

Chapter 16: The Final Blessing of Jacob

Genesis 49:1–33

At the very end of Jacob’s life, the patriarch and father of the nation of Israel has one critical task remaining: to bestow his blessing on his sons. He had given the special, double-portion blessing to Jacob by adopting Ephraim in Manasseh in the previous chapter, but now he must bless all his sons. This blessing will have far-ranging implications for the future of the nation, previewing the inheritance that each tribe will receive and the special characteristics of each tribe. Most of all, however, Jacob is focused on prophesying the tribe of Judah as the tribe from whom God will raise up a perpetual kingship. That kings will come from Judah is not one more detail in a long chapter of blessings, but the center of God’s redemptive plan for his people, and, ultimately, for the whole world. As Jacob blesses his sons, we see that *God blesses the world through the King of Israel*.

Bestowing the Kingship (Gen. 49:1–12)

After Jacob blesses Joseph and Joseph’s sons, Jacob calls all his sons to him (v. 1a). Although the text does not immediately tell us that Jacob is calling his sons for a blessing, we should look to the end of this chapter: “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” (v. 28). Jacob is now extending his blessing to all of his sons. The threefold use of the term “blessing” in here at the end of Genesis recalls the original blessing that God gave to Adam and Eve at the beginning of Genesis (1:28).¹

When Jacob first summons his sons, however, he characterizes what he is doing in a very different way: “Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you what shall happen to you in the days to come” (v. 1b). This is not, then, the well-wishes of a father to his sons before he dies. Moreover, this is not a confession of Jacob’s faith. Much more, here we see Jacob giving prophecy about the future state of the people of Israel.² Indeed, we will see that not all of Jacob’s “blessings” for his sons are positive. Gordon Wenham even goes so far as to insist upon calling this the “Testament of Jacob” rather than the “Blessings of Jacob,” due to the inclusion of curses as well as blessings.³ Regardless, just as Jacob’s life began with a prophecy (Gen. 25:23), his life will now end with a prophecy.⁴

The Disqualification of Reuben (v. 3–4)

This section becomes the first of three times in the Pentateuch when Israel receives prophecies of what will happen to them “in the last days.” Balaam will prophesy about the future of Israel during

¹ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 233.

² Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:438.

³ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 468.

⁴ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 646.

his oracles to Balak, and Moses will prophesy about the future of Israel when he comes to his death at the end of Deuteronomy (Num. 24:14; Deut. 31:29).⁵ Moses’s prophecy is the closest to what Jacob does here, since Moses will also speak about Israel tribe by tribe, just as Jacob does here.⁶ In both cases, we are seeing a momentous declaration at the end of an era—for Jacob, the end of the patriarchs; for Moses, the end of the Pentateuch, before crossing into the Promised Land. Notably, all three prophecies of what will happen “in the last days” feature a king coming for Israel (Gen. 49:10; Num. 24:7; Deut. 33:5).⁷

Jacob begins this blessing with his firstborn son, Reuben. The beginning of the oracle for Reuben sounds positive, as Jacob recounts all the privileges that Reuben enjoyed by virtue of being the firstborn. Thus, Jacob calls Reuben “my might, and the first fruits of my strength, preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power” (v. 3). Jacob’s purpose for heaping up this praise, however, is to show the magnitude of Reuben’s downfall because he had an affair with Jacob’s concubine, Bilhah (cf. Gen. 35:22).⁸ In the last chapter, the adoption of Joseph’s two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, gave Joseph the double-portion of Jacob’s inheritance that would have been reserved for the firstborn. Jacob now makes explicit his justification for doing so, as he demotes Reuben from the status of firstborn: “Unstable as water, you shall not have preeminence” (v. 4).⁹ This understanding is made even more explicit in 1 Chronicles 5:1: “The sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel (for he was the firstborn, but because he defiled his father’s couch, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph the son of Israel, so that he could not be enrolled as the oldest son.” This oracle is fulfilled in the failed leadership of the tribe of Reuben through the rest of their history: “It earned a name for irresolution in Deborah’s day (Judg. 5:15b, 16); later it seems to have been overshadowed by Gad and periodically overrun by Moab. Its only recorded moment of partial initiative was in the inglorious rebellion of Dathan and Abiram (Num. 16:1).”¹⁰

