

"Don't Bury Me in Egypt"
Genesis 49:1 – Genesis 50:36
Cheri Bean

A Christmas Carol, is a novella by Charles Dickens, first published in London in 1843. It has been around a long time and adapted in many ways for film, stage, opera and other media.

You know the story...Ebeneezer Scrooge is well known for his harsh, miserly ways, until he is visited by the ghost of his former business partner, Jacob Marley, and then by three other spirits. Marley's ghost, who wanders the earth entwined by heavy chains due to a lifetime of greed and selfishness, warns Scrooge that he has a single chance to avoid the same fate or be cursed as he was. After being shown the future and the fate that awaits him, Scrooge is transformed into a kinder, gentler man.

Every time I watch an adaptation of this story, I ask myself, would I want to know the future and have that last opportunity to change my evil ways? My answer is a firm "no" because I know that my sins are forgiven and that my future is secure because I have a loving and merciful Savior who sacrificed His life to justify mine.

Each time I read and reread Genesis 49, I wondered how the sons of Jacob embraced the words of their father who, on his deathbed, spoke to each of them concerning their future. As the last significant act as a patriarch and as the heir to Abraham and Isaac, Jacob gathered his sons to bless them, pronounce their future, and give them ongoing responsibilities.

Before we dive into Jacob's prediction of each son's future, it is interesting to note that this is the first declared prophecy through a man in the Bible. And don't miss chapter 49:2 when Jacob says, "Assemble and listen sons of Jacob; listen to your father Israel." Jacob is embracing the fact that he was both Jacob and Israel, and his sons are sons of each. I believe that Jacob had reached a place of spiritual maturity, as he embraced both what God made him (Israel) and what he had to battle against (Jacob).

In this message, we will examine Jacob's prophecies over his sons, the deaths of Jacob and Joseph, and the lessons we can glean from these passages.

The Prophetic Blessings Upon the Sons of Israel

Jacob's last words foretold that some of his sons and their descendants would experience success, others hard times. As Dan pointed out in chapter 48, Jacob adopted Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, as his own; this allowed Jacob to give Joseph a double inheritance as one whose character had earned his trust and confidence.

Jacob first addressed the sons of Leah. **Reuben** as the firstborn of the family would traditionally have claim to the inheritance rights of the firstborn, but he forfeited it through pride and through immorality. He had defiled his father's bed by having sex with Bilhah, his father's concubine and mother of his brothers Dan and Naphtali. Because he was "unstable as water," he would not excel.

We know the tribe of Reuben never did excel. No prophet, no judge, nor king that we know of came from the tribe of Reuben. According to C. H. Spurgeon, "So a man may have great opportunities, and yet lose them. Uncontrolled passions may make him very little who otherwise might have been great."

Simeon and Levi, the second-born and the third-born sons, respectively, received the same words for the same evil deed. They were instruments of cruelty when they wiped out all the men of Shechem in retaliation for the rape of their sister Dinah. The consequence? The tribes would be divided and scattered in Israel.

The real problem with Simeon and Levi was their anger which was sinful because it was rooted in self-will. Ephesians 4:26 warns us: "In your anger do not sin..." Ephesians 4:31 gives us further information as to how we should handle our anger: "Let all bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander be removed from you along with all malice."

This prophecy of dividing and scattering turned out to be a curse for Simeon as this tribe started out from Egypt as the third largest tribe, but ended up being absorbed into the tribe of Judah.

The tribe of Levi, on the other hand, was blessed because of the faithfulness of this tribe during the rebellion of the gold calf. This tribe was scattered as a blessing throughout the whole nation of Israel. It was the priestly tribe, it received no large tract of land, for the Lord was its inheritance, not land.

C. H. Spurgeon tells us, "Happy is that man who, though he begins with a dark shadow resting upon him, so lives as to turn even that shadow into bright sunlight. Levi gained a blessing at the hands of Moses, one of the richest blessings of any of the tribes."

