

# God's Blessing on His People in their Diversity

Genesis 49:1-28

*Halifax: 19 February 2017, 10:30 AM*

## **Introduction**

Last week we saw how Jacob on his deathbed joyfully conferred the leadership of his family upon Joseph.

- He did this by adopting Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh to be his own sons so that Joseph was given the customary double portion of Jacob's inheritance.
  - We considered the irony in that Jacob was a refugee who had very little in this world, yet was setting out to bless Ephraim and Manasseh who had great riches in this world.
- We saw how, even though this was so, by faith both Jacob and Joseph knew that the inheritance Jacob was giving them was of far more value than what they already possessed in Egypt...
  - It was an eternal inheritance in which this family was able to walk before God and be shepherded by Him, and to have the Angel of God (which speaks of Christ) redeem them from all evil!
  - All the riches and power of Egypt in this world do not compare with this inheritance!
    - And Joseph's sons were appointed to lead the nation at this time while they were in Egypt.

And now, this week, we come to Genesis 49 where we will see how Jacob gathers all twelve of his sons together to bless each one of them.

- What is so special here is the fact that although they have very different characteristics,
  - and although some of them have great sins upon their record that bring loss of privilege, they all receive the blessing.
    - It is not like it was with Isaac and Ishmael where only Isaac was blessed with the blessing of Christ's kingdom...
    - Or like it was with Jacob and Esau, where only Jacob was blessed and Esau was cut off...
    - But in this case, not one of them is cut off—and we see in this text how each of the twelve tribes receives a blessing in the kingdom that is unique to who they are.
- This, of course, instructs us that to this day,
  - the church is made up of weaker and stronger believers,
    - of those that have stumbled and lost privileges and of those that have been faithful and gained privileges;
    - of those who are meek and gentle and those who are warriors;
    - of those who are servants and those who are leaders;
    - of those who are courageous and of those who cunning...
    - Yet all are brought to the blessed inheritance of the LORD and given a place of important service to the rest.

- What an encouragement it will be for us to look at this today.
  - Please listen as I read to you beginning in Genesis 49:1.
  - This is the Word of God which was written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.

**Genesis 49:1-28:** And Jacob called his sons and said, “Gather together, that I may tell you what shall befall you in the last days: <sup>2</sup> Gather together and hear, you sons of Jacob, and listen to Israel your father. <sup>3</sup> Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity and the excellency of power. <sup>4</sup> Unstable as water, you shall not excel, because you went up to your father’s bed; then you defiled *it* —He went up to my couch. <sup>5</sup> Simeon and Levi *are* brothers; instruments of cruelty *are in* their dwelling place. <sup>6</sup> Let not my soul enter their council; let not my honor be united to their assembly; for in their anger they slew a man, and in their self-will they hamstrung an ox. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> Judah, you *are he* whom your brothers shall praise; your hand *shall be* on the neck of your enemies; your father’s children shall bow down before you. <sup>9</sup> Judah *is* a lion’s whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He bows down, he lies down as a lion; and as a lion, who shall rouse him? <sup>10</sup> The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes; and to Him *shall be* the obedience of the people. <sup>11</sup> Binding his donkey to the vine, and his donkey’s colt to the choice vine, he washed his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes. <sup>12</sup> His eyes *are* darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk. <sup>13</sup> Zebulun shall dwell by the haven of the sea; he *shall become* a haven for ships, and his border shall adjoin Sidon. <sup>14</sup> Issachar is a

strong donkey, lying down between two burdens; <sup>15</sup> he saw that rest *was* good, And that the land *was* pleasant; he bowed his shoulder to bear *a burden*, and became a band of slaves. <sup>16</sup> Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel. <sup>17</sup> Dan shall be a serpent by the way, a viper by the path, that bites the horse’s heels so that its rider shall fall backward. <sup>18</sup> I have waited for your salvation, O LORD! <sup>19</sup> Gad, a troop shall tramp upon him, but he shall triumph at last. <sup>20</sup> Bread from Asher *shall be* rich, and he shall yield royal dainties. <sup>21</sup> Naphtali *is* a deer let loose; he uses beautiful words. <sup>22</sup> Joseph *is* a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a well; his branches run over the wall. <sup>23</sup> The archers have bitterly grieved him, shot *at him* and hated him. <sup>24</sup> But his bow remained in strength, and the arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the Mighty God of Jacob (From there *is* the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel), <sup>25</sup> By the God of your father who will help you, and by the Almighty who will bless you *with* blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that lies beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb. <sup>26</sup> The blessings of your father have excelled the blessings of my ancestors, up to the utmost bound of the everlasting hills. They shall be on the head of Joseph, and on the crown of the head of him who was separate from his brothers. <sup>27</sup> Benjamin is a ravenous wolf; in the morning he shall devour the prey, and at night he shall divide the spoil.” <sup>28</sup> All these *are* the twelve tribes of Israel, and this *is* what their father spoke to them. And he blessed them; he blessed each one according to his own blessing.