The Disqualification of Simeon and Levi (v. 5–7)

Next, Jacob addresses Simeon and Levi together (v. 5–7). This is the only time that Jacob combines his sons for their oracles, but his reason for doing so is clear. Simeon and Levi are treated as one because of they joined forces to slaughter the men of Shechem in Genesis 34, in response to the rape of Dinah. Jacob expressed horror at what his sons had done when it originally happened (Gen. 34:30), and we see here that Jacob has not been able to forget it. Moreover, we must remember that this is not a recounting of Jacob’s private convictions, but an oracle of God. As such, we learn from this God’s perspective on what Simeon and Levi had done, condemning their cruelty and cursing them for what they had done.¹¹ For Simeon, this curse of being *divided* and *scattered* in Israel (v. 7) will be fulfilled in that Simeon virtually vanishes from appearing in the biblical narrative after the

⁵ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 233.

⁶ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 646.

⁷ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 233.

⁸ Kidner, *Genesis*, 227.

⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:442.

¹⁰ Kidner, *Genesis*, 227.

¹¹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:444.

conquests of the Promised Land.¹² For Levi, however, God will redeem this curse into a blessing, by scattering the Levites as overseers and teachers of the law, settled throughout the whole nation of Israel.¹³ Levi will be the only tribe not to gain an inheritance in the land, but God will give them something even better: himself (cf. Num. 18:23–24; Deut. 10:9; 12:12; 14:27; 18:1–2; Jos. 13:33; 14:3; 18:7; Ezek. 44:28).

Establishing the Kingship in Judah (v. 8–12)

These initial oracles of judgment against Reuben, Simeon, and Levi serve an important purpose. These are the first three sons born to Jacob, but, one by one, Jacob shows how each of them have been disqualified from the chief leadership of the nation in the future.¹⁴ Instead, the fourth son born to Jacob will take that role, as we see next in Jacob’s oracle about Judah. Where Reuben, Simeon, and Levi are worthy of censure, Jacob begins the oracle for Judah with a play on Judah’s name, which means “praise”: “Judah [יְהוּדָה; *yehūdā*], your brothers shall praise you [יְרַדְּכָה; *yôdūkā*]” (v. 8a).¹⁵ Where Joseph gained the double-portion of the inheritance in the birthright, Judah becomes the royal tribe, from whom “the scepter shall not depart...nor the ruler’s staff” (v. 10; cf. 1 Chron. 5:1–2; Ps. 78:67–68).¹⁶ Judah becomes the “lion” (cf. Num. 24:9; Rev. 5:5) who will fiercely conquer Israel’s enemies.¹⁷ Where Joseph had been the ruler to bless the nations in the book of Genesis, now Judah will take that role in the future.¹⁸ As a further indication of the transfer of rulership from Joseph to Judah, Jacob states that Judah’s brothers “shall bow down before you,” in the same way that they had bowed down previously before Joseph (cf. Gen. 37:10; 42:6; 43:26, 28).¹⁹

Moreover, the results of Judah’s kingdom will mean abundant prosperity. Citizens of Judah will have such an excess of grapes that they will carelessly tie their donkey’s colt to choice vines, and such an excess of wine that they can use it to wash their clothes.²⁰ Judah, through Judah’s king, will be the source of blessing and prosperity for the whole world.

Blessing the World (Gen. 49:13–28)

The most significant oracles are for the tribes of Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, setting aside the first three in order to establish the kingship in the fourth. Nevertheless, Jacob has a blessing for all his sons, which he proceeds to give in the second half of these oracles. There have been many proposals for understanding the order in which Jacob addresses each of his sons. The simplest is probably the best, recognizing that Jacob is roughly following birth order, as organized by the mothers: first, Leah’s sons (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, and Zebulun), then the son of Bilhah

¹² Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 234.

