



TALKS FOR GROWING CHRISTIANS TRANSCRIPT

Talk Genesis 49:16-27: Jacob's Patriarchal Blessing on Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Joseph and Benjamin

16 *"Dan shall judge his people
As one of the tribes of Israel.*

17 *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.*

18 *I have waited for your salvation, O LORD!*

19 *"Gad, a troop shall tramp upon him,
But he shall triumph at last.*

20 *"Bread from Asher shall be rich,
And he shall yield royal dainties.*

21 *" Naphtali is a deer let loose;
He uses beautiful words.*

22 *" Joseph is a fruitful bough,
A fruitful bough by a well;
His branches run over the wall.*

23 *The archers have bitterly grieved him,
Shot at him and hated him.*

24 *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),*

25 *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.*

26 *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.*

*27 " Benjamin is a ravenous wolf;
In the morning he shall devour the prey,
And at night he shall divide the spoil."*

Background Notes

As we have mentioned before, Genesis 49 is not the easiest chapter in the Bible to translate and interpret, since this prophetic blessing of Jacob is in poetic language. When I was working as a research scientist, I had to translate an article from a Russian technical journal into English. Now I don't know much Russian – in fact I don't know **any** Russian -- but the job was not too difficult. I just got a Russian/English dictionary, looked up the words, translated, and interpreted. But that was technical literature, and I already had a pretty good idea of what the article was about. There is no way, however, that I could have translated and interpreted a Russian poem!

Sometimes the translation and interpretation of Hebrew poetry can be difficult. Not only is Genesis 49 Hebrew poetry, it is prophecy as well. Prophecy is always harder to interpret than history, particularly if we don't know whether the prophecy has been completely fulfilled or not. That would be true of some of the prophecies here in Genesis 49, because some of them continue on into the future, to the last days, as we saw in verse 1.

In verses 16-17 we have Jacob's prophecy about Dan. *"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..."*

Is verse 17 is a promise of blessing that Dan would be able to defeat his enemies with cunning strategy, or is it a prediction in poetic language that Dan would allow "the serpent," Satan, to bring idolatry into Israel, and thus Israel would fall backward? Look at Judges 18 in this connection. Idolatry came into Israel, and Dan, in a big way, was responsible for permitting idolatry to come into the land. In addition, look at 1 Kings 12. The tribal area of Dan is where King Jeroboam I set up one of the "golden calf" shrines. Some commentaries even suggest that this prophecy about Dan in Genesis 49 is a reference to the false prophet or antichrist of future, and that this apostate Jew of the Last Days will come from the tribe of Dan.

We can't be sure, but maybe that is why Jacob cried out for the salvation that he knows will only come through the Messiah: *"I have waited for your salvation, O LORD!"*(v18). The Hebrew word that is used here for salvation is "yeshua" -- the Hebrew name for Jesus.

In verses 19-21 we have the prophecies concerning Gad, Asher, and Naphtali. These are the three sons, along with Dan, who were born to Jacob's concubines: Dan and Naphtali to Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid, and Gad and Asher to Zilpah, Leah's handmaid. Let's just read those verses again: *"Gad, a troop shall tramp upon him, but he shall triumph at last. Bread from Asher shall be rich, and he shall yield royal dainties. Naphtali is a deer let loose; he uses beautiful words."*

These prophecies have all come true, or will come true. The tribe of Gad, which settled in Transjordan (the eastern side of the Jordan River), was exposed to raids by enemies from the east -- but Gad will be part of Christ's kingdom in the Last Days.

The tribe of Asher inhabited the rich seacoast of Israel, north of Mount Carmel.

And of Naphtali, it was predicted that he would give goodly or beautiful words. The tribal area of Naphtali included the area around the Sea of Galilee. All but one of Jesus' disciples came from this area – the one exception was Judas Iscariot. The area of Naphtali is where our Lord did most of His earthly ministry. It is hard not to see our Lord's gracious words as a fulfillment of this prophecy. In Luke 4:22 we read, *"So all bore witness to Him, and marveled at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth."*

That brings us then to the last two sons of Jacob, the sons of Rachel – Joseph and Benjamin. Let's take two doctrinal points from the prophecy concerning Joseph.

