldly political power. He is effective. By his management of the surpluses of Egypt's grain he saves many from dying during the seven years of famine.

In contrast, Judah is emblematic of the saving power of God's grace. We saw how Judah is a changed man as a consequence of his encounter with God via the wisdom of his daughter-in-law Tamar. His life is changed. Jacob tells us that the scepter belongs to Judah. God begins to reveal that from Judah's descendants will come the kings of Israel. Judah's line will bring the great king, David. Eventually, from his line, will

come a special king – the Anointed One – the Messiah. The Messiah will bring not bread and grain, but the food of eternal life. His sacrifice will gain victory over death and the power of sin.

Every person has a choice. Where will you place your faith. Many today want another Joseph, someone who will take care of them physically, meet their needs for food, shelter and clothing. Some understand that they first face a deeper, more intractable problem: the need for grace to overcome sin and separation from God. I am inviting you to come to Christ today. Place your faith in him. Believe in him and be saved.

Say “Amen!” Somebody.



## Genesis 49

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

- 2 “Assemble and listen, O sons of Jacob,  
listen to Israel your father.
- 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!
- 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 hamstringed oxen.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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?
- 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.
- 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.
- 13 “Zebulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea;  
he shall become a haven for ships,  
and his border shall be at Sidon.

- 14 “Issachar is a strong donkey,  
crouching between the sheepfolds.
- 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.
- 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.
- 18 I wait for your salvation, O LORD.
- 19 “Raiders shall raid Gad,  
but he shall raid at their heels.
- 20 “Asher’s food shall be rich,  
and he shall yield royal delicacies.
- 21 “Naphtali is a doe let loose  
that bears beautiful fawns.
- 22 “Joseph is a fruitful bough,  
a fruitful bough by a spring;  
his branches run over the wall.
- 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,  
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.
- 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.
- 27 “Benjamin is a ravenous wolf,  
in the morning devouring the prey  
and at evening dividing the spoil.”