

Genesis 49:1-28 What would you say to the children?

Introduction

It will one day come to us all. The day when we know our time is nearly up. What would you particularly want to say to your closest family members and friends? It has to be accepted that a proportion of people never have this opportunity. This may be due to an untimely death, for example in a road crash, or more commonly due to the loss of critical faculties much earlier increasingly today for a number of people through a dementia-related illness. However, many people do have this scenario and it provides a good though possibly painful opportunity to reflect on our lives and the choices we have made, especially the priorities we have used to shape our lives. For those of us who are parents or grandparents there is a reasonable possibility that our turn will one day come. The challenge naturally comes rather forcefully to us that if there are things currently needing to be said or done – not to leave them to an unknown future date. For some Christians a need to speak to family members or friends about the faith we hold dear but who have yet to commit their lives to Jesus. For others family conflict issues or relational matters that need to be resolved; life is far too short to put off resolution of these kinds of issues as far as it is up to us. Our Lord invites us to live now in a manner with which we would be comfortable later as we look back on our lives towards the very end of our allocated time.

Here in Genesis beyond this scene at a family gathering are funeral arrangements for the patriarch. What a life he had lived over so many years. It was a real rollercoaster of a ride through good times and tough, affected to a significant degree by the choices he had made, but ultimately God's will was done in his life and the covenant promises to Abraham and his descendants were passed on through him to Joseph, together with an extended family that will become the nation of Israel. Genesis 49:1-28 is a summary of the reflections Jacob makes to his children about the way they had lived and were living their lives.

1. Reuben -The danger of spiritual instability (Genesis 49:1-4)

Then Jacob called for his sons and said: 'Gather round so that I can tell you what will happen to you in days to come.'² 'Assemble and listen, sons of Jacob; listen to your father Israel. ³ 'Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, the first sign of my strength, excelling in honour, excelling in power. ⁴ Turbulent as the waters, you will no longer excel, for you went up onto your father's bed, onto my couch and defiled it.

(a) **His advantages** *'Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, the first sign of my strength, excelling in honour, excelling in power* (Genesis 49:3) In that culture the firstborn son had great advantages and opportunities for his future life. Yet they were accompanied by responsibilities to care for younger siblings and his mother in the event of the premature death of his father. In addition to his physical advantages he also had the spiritual advantages as a covenant child of the line of Abraham. Paul, in his letter to the Church in Rome, sets out the advantages a Jew has over a Gentile. *Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. ⁵ Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, for ever praised! Amen* (Romans 9:4-5). Yet a Jewish person could have such privileges without believing in the God of the covenant or living a life in the light of its promises and privileges. A child can have the privilege of being brought up in a loving home where God's name is honoured and His Word taught yet as they get older they may choose not to commit their lives to the Lord Jesus and follow Him. In the light of the promises and blessings of the Gospel and the eternal consequences of rejecting Him it seems the obvious thing to do to

follow Him, despite the real pressures and occasional hardships that a Christian may face for their faith in the United Kingdom. Advantages are just that –how we respond to them – whether spiritual in a Christian family or church family; educational opportunities or material blessings- is another matter altogether.

(b)**The disappointment with Reuben** *Turbulent as the waters, you will no longer excel, for you went up onto your father's bed, onto my couch and defiled it* (Genesis 49:4). What was his major flaw? It was a one night sexual act with his father's concubine Bilhah (Genesis 35:2). It was not kept secret his father knew about it if not at the time shortly afterwards. He was not the only son to engage in inappropriate sexual activity, but to do what he did within the immediate family circle and as the first-born son was to humiliate his father. The damage done within that extended family had lasting consequences. There are times when all of us make mistakes and need to say sorry. However, sometimes there are consequences that follow even if genuine apologies are given and accepted, as appears possible in this case. What were the consequences for Reuben and his descendants as a result of his sinful choice? ...*you will no longer excel...* He would lose his place of honour in the family and his descendants would likewise not excel in the nation of Israel in future generations. When we look over the future history of the Israelite nation the descendants of Reuben were there but none of the great men and women in the nation came from their ranks. It is noteworthy that at the end of his own life, Moses, the greater leader of the nation of Israel, gave prophetic utterances concerning each of the tribes. Of the tribe of Reuben he simply said these restrained words: *Let Reuben live and not die nor his men be few* (Deuteronomy 33:6). The tribe of Reuben with that of Gad and part of the tribe of Manasseh settled in land on the far side of the Jordan River which was vulnerable to enemy attacks. Some of these attacks are recorded in the Bible (II Kings 20:32-33). We must be very careful how we think and refer to the sins or good conduct of ancestors affecting us in future generations. It cannot be avoided because God makes reference to it in Exodus 20:4-6, in the teaching on the second commandment against idolatry. *You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me, ⁶but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love Me and keep My commandments.* However, we must also put alongside that the teaching of Ezekiel 18 which explicitly teaches that each person is responsible before God for their own conduct. For example, Ezekiel 18:20 states: *The one who sins is the one who will die. The child will not share the guilt of the parent, nor will the parent share the guilt of the child. The righteousness of the righteous will be credited to them, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against them.* Our choices affect not only ourselves but our descendants. This much is clear and is a further encouragement to lead a God-honouring life as an example to those that follow on after us.

