

Week 13 – Jacob’s Last Words – Genesis 49:1-33

Scripture Reading: John 15:1-11

Introduction

The phrase, “famous last words,” can have two different meanings

We use it somewhat sarcastically when someone has said something that we are sure will be immediately disproven

Such as a person saying, “Don’t worry, we’ll be there in plenty of time” just as traffic slows to a crawl and the person with them says, “Famous last words.”

Or we can use the phrase to mean the recorded last words of some famous or even infamous person

You can find many different lists of last words online and they range from the silly to the scary to the sublime

And sometimes you have to wonder if the dying person would have wished to say something other than they did since they had no way of knowing they were uttering their last words because of what last words reveal about a person

Convicted murderer, **James W. Rogers**, while standing before a firing squad in Utah was asked if he had any final request and his last words were, “Bring me a bullet-proof vest.”

Groucho Marx is quoted as saying, “This is no way to live” just before he died

Sir Winston Churchill’s last words were, “I’m bored with it all.”

Comedic actor **W.C.Fields** pronounced a curse upon the world and everyone in it as he expired

The philosopher **Voltaire** when asked to renounce Satan while on his deathbed told the attending priest, “This is no time to be making new enemies.”

Albert Einstein’s last words are lost to history because he spoke them in German and his attending nurse didn’t speak German

Wilson Mizner was a famous playwright but he is probably best known for the saying, “Be nice to people on the way up because you’ll meet the same people on the way down.” But those weren’t his last words. When Mizner was on his deathbed, a priest said, “I’m sure you want to talk to me.” Mizner told the priest, “Why should I talk to you? I’ve just been talking to your boss.”

The wife of renowned chemist, **Michael Faraday**, asked him while he was on his deathbed if he had ever pondered what his occupation might be in the next life and he answered, “I shall be with Christ, and that is enough.”

Blues singer **Bessie Smith** died saying, “I’m going, but I’m going in the name of the Lord.”

Leonardo da Vinci was quite modest considering all he accomplished in life as his last words were, “I have offended God and mankind because my work did not reach the quality it should have.”

Lastly, regardless of what you think of his other prophecies, **Nostradamus** was quite correct when he predicted, “Tomorrow, at sunrise, I shall no longer be here.”

Today

Last week we began looking at the final days of Jacob and we discovered there were three deathbed scenes that cover at least part of four chapters of Genesis

And we looked at the first two scenes when Jacob met with Joseph alone and then again with Joseph and his two sons

Today we will consider the final deathbed scene that ends with the death of Jacob in Genesis 49 when Jacob calls all of his twelve sons to his bedside to hear his final words to them

And in those final words we will see the wisdom of a godly, old patriarch who has watched his sons throughout their lives and, therefore, knows each of them perhaps even better than they know themselves

But we also will see that his final words are more than just that as Jacob is endowed by God with prophetic insight

And that the faults and merits that describe each individual son ultimately describe the nature of the tribes that will ultimately descend from them and therefore describe the future of the nation of Israel

I want you to picture the scene as we begin to look at the passage because it helps to clarify the order in which Jacob addresses his sons

What we see is that the sons understood why their father had called them to his bedside

And as they stood around him they naturally divided themselves into three groups according to who their mother was

So we see Jacob first address his sons that he had with Leah

Then he comes to the sons that he had with the servants of Leah and Rachel – Zilpah and Bilhah

And, finally, he addresses the sons he fathered with his beloved Rachel

Visualize them arranged in an arc around his bed and Jacob scanning the line by starting at one end and progressing to the other so that Jacob addressed the sons in the order that they happened to arrange themselves

As his eyes pass over each of them in turn we will see some addressed out of birth order and the sons of Zilpah and Bilhah somewhat oddly ordered with Bilhah's sons listed first and last with Zilpah's sons sandwiched in between them

Let's begin, as Jacob did, with Leah's sons

I. Leah's Sons

Leah had six of Jacob's twelve sons including his first three sons

And Jacob begins addressing them in order of their birth meaning that he first addresses Reuben, the firstborn, followed by Simeon and Levi

Verse 28 (**Genesis 49:28**) says that Jacob's words to each of his sons were "blessings" in fact it says that Jacob "*blessed them, blessing each with the blessing suitable to him*"

