

Blessing and Destiny

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[0 : 00] It's funny how the fates and fortunes of family members, siblings in particular, can turn out so differently. You might be thinking of your own.

Same parents, same gene pool, and yet so vastly different destinies and fates. One modern example I can think of are the Hitchens brothers.

Many of you would know Christopher Hitchens. He's one of the four horsemen of atheism. There's a picture of him on the slide. He wrote the book, *God is Not Great, How Religion Poisons Everything*. In 2011, unfortunately, he died of cancer, still an atheist. Now, his brother, on the other hand, is a Christian, actually an Anglican.

That's his Peter. He used to be an atheist, but he wrote a book, I think in reply to his brother, called *The Rage Against God. How Atheism Led Me to Faith*.

[1 : 02] So, two brothers, two very different beliefs, and therefore, I would argue, two very different destinies as well. And if you look at Genesis, there are ample examples on there.

If you've been with us through the series, Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau. And tonight, we see the fates of two, not just two brothers, but twelve.

And as we look through it, we see quite a divergence of destinies, or what is predicted to be at least. So, what are we to make of this chapter? Apart from being a historical record of the tribes of Israel, which, you know, if we're not the descendants of Israel, probably not that interested.

What purpose is this chapter for us? It's not obvious, is it? Not at first. As well, I guess I ask the questions, are these merely Jacob's blessings, reflecting what he would like to see happen?

Or are they God's blessings as well? You see, if you've been following Genesis, all the blessings up to now have been quite different, haven't they?

[2 : 15] When God blessed Abraham, then Isaac, then Jacob, they all came directly from him, from his mouth, in the form of visions or dreams. But not here.

Even as we read the first two verses, and if you look right to the end, verse 28, the narrator doesn't even call these God's blessings. So, verse 1, Jacob called for his sons and said, Gather round so I can tell you what will happen to you in days to come.

Assemble and listen, sons of Jacob, listen to your father Israel. And then right at the end, at verse 28, the narrator ends with, All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father said to them when he blessed them, giving each the blessing appropriate to him.

So, it's not clear, is it? But I think as we shall soon see, because these blessings do come to pass, then we have to conclude that they must be from God. Somehow, his sovereignty is working even through Jacob's blessings.

Whatever may prompt Jacob to make these blessings, God actually uses them to achieve his purpose and plan. Now, we won't have time to look at all twelve, and there's probably not a lot of detail anyway for some of the others.

[3 : 32] So, what we'll focus on instead are the significant ones, the five, Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, Judah, and Joseph. And what we'll discover are actually insights into how God works, both in history, but also in our lives.

So, first, first bullet point, first to Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, where we see that God is the one who judges past wrongs.

So, listen to Reuben's blessing in verse 3. Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, the sign of my strength, excelling in honour, excelling in power.

Turbulent as the waters, you will no longer excel, for you went up onto your father's bed, onto my couch, and defiled it. Jacob, of course, is referring to what happened in Genesis chapter 35 and verse 22, where Reuben slept with Bilhah, which was Jacob's concubine.

Now, at that time, Jacob heard of it, but he didn't do anything. Now, history catches up with Reuben, and Jacob removes the rights of Reuben as firstborn from him.

[4 : 45] Now, the rights of the firstborn includes having authority to lead the rest of his family, his brothers. And if you care to read the rest of the Bible from here on in, that's exactly what happens.

The tribe of Reuben no longer plays any role in the leadership. Yes, they're still one of the 12 tribes, but the honour of ruling Israel actually passes over him or his tribe to another.

And so, you think this honour might then fall to the next, to Simeon or Levi. And that would be true, were it not, for their sins as well, which they have committed together.

So, Jacob, therefore, treats them together in the next blessing. So, in verse 4, Jacob says this, Now again, if you look back into Genesis, this incident is recorded in chapter 34.