May the LORD bless the reading of His holy Word.

**I. You can see in the first place how Jacob gathers them together to bless them all.**

A. In verse 1-2, it says that he calls them, and twice he says, “Gather together.”

1. What a tremendous thing it is to see this when we think about how divided this family had been over their years!
    - There was the great rivalry between Rachael and Leah, and they had brought their maids into the fray with them.
    - Things had escalated the point that plans had been made to murder Joseph until it was realised that he could be disposed of at a profit by selling him as a slave.
  2. And now, here they are, together as one family...a thing that would have been thought entirely impossible just a few years prior to this.
    - Does this not give us hope for the church today, as divided as it is, even because of sin and unfaithfulness? God can indeed reconcile us?
      - And He will—we shall be one in Christ Jesus—one way or another.
      - Yes, there will be Esaus and Ishmaels who are cut off—false sons who are cast out—but all who are the true sons of God, even though they may be divided for a time, will be united again.
        - Lord, I wait for your salvation!
- B. Jacob tells his sons what his purpose is in this assembly...
1. He gathers them together to tell them what will befall them in the last days.
    - The words *last days* can refer either to the indefinite future or the final future, and it seems that here it somewhat refers to both.
    - In many ways, Jacob looks into the time when they depart from Egypt and settle in the land of Canaan...
      - There is a great emphasis on what each of the twelve tribes that descend from these twelve sons will be in the land of Canaan...
        - but there is also a looking farther ahead to the coming Messiah through the tribe of Judah.
        - The promised Son who will save the world has been the focal point of many of the prophecies in Genesis, though it is yet far off.
  2. As we look at the whole passage, this promised blessing to Judah is at the centre of things...
    - And it is so important that I am going to devote a separate sermon to it whereas today we will just look at Judah along with the other tribes in a general way.
  3. And notice Jacob makes it clear that he is speaking prophecy here...
    - These are not merely his dying wishes being conveyed to his sons.
      - No, Jacob is speaking as a prophet and is telling each of his sons what is to befall the tribe that will come from their loins.
      - He is speaking the very word of God to them!
- C. Therefore, he admonishes them in verse 2 to, as he says, “**listen to Israel your father.**”
1. Children should certainly listen to the last words of their fathers, especially those who have walked with God...
    - and fathers (who ought to have instructed their children all their life long) should be eager to leave them with words of wisdom and grace to live by.

2. But here, because Jacob is speaking as a prophet, it is all the more vital for them to hear what he says—and for us to hear this because it is recorded in scripture.
  - You know how often, when I am preparing to read the scriptures, I prepare by saying, “listen carefully, because this is the very Word of God which is given for you.”
  - You do great harm to yourself if you let the word go by you as so many sounds that you do not take in.
    - God will judge you for that.
    - Jesus said, “Be careful how you hear.”
      - Indeed, what blessing comes by taking heed to the Word and receiving it with faith and love that you may practice it!
      - That is what Jacob is calling for.
3. And note well, his words here are summed up in verse 28 as blessings for each one of them.
  - Verse 28 says: **All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father spoke to them. And he blessed them; he blessed each one according to his own blessing.**
    - a. As I already mentioned in the introduction, even though some of them were called out for their sins and lost privileges,
      - all twelve of them were still tremendously blessed to be numbered with God’s people.
      - Even those chastisements were for their good that they might learn to walk more carefully with their Lord.
    - b. Grace has the first and last word here for each tribe as the Lord works in each one of them individually according to who they are.
      - Each one has his own unique blessing, and all of them are blessed together as heirs of the grace of God in the promised Saviour.

