

Joseph – Consequences and Promises

One of the most famous atheists of the twentieth century was Madeline Murray O' Hair. She founded the organisation American Atheists, where she vigorously prosecuted the idea of absolute separation of church and state. She filed lawsuits which resulted in the end of Bible reading in American public schools. She sued NASA for reading Genesis during the Apollo 8 moon mission, she filed all kinds of lawsuits seeking to end tax exemption for churches.

Her son Jon Murray helped her with her atheist activism. But perhaps the shock of her life came when her older son William at the age of 34 became a Christian. Commenting on his conversion, she said, "One could call this a postnatal abortion on the part of a mother, I guess; I repudiate him entirely and completely for now and all times ... he is beyond human forgiveness"

From one point of view, her younger son Jon is what we would expect, having been raised by a vociferous atheist. But her older son's conversion shows that family, upbringing, and traits do not seal your fate.

Back when we began this series in Joseph, we looked at his family. What we saw then was a principle that family shapes you, but it does not have to determine who or what you will be. We saw Joseph's family was one of deception, rivalry, and spiritual apathy. But Joseph emerged as a truth-teller, a man Spirit-controlled and God-focused. Joseph's brothers seemed like the natural product of such a home, but Joseph proves that family is formative, not determinative.

The same thing is at work in Genesis 49, as Jacob gives his death-bed blessing for each of his twelve sons, where their characters will probably shape their descendants', but it is not cast in stone. This is a momentous event. It is Jacob the patriarch, declaring the privileges and blessings on his twelve sons, the inheritors of the Abrahamic covenant, the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel.

One by one, Jacob is going to speak to each of his sons, and make a pronouncement. Understanding what he is doing gets tricky. We aren't sure if he is predicting the future, like he did with Ephraim and Manasseh, or if he is saying what he wants to see happen, or making an educated guess as to where things will end up, or simply giving a customary blessing.

I believe what Jacob is doing here is mostly giving a prediction of the future of the descendants of the sons of Israel, based on the character of that son. He knows these twelve men, and so he is firstly commending them or rebuking them for their lives. But he is then making a broad prediction, which works on this principle: if the descendants are like their ancestor, this will be the consequence. The Reubenites are like Reuben, this will be their lot. If the Levites are like Levi, this will be the consequence.

What that means is that what Jacob is saying is not inevitable, it is likely. We know that traits and attitudes do carry through families and ethnic lines. We recognise certain temperaments and attitudes common to people groups. Paul even recognised that when he said of the people of Crete "¹² One of them, a prophet of their own, said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.'"¹³ This testimony is true. (Tit. 1:12-13)

Broad generalisations of people groups often enough have some truth to them. Even Paul would have recognised there were Cretans who didn't behave like most Cretans, but so culturally ingrained were those ungodly patterns of behaviour, that it could be said in inspired Scripture.

So Jacob is expectant that the characteristics of Judah, will be seen in the Judahites. The character of Benjamin will be seen in the Benjaminites. But it is not cast in stone. Jacob's predictions will not come true, if the descendants act differently. If their ancestor was mostly immoral or cruel, they can

choose a different fate. If their ancestor was godly and devoted, they can choose to be different. And so we will see as we go through each one, what the man was, what Jacob thought would be the consequence, and what actually happened.

This truth harmonises two seemingly contradictory ideas. The one is what God says of Himself in Exodus 34:7 “ *by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation.*” (Exod. 34:7). The other is what we read in Ezekiel 18:20: “ ²⁰ *The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.*”

Children often bear the consequences of the sinful and foolish decisions of parents. One of the consequences might be imitating the parents, passing down sinful habits. But each person is a free moral agent, who is responsible to hold even his family to the standard of Scripture, and can choose to be different to what he has inherited. Through this chapter we will keep seeing the great shaping power of family and culture, but also the great responsibility in the individual to choose the good and reject the evil.

