

“In the Last Days”
Genesis 49:1-12
August 13th, 2017

A man and his wife were having some problems at home and were giving each other the silent treatment.

Suddenly, the man realized that the next day, he would need his wife to wake him at 5:00 AM for an early morning business flight. Not wanting to be the first to break the silence (and LOSE), he wrote on a piece of paper, "Please wake me at 5:00 AM." He left it where he knew she would find it.

The next morning, the man woke up, only to discover it was 9:00 AM and he had missed his flight. Furious, he was about to go and see why his wife hadn't wakened him, when he noticed a piece of paper by the bed. The paper said, "It is 5:00 AM. Wake up. "

Fortunately, God hasn't given us the silent treatment! He has spoken! And His Word to us is the "Book of Books!" God speaks audibly each time those whom He has duly called to minister His Word open the Scriptures and preach to His people.

That reality horrifies me often. To think that God actually speaks through me as I preach His Word, *really?* The voice is mine, but the words that come forth are His. Here is how the *Larger Catechism* to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* puts it in question 155, when it asks, *How is the word (of God) made effectual to salvation? The answer?* "The Spirit of God makes the reading, but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will..."

Today, we begin the second to last chapter in the Book of Genesis. **Genesis Chapter 49** is a series of blessings (and curses) given by Jacob to his sons just prior to his death. They are descriptive, meaning they describe each son's predominant traits. And they are also prophetic – the character of each son finds an outgrowth in the future existence of the 12 tribes of Israel.

We will focus this morning only on the first 4 sons of Jacob by Leah in their birth order.

Genesis 49:1-12:

¹“And Jacob called his sons and said, ‘Gather together, that I may tell you what shall befall you in the last days:’

²‘Gather together and hear, you sons of Jacob, and listen to Israel your father.

³‘Reuben, you are my firstborn, My might and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity and the excellency of power. ⁴Unstable as water, you shall not excel, because you went up to your father's bed; then you defiled *it*— He went up to my couch.

⁵‘Simeon and Levi *are* brothers; instruments of cruelty *are in* their dwelling place. ⁶Let not my soul enter their council; let not my honor be united to their assembly; for in their anger they slew a man, and in their self-will they hamstrung an ox. ⁷Cursed *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.

⁸ ‘Judah, you *are he* whom your brothers shall praise; your hand *shall be* on the neck of your enemies; Your father’s children shall bow down before you. ⁹ Judah *is* a lion’s whelp (cub); from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He bows down, he lies down as a lion; and as a lion, who shall rouse him? ¹⁰ The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes; and to Him *shall be* the obedience of the people. ¹¹ Binding his donkey to the vine, and his donkey’s colt to the choice vine, he washed his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes. ¹² His eyes *are* darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk.”

The first two verses are a prologue. Of particular note is the use of a phrase we don’t typically hear used of Genesis. Rather, it is associated with prophetic books of sacred Scripture like Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelation. That phrase is “in the last days.” (*NKJV, KJV*).

Why, I heard another Christian use the term just this past Friday as I took a friend to the food pantry – “Well, we’re in the last days you know.” Perhaps you’ve thought that as you watched the news this past week with the threats of extreme action by our President and the dictator running North Korea. For me, that brings back to mind the days of the Cold War and Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) with the then Soviet Union. Or, with what the Wisconsin company is doing offering to embed RFID microchips in employees’ bodies so they’ll be able to more quickly sign into their company offices and computers.

The phrase found in the Bible’s *English Standard, New International* and *Revised Standard* versions is more helpful here. That phrase is “days to come.” Jacob was not living in last days as he prophesied his sons’ future. Though the term is first used in Genesis, “the last days” refers to an undetermined time in the future. Since the first coming to earth by Jesus Christ that first Christmas in Bethlehem, and until His return to earth in power and glory, we are living in those “last days.”

