

Prayer

Praise the Lord, for You can use our emotions, our will, our minds, our strength, our hearts, our attitudes, our likes and dislikes, and all the faculties of our bodies and souls in the service of His Kingdom. Praise the Lord, for His work and His will is all-encompassing, and we rejoice to know that it can be no other way. He is the Lord! AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Human Spirit

Pray for those people who find it hard to accept that God loves them, even though they may have no contact with Christianity; their spirits have been blocked off from their Maker. Pray against the works of the enemy to create division between God the Father and the work of His Spirit, in each soul created. Pray for the success of evangelism and the salvation of souls.

Meditation

Keep things simple.

Believe and do your best to work your way out of doubt.

Hope, even though the road ahead seems impossible.

Read, think and learn, and don't let the devil put you off.

Be at peace with your past, and lodge your troubles with Jesus

Love, and keep on loving when others will not.

Give your emotions space, and let God work through them.

Be bold and take the risks which scare others, for Christ.

Make up your minds, stick to your godly conclusions.

Listen to other people and hold your tongue, it works wonders.

Keep things simple, and get on with what the Lord has for you to do.

Bible Study - Genesis 49:13-27

¹³ *Zebulon shall settle by the seashore; he will be a haven for ships, and his border will be at Sidon.*

¹⁴ *Issachar is a strong donkey, stretched out between the courier bags.* ¹⁵ *He saw how good it was to have a settled life and how pleasant the land was, so he put his shoulder to the burden, and ended up in forced labour as a slave!*

¹⁶ *Dan acts as a judge for his people as does any of the tribes of Israel.* ¹⁷ *Yet Dan will become a snake by the roadside, a viper along the path that bites the horse's heels so that its rider falls backward.*

¹⁸ *I long for your deliverance O LORD.*

¹⁹ *Gad will be attacked by raiders, but he will raid them from behind.*

²⁰ *Asher's food will be rich, and he will provide delicate royal food.*

²¹ *Naphtali is a doe running free, which bears beautiful fawns.*

²² *Joseph is a son of Pharaoh, a son of Pharaoh in his eyes, with daughters lined up for him.* ²³ *The archers attacked him with ferocity; bearing a grudge against him.* ²⁴ *But his bow remained steady, his arms and hands were poised and ready; thanks to the Mighty One of Jacob, thanks to the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel,* ²⁵ *thanks to the God of your father, may he help you, thanks to the Almighty. May He bless you with the blessings of heaven above, and the blessings of the deep that lies underneath, and the blessings of the breast and the womb.* ²⁶ *The blessings of your father far exceed the blessings of eternal mountains, or the reward of everlasting*

hills; may they be for the head of Joseph, as a crown for the prince amongst his brothers.

²⁷ Benjamin is a ravenous wolf, in the morning he east his prey, and in the evening he divides the spoil.'

Review

Today's passage follows the sequence of blessings (and curses) given by Jacob on his death bed to his sons. Yesterday, we read the first four pronouncements on Jacob's sons Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. Although the traditional double-portion birthright given to the eldest was denied Reuben and also Simeon and Levi (see yesterday's study), it was Judah who received the highest accolade of prophetic blessing, linking him to the future leadership of the People of Israel, and eventually the Messiah. Today's passage covers Jacob's words to the remaining eight sons. Most of the words are cryptic, but it is clear that Joseph, Jacob's favourite son, was blessed for himself; even though he now represented his two sons Ephraim and Manasseh (see 48:5f.) who would later replace him in the tribal lists of Israel.

The whole of Genesis 49 is an extraordinary piece of literature, and although we do not know anything about the ancient traditions by which Jacob's final words were passed down to those who wrote it, the actual words in Hebrew are profoundly difficult to translate. Many of the words are complex and unique to this passage of Scripture, and there are few ways to try and work out what some passages mean than relying on tradition. My translation is rather different from what you will find in other Bibles, and I will explain some of the important differences, such as the beginning of the prophetic word about Joseph (49:22).

Most of the brothers are given pronouncements which indicate in a more or less cryptic way something about where they will end up in Canaan and their reputation in the future tribal 'league' which would make up all of Israel. Zebulun's tribe settled in the north of Canaan on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, being a focus for trade (49:13); Issachar's tribe settled inland to the south of the Sea of Galilee, and Jacob's pronouncement indicates that although they were strong, they sought an easy life and ended up in bondage to others (49:14,15)! The location of the tribe of Dan is difficult to ascertain, for Scripture describes Dan as both near to Philistine territory in the south, and also above the Sea of Galilee in the north. The instability of Dan (see Judges 18:29f.) as a clan may be reflected in the aggressive description in Jacob's blessing (49:16,17). Gad settled on the 'Transjordan' eastern side of the river Jordan, and was always vulnerable to attack, as was clear from Jacob's words (49:19); and Asher occupied the commercially rich lands at the north of Israel along the major trade routes running through Israel (49:20). Jacob's pronouncement about Naphtali (settled in the central far north of Israel) is virtually untranslatable, but most scholars agree that it implies a free-spirited tribe, burdened by the actions of future generation (the 'beautiful fawns' 49:21).