Now then, what they had done was to rescue their sister Dinah after her rape. But, what they did was so over the top, so violent, that even Jacob, the father who never likes to get involved in anything, stay out of trouble kind of guy, he had to chastise them at the time.

[6 : 18] And now, in verse 7, he follows up with a curse. Curse be their anger and their fury, I will scatter them in Jacob, I will scatter them in Israel.

Now, these were meant to be blessings, but so much for Simeon and Levi's blessing is actually a curse, isn't it? And it's actually quite heartbreaking as a curse or blessing, because, remember what the key aspect of God's blessing to Israel was?

It was to give them land, wasn't it? Promised land. And these, this is the very thing that's actually deprived from both Simeon and Levi. And of all the blessings, I think this is the one that's closest, if you like, to the one that you hear God's voice directly.

If you notice, Jacob and Israel are referred to in the third person. Jacob almost is like a prophet trying to speak on God's behalf. And if you look at the map, which I've got on the slide, this is again how it turns out.

So, later on in Joshua, when the land is eventually allocated, Levi gets nothing. Instead, you will read that they are assigned cities that are dotted across the land.

[7 : 37] Simeon, on the other hand, does appear to have some land. So, that's in the yellow down in the bottom left there. But it's actually within the territory of Judah. Judah. And if you read the Bible, over time, what happens is that they get absorbed into the tribe of Judah.

And so, in one sense, you could say they were dispersed into Israel as well. And so, we see with these three brothers that justice eventually catches up with them.

God remembers and judges them even though they may have appeared to have escaped scot-free for a time. And I guess if we look around in the world and we see evil go unpunished, we often might be tempted to think that God has forgotten, hasn't He?

But God's Word shows us that that's not the case. For example, Proverbs 11, verse 21, God actually makes this explicit promise. Be sure of this, the wicked will not go unpunished, but those who are righteous will go free.

The wicked will be judged. It just may not be how we expect or it may not be when we would like it. But the wicked will be judged by God eventually.

[9 : 03] So, if God's judgment is certain, then I guess what follows as well is, so is God's judgment of our sins, our own sins?

Or do we think that we are the only ones that God will make an exception of? Well, so far we've seen the rights of the firstborn slip through the hands of the three brothers.

And then it finally falls into the lap of Judah. Now, Judah isn't blameless either. If you recall, he did some nasty things to Tamar, for instance.

But at least he was contrite. Maybe that may have been the reason why. Still, I don't know we can say that Judah actually deserves the rights of the firstborn.

He is not blameless. He is not righteous by any means. But, for whatever reason, the extravagant blessings of the firstborn now falls into his lap.

[10 : 11] So, look at verse 8. This is what Jacob blesses him with. Judah, your brothers will praise you. Your hand will be on the neck of your enemies. Your father's son will bow down to you.

You are a lion's cub, Judah. You return from the prey, my son. Like a lion, he crouches and lies down, like a lioness who dares to rouse him. The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the rulers star from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come, and the obedience of the nation shall be his.

Again, when you read the Old Testament, you'll see how this blessing is fulfilled, and it's fulfilled in the king, King David, the second king of Israel. He's from the tribe of Judah, and after he becomes king, all his descendants remain on the throne of Israel until the time of exile.

In fact, God himself makes David this promise on the slide in 2 Samuel chapter 7. God promises to establish his throne forever. And all this is, I guess, foreshadowed right here by God in Jacob's extremely lavish blessing on Judah.

So Judah will be so wealthy that even his donkey and his colt can afford to munch on grapes. That's what it means by he will tether his donkey to a vine, his colt, to the choicest branch.

[11 : 42] Grapes which would otherwise be made into expensive wine, well, he would just let the donkey just munch on the grapes. It's a bit like feeding sashimi to your cat. Anyone do that here?

I'm sure one or two of you might. Or even the grapes that get turned to wine, well, what does he say later on? That it will be used to wash clothes instead of being used to toast at banquets.

He will wash his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes. I have to say as I read that I'm not sure why you would ever do that because wine is meant to stay in clothes badly.

