

## If God is For Us: The Life and Trials of Joseph

*The Last Words of Jacob* (Genesis 49:1-33)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on December 21, 2025

### Introduction

- ❖ **A man's last words can be trivial and quickly forgotten, or they could be etched in history, passed on and remembered for generations.** "*Et tu, Brute?*" were the famous last words of Julius Caesar (according to Shakespeare). George Washington's last words were, "*Tis well.*" Which is much more noble and far more inspiring compared to Winston Churchill's. The last thing he reportedly said was, "*I'm bored with it all.*" Which is at least better than Elvis Presley's last words, "*I'm going to the bathroom to read.*" Had he known that would be it, I assume he would've come up with something more profound.
  - But that's the problem, isn't it? Most people have no idea when their time is up, or they're not conscious in their final moments. **So they have no opportunity to offer any profound or memorable last words.** But Jacob, the biblical patriarch, is not like most people. He's been anticipating his death for many chapters. **And now he's summoned all his strength to sit up in his deathbed to bestow a final blessing.**
- ❖ Last week, we looked at chapter 48 and how Jacob both adopted and blessed the two sons of Joseph. In today's text, he still has a direct word for Joseph. He still blesses his favorite son. But what he says to Joseph should be interpreted in light of the blessing he already gave to Ephraim and Manasseh. Those two blessings are intimately connected.
  - So the events of our chapter follow directly on the heels of the previous chapter. We're told in v1 that Jacob calls his sons to gather around his bed. "*Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you what shall happen to you in days to come.*" So not only will his words contain blessing, they'll also contain some prophecy. The LORD will speak through Jacob to prophesy of things to come, regarding the fate of these twelve tribes that will come out of these twelve brothers and their kin.
- ❖ **I'm sure the brothers were eager to hear what their father would say.** What kind of blessing he's reserved for them. It's not clear. All they know is that they're not deserving of much. The ten oldest are all guilty of betraying Joseph, selling him into slavery, and deceiving Jacob into thinking he was dead. In previous chapters, we read about the sordid details of the sins committed by the four oldest brothers, Rueben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. We don't know much about the others, but it's likely they have their own messy pasts.
  - **I'm sure the only thing clear in the mind of these brothers is that Joseph – the favored son, the golden child, the one who outperformed all of us combined – he's definitely getting the best blessing.** His line will be the one through whom the Messiah comes. The Chosen One originally prophesied in the beginning of Genesis. In Genesis 3:15. **The Offspring of Eve who will crush the serpent, decisively defeating the devil.** The same Offspring promised to Abraham, in Genesis 17:6, through whom nations and kings will arise. Through whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed (22:18). That messianic promise was passed on from Abraham to Isaac (not Ishmael). Then from Isaac to Jacob (not Esau). **And I'm sure the sons of Jacob are thinking that that particular promise is going to Joseph.** He's a lock.

- ❖ But, as we walk through Genesis 49, what we'll discover, once again, is that God's ways are higher than our ways. He challenges our conventional wisdom. He surpasses our human expectations. **Who we think deserves the honor of carrying forth the messianic line is not who ends up getting it.** What we come across in the last words of Jacob are three important lessons on sin, grace, and our ultimate hope: (1) The generational impact of sin is real. (2) The Abrahamic blessing is without equal. (3) The blessing of God is a person.

