

SOVEREIGN GRACE PLANS THE FUTURE II

Genesis 49: 16-28

Please review this week's catechism question.

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever felt like you wanted to quit being a Christian? What contributes most often to your desire to stop believing and acting like a Christian?

Many of us, while we rarely admit it, have been tempted to quit the Christian life. We are so tired of not measuring up, of constantly failing that we can't take it anymore. Or we're so tired of being disappointed by other Christians or by God himself that we want to quit. In the second half of Genesis 49 Jacob, as he continues to tell his sons what is going to happen to them in "days to come", sets forth a realistic picture of what God has in store for his people. In the middle of this passage he interrupts his prophetic words with this cry, "I wait for/hope in your salvation, O Lord." In the midst of describing God's saving work, Jacob declares that he is going to wait for and hope in that coming salvation. The salvation that God promises is a promise, which means it is still in the future. Jacob confesses what every true believer confesses, "I am going to wait for your salvation, no matter how long I must wait, for what you are offering is better than every other offer of happiness."

We discover in Jacob's description of the ways in which God is going to save his sons reasons that we can live in hope. Jacob gives us what we need in order to hold on, to not give up. God knows that there are many reasons for us to feel discouraged and hopeless in this world. However, in the midst of Jacob's description of the future for God's people we find reasons to hope in the midst of seemingly hopeless situations.

STUDY

1. The first six sons Jacob addresses in vv. 3-15 are the sons of Leah, Rachel's older sister who Jacob was tricked into marrying. The next four sons he addresses are the sons of the two maidservants, Bilhah, Rachel's maidservant (Dan & Naphtali) and Zilpah, Leah's maidservant

(Gad and Asher). What would be a legitimate concern these four sons might have as they listen to their father "bless" his sons? (Look at how Jacob arranges his "families" when he meets Esau in Genesis 33:1-2)

It would not be hard to imagine these four men standing at the back of the crowd of sons with their arms folded, sullen looks on their faces, just waiting to see in what way they will be slighted again. They have always been outcasts in the family; never fully accepted as sons. They wait to see how they will be excluded again.

2. What indications are there in vv. 16-21 that the four sons of the maidservants are being treated the same as the other brothers?

Jacob, speaking as God's prophet, gives to these four sons a full inheritance in the family of God. They will inherit 1/12th of the land of Canaan. The prophecies he makes concerning them while short compared to Judah and Joseph are basically positive, unlike the prophecies concerning the three oldest brothers, Reuben, Simeon and Levi. If you'll look at v. 16 you can see that Jacob makes a point of telling these sons that they are going to be treated just like the other brothers. Dan will judge or vindicate his people, just like one of the tribes of Israel. In other words, his birth from a servant woman will not impede his rights as a full heir of Jacob. So it is with each of the four sons of the servant women.

3. One of the main reasons given by people who have stopped going to church as to why they have done so is that they felt excluded, left out, like outsiders. What difference would knowing and rejoicing in the fact that you were a fully accepted son or daughter of God make in your ability to stay in the church even though feeling like an outsider?

What God does in accepting these four men into the full rights of sonship is the only sure antidote I know to stave off the bitterness that comes knocking at your door when you feel like an outsider in the church. Regardless of how other humans may treat you, you are a child of God, a joint heir with Christ of all the glories of heaven. It didn't matter how the rest of their brothers felt about them, Dan, Gad, Asher and Naphtali are sons of Israel and full heirs of all the promises of God. There is a security and a joy that comes to everyone who feels the amazing reality that you have been fully accepted as a member of God's

family. *He has accepted you and welcomed you into his family. You are free from the tyranny of needing to be accepted by people because God accepts you. You are free to offer acceptance to others rather than to demand it for yourself.*

We can live full of joyful confidence in the future because God includes the outcasts in his promises

4. Judges 13-16 records the life of Samson, perhaps the most famous of Israel's "judges". Review his story. What are some ways the prophecy of vv. 16-17 are fulfilled in Samson's life? Describe what the metaphor of the snake biting the heel of the horse and having the rider thrown off is picturing. (NOTE: The last time that "serpent" and "heel" were used in the same sentence in Genesis is Genesis 3:15.)