But as we look at what he has to say regarding the first three sons we can't help but think that maybe his words should have been called blessings and curses because he is pretty rough on them and his predictions are not exactly favorable

However, we need to recognize that not everything that is painful need be harmful and when properly considered we see that Jacob's criticisms are really blessings in disguise because they serve as warnings of each tribe's vulnerability to sin so that they might guard against it

And these final words of blessing would prove to be just what the nation of Israel would need to guide them during their protracted stay in Egypt

Because they could look back to the blessing and see it pointing forward to the time when each tribe would finally receive their inheritance and they would be safely established in the Promised Land

Reuben

As the firstborn, Reuben should have enjoyed many advantages

It was customary for the firstborn son to be entitled to increased honor over all those who came later and a double portion of the inheritance when his father died

But being born first doesn't guarantee preeminence when it comes to character

Jacob had high hopes when Reuben was born and he was proud of him

But Reuben forfeited his birthright when he had sexual relations with Bilhah, his father's concubine (**Genesis 35:22**)

Jacob doesn't go into great detail concerning the event or even mention Bilhah's name but simply says that Reuben had defiled his father's bed – but we see that he also defiled himself and those who will come after him in his lineage

And we see clearly that sin has consequences and that some of the consequences affect others beyond the sinner

Look with me at **Exodus 20:5-6** where God says:

"...I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments."

We may not like it but sin is not a private affair – sin is far-reaching and it can have generational effects

If you are ungodly it will affect your children and, in all likelihood, others

However, on the positive side, we can have confidence that the converse is also true and if you live for Christ and are godly your children will surely benefit

But Jacob's prophetic word to Reuben is that because he has proven to be "unstable" or as the NASB puts it, "uncontrolled" or "turbulent" as we see it rendered in the NIV he could no longer have "preeminence"

Because a leader of God's people cannot be unstable and quick to rush into sin

Therefore, neither Reuben nor his descendants after him would ever again excel in Israel

And history tells us that Jacob's word proved to be true as there are no notable descendants from the tribe of Reuben listed in Scripture

The most prominent Reubenite may well be Korah from Numbers 16 who impetuously led a rebellion against Moses and Aaron only to be judged by God who caused the ground to open up to swallow the rebels along with their families and all their possessions

And when the Israelites finally entered the Land, the tribe of Reuben was one of the two-and-a-half tribes that remained on the east side of the Jordan and they were given the smallest of territories there since their numbers were so diminished by that time

Eventually, when God began to pour out his judgements upon the ungodly states of Israel and Judah, Reuben was one of the first to be overcome and destroyed

The first had become last as the consequences of a momentary sin were realized throughout the entire history of the tribe

Simeon and Levi

Next, Jacob moved on down the line and considered his second and third-born sons, Simeon and Levi

And in verse 5 (**Genesis 49:5**) we read something that at first seems odd when Jacob said, "*Simeon and Levi are brothers...*"

Of course they were; the fact that they were brothers is obvious since they both had the same mother and father

But what Jacob means by that statement is that they were of one mind and one disposition

Simeon and Levi encouraged one another's wicked tendencies and together they engaged in far worse behavior than they ever might have alone – they were partners in crime so to speak

Of course, Jacob is referencing the wicked and deceptive violence the brothers visited upon the people of Shechem

Briefly, the son of a ruler of Shechem who was named Shechem raped Jacob and Leah's daughter, Dinah and her brothers, Simeon and Levi found out and were angry

But, as it turned out, Shechem actually loved Dinah and he and his father came and tried to make things right

Shechem proposed to marry Dinah and his father offered to pay a dowry for her and suggested that there could be friendship and intermingling between the two peoples

But Simeon and Levi weren't going to permit that to happen and they perverted their religious traditions and soiled the sign of the covenant as they sought revenge

They plotted together and told the men of Shechem that they could allow their women to intermarry only with circumcised men

And three days after the circumcision, when the men would have been at their most vulnerable, Simeon and Levi came, killed them all, and plundered their cities of all that was valuable

At the time of the event Jacob only seemed concerned with himself as he said that the two had brought trouble on him and made him detestable to the natives of the land but now he distances himself from them