### The Generational Impact of Sin

- ❖ Let's start by considering the generational impact of sin. **I'm talking about the reality of a generational curse – where the sins of the father are passed down and wreck havoc on subsequent generations.** This is highlighted in many of the "blessings" that Jacob bestows to his sons. **To be honest, some of them read more like curses.** They come across very negative. So it's hard to see how they're all counted as blessings.
  - But considering their checkered past and how all the brothers end up populating the Twelve Tribes. And they all receive a share of the Promised Land. **It's important to emphasize that just being mentioned at all in Jacob's last words – to even be included – is a blessing.** But we can't ignore how some of these blessings paint a dark and foreboding picture when it comes to the future of some of these tribes.
- ❖ **Reuben's blessing** is a good example. It begins in v3 by describing every expectation you might have for the firstborn in the family. The honor and dignity and strength that comes with being the oldest and most responsible. Responsible to carry on the legacy of your father. *"Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, and the firstfruits of my strength, preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power."* He was in a position of primacy and privilege. He would've been the first choice to carry forth the messianic line.
  - But the next verse paints a different picture. *"Unstable as water, you shall not have preeminence, because you went up to your father's bed; then you defiled it—he went up to my couch!"* **Reuben's instability, his unreliability and volatility, is demonstrated in various instances.** V4 highlights his rash sin of sleeping with Bilhah, his father's concubine and mother of some of his half-brothers. That sin resulted in a forfeiture of his position of primacy and privilege.
- ❖ But don't forget how Reuben tried to rescue Joseph from the pit – but failed. And how he tried to ensure the safe return of Benjamin – but was rejected. You could never count on Reuben. And the same could be said of the tribe that comes out of him.
  - Later in Judges 5, the tribe of Reuben demonstrates the same unreliability. They were just as flaky as their forefather. **When Deborah and Barak led the people of Israel into battle against the Canaanites, the Reubenites were noticeably absent.** Listen to these indicting words in Deborah's song in Judges 5:15b-16, *"<sup>15</sup>Among the clans of Reuben there were great searchings of heart. <sup>16</sup>Why did you sit still among the sheepfolds, to hear the whistling for the flocks? Among the clans of Reuben there were great searchings of heart."* **In other words, while the other tribes were out fighting, the Reubenites were at home thinking about it.** Searching their hearts.

- ❖ This is what I mean by a generational curse. The generational impact of sin is real. **The same sinful proclivities often get passed down from parents to their children.** Because, compared to all other heroes, mentors, or disciplers you might have in your life, your parents have the greatest influence on who you are – for good or bad, for better or worse.
  - **Parents, you are your child’s most impactful discipler.** You’re discipling them whether you realize it or not, whether you’re intentional or not. **Most lessons are caught not taught.** Your kids are catching things all the time growing up in your house. That’s how the instability of Reuben was passed down from generation to generation. By example from parent to child. That’s why you can’t count on the Reubenites and why you never read of any prophet or judge coming out of their tribe.
  
- ❖ And tribes of **Simeon** and **Levi** aren’t any better off. That’s because their forbearers had teamed up earlier in chapter 34 to massacre the men of Shechem in revenge for the rape of their sister Dinah. Look at v5, “*5Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords. 6Let my soul come not into their council; O my glory, be not joined to their company. For in their anger they killed men, and in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen.*”
  - Notice how the pronoun “I” is used in v7. It reminds us that this is a prophetic word with the LORD speaking through Jacob. “*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.*” **And again, the curse of sin passes down and impacts future generations.** In the future, the tribe of Simeon is one of the smaller tribes. And eventually they dwindle so much that they’re effectively absorbed into the tribe of Judah (cf. Josh 19:1, 9).
    - Now, down the road, the tribe of Levi is likewise scattered in Israel, but in a different sense, for a different reason, which we’ll consider in a moment. But my point is all the same – the generational impact of sin is not to be ignored.
  
- ❖ Skip over to v16 and see the same principle reinforced in the tribe of **Dan**. Dan means “he judges,” and the blessing in v16 sounds positive at first. “*Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel.*” But the generational curse shows up in v17, “*Dan shall be a serpent in the way, a viper by the path, that bites the horse’s heels so that his rider falls backward.*”
  - The cunning and ferociousness of Dan will be passed down to future generations. **This is illustrated in the life of the most famous Danite, Samson.** His story is recorded in the book of Judges (13-16). If you’re familiar with it, you know how Samson used his cunning and ferociousness to merely serve his self-interests. But mercifully, they were also used by God to deliver his people out of oppression.
  