TRANS> Let us then look at this example of God’s diversified people and the blessing that comes to each one of them.

## II. First, let us look at the gain and loss of special privileges.

A. First there is Reuben who was Jacob’s firstborn.

1. Reuben does not lose the privilege of sonship—he is not cut off as a son of God’s kingdom—but he loses the privilege of the firstborn.
  - As the first born son, it was his right lead the family at this time which would have involved two wonderful blessings...
    - A double portion of the inheritance and leadership of the family.
  - We are expressly told that he lost this privilege in 1 Chronicles 5:1-2 where it says: **Now the sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel—he was indeed the firstborn, but because he defiled his father’s bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph, the son of Israel, so that the genealogy is not listed according to the birthright; <sup>2</sup> yet Judah prevailed over his brothers, and from him came a ruler, although the birthright was Joseph’s—**

2. Jacob presents Reuben's loss in a dramatic way...
    - He speaks of the tremendous potential that Reuben had to excel in exalted terms (verse 3: **Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity and the excellency of power.**)
      - only to show how the exalted hopes were shattered in verse 4.
    - Note the play on the word *excellency* twice used in verse 3 followed by *you shall not excel* in verse 4... it says: **Unstable as water, you shall not excel...**
    - And then the reason is given—**you shall not excel, because you went up to your father's bed; then you defiled it...**
      - This refers to that time years—even decades before, when Reuben had slept with Jacob's concubine Bilhah—perhaps as a way of exerting his dominance over his father as the leader.
        - All we were told at the same was that Jacob heard about it...we are not told that he did anything...
          - Perhaps Reuben thought he had gotten away with it, but now his sin comes to find him out.
        - Oh dear brothers and sisters, do not think that sin will not have consequences!
          - Be sure your sin will find you out! It will come back to haunt you!
      - As if horrified at the very thought of what his first born son did, Jacob exclaims to all his gathered sons **he went up to my couch!**
        - Talk about a thing that ought not be done in Israel! Here indeed!
  3. What Reuben did for selfish gain now becomes the root of painful loss.
    - And so it was fulfilled—he did not excel...
      - No king, no prophet, no judge ever came from this tribe and he ended up being overshadowed by Gad and overrun by Moab in future years.
    - All we find is an attempt of the Reubenites, Dathan and Abiram, in Numbers 16 to *usurp* leadership in place of Aaron and Moses.
      - The Lord sent a dreadful punishment upon them in which the ground opened up to swallow them and their households alive!
  4. Yet, by the grace of God, the sons of Reuben as a whole still received their place among the sons of Jacob as sons of Christ's kingdom.
    - Their loss was great, and many of them died without hope, but many more were still blessed, having their names written down in heaven.
- B. We see a similar loss of privilege with Simeon and Levi due to their sin.
1. Jacob opens by describing them to be brothers—meaning that they were of like nature—and then he describes that nature...
    - They are men whose tools became instruments of cruelty in their fierce anger.
    - You will remember how they had reacted (or rather overacted) to the rape of their sister by Shechem—how they agreed to give their sister Dinah in marriage to Shechem if he and all the men of the city that was called by his name would be circumcised...
      - all a false offer that they might kill all the men when they were recovering from their circumcision.

