

Genesis 48-49

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[0 : 00] We're coming to the end. Next will be the conclusion to our series in the story of Joseph and the story of Jacob and his family. And this is a key moment that we come to here in Genesis 48.

So let's begin reading Genesis 48, starting at verse 1. After this, Joseph was told, behold, your father is ill. So he took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.

And it was told to Jacob, your son Joseph has come to you. Then Israel summoned his strength and sat up in bed. And Jacob said to Joseph, God Almighty, appear to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and bless me and said to me, behold, I will make you fruitful and multiply you.

And I will make of you a company of peoples and will give this land to your offspring after you for an everlasting possession. And now your two sons who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt are mine.

Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine as Reuben and Simeon are. And the children that you fathered after them shall be yours. They shall be called by the name of their brothers and their inheritance. As for me, when I came from Paddan to my sorrow, Rachel died in the land of Canaan on the way when there was still some distance to go to Ephraim.

[1 : 12] And I buried her there on the way to Ephraim, that is Bethlehem. When Israel saw Joseph's sons, he said, who are these? Joseph said to his father, they are my sons whom God has given me here.

And he said, bring them to me, please, that I may bless them. Now the eyes of Israel were dim with age so that he could not see. So Joseph brought them near him and he kissed them and embraced them. And Israel said to Joseph, I never expected to see your face.

And behold, God has let me see your offspring also. Then Joseph removed them from his knees and he bowed himself with his face to the earth. Look down at verse 15.

And he blessed Joseph and said, the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked. The God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day.

The angel who has redeemed me from all evil. Bless the boys. And in them, let my name be carried on. In the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.

[2 : 17] If you knew that you were to die soon, what would you do to prepare? This past Wednesday, the Veritas Forum addressed the topic living well in light of death and beyond.

It was a fascinating conversation between two very contrasting viewpoints. Shelly Kagan, a philosophy professor from Yale, said we should live this life with gusto because it's the only one we'll ever have.

We are like stars blazing in the night. But when we die and burn out, it's the end. That's it. The darkness will ultimately prevail.

N.T. Wright, a Christian theologian, said the Christian vision is that the same God who created this world in which we live came to dwell among us in the person of his son, Jesus Christ, and he will one day resurrect our bodies and renew the world.

And in light of that glorious future, our present existence acquires new and lasting meaning. Well, this morning, as we look at our passage in Genesis, we see Jacob the patriarch nearing the end of his life, facing his own impending death.

[3 : 26] And we don't see him reminiscing about the past, wistfully thinking about all the things that he has lost, his health, his ability to walk around, his house back in Canaan.

We see him looking intently into the future. In particular, we see him doing two things. Now, that sort of provide a sandwich of this story. At the end of chapter 47 and at the end of chapter 49, the sort of the bookends of these two chapters, he speaks to Joseph and then to all of his sons.

And both times he says exactly the same thing. He says, don't bury me here in Egypt, where we are right now. Bury me in Canaan with my fathers. Now, what was going on?

Well, this wasn't just crotchety old Jacob making funeral logistics a little bit more difficult. What he was doing was making a clear statement of his fundamental identity and destiny.

Jacob's grandfather, Abraham, had come from Mesopotamia. His family had recently moved to Egypt. And it seemed like Egypt was providing them with everything they could want. They were reunited as a family.

[4 : 35] They had food instead of a famine. They had plenty of land under the favor of the pharaoh instead of struggling through a difficult existence on the margins of Canaanite society.

But Jacob said, no, my ultimate destiny is not where my grandfather grew up. And it's not in this pretty neat place where we live now.

My destiny is in the land that God promised. Even though the only thing we own is a field with a cave in it in the land of Canaan, I'm trusting the promise of God, even though I'm never going to see it in my lifetime.

So he says, bury me there. That's where I belong. And that's the promise that I'm staking my claim on. That's the first thing he did. The second thing he did, which is the focus of today's passage, was he pronounced blessings over his kids.