2. **Simeon and Levi –The lack of self-control** (Genesis 49:5-7)

(a)**The sad description** (Genesis 49:5-7a) *'Simeon and Levi are brothers – their swords are weapons of violence.⁶ Let me not enter their council, let me not join their assembly, for they have killed men in their anger and hamstringed oxen as they pleased.⁷ Cursed be their anger, so fierce, and their fury, so cruel! I will scatter them in Jacob and disperse them in Israel.* If this is the best gloss their father can put on the lives of Simeon and Levi then what would a negative assessment of their character and conduct look like? These brothers were exceptionally close to one another as if a shadow of their sibling. Yet they were partners in crime. In Genesis 34 there is the sad description of their misconduct. It was right that they valued the honour of their sister, but the way they responded was a total disaster. Murder and mayhem, looting and violence is a discrete way to cover their misconduct. Jacob at the time told them: *You have brought trouble on me by making me obnoxious to the Canaanites and Perizzites, the people living in this land. We*

are few in number, and if they join forces against me and attack me, I and my household will be destroyed (Genesis 34:30). Did they apologise for their actions? No they were consumed with motives of revenge and hatred for the young man Shechem and his family because he forced their sister into sexual activity outside of marriage. Yet it was not the only crime they committed as a result of their untamed tempers. Cruelty against people and animals was a hallmark of their lives. There are a small number of people in our land whose lives are a catalogue of crime or disaster or both! What is even worse some families have generational disfunctionality where unwise choices are replicated in successive generations. The message we have to give is that this is not an unending cycle with God's help it can be broken. The example here of the future generations of Levites is inspirational.

(b) **The consequences of their actions** *I will scatter them in Jacob and disperse them in Israel.* (Genesis 49:7b). Did these men's tribal descendants gain inheritances in the land? Joshua 19:1-9 makes reference to the tribe of Simeon. *The second lot came out for the tribe of Simeon according to its clans. **Their inheritance lay within the territory of Judah.*** ² *It included: Beersheba (or Sheba), Moladah, ³Hazar Shual, Balah, Ezem, ⁴Eltolad, Bethul, Hormah, ⁵Ziklag, Beth Markaboth, Hazar Susah, ⁶Beth Lebaoth and Sharuhem – thirteen towns and their villages; ⁷Ain, Rimmon, Ether and Ashan – four towns and their villages – ⁸and all the villages around these towns as far as Baalath Beer (Ramah in the Negev). This was the inheritance of the tribe of the Simeonites, according to its clans. ⁹The inheritance of the Simeonites was taken from the share of Judah, because Judah's portion was more than they needed. **So the Simeonites received their inheritance within the territory of Judah.*** This geographical area was in the south of the country, but crucially in line with Jacob's prophecy the Simeonites were allocated parts of the inheritance of the tribe of Judah, rather than their own territorial area. What about the tribe of Levi? They did not get an inheritance either. After the conquest of Canaan the Levites were scattered throughout the land living in forty-eight cities allocated to them amongst the different tribes in order to teach God's Law to the people of Israel (Joshua 21:41-42). In the time of King David when young Solomon was crowned as king of Israel, the following account was made of them, recorded in I Chronicles 23:2-5: *He also gathered together all the leaders of Israel, as well as the priests and Levites. ³The Levites thirty years old or more were counted, and the total number of men was thirty-eight thousand. ⁴David said, 'Of these, twenty-four thousand are to be in charge of the work of the temple of the Lord and six thousand are to be officials and judges. ⁵Four thousand are to be gatekeepers and four thousand are to praise the Lord with the musical instruments I have provided for that purpose.* They were to become the priests of the nation and honoured God when standing firm and faithful with Moses against idolatry at the time of the Golden calf incident. Exodus 32:25-29 records what happened when Moses came down from the Mountain and appalled at what he saw asked the God-honouring people to stand with him. *Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughing-stock to their enemies. ²⁶So he stood at the entrance to the camp and said, 'Whoever is for the Lord, come to me.' **And all the Levites rallied to him.** ²⁷Then he said to them, 'This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: "Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbour."'* ²⁸ *The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died. ²⁹Then Moses said, 'You have been set apart to the Lord today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and He has blessed you this day.'*