After alluding to Israel as a disappointing people and as a dispersed people, there is good news for Israel as they become a delivered people as seen in **Judah**. Son number four, wasn't a completely exemplary character, as he suggested making a profit from getting rid of Joseph. In addition, he had dealt unfaithfully with his daughter-in-law Tamar, and had sex with her when he thought she was a prostitute. But he showed good character when he interceded and offered himself as a substitute for Benjamin. Judah received a blessing that is an example of the richness of God's grace to the undeserving and he became the new patriarch of the family and received double the inheritance of any of the other brothers.

This blessing also contained a description of Judah's material abundance. According to verse 11, "He will tether his donkey to a vine, his colt to the choicest branch and wash his garments in wine." This refers to Judah's land which was great wine-growing country.

Jacob's prophecy was speaking of his own son, but everything he said of Judah was said in reference to God's ultimate leader, our Lord Jesus Christ who is called the "Lion of the tribe of Judah" in Revelation 5:5. The promise was that Israel would keep the scepter until Shiloh comes. Jesus is referred to as Shiloh, the name meaning, "he whose right it is" or "to whom it belongs." It was a title anciently understood to speak of Messiah. This leadership prophecy took some 1600 years to fulfill from the reign of David, through the dynasty of kings of Israel that would come from Judah and finally rest with Jesus the Messiah.

Jacob's eyes were dim, but he could see a long way. He could see the coming of Christ, the Shiloh.

Jacob skipped the birth order as he turned his attention to his tenth-born and nineth-born sons who were also sons of Leah. The tribe of **Zebulun** was noted for its faithfulness to David, supplying the largest number of soldiers to David's army of any single tribe. They settled the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Sea of Galilee and is referred to as "A haven for ships."

They became an exiled people when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem, and burned the temple. At that time, the Jewish people were scattered once again, and the name "Israel" was replaced by the name of her enemies: "Philistine" – or "Palestine."

Jacob described **Issachar** as a strong donkey, probably because it was a large tribe. The image projected here seems to be of strong people who weren't afraid to carry heavy burdens. The people of Issachar were hard working and devoted to the soil. Their everyday labor was a help to others. In years to come, this tribe would be pressed into servitude and become the bearers of burdens for its masters. Because of their size and abundance, they became targets of oppressive foreign armies who put them into servitude.

Next in line for Jacob's blessing were **Dan and Naphtali**, the sons of Bilhah, Rachel's maid, and **Gad and Asher**, the sons of Zilpah who was Leah's maid.

Dan was referred to as a serpent by the way, a viper by the path, that bites the horses' heels so that its rider shall fall backward. In verse 16, the Bible says "Dan shall judge his people." One of the most prominent of the Judges was Samson who was from this tribe.

Dan was a troublesome tribe. It was the people of Dan who introduced idolatry into Israel. Later Dan became a center of idol worship in Israel. Some Bible scholars even believe that the antichrist would come from the tribe of Dan which is based on Daniel 11:37 and Jeremiah 8:16. I will leave those verses with you to peruse during your independent study time.

We do know the people of Dan were left out of the genealogies in 1 Chronicles 2-10 and in the tribal listing of Revelation 7:1-8. Could this be because of their idolatry? However, when Ezekiel described the placing of the tribes during the Kingdom Age, he had a place for Dan according to Ezekiel 48:1-2.

For some unknown reason, Jacob spoke to Gad and Asher, the sons of Zilpah, before he spoke to Dan's brother Naphtali. We see that in verses 19-21, the blessings are short and mostly sweet.

In verse 19, we read that "Raiders shall raid **Gad** but he shall raid at their heels." In other words, Gad will be plundered by marauding bands, but he will turn and plunder them. Victory would be his in the end. Spurgeon reminds us that "This has been the blessing of many a child of God - to fight, and apparently to lose the battle, yet to win it at the end."

We find **Asher's** blessing in verse 20: "Asher's food shall be rich, and he shall yield royal delicacies." Apparently, the land eventually occupied by Asher was good enough to bring not only necessities, but also luxuries. This tribe settled on land that was fertile and good for growing olive trees.

Naphtali uses "goodly" words. Verse 21 describes Naphtali as a "deer let loose; he uses beautiful words." Since Naphtali's land was in a key portion near the sea of Galilee, the region where Jesus did much of His teaching and ministry. Some scholars agree that this was fittingly said of Naphtali and his tribe.