Even though the two are his sons he rightly names their sin and condemns it

Far too many people today are prone to excusing the sins of their children or other loved ones and we see this happen even within the church as suddenly violations of God's moral law seem to be justifiable or at least excusable

Jacob rightly denounced the sin of his sons and demonstrated definitively that he wanted nothing to do with it

But notice that he doesn't curse them

Rather he pronounces a curse on their anger and their wrath saying that their anger was fierce and their wrath cruel

And his judgment, which is actually God's judgment, was that they would be divided and scattered

But not driven from their people to be scattered among the Gentiles – they would be scattered in Israel which meant they would have no tribal land unto themselves in the Land

And we know this happened as the tribe of Simeon was allotted land within the confines of the territory of Judah as we see in Joshua 19

The tribe of Levi was also denied a portion of the Land but in a completely different way

The Levites in time became the tribe of priests who were placed in cities scattered throughout the Land and it was said that their portion would be God himself

The two brothers had banded together to their detriment so now their two tribes would be dispersed for their own good and it seems to have worked because biblical history records no further evil activity on their part

We can't help but be reminded of **Hebrews 12:11** which says:

For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

As we see God transform what started out as a judgment into a great blessing

But that was to be realized later and for now Jacob's words had to cut and one can only imagine what Judah who is next in line was expecting when his father's eyes fell on him

Judah

I imagine that while Jacob was recounting the sins of his three older brothers he was thinking of sleeping with his daughter-in-law Tamar when she disguised herself as a prostitute and how it was he who had suggested selling Joseph

In light of those things he must have expected a judgment similar to those his brothers had received

But instead, Judah's blessing was positive and lavish as Jacob spoke of preeminence, praise, prosperity, and permanence

Courage and strength are to define the tribe of Judah as Jacob likens Judah to a young lion full of vitality exhibiting dominance over both family and foes

And then as an older lion or lioness lying down in secure repose daring anyone to disturb him

The part of the blessing that regards the scepter is disputed and unclear so we can't speak about it with dogmatic precision but plainly it speaks of ongoing rule by the tribe of Judah until some culminating future event that will permanently establish it

And when we look at the great kings that came from the line of Judah we get a sense of this prophetic reign

King David who was called "a man after God's own heart" was from Judah as, of course, was Solomon, his son

King Josiah was also from the tribe of Judah and **2Kings 23:25** tells us:

Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses, nor did any like him arise after him.

And there were others from the tribe of Judah who excelled all the way down to Joseph, the adoptive father of Jesus, who is the ultimate Lion of Judah according to **Revelation 5:5**

I believe it's safe to say that there has never been a more distinguished family line than Judah

Jacob also spoke of a future time of great prosperity where every man would own his own donkey and his own vineyard

In fact they would be so well off they could tie their donkey to a vine and not worry should the donkey eat or otherwise destroy the vine and wine would be so plentiful that a man could wash his clothes in it if he wanted to

And while dark eyes and a white smile aren't modern ways of describing good health those descriptors would have indicated a good diet and healthy lifestyle back in Jacob's day

And while Jacob's words are metaphorical and may well point to another time beyond even today we know that God prospered Israel when he brought them into the Land which was known as the land of milk and honey

As we come to the remaining sons of Leah we see that their blessings are considerably shorter and more restrained than Judah's and we know that neither tribe produced any descendants that were particularly prominent

Zebulun and Issachar

Our ESV Bible says Jacob prophesied that Zebulun would "dwell at the shore of the sea" but the better translation might be "toward the sea" indicating that Zebulun would be in a favorable position to take advantage of trade routes

That is what happened historically as they were not positioned directly on the sea and were not a seafaring people but were rather positioned where goods would travel overland to and from the sea

Zebulun was in a position of great opportunity but also great danger throughout their ancient history because it's difficult to be godly and famous at the same time and we know that Zebulun struggled to follow God

Jacob characterizes Issachar as a "strong donkey" who is satisfied

We would see being called a donkey as an insult because we think of donkeys as stupid, stubborn animals but that wasn't the case with Jacob

Donkeys in Jacob's day were very valuable animals and when Jacob used an animal to describe one of his sons he was intending to refer to the chief virtue of the animal which in this case meant the donkey's notable strength and patience

