

Blessings for the tribes

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Preacher: Aaron Reeves

[0:00] So, we've been going through the story of Joseph and his family from the book of Genesis. And it's been a while since we've touched on this, a few weeks, I think. So we'll be recapping very, very briefly what's been going on in the life of Joseph and see where we are with the text today.

There's a lot of words, there's a lot of things in this text, a lot of confusing things. And my plan is to swing by the text a few times and pick up some things as we go.

So we'll do it a little bit differently to how I usually do it. But we'll make a start and look back at what's been happening. So, back in October, we were learning about how Joseph was mistreated by his brothers.

He was sold into slavery. And we learned about his dreams and this dream that he had that one day his brothers will be bowing down to him.

And his family, in fact. We've seen him go through many trials. And we've seen him rise to be second in power over all of Egypt.

[1:25] Just recently, we have heard how he brought his family from Canaan down to Egypt to join him. And how they were blessed with homes in the best part of Egypt.

And that brings us up to where we are now. So that's a very, very quick overview. Let's start unpacking what we see at this point in time. So there's a political context here.

We're in the land of Egypt. And I'm hoping this works. This is my first attempt at a PowerPoint presentation. There we go. So we're in the land of Egypt.

And in the last installment, Steve painted a very good picture of what was going on politically. So Joseph's family were brought to Egypt at a time where famine was ravishing the land.

And in the last chapter, we see that the famine is still going very strong. People had no food.

[2:29] They had no money. They had no livestock. And Joseph, as a ruler, demonstrated a great wisdom that God had given him. He enabled him with this wisdom.

And he bought the land from the people. And he let the people farm it. And he took one-fifth of everything that was harvested and given to Pharaoh.

And that was the rules. Steve pointed out this might have been the first ever implementation of income tax. So now we have a land in slavery, essentially.

Joseph's family are living in Goshen together. So Goshen was one of the best parts of Egypt. And Joseph is provided for them with homes and food.

So that's the kind of political overview of where we are at the moment in Egypt. And in the personal context of where Joseph is, I thought we'd just touch on that very quickly.

[3:40] So we're about 17 years on from when his father came to Egypt. So he's made a home and he's got settled. And his father's there.

And he calls for his son, Joseph. We're going from Genesis 47 at this point. So there we see Jacob and Joseph. And we follow a conversation in Genesis 47 where Jacob tells Joseph that the time is coming where he's going to die.

Jacob asks for Joseph's kindness and faithfulness to fulfill a promise to bury him, to bury Jacob back with his fathers in the land of Canaan where he came.

And Joseph agrees. The moment follows where we see Jacob worshiping God. This was his response.

Give thanks to God for his life. God was speaking to him. He knew he was going to die. And here at the end of Genesis 47 we see that moment where he worships.

[4:57] And this brings us up to our chapters today, 48 and 49. So as an overview, there's a lot of very interesting things that are going on in these chapters.

When you read it straight, you can get the picture of what's happening. So this is the very basic overview. So Jacob is dying.

Joseph's father is dying. This is emphasized in chapter 47 as we've just said. And it's confirmed in 48, 21. Joseph is called to his father's bedside.

And Jacob blesses his 12 sons. So it seems fairly straightforward. But when you get a bit more involved with the text, when you really dive into it, we see there's a lot more unusual things going on.

Some things that are fairly difficult to understand. Jacob claims his grandchildren Ephraim and Manasseh as his own sons. We see some unusual physical things going on.

[6:09] And there's some bowing down and hand placements and things like this. We see Joseph being displeased. You think this is a strange time to be displeased with your father as he's dying.

It's unusual. So in order to understand exactly what's going on with the blessings, we need to see why all of this is happening.

So I've broken it down into three sections. We have the situation according to Jacob. We have the rights of the firstborn, which is tied up in the tradition of what we see.

Excuse me. And we have Jacob breaking from that tradition. So the situation according to Jacob. Jacob was very ill. Verse 2, he said he had to rally up his strength just to sit up on his bed. So he knows he's dying.

[7:20] He's pulled all his strength together. He's sat up on his bed. And the first thing to happen is that he explains to Joseph. He dives right in and says about the promise that God made to him.

It's on the screen. Jacob said to Joseph, God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan. And there he blessed me. And he said to me, I'm going to make you fruitful and increase your numbers.