¹³ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:448–49.

¹⁴ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 234.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:450.

¹⁶ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 234.

¹⁷ Kidner, *Genesis*, 229.

¹⁸ Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*, 716.

¹⁹ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 235.

²⁰ Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:896–97.

(Dan), Zilpah (Gad, Asher), and, again, Bilhah (Naphtali), and then finally the sons of Rachel (Joseph, Benjamin).²¹

Zebulun (v. 13)

Jacob’s blessing for Zebulun looks toward the sea: “Zebulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea; he shall become a haven for ships, and his border shall be at Sidon” (v. 13). While Zebulun’s territory will not reach all the way to the sea, Moses will also acknowledge that Zebulun will “draw from the abundance of the seas and the hidden treasures of the sand” (Deut. 33:19).²² Also, while Zebulun’s border reaches toward Sidon, Sidon itself falls to Asher (Josh. 19:28). The preposition translated “at” Sidon can also mean “toward” Sidon.²³

Issachar (v. 14–15)

Issachar’s oracle contains an important phrase in the larger context of Genesis: “He saw that [it] was good” (v. 15a). This is the same phrase that appeared for God’s evaluation of his creation in Genesis 1, but it also appears to describe the initial stimulus that leads into various sins (e.g., Gen. 3:6; 6:2; cf. Josh. 7:21; 2 Sam. 11:2–4). Some, then, have seen this oracle in a negative light, suggesting that Issachar is quitting the conquest early, and thus becoming enslaved into forced labor.²⁴ In this context of “blessings” (v. 28), however, it is probably better to understand this as a restoration for Issachar of the original good land that God gave to his people at the creation.²⁵ Although the word here for “forced labor” is only used elsewhere to describe the forced labor of describe slavery (e.g., Josh. 16:10), it may here be metaphorical, simply describing diligent work in their land (cf. Gen. 2:15).²⁶

Dan (v. 16–18)

The name “Dan” means “judge,” and Jacob applies the meaning of Dan’s name to a special status as “judge” over his people (v. 16). Samson was a judge from the tribe of Dan over the nation of Israel (Judg. 13:2), but Jacob is saying that Dan will judge his people “as one of the *tribes* of Israel” (v. 16). From this observation, Calvin points out that Dan becomes one of the four standard bearers to lead the Asher and Naphtali in the wilderness from camp to camp (cf. Num. 2:25–31).²⁷

The second statement of Dan’s oracle about being a serpent biting the horse’s heels (v. 17), is a bit more difficult to interpret. The imagery of a serpent, of course, raises the memory of the serpent in the garden in Genesis 3.²⁸ That does not necessarily make this statement a rebuke of Dan, since it may rather mean simply that Dan will strike his enemies cunningly, with the same kind of

²¹ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 233–34.

²² Kidner, *Genesis*, 230.

²³ Kidner, 230.

²⁴ Hamilton rejects this view, but gives a helpful survey of it. (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 667.)

²⁵ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 236.

²⁶ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 667–68.

²⁷ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:462–63.

²⁸ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 670.

“craftiness” of the serpent (cf. Gen. 3:1).²⁹ We should also note that the word for “heels” (עֲקֵב; *‘aqēb*) is closely related to Jacob’s own name (יַעֲקֹב; *ya‘āqōb*), given because Jacob had grasped the heel of Esau in the womb at birth (Gen. 25:26).³⁰ Although not entirely clear, we should probably understand this as a censure against Dan.³¹ Over the rest of the tribe’s history, Dan will become known for violence and treachery (cf. Judg. 18) so that, “In the list of tribes which make up the Israel of Revelation 7:5–8, Dan finds no place.”³²

Intriguingly, Jacob interjects the oracles of his children with a prayer in v. 18: “I wait for your salvation, O LORD.” Some have taken this as a reference to Dan’s prophecy, to give Dan’s oracle a positive interpretation.³³ Others see this as an expression of Jacob’s personal affection for his children as their father.³⁴ I am inclined to take the latter view of this. I wonder, however, if this may also be some modest repentance on Jacob’s part. Reflecting back on his own lifetime of heel-grabbing, he sees a lifetime of pain because he lived by scheming, rather than by faith. Now, at the end of Jacob’s life, when he truly “sees” by faith (cf. Gen. 48:8–17), he realizes that he should have *waited* for the Lord’s salvation, rather than grasping at it for himself.