- ❖ And let’s consider one more tribe. Look at v27 and the tribe of **Benjamin**. “*Benjamin is a ravenous wolf, in the morning devouring the prey and at evening dividing the spoil.*” Again, this is another blessing that comes across as largely negative. Benjamin’s ravenous appetite is passed down and impacts future generations. **That’s clearly demonstrated in the first major civil war among the Twelve Tribes found in Judges 19-21.** The ravenous lust of the men of Gibeah, a clan of Benjamin, led to a detestable sin, triggering widespread disgust and condemnation from the other tribes. And it led to war. A generational curse is to blame.

- ❖ **Back in those days, there was saying, “*The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.*”** (cf. Jer 31:29) It means that children often have to bear the consequences of their parent’s sins. It’s a principle reinforced in these “blessings” over Jacob’s sons. They serve as a warning of the generational impact of our sins.
- ❖ But that’s not the whole story. **Yes, the generational impact of sin is real, but it’s not decisive. There *is* hope. There is a way to break the generational curse.** You see, for every Simeon whose descendant are largely scattered and absorbed into other tribes, there is a Levi whose initial curse is transformed into a blessing.
  - There’s a future incident, in Exodus 32, where after Moses confronts the people for constructing that idolatrous golden calf, **the Levites channel their anger righteously in a form of zeal for the LORD.** They put to death the guilty for the LORD’s sake, and for that they are, from that day on, set apart as holy and ordained as a tribe of priests, guarding the holiness of God (Ex 32:29).
    - So the Levites are still scattered like v7 prophesied. But they’re scattered among their brothers to serve as priests, teaching their brothers the Law and ministering at the tabernacle or temple.
- ❖ **My point is that the fate of the tribe of Levi should encourage you to know that you aren’t destined to repeat the mistakes of your parents.** Your life, your future, doesn’t have to be defined by their sins. There is hope. The generational curse can be broken. That’s what happened for Levi’s descendants.
  - Simeon’s descendants were merely defined by their father’s curse. **But Levi’s descendants took that quick temper passed down to them and gave it over to God.** They channeled it for good. They used it in service of his holy name.
- ❖ The same can be true for you. **No matter what sinful patterns or proclivities your parents may have passed on to you, you don’t have to be defined by them.** You don’t have to repeat them. The generational impact of sin is real but not decisive. By the grace of God, you can stop that pattern. You can break that curse.
  - Channel that ferociousness your parents passed on to you into an active zeal for the Lord. Put that energy they passed on – not into serving self-interests – but into ministries that glorify God. Or maybe instead your parents passed on a general anxiety or unhealthy risk aversion. What if you transformed that into a healthy cautiousness and attentiveness to detail that other leaders in the church might lack?
    - You don’t have to be defined by their sins. We’re all influenced by our parents and our forbearers, but we don’t have to be passive victims. **They may have eaten sour grapes, but by the grace of God and through the resources we have in our faith, we can take far better care of our teeth.**

## The Abrahamic Blessing is Without Equal

- ❖ That's the first lesson: The generational impact of our sin is real but not decisive. Here's the second lesson: The Abrahamic blessing is without equal. I want to draw attention to the particular blessing that Joseph receives in vv22-26. **And the point I'm making is that Joseph is the last person in the world you'd think would need any more blessings.** And yet here he is being blessed with a blessing that surpasses anything this world has to offer.
- ❖ Listen to v22 and you get a sense of how blessed Joseph already is, "*Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring; his branches run over the wall.*" He's like a fruitful vine planted next to an abundant spring supplying it water and nutrients. **So it grows and grows, overgrowing the garden walls to the point that its branches hang over, offering its fruit for the picking to any passerby.** That's a fitting description of Joseph. He has become so fruitful in his management of Egypt's grain supply that the kingdom has more than enough to share with all the masses coming from around the world.
- ❖ **But, as we know, Joseph didn't achieve this level of prosperity without enduring a fair share of persecution.** Look at v23, "*The archers bitterly attacked him, shot at him, and harassed him severely.*" In the Bible, arrows are used figuratively to refer to verbal attacks. So this is probably a reference to the slander and accusations he endured, especially coming from Potiphar's wife.
  - "*Yet his bow remained unmoved; his arms were made agile by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob (from there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel).*" **Yet through it all, through all the hardships, through all the attacks, the God of Jacob, the Shepherd and Stone of Israel, was with him.** Strengthening his faith as hard as a stone. Guiding him through dangers like a shepherd.
    - Jacob goes on to pray to Shaddai, to the God Almighty, that he might bless Joseph with all the blessings of the heavens above and blessings of the deep below. He wants blessings to overflow on the head of Joseph, "*on the brow of him who was set apart from his brothers.*"
- ❖ This is a huge blessing that Joseph receives from his father. It stands in stark contrast to the ones we've already seen. Jacob is pulling out all the stops and is just pouring out blessing upon blessing on Joseph's head. **But my point is that, from the world's perspective, Joseph is the one son in your family who doesn't need it.**
  - He's your only son who's made it. Who achieved his life goals. Whose dreams came true. Who's at the peak of his career, the pinnacle of his profession. He's reached the heights of worldly success. He possesses all the prosperity and power in the world. And yet here is frail, old Jacob bestowing a blessing on his highly accomplished son.
    - **What could Jacob offer that Joseph doesn't already have?** From the world's perspective, there's nothing more you can give to the man who has everything. You can't elevate him any higher.

