

Blessings In Disguise
Genesis 49

Perhaps you've heard the old Chinese proverb of the old man, his son, and their horse. The ancient story goes that there was an old man who had a dear son, and they had a horse that they used as they worked on the family farm.

One evening the stable door was left open, and the horse ran away. Well, the old man's neighbors heard about this, and they quickly said, "*Oh, aren't you unlucky!*" But the man just replied, "*Maybe so, maybe not. We'll see.*"

Then a few days later, the horse returned, and along with him came a beautiful female horse. So now the man had two horses, and the potential to produce more! When the old man's neighbors heard about this, they said, "*Oh, aren't you lucky!*" But the man just replied, "*Maybe so, maybe not. We'll see.*"

Shortly after that, the man's son was riding the female horse, trying to tame her, when she threw him off, causing him to severely break his leg. Of course, the old man's neighbors heard, and they quickly said, "*Oh, aren't you unlucky!*" But again, the man just replied, "*Maybe so, maybe not. We'll see.*"

Well, then shortly after that, word came that the country was going to war, and so all able-bodied young men were required to leave home and fight. The neighbors of the old man grieved that their sons had to go to battle, because some would probably not return. The old man's son, however, couldn't go. He was still recovering from what was likely a life-altering leg injury. And when the old man's neighbors realized this, they said, "*Oh, aren't you lucky!*" But the man just replied once again, "*Maybe so, maybe not. We'll see.*"

Some things that at first seem to be blessings really are not. And some things that don't seem like blessings really are. Blessings often come in disguise.

This is true of God's covenant blessings. They aren't always immediately obvious. In Ephesians 1 in the NT, the apostle Paul tells the church that believers do not always recognize God's covenant blessings. He says that we have been blessed in Christ by God with every spiritual blessing, and yet Paul says that he must pray for the churches, that God would help the believers see these blessings.

Then in Ephesians 3, Paul speaks this way again, and he expresses that he prays for them, that they would be able to comprehend the greatness of the love of Christ which is theirs through the covenant of grace.

Why would Paul need to pray for those who are so blessed to know that they are blessed? It's because sin clouds our view of God's covenant blessings. As a result, we don't enjoy the fullness of comfort and hope that His blessings provide. We may even dismiss them altogether.

We can't help but underestimate or even overlook God's covenant blessings. To be sure, we see to a degree, and our ability to see grows as God changes us. But we fail to see the fullness of His covenant blessings, and we fail to honor Him as we should.

And yet, because of Jesus Christ, God does not take the blessings away. We cannot lose them, because we didn't earn or achieve them. Christ secured the covenant blessings for those He came to save, and so they are ours forever, sealed for us because of God's free grace.

And so just as Paul prayed, we should pray that we would recognize and rejoice in the blessings of the covenant, and we should look for them in our lives. But what exactly are we looking for? Is there some guidance that God gives us as we try to recognize the covenant blessings? Yes there is. There's instruction throughout the Scriptures. And here in Genesis 49 is one example.

In this account, Jacob, who was renamed "Israel" by God, blesses his 12 sons. Jacob is about to die. The sons represent the future tribes of ancient Israel. They must carry on with God's covenant promises, walking by faith and obeying God and passing on the hope of those promises to the next generation.

But you may have noticed that the words of Jacob's blessings are not all pleasant. In fact you may see some statements and wonder, "*How is that a blessing?*" Well, God's covenant blessings come in many forms. Notice the outline on pages 6-7 in your WG. Genesis 49 teaches us that the covenant blessings can come in the form of sharp rebuke, divine insight, and calm assurance.

Jacob's words are prophetic. He says as much in verse [1], "*Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you what shall happen to you in days to come.*" Jacob was inspired or enabled by God to speak regarding the future. And what he says addresses the lives of his sons, but also, his words speak to future events that wouldn't begin to play out for another 400 years or so. These things would take place between the time of the Israelites' settlement in the Promised Land and the reign of Jesus Christ. The general order in which Jacob blesses his sons is according to their mothers, beginning with Leah, and then according to the age of the sons, from oldest to youngest.

So he begins with Reuben, Simeon, and Levi. These three have checkered pasts. Reuben committed sexual immorality with one of his father's wives. Simeon and Levi committed a massacre against the men of Shechem as revenge for the disgusting defilement of their sister, Dinah.

It's an understatement to say that, in both cases, the sons exhibited a lack of restraint. Sexual desire is natural, and a desire for justice is natural, but immorality and vengeance go beyond the boundaries God has put in place. God sets boundaries for our benefit.

What Reuben, Simeon, and Levi did were gross transgressions. They were flagrant. And there was a cost, as there always is with these kinds of things. Reuben forfeited his rights as the firstborn son. Simeon and Levi forfeited future land for their descendants.

But they are still sons, still part of the covenant community, and still blessed. They all had descendants and they all appear to have had pretty good lives. But as a good father, Jacob leaves them with these words of correction and discipline. They are words of warning.