We begin at the end of chapter 48, where Jacob tells Joseph that he has an extra gift of land for Joseph:

²¹ *Then Israel said to Joseph, "Behold, I am dying, but God will be with you and bring you back to the land of your fathers."* ²² *"Moreover I have given to you one portion above your brothers, which I took from the hand of the Amorite with my sword and my bow."*

We don't have an account in Genesis of when Jacob took this land, and the descendants on Joseph will have to re-take it once in the land, but it is allocated to them.

Genesis 49:1 *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."* *Reuben, you are my firstborn, My might and the beginning of my strength, The excellency of dignity and the excellency of power.* ⁴ *Unstable 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.*

Reuben, the firstborn, whose name means 'behold a son'. Reuben is 85 at this moment. He should have been might, strength, excellence of dignity and power. He should have been the leader, the one protecting, managing the household. But what did he do? He gave himself to immorality with Bilhah, the maidservant of Rachel. Whether it was pure lust, or whether it was an act like Absalom's when he lay with David's concubines to usurp David's place, we don't know. But what we do know is that in that act, he forfeited his place as the firstborn. He lost his position, he lost his inheritance, he squandered his birthright. Reuben was a man driven by appetite and passion, and so without discipline and stability.

The person driven only by his appetites, following after whims and passions, will never have a stable enough life, but will always be tossed to and fro. ²⁴ *Wisdom is in the sight of him who has understanding, But the eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth.* (Prov. 17:24)

The tribe of Reuben was given the barren wastelands east of the Dead Sea. The Reubenites never did excel. Some of them followed Korah in his rebellion against Moses. We never hear much more of the Reubenites, no great Bible character comes from this tribe, and they were carried off into captivity by the Assyrian King Tiglath-Pileser in the first of several deportations that destroyed the ten tribes of Israel.

Let me insert a parenthesis here. There is no such thing as the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. After the reign of King Solomon, Israel was split into two kingdoms. In the south, you had Judah and

Benjamin, ruled by the descendant of David. In the north, you had the other ten tribes, ruled by a succession of idolatrous kings. Between 740 and 722 B.C., Assyria attacked, deported, and finally destroyed all of these ten northern tribes. The ones who were taken to Assyria intermarried and lost their identity. The ones who were left behind also intermarried with Assyrian and Canaanite people, and became the Samaritans – holding an entirely different religion. So there was no expedition of the ten tribes, and they ended up in Europe or America, or whatever some outlandish theories state. What we do know is that many Israelites from the ten northern tribes chose to live in the south and so survived the Assyrian invasion. Even after the Babylonian captivity of Judah, you still have the tribal identities, so that even up to the New Testament era, people know what tribe they are from. But increasingly that was lost, after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70, and the dispersion of Jews from Israel in 135.

So Reuben did not excel, for his descendants seemed to carry on the same ill-discipline of their forefather. Jacob then turns to his second and third sons by Leah.

⁵ *"Simeon and Levi are brothers; Instruments of cruelty are in their dwelling place. ⁶ Let 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. ⁷ Cursed 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.*

Simeon means “he has heard” and Levi means “joined in harmony”. Jacob is here referring to the incident recorded in Genesis 34. Dinah, their sister, was preyed upon by the prince of Shechem, who had the same name as the city. After shaming her, he then wanted to marry her. Simeon and Levi told Shechem and his men that he could do so, on condition he and they were circumcised. And once they did so, and were incapacitated with pain for a day or two, Simeon and Levi took their swords, went into the city, and murdered every male. They plundered the town, and took captive all the women and children. At the time, Jacob had said to them, you have now made me stink in the eyes of all the Canaanites, who will see us as murderous, cowardly thieves.

So here Jacob distances himself from their cruelty. His prediction is “*I will divide them in Jacob And scatter them in Israel.*

What's interesting is by the time of Israel's entrance into Canaan, Simeon was the smallest tribe. They never had well-defined borders, and only seemed to obtain cities within the territory given to Judah. They were indeed scattered, and eventually really absorbed, for the most part into Judah.