- ❖ But that's not Jacob's aim. **His blessing is not meant to elevate Joseph any higher but to anchor him. To anchor him to the promises of God.** The blessing of his fathers – the Abrahamic blessing – is tied to an eternal inheritance that extends beyond our lifetime and beyond all measure of worldly success and happiness.
  - **At his old age, with his life experience, Jacob knows that – while success and achievement might secure your present position – it can't secure your eternal future.** So even his most accomplished, most successful son is in desperate need of a blessing from God. A blessing that secures an eternal inheritance that you can never lose. That can never be taken away. That's something Egypt can never give to Joseph. That's why even *he* needs this blessing.
- ❖ **And since none of us come close to the heights Joseph achieved, if *he* needs this blessing then we certainly do as well.** Friends, no matter how hard you chase after your dreams. No matter how successful you become. No blessing this world has to offer – no amount of power or privilege on earth – can match the blessing of God, who blesses us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Eph 1:3). It's without equal.
  - **If this blessing is matchless – if even the richest, most powerful man on earth would still be disadvantaged and deprived without this blessing – then that puts everything in perspective.** It shows how foolish we are to prioritize the attainment of worldly wealth or comfort over spiritual blessings. Especially when those blessings have everything to do with eternity and where we'll spend it!
- ❖ **It's as foolish as being on an airplane in the unlikely event of an emergency.** And instead of prioritizing the putting on of your oxygen mask, you're fiddling with your chair's incline to make it more comfortable.
  - **Imagine a tornado siren is sounding.** A cyclone is aimed at your house. But you're so concerned with appearances that you step outside to arrange the lawn furniture so it doesn't look messy afterward. **Or your house is on fire.** Smoke is everywhere. But you're adjusting the thermostat to minimize costs and maximize savings.
    - **When you put things in stark terms like that, you realize how silly it is to put so much time and attention on our comforts, our appearances, our finances.** And so little priority on our souls, our eternity, and God's blessing.

### **The Blessing of God is a Person**

- ❖ My point is that all of us need to prioritize the blessing of God in our lives. **And remember that the blessing of God is *not* a higher degree of power or a greater form of wealth or happiness than what this world has to offer.** No, the blessing of God that we should be after is ultimately a person. So it's ultimately about a relationship with that very person. That's the third and last lesson to be drawn from Jacob's last words.
- ❖ This brings our attention to the blessing that Jacob gives to Judah. **Now considering the kind of blessing that Reuben received, at first glance, you would think Judah would get more or less the same.** Since his sins were on par or arguably worse than Reuben's.

