

Prayer

Deal gently with us, Lord Jesus, when we are vulnerable because we have been hurt. We would like to be people who are strong and who stand upright in all circumstances; but teach us that we are often at our strongest when we feel at our most vulnerable, for in turning to You we have the greatest source of strength in the world. Thank You Lord: Alleluia!

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Human Spirit

The human spirit has an instinct for what is right and wrong, but the world can twist and change this if the spirit is not allowed to take nourishment from its source and provider, God Almighty. Pray for all who have a conscience and genuinely seek what is right and reject what is wrong; may they all come to know the God who in Christ has won the victory of good over evil.

Meditation

When you stop for a moment to think about things,

Do you wonder at the news in our bewildering world,
Or take refuge in knowledge that God's hand is on all?

Do you see different lifestyles as alien and strange,
Or as people Jesus died for, who laugh and cry like you?

Do you think of the church as a strange outdated institution,
Or as the body of Christ, the place Jesus 'rules' on earth?

Do you see yourself as easy with loved ones and friends,
Or as needing love and forgiveness from other and God?

Do you long for the day when disasters stop in this world,
Or look forward to the time when Christ will come, in Glory!

When you stop for a moment to think about things,
Where will you be led, by the Lord?

Bible Study - Genesis 49:1-12

¹ Then Jacob called his sons, and said: 'Gather yourselves together, so that I may tell you what will happen to you in the days to come. ² Assemble and hear, sons of Jacob; listen to Israel your father.

³ Reuben, you are my firstborn, my strength and the first fruits of my manhood, first in rank and first in might. ⁴ Unstable like water, you will no longer come first, because you climbed into your father's bed and defiled it; you got up on my couch!

⁵ Simeon and Levi are brothers; their swords are weapons of violence. ⁶ May I never be in their circle of friends; let me not join their company. In their anger they killed men, and they hamstrung oxen as they pleased. ⁷ Cursed be their fierce fury, and their rage, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob, and disperse them in Israel.

⁸ Judah, your brothers will praise you; your hand will be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons will bow down before you. ⁹ Judah is like a lion's cub, grown up on prey. He stoops and crouches down like a lion or like a lioness; who dares rouse him? ¹⁰ The sceptre will never leave Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet until it comes to the one to whom it belongs, and he receives the homage of the peoples. ¹¹ He tethers his donkey to a vine and his colt to the

choicest branch, he will wash his garments in wine and his robe in the blood of grapes; ¹² his eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk.'

Review

In an extraordinary series of oracles addressed to each son in turn (which make up most of Genesis 49), Jacob spoke to his sons about their future before he died. However, in many cases, certainly the ones we have read today, the future would be a result of what they had done in the past. Jacob had summoned his sons for the formal blessing and revelation of his will before he died, but what they received was not so much a blessing as a prophecy, and Jacob held nothing back from what God had revealed to his heart. Tragically, the first three of his sons had committed sins which meant that their future was not secure, and Jacob had to speak sternly to them in the form of a curse. Judah was the only son from our reading today to receive anything like a blessing; and it was a very significant blessing.

The beginning of chapter 49 reads a little differently from the narrative we have been used to. Jacob calls his sons using very stylised and poetic words; 'assemble and hear, sons of Jacob, hear ...' (49:2). One of the reasons why we know that this chapter of Genesis is different from the story which preceded it is that it is written in poetic style, and has all the hallmarks of a formalised piece of poetry. That is not to say it is corrupt or unoriginal in any way, but those who have recorded the great tradition of what Jacob said 'on his death-bed' used poetry rather than prose to pass on his words.

Firstly, Reuben was the firstborn of Jacob and the expected leader, but he had failed so many times, particularly in the story of Joseph; and Jacob rounded on his 'instability' (49:4). However, what had really annoyed Jacob was the incident in which he had slept with Bilhah, Rachel's maid, after Rachel's death (35:22). It was a rash and insolent act which was an insult to the memory of his favoured wife, and it had shocked Jacob to the core. This, more than anything else, in Jacob's eyes this discounted Reuben from the 'double-portion' blessing of a man's firstborn son. Little more is said about Reuben; Jacob dismissed him and failed even to say anything about his future. In fact, after the tribal settlement in the Promised Land, the tribe of Reuben quickly disappeared, and is hardly mentioned in Scripture after Genesis, apart from formal lists of the tribes.