2. Note how Jacob shows that he in no way condones what they did...
  - In verse 6, he says: **Let not my soul enter their council; let not my honor be united to their assembly...**
    - With these words he distances himself as not even wanting to consort with such cruel men as these...
  - In verse 7 he curses not them, but their anger... **Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; and their wrath, for it is cruel!**
  - They had fiery natures like James and John whom Jesus named the sons of thunder...
    - Remember Luke 9:54 when the Samaritans did not receive them on their way to Jerusalem and they said, **Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?**
    - Good thing they asked—Jesus rebuked them and told them that they did not know what spirit they were of...they had natures like Simeon and Levi...
      - But Jesus chose them and used them as apostles in His kingdom!
3. But in the rest of verse Genesis 49:7, Jacob declares the consequences of the actions of Simeon and Levi which we find are still laced with mercy!
  - a. He declares, speaking for God, **I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel.**
    - It is a curse in that they were to be divided and scattered, so that they did not either of them receive an allotment in Canaan but were scattered among the other tribes...
    - But what a mercy it was that they were not divided *from* their brothers in the sense of being cut off from the sons of Jacob!
      - They were still with their brothers in Canaan—it was only that they were not given their own territory.
  - b. And in what become of them, we have a very helpful lesson...
    - 1) Simeon was given cities within in Judah from which he was later driven out by Judah and scattered about within Israel.
    - 2) But with Levi, we see that this son of thunder, though scattered in Israel as Jacob said, had that scattering turned into a blessing!
      - Yes, that fiery nature of Levi was used for God’s glory when Israel worshipped the golden calf and Moses ordered that those who did not repent be executed—and who came forward but Levi to execute their own brothers in zeal for the Lord?
        - Exodus 32:26-29 tells the story: **Then Moses stood in the entrance of the camp, and said, “Whoever is on the LORD’S side—come to me.” And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together to him. <sup>27</sup> And he said to them, “Thus says the LORD God of Israel: ‘Let every man put his sword on his side, and go in and out from entrance to entrance throughout the camp, and let every man kill his brother, every man his companion, and every man his neighbor.’ ” <sup>28</sup> So the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And about three thousand men of the people fell that day. <sup>29</sup> Then Moses said, “Consecrate yourselves today to the LORD, that He may bestow on**

**you a blessing this day, for every man has opposed his son and his brother.”**

- The result was that though they had no land as their inheritance, they were given the LORD as their inheritance—they were given to serve as priests in God’s house and so lived from the tithes...
  - Their scattering was no longer a curse to them, but a blessing as they were able to live in special cities among the other tribes and be ministers to the people, teaching them in the Lord’s ways.
  - We will not take the time to look at all the passages, that pertain to this, but in Numbers 18:20-21, it says: **Then the LORD said to Aaron: “You shall have no inheritance in their land, nor shall you have any portion among them; I am your portion and your inheritance among the children of Israel. <sup>21</sup> Behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tithes in Israel as an inheritance in return for the work which they perform, the work of the tabernacle of meeting.”**
- c. This shows that even though we (or our family) may have lost a great privilege because of our sin,
  - God is able to turn even the loss into a tremendous blessing as a reward for faithfulness to Him!

C. But there is also an example of privilege gained right here in our text with Judah!

1. Judah must have been trembling after hearing what Jacob had said to his brothers.
  - He had been a key player when Joseph had been sold as a slave; he had married a Canaanite; had brought forth sons that were so wicked that God had killed them; and then he had slept with his daughter-in-law!
  - But remember what else Judah had done!
    - When Benjamin, the son of Jacob’s old age, had been condemned to slavery for allegedly stealing the silver cup of Zaphnath Paneah (that’s Joseph’s Egyptian name before they learned who he was),
      - It was Judah who, in love to his father, stepped forward and said, “take me as your slave instead of Benjamin because he is the son of his father’s old age.”
  - He took what is perhaps the most Christ-like action in the entire Old Testament!
2. And the result is that Jacob declares here that the Messiah, the Son that God had promised who would come from the seed of Abraham,
  - would come from Judah!
  - In verse 8-12, Jacob presents Judah as highly exalted...
    - His brothers would praise him and bow down to him—in other words, they would delight to have him lead them!
    - He would be a bold leader who conquered all his enemies like a courageous lion—who after conquering would lie down in peace...
      - In other words, his kingdom would be absolute, but would lead not to violence and war for the sake of war—but to peace.
    - And great prosperity and beauty is described of him!

- His reign would never end—it is the glorious King Jesus who is here promised...
  - It is hard to wait to look at this more in our next sermon, but I must.
  - This Son of Judah, this lion of the tribe of Judah, will be the one who will rule over the kingdom that will bring this blessing to the house of Jacob, and yes, to the entire world!
3. So the privilege of bringing forth the Saviour of the world falls upon Judah!
- How amazed he must have been as he thought on his sins!
    - Even now, his brothers were already following his leadership and admiring him as one who was fit to lead them!

TRANS> So you see a diversity here in these sons of Jacob—

- all are in the kingdom—three have lost privileges, but for Levi that loss will be turned to a privilege—and the fourth one, Judah, has gained the highest of all privileges.

### III. Now let us look at the blessing that comes to some of the other tribes—the less well known ones who all have their part to play in the kingdom.