Chapter 48, he blessed Joseph and his, Joseph's two sons. And chapter 49, he blessed all 12 of his sons. Now to some of us, this practice of pronouncing blessings might seem a bit strange.

[5 : 47] And if you look at Jacob's particular blessings, especially in chapter 49, which we'll look at some of them, they seem maybe even stranger. I mean, what does, naphtali is a doe let loose that bears beautiful fawns.

Or could also be translated gives beautiful words. It's even hard for some of the translators to figure out what he was actually saying. We're dealing with a very ancient Hebrew poem here with several words that appear nowhere else in the Bible.

But despite all that, the main point is clear. He pronounces blessings, words of blessing over his kids. And this is carrying on a pattern in the book of Genesis. When God created human beings in chapter 1, it says he blessed them and said, Be fruitful and multiply and go forth into the world.

Fill the world with life. Of course, when Adam and Eve turned away from God, the result was they went into all the earth and they spread sin and death and a curse.

But God intervened. His plan to bless the world was not thwarted. He called Abraham in chapter 12 and blessed him and said, I'll make you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing.

[7 : 00] And in you, all the families of the earth will one day be blessed. The blessing promised to Abraham had been passed down to Isaac and now to Jacob. And now Jacob was passing it on to his sons as well.

And that's what we're going to focus on this morning. In our passage today, we'll see what it means to receive the blessing of God and what it means to pass it on. We'll look at four aspects of what it means to receive and pass on the blessing of God.

So the first aspect of God's blessing, what it means to receive and pass it on, is that we see God holds us together when we should have fallen apart. If you think about it, left to their own devices, Jacob's family should have totally fallen apart.

Scattered, self-destructed, died. I mean, just think about all the junk that's gone on in Jacob's family so far in these chapters of Genesis that we've looked at the last two months.

Jacob's firstborn son, Reuben, slept with his dad's mistress. Simeon and Levi, second and third, massacred a whole town in unrestrained rage.

[8 : 14] Joseph was a spoiled teenage brat who seemed to see himself as the center of the universe. His brothers resented and hated him, so they threw him into a pit, sold him into slavery, and then lied to their father about what had happened.

Jacob was so focused on his favorite son, Joseph, that he acted as if he had no children left. He literally talked as if, my son is gone. When there were also 11 more standing right there with him.

Judah got sick of his father's favoritism, and so he went off to live on his own among the Canaanites for nearly 20 years. The four different mothers of the 12 boys were constantly scheming to get ahead of each other, and finally a terrible famine threatened to starve them all to death.

This was a dysfunctional, crazy-making family that was self-destructing over and over and over again. But what we've seen in the last couple weeks is that God took this family with all its trouble, and by his grace brought them together, reconciled them to one another, and brought them to live and flourish safely in the land of Egypt.

These two chapters of blessings emphasize the unity of Jacob's once divided family. Joseph's two sons were born in Egypt, completely apart from the rest of the family.

[9 : 36] But in chapter 48, Jacob says, they belong to us too. They're included in the blessing. Verses 8 through 12 of chapter 48 actually describe an ancient adoption ceremony.

That's why verse 12 refers to the sons being on Jacob's knees. It was sort of a symbolic gesture of accepting, receiving, and claiming a child as one's own.

So Jacob's saying, your sons belong here, belong with us. Chapter 49, we see Jacob's 12 sons gathered all together and addressed one by one.

And chapter 49, verse 28, the end of our passage concludes, all these are the 12 tribes of Israel. This is what their father said to them as he blessed them, blessing each with a blessing suitable to him.

So what we see here is that it's not just, it says not just the 12 sons of Israel, but the 12 tribes. In other words, they're not only united as brothers in a family, but they're the seed of a great nation.

[10 : 46] What God has promised he would build through Abraham. The point is God kept Jacob's family together and built them into the seed of a nation when normally they should have fallen apart. Left to their own devices, they would have died.

And you know, today God continues to bless his people by keeping us together. When if we were just left to our own devices, we'd fall apart and self-destruct and die.