I will make you a community of peoples. I will give you, I will give this land as an everlasting possession to your descendants after you. I don't want us to underestimate how emotional this scene is.

Jacob's facing death. He knows this is going to be a very emotional time. It's a very emotional moment. He goes on to talk about the death of his wife, which is clearly something that was on his heart in his last moments.

And this is Joseph's mother, so this is going to have an emotional impact again. I think what he's saying here, by diving right in with this, I think he's saying, Son, there's going to be a lot of emotions here, but let's get one thing absolutely clear.

[8:35] This is still about God's plan. There's still more to this story. It doesn't end here. It doesn't finish here.

There's God's promise of descendants. There's things to consider and there's still things to do. Emotions, I speak about this quite a lot, but I guess I'm an emotional person.

They're very important and they're also unavoidable. It's something we deal with every day. We can't let them distract us from the task at hand. So firstly, Jacob outlines God's plan and he immediately goes on to say, here's how we do our part.

Verses 5 to 6, where Jacob counts his grandchildren as his own, is the beginning of that plan. So I think this is some of the things that are going on in the mind of Jacob.

And it adheres to the culture of the time that before a man dies, he passes on his blessings to his sons. It's not dissimilar from the culture we have where we have a will.

[9:47] And everything that we have, everything we own is passed on when our time comes. And this brings us to a second point regarding that tradition.

That's the right of the firstborn. So this tradition dictates that the firstborn son must be acknowledged as the firstborn, as special, and get a double portion of everything his father has.

This is outlined in Deuteronomy 21.15. There's quite a lot of text there. Let's read it. If a man has two wives, and he loves one but not the other, and both bear him sons, but the firstborn is the son of the wife he does not love.

When he wills his property to his sons, he must not give the rights of the firstborn to the son of the wife he loves in preference to his actual firstborn. The son of the wife he does not love.

He must acknowledge the son of his unloved wife as the firstborn by giving him a double share of all he has. That son is the first sign of his father's strength.

[10:58] The right of the firstborn belongs to him. So regardless of a person's feelings, the firstborn son has this right. The right to a double portion.

And he must not be excluded from it because of the way that the father might feel about the mother. Jacob, Israel, is breaking from this tradition.

And it brings us to this third point. Which also explains why Joseph was a little bit unhappy about this.

Let's look at what happened. We know that Jacob is dying, and he's following this tradition and promise passing blessings over to his sons.

We know that he has 12 sons, and he is including Ephraim and Manasseh, his grandchildren, in with these in some context. This is unusual.

[12:01] So Jacob was almost blind. In fact, he was so blind that he was talking about Joseph's sons in the text in verse 5. He didn't realize they were there until verse 8.

And he asked, who are these people? So Joseph brings the boys close to Jacob. In verse 11, Jacob gives thanks to God for the blessing.

Israel said to Joseph, I never expected to see your face again, and now God has allowed me to see your children too. And the boys, it says children, the text says children, but the boys are probably around 20 years old at this point.

If you picture it, they're probably knelt down in front of Jacob. They wouldn't be, I don't think they'd be standing up, kind of towering over him. They're knelt down in front of him. And this is where we start to see the traditions and the actions play out from the text.

So Joseph's sons are knelt down. And Joseph moves them off to pay respect to his father by bowing down to him as far as physics would allow him to.

[13:14] His face was on the ground. He then brought the boys back to Jacob for the blessing. So Jacob is perched up on his bed, probably something like this.

And the boys are in front of him here. Jacob is somewhere over there behind him. Not Jacob, sorry, Joseph. It's worth noticing at this point that the right hand is the place of the firstborn during this ceremony, during this thing that's going on.

It's a valued place to be next to authority, as we can see other places in the Bible. Let me sing a slide there, no worries.

Okay, so Psalm 16:11 says, You make known to me the path of life. You'll fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

In Revelation, the text is an honest room. In Revelation 2, 1, Christ holds the seven stars in his right hand. Mark 14, 62. Again, the high priest says to him, sorry.

[14:32] Again, the high priest asks him, Are you the Messiah, the son of the blessed one? I am, said Jesus. And you will see the son of man sitting at the right hand of the mighty one and coming on the clouds of heaven.

