



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## The Testament of Jacob

Genesis 49:1-28

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This morning we come to the penultimate chapter of Genesis. And as I said last week, while these long and detailed accounts of Jacob blessing his sons and of his death may seem dry and unimportant after all the drama of Joseph's story, they're actually the point at which the storyline of Genesis reaches its crescendo. We're prone to looking at the stories told in Genesis as disconnected events. Unfortunately, the Bible storybooks we read from the time we're children teach us to look at the Bible this way. It doesn't help that due to time, we're stuck studying the Bible in snippets too. But one of the things I hope you've seen as we've been studying Genesis is the connectedness of all these stories—in fact, that they're not the stories of Abraham or Jacob or Joseph, but ultimately God's story. God's story in the Bible begins with the blessing of creation and humanity's rejection of that blessing. The rest of the story reveals God's unfolding plan to restore his original blessing to us.

God's blessing brackets Jacob's life. He was born a son of Abraham—a son of God's covenant. Most of his life is the story of God working to capture Jacob, who was born blind to covenant grace, just as we all are. But now, at the end, we see that God has captured Jacob's attention and as his life ends, Jacob passes the covenant and all of the promises and hopes associate with it to his sons. And those sons are a mixed bag. Joseph understood covenant grace as a youth. His brothers did not. Through trials and tribulations, God captured Judah and opened his eyes to his covenant grace. But we know very little—if

anything—of Jacob's other sons. God was pursuing all of them, but at this point, some may still have been blind to God's grace. But Jacob *knew* and because he knew he had *hope* that God would fulfil his promises through his sons. And so in this last testament of Jacob, the storyteller brings us back to the main theme of Genesis: God's plan is to restore the lost blessing through Abraham's seed.

Look now at Genesis 49:1-2:

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

These are words that point to the future and to the final fulfilment of God's promise of blessing. In our translation, Jacob gathers his sons to tell them what will happen to them in “days to come”. The Hebrew literally refers to the “last” or “latter days”. It's a phrase that's used several times in the Pentateuch—in the first five books of the Old Testament. It's a phrase also used by Balaam in the book of Numbers (24:14) and in the last words of Moses (Deuteronomy 31:29). And in all three of these instances, the “last days” described are the time when God will fulfil his promises and deliver his people.

These are passage that point ahead to the coming of a king who will deliver his people. Here, in verse 10, Jacob foretells that this king will come from the tribe of Judah.

Jacob addresses his sons more or less in the order of their birth. He begins with Reuben, the oldest. Reuben had already felt his father's disapproval, but Jacob addresses him first anyway. I can imagine Reuben being suddenly full of new hope as Jacob speaks his first words:

**“Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, and the firstfruits of my strength, preeminent in dignity and**

**preeminent in power.”** (Genesis 49:3)

Jacob begins with an affirmation of what was Reuben's right by birth, but then he goes on:

**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!”** (Genesis 49:4)

By birth, Reuben was preeminent in dignity and power. He was the firstborn and his was the leadership of the family when Jacob died. But because he tried to usurp his father's authority by sleeping with his concubine, that preeminence has been taken away. Reuben may be the oldest of Jacob's sons, but the inheritance that went with being the firstborn is being given to another.

In Chronicles 1:1-2 we're told that Reuben's rights as firstborn were given to Joseph. This is what we saw last week in Chapter 48 as Jacob adopted Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, as his own. And as we look at the history of Israel we see Jacob's testament confirmed. No prophet, priest, or king ever arose from Reuben's tribe. He was the son born to preeminence, but through his sin he abdicated that preeminence.

And as we continue on we see that Reuben isn't the only who has lost his position. Look at Jacob's words to Simeon and Levi in verses 5-7:

**“Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords. 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. 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.”**

Think back to the brutal slaughter of the men of Shechem by Simeon and

Levi. The prince of the city had raped their sister and then proposed to marry her. They lured the men of the city into trusting them: “You can marry our sister, but to join our family, all the men of your city must be circumcised.” And then while the men were convalescing, they murdered them all. As Jacob says, “In their anger they killed men, and in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen.” Oxen are peaceful work animals. No one hamstring oxen. This is Jacob’s poetic way of condemning their slaughter of peaceful men. And as Jacob took away Reuben’s inheritance, so he takes away the inheritance of Simeon and Levi because they were cruel. Jacob looks forward to the day when his descendants will return to Canaan to take up their inheritance, but says that Simeon and Levi will be scattered in the land.