I want to share one particular story from the history of this church that expresses this kind of blessing of God and holding us together when we could have fallen apart.

This happened nine years ago, 2005. We didn't have this building. We were renting space from a Seventh-day Adventist church. And they came to us and said, it's been nice having you be here and rent our building.

But you're growing and so are we. And so we want you to move out. We'll give you six months. We had six months to find a place for 150 people to meet every Sunday in downtown New Haven.

[11 : 48] At the same time, the Trinity elders were having some trouble. Now all the elders were faithful men of God. They loved God's word. They loved the church.

They were sincerely committed to doing what was right and good. But they had a disagreement. And they put all their effort into working through it, but they couldn't find a way forward.

And it lasted several months. They did what they could. And finally, two of the elders said, we think we have to resign. So they said at the next congregational meeting, they were going to publicly resign their positions.

Well, the day before the congregational meeting, a woman in the church heard the news. She went to one of the elders, who was also her small group leader. And she said to him, the Bible says that we should make every effort to pursue the unity of the spirit and the bond of peace.

Have you guys tried everything you can? It was a very bold thing that she did to take initiative to approach her small group leader and ask him that question.

[12 : 54] But the elders talked later that night and they said, you know, we've tried all that we can to work through this among ourselves, but there's one thing we haven't done. We haven't asked someone else to come and help us. And so we should do that.

And they said, we'll ask a Christian leader that we all trust from outside the church to come in and be a mediator and hear us out and give us advice and help us move forward.

So that's what they announced at the congregational meeting that night. They said, we were going to resign, but we're going to pursue mediation. Pray for us. And people prayed. And you know what? People didn't gossip. And didn't speculate over what exactly was going on, but they prayed.

And God answered our prayers. Over the next two months, the elders met with the mediator. At the next congregational meeting, all five of them stood up and said, we've fully resolved our disagreements. We're in complete unity.

We're ready to move forward together. That same night, we voted to buy this building that we now meet in for \$1.25 million. That was, yikes.

[14 : 01] That was a step of faith. There weren't any other options, by the way. We were researching everything we could. Abandoned movie theaters, everything. Okay?

And three years after we move in, the mortgage was paid off by God's grace. So we went from a disagreement that could have split the leadership of this church and undermine our confidence in moving forward as a church.

Averted by God's grace. God kept us together and even made us grow. When if we were simply left to our own devices, we could very easily have fallen apart.

God has blessed us. There's a lot of other stories that could be told. And God continues to bless us every time that a Christian friendship, which has been strained by gossip or neglect, is reconciled through repentance and forgiveness.

Every time that a Christian marriage, which has grown distant through selfishness and fear, is renewed by tender pursuing love and patient prayer.

[15 : 07] God continues to bless us every time that Christian ministry leaders who have avoided each other or mistrusted each other take the time to listen to one another and pray together and seek unity in the truth of God's word by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And you know God is still blessing us by holding us together and not letting us fall apart. That's the first way God blesses us and that we can participate in carrying on his blessing to others.

The second way is that God initiates sovereign grace instead of following social convention. Look down at chapter 48, verse 13. It says, Joseph took them both, his two sons, Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel's left hand, and Manasseh in his left hand toward Israel's right hand, and brought them near him.

And Israel stretched out his right hand, and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who is the younger, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, crossing his hands, for Manasseh was the firstborn.

Now this was not the conventional way to do things, to go like this. That even looks a little odd. Right? So, verse 17, Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim.

[16 : 21] It displeased him. And he took his father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. And Joseph said to his father, Not this way, my father. He's thinking, Dad's maybe losing it a little bit.

No, no, no. Dad, not. No, no, no. Not that way. This one is the firstborn. Put your right hand on his head. But his father refused. And said, I know, my son. I know. He also shall become a people.

He also shall be great. Nevertheless, his younger brother shall be greater than he. And his offspring shall become a multitude of nations. So he blessed them that day. Saying, By you, Israel will pronounce blessings.