(c) **The transformation of the Levites** Yet through their later good conduct in the time of Moses the curse was turned into a blessing. It is worth noting that both Moses and Aaron, together with both their parents were Levites (Exodus 2:1). I Chronicles 23:13 states: *The sons of Amram: Aaron and Moses. Aaron was set apart, he and his descendants for ever, to consecrate the most holy things, to offer sacrifices before the Lord, **to minister before Him and to pronounce blessings in His name for ever.*** ¹⁴ *The sons of Moses the man of God were counted as part of the tribe of Levi. They had lost a physical inheritance, but gained a special place in the nation. This was*

confirmed in the time of Phinehas, Aaron's grandson when he took a stand with Moses against idolatry in their midst. Numbers 25:10-13 records God's verdict on Phinehas' actions: *The Lord said to Moses, ¹¹ 'Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, has turned My anger away from the Israelites. Since he was as zealous for My honour among them as I am, I did not put an end to them in My zeal. ¹² Therefore tell him I am making My covenant of peace with him. ¹³ He and his descendants will have a covenant of a lasting priesthood, because he was zealous for the honour of his God and made atonement for the Israelites.'* There were other distinguished Levites in the nation: Eli the priest was the national leader for many years (I Samuel 1-4); Ezra the spiritual leader of the nation that returned from exile in Babylon (Ezra 7:1-5); in the New Testament Luke 1:5-6 tells us about the parents of John the Baptist: *In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. ⁶ Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.* Jesus said this of their son John in Matthew 11:11: *Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist;* Their ancestor's action had consequences but his descendants good conduct turned the family inheritance to one of blessings. There is no fatalism here in the Bible! Each person is created in the image of God and has the responsibility for the choices they make. This is true for each of us. Whatever our upbringing which undoubtedly affects us for better or for worse, yet we can turn with God's help our disadvantages into a sphere of blessing for us and for potential descendants.

3. The other brothers - The responsibility to take opportunities (Genesis 49:13-21, 27)

(a) **Zebulun and Issachar** (Genesis 49:13-15)¹³ *'Zebulun will live by the seashore and become a haven for ships; his border will extend towards Sidon. ¹⁴ Issachar is a scrawny donkey lying down among the sheepfolds. ¹⁵ When he sees how good is his resting place and how pleasant is his land, he will bend his shoulder to the burden and submit to forced labour.* Two brothers with blessings but little prominence in the future nation; Issachar produced one of the Judges of Israel, Tola, who ruled the nation for twenty-three years (Judges 10:1-2). Zebulun also had one judge from their ranks, Elon (Judges 12:11), who ruled for ten years. Zebulun's territory was a centre for business and trade. The skills of this tribe were not in the field of agriculture, rather in a different sphere. The challenge was whether those skills would be best utilised and the opportunities grasped? Issachar had fertile lands, but although faithful probably did not make the best use of their talents. They did nothing wrong, but so much more could have been accomplished had they put their minds to it. The challenge is always before us to make the best use of the talents at our disposal. Will we do so? Opportunities have to be grasped which are rarely when we would want them –it is a challenge to us as God's people to make the most of God's provision for us.

(b) **Dan and Gad, Asher and Naphtali** (Genesis 49:16-21) *'Dan will provide justice for his people as one of the tribes of Israel. ¹⁷ Dan will be a snake by the roadside, a viper along the path, that bites the horse's heels so that its rider tumbles backwards. ¹⁸ I look for your deliverance, Lord. ¹⁹ Gad will be attacked by a band of raiders, but he will attack them at their heels. ²⁰ Asher's food will be rich; he will provide delicacies fit for a king. ²¹ Naphtali is a doe set free that bears beautiful fawns....* They were children of the concubines Bilhah and Zilpah (Genesis 30:6-13). It was an unsavoury battle between Rachel and Leah to produce the most children for Jacob. At a time when they were not conceiving their maids were ordered to go to the master's bed by his wives. These blessings are short but positive. The birth circumstances of the boys were less than promising but God did not hold it against them nor against anyone today. Each person is valued equally by our heavenly father. Galatians 3:26-29 reminds us that there is level ground on we as Christians stand as a result of Jesus' sacrifice in our place on the cross.