And we see in later history that the tribe of Issachar was indeed strong but they also tended to be complacent and lacking in ambition –

They were content and unwilling to exert themselves and Jacob seems to indicate that there would come a time when the tribe of Issachar would submit willingly to forced labor and we know that their territory was later invaded with some frequency and we might suppose that meant the people were forced into servitude at those times

Possibly the only significant future thing we can say about the territories of Zebulun and Issachar is that all of Jesus' disciples except Judas came from that area

Next in line were the four sons of the concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah, and all of these blessings are short and positive

II. Concubines' Sons

Dan

Dan was the son of Rachel's handmaiden, Bilhah, and as such would have legally been considered one of Rachel's sons although, in practical terms, there was a great deal of difference between being born of a servant and a wife

Dan is pictured as a judge of his people meaning that he would stand for justice

He is also characterized as a snake by the roadside that strikes from hiding which again was meant to be a positive characteristic

We see this trait perhaps best in the example of Samson who excelled in guerilla warfare against the Philistines

Gad and Asher

Gad and Asher were the sons of Leah's servant, Zilpah

Gad is mentioned very briefly and Jacob's description speaks of retaliation against an enemy –

Jacob prophesied that the tribe would be vulnerable but would always fight back and that proved to be the case as they settled in the Transjordan region where they were continually forced to defend their territory

The name Asher meant “happy” or “fortunate” and an abundance of food is prophesied for Asher

The tribe of Asher was later to be allotted land on the sea and they were the beneficiaries of seaport trade and fertile land bathed with frequent coastal rains on the western slope of the mountains

Anna, the prophetess who waited for Jesus in the temple, was from the tribe of Asher

Naphtali

Naphtali was the second son of Bilhah and Naphtali's blessing is rather obscure and difficult to understand as no future events in their history seems to shed additional light on its meaning

I think the best we can do is view it as a positive pronouncement of some kind and let it go at that

Finally, Jacob came to the sons of his beloved Rachel and Joseph was first in line

III. Rachel's Sons

And Jacob's abundant love for Joseph is evident in his blessing

Joseph was the most highly favored son and Jacob spoke an abundant blessing over him that centered on fruitfulness

Joseph had indeed been fruitful all his life in spite of all that he had been through

And we know that his fruitfulness was because he always abided in and depended on God

As we have studied his life the defining characteristic of it has been that he saw all circumstances as being from and controlled by God and virtually every sentence that we see Joseph speak has the name of God in it

Without a doubt Joseph had been attacked from all sides as he had been mistreated first by his brothers then by Potiphar's wife and Potiphar himself who imprisoned him unjustly where he was mistreated by the cupbearer

But in spite of all of that, Joseph was a vine that was fruitful and not only for the benefit of his family but he also reached “over the wall” and benefited Egypt and the surrounding area

Joseph is a vivid picture of the truth we see in John 15 which we heard as our Scripture reading earlier

That those who abide in the Lord are fruitful because the only way to be fruitful is to abide in the Lord

And Joseph's line continued to be fruitful as we see five of the fifteen judges of Israel come from Joseph's lineage as did Samuel and Joshua

I also want to call attention very quickly to the names of God that Jacob uses in his blessing of Joseph

He refers to God first as his personal protector and provider – the Mighty One of Jacob

Then he calls God the Shepherd the Stone of Israel indicating the care, direction, and foundation that God provides

He also refers to God as “the God of your father” showing his personal attachment to God as he passed his faith on to his sons

And finally, he refers to God as *El Shaddai*, the Almighty, as God is shown to be the source of every good and perfect gift for his people

Benjamin

Lastly, Jacob cast his eyes on Benjamin and his blessing seems kind of anti-climactic after Joseph's

Jacob describes Benjamin as “a ravenous wolf” which seems totally out of character for everything we know about him

However, this description is appropriate for the tribe that descended from Benjamin as it was the smallest of the tribes but the boldest and fiercest

The tribe of Benjamin was always ready to take up arms in God's cause and they are seen to be quite successful in the art of warfare

Many notable characters are found in the line of Benjamin throughout biblical history including the apostle Paul

And in verse 28 (**Genesis 49:28**) that wraps up the blessing section we see for the first time the title, "the twelve tribes of Israel" as we see that each received his own, suitable blessing which tells us God deals with us justly as individuals

Now, in the final verses of the chapter, we see Jacob make one last request of his sons before he dies

IV. Jacob's Final Request

In verse 29 Jacob announces that his death is imminent and he gives his sons instructions for his burial

And that request reveals a great deal about Jacob's focus and his beliefs as his death approached

Look with me at verses 29-30 (**Genesis 49:29-30**) –

Then he commanded them and said to them, "I am to be gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, in the cave that is in the field at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess as a burying place.