So the right hand is the important place to be. Going back to our text, Joseph puts Manasseh, the firstborn, at the right hand of Jacob, and Ephraim at his left hand.

The right hand is the important one. It's for the firstborn, Manasseh. And Joseph is expecting Jacob to put his hands out. And straight onto Ephraim and Manasseh's head.

But Jacob hits him with the old switcheroo. He does this. Crosses his arms. So his right hand, remember this is the important hand, is now on the youngest, Ephraim's head.

And his left is on Manasseh's. Jacob begins to bless Joseph through these lads.

[15:35] As it says in verse 15. Joseph isn't so happy about this. In verse 17 we see that Joseph notices that this doesn't follow the established pattern of blessings and tries to correct Jacob's hand placement.

But Jacob explains his actions in verse 19. He says, actually both of these sons will be blessed. But in this case, the younger will be the greater.

He goes on to say, by Joseph's descendants this pattern of blessing will occur. May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.

And Sainis puts Ephraim above Manasseh. And he directs his attention back to Joseph. Where he assigns his blessings to Joseph and almost picks up where the chapter opens.

By saying that, although some things are ending, God will always be present and his plans will continue. And he gives Joseph a double portion in the extra giving of land.

[16:55] So, some initial blessings have occurred. Joseph has gone to Jacob. These blessings have occurred. See a lot of tradition played out.

We see that Joseph was in fact assigned a double portion at the right of the firstborn. As we spoke about. But Joseph wasn't the firstborn, was he?

Reuben was the firstborn. As we move into the next chapter, we'll see what's happening with that. As Jacob calls all of his sons in and starts tying up all the loose ends, making sure everything's in order.

And he begins the blessings to the tribes, which are his sons. So, we move to Genesis 49. Excuse me.

And Jacob called for his sons and said, Gather round, so that I can tell you what will happen to you in days to come. Assemble and listen, sons of Jacob, listen to your father, Israel.

[18:10] Jacob then, according to verse 28, begins to outline his sons as the 12 tribes of Israel. Or the heads of the 12 tribes of Israel.

I don't think we've got time to go through each one particularly and pull out how all of this played out. It would take, I think, a lot of time. So, I've got some main points which I want to draw out from these.

And we'll go through each son and we'll see the blessings to the 12 sons, the 12 tribes. So, up on the screen, we have these 12 tribes.

And we start with Reuben, as that's where the text brings us. So, we can start to see what happened to Reuben's blessing.

We see, excuse me, we see that from the text he addresses Reuben as the first sign of my strength. Remember that back from Deuteronomy. Which is direct reference to him being the firstborn.

[19:11] And then, he charges him with a sin that occurred 40 years previously. Sleeping with Jacob's concubine, Bela.

And as a result, his tribe would not excel. This is referenced in 1 Chronicles 5.1.

The sons of Reuben, the firstborn of Israel. He was the firstborn. But when he defiled his father's marriage bed, his rights as firstborn were given to the sons of Joseph, son of Israel.

So, he could not be listed in the genealogical record in accordance with his birthright. And though Judah was the strongest of his brothers and a ruler came from him, the rights of the firstborn belonged to Joseph.

So, that confirms what we saw at the end of the last chapter. It's a bit of a curveball, isn't it?

[20:14] You go to your sick father, he calls you in, you're expecting a blessing, and he says, actually, 40 years ago, you can only imagine the look on his face.

So, we get to Simeon and Levi, who were scattered. They're placed together and named as brothers.

I mean, they're all brothers. These two are linked together for their anger and for their cruelty. And it's probably referring back to Genesis 34, where they wreaked violent havoc on Shechem by murdering the men and plundering the city.

They really were merciless. And here, Jacob curses the anger of these two men. And it's, I think, important to know that he's not cursing them directly, is he?

He's cursing the anger. It's the anger and the cruelty there's an issue. He declares that as tribes, they would be scattered, which, according to Moses' census in Numbers 2, was about what happened.

[21:29] The Simeonites were the smallest in number, apparently the weakest, and the Levites never had a territory of their own. Shall we come to Judah?

This is verse 8. There's a lot said here, isn't there? Your brothers will praise you. Interesting that Genesis 29, 35, tells us that he was called Judah because his mother was praising God for him. In Hebrew, the words for Judah and praise are, this is obviously not the correct pronunciation, but something like Yehuda and Yadah. They're very similar.