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷ *for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.* ²⁸ *There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* ²⁹ *If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.* This is not a slogan merely for our holidays at the Keswick Convention where this text is prominently displayed for attendees to note. It is a statement to all God's people in whatever church we gather to remember that all those for whom Christ died are equal in His sight and in standing in His family. We may hold different offices and exercise different ministries in local churches, but no-one is greater or lesser than another brother or sister in Christ. James addresses this point in regard to social class issues (James 2:1-7) and urged his readers to treat incomers equally. It is true regarding our racial origins or gender – we are one in Christ as persons, all equally sinners saved by His grace. Some people will be more prominent and have greater gifts and opportunities. Let us remember that Jesus in His Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30) indicated that far more would be expected from those to whom more had been entrusted. The question for us all is this: am I using my talents and my opportunities to the best of my abilities in His service and for His glory? This is all that the Lord asks of us.

(c) **Benjamin** (Genesis 49:27) *'Benjamin is a ravenous wolf; in the morning he devours the prey, in the evening he divides the plunder.'* Little brother founded the smallest tribe that would have a mixed history. (i) The blessings Despite being a small tribe there were still individuals who rose to prominence in the nation. This tribe was celebrated for its national contributions in David's Psalm 68:26-27: *Praise God in the great congregation; praise the Lord in the assembly of Israel.* ²⁷ *There is the little tribe of Benjamin, leading them there the great throng of Judah's princes, and there the princes of Zebulun and of Naphtali.* There are prominent figures in Israel's history such as Ehud (Judges 3:15-30), a brave left-handed man who turned his then social disadvantage to outwit the oppressive Moabite King Eglon. Saul, the first King of Israel (I Samuel 9:1-2), was a gifted young man selected from this unpromising tribal background. Abner, the brilliant military commander of the nation under Saul was also a Benjaminite (II Samuel 3:6). Mordecai and Esther (Esther 2:5-7) likewise were members of this tribe. How many people in a nation rise to greatness from unpromising or disadvantaged backgrounds when given an opportunity? One of the glories of the Reformation in Scotland was the determination of John Knox and his successors that no boy with abilities should miss out on the appropriate educational opportunities. The vision was only partially realised (and we would want to include education for girls also!) but the fact that these sentiments were promoted in this country centuries ahead of most others in the Western world is something to thank God for. The imagery of Benjamin is of a person who grasps with both hands the opportunities given to them whether small or large. Is that that a fair description of you and me with respect to God's service? Are we willing to do what we can to honour Him? I trust we will. (ii) The darker moments (see Judges 20-21). The Benjaminites stood shoulder to shoulder with each other – a good quality, but one dark shadow was cast over their history recorded in the later chapters of the book of Judges. Some of their number were guilty of horrific crimes of violence and sexual depravity, but for reasons of foolish pride in their tribal name were unwilling to hand those responsible over for trial. The tribe was nearly wiped out in the war that followed. The prayers and tears in Israel as a consequence were no surprise. Yet God had the last word. In the New Testament the apostle Paul in his list of possible grounds for boasting in his Jewish heritage wrote these words: *If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more:* ⁵ *circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee;* (Philippians 3:4-5).

4. **Joseph - The joy of prosperity** (Genesis 49:22-26)

(a) **Steadfast in adversity** (Genesis 49:22-24a)²² *‘Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine near a spring, whose branches climb over a wall. ²³ With bitterness archers attacked him; they shot at him with hostility. ²⁴ But his bow remained steady, his strong arms stayed supple...* For a couple of decades of his life all kinds of adversity afflicted him. The arrows of his brothers’ jealousy leading to slavery; the enslavement itself; the lust of Potiphar’s wife that resulted in his imprisonment; yet through it all Joseph trusted in God. As a result of faithfulness under great trials he was given extraordinary opportunities for ministry as Vizier (Prime Minister) of Egypt. To take charge of governing a nation through a national emergency for seven years and in your first government position was an extraordinary success. God calls us to stand firm under fire; in Paul’s words *to endure hardness with us as good soldiers of Jesus Christ* (II Timothy 2:3). He will bring us through these times to the valley of blessings.