- A. First we have Zebulun—we might call him Zebulun the merchant of the seas...
- It was his lot dwell towards the sea and towards Sidon (as the Hebrew can be understood here).
    - From this location, he was able to be used to bring in the blessings that came through ships on the Mediterranean Sea—which brought great blessing to Israel.
- B. Next there is Issachar the donkey—not in a negative way—donkeys were highly esteemed in these days...
- and Issachar is pictured here is a faithful worker of the land—enjoying the quiet restful life of a farmer as opposed to being a soldier or a sailor or politician.
    - He was a servant who provided food from the field for his brothers—not living in luxury, but enjoying the land.
- C. Next, in verse 16-17, there is Dan the judge...a play on his name which sounds like the Hebrew word for judge...
- Though he was the son of a concubine, he took a place as a cunning leader who, though small in size, was able to bring down his enemies...
    - He is not portrayed as a courageous lion, but was a crafty serpent who, though small, is able to bring down his enemies.
    - Thus, being situated next to the Philistines, though they were greater in number, he was able to keep them in check...
      - Samson was from this tribe, and he, by cleverness and strength in the Lord, was able to keep them off the land of Israel.

TRANS> In verse 18, Jacob, just thinking of his gathered family and the blessing it is to have them all obtaining their place in the kingdom of the Lord,

- and that when it had looked so hopeless for him just a few years before...
  - breaks out with an expression of joyful hope, saying: **I have waited for your salvation, O LORD!**



- This is a very precious verse that reminds us of how special it is to be among our brothers and sisters who are all blessed in the Lord, waiting for his salvation!
    - He has called us each to inherit a blessing.
- D. Next on the list is Gad...again there is a play on his name which means troop, for he is told that a troop will tramp upon him!
- He had his place on the other side of the Jordan, and the neighbouring kingdoms of Ammon and Moab often tramped upon him,
    - but he was a warlike tribe that was used to keep the border of Israel secure...as it says, he would triumph at last!
  - We might think of Jephthah who came from this tribe and was raised up in the days when, as we are told in Judges 10, the tribes on the other side of the Jordan were “harassed and oppressed” for 18 years, and when as Judges 10:10 says, **Moreover the people of Ammon crossed over the Jordan to fight against Judah also, against Benjamin, and against the house of Ephraim, so that Israel was severely distressed.**
    - It was Jephthah of Gad whom God raised up to lead Israel to deliverance from Ammon.
- E. And in verse 20 we are told of Asher—
- They lived in a fertile plain next to Mount Carmel where to this day an abundance of olive oil is produced...
  - They provided these finer things and enjoyed the wealth that came from that...
    - While Issachar provided staples for God’s people, Asher’s bread is said to be royal dainties.
      - Each son is given his place in God’s kingdom.
- F. And the last tribe we will look at in this section of lesser known tribes is Naphtali.
- This tribe is described in verse 21: **Naphtali is a deer let loose; he uses beautiful words.**
    - This is somewhat obscure because we do not know a lot about this tribe, but that is the point in this section—that all have their place from the greatest to the least, just as it is in Christ’s kingdom today.
  - Being described as a deer let loose who uses beautiful words, it could well be that this tribe was skilled in diplomacy...
    - That they won their enemies by friendship rather than by war...
    - Certainly we have a beautiful example of that when Joab comes to besiege the city and a woman of Abel Beth Maachah which was in Naphtali intercedes by wise words and prevents bloodshed...
      - She begins her speech with these words that fit perfectly with this description of Naphatli in 2 Sam 20:18-19: **So she spoke, saying, “They used to talk in former times, saying, ‘They shall surely seek guidance at Abel,’ and so they would end disputes. <sup>19</sup> I am among the peaceable and faithful in Israel. You seek to destroy a city and a mother in Israel. Why would you swallow up the inheritance of the LORD?”**
  - What a blessing to have those among the people of God who are bold as lions—but also to have those who peaceable and able to end disputes like Naphtali!

TRANS> And so you see how each has a place in the kingdom—even of these lesser known tribes that are mentioned here.

- We may think of the words of Paul in 1 Cor 12:18-22 about the members of the church of Jesus Christ: **But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where *would* the body *be*? But now indeed *there are* many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you”; nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary.**
- How thankful we should be for each one and the blessing that each adds to the whole by the grace of God!