But Levi is a different story. During the time of the golden calf, the Levites stood with Moses, and executed judgement for him. The tribe showed they were willing to fight for what was right. Against their ancestor's cruelty, they channeled that zeal into fighting for what was right. And so from that tribe came Moses and Aaron, Samuel, Zechariah, Ezekiel, Malachi, John the Baptist. Today we blame a lot on our personality, on our temperament, on what we call our traits. But we see here the principle that whatever traits might run in your family, whatever temperament is more natural to you, it can be put to the service of the flesh, or it can be Spirit-filled.

Jacob now moves to the fourth son, and here the prediction is long, and mingled in with some divine revelation.

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; 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.*

Judah's name mean praise, so Jacob plays on that word, and says that he has essentially become the leader of the brothers. Yes, Joseph has the firstborn inheritance, but Judah really becomes the prince. *Now the sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel-- he was indeed the firstborn, but because he defiled his father's bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph, the son of Israel, so that the genealogy is not listed according to the birthright; ² yet Judah prevailed over his brothers, and from him came a ruler, although the birthright was Joseph's-- (1 Chr. 5:1-2)*

Why doesn't Jacob refer to Judah's immorality with Tamar, his harlotry? Why does Reuben get rebuked for that, but not Judah? It seems the answer is the principle – you can repent of your evil, and be changed, or you can remain in it. Judah seems to have so changed from the man who sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites into the one willing to sell himself into slavery for Benjamin, that Jacob blesses him based on what he has become.

Three times he is compared to a lion, for its ferocity, its strength, its dominance. Judah will rule. And Judah did rule. Judah received a large area, and after the disaster of the Benjamite king Saul, it is the house of David in Judah that comes to rule the other tribes.

In fact, the scepter, the throne, will not depart from Judah until Shiloh comes. Now who or what is Shiloh? The NKJV leaves this Hebrew as a proper noun, untranslated. Translated, Shiloh means 'he to whom it belongs'. What belongs to him? The antecedent would be sceptre – the symbol of kingship. The one to whom the sceptre really belongs, the one to whom the people will yield obedience – in other words, the Messiah. The coming King. Ancient Jewish Targums were united in believing this was a reference to the coming Messiah. And proof of that is the kind of golden age described that Messiah will bring – an age when you tie your donkey to a vine, which you would only do in a time of abundance, where wine is the washing powder.

Here is the fascinating fulfillment of this prophecy. The sceptre or right to rule remained with Judah from the time of David, even through the Babylonian Captivity, Zerubbabel who comes back as the governor is from Judah. And through Persian, then Greek, then Roman rule, Judah still maintained a level of self-governance over Israel. But a very significant event took place in the year 6 A.D. Herod Archelaus, the ruler of Judea, was so wicked that the Jews appealed to Caesar to have him removed. Caesar removed him, but then did a surprising thing. Instead of appointing another ruler from among the Jews, he replaced Herod with a Roman procurator, Coponius, and in a few years, Judea was a Roman province. Why this was significant is that the Jews had now lost the right of capital punishment, and so the sceptre had departed from Judah. The Sanhedrin met for an emergency meeting, and Rabbi Rachmon describes what happened: “When the members of the Sanhedrin found themselves deprived of their right over life and death, a general consternation took possession of them; they covered their heads with ashes and their bodies with sackcloth, exclaiming, “Woe unto us, for the scepter has departed from Judah and the Messiah has not come.” But what they didn't know is that 100 kilometres north, in the little town of Nazareth, Messiah was helping in his father's carpentry shop, probably ten or eleven years old, and a year later would appear before some of them in the Temple, asking them questions. The prophecy was fulfilled, exactly as Jacob had seen it.

Judah ruled over the others, not only through David, but through David's greater Son, Jesus, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. He will one day usher in the Golden Age, and to him will be the obedience of the people.