So I can only guess it must be sauvignon blanc rather than cherez. Now again it's probably like using bottled water to do your laundry or take a bath, something like that.

Only crazy rich people will do that. Further, not only will Judah be rich, his prestige will be sought after as well.

[12 : 40] So that's what verse 12 talks about. He's being figuratively described as a handsome and desirable man. Now compared to Judah and then Joseph later on which will come in a while, if you look at all the other blessings of the other brothers in verses 13 to 21, they all sort of pale by comparison, don't they?

Sure, it's not as bad as Reuben, Simeon and Levi. Some have promises of wealth and military might, but they're all rather subdued compared to Judah and Joseph.

Now I think you have to then conclude that all of this has got somehow to do with Jacob's bias. And particularly when you come to Joseph's blessing, it's pretty obvious that Jacob is still showing favoritism to Joseph.

So in verse 22, we'll jump straight down there now. First, Joseph's challenges are described, so it says that Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine nearing a spring, near a spring, whose branches climb over a wall, with bitterness arches attacked him, they shot at him with hostility, but his ball remained steady, his strong arm stayed limber.

And Joseph is able to prevail, Jacob says, because God is with him, 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 skies above, blessings of the deep springs below, blessings of the breast and womb.

[14 : 22] Now, do you notice how many times the word blessing is used just in relation to Joseph? Too many, don't you think? Especially when it's not mentioned, even once with any of the other brothers.

And then to top it off, Jacob adds his own blessing to God's, your father's blessings are greater than the blessings of the ancient mountains, than the bounty of the H.O.

hills. Let all these rest on the head of Joseph, on the brow of the prince, among his brothers. Now, I don't know what it's like with the rest of you parents, but I have to say, favoritism like this would never fly in my household.

There'll be howls of protest. And to be honest, if it happened to me, I would be howling as well. It just doesn't seem fair, does it? I mean, what has Joseph done to deserve all of these blessings? But if you think about the whole series that we've been through, it's really been Jacob's favoritism, hasn't it? That's been fueling this saga all the way.

[15 : 35] From chapter 37, when he favors him with the court, and then even when he's there in Egypt and he comes back and Benjamin gets more than all the other brothers, it's sort of the favoritism has been the underlying theme that has been going out through this series, hasn't it?

And yet we've seen at the same time that God has still worked through this human bias and through the human flaws of both Jacob and all the other brothers.

So, this blessing may reflect Jacob's bias, but God still blesses Joseph through it anyway. And again, if you look at the map, which I had previously, Joseph has a territory that is actually very generous as time goes on.

So is Judas incidentally, but remember how Joseph's sons in last week's chapter was blessed already, weren't they? None of the other grandchildren actually were blessed by Jacob, and so Joseph has already had a double blessing.

His grandsons have been blessed, and then now he's being blessed and with such a lavish blessing as well. And if you look at the land, Manasseh and Ephraim, there's big territory, isn't it, compared to the other tribes.

[16:59] And later on, when the kingdom of Israel is split between north and south, the northern kingdom, even though it's normally called Israel, also takes the name of Ephraim because it reflects the influence of Joseph's younger son.

It all seems rather unfair, don't you think? But God actually allows these blessings to take their course. In fact, Jacob is right, none of these blessings will come to pass except by the mighty hand of God.

Only if God blesses from the skies above with rain and from the deep springs below, will Joseph and all the other tribes prosper in the land they will inherit.

And that's the same with us as well. All blessings in life come from God. Our life, our provision, our well-being, all of it only happens because God is blessing us.

And yet, while God blesses us, it doesn't mean that each and every one of us will be blessed in the exact same way. We all don't have the same talents or opportunities or wealth or health.

[18:12] Some of us will experience greater earthly success. Some of us will have greater gifts or appear to be more fruitful for God, like Billy Graham, for instance.