The main pronouncement of Jacob in this text, however, is the prophetic blessing of Joseph (49:22-26). The very beginning of Jacob's words are profoundly difficult to translate, and you will find that most versions of the Bible read something like this; 'Joseph is a fruitful vine ... his branches running over a wall ...'. My translation is very different; 'Joseph is a son of Pharaoh ... with daughters lined up for him ...'. How can I come to such a totally different conclusion? Unfortunately, the traditionally accepted translation, by the admission of scholars, simply does not attempt to translate the words as they are in the Hebrew text. Because the words are peculiar and appear to make no sense, they merely suggested ways that the words can be amended to make some sense which might describe Joseph. On closer inspection, and in agreement with at least one other scholar, I came to the conclusion that the most literal translation of the Hebrew is a play on the name of Pharaoh, hence my translation. It is a picture of Joseph as Pharaoh's 'right-hand man' as we might say, or as the ancients would say, his 'son' (which is in truth what the Hebrew says!), and a man who could have had the pick of any of Pharaoh's daughters to make a harem (49:22); something he did not do.

The rest of the text is awkward, but it is extremely clear that it is an overflowing list of blessings, following Joseph's successful resistance of those who attacked him (probably at Pharaoh's court? 49:23,24). The blessings speak of God using a variety of wonderful expressions; 'Mighty One of Jacob', 'the Shepherd', and 'the Rock of Israel' (49:24); the 'God of your Father' and 'the Almighty' (49:25). Each of these names is enigmatic and reminds us of different events or aspects of Jacob's life, the heritage he wished to pass on through Joseph and his sons Ephraim

and Manasseh. The blessings are extended geographically, and then to procreation (49:25), before the prophecy that Joseph would be a prince amongst his brothers (49:26). There are many wonderful things we can meditate upon within this extended blessing, but we are left with the fact that Jacob gave two of his sons the profoundly favourable blessings which gave each of them authority within the tribal alliance which would make up the 'People of Israel'.

The later history of God's people shows that they were indeed split, for much of their history in groups centred upon Judah, often including Benjamin and Simeon and possibly part of Dan; and Ephraim, representing the younger but stronger of Joseph's sons, and incorporating the other remaining tribes. Jacob did not give a 'double blessing' to one heir, he divided up his blessing between two sons; Judah, the first in line after the disgraced Reuben, Simeon and Levi, and Joseph (through to his sons Ephraim and Manasseh) the first son of his favoured and beloved wife Rachel.

Finally, Benjamin was given a word by Jacob which indicated a somewhat contented if not spoilt existence, possibly a reflection of his real life. In later history, Benjamin was settled near to Judah, in regions also close to Ephraim, and it had a history of independence in action which was at times highly disruptive of Israel (Judges 20), and at other times very helpful (as in the complex story of the reunification of Israel under David in 2 Samuel 2,3,4). He was just like a 'ravenous wolf'!

Going Deeper

Application

Unless you have a significant interest either in literature or the history of Israel, then it can be hard to find a use for these wonderfully enigmatic descriptions of the sons of Jacob. It is helpful to know some of the ancient views held about the twelve tribes and the way that they affected the future life of God's people, but what can we make of it all?

People fit together in the Church in a variety of different ways, in the same way as the twelve tribes of Judah all had very different roles and outcomes to their involvement in God's purposes. One thing does strike me, and it has done so for some time, which is that God has not given His people monochrome authoritarian leadership. The idea that one person should be 'the' leader and have exclusive rights to make judgements has never been the way that God has worked through His people, at least, not in the Bible. We do indeed have only one Saviour, but the organisation of God's earthly people should reflect this as a whole, not through unitary management and leadership. In this passage, Jacob gave two of his son's authority to lead. It led to difficulties, but it also meant that the rich diversity of God's people was sustained, and the complex issues of unity and diversity were not lost through the absolute dominance of one tribe over all the others. There are other indicators of the multiple nature of leadership in the Bible, such as the emphasis on the roles of 'prophet', 'priest' and 'king' (roles which were also united in Christ – but in Him alone), which need to be reflected within any leadership structure of the church. However, this text at least indicates a good principle for leadership which is consistent with the whole Bible, which is that leadership is not unitary.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Is it wise to try and find meaning in all these sometime obscure oracles of Jacob about his sons?
2. Discuss what the outpouring of blessings on Joseph means in verses 24 to 26. What can they mean for us?
3. Do you find it interesting to know about the history of God's people? Is it hard for people to understand and therefore should it be left to one side?

Discipleship

As an exercise in Bible study, try reading through the oracles of Jacob about Judah (49:8-12) and Joseph (49:22-26). Read them through several times and make lists of what is found in them. Then look carefully at the lists, and try to assess their similarities and differences. What

kind of leader is Judah? What kind of leader is Joseph? Consideration of this may well help you understand more about the nature of leadership, even within the church!

Final Prayer

Oh God, in whom nothing can live but as it lives in love: grant us the spirit of love, which does not want to be regarded, honoured or esteemed, but only to become the blessing and happiness of all who need it; this we pray in Your name, for You Yourself are Love, in time and eternity. AMEN (*William Law*)