Beginning with verse 3, Jacob singles out each son, beginning with the first-born **Reuben** (verses 3-4). As we consider Jacob’s words to/about Reuben, we must remember an incident in his past that disqualifies him from leadership among the 12 tribes. That incident Jacob refers to was Reuben’s going “up to (his) father’s bed; and (defiling) *it*.”

This harkens back to Reuben committing adultery with his father’s concubine Bilhah (**Genesis 35:22**). It was a brief incident, but what lasting consequences it bore! Reuben would always know that he had lost first place among his brothers and that his place was given to a younger brother. Further, his descendants would not excel in Israel because of his sin. One commentator notes, “We never find that any one of the tribe of Reuben was distinguished by peculiar honors; (not the) priesthood nor the royalty that was given to the first born of Jacob. None of the ancient heroes, whose names are yet famous belonged to this tribe. There were kings of different tribes, but none, as far as we know, of the tribe of Reuben.” (Lawson, quoted in Boice, 1179) About the only recognition Reuben would know was having a corned-beef, Swiss cheese, and sauerkraut sandwich named after him!

Application: A principle that comes to mind as I ponder Reuben’s life comes from the lips of our Lord Jesus in Luke’s gospel account (**Luke 16:10**). There, Jesus is speaking with His disciples and He concludes his statement with these words, “He who *is* faithful in *what is* least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in *what is* least is unjust also in much.” Jesus restates this principle in somewhat different language in Matthew’s gospel account where in the Parable of the Talents, the Master is rewarding his servants for multiplying his money. Jesus says in

Matthew 25:21, “You were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things.” Reuben’s sin revealed that he could not be trusted with his father’s concubine; that being the case, *how could he be trusted with hundreds and thousands of more people? Friend, do you have sin that needs to be confessed and forgiven?* Don’t delay – your future, and the future of your family and friends may be hinging upon it.

In verses 5-7, Jacob addresses two of his sons – **Simeon and Levi**. Jacob’s language for these two is very strong; in fact, he curses them for their anger in verse 7. *Do you remember what they did?* Back in **Genesis Chapter 34**, we learned that Dinah, Jacob’s only daughter by birth, was raped by Shechem, shortly after Jacob and his family arrived in the land of Canaan. Shechem wanted to make things right by marrying Dinah. But, Simeon and Levi were incensed, and they set Shechem up by requiring him and his people to undergo circumcision. As they all recovered from their operations and were yet in pain, Simeon and Levi killed them by the sword. Here in **Genesis 49**, Jacob refers to their anger as “wrath,” “fierce,” and “cruel.” Their sin was using the holy things of God to gain revenge. So, God divided them up among the other tribes.

Application: Their violent anger disqualified Simeon and Levi from prominence among the 12 tribes. This teaches us that our demeanor can disqualify us from positions of trust and responsibility! God’s word warns us that anger is often sinful. The Psalmist David writes in **Psalm 4:4** – “Be angry, and do not sin.” The Apostle Paul repeats that in his letter to the church at Ephesus (**Ephesians 4:26-27**), “Be angry, and do not sin”; do not let the sun go down on your wrath,²⁷ nor give place to the devil.”

Friend, are you a hot-head? Do you have a short fuse? If something doesn’t go your way, do you whine and complain, or strike out at others? These kinds of behaviors are the works of the sinful flesh; they are not characteristic of the children of God.

Unbridled anger always results in damaged relationships – between spouses, between parents and children, and between even the closest of friends. A string of multiple broken marriages often has sinful anger at the center. The inability to keep jobs is often rooted in expressions of anger. I know a man who has been divorced multiple times (and he thinks the problem in each case was his ex-wives). He has worked at so many jobs he cannot remember them all. Yet, the “pink slips” came because the problem was always his supervisor or a co-worker – or both. He was never the problem (but seems to be the only one not able to see that). Sinful anger expressed regularly is also a barrier to making or keeping friends.