(b) **The source of his fruitfulness** (Genesis 49:24b-25) *because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob*, personal testimony here from Jacob; the One who brought me through my trials will sustain and strengthen you as well. His strength is sufficient to compensate for our weakness. *because of the Shepherd*, The image of God as shepherd cited previously in Genesis 48:15: *the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day....*; Psalm 23 would not be written for many hundreds of years, but Jacob is testifying to what the aged David did. Can you and me profess the same? *the Rock of Israel*, Edward Mote’s familiar hymn ‘My hope is built on nothing less’ contains these lines: ‘On Christ the solid rock I stand all other ground is sinking sand’(C.M.P.473) –Is this your testimony too? I hope so. ²⁵*because of your father’s God*, repetition yes, but for effect –sons you will accomplish nothing unless he is your God as well. I tried my way it didn’t work- put your faith in Him it’s the only way. Why? *who helps you, because of the Almighty, who blesses you...*The One who overshadows you, who equips and resources you, even nourishes you. It is possible that El Shaddai (Almighty) is actually a feminine image of a mother who watches over and protects her vulnerable offspring. When combined with the strong masculine image of *the Mighty One of Jacob*, we have a complete picture of God being all that we need to make us fruitful in His service.

(c) **The extent of his blessings** (Genesis 49:25b-26) *with blessings of the skies above, blessings of the deep springs below, blessings of the breast and womb. ²⁶ Your father’s blessings are greater than the blessings of the ancient mountains, than the bounty of the age-old hills. Let all these rest on the head of Joseph, on the brow of the prince among his brothers.* From the limited specific blessings given to some sons, Jacob struggles to express the unlimited deluge of blessings he prophesies for his favourite son. Joseph didn’t ask for them, but his father gave them. Our heavenly father with His grace to us also gives lavishly to His obedient and fruitful children.

5. **Judah –The Blessing of Grace** (Genesis 49:8-12)

(a) **Unexpected blessings** (Genesis 49:8)⁸ *‘Judah, your brothers will praise you; your hand will be on the neck of your enemies; your father’s sons will bow down to you.* Here was the former black sheep of the family whose private life was a mess (Genesis 38); who had sold Joseph into slavery- the others went along with it but it was his call and he had to live with it. Judah must have trembled in fear hearing the judgements on Reuben, Levi and Simeon, yet redemption is possible. He did not deserve these blessings and would have been astonished at what he heard. Yet his was a life transformed. No-one was touched more than Judah by the series of visits to Egypt to buy grain; Like his aged father he had a struggle to find faith and only as a relatively older man did he make that profession. Yet what service he rendered in later adult

life. Some Christians have many years to serve the Lord, others few –but what we do with them is what matters most. How are you using the time God has given you?

(b)**Judah the strong leader of the family** (Genesis 49:9-10) *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?* ¹⁰ **The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his.** From the time of King David onwards descendants of Judah reigned in Israel, and latterly in Judah when the kingdoms split after Solomon's reign. Then great David's greater son, the Lord Jesus Himself came from this tribe. He came the first time as a humble servant but when he returns He comes to reign as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. In Revelation 5:5 it states: *the Lion of the tribe of Judah, (the Root of David* another messianic image of the reign of King Jesus see Isaiah 11:1-9) **has triumphed.** Most of this prophecy has already come true –only the return of Jesus outstanding!

(c)**Judah's future in the land will be one of blessing** (Genesis 49:11)¹¹ *He will tether his donkey to a vine, his colt to the choicest branch; he will wash his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes;* ¹² *His eyes will be darker than wine, his teeth whiter than milk.* A further 400 plus years would come and go before they entered the land *flowing with milk and honey* to which God would call Israel to possess in the time of Moses (Exodus 33:3a). Notice how long these blessings took to be physically possessed? There was no instant possession only a faith deposit of the promises of God. Do you ever think that God might bless your children, grandchildren or even further down the line because of your obedience in some matter? This appears to be a biblical pattern that some of the unexpected blessings we receive may have come as a result of godly living by someone else or some other people? Likewise, we must reciprocate and bank obedience in the present as we build God's kingdom together. It is important that we view the decisions taken in Church Meetings, Baptist Union Assemblies and other collective gatherings of God's people in the light of the future. We may not live to see the fruit of our labours; our faithfulness; we received a baton that we too will pass on in the heavenly marathon!

Jacob's last words: ²⁸ *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.*** If Jacob inspired by the Holy Spirit could do that, how much more will our heavenly father grant each of us appropriate blessings for our good and for His glory, Amen.