This is exactly what happens. The tribe of Simeon never fully takes the territory given to it and ends up absorbed into Judah, virtually disappearing from Old Testament history. The tribe of Levi receives no allotment of land in Canaan, but this is because Levi’s tribe is chosen to fulfil the priestly ministry of Israel. Levi is scattered throughout the land, but in Levi we also see God’s grace at work. As the story moves into Exodus, God redeems the fierceness of Levi for good. In Exodus it’s the Levites who rally around Moses and Aaron, fiercely loyal to God and his law, as they put the idolatrous Israelites to the sword. God had given Levi a gift of fierceness and of zeal. Without his grace he had abused that gift and had slaughtered the innocent. But as Levi’s descendants turned to God, that gift was redeemed and put to kingdom use. Levi’s descendants became a tribe of priests—zealous mediators between God and his chosen people, protecting them from the awesome and fearful presence of their holy God.

After removing Reuben, Simeon, and Levi as heirs of the blessing, Jacob makes his longest pronouncement over Judah, envisioning a future in which Judah is the preeminent son. Jacob had already given the rights of the firstborn to Joseph and his sons, but he chooses Judah over his brothers as the family ruler. Judah’s tribe will be the royal tribe. Jacob begins by describing Judah as a conquering warrior. Look at verses 8-9:

**“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 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?”**

Joseph received the birthright—the inheritance of the firstborn—but Judah is to receive the throne. Jacob describes him as a conquering warrior and as a noble and powerful lion and then he reminds us of Joseph’s dream. In the dream Joseph saw his brothers and his father bowing before him. That dream was fulfilled when they came to Egypt to buy grain, but now Jacob points to that as a foreshadowing of Judah’s future greatness. Again, his is the throne of Israel. Verse 10 goes on:

**“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.”**

Jacob describes the victorious warrior, the lion who has caught his prey, as holding the sceptre or the king’s staff. This is an image of David and his descendants, who ruled over the nation, but Jacob points to someone beyond David. Judah will hold the sceptre, it says, until “tribute comes to him”. This is a difficult phrase and a better translation would be “until the one to whom it belongs comes”. Judah and David and their sons are

only keeping the throne warm, so to speak, until the one to whom that throne *really* belongs comes. This future king is one whose rule extends beyond the nation of Israel. To him belongs the obedience of the peoples—plural. Daniel’s prophecies of the Messiah look back to these verses:

**There came one like a son of man...and to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13-14)**

It’s to these words of Jacob that St. John looks when he writes in Revelation:

**Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered...and they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you...for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. (Revelation 5:5, 9)**

Jacob describes the reign of this future king from the line of Judah in verses 11 and 12:

**“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. His eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk.”**

This is a poetic image of the fulfilment of the promises made to Abraham. This future son of Judah and king of the nations will rule a kingdom in which God’s blessing is not only restored, but flows abundantly. In biblical imagery, wine is always a symbol of goodness, blessing, and abundance. Starving people gobble up

their grapes as soon as they're ripe, but people with an abundance can afford the luxury of fermenting their grapes and making wine. And yet here in this future kingdom the blessing of abundance is even greater. Grapes will be so abundant that a man will tie his donkey to a vine and not care that the donkey will eat its grapes. Wine will be in such abundance that it will be as common as wash water.

Again, later biblical writers saw the Messiah in these verses. Isaiah describes the coming king as wearing clothes so stained with the blood of his enemies that he looks as though he's been treading grapes in a winepress. This is the king who comes to bring the wrath God on the unrighteous.<sup>1</sup> Revelation draws on this imagery too as it describes Jesus in his victory, riding on a white horse and dressed in a robe dipped in blood.<sup>2</sup> "From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations.... He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty" (Revelation 19:15).

Jacob's pronouncements for the rest of his sons show them living under and experiencing the blessings brought about by Judah's kingship. Their individual blessings are more cryptic than the blessings we've seen already. Most of them are word plays on the name of the son they're spoken over.

**"Zebulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea; he shall become a haven for ships, and his border shall be at Sidon." (Genesis 49:13)**

This blessing is a bit of a mystery, because Zebulun's territory was inland and never reached the sea. It did border Phoenician territory around the port of Sidon and it's possible that many of Zebulun's descendants worked seasonally in the Phoenician ports. Whatever the specifics, the idea Jacob expresses is of the tribe

expanding into the farthest reaches of Canaan.

**"Issachar is a strong donkey, crouching between the sheepfolds. 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." (Genesis 49:14-15)**

Issachar is a play on the word for "wages" and Jacob plays on it more, saying that Issachar's descendants will be servants or slaves. Letters we have from El-Amarna tell us that families from the tribe of Issachar settled in the fertile Jezreel plain, choosing to live as serfs on good land rather than living as free shepherds in the poor land nearby.<sup>3</sup>

**"Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel. 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. I wait for your salvation, O LORD." (Genesis 49:16-18)**

Dan means "judge" and so Jacob says that Dan will "judge" or "vindicate" his people. He compares him to a viper that attacks the heels of a horse and defeats the horseman. It's a positive image of this small tribe making a large contribution as the Israelites battle the Canaanites for the land. And this may be why Jacob interjects: "I wait for your salvation, O LORD." His testament—his blessing on his sons—is all in anticipation of the fulfillment of God's promises under the future king from the tribe of Judah who will lead his brothers to victory.