Gad (v. 19)

The oracle for Gad is an extended pun, where four of the six words contain the consonants *g-d*, echoing Gad’s name: “Raiders [גְּדוּדִים; *gēdūd*] shall raid [יַגְדוּנֵם; *yəgūdennū*] Gad [גָּד; *gād*], but he shall raid [יַגְדֵם; *yāgūd*] at their heels” (v. 19). Once again, the word “heels” (עֲקֵב; *‘aqēb*) appears, although it seems that here Gad’s raiding at the heels of his raiders is a positive note of fierce self-defense.

Asher (v. 20)

Asher’s blessing echoes Judah’s by speaking of food, including the “delicacies of a king” (ESV: “royal delicacies”; v. 20). It is a happy blessing, which is fitting, since Asher’s name means “happy” (cf. Gen. 30:13).³⁵ Still, this may not be the best kind of happiness, since Asher lives alongside the Canaanites and the Phoenicians (Judg. 1:32; Ezek. 27:17), perhaps producing royal delicacies not for their kings, and not for Judah’s king.³⁶

Naphtali (v. 21)

Jacob describes Naphtali as “a doe let loose that bears beautiful fawns” (v. 21). The idea of a doe “let loose” may refer to the fact that Naphtali’s borders do not include a northern border, perhaps hinting at the opportunity to expand her territories (cf. Josh. 19:32–39).³⁷

²⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:463.

³⁰ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 670.

³¹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:463.

³² Kidner, *Genesis*, 231.

³³ E.g., Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 236–37.

³⁴ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:463–65; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 481.

³⁵ Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:896–97.

³⁶ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 482.

³⁷ Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:902.

Joseph (v. 22–26)

Where Joseph, Ephraim, and Manasseh received other blessings from Jacob in Genesis 48, Jacob nevertheless turns to extend another lengthy blessing for Joseph here. First, Jacob describes Joseph as a “fruitful bough by a spring,” whose branches run over the wall (v. 22). This imagery of a righteous man flourishing with fruitfulness, like a tree planted by a river, appears throughout the Old Testament (Ps. 1:3; 92:12–14; Jer. 17:7–8).³⁸ Next, Jacob acknowledges Joseph’s great suffering by speaking of the archers who bitterly attacked Joseph (v. 23). In response to this, Joseph was unmoved, by strengthened for battle and helped by “the Mighty One of Jacob”, from whom is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel (v. 24). Beyond this, Jacob piles blessings on Joseph: “...the Almighty who will *ble*ss you with *ble*ssings of heaven above, *ble*ssings of the deep that crouches beneath, *ble*ssings of the breasts and of the womb. The *ble*ssings of your father are mighty beyond the *ble*ssings of my parents....” (v. 25–26). This repetition of the word “blessings” prepares us for the final summation of the “blessings” in v. 28).³⁹

Benjamin (v. 27)

Jacob portrays Benjamin in fierce terms, while Moses will portray Benjamin in more tender terms (Deut. 33:12).⁴⁰ While this oracle is fierce, it is not necessarily negative, since fierce warriors were important in the Old Testament. Indeed, King Saul will be a fierce warrior from the tribe of Benjamin (cf. 1 Sam. 9:1; 11:1–11). Nevertheless, it is the tribe of Benjamin who commits the ravenous, terrible crime at Gibeah that will mimic the depraved wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah (Judg. 19; cf. Gen. 19).

