

### Jacob's Blessing on Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Joseph, and Benjamin

#### Genesis 49:16-27

Genesis 49:16-27 - *"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."*

#### Background Notes

As we have mentioned before, Genesis 49 is not an easy chapter 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, not poetic, 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 figurative language of Hebrew poetry can be difficult to translate and interpret. 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. And some of the prophecies of Genesis 49 continue on into the future, to *"the last days,"* as we saw in verse 1.

Verses 16-17 are 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.

The tribe of Dan was largely responsible for permitting idolatry to come into the land. Look at 1 Kings 12. The tribal area of Dan is where King Jeroboam I set up one of his idolatrous “golden calf” shrines.

Some commentaries suggest that this Genesis 49 prophecy about Dan is a reference to the false prophet or antichrist of future, and that this apostate Jew of the End Times will come from the tribe of Dan. We can't be sure of this, but perhaps that is why Jacob cried out for the salvation that he knew would only come through the Messiah: *“I have waited for your salvation, O LORD!”*(v18). The Hebrew word used here for salvation is “*yeshua*” - the Hebrew name for Jesus!

Verses 19-21 are the prophecies about Gad, Asher, and Naphtali. These three sons, along with Dan, were born to Jacob's concubines: Dan and Naphtali to Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid, and Gad and Asher to Zilpah, Leah's handmaid. *“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 either all come true, or they will come true in the future. The tribe of Gad chose to settle on the eastern side of the Jordan River, and it 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, and the one exception was Judas Iscariot. Our Lord did most of His earthly ministry in the tribal area of Naphtali, and it is easy to see our Lord's gracious words as a fulfillment of this prophecy. Luke 4:22 says, *“So all bore witness to Him, and marveled at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth.”*

In our Doctrinal Points we will discuss the prophecies about Joseph and Benjamin, Jacob's sons by his beloved wife, Rachel.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. Fruitfulness must find its source in God.

Verse 22: *“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.”*

These verses predict 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 would reach out to help others. This was surely true of

Joseph, and it 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 is the source of all blessing and fruitfulness!

This is true for us today. Fruitfulness must find its source in God. The world would say, “You can generate your own success. Think positively! Treat yourself well! If you feel good about yourself, you will automatically give of yourself for others!” But that’s a lie!

How far do you think that self-generated strength will take you? Will it take you to the point of sacrifice? No. Will it take you to the point of giving up your own pleasures to help those in real need? No way! We can be truly fruitful only when we find our strength in El Shaddai, in God Almighty. When we find our source in God, and not in ourselves, our branches will “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. Little or 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.

Of Joseph, verse 23 says, *“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, the arrow of being forgotten by the butler! Yet, Joseph was faithful. He 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 marvelous description of the characteristics of our 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’ll never be able to make it if we try to stand firm 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: His arms were *“made strong by the*

*hands of the Mighty God of Jacob”!* Did you ever see a child try to shoot an arrow from a bow that has too much tension – that’s too much for the child to handle? The bow shakes as the string is pulled back - it’s just too hard in control. But then the archery instructor comes along. He’s 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 - and the shot is accurate!

Do you like that picture? Here’s the point: Are we trying to pull the bowstring ourselves, in our own strength? Are we losing spiritual battles as a result? Try Joseph’s secret! Depend on God! Don’t try to fight in your own strength. Pray, with believing faith, when the evil one attacks. That’s like asking the Lord to stand behind you and grasp your hands when you’re using that big bow to do battle against those attacks. 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” a positive or a negative image? Maybe it’s both positive and negative? It’s hard to say. It may mean that as a ravenous wolf, Benjamin would be successful in battle - or maybe it means he’d be cruel in war. Or maybe it means both. Judges 20 indicates that the moral standards in Benjamin were not the best - but Benjamin produced some valued warriors. In any case, a ravenous wolf is the animal that best described Benjamin!

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? Do we consider ourselves to be “lions” - but God would say we’re “kittens”? Would we say, “I’m strong like an ox” - but God would say greedy like a “pig”? Would we say “horse,” but God would say a stubborn “mule”? Would we say “golden retriever,” but God would say “grey mouse”?

Interesting question, isn’t it? Let’s hope God wouldn’t have to say “snake” or “rat” to describe us. God had Jacob use animals to describe and predict the character of his twelve sons and the twelve tribes of Israel. It’s worthwhile to think about this, isn’t it? If God were to use an animal to picture you, what animal would best describe your character?