But the thing is then not to be envious or to start comparing. Why? Because the truth is, each of Jacob's sons was still chosen by God, weren't they?

They all still inherited the blessings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They're not like Ishmael, they're not like Esau, who were cut off from the covenant. No, all of them were part of God's promises.

God will be their God, and they will be his people, all of them. And again, it's the same for us. If we are in Christ, that is, if we believe in Jesus, if we put our faith in him, then we are all in God's blessings.

As Paul has said in Ephesians 1, every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus is ours. We can't be any more blessed than that. Forgiveness of sin, relationship with our creator, gift of the Holy Spirit, being made holy and blameless, all these things are common to all of us as believers.

[19:25] And so we need to just keep remembering that, even when our individual circumstances might be different. Some of us will end up having more money, fame or success.

Some of us may marry, while others don't. Some of us may have children, while others can't. And often, it might even be the result of not just what we do, but what others do on our behalf.

It may be our parents' choices for us, or the decisions of those who are our leaders or in authority over our bosses, our teachers, our pastors. Sometimes what people decide for us may have major ramifications for us, just as how Jacob blessed each son had major ramifications for their destiny. And more often than not, God actually wouldn't intervene to change those outcomes, even when they may seem unfair. And yet, God is still in control.

He's still working even through the flaws of human choices to achieve his purpose and will. And so, as Christians, we need to trust our God, rather than just do and blame God for it.

[20:47] I know sometimes it's easier said than done, but we need to learn to live this way in order to find God's peace and contentment. God's grace and love.

And the amazing thing is, when we learn to live like that, we will often see God's grace shining through. God's God's God's grace and love.

Which brings me to my third and last point, and that's to see how God's grace often shines through in surprising ways. And that happens here, even with Jacob's blessing.

So I want us to just come back again to Levi, to his curse. We saw how Jacob cursed his anger, and yet, when we get to the next book in Exodus, what do we find in the very first two chapters?

Who does God raise up as the leader? Moses, right? What tribe is Moses from? Well, Exodus chapter 2 in verse 1 tells us, both his father and mother are from the tribe of Levi.

[21:56] Moses was a Levite. So God reverses or redeems the curse on Levi. And although Levi, or the tribe of Levi never inherit any land, this supposed curse is actually turned into a blessing because the Levites become the priestly tribe.

They become the tribe that are able to go into the temple of God to serve him in the temple exclusively. They are the only ones that can enter, as it were, into God's presence. And so, whilst they don't have any land, in Joshua, this is how the inheritance is being described. Joshua says this, but in the tribe of Levi, Moses has given no inheritance. The Lord, the God of Israel, is their inheritance, as God promised them. Now, how wonderful is that? Because they don't get any land because the Lord himself is their inheritance. Now, we too, I have to say, are just like Levi, under a curse. Paul says of us in Romans that all have sinned and fall short of God's glory. [23 : 09] And the result, chapter 6, the wages of sin is death. So, we are all under a curse, just like Levi, and yet in Christ, we have God as our inheritance.

In this life, we may not end up possessing material land or riches, but we're still rich because God is our inheritance. And then secondly, let's look at Judas blessing again as well, because here is another surprising display of God's grace.

Now, I said earlier that it's true King David that this promise was first fulfilled, but we find the ultimate fulfillment of this blessing in Jesus. In fact, in Revelation chapter 5 verse 5, he's described in the exact words of Jacob's blessing there.

He's described as the lion of the tribe of Judah. He's the one from whom the scepter will never depart. He's the one who commands the obedience of the nations. And yet, what do we see with Jesus throughout his earthly life?

He was anything but rich and powerful and attractive, wasn't he? He didn't have any donkeys and colts to just give to munch grapes. He didn't have any throne to sit on.

[24 : 27] He didn't have any land which he inherited. In fact, Jesus himself said that he didn't even have a place to lay his head. And that is why in the very next verse, which I've still got up on the screen, John writes in Revelation that even as they say, look, the lion of the tribe of Judah, he looks up and what does he see?