Saying, God make you as Ephraim and as Manasseh. You see, Jacob was being very intentional in what he was doing. And again, he was following a pattern that runs throughout the book of Genesis.

In a society that was ruled by firstborn sons, God often chose the younger son over the older. Abel over Cain. Isaac over Ishmael. Jacob over Esau.

[17 : 17] Perez over Zerah. Ephraim over Manasseh. Now, what's the point? God is not bound to follow social conventions and cultural patterns.

Back then, the firstborn son gets the double portion. He's the leader. That's what you're entitled to if you're a firstborn son.

Even today, in a far more egalitarian society, firstborn children still have a statistical advantage. The most ambitious, the best educated, you are 30% more likely than others to attend an Ivy League school.

That's the statistics. But, you know, God says God is not obligated to give special honor in his kingdom to firstborn children or to anyone else.

You see, God rules his kingdom by sovereign grace. What that means is, if we're part of God's kingdom, it's because he's chosen us and brought us in and made a way for us to be included by his grace, by his mercy.

[18 : 21] And it means that in his kingdom, God sovereignly assigns to us different roles, different gifts, different spheres of influence, according to his own wisdom and not according to human standards.

You know, there's great freedom when we accept our different roles and seek to use our different gifts in order to build up the whole body instead of getting trapped in envy, rivalry, and comparison.

Which for so long had dominated Jacob's family. Envy, rivalry, and comparison. Leading to hatred and anger and all kinds of other things.

But here, there's quiet acceptance at the end. Jacob never explained why he put Ephraim over Manasseh.

You know, he didn't say, Ephraim is more righteous than Manasseh. Or, Manasseh is disqualified from, because of something he did. He doesn't say that Ephraim deserved a bigger portion of the inheritance.

[19 : 29] Now, we do know Jacob's words prove true. Ephraim came the most prominent tribe among the northern tribes in Israel. In fact, the northern kingdom, when the kingdom split, the northern kingdom was often simply called Ephraim.

Ephraim. Although it actually included ten tribes. It was simply called Ephraim because Ephraim was the most prominent. Now, what's the point? Sometimes God doesn't tell us why he blesses certain people in some ways and other people in other ways.

And this is sometimes hard for us to accept. Because we want everything to be, sometimes we have this, we want everything to be equal.

In the sense of the same. But you know, God has made us different, and yet he's called us together. You know, in God's kingdom, there are faithful pastors who lead small congregations of 25 to 50 people their whole life long.

Other faithful pastors lead congregations of 5,000 or more. Some Christians are respected in their work and promoted to high positions. Some Christians are fired or laid off for living out Christian principles.

[20 : 41] Some couples get pregnant the first time they try to have a kid. Others wait anxiously for years or remain infertile their whole lives. Some Christians bring glory to God by being miraculously healed.

And others bring glory to God as they die in faith from the exact same illness. You know, we don't always know why. And we can often go wrong if we assume that we know why.

Especially if we assume that the stronger your faith, the more successful you'll be. And God doesn't work that way.

Sometimes he simply chooses to bless people in different ways. And it's not a function of our merit or how good we are. He just chooses to bless different people in different ways.

And we don't know always why. But what we can know and what we do know is that God has called us and blessed us together. You know, both Ephraim and Manasseh were blessed.

[21 : 41] And in fact, we can get so caught up in the difference between the two of them that we miss the point they're both part of the family. They both get the inheritance. New Testament says every Christian is blessed with every spiritual blessing in Jesus Christ.

We're forgiven of all of our sins. We're adopted as God's children. We're reconciled with God. We have the presence and power of the Holy Spirit living in us as a first installment of what God's going to do when he comes again one day.

You see, what we share in common through Jesus Christ is actually far more significant than any of the ways in which we differ. And whatever our roles, whatever our gifts, whether they're center stage or behind the scenes or extensive or limited or however they change over our lives, God has called us to use every blessing he has given us to build up the whole body of Christ.

This is Ephraim and Manasseh were each called to different roles in the kingdom of Israel, but they were both called to essential places. They were both called to be part of God's work in that way.