Jacob's short blessings on Gad, Asher, and Naphtali all express the same desire to see them defeat their enemies and prosper in the land God has promised. Look at verses 19-21:

**"Raiders shall raid Gad, but he shall raid at their heels." "Asher's food shall be rich, and he shall yield royal delicacies." "Naphtali is a doe let loose that bears beautiful fawns."**

In verses 22-26 Jacob blesses Joseph. He follows the same pattern as in the shorter blessings, but whereas he *implies* blessing in the others, with Joseph he's very explicit, using the words "bless" and "blessing" six times.

**"Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring; his branches run over the wall. The archers bitterly attacked him, shot at him, and harassed him severely, 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), 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. 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."**

Consider Joseph's story. He was the son who faced tribulation, but through it all he "remained unmoved" in his faith. When faced with difficulties he was given great wisdom—he was "made agile". But Joseph did none of these things on his own. He stood unmoved and his hands were made agile by God—by the "Mighty One of Jacob". And so Jacob envisions Joseph's descendants experiencing more of that same blessing. God will continue to shepherd him and increase his numbers with blessings of the "breast and womb".

<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 63:1-6

<sup>2</sup> Revelation 19:11, 13

<sup>3</sup> Roland de Vaux, *The Early History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1978), page 664.

And finally Jacob then blesses Benjamin, his youngest son. Look at verse 27:

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

Jacob saw that his youngest sons and his descendants would be known for their bravery and skill in battle. He describes them as a predatory animal that takes down more prey than it can eat and then blesses other by sharing it. Consider that many of Israel’s greatest warriors arose from Benjamin. There was Ehud, who overthrew the Moabites, judged Israel, and brought peace that lasted for eighty years. There was Saul, Israel’s first king. And consider too St. Paul, the great warrior for the faith who carried the Gospel to the gentiles; he also came from the tribe of Benjamin.

Finally, in verse 28, the storyteller sums all of this up:

**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.**

Jacob’s desire—and ultimately his *hope*—is the fulfilment of the promises God first made to Abraham and that were passed down to him. He now passes those promises and the hope that goes with them down to his sons. And so his blessing focuses on two main ideas. First, Jacob stressed the imagery of the victorious warrior and the defeat of the enemy. This was what would usher in the peaceful kingdom of the Messiah. But also Jacob stresses the imagery of prosperity and abundance: lots of children, rich food, and wine as plentiful as wash water. Behind this is the idea of a restoration of the Garden that was lost when humanity rejected God’s blessing. In blessing his sons, Jacob looks to that time when the great king comes and God will restore

humanity to his fellowship and to the peaceful life of worship for which he created us.

Let me close by taking us back to where we started. God’s blessing bracketed Jacob’s life. He was born into the covenant family, a son of God’s promise. He was circumcised when he was eight days old and in that his father consciously and deliberately included him in those covenant blessings. And now as he prepares to die, Jacob recalls those same covenant promises as his hope. He’s hasn’t seen their complete fulfilment, but he’s seen them fulfilled in part and he trusts in the God who made them. And so he passes that hope, that faith in God’s promises, to his sons.

Jacob should cause us to ask: Does God’s blessing bracket my life? Do I live my life for myself, or do I live it for the king, thankful for the grace he has given and living in the hope of his promise of an eternal kingdom? If Jacob could believe and live in faith having only the bare promises themselves, only able to look forward to their fulfilment and to the future coming of the King, how much greater should our faith and hope be seeing that the King has already come to us and has already established his kingdom? Jacob’s circumcision pointed to the life that would be brought by the king one day in the future; our baptism assures us of our inclusion in the life that the King has already purchased with his blood at the cross. As he offers us himself in the bread and wine this morning and as we come to his Table, remember that here he gives us the sign and seal of his promise of blessing. Here he reminds us of the redemption he has already accomplished for us at the cross, but here he also gives us assurance of our future hope in the fulfilment of his kingdom...in the new heavens and new earth, in the New Jerusalem. Here he reminds us of his blessing of Creation in the beginning; here he reminds us that he has restored

the blessing to us through Jesus, even though we once rejected it; and here he gives us reason to hope for the future restoration of his full blessing to all of his Creation—for that day when all will be set to rights in the great “cosmic temple” of the Lord.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, in the collect this morning we asked to be absolved of our offences. We thank you that through your Son, Jesus, we have that absolution. Give us grace now to live the new life that he has given and to live in hope of that great day when his kingdom shall fill the whole earth and your promise of blessing be finally and fully fulfilled in him. Amen.