And finally, Jacob gives his blessing to Rachel's sons.

In verse 22, **Joseph** is described as "a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a well; his branches run over the wall." This passage speaks of Joseph's deep and real relationship with God. Spurgeon tells us, "The main point in Joseph's character was that he was in clear and constant fellowship with God, and therefore God blessed him greatly. He lived to God, and was God's servant; he lived with God, and was God's child."

I believe the five great titles that Jacob gave God in verses 24 and 25 are very significant in Jacob's personal journey. They are:

- The mighty God of Jacob
- The Shepherd
- The Rock of Israel
- The God of your Father
- The Almighty

It certainly appears that Jacob had come to know who God was for himself!

I was surprised that so little was said about **Benjamin**, a favored son, but I am reminded that each son received a blessing that was appropriate for him.

In Genesis 49:27, Benjamin is spoken of as a "ravenous wolf; in the morning he shall devour the prey, and at night he shall divide the spoil." This was the tribe with a reputation for fierceness. Both Saul of the Old Testament and Paul of the New Testament would come from this tribe. The cruelty of this tribe in general is seen in Judges chapters 19 and 20. If I had that many brothers, I might have developed a reputation for fierceness as well.

And so, Jacob concluded the blessing of his sons. Some of the things mentioned regarding these tribes may seem a bit cloudy, but only because we may not know their exact fulfillment until the age to come.

Before we leave the topic of Jacob and blessings, I wanted to draw your attention to a blessing that Jacob may have misunderstood for years. As you will remember, Jacob was hoodwinked, tricked, deceived into marrying Leah before he was able to marry Rachel, the love of his life.

Time passed. Between Leah, Rachel, and their handmaidens, Jacob fathered his twelve sons. Rachel died when she gave birth to Jacob's youngest son, Benjamin, and Jacob buried her in Canaan. Years later, Leah died, and Jacob buried her in the Promised Land in Machpelah with his ancestors. After blessing each son, Jacob did not say, "When I die, bury me near the love of my life in Canaan." His instruction was to bury him at Machpelah – by Leah.

Some commentors believe that at the end of his life, Jacob, now Israel, realized his marriage to Leah which was so unfair, was in reality the biggest blessing in his life because from Leah – not Rachel – came Judah. And from Judah came the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

This tells me that we should be aware that the negative incidences in our lives may actually be hidden blessings. We are reminded in Isaiah 55:8-9:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

The Death of Jacob

We know that Jacob's final instruction to his sons was to bury him with his fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron, in the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, in the land of Canaan. He knew that he was not an Egyptian. He was a son of the promise, an heir of God's covenant with

Abraham and Isaac. It makes sense that Jacob wanted to be buried with his ancestors in Canaan – the land of promise.

Verse 49:33 tells us, "Jacob drew up his feet into the bed and breathed his last and was gathered to his people." This ends the life of the last of the great patriarchs, but we know the work and plan of God did not end. It continued through men and generations to come. We know it is working through us today!

Chapter 50, describes Joseph's grief at the loss of his father, the mourning period and how Pharaoh gave permission for Joseph to take his father's body to Canaan. It also describes the funeral procession which consisted of Jacob's family, the servants of Pharaoh, and the elders of all the land of Egypt. This great company even included chariots and horsemen.

After he buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt with his brothers and all who had gone up with him to bury his father.

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they asked themselves, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" So, they sent word, I am assuming via messengers, to Joseph saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father."

When their message came to him, Joseph wept. The Scriptures do not say why he wept, but I believe he felt that after all that he had done to encourage his brothers, it was cruel of them to say, "Joseph will perhaps hate us and pay us back for what we did to him."

Joseph must have summoned his brothers to his home. I can't imagine them going on their own. When they arrived, they fell prostrate before him in fear – their last bow in fulfillment of Joseph's prophetic dreams. The brothers offered to become servants and work their way to the place where Joseph could forgive them and accept them.

Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives... So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." Joseph reassured them and spoke kindly to them (Genesis 50:19-21).

The Death of Joseph

Joseph stayed in Egypt along with all his father's family. He lived to see the third generation of Ephraim's children. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." He continued by saying, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place." Joseph made the Israelites swear an oath to do just that.