So we see so far that God holds us together when we could have fallen apart. God initiates sovereign grace instead of following social conventions.

- [23 : 04] The third thing we see as we look in chapter 49 is God curses our sin in order to bless us. So let's read 49, verse 1 through 7.

Jacob called his sons and said, gather yourselves together that I may tell you what shall happen to you in days to come. Assemble and listen, O sons of Jacob. Listen to Israel, your father. So he begins his blessings here.

He says, Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might and the firstfruits of my strength, preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power, unstable as water.

You shall not have preeminence. Because you went up to your father's bed, then you defiled it. He went up to my couch. Simeon and Levi are brothers.

Weapons of violence are their swords. Let my soul come not into their counsel. O my glory, be not joined to their company. For in their anger they killed men. And in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen.

- [24 : 07] Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce. And their wrath, for it is cruel. I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel. As you read these, you might think, what kind of a blessing is that?

Jacob rebuked them publicly in front of everyone else. He chastised Reuben for his lack of self-control, unstable as water. And Simeon and Levi for their fierce anger.

If you look down at verse 14 and 15, he criticized Issachar for being lazy. Crouching between the seat folds. You see, by this time Jacob knew his sons very well.

There are some points in the story that we've seen so far that Jacob seems to be so focused on himself that he seems oblivious to everything else that's happened in his family. And all the conflicts among the brothers.

But actually, he's very clear-sighted by this time. He knows his kids very well. And he knows that though they had been brought together by the grace of God, they were still vulnerable to their own worst tendencies.

- [25 : 14] And he wasn't afraid to call them out and warn them. He cursed their sin in order to bless his sons. You see, what Jacob didn't do here, he's not telling his sons off and sending them away.

No, he's rebuked them as members of the family. Verse 4, he says to Reuben, you shall not have preeminence. Verse 7, he says to Simeon and Levi, I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel.

But notice, they're still in. They're not the leader, but they're still part of the family. He's not telling them off and throwing them out of the house.

He's rebuking them so they don't keep on doing the stupid stuff that got them in trouble in the first place. He's protecting them from themselves. One commentator said, though some forfeited their privilege, none altogether forfeited his inheritance.

Even if they were disappointed individually as Israel, as God's people, they entered into the promise of God. Yesterday at our parenting seminar, the Snyders were talking about the discipline of children, how important it is for us as parents not to withhold discipline or correction from our kids.

- [26 : 31] Now, of course, biblical discipline or training doesn't start with correction and punishment. It starts with positive instruction and blessing. The blessing of chapter 48, verse 15 and 16 is a wonderful blessing that we can, in many ways, pray for our kids.

They would come to know God as the faithful shepherd. That they would know the God whom our spiritual ancestors have trusted.

That they would know God who is to redeem them from evil. But, you know, sometimes in order to bless our kids, we also need to call them to account for their sin and follow through with appropriate corrective measures.

And the Snyder said, as Christian parents, we seek to lead our kids to a right understanding of guilt. In other words, acknowledging our sin and responding with confession and forgiveness that leads to resolution.

But not shame that leads to withdrawal and alienation and despair. You see, what Jacob's doing is here. He's not shaming them and pushing them to the side and saying, I don't ever want to deal with you again.

[27 : 43] Or I'm going to distance myself from you forever. He's calling them out so they can see their guilt and confess their sin and walk in the way that is right and good.

You know, it's a blessing to be lovingly rebuked for our sin. Right? Whether you're a kid or whether you're an adult.

Many of us have trouble realizing that it's a blessing to be lovingly called out for our sinful patterns. James 5 says, my brothers, if any of you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Do we receive loving rebuke as a blessing from God or do we run away from it or lash out against it? Do we have the courage to extend loving rebuke to others when they have a pattern of sinful anger or laziness or lack of self-control?

You know, the purpose of loving rebuke is not to tell somebody off so you don't have to deal with them anymore. It's to love them as a brother or sister and win them back. It's a lot harder to do than just telling someone off.