The grown-up Christian response to things that make you sinfully angry is to search for solutions, and not spit out salvations! Getting control of one’s self and seeking the help of other Christians who can help you root out unbiblical anger triggers are God’s way of dealing with unbiblical wrath. Remember, a volatile temper in no way demonstrates capacity for leadership; instead, it can be a ticket to more heartache and isolation.

One other note (grace!) – even though such sinful anger disqualified both Simeon and Levi for the birthright, God granted fertile land east of the Jordan River for Simeon’s descendants, and He made Levi the tribe responsible for Israel’s worship of God. Their inheritance would not be land, but the Lord Himself. *And, fellow Christian, what more could you want than Jesus?*

We've one more son of Jacob and Leah to discuss – **Judah**. Where Reuben's blessing filled two verses and Simeon and Levi's filled 3 (1 ½ each), Judah's blessing covers 5 verses! Right off the bat, we see Judah is destined for greatness among the 12 tribes. Verse 8 reads, "Judah, you *are he* whom your brothers shall praise (Judah's name means 'praise'); your hand *shall be* on the neck of your enemies; your father's children shall bow down before you."

What's really amazing is that Judah's past wasn't pure and holy. When we studied **Genesis Chapter 37**, we learned that Judah had slept with his daughter-in-law Tamar when she was disguised as a prostitute. That chapter also revealed that Judah was the one to suggest that Joseph be sold to traders heading for Egypt. He was no saint when he was younger!

Three different times in verse 9, Jacob uses a lion to describe Judah:

- 1 – "Judah is a **lion's** whelp (cub);"
- 2 - "He lies down as a **lion**;"
- 3 – "...as a **lion**, who shall rouse him?"

As the lion is known as the "king of the beasts," so Judah would be known as the "tribe of kings." Israel's first king, Saul, came from the tribe of Benjamin. But the first *great* king of Israel, perhaps the greatest of all human kings, was Saul's successor – David. David was of the tribe of Judah. He was "a man after God's own heart" and a man of great character (though not flawless). He was a great leader who ruled 40 years.

Judah would produce other great kings as well, among them Solomon, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Uzziah, Jotham, Hezekiah, Josiah, and Zerubbabel.

But, the greatest king of all is hinted at in this passage. Look again with me at verse 10 – "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes; and to Him *shall be* the obedience of the people." A scepter is a long, decorated staff; a symbol of sovereignty. And, that scepter in verse 10 looks ahead to the coming of "Shiloh."

As a student of the American Civil War, I know Shiloh to be a small, country church in the southwestern Tennessee wilderness where a great battle took place. But, this isn't referring to that. In the Old Testament, Shiloh was, for a time, the primary place of worship for believing Israel. This gives some perspective for what we find in the Bible's last book, the Revelation of Jesus Christ. There in **Revelation Chapter 5**, an angel called out to see if there was anyone who could open a scroll that contained 7 seals. No one came forward, and the Apostle John, whom God had given this revelation began to weep. One of the elders said to him (**Revelation 5:5**), "Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals."

Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of the living God, is the Lion of the tribe of Judah. He is the Root of David, and He is the King of Kings. He would descend from Judah upon His coming and take the scepter as "Shiloh."

A 12-year-old Ethiopian girl was abducted by seven men intending to force her into marriage. The men held her for seven days, beating her repeatedly. There was not a human being within earshot to hear the cries of this girl. But her cries were heard.

In response to the girl's cries for help, three large lions leapt from the brush and chased her captors away. Perhaps the child thought she had traded one danger for another, but remarkably, her heroes formed a protective perimeter around her. Some hours later, when police arrived, the guardian lions simply stood up and walked away.

For whatever reason, the predator served as protector. This 12-year-old girl was helpless, powerless to change her horrific circumstances. Her deliverance had to come from a power greater than, and outside of, herself. In the same way, we are powerless to save ourselves from sin and death. Our only hope is in Christ, the Lion of Judah.

Do you serve this King, dear one? Or do you serve King Self? I exhort you to get that straightened out – before it's too late.