

Jacob's Blessing on Judah, Zebulun, and Issachar

Genesis 49:8-15

Genesis 49:8-15 - "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. ⁹ 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?

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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. ¹² His eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk.

¹³ "Zebulun shall dwell by the haven of the sea; he shall become a haven for ships, and his border shall adjoin Sidon.

¹⁴ "Issachar is a strong donkey lying down between two burdens; ¹⁵ 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."

Background Notes

Jacob's patriarchal blessing is Hebrew poetry - in fact, it is the longest poem in the book of Genesis. In most English Bibles it is clear that the chapter is Hebrew poetry by the construction of the text. (In the text above, we have condensed the poetic form for reasons of space.) Because most of this chapter is poetry, a lot of figurative language is used, and there are many "plays on words." As a result, it's not easy to interpret Genesis 49!

Furthermore, Genesis 49 is a prophetic oracle about the tribes of Israel that carries on to the "last days." Verse 1: "*And Jacob called his sons and said, "Gather together, that I may tell you what shall befall you in the last days."* So it's hard to understand this chapter - not only because it is poetic language, but also because some of it has not yet been fulfilled. It will be fulfilled in the future, when Israel returns to the Land for the millennial kingdom of Christ. Then the tribes of Israel will once again have designated areas within the boundaries of the land of Israel. (See Ezekiel 48).

Genesis 49:1-7 are the predictions about Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, the first three sons of Jacob. Verses 8-15 are the blessings on Judah, Jacob's fourth son, and on Zebulun and Issachar. Zebulun and Issachar were not sons #5 and #6 - they were actually sons #10 and #9. Why did Jacob skip over sons #5 through #8? Because Zebulun and Issachar were sons of Leah, Jacob's first wife, as were the first four sons - Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. So Jacob grouped together the sons by each of his four wives together as he gave this prophetic blessing. Perhaps they were standing in that order by his bed when Jacob pronounced the blessings.

Doctrinal Points

1. Blessing and leadership would come from the tribe of Judah.

In verses 8-12 is the prophetic blessing on Judah. It is filled with the promise of blessing and leadership. Up to this point in the story, we would have assumed that the blessing for Judah would rather have been given to Joseph. After all, the birthright was removed from Reuben and given to Joseph, and Joseph was the hero of the story. In fact, the entire family owed their very survival to Joseph!

Joseph did receive great blessing, as we'll see in the next section. But there was also a tremendous blessing for Judah. 1 Chronicles 5:2 says that *"Judah prevailed over his brothers, and from him came a ruler, although the birthright was Joseph's."* It seems that the responsibility and dominion aspects of the birthright were given to Judah, while the inheritance aspect of the birthright was given to Joseph.

The prediction was that great blessing and strength would come to Israel through Judah. *"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" (v8).* This is a great blessing!

Verses 11-12 are a further description of blessing: *"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. His eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk."* Now we might not think it's such a great blessing to "tie your donkey to a choice vine" and "wash your garment in wine," but we need to remember that this is poetic language!

The idea is that Judah would become so prosperous that it wouldn't matter if his donkey was tied to a choice vine, and the donkey ate the grapes – and maybe the vine as well! Conditions for Judah would be so prosperous and plentiful that there would be plenty of choice vines, and wine would be as plentiful as the water in which you would wash your clothes! There would be no scarcity of food and drink, so everyone would have a healthy appearance: *"His eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk."*

Some commentators apply verses 11-12 to the Lord Jesus, because the Messiah is mentioned in verse 10, but I see this as a general description of great blessing upon Judah and his descendants.

Furthermore, great leadership as well as great blessing would be associated with Judah. Notice that the other tribes would bow down to Judah, and praise him (v8). That's leadership! The description of Judah as a lion certainly continues the idea of leadership, since the lion is known as the "king of the beasts." You don't play games with a lion - there is no question about who is in charge!

So great blessing and leadership were promised to the tribe of Judah. This came true in the past, and will continue to come true the future, when the Lord Jesus Christ, the "Lion of the tribe of Judah" returns to this earth (Revelation 5:5)!

2. Kings and the Messiah would come from the line of Judah.

“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” (v10).