So, Joseph died at the age of a hundred and ten. And after he was embalmed, he was placed in a coffin in Egypt. His coffin was a constant reminder to the Jewish people to have faith in God. When the Jews found themselves slaves instead of resident aliens in Egypt, they could look at Joseph's temporary burial place and be encouraged. During their wilderness wandering, as they carried Joseph's remains from place to place, he ministered to them and urged them to trust God and never give up.

I opened this message with the concept of knowing the future. A coffin in Egypt may appear to be a discouraging way to close a book, but from the viewpoint of faith, it couldn't be more encouraging. After all, even though Joseph was dead, his witness was still going on.

John Wesley said, "God buries His workman, but His work goes on." The Apostle John wrote that "...he who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:17).

As we look toward our future, it would be good to consider a quote by G. Campbell Morgan who said:

"Commit your life to God, see vision, do the work that's nearest, the work He appoints, truly and well and faithfully, and die knowing that you have started delicate influences, dynamic forces which will proceed through every succeeding generation until they gather up the harvest of glorious result about the throne of the Eternal. The man of God has not finished his work in the world when they put him in a coffin."

Yes, Joseph is still blessing us today even as we study his life! I believe that our lives, too, can continue to bless others when our life on earth has ended.

Lessons Learned Through Jacob's Blessings

Jacob's blessings to his boys are loaded with lessons for us. Here are three to consider.

First, at the end of Jacob's blessing to **Dan**, in verse 49:18, Jacob exclaimed, "I trust in you for salvation, O Lord!" In that statement, Jacob was emphasizing to Dan that he would be a strong leader only if his trust was in God, not in his natural strength or ability. There is a lesson for us in this verse as well: Those who are strong, attractive, talented or believe that they are particularly intelligent often find it easier to trust in themselves or the trappings of this world rather than in God who gave them their gifts. We must remember to thank God for who He made us to be and what He gave us; so, our trust does not become misplaced.

Second, in verses 8-12, Jacob blesses **Judah**, and we see his references to the coming of Jesus through the line of this tribe. There are many lessons that we can draw from this passage which alludes to the Lion of Judah. C. H. Spurgeon summarizes them in this quote:

"Bow before Him, accept His grace, trust in His atoning sacrifice, and then the power that should make us now tremble will be exerted on our behalf, and cause us to rejoice forever."

Third, after all that **Joseph** had done to encourage his brothers, they doubted his love and forgiveness. That sounds very much how we deal with God's love for us doesn't it? When we doubt God's Word, we begin to question God's love, and then we must guard against giving up all hope for the future, because faith, hope, and love go together. But it all begins with faith: "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17).

How do we know God loves us and forgives those who put their faith in Christ? His unchanging Word tells us so. According to 1 John 5:13, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life."

Charles Wesley may have had Joseph and his brothers in mind when he wrote his hymn *Depth of Mercy*:

Depth of mercy! Can there be
Mercy still reserved for me?
Can my God His wrath forbear –
Me, the chief of sinners, spare?

There for me the Savior stands,
Holding forth His wounded hands;
God is love! I know, I feel,
Jesus weeps and loves me still.

In verse 49:12, Jacob blesses Joseph as a fruitful bough by a spring whose branches run over the wall. And here we learn the key to satisfaction: Be a fruit-bearer. When we are fruitful and do the good works that the Lord intends for us to do, our fruit extends over our own boundaries and spills over to our neighbors, coworkers, friends, and family.

Thus ends Genesis. The book that began with creation ends with a coffin. As we leave the book of Genesis, let us remember the rich lessons that God imparted to us along this portion of our journey.

As we begin a new year, let us be resolved to rekindle our passion to serve the Lord. May God's Word abide in us, fill us up and overflow to those with whom we come in contact - especially those around us who are starving for joy, peace, and the love of Jesus Christ. Let us seek to do God's will each day and be led by His Spirit who will give us freedom from sin and self. The Holy Spirit enables us to love others, to overcome the flesh, and to bear fruit. Will you yield to Him and let Him continue to transform you?

God will be glorified.
Those around you will be edified.
And you will be satisfied.