Blessings for the World through Israel (v. 28)

Verse 28 gives us a summary statement of the preceding verses as a blessing for all twelve tribes of Israel. The threefold repetition of the word “blessing” in this verse, however, suggests that we are seeing not only the close of the blessings given to the tribes of Israel in chapter 49, but also the closing bookend of the blessings that were given to humanity as a whole at the beginning of Genesis (1:28).⁴¹ The point is simple, but profound: God’s blessings to all humanity will flow exclusively through this nation of Israel, whom God has chosen out of all the people of the earth.

Buried in Faith (Gen. 49:29–33)

Once his blessings are done, Jacob gives instructions to his children for where to bury him. There is a chiasmic structure to the final preparations for Jacob’s life, with a contrast between Jacob’s conversations with Joseph and with all his sons:

³⁸ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 484.

³⁹ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 237.

⁴⁰ “Something of the dash and spirit of the tribe can be seen in Judges 5:14; Psalm 68:27; something of its violence in Judges 19–21.” (Kidner, *Genesis*, 233.)

⁴¹ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 233.

- A. Jacob's Request to be Buried in Canaan to Joseph (Gen. 47:29–31)
- B. Jacob's Blessing for Joseph and Joseph's Sons (Gen. 48:1–22)
- B'. Jacob's Blessing for All His Sons (Gen. 49:1–28)
- A'. Jacob's Request to be Buried in Canaan to All His Sons (Gen. 49:29–32)

Just as Abraham and Isaac were buried in the field at Machpelah, which Abraham purchased from Ephron the Hittite, so Jacob insists that he be buried there. Abraham originally purchased that field to bury Sarah, his wife (Gen. 23), but here is the only place we read that Isaac's wife, Rebekah, and Jacob's wife, Leah, are also buried in that cave.⁴² (Rachel was buried at Ephrah, or Bethlehem, while Jacob was traveling; cf. Gen. 35:19; 48:7.)

After Jacob finished these preparations, he breathed his last and died (v. 33). This is important, since it means that Jacob's very last words are words of faith in the promises of God.⁴³ Jacob not only gave his sons a blessing about their future, but he pointed his sons beyond the grave itself by reminding them of the hope of the resurrection of the dead through burial in Canaan.⁴⁴ With that, the era of the Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob comes to an end. The promises have not been fulfilled, but Jacob dies in faith, looking forward to the day when God will overturn death itself to fulfill his promises to his people.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Why is Reuben, the firstborn, disqualified from being the king over Israel (v. 3–4; cf. Gen. 35:22)? Why are Simeon and Levi, the second and third sons of Jacob, disqualified from being king over Israel (v. 5–7; cf. Gen. 34)? Knowing about Judah's role in selling Joseph into slavery, and his shameful acts with Tamar, does Judah (the fourth son of Jacob) deserve the kingship (Gen. 37:26–27; 38:12–19)? On what basis, then, does God establish the kingship of Israel with the tribe of Judah?
- 2) What kinds of blessings does Jacob extend to all his other sons in v. 13–27? What sort of an inheritance will these tribes receive? What sort of characteristics will these tribes exhibit? What kind of future does Jacob prophesy for the nation that will emerge from his family? How does Jacob's "blessing" restore the original blessing that God had given to all humanity at the beginning of creation (v. 28; cf. Gen. 1:28)? How does this blessing for Israel extend to the rest of the world?
- 3) Why does Jacob ask once again to be buried in the land of Canaan? When did the cave in the field at Machpelah come into the possession of Jacob's family? Who else is buried there? Why does it matter where Jacob is buried? What does Jacob's burial say about his faith in the promises that God made to him and his fathers before him? What does Jacob's burial say about his faith in the ultimate resurrection of the dead?
- 4) What does this passage tell us about the importance of God's blessings toward us? How does the

⁴² Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 487–88.

⁴³ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 238.

⁴⁴ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:472.

Bible speak of God's blessings? In what way should we seek God's blessings? Why does God promise to bless his people? What role should seeking God's blessings play in the life of believers? What are the nature of the blessings we have in Christ (cf. Eph. 1:3)? Do you pray to receive increasingly more of God's blessings for you in his Son, and through his Holy Spirit?