You definitely see a connection there. Jacob goes on to a number of prophetic blessings for Judah and his tribe. He will have power over his enemies.

Judah's described as a lion. Verse 10. This is the very, very interesting part of the part I found most interesting. The words you might have in your Bible might vary depending on which translation you're using.

[22:44] The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, which is to say there's no departure of authority or power, kingship, until, this is the next sign, he to whom it belongs, talking about the authority and the power, shall come, or, until tribute, this is another translation, comes to him, or yet another version, which is, this is the New King James, says, until Shiloh comes.

Now, Shiloh is the actual word that appears in the Hebrew, and the meaning of the phrase itself is not totally certain, but when we look at the context, actually, it does make sense.

Judah holds authority until he, to whom the authority belongs, Shiloh, comes. From then, the obedience, this is still verse 10, the obedience of the nations will be his.

verses 11 and 12 go on to tell the riches emanating from this rule, he'll tether his donkey to the best places, there'll be an abundance of wine and milk, like water.

This is the image of the riches of a blessed nation washing their robes in wine. That's extravagant, isn't it? Probably very hard to get out afterwards.

[24:12] Let's draw this out in a modern context. Imagine a city you could visit, where you could park wherever you like, there's no problems.

There'll be no lacking in wine to gladden the heart, or milk to nurture you. The authority will be one that is completely dependable and everlasting.

One that is righteous and deserves the obedience of its people. Does that sound too good to be true? I'd say that if you heard about a city like that, it would be worth looking into, wouldn't it?

So, who is this king? In the middle of the text, in the middle of these blessings to the nations, we have this king, we have this city that's raised. who is the king to whom this obedience and authority belong?

There's some familiar words, if you know your Bible even vaguely well, there's some familiar words here, aren't there? Lion, tribe of Judah, robes, washed in blood.

[25:29] I think the text says the blood of grapes. I think we know who that's talking about. Jesus is described as the lion of the tribe of Judah in Revelation 5.5.

He's described as the conqueror and the one with, the only one with authority to open a scroll that nobody can open. And how are the people of Jesus described in Revelation?

In 7.14, it says, these are they who have come out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb. We heard something similar about this this morning.

White would be the image of purity. They are made pure only by blood. The blood of the lamb, that's the blood of Jesus. And I find it amazing that as we go through this text, in my first read, I was reading through it and I was struggling with it and then just suddenly as the Lord does, as he always speaks to his people.

I remembered all these studies that we did before in Revelation and there is Jesus in the middle of this text shining so brightly. I think it's absolutely incredible. That brings us to Zebulun.

[26:49] According to Joshua 19 and many people much smarter than I am, the blessings were attributed to Zebulun came to pass when the borders of the land were extended.

According to Wikipedia, which is always correct and true, the eastern border was the Sea of Galilee. Issachar, the sixth son, is prophesied to become a nation that will submit to forced labor. Dan, number seven, will provide justice for his people who will have snake-like characteristics. There's a lot of varying opinions and different things going on with this and I don't want to dive into it too much.

There are some interesting things said. A general consensus is that this kind of this snake-like imagery just refers to their size in relation to the strength of them.

I wonder if the stumbling rider might in some way refer to they were notorious as for falling into idolatry. They were stumbled.

[28:24] I wonder if there's a connection there. Verse 18, after the blessing of Dan, Jacob interjects, interjects. He says, I look for your deliverance, O Lord.

It's a reminder of the situation that we see that Jacob is a dying man.

These are his last moments and he's prophesying. God's given him this ability to tell what is going on with the nations, what's going to happen. This is work that he's doing and it must be tiring, it must be painful.

The man could barely sit up off of his bed and he interjects and his strength, maybe he feels his strength is failing and he says, I look for your deliverance, O Lord.

in any situation given during the day when we're about our activities, it's so important to have that in your mind, isn't it?

[29:40] Not lose ourself in emotional things that we're doing, that we're doing, especially when things are difficult, we can get too involved in trying to put them right. In the job that I do, there's a lot of pointing and a lot of clicking if things go wrong and you have to work very, very quickly and you have to think and I think it wouldn't be a stretch to say more and more what we need to do is just take that few seconds to stop and say, look for your help, Lord.

