

A Father's Blessing

Genesis 49:28-33

THE END IS NEAR . . .

Jacob was a liar, a cheat, and a deceiver. And he was a man loved by God, pursued by God, and used by God. If you're new to Christianity this description may sound like an odd combination and you may even wonder if it's appropriate to talk about one man that way. I pray that it is, because that means there's room for all of us.

In these verses, we meet Jacob very near the end of his life as he is saying his last words to his twelve sons and their families. Jacob has lived a colorful life, and in fact his sons have certainly followed his lead in this. But here at the end, there is very little parenting to be done, and Jacob comes face to face with his own mortality.

GENESIS 49.28-33

28 All these are the twelve tribes of Israel. This is what their father said to them as he blessed them, blessing each with the blessing suitable to him. 29 Then he commanded them and said to them, "I am to be gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, 30 in the cave that is in the field at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess as a burying place. 31 There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife. There they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife, and there I buried Leah—32 the field and the cave that is in it were bought from the Hittites." 33 When Jacob finished commanding his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed and breathed his last and was gathered to his people.

D-I-Y

I'm pretty convinced that my dad can fix just about anything. Growing up, we rarely heard "well kids it's done; we'll just need to get a new one." The lawn-mower stopped working; my dad would take a look at it and get it running in no time. The brakes on my car were wearing down; we replaced them ourselves. Even when doing that, he cut his hand and (briefly) contemplated giving himself stitches. Mom said no. As I got older I learned that his instincts to fix things himself came largely from his upbringing. He grew up on a small farm in eastern North Carolina, and there never was much money around. His mom told me that when he was in high school, he had to keep his tool box and coveralls in the trunk of his '46 Ford because he never knew when it might break down—which it often did.

When I was in high school, I remember being out on the lake when my faith in my dad's abilities to fix things was brought into question. Our town was situated on the northwest shore of one of the larger lakes in Wisconsin, so many a weekend afternoon was spent out waterskiing and swimming.

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On this occasion, though the boat stopped, and we couldn't figure out why. My dad had his tool box, and years of experience dealing with these kinds of things, but he didn't know what happened. He went through his normal checklist, as I was trying to remember from my boater-safety class how to signal to other boats that we needed help. After a few minutes and a lot of poking and prodding of the engine, my dad figured out that a distributor cap had come loose. Soon we were on our way.

Sooner or later, we all end up in a similar spot where we're forced to realize that everything we have and everything we know simply isn't enough. We have the education, we have the training, and we have the experience to deal with what life brings us, but at some point we come to the end of ourselves and wonder how we'll keep going. For Jacob, this was a place he often found himself, but how much more here at the end of his life. He grew up hearing the promises of God regarding a nation and a land; but neither of which were within his grasp at this point. But even on his death bed, Jacob was not without hope, but cast Himself upon the LORD by faith. The writer of the book of Hebrews tells us that Jacob was doing that very thing: "'By faith, Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph . . ." [Heb 11.21]. I'm sure that somebody has said somewhere that all of parenting is an act of faith – but so near the end of a father's life, this is highlighted for us, isn't it?

Certainly this call of faith isn't directed merely to Fathers at the end of their lives—but to all of us, everywhere. God, by his abundant grace, breaks into our lives, and sometime subtly, and sometimes not so subtly, reminds us that we are not in control, and that in fact He is. What then does Jacob tell us about living in this place of radical trust, of loving dependence upon our heavenly Father?

ASSUME THE PAST

Part of living this path of dependence includes honestly assuming the past on our lives. Jacob does this here very subtly, but it's powerful. We see it first in verses 1-2 of chapter 49 – where he refers to himself by two different names: Jacob and Israel. 'Jacob' was his given name, it meant 'deceiver' and served as a self-fulfilling prophecy as Jacob lied, cheated, and swindled even his own family. 'Israel' means 'he strives with God', and this was the name God gave him after wrestling with him late one night. The first name was one of scorn and derision; the second one of grace and promise. But even at the end of his life, Jacob wasn't trying to run from who he was. He owns-up to the past sin in his life.

We see something similar happening as we scan blessings referred to hear from the first 27 verses of this chapter as Jacob helps his sons honestly face their sin. He reminds his first-born Reuben of the disgrace he caused his own father in his relationship with his step-mother [49.4]. He looks at Simeon and Levi and makes note of their rash anger [49.6-7]. And so on. He doesn't gloss over the sin he's passed on to his children, but keeps it before them so that they would never forget who they are.

Part of living by faith is being honest with ourselves and with others regarding who we are and where we've come from. We are not blank slates that every few years get wiped clean as we 're-invent' ourselves, but rather we are (in part) the products of the environments in which we were raised, and the people who influenced us throughout our lives. We cannot simply run from the problems of our families and from the tragic events of our lives and pretend that everything is okay. We need to acknowledge that this often isn't pleasant for us; it's not easy. Especially in the realm of fatherhood this is difficult because facing the past—considering our fathers—

But even as we face our pasts, we must remember that we need to do with a strong measure of humility, and the casting-off of a victim mentality that simply blames everybody for our problems. Jacob levels no blame here; he simply moves and acts in full knowledge of who He has become and his need for God's grace.

