

## A Final Farewell Genesis 49:1-33

I heard about a man who was fairly well-off whose family had gathered at his estate with the lawyer for the reading of his last will and testament. Each family member was hoping for some portion of the inheritance to live comfortably for years to come. The lawyer opened the sealed envelope and read the hand-written letter, which simply stated “I, Samuel Jones, being of sound mind spent it all.”

Jacob is near the end of his life and somehow he knew it, so he called for Joseph who came immediately after hearing the news. Ephraim and Manasseh were with him. We learned last week that Jacob adopted them as his own sons and who would receive portions in the Promised Land. This was to be Joseph’s double portion of the inheritance as Jacob’s choice for firstborn since Reuben had spurned that right due to his incestuous relationship with Jacob’s wife, Bilhah.

The wording from **49:1** suggests that the other sons must have either been waiting outside nearby or were in the same room while Jacob spoke to Joseph but then called them all to his bedside. My personal belief is that they were not in the room at this time as we will see in **verse 3**. We are drawing to the close of the book of Genesis and the life of Jacob. In a sense, we might refer to **chapter 49** as his last will and testament. **Verse 1** tells us that he called them to gather around so he could tell them what would happen to them in the days ahead.

This chapter is often referred to as Jacob’s blessing, but it is more than that because his words are prophetic. They are intended not only for his sons but will also describe the nature and character of each tribe. This is a description of their character and conduct. For some, their past conduct altered their future inheritance. You reap what you sow.

Jacob addresses each son and in **verses 1-7** we see that his words are weighty.

### I. JACOB’S WORDS ARE WEIGHTY – vs. 1-7

We begin with his oldest, Reuben.

#### A. The Problem of Reuben is Volitional – vs. 3-4

As I mentioned a moment ago, what Jacob says in **verse 3** leads me to believe that the 11 other sons were outside as Jacob spoke with Joseph and then called them in for a family gathering. Jacob spoke of Reuben being the firstborn. He began by noting that as firstborn he was to be Jacob’s strength in carrying on the family name, the one who would be the patriarch. As firstborn, he should have lived a life of integrity, but in an act of the will, he brought disgrace on the family name. After Rachel died, he wanted to entrench himself in the eyes of his brothers as the heir to the family inheritance, so he slept with Jacob’s concubine Bilhah. It was a willful and deliberate act to seize control of the inheritance. Instead, he brought disgrace and shame to himself and to the family. In **II Chronicles 5:1** we read that he defiled his father’s bed. The consequence of this volitional act resulted in the forfeiture of the rights of the firstborn to Joseph. We also read in that verse another consequence. He was not listed in the genealogical record as firstborn. That was also given to Joseph.

I imagine that when Reuben heard those first words he may have thought to himself that everything was fine. They are favorable words: firstborn, strength, honor. Those are the things you would expect to hear about someone who one day would lead the clan. But what Jacob says next takes the wind right out of his sail. **Wenham says these words to Reuben are “one of the fiercest denunciations in Genesis.”**

Jacob describes him as **“Turbulent as water”** which refers to being unstable and weak. **Warren Wiersbe writes “Reuben’s arrogant attitude and reckless way of life weren’t fitting for a firstborn son. Water is weak in itself, but turbulent water is destructive.”**

We have all probably waded in a creek somewhere, and enjoyed the gentle flow of water passing by, but we wouldn’t think of doing that near the Niagara Falls. A nice gentle rain is pleasant and refreshing,

but whip it up into a storm like what we are seeing in the gulf coast during this hurricane season and we can see it's destructive force. Storms that swell a river to overflowing, are destructive. It can topple buildings and bridges, move tons of rock and dirt, carve out canyons destroy standing timber.

As a people, they would not excel. No one from that tribe would step up and distinguish himself as a leader. When you look at the census taken after the exodus and the one taken just before they entered the Promised Land you will see that as a tribe they had already begun to diminish in number. In **Judges 5:15-16**, the Reubenites are described as indecisive. We would call it wishy-washy. They were a people without conviction of heart or courage of will. Reuben's weakness and lust cost him dearly.

John Phillips states that Reuben "lacked character, courage, and conviction." He was not a leader. The Reubenites were the first tribe to settle on the east side of the Jordan and they were the first carried off by the Assyrians. His character is demonstrated in the character of his descendants. His problem was volitional – willful weakness and lust. Every act of sin is a willful act, it's a conscious and deliberate choice to disobey God's commandments.

**Do you have a character like Reuben?**

We are told to **"be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might so that we can stand against the devil's schemes"** (Ephesians 6:10)

From **Galatians 5:16** we are told to **"walk or live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature."**

The difference between the character of Reuben and the character of Joseph was in their convictions. Joseph had them. Reuben did not.

Next, we have Simeon and Levi together. Their problem is violence.