I want to focus for a few moments on the two phrases of verse 29

First, Jacob says, "I am to be gathered to my people" then he says, "...bury me with my fathers" and that is significant

We would be in error if we were to look at his first statement about being gathered to his people as merely a more poetic way of saying, "I'm dying" or another way of saying "I will be buried where my ancestors are buried"

The order of two statements of verse 29 show us how much Jacob understood about the next world and how much he was focused on the world to come

He first says that he knows his spirit is about to leave his body and join with the spirits of his ancestors

He knows that is a fact and that it will happen regardless of whether he is buried in Egypt or Canaan or somewhere else altogether – he was about to be gathered to his people

But, he doesn't want his body laid to rest in Egypt for reasons we'll consider in a moment so he makes the additional request to have his body carried back to a particular cave in Canaan for burial

In other words, he knew his spirit was about to join with their spirits where they were so he wanted his body to be where their bodies were

This is a supreme statement of faith and it would be difficult to put too much emphasis on its importance

Last week we talked about obituaries and how they report on the life of the person who has died

And how, if you want your obituary to read well, you have to have lived well

No one who lived as a jerk should expect people to call him a sweetheart after they are gone and no one who lived a life given over to sin should expect to be called a saint

And now as we consider the last words of the dying we see that they often reveal what a life was all about

And Jacob's last words reveal that he has a proper understanding of the passing, transitory nature of this life and the reality and permanence of the next

Hebrews 11:9-10 tells us that Abraham lived as a sojourner in a foreign land as he looked forward to the city of God

And that should be a defining characteristic of all who call themselves a follower of Jesus Christ

Christ-followers should consider themselves to be sojourners just passing through this world and doing what they have been given to do while on the way to their permanent home

The proper perspective of this world and the next should be very clear to us as it was for Jacob

And then we see Jacob share the story again of how he came to possess the piece of land in Canaan where his burial plot was to be because that piece of ground showed complete faith in God's promise to give them all the land

The inhabitants of Canaan knew that plot of ground belonged to family and by being buried there they were demonstrating their confidence in their God and his promises

They may well have only owned a field containing a burial cave at that point but that was just the start

Conclusion

Then in verse 33 (**Genesis 49:33**) we read –

When Jacob finished commanding his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed and breathed his last and was gathered to his people.

It's only at the end that we see once again that it appears that Jacob had mustered his strength and spoken to his sons while sitting on the edge of his bed

We are given the picture of him tucking himself back under the covers and his spirit going to join his people and his God as he breathed his last breath on this earth

Jacob had been on a long pilgrimage on this earth and his sojourn was far from perfect

But we know that he passed from this imperfect life seamlessly into perfect life as we see in **Matthew 22:32** where Jesus in quoting Exodus 3:6 demonstrates that God is the God of the living and not the dead

Former Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes [**Holmes.jpg**] once said, "Some people are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good"

And I suppose it's possible for that to be true if a person uses thoughts of heaven to escape from the demands of this earthly life – because we do have a job to do until God calls us home to his heaven

But I think the greater danger is to be found in thinking too little of heaven – of having an incorrect view of this life and the next

It seems to be the more prevalent condition that some, even believers, are prone to live as if this world is all there is and living as if this world and its pleasures were meant to satisfy them and they forget all about the life to come

Whereas those who live this life in light of the reality of the life to come and who know that they will one day be gathered to join God's people and to give an account for this life are those who are bound to live their best life here and be best prepared for it

Jacob walked this earth for 147 years and his final words reveal that as his earthly life came to its inevitable end he was looking forward to the next life with confidence

May the same be said for each of us when our time comes

Let's pray