ACCEPT THE PRESENT

The next thing hear from these verses is a challenge to patiently accept the present circumstances of our lives. For each of us our past has helped shape us, but that never removes from us the responsibility for how we respond to present situations. Aside from having to face the present circumstances of his own mortality (which we've already considered), we see this most clearly as Jacob directly faces the 'unsaid' issue of geography. With all the talk of this specific grave where he wants to be buried [49.29-32] – we'll come back to this in a moment – is the reminder that Jacob isn't living where he wants to live. He and his entire family had to relocate to Egypt due to famine. This was not the land God promised his grandfather. This was not to be the place where his descendants would live. But this is where he was.

This may be the toughest aspect of faith for us. We can ignore the past and live as if the future doesn't matter, but we can't do much about the reality before us at any given moment. This is scary for us, because it calls us to look at our lives and live with the trust that we are where we are exactly because God Himself has placed us there. For Jacob and his sons, this means that they had to leave the land promised his grandparents and head to Egypt – because of a long period of bad weather and no food. The last quarter of Genesis outlines the great lengths to which God went to care for his people and preserve them. One of Jacob's sons was sold into slavery by his own brothers. Eventually this slave was bought by an Egyptian and was put in charge of collecting the grain for the whole nation. Eventually he was set over all of Egypt, second only to the Pharaoh himself. But in Genesis 50, Joseph—this brother, slave, and now royalty, told his brothers "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" [50.20]. This is the call to accept the present that hinted at for us in Jacob's life.

AWAIT THE FUTURE

The third thing that we hear from these verses is the very biblical call to anxiously await and long for God's future. We see this most clearly in the middle section of the verses we're considering, vv. 29-32. That phrase 'gathered to my people' used several times in this passage [29; 33] speaks of Jacob's death—and pictures for us part of the hope God's people. We can't help but wonder if Jacob wasn't looking forward to

being with those who had gone before him in faith, to being in communion with them in ways that he wasn't in this life.

But as we keep reading, we see another key aspect of this anxious waiting – in particular waiting for the completion of God's promised work. It might even be comical to some of us the way that Jacob seems to be repeating himself in these verses as he goes on and on about this cave. In verse 29, Jacob locates it as "the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite" and then further as the cave "in the field at Machpelah . . . which Abraham bought . . . from Ephron" [30]. He then reminds his sons of who is buried there – Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Leah [31]. This field was the sole property owned by this family within the land promised by God to Abraham – in a sense it was a down payment, a security of that which is to come. For Jacob to be so adamant about his burial place sounds strange, but this is his way of clinging to the promises of God, and keeping those same promises before his sons. "Egypt is not our final stop" he says. "God has promised us something far better, and I want you to journey and take me all the way back there so that you won't forget the hope that you have."

For us, this is a call to embrace a view of not only our lives and our times, but all of history and all of life. Remember what Jacob has already said to us about himself and about his sons. This isn't about how much money he's got, or how much good he's done. He's clinging to something – Someone – outside of himself as his hope for what is to come. We are part of a bigger story; the fact that we are gathered here from across the globe is a testimony to God's faithfulness to us. When we lose sight of the future, we get trapped in the mud and mire of our own lives and we often miss what God is doing even there.

THE HOPE OF REDEMPTION

I want to acknowledge that this day—this holiday—is difficult for many of us. Thoughts of our fathers for many brings to mind thoughts of unfaithfulness and desertion, the smell of alcohol, the pain of unwarranted discipline, and impossible expectations. Maybe even worse, though, is the feeling that you're trapped. Even this morning you're living with the fear that you will be no different from those who have hurt you, as if you can't escape it. Whether we do it intentionally or not, we often live as if we are bound by some vague sense of destiny, and that there is little hope for change. This is not true, because the promises of God are true, and they offer us a living hope.

Look back into chapter 49, for a moment, specifically at verses 8-12. These are Jacob's words to his son Judah. The language here is fascinating, but I wasn't us to focus in particular on verse 10. Jacob is describing something that far out-measures even the life span of his son. He's describing a rule—a kingdom—and a king that will have a scope that will encompass all of creation: "to him shall be the obedience of the peoples" [49.10]. Jacob's faith was not in faith itself; it wasn't found in happy thoughts or merely feeling good about himself. Rather his eyes, his heart, his affections, and his longings were thrust upon God alone, and this promise that one day all things would be made right; that redemption would come even to those such as us. This is the promise of the Gospel. God does not leave us by ourselves, in slavery and fear, but calls to us to believe in Him alone.