Samson was a member of the Danites. He judged Israel for 20 years. But also notice that Dan is compared to a snake that sits along the path and strikes the heels of a horse, thus throwing off the rider. In other words, Dan, while small will be able to attack and conquer larger opponents by ambushing them. Again, if you will read the story of Samson you will see that this is an accurate, poetic description of how he, a single man, took on and overcame the armies of the Philistines. He did so by cunning strength, often through ambushes. In addition, while Dan is going to be a judge and though small, he is going to overcome greater enemies, yet he is compared to a serpent that bites the heel of a horse. The last time a serpent biting a heel was mentioned in Genesis was in chapter three where Satan's warfare against the Messiah and the people of God is described. The success of Dan is not an unqualified success. There is something of evil in this tribe. Again, if you read the story of Samson you will see that while he accomplished much good for Israel, yet he was a very unholy man who also caused much harm.

5. If you were to review each of the other prophecies you would discover the same two things. First, God's promise of greatness for each of the tribes is fulfilled in many different ways. Second, the success of each of the tribes is not unqualified. Each of the prophecies contains a warning of suffering and/or evil in addition to the success. Each of the tribes suffers and does evil as well as succeeds. How does

seeing the success and the failures of these tribes, just as Jacob predicts build hope in us as we consider the promises of God for us?

One of the effects that reading the Bible ought to have on us is that we see the manifold ways that God has kept his word to his people through the centuries. The Bible records the many promises of God and then shows many of the ways that he has kept his word. When we see the faithfulness of God to his promises in history we ought to have confidence that God is going to fulfill all of his good promises. . . God has given overwhelming evidence that he is trustworthy. He has never broken his word. Our lives and his word are filled with evidences of his faithfulness. We can be joyfully confident because he has kept his promises.

While God through Jacob promises a glorious future for the people of God, yet it is in the future, not now. This entire prophecy is laced with a serious dose of reality. There is an amazing future in store for the people of God when the king to whom the scepter belongs finally comes, the Lord Jesus Christ. However, until he comes we are going to experience only the partial fulfillment of the promises. Christians who teach or believe that there is some way to guarantee a pain free, sin free, disappointment free life here and now are not paying attention to what the Bible actually says. We are the heirs of all these promises through the work of Jesus and just as these sons can be sure that their ultimate destiny is glorious, yet it is just as certain that there is going to be much trouble along the way. We should not be surprised that life goes so poorly when we are children of God. We should not be surprised and disappointed by our sin and by the sins of others. We should not be confounded by disease, accidents, financial loss and irritating spouses. The kingdom of God has come to us in and through Jesus Christ but it is still coming in its fullness. We have been saved and we are still waiting to be saved. We are making progress but we are not perfect. God's descriptions of what will happen to these sons in days to come is awesome and awful at the same time.

6. Have you ever felt like quitting because it seems like God is not keeping his promises? Have you ever felt like quitting because either you or another Christian is not living like they are "supposed" to live?

We can live full of joyful confidence in the future because God has fulfilled his promises in the past and because God tells us that we should not expect perfection now.

7. A literal translation of v. 22 is: “Joseph is a son of fruitfulness, a son of fruitfulness by a spring whose daughters climb over a wall.” Compare this to Genesis 41: 50-52 and Psalm 1: 1-3. How is this verse a good summary of Joseph’s life?

While he has lived in the midst of adversity for most of his life, yet his life has born fruit in the salvation of millions of people beyond the wall of his own family. He is the righteous man of Psalm 1 who is “like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.” Joseph is a tree living in the desert which has produced an abundant crop of fruit and has remained alive and thriving in the midst of very harsh circumstances.

8. Verses 23-24a describe his life with a different metaphor. How is this an excellent summary of his life?

He was opposed by his brothers, by Potiphar’s wife, by Potiphar, and by the cupbearer for Pharaoh. All of these individuals were like archers shooting at him, trying to destroy him. Yet, as v. 24 says, he successfully defended himself from their arrows with his own bow. He overcame all of his adversaries and became the ruler of all Egypt and the Savior of the world.

9. According to vv. 24b-25a, why was Joseph a “son of fruitfulness”, why was his arms steady with the bow in defending himself?