I don't think anyone likes to be corrected, not privately and especially not publicly. We don't really like to be told what we did wrong. We definitely don't like to pay a price for it. But it is a blessing to be reprimanded. Proverbs 3 says, *"Do not despise the LORD's discipline or be weary of His reproof, for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights."*

Did Jacob love Reuben, Simeon, and Levi? All the evidence says, "yes." If he didn't love them, he wouldn't correct them. If they didn't learn from their mistakes, there would be consequences far worse than the ones Jacob was giving them.

Ecclesiastes 7 says, *"It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools."* When you're being corrected or disciplined by God, you may not feel blessed. But sometimes, God's covenant blessing comes in the form of sharp rebuke. It's good to receive His rebuke. Why?

Well, there are earthly benefits to correcting your path and living according to God's moral law. Generally speaking, you will do well in life when you obey God. That doesn't mean you will always be successful as the world measures success, but all things being equal, you will do better in life if you obey God than if you disobey Him.

Of course, there are evil people in the world who do wrong all the time and they appear to face no consequences. But that's only from our perspective. God sees, and He is just. Everyone must humble themselves before God and submit to His rule. Better now than later, because there are earthly consequences for resisting God, but the eternal consequences are infinitely worse. Jacob blesses his sons by rebuking them in the present so that they might humble themselves and know God in the future.

Where do you see God rebuking you right now? Where in your life is God correcting you? Picture a little child who willingly runs out into a busy street. The parent then saves the child and corrects him or her. That child, unaware of the danger in the road, may throw a tantrum because they didn't get their way! But their way was the way to pain and tragedy. Proverbs 14 says, *"There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death."*

Better to lose status and reputation now, than to lose your soul in the end. Better to lose some earthly inheritance now than to lose God's eternal inheritance in the end. God's covenant blessing sometimes comes in the form of sharp rebuke.

Now we're going to skip over verses 8-12, and we'll come back to those. Let's look at 13-27. These verses are somewhat hard to understand. But as I said earlier, they relate to the Israelite conquest of Canaan many hundreds of years in the future, and to how the land of Canaan was to be divided among the Israelites at that time.

Imagine the arguing that might go out without any kind of instructions! This served as a guide for distributing the land among the tribes. This is much like a will. And the words of Jacob here came true in the future. The tribes faced things that Jacob clearly foretold.

This is another aspect of the Word of God. It rebukes us, and also, it tells us what is to come. We would all like to know the details of our futures. At least, we think we would. Obviously, according to God's plans, it's better not to know. That can be hard to understand. But though God doesn't tell us everything, He does tell many things. In these verses, Jacob has divine insight for his sons. All of this chapter is divine insight, but here Jacob gives particular insight to his sons.

Verse 13 says that Zebulun's descendants will have a good settlement in the Promised Land – near the coast – but we later learn that they would have to contend with others for the land. In a similar way, we are all placed where we are according to God's providence. Acts 17 says that God determines the boundary lines and places we live. However, things may not be easy all the time. That doesn't mean you aren't where God planned for you to be! Zebulun must trust and obey God.

Verses 14-15 describes Issachar's tendency to be complacent, even though he is strong. We later learn that his descendants would be enslaved by the Canaanites because of apathy. They had God on their side, but they wouldn't fight. They needed to take a stand.

In verses 16-17, Jacob points out the shrewdness of Dan. Shrewdness can be a good trait. Jesus told his disciples to be shrewd – to be wise and not gullible or unguarded. But shrewdness can be relied on more than God. Depend primarily on the LORD.

Verse 18 says as much. This is divine insight not only for Dan and his people, but for all of us: use your powers of discernment, but also, cry out, *"I wait for Your salvation, O LORD."*

In verse 19, Gad learns that he will have to fight to protect what is his from raiders. But God has prepared him and his people – he's a raider at heart.

And verse 20, Asher will have the responsibility of being a good steward of great abundance. It's not a small task to be entrusted with good things from God. With it comes temptation, so beware!

Verse 21, Naphtali will be fruitful, but he must not be prideful. Being vain and conceited is as natural to humanity as walking, talking, and breathing.

Verses 22-26, Joseph is told that he will struggle but prevail, so he must never forget that God Almighty is his help.

And then verse 27, Benjamin will be a warrior. We later learn that in the future, the Benjamites would be allotted in piece of land that would become a war-zone.

You see, with each blessing, there was meaning for the son and also, for his descendants. There is present meaning and future meaning in these blessings.

Proverbs 4 says, *“The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight.”* That’s an interesting statement. Basically, it says that gaining wisdom begins with admitting that you need it and that you don’t naturally have it.

Part of the covenant blessing of God includes receiving wisdom from God. He’s the Creator of all things, He knows and understands all things, and He’s working in and through all things to accomplish His good plans. Therefore all things have meaning, not just in and of themselves but because God gives them meaning. Nothing in your life is meaningless.

Even the seemingly mundane aspects of life are ordained by the God of the universe, who, Scripture teaches us, is intrinsically wise. Wisdom is part of His very nature. And so it’s not cliché to say that, “God knows best.” God’s covenant blessing also comes in the form of divine insight.