The dreadful massacre of Shechem lies behind Jacob equally ruthless words to Simeon and Levi. The two brothers had taken advantage of the circumcision laws and massacred the inhabitants of a town and destroyed their cattle (34:13f.). Jacob feared for the reputation of his family in a locality (Bethel) which he loved because of the Lord's appearance to him there (28:10f.) and he moved his family south. Jacob's curse on these two brothers was that as a consequence of their actions, they would be dispersed throughout Israel (49:7). In the reality of Israel's later life, the tribe of Simeon seems to disappear after the entry into the Promised Land, and there are hints that the tribe was subsumed into Judah (Joshua 19:1). Levi, however, the tribe that produced Moses and Aaron, appears to have been redeemed by later actions (see Exodus 32f.) but was indeed dispersed amongst Israel, but as a tribe of priests. They had no holding of land as a consequence and became dependent upon the other tribes to whom they gave priestly service.

This brings us to Judah. He was the fourth of Jacob's sons, and the fourth born to Jacob's wife Leah. Over the whole period of the Joseph story, Judah's influence had been increasing. Now, due to the failure of the first three of Jacob's sons, he was in line for the great honour of Jacob's primary blessing; and it is a remarkable blessing! Clearly, Jacob's prophecy raised Judah above his other sons (49:8), but in verses of Scripture which have become very controversial over the years, governing authority was granted to Judah using language that is remarkably similar to the Messianic language found in later passages of Scripture which describe the times in Judaism after the Babylonian Exile (fifth century BC. onwards). Most modern translations avoid the Messianic language (49:10) about the return of the ruler's staff to the one to whom it belongs, believing it to be a later interpretation. However, the translation I have given comes fairly naturally from the text, and the issue of whether or not it speaks of future rulers of Israel, perhaps even the Messiah, remains open. I feel that there is no reason why scholars should cover up what the early Christians clearly believed was a prophecy about the coming Messiah, His authority, His command of all peoples and His final victory.

Jacob poured words of blessing on Judah which may not have been fully understood, but they did at the very least point forward to Judah's later pre-eminence as a tribe first under David, and

eventually as the remaining loyal tribe of God's people in the final days of Jerusalem (600-580 BC.) In addition, words from this prophecy are responsible for the famous description of the Messiah as the 'Lion of Judah'; a phrase which has had a deep influence on the life of the Jewish People and also Christians, and is linked in later Scripture to significant Messianic texts (Hosea 5:14, Micah 5:8, Daniel 7:4).

Going Deeper

Application

We do not live in a world in which blessings passed from father to son are regarded as having any significant influence upon people's lives. The manner in which early people placed emphasis on these things reminds us, however, of the power of words, and in particular the power of words of a parent to a child. Many a Hollywood epic has developed out of stories which have their emotional root in the relationship of parent and child, and the effect of words said between them for good or for ill. Such stories often involve misunderstanding and distrust as well as love, and almost every emotion known to humanity can be woven into stories of intrigue surrounded who said what to whom and when; especially just before a person has died.

The best thing we can do is to remember that the words we say to each other, especially within the family, matter enormously. Basically, we do curse or bless each other by what we say, and most of our responses to those we love are not neutral; there are coloured by thousands of memories, expectations, hopes, disappointment and ingrained attitudes. Sometimes these all add up to a healthy family, but this is not so, and the figures of family breakdown within Western Society are too high for all this to be ignored.

All of us have a responsibility to understand that the words we say have a greater effect on others than we realise, and to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit on what we say and do, especially within the family. The love of God shown in Jesus Christ can liberate whole families from the darker trials of family life which are often triggered by irresponsible and casual talk.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss the significance of tribes of Israel such as Reuben and Simeon which largely disappear from Scripture.
2. Read through the blessing of Judah and discuss the meaning of the many different elements to Jacob's words.
3. How can we go about making sure that the words we speak within the family are godly and a blessing to others; and is it ever necessary to curse others by our words?

Discipleship

Think back on your own life and consider what has been said to you that has affected you deeply over subsequent years. Think also about the attitudes shown to you by significant people in your life, and how this has affected you. Now consider whether you have repeated any of what has been said and done to you, in your words and actions towards others, especially those you love. Be sure to approach this task with care and prayer.

Final Prayer

You, Lord Jesus Christ, came to give all humanity the greatest blessing the world has ever known, which is the love of God the Father. Thank You for doing this and being prepared to follow through its consequences through death to the victory of resurrection! AMEN