Doctrinal Points

1. Fruitfulness must find its source in God.

Verse 22 says: *"Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a well; his branches run over the wall."* And verse 26: *"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."*

It is predicted here that Joseph would be greatly blessed and very fruitful. He would be a fruitful bough, a branch by a well, and his branches would run over the wall – fruitfulness that reached out to help others. This was surely true of Joseph, and was fulfilled in the great tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. Notice how these blessings include offspring: *"Blessings of the breasts and of the womb"(v25).*

What was the source of Joseph's fruitfulness and blessing? Verse 25 gives the answer: *"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."* God Almighty! El Shaddai! God Almighty was the source of all blessing and fruitfulness for Joseph.

The same is true for us today. Fruitfulness must find its source in God. The world would say, "You can generate your own fruitfulness and success. Think positively! Treat yourself well! If you feel good about yourself, you will automatically give of yourself for others!" What a lie!

How far do you think that self-generated strength will take you? Will it take you to the point of sacrifice? Will it take you to the point of helping those in real need? No way! We can be truly fruitful only when we find our strength in God Almighty. Only when we find our source in God, not ourselves, can our branches "run over the wall."

Do you wish you could be more fruitful as a Christian? When we try too hard in our own strength, and we don't depend on the Lord, we will burn out quickly. No fruit will result. We can't try to do the Lord's work in our own strength. We must do it God's way. Fruitfulness must find its source in God.

2. Faithfulness must find its source in God.

Verse 23 says of Joseph, *"The archers have bitterly grieved him, shot at him and hated him. 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."*

Think of the arrows that the enemy shot at Joseph -- the arrows of hate and betrayal by his brothers, the arrows of temptation by Potiphar's wife, the arrows of false accusation and imprisonment! Yet, Joseph was faithful, and did not fall. How was Joseph able to avoid temptation? In verse 24 we find the answer: *"his bow remained in strength, and the arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the Mighty God of Jacob...the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel."*

What a character description of God is revealed in those three names of God! The Mighty God, the Shepherd, and the solid Rock of Israel -- no wonder Joseph was able to withstand the attacks!

What about us? We will never make it if we try to stand against Satan's attacks in our own strength. We must find our source of strength in God. I love the picture of God helping Joseph in verse 24. Did you ever see a child try to shoot an arrow from a bow that has too much tension? The bow shakes as the string is pulled back, and it is not in control. But now along comes the archery instructor. He is the strong expert. He stands behind the child and puts his arms around the child; he grasps the child's hands in his own hands, and with **his** strength the bow is pulled back. Everything is under control.

Do you see the picture? Here's the point -- are we trying to pull the bowstring ourselves -- and losing spiritual battles as a result? Try Joseph's secret! Depend on God, and not on your own strength. Pray, with believing faith, as you fight the battles. It's like asking the Lord to stand behind you and grasp your hands as you're trying to use that bow to fight the battles. Faithfulness must find its source in God.

Practical Application

What animal would best describe your character?

Throughout Genesis 49 Jacob used various animals to describe what certain tribes would be like: the lion for Judah, the donkey for Issachar, the snake for Dan, the deer for Naphtali, and the wolf for Benjamin. *"Benjamin is a ravenous wolf"* (v27).

Is a "ravenous wolf" positive or negative -- or is it both positive and negative? It's hard to say. It may mean that as a ravenous wolf, Benjamin would be successful in war -- or maybe it means cruel in war -- or maybe both. From Judges 20 we know that that the moral standards in Benjamin were not the best, but we also know that Benjamin produced some valued warriors. In any case, a ravenous wolf is the animal that described Benjamin best.

What animal would best describe your character? If God were describing your character with an animal, would the animal **God** chooses be the same animal **we** would choose? Would we consider ourselves as "lions" -- but God would say "kittens"? Would we

say, "I'm like an ox" -- but God would say "pig"? Would we say "horse," but God would say "mule"? Would we say "golden retriever," but God would say "grey mouse"?

Interesting question, isn't it? Let's hope God would not have to use a "snake" or "rat" to describe us. Think about it! God had Jacob use animals to describe and predict the character of his twelve sons and the twelve tribes of Israel. If God were to use an animal to picture you, what animal would best describe your character?