Did the Judahites follow their ancestor? Some of the time, but as the book of Ezekiel shows, not always. Their deportation to Babylon was proof of them abandoning their godly heritage.

The next few sons have rather short blessings.

"Zebulun shall dwell by the haven of the sea; He shall become a haven for ships, And his border shall adjoin Sidon.

Zebulun was actually the tenth son by birth order, and Leah's sixth and last son. Jacob's wish for Zebulun was that he would become a sea-farer. But Zebulun failed to live up to this. The tribe did end up close to the Sea of Galilee, and close to the Phoenician territory, but they never became a sea-faring people. Nazareth was in Zebulun. Possibly the reason for this is found in Judges 1:30 ³⁰ *Nor did Zebulun drive out the inhabitants of Kitron or the inhabitants of Nahalol; so the Canaanites dwelt among them, and were put under tribute. (Jdg. 1:30)*

Instead of doing the hard thing, and driving out the Canaanites, they chose to simply allow them to live in the land, and tax them. It seemed like a pragmatic solution. But we know from the book of Judges that the Canaanites grew and then oppressed the Israelites. They never reached the sea, because they never obeyed God fully.

But whenever we compromise in God's Word, the harvest that comes in is bitter. Compromise is an attempt to make life easier for ourselves, but the long-term consequences are always harder to live with than if we had simply embraced the difficulty of obedience up front.

¹⁴ *"Issachar is a strong donkey, Lying down between two burdens; ¹⁵ He saw that rest was good, And that the land was pleasant; He bowed his shoulder to bear a burden, And became a band of slaves.*

Issachar, the ninth son overall, and Leah's fifth means recompense, reward, wages. In contrast to compromising Zebulun, Issachar fought bravely alongside Deborah. He was a strong, reliable burden-bearing tribe. And in reward, they received the fertile land of Galilee. Mount Tabor, or what is known as the Mount of Transfiguration was in Issachar. A pleasant, fertile area, the bread basket of Israel. But it is possible that in their prosperity, they became complacent, and were conquered by Canaanites, hence the reference to becoming a band of slaves.

¹⁶ *"Dan shall judge his people As one of the tribes of Israel. ¹⁷ Dan shall be a serpent by the way, A viper by the path, That bites the horse's heels So that its rider shall fall backward.*

Dan was the fifth son born, the first to Rachel's maidservant, Bilhah. Dan means judge. And indeed, Dan did judge Israel. Samson was from the tribe of Dan. But what does Jacob mean that Dan would be like a hidden snake that bites a horse? We don't know exactly, but the image is one of deceitfulness. We know that Dan was the first tribe to begin organised idolatry. In the list of the 144 000 sealed believers in Revelation, the tribe of Dan is not mentioned, and it could be that Dan had become so identified with idolatry that they cannot be identified with sealed believers. Dan is mentioned in Ezekiel. But sadly, this, the smallest tribe, became identified with bringing apostasy into Israel, like a snake in the grass.

And now, just after the midway point, Jacob points out that Israel's hope is not in these men or their descendants.

¹⁸ *I have waited for your salvation, O LORD!*

God is the one who will honour His promises to Abraham, and Jacob has looked to Him, and Him alone. But now he moves to his next blessing.

Gad, a troop shall tramp upon him, But he shall triumph at last.

Gad was the seventh son overall, and the first by Leah's maidservant Zilpah. Jacob is using a play on words here – Gad means troop/ raiders. He was indeed a fighter. He was given the land east of

the Jordan, and had to continually fight against the Amorites and the Moabites. Elijah was from Gad.

⁹ *"Bread from Asher shall be rich, And he shall yield royal dainties.*

Asher was Zilpah's second son, and Jacob's eighth. His name means blessed. Asher was given rich pastureland. We read that Asher was partly responsible for feeding Solomon's household. In the New Testament, Anna the prophetess is from Asher.

²¹ *"Naphtali is a deer let loose; He uses beautiful words.*

Naphtali was Bilhah's second son and Jacob's sixth. It is hard to know if this is praise or not. Naphtali was praised for fighting alongside Deborah.