He sees a lamb that is slain. Perhaps that may be the reference to washing with wine in the original blessing or the blood of grapes.

But what Jesus does with Jacob's blessing of Judah is turn its fulfillment on the head. We look at that blessing and we think, oh, king, got to be rich, got to be powerful, got to be mighty.

But no, Jesus becomes the eternal king, not by taking up worldly riches or power, just like every other king, but no, by laying down his life for his people.

The enemy which he crushes, which he puts his hand on the neck of, is the enemy of sin and death, which he overcomes, which he conquers, by dying for us, by being poor, not by being rich in the worldly sense.

[25 : 41] And the way God fulfills his purpose for this world, therefore, is to bring about justice and grace at the very same time. God and it shows us our need then to trust in God, even though we may not understand how his blessing works out in our own lives.

We may not always see and think this is God's just way of doing it, but we mustn't measure our blessing by the yardstick of this world.

Rather, we need to look at how God acts in the Bible through grace and we need to look at Jesus' example himself. As I was growing up, I used to read quite a few Christian biographies, many of which actually fanned my faith in Jesus.

I'm very thankful for it. Some of you might not be old enough to remember, but I read things like Corey Tenboon's Hiding Place or Brother Andrew's God Smuggler.

But there was one other book that really impressed me and that was Johnny. I've got a picture of it on the slide. Johnny Erickson was actually a 17-year-old girl and she became a quadriplegic that's paralyzed from the neck down at 17 from a diving accident.

[27 : 03] And this book which she wrote was actually a chronicle of her struggle with God, her anger and her depression. But it also chronicles how she found God's grace through that. And then she went on to start an international ministry to people with special needs called Johnny and Friends.

Well, last year in July was the 50th anniversary of that accident. And I want to just close tonight by just reading a final section of an article she wrote to mark that anniversary.

Here's what she said. Last week, my husband, Ken and I were at our Johnny and Friends family retreat in Alabama. We were lunching in the big noisy dining hall when a college-age volunteer

approached me holding a kid with Down syndrome on her hip.

She gestured at the crowd and asked, Miss Johnny, do you ever think how none of this would be happening were it not for your diving accident? I flashed a smile and said, it's why I thank God every day for my wheelchair.

After she left, I stared for a moment at the dining hall scene. I suddenly had a 35,000-foot view of the moment. She's right.

[28 : 19] How did I get here? It has everything to do with God and His grace, not just grace over the long haul, but grace in tiny moments, like breathing in and out, like stepping stones leading you from one experience to the next.

grace. The beauty of such grace is that it eclipses the suffering until one July morning. You look back and you see five decades of God working in a mighty way.

Grace softens the edges of past pains, helping to highlight the eternal. What you are left is peace that's profound, joy that's unshakable, faith that's ironclad.

God's love for God. It's the hard but beautiful stuff of which God makes 50 years of your life. Like, when did that happen? I cannot say, but I sure love Jesus for it.

Friends, do you long for that peace that's profound, that joy that's unshakable, that faith that's ironclad? God. Well, that comes from trusting in God's sovereignty and grace, and believing that no matter what our circumstances, how humans may seem to stuff up our lives, including like Jacob of his children, God's will for us will prevail.

[29 : 43] And then one day we will have that same 35,000 foot view and see all of history and our lives and know like Johnny that we've been blessed by God after all.

Let's pray. Father, thank you for your son Jesus, through whom we have life and blessing.

Strengthen us in the face of life's injustice or hardship. Help us not to see the many things that are unfair where people seem to be more blessed than us and to think that you have no longer loved us or blessed us.

Help us to know that your sovereign will is not a harsh reality we have to put up with, but a loving comfort in which we can take great solace in. We ask this in the name of your son Jesus, who gave his life for us, to save us, to redeem us.

Jesus, our Lord and Savior. His name is thine.

[30 : 55] Amen.