In what areas of your life do you need His insight? He gives it freely to His covenant people. How? Well, in no particular order:

God gives us His Holy Spirit to dwell within those who are born again.

He gives us His holy Word, the Scriptures, which resonate with us because we have the Spirit.

He ordains and empowers the preaching and teaching of His Word in the church.

God works providentially in our lives, and teaches us through what we experience, as we interpret things in the light of His Word.

And God surrounds us with His people – the covenant community of the local church – with leaders and fellow members who care for each other by speaking truth and giving advice to each other.

God’s divine insight is abounding! Make the most of it and enjoy the richness of His covenant blessing!

Now let's backtrack to verses 8-12, and look at them along with 28-33. We've looked at the blessings on all of Jacob's sons except one – Judah. Preeminence in the covenant family was divided between Joseph and Judah. Joseph's descendants would get a double portion of the land (through the adoption of Ephraim and Manasseh by Jacob) but the leadership of the family went to Judah.

Authority and dominion was given to Judah and his offspring. And for this reason, Judah and his line received a blessing that reaches farther than all the others, because from Judah would come the ruler of Israel. The king came from Judah. In the short run, this would be the great king David. In the long run, it would be the infinitely greater King Jesus.

Notice verse 8 says, *"your father's sons shall bow down before you."* This describes the dominion of Judah. And verse 9 compares him to a lion. A lion would come from Judah. This comes up at the end of Scripture, which describes the end of time as we know it. In the book of Revelation, chapter 5, Jesus Christ is the lion of the tribe of Judah. He conquers all His enemies!

Now look at verse [10] *"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."* Judah's great descendant will have royal authority. In short, the tribe of Judah is ordained by God to rule. That rule would be threatened and eventually rejected and it would come to an end in Israel. But the rule of Jesus – the true and eternal king – will never end! Revelation 19 says he is the King of Kings. And verses 11-12 refer to the future abundance that Judah and his people would enjoy.

But at last we come to the death of Jacob. Verses 28-33 retell it. As I said, Jacob is the inheritor of God's covenant promises and these blessings function something like a will. This serves as the historical document founding the 12 tribes of Israel. If you do the math, you can count Jacob's 12 biological sons in this chapter. But we watched last week in ch.48 as Jacob adopted Joseph's boys, Ephraim and Manasseh. That would make 14 sons. So how are there 12 in the future?

Well, Joseph only counts twice (for Ephraim and Manasseh). But that's still 13. How is there 12? The answer is that at the conquest and division of Canaan, the tribe of Levi received no land inheritance. They were to be spread out among the tribes, throughout the land, to serve as the priests. Moses and Aaron, for example, were Levites.

Now notice verse 28 says, *"This is what their father said to them as he blessed them, blessing each with the blessing suitable to him."* All of these are blessings. Jacob also repeats once more his desire to be buried in Canaan, this time for all the sons. That, along with the description of the ruler from the tribe of Judah, was meant to be comforting and to provide hope for them and the generations to follow.

God would establish them as a nation, and He would establish them in a place. And He would be with them. These are confirmations that what God has promised, He will do. And so these are words of assurance for the covenant community.

What would you give for calm assurance in times of fear and anxiousness? God's covenant blessing comes in the form of calm assurance. Hebrews 11 says, "*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for.*" In other words, faith is an almost strange confidence in things yet to come, in things that are perhaps not visible to the human eye, yet absolutely certain and real.

Jacob didn't tell his sons to bury his body in Canaan because he was so confident in them. He told them to do it because he was so confident in God. He was confident in the God of grace who had given him faith, and who showed him steadfast love in spite of his many failures, and who had blessed him regardless of his shortcomings in life. God had supplied Jacob with a calm assurance of His power and plans. This is a blessing of the covenant.

There is a peace and calmness that will guard the hearts and minds of God's people. It is the covenant peace of God Himself. And it will guard the hearts and minds of those who are in Christ Jesus.

As we go to the Lord's table today, we remember that it is the table of covenant blessing. And as we listen and participate, God's covenant blessings come to us.

Some of the blessing comes in the form of sharp rebuke, as we see and acknowledge our sin.

Some of the blessing comes in the form of divine insight, as God shows us more about ourselves and about Himself.

And some of the blessing comes in the form of calm assurance. At the table we are assured that Jesus has done all the work for our salvation.

He has made us right with God, and set us free to grow in His grace and knowledge. But know this: the sharp rebuke of our sin, the divine insight we need to live, and the calm assurance of God's power and plan are ultimately all found in one place.

Do you know where? The table shows us. It is in the person and work of Jesus Himself. Jesus Christ is the summation of God's covenant blessing. Through our union with Him, we have access to every covenant blessing, for through Him we have access to Him. Jesus Christ is everything to us.

We look to Him; we hope in Him. Do you know Him in this way? Will you admit your sin and trust in Him now?

Let's bow in prayer together.