- ❖ But this blessing doesn't operate according to conventional wisdom. It operates according to God's grace. Judah is the one blessed to carry forth the messianic line. **That honor doesn't go to Joseph the favorite, successful son. It goes to Judah the humbled, repentant one.**
  - Look at v8, "*Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down before you.*" Note the language found in Joseph's dream about his brothers bowing down to him. It will be true of Judah as well. And he'll triumph over his enemies like a lion. That's what v9 says.
- ❖ And then look at v10. It's prophesied that, "*The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.*" **That means Judah's line will be a royal line.** This just reinforces what God had previously promised about kings coming from Abraham's line (17:6). **And this, of course, is initially fulfilled in the person of King David of the tribe of Judah.** But the ultimate fulfillment is found in someone still to come.
  - But notice how it says the scepter (kingship) shall not depart from Judah *until* tribute comes to him. Looking at the footnotes in the ESV, you realize this is a complicated verse. Because that phrase "*until tribute comes to him,*" could be translated "*until Shiloh comes*" or "*until he comes to Shiloh.*" **Taking that last approach, the NIV says, "until he comes to whom it belongs."** With stress on the *he*. Who's he?
    - So there might be some disagreement on how to best translate this line, but everyone is generally in agreement that the scepter and ruler's staff are symbolic of kingship. **And this line is saying that this kingship will remain in the tribe of Judah until this "he", the Messiah, comes.**
- ❖ **Look at v11 and how it describes the abundant and prosperous reign of the Messiah.** "*Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he has washed his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes.*" Only the wealthy would tether a young donkey to their choicest vine, knowing that colt will eat all of its fruit. Likewise, only the extremely rich have so much wine in excess that they use it as freely as plain water. In this verse, they have the luxury of washing their garments with fine wine.
  - And it's agreed that v12 is describing the beauty of – not Judah – but this Messiah who will come from Judah's line. "*His eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk.*" **Taken together, the whole point I'm making is that the blessing of God that Jacob bestows on his sons will ultimately be fulfilled in this messianic figure from the royal line of Judah.** And the only way to experience the abundance and joy of this blessing is to live in his kingdom, under the Messiah's loving rule.
- ❖ **With that blessing concluding the first book, the rest of the Bible continues raising the question of the Messiah's identity and intensifying the hope that one day he'll come and establish his kingdom.** God's people waited and waited in eager anticipation. They waited roughly two thousand years. Until that holy night a baby was born in a manger, in Bethlehem, the city of David, of the tribe of Judah.

- ❖ And from the beginning of Jesus's public ministry. People began to connect the dots. **They saw in his actions, in his signs and wonders, hints that he was the fulfillment – or more like the embodiment – of God's Abrahamic blessing.** His first public sign pointed to this – to the overwhelming abundance and joy marked by life in his kingdom.
  - In John 2, he takes plain water that had been set aside for ceremonial washing and turns it into fine wine. That's a sign of extravagancy. **Jesus is suggesting that, in the kingdom come, in the Messiah's reign, fine wine will flow in such abundance that it'll be as common as plain water.** You'll use wine for just washing your hands.
  
- ❖ **And then, on that first Palm Sunday, the signs pointing to Jesus as the Messiah were unmistakable.** He entered the royal city of Jerusalem riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey. Which was a messianic expectation ever since Zechariah borrowed language from our text and prophesied of a king, humble and mounted on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zech 9:9).
  - But just as intensely as he was welcomed, in five short days, the Messiah was arrested and the crowds were chanting to crucify him. He died a shameful death on the cross – for us and for our salvation. But, on the third day, he was vindicated by God when he came roaring out of the grave. **The last book of the Bible borrows language from our text, describing the Risen Christ as the Lion of the Tribe of Judah (Rev 5:5).**
  
- ❖ Friends, the Bible is made up of many books. But they all tell the one central story of how the blessing of God is graciously bestowed on an undeserving people and fulfilled in the person of Jesus, as you submit yourself under this King and his good and loving rule.
  - So the question is – **Do you know this King and have you placed yourself under his rule?** Because that's where true blessing is found. Not in having money. Not in having power. Not even in having a comfortable life where everyone in your family is happy and healthy. For some of us, that's all the blessing we want. That's all we're asking for this Christmas. You're far too easily pleased.
    - **God wants to bless you with so much more.** More than you can ask or imagine. It's a blessing found in a person. In a relationship with Jesus. He invites you to receive him and his blessing by faith.