## **B. The Problem of Simeon and Levi is Violence – vs. 5-7**

Growing up these two brothers were joined at the

hip. You might say they were inseparable and they even shared the same traits. Both were angry and violent in nature. It was this very violent nature that led to the massacre at Shechem after their sister Dinah had been raped. They deceitfully lured the people of Shechem by making a treaty between them and Jacob. Instead, these two angry brothers took revenge into their own hands and slaughtered them bringing disgrace on their family and the fear of retaliation by the Canaanites.

Jacob's words were a rebuke for their anger and cruelty. They would be scattered throughout the nation. The tribe of Levi was given no land in Canaan. Instead, they were settled into 48 cities throughout the other tribes. Simeon's territory was surrounded by Judah and over time they were absorbed into the tribe of Judah.

We read in **Ephesians 4:31** that we are to **"Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice."** The next verse tells us how we are to act instead. **"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."** (v. 32)

Yea, but did you see what they did to our sister? Yea, but did you see how my boss treated me at work?

Yea, but did you see how that guy cut me off in traffic?

Yea, but and you fill in the blank.

A friend of mine played High school basketball down in Belleville and the guy guarding him had been riding him all game, taunting him, badgering him, needling him. My friend got cornered by his opponent who was in his face egging him on so my friend took the ball and intentionally threw it in the face of his opponent. He was ejected.

Among the characteristics exhibited by a godly person is self-control (**Galatians 5:22-23**). Self-control is simply the control of self or the control over our emotions, desires or actions. Like an athlete who exercises self-control in the things he eats or in his training regimen, so the follower of

Christ is called on to control his will, his emotions, his desires, his actions, and his thoughts.

A lack of self-control is costly and is more than just losing one's temper or giving in to that craving for a large dessert when you are on a diet. A lack of self-control has cost people promotions, jobs, families, respect, reputation, money and so much more. Some have lost time to incarceration, others have lost their lives all because they lacked self-control. A lack of self-control cost Simeon and Levi.

The person who desires to live godly will allow the Holy Spirit to develop the fruit of self-control along with kindness and forgiveness. The person who desires to live godly recognizes that self-control is impossible without the work of the Holy Spirit in his or her life.

After the exodus we see a change in the Levites. While Moses was on the mountain receiving from God the 10 Commandments, the Israelites urged Aaron to craft gods of gold and they reveled in their sin. Let's read what happened.

### **Exodus 32:25-29**

The Levites had learned self-control and separated themselves to God and in His grace chose them as priests to deliver His commandments.

**Do you have a character like Simeon and Levi? Do you need God's Spirit to mold you with self-control, kindness and forgiveness?**

Because of weakness, lust, anger, and violence, Jacob's words to his first three sons were weighty. In **verses 8-12** his words are wonderful.

## **II. JACOB'S WORDS ARE WONDERFUL – vs. 8-12**

These words are to Judah alone. They affirm that the tribe of Judah would become the leading tribe among the Israelites. In these verses we see that sovereign power would be given to him.

### **A. His Power is Sovereign – vs. 8-10**

His would be the royal tribe, the tribe the others would look up to. Though Judah was not the oldest

son, Jacob's first three forfeited the right of leadership. Judah was not given the right of the firstborn, but he would be given headship among the tribes. The rest would look up to him. Jacob described the power he would have as ruler over his enemies. His rule would be like that of the mightiest of beasts, the lion. Jacob referred to Judah as a lion, a lioness and a lion cub, which speaks of rule and sovereignty.

Kings would come from his tribe that would rule over Israel. But it wasn't just a temporal kingdom Jacob spoke of. From Judah there would be established an eternal kingdom. The scepter would never depart from Judah. Once David became king, the tribe of Judah remained loyal to his descendants as the rightful heirs to sit on the throne even after the kingdom was divided.

Jacob gave a prophetic word that through Judah's lineage would come the Messiah. The KJV uses the term "**Shiloh**". In the NIV it's translated "**until He comes to whom it belongs**." Both Christian and Jewish commentators have historically attributed this passage as a reference to the Messiah, Jesus Christ. All agree that the reference to the scepter remaining with Judah means an eternal kingdom rule that will belong to the Messiah. The root word for Shiloh is the same as Shalom from which we get the word peace. The Prince of Peace we read about in **Isaiah 9:6** would come through Judah's line.

In **Revelation 5:5**, John is found weeping because there was no one in heaven who could open the scroll that was in the hand of the ancient of days who sat on the throne. An angel then told John not to weep because the "**Lion of the tribe of Judah**" was worthy. He is the one foretold by Jacob would come through Judah's family tree.

In **II Samuel 7**, God sent the prophet Nathan to David to tell him that his kingdom would be established forever. It would be an eternal kingdom through the reign of one who would sit on the throne for all eternity. The Lion of Judah, Jesus.