At last Jacob comes to his sons by Rachel, Joseph and Benjamin. Let's jump ahead to Benjamin.

²⁷ *"Benjamin is a ravenous wolf; In the morning he shall devour the prey, And at night he shall divide the spoil."*

It is interesting that though Benjamin had taken Joseph's place as the favourite, he was clearly not Joseph's spiritual equal. The characteristics of Benjamin seem to be a warlike, aggressive character. That's what they became, a tribe of warlike people. The left handed slingers in the book of Judges are from Benjamin. Ehud the judge, Saul and Jonathan, Mordecai, and Esther and the apostle Paul.

Jacob's longest praise is for Joseph.

²² *"Joseph is a fruitful bough, A fruitful bough by a well; His branches run over the wall. ²³ The archers have bitterly grieved him, Shot at him and hated him. ²⁴ But his bow remained in strength, And the arms of his hands were made strong By the hands of the Mighty God of Jacob (From there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel), ²⁵ By the God of your father who will help you, And by the Almighty who will bless you With blessings of heaven above, Blessings of the deep that lies beneath, Blessings of the breasts and of the womb. ²⁶ The blessings of your father Have excelled the blessings of my ancestors, Up to the utmost bound of the everlasting hills. They shall be on the head of Joseph, And on the crown of the head of him who was separate from his brothers.*

Joseph is compared to a fruitful plant, and then to an animal being hunted. Jacob is recalling how the brothers persecuted Joseph, but then speaks of God's goodness to Joseph, referring to God as Jacob's Mighty One, the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, and the Almighty. He speaks of how God blessed Jacob in the past, and will bless him in the future. Notice how as soon as Joseph is in the picture, God is once again invoked. Jacob here calls for the greatest and highest blessings of all on Joseph's head, and notice how he summarises Joseph's life at the end of the phrase – he who was separate from his brothers.

Again, if family traits were determinative, which tribes should have been the godliest of all? The two tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim, who represent the double-portion of the tribe of Joseph. We would expect them to be devoted, Spirit-filled, truth-tellers. But Manasseh and Ephraim succumbed to the idolatry and apostasy of the ten northern tribes. They did not remain separate from the brothers, but followed them into evil. And in 722 B.C., the tribe of Joseph was carried off into captivity, and mostly lost to history, except for those few who fled south.

The Manassehites and Ephraimites squandered their inheritance, and abandoned the godly heritage of their ancestor.

²⁸ *All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father spoke to them. And he blessed them; he blessed each one according to his own blessing.*

Francis Schaeffer and his wife Edith established a Christian community in Switzerland, called La'Bri. There they taught Christian worldview, the importance of the arts and culture to Christianity, and the need to confront post-modernism with thoughtful apologetics and evangelism. Their son, Franky Schaeffer, was homeschooled and grew up in that environment. He recently announced that is an atheist, a good part of the time. "I do not always believe let alone know if God exists," Schaeffer writes in one of his books. "I do not always know he, she or it does not exist either, though there are long patches in my life when it seems God never did exist." Franky Schaeffer has mostly turned his back on the Christianity his parents taught.

You might be the son of a godly pastor, or the son of a world-famous atheist. The son of Madeline Murray O' Hare became a believer. The son of Francis Schaeffer has become an unbeliever.

This doesn't mean it is all random. What you have been given by family may dispose you towards aggression or passivity, towards creativity or towards strict logic, towards combat or towards irenic peacemaking, towards industriousness, or towards contemplation. It may dispose you towards the Gospel or away from it. But in the end, the deciding factor is captured in the words of A.W. Tozer:

"Every man holds his future in his hand. Not the dominant world leader only, but the inarticulate man lost in anonymity is a "man of destiny." He decides which way his soul shall go. He chooses, and destiny waits on the nod of his head. He decides, and hell enlarges herself, or heaven prepares another mansion. So much of Himself has God given to men."