After all, we are about his business, as Ben's always pointing out. Shall we move on? to Gad. He says, Gad will be attacked but there will be a capable defense. Asher, the ninth son, will be blessed with food.

It's made me chuckle a little bit when I saw it. We're starting to see a picture of the variety of God's people, aren't we? The things that God blesses in such particular, such amazing ways. such a uniqueness there. Naphtali, like a doe set free that bears beautiful forms or in some translations it uses beautiful words.

[31:01] So maybe this is a tribe blessed with language in some way. And we get to Joseph, the eleventh son and what an amazing, amazing verse this is.

Let me just find it in my Bible. I'm going to read this. Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine near a spring whose branches climb over a wall.

With bitterness, archers attacked him. They shot at him with hostility but his bow remained steady. His strong arm stayed supple because of the hand of the mighty one of Jacob, because of the shepherd, the rock of Israel, because of your father's God who helps you, because of the almighty who blesses you with blessings of the heavens above, blessings of the deep that lies below, blessings of the breast and womb.

Your father's blessings are greater than the blessings of the ancient mountains, than the bounty of the Asia old hills. Let all these rest on the head of Joseph, on the brow of the prince among his brothers.

Isn't that a beautiful, beautiful few verses? Joseph is fruitful. He remained faithful and he remained steady because of God, the shepherd, his shepherd, the mighty one of Israel.

[32:24] And he had a covering of the mightiest blessings from the skies above to the deep springs, from the breast and the womb, God's protection and God's nourishment and he's prince among his brothers.

It brings us to Benjamin to near the end of this, our section of this chapter. to be a tribe of great power and gain and in terms of warriors feared.

I haven't got the reference here but I was reading that they were in fact very, very fierce warriors.

And we go to finally verse 28 and it says that each of these blessings were appropriate to each son uniquely.

I'm paraphrasing that. So what do we make of all of this? We've heard a lot about blessings, haven't we? There's a lot of text here in these two chapters.

Without a doubt, we can see that God blesses his people in a variety of ways and he uses, also uses, other people to do this.

[33:35] In these chapters I want us to notice, there's a lot that can be said but there's something I wanted to notice that's very, very important. So when talking about Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph said, they are the sons God has given me here.

Israel said to Joseph, I never expected to see your face again and now God has allowed me to see your children too. And he blessed Joseph and said, may the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked faithfully, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the angel who has delivered me from all harm, may he bless these boys.

This is just a small section of chapter 48 and what do we see? We see a God that deals with us one on one and he blesses us with us in mind.

He doesn't haphazardly throw down a blanket blessing and hope it covers 144,000 people. He knows exactly what each of us need for the future as groups of peoples and as individuals.

And our response to that must be an appropriate response. Like Joseph, we're going to face a lot of ups and a lot of downs with our lives here on this earth. There are going to be days where we feel overwhelmed with emotion and things that are going on.

[35:07] God's promise is always, always true and we need to keep focus on him. Look at how the twelve tribes were blessed.

They were blessed as individuals, each named specifically. We see that God also does deal with disobedience with Reuben, Simeon and Levi.

We heard something of this this morning but no matter what their sin was, amazingly, God didn't leave them out completely, did he?

He didn't just chuck them to one side and were forgotten or abandoned although the reward varied considerably. And I forgot to go through the...

It wasn't a bad effort. James 1.17 Every good and perfect and every perfect gift is from above coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

[36:14] We can take comfort knowing this is the same God. God does not change. This is the same God that drew close to Jacob and Joseph and it's the same God that sent his son to conquer death.

The line of the tribe of Judah. The king that is worthy of our obedience who is at the right hand of God and is interceding for us. This is our God.

It's the same God as in Jacob's day and it's the same God now. Right now, tonight, I want us to recognize just how blessed we are because we know Jesus.

If you're a Christian, we know Jesus personally and we're part of his story. This is a story that was always planned and whatever our circumstances are right now, God had us in mind.

Jesus had us in mind when he went to the cross. We need to give absolute praise to that king because we are blessed in that.

[37:32] As we heard this morning, we are forgiven of even the most vile sins. Our robes are made white by his blood and we have a place in that great city that we were talking about earlier.

And we can ask, why is this the case? And it's because the God of Jacob, the same God of history, the God that is always there, loves us.

And the Lord of history will never stop being there for his people. Amen. Amen.