I wonder if Judah's response was anything like David's. When he heard the news that his kingdom

would be eternal, he went and sat before the Lord in humble prayer and asked who he was that the Lord should bestow such an honor on him. **Did Judah wonder as well why such a blessing should be given to him and to his descendants?** Even though, like his older brothers, he had committed a sinful act through incest with his daughter-in-law, Tamar, we see a marked change in character over time as he pleads with Joseph for the life of Benjamin willing to become a substitute, displaying humility, character, love and sacrifice.

Not only do we see that through Judah his power is sovereign, but also his prosperity is sure.

### **B. His Prosperity is Sure – vs. 11-12**

We often think of a donkey as a stubborn and dumb animal, a bit unruly with a mind of its own. No one in his right mind would tie such an animal like that to a vine with branches that are bursting with grapes where there is the potential of the donkey destroying all the fruit and both being lost. No one would think of washing his clothes in a vat of wine. This figure of speech is meant for dramatic effect. It's meant to show that Judah would be prosperous in the Promised Land.

It also refers to a time yet future in the Millennial kingdom age when Messiah's reign would bring with it great prosperity

What Jacob says to Judah are indeed wonderful words and some day we will be a part of His eternal kingdom that is not of this world.

**Revelation 5:9-10 “And they sang a new song: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because You were slain, and with Your blood You purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.’”**

On Tuesday we will elect a new President. We don't know who it will be. We know that his term will only last for four years. I hope you find the words of Jacob to be of comfort because we know that the promised Messiah, who has come in the

person of Jesus Christ, the Lion of Judah will one day reign for eternity. Let those words be wonderful.

**But I need to ask, will you be a part of that eternal kingdom? Have you by faith believed in Jesus the Messiah as your personal Savior? Have you admitted that you are a sinner forever separated from God apart from saving grace? Have you confessed that He is the only Savior through whom you can have eternal life and thereby granted a home in His eternal kingdom? Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. Those are indeed wonderful words.**

Christ the blessed One, gives to all

Wonderful words of Life;

Sinner, list to the loving call,

Wonderful words of Life.

All so freely given,

Wooing us to heaven –

Beautiful words, wonderful words,

Wonderful words of Life.

Beautiful words, wonderful words,

Wonderful words of Life.

CCLI1292471

That takes care of four sons. There are eight more to go. For seven of them, Jacob's words are well-chosen.

### **III. JACOB'S WORDS ARE WELL-CHOSEN – vs. 13-21, 27**

Two of these sons are from Leah, the other sons are from Bilhah and Zilpah, and the last is Jacob's son, Benjamin, born to Rachel.

We read about Zebulun in **verse 13**. His tribe was between the Mediterranean Sea and the Sea of Galilee. Jacob said his prosperity would come from the sea, yet his borders didn't touch any body of water. What we learn though is that its location was on an important trade route between those two bodies of water and Damascus.

Next, is Issachar. We read about him in **verses 14-15**.



Depending on the translation, scholars are divided on the interpretation about Issachar. His name can mean either he will bring a reward or man of wages. The word rawboned interpreted as strong in some Bibles can also mean bony as in skin and bones. The interpretation varies. Jacob's prophecy could either imply that his descendants would be strong and able to carry burdens or they would be weak and thin and unable to bear burdens well.

The imagery of a donkey lying down under its load has two potential meanings. It could mean that they are resting for the work that is ahead of them or that, like a donkey, they stubbornly refuse to work.

Given what Jacob says here and their history, they would be a strong people given to hard work and devoted to the soil but would live in servitude to others. Because the soil was fertile and productive, they were susceptible to marauding bands raiding the land. They became subservient to the people in the land because they never drove them out.

Under King David, they were described as a people who **“understood the times and knew what Israel should do.” (I Chronicles 12:32)**

Scholars aren't sure if it means they had political astuteness knowing how to interpret the times. Others think they had a keen understanding of some of the sciences. And others think it refers to an understanding that it was the proper time to crown David as King.

Then there is Dan. He is the first son of Bilhah and we learn of his prophecy in **verses 16-17**. His name means to judge and he is described as being serpent-like. Kent Hughes writes that Medieval Jewish scholars believe that being like a snake is a reference to Samson who was from the tribe of Dan. He used stealth and trickery to defeat the Philistines.

In **Judges 18:20** the Danites set up an idol for worship. This tells me that they weren't really committed to following God. Later on in **I Kings 12** after the nation of Israel split and Jeroboam became king, he set up one of the idols in Dan where people could go and worship.