The scepter, of course, is symbolic of kingship. The first king of Israel, Saul, was from the tribe of Benjamin, but he was removed and replaced by David, who was of the tribe of Judah. The prophecy says that the scepter would remain with Judah *“until Shiloh comes.”* Who or what is Shiloh? Shiloh either means “the One who brings peace,” or “the One to whom tribute belongs.” So “Shiloh” is the Messiah! It’s the Lord Jesus Christ!

Whether it is a title or a designation, either way Shiloh refers to the coming Messiah. Ancient Jewish commentaries interpreted the word “Shiloh” this way. The “targums” were the ancient Aramaic translations from the Hebrew of the Old Testament books, and the targum for Genesis translates the word “Shiloh” as “Messiah.”

What an amazing prophecy! This prophecy was fulfilled in the line of kings, starting with David and culminating with Christ. Kings and the Messiah would come from the line of Judah.

By the way, this is a good prophecy to show your Jewish friends who are still waiting for the Messiah to come. A straightforward reading of verse 10 certainly seems to indicate that the Messiah **had** to have come **before** 70 AD, because in 70 AD the nation of Israel ceased to exist. Verse 10 again: *“The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes...”* So if you ever converse with orthodox Jews who are still waiting for the Messiah to come, turn them to this passage.

The end of verse 10 says, *“And to Him shall be the obedience of the people.”* We know that when the Lord Jesus returns, every knee will bow to Him, and every tongue will confess Him as Lord. *“At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10-11).*

What a wonderful prophecy we have about Jesus Christ in Genesis 49!! Kings and the Messiah would come from the line of Judah.

Practical Application

Will we reach our full potential?

Not much is said about Zebulun and Issachar in verses 13-15, but it appears that there’s a bit of a contrast between these two closely related tribes. The tribe of Zebulun, it seems, took better advantage of its opportunities than the tribe of Issachar did. *“Zebulun shall dwell by the haven of the sea; he shall become a haven for ships, and his border shall adjoin Sidon.”*

In the Hebrew language, the idea is that Zebulun's borders would be "toward the sea," and "toward Sidon." Zebulun's tribal territory was land-locked, but they took advantage of an ancient trade route that ran through their territory. They even linked this trade route with Mediterranean Sea commerce, all the way from the natural harbor where Haifa is today, up to Sidon on the coast of Phoenicia. Zebulun took advantage of its opportunities.

There's a spiritual lesson here that is similar to the parable of the "pounds" (minas) that was given by our Lord in Luke 19. The Lord gives us many opportunities to wisely use the time He gives us, and to properly use the abilities and talents He has given us to serve Him. But do we take advantage of the time and the opportunities? We should follow the example of Zebulun, and take advantage of our opportunities.

Issachar, on the other hand, does not seem to have reached his full potential. *"Issachar is a strong donkey, lying down between two burdens. 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"* (v14-15). Issachar was strong, but the prophecy seems to be saying that because he saw that the land was good and pleasant, Issachar lay down on the job and ended up doing forced labor.

This doesn't mean that nothing good ever came from the tribe of Issachar. At the time of David for example, we read in 1 Chronicles 12:32, *"of the sons of Issachar who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do, their chiefs were two hundred; and all their brethren were at their command."* In the tribe of Issachar there were thoughtful and respected men who "understood the times," and these men were able to help David. Today we need people who properly understand the times in which we live and to advise us with wisdom.

However, it seems that the tribe of Issachar didn't reach its full potential. They enjoyed the good and pleasant land without taking advantage of all the opportunities that God gave them. So, once again, the question for us is: will **we** reach our full potential?

The Lord gives us many opportunities as individuals and as churches. Too often we fall short of our potential because we become content and complacent in our lifestyles, in our pleasant home settings, or in the comfortable routines at our churches. We're often not challenged to be creative, and reach out, and work towards new goals. It's easier to comfortably "lie down on the job"! Sometimes we're more like Issachar than like Zebulun.

Just before his death, the apostle Paul was able to tell Timothy that he had **finished** the race. He had **finished** the course the Lord had laid out before him! Will we be able to say that we've finished the work God gave us to do here on earth? Will we reach our full potential?