[29 : 07] It's also harder than just withdrawing and ignoring them. But that's what God calls us to as a family is to love one another enough to sometimes call each other out for our ultimate good.

And you know, when a loving rebuke is extended and received, sometimes our greatest liability can become our greatest asset. So take Levi, for instance. His fierce anger led him to violently, massively overreact.

But later on, his greatest asset was his fierce zeal for the purity of God's people. Levi was scattered in Israel, having no territorial inheritance.

But as the priestly tribe, the tribe of Levi represented all of the tribes coming before God in prayer. You see, by the grace of God, sometimes our greatest weaknesses and even our greatest failures can be the doorway to our greatest strengths.

Stubborn willfulness can become tenacious perseverance. Fierce anger can become godly zeal. Hypersensitivity can become deeply felt compassion.

[30 : 21] That's the blessing of being called out. That God curses their sin to bless his sons. Finally, last point.

The last way that God blesses us, he provides a savior instead of giving us over to our enemies. Chapter 49 includes a blessing for each of Jacob's sons. But two of them stand out. Joseph, of course, at the end.

Verse 22 through 26. And Judah in verse 8 through 12. Now for most of the last 12 chapters, for most of our sermon series this fall, our story is focused on Joseph.

We've called this series The Gospel According to Joseph. We've seen how Joseph persevered through hardship and saved the land of Egypt from famine and provided for his starving family and reconciled with his brothers and how he's a picture of a greater deliverer to come.

And Joseph is extravagantly blessed by his father. He's fruitful. He's fruitful. Blessed with abundant blessings. But you know, the greatest and most lasting blessing of all isn't given to Joseph in this chapter.

[31 : 30] It's given to Judah. Verse 8. Judah, your brother shall praise you. Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies. Your father's son shall bow down before you.

Judah is a lion's cub. From the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down. He crouched as a lion. And as a lioness, who dares rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet until tribute comes to him.

And to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he has washed his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes.

You see, what God is promising here is that from the tribe of Judah, God will provide a king, a savior, who will defeat our greatest enemies. You see, the story of Joseph that we've looked at all this time isn't really about Joseph, ultimately.

It's about how God brought Joseph all the way to Egypt to save his family from famine and to preserve the line of Judah from which the Messiah would one day come. The promise here was understood to be a messianic prophecy long before the time of Jesus.

[32 : 40] That a descendant of Judah would not only unify the family, verse 8, but also rule the nations, verse 9 and 10. And usher in a time of unparalleled prosperity and peace, verse 11 and 12.

And in the New Testament we see that this promised Lion of Judah, who will rule the nations, is also the Lamb of God, who was slain for the sins of the world.

And the Lord, who ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, who lives again as the risen king, the one who conquered death. The one who is our hope for this life and for all eternity.

You see, God has a plan that is far bigger and far more glorious, far more intricate than what any of us will see. Jacob came to the end of his life.

And he looked forward to what he hadn't yet seen or experienced. And he trusted God's promise that it was coming. And there's a lot of times in our life and maybe even facing our death when we don't see the completion of God's plan.

[33 : 57] And we see a lot of unfinished things. But can we look back to how God has blessed us already? And can we look forward and trust his promise that one day he will come again and make a new heavens and a new earth?

Brothers and sisters, may we be like Jacob. May we experience God's blessing. May we extend God's blessing. May we live and may we die in faith. Let us pray. Lord God, we thank you for speaking words of blessing to us.

We thank you for accepting us into your family and providing your son Jesus Christ. So that we might come home to you. We thank you, Lord, that though you call us to different roles and give us different gifts.

For your own purposes that you have called us together and you have blessed us with a glorious inheritance. And thank you that you have made us together much more than what we are on our own.

Thank you for calling us into your family and blessing us. We pray that we would know this blessing that you've given to us in the Lion of Judah. In the Lamb of God and Jesus Christ our Lord.

[35 : 28] We pray in his name. Amen.