**Verse 18** remains a bit of a mystery to scholars. They aren't sure whether to put it with the preceding verse about Dan, the following verse about Gad or if it should stand alone. What is clear is that this is the first use of the word salvation (KJV) or deliverance (NIV) in the Bible. It is also clear that Jacob understood that salvation comes from God. Some scholars think that Jacob realizes his time to die is near and he's drawing strength to finish his words of blessing. Whatever the case, take to heart our need to look to God for salvation.

Gad is mentioned next in **verse 19**. Like Reuben, this tribe also settled on the east side of the Jordan River. The name Gad means troop and in the original Jacob has a little fun with a play on words using Gad's name. The verse literally reads “Troop, a troop will troop upon him, but he will troop on their heads.” They were susceptible to attack from the Amorites who lived to the east of their border so fulfilling the prophecy that they would suffer attack.

The Gadites would become great warriors and in **Deuteronomy 33:20** Moses described them as a great lion.

In **verse 20** Asher follows Gad. His name means blessed or happy. The land they were given would be fertile. The rich soil would produce crops fit for a king. Their olive groves would produce an abundance of rich olive oil.

In **verse 21** Naphtali is likened to a doe. They would be a free-spirited people who would not be bound by tradition. The KJV provides more insight into the intent of Jacob's words. The NIV says he would have beautiful fawns while the KJV says he would have goodly or beautiful words. It suggests that they would be poetic and expressive. Their speech and literature would be eloquent.

Of note is that during the days of the judges, Deborah and Barak came from the tribe of Naphtali.

Skipping ahead to **verse 27** we read about Benjamin who is described as a ravenous wolf. Like Judah, he would be fierce in battle. This is evident in the book of Judges. The ravenous nature of a wolf is also

evident in the person of King Saul who was from the tribe of Benjamin. We see this beastly nature in his many attempts to kill David. Centuries later another Benjamite would be a ravenous wolf who attempted to kill Christians, but who in turn after his conversion would be just as fierce for Christ. We are talking about the Apostle Paul.

Jacob had some well-chosen words for his sons that reflected their character that would be passed on to their descendants. As we consider all his sons, we close with some welcoming words to Joseph.

#### IV. JACOB'S WORDS ARE WELCOMING – vs. 22-26

Even after all these years, Joseph is still the favored son. Six times Jacob uses the word bless in his words to Joseph. He would be like a vine drawing water from a spring so it can grow over a wall. This fruitful vine in **verse 22** is a reference to Ephraim. As a tribe they would become very fruitful in the land and extend the borders of their territory just like a vine that climbs over a wall. Like a vine he wouldn't be contained.

**Verse 23** refers to all the attacks others made against him. Archers speak of his many sufferings. Arrows are the lies that were said about him. His brothers were cruel in what they said about him and their actions against him. Potiphar's wife falsely accused him. He was innocently thrown in prison. Everything and everyone seemed to be against him. But in spite of all the hostility toward him, he had remained steady and faithful.

Notice in these verses the multiple references to God. He is called the Mighty One, the Shepherd, the Rock, God, Almighty. It is He in whom Joseph trusted during all the assaults against him.

You remember the story of the three little pigs. One built his house out of straw and the big bad wolf huffed and puffed and blew that house down. The second built his house out of wood and again the big bad wolf huffed and puffed and blew that house down. The third built his house out of stone but try as he could the big bad wolf could not blow the

house down made of stone.

In the Sermon on the Mount (**Matthew 7:24-27**) Jesus told the people that anyone who listened to His words and practiced them would be like a man who built his house on the rock. No matter how hard the storms assaulted that house it would stand firm. If we want our lives built on a firm foundation that will withstand the storms of life, we must build on Jesus who is the Rock. The Psalmist encourages us to run to the Rock, to find shelter in the Rock, to hide in the Rock.

**Psalm 18:2, 31, 46**

**Psalm 27:5**

**Psalm 31:2-3**

**Psalm 62:2**

Jesus goes on to warn in the Sermon on the Mount that anyone who builds on sand will not survive the storms of life. An unstable foundation that many try to build on are things like the sand of people (friends or family) or the sand of their possessions or the sand of their portfolio or the sand of their position. No matter how secure we may think they are, they are like shifting sand, the storms of life come along and huff and puff and we will not stand. There is only one firm foundation, one rock. There is only one shepherd. There is only one Almighty God.

**On what or in whom are you trusting today? What is the foundation of your life?**

With these words Jacob blessed and challenged his 12 sons. His closing words to them were a reminder to bury him back in Canaan. When he was done he crawled back into bed and closed his eyes for the last time, absent from the body, but present with the Lord. He wanted his sons to rest secure on God his rock, his shepherd, the One who is Almighty. He wanted his God to be their God. Through Him would come salvation and an eternal kingdom. We celebrate Him today through communion.

Before we take communion, let's sing this hymn of commitment and challenge.

*Take My Life and Let It Be Consecrated*