The “secret” to Joseph’s success was that God helped him and blessed him. Joseph overcame his enemies and became a source of life to the world because God is the one who sustained him and strengthened him.

10. How does Jacob describe God? What do each of these “titles” tell us about God?

The God who supported Joseph in his trouble is the Mighty One of Jacob. Here is set forth God’s power. It is his power to conquer his

enemies and his power to rescue his people. All other powers are as nothing before him. If the Mighty One of Jacob exercises his power on your behalf, nothing and no one can resist him or bring harm to you. Even though Joseph suffered much, nothing harmed him as the Mighty One of Jacob rescued him out of all his troubles. The Mighty One of Jacob delivered Joseph out of his 20 years of suffering as an imprisoned slave.

Not only is this God our Mighty Warrior but he is also our Shepherd. We are dumb, stubborn, defenseless, weak sheep. He is our Shepherd who leads us beside quiet waters, who leads us in paths of righteousness. He carries the sick and tends to the lambs of his flock as a faithful shepherd. He is also our Rock. He is the foundation of our lives. He remains firm and stable even when the flood waters pound against it. He cannot be moved or perturbed. He is a sure defense. We can run to him and find refuge there from the enemy and security from the storm. For Joseph he is his father’s God. What a powerful thing to be able to say to your children. The God who will help you has been the God who has helped me. Every parent ought to yearn to be able to say this to their child. “The only God who can help you has been the one who has helped me.” Finally, Joseph was supported by “Shaddai”. Usually this is translated “Almighty” but the root from which the word is taken refers to the breast of a woman. It seems to me, especially considering this context, that the reference has more to do with God’s nurturing and supplying Joseph with all that he needs to stand in the midst of his many trials. God has been to him like a nursing mother in the midst of his difficulties, seeking to comfort him and sustain him. He is the God of all comfort who comforts us in all our afflictions.

11. How have you experienced God as your Mighty One, Shepherd, Rock, your father’s God, Comfort in times of trouble?

We can live full of joyful confidence in the future because God strengthens us to endure in the present.

12. Compare v. 25b with Genesis 3: 16-19. What does the blessing of God accomplish?

The second half of v. 25 is a promise that the blessings of God for his people will be the reversal of his curse upon humanity. In Genesis 3, as

a result of their sin, God cursed the life of Adam and Eve, of humanity on this earth. He cast them out of the Garden of Eden, the place of intimate fellowship with him in the enjoyment of his perfect creation. The story of Genesis, indeed the story of the entire Bible, is that God is going to restore his people to the Garden and all of its pleasures. The curse will be overcome. In v. 25 we find that promise. The curse had two dimensions. For the woman the curse was trouble in the raising of children and in her relationship to her husband. For the man the curse was trouble in the world of work, in the world of subduing the creation and making it serve his needs. Here we see the reversal of the curse in the blessings of heaven and the deep upon the work of humanity and the blessing upon the breast and womb. The promise of God is that we are going to return to the Garden of Eden.

13. Verse 26a describes the “blessing of God” with a different picture. What would be significant about Jacob’s blessings being greater than the bounty of the mountains? (NOTE: What would be true of mountains in an arid climate like the land of Canaan? What happened on top of the mountains of Canaan, see 1 Kings 14: 22-24?)

Here is a clear comparison between the blessings of God and the blessings that this world and its gods offer. In the arid climates of the Middle East, the tops of mountains and hills were always green and verdant whereas the lowlands were often withered and unproductive. Additionally, it was on the tops of the mountains and hills that the false gods were worshipped. The fertility gods and goddesses inhabited the tops of the mountains. Therefore, God promises that the blessings he confers are greater than any of those that can be had through any of the false religious systems this world contains or through the best part of this creation. While there are many pleasures to be had here, the pleasures that are coming for the people of God are infinitely greater.

14. How do these promises help us to not give in to the promises of sin and the world (see Hebrews 11: 13-16 & 24-28)?

One of the main reasons people abandon Christ is because they come to believe that the pleasures promised by sin, the world and false religious systems are greater than the pleasures promised by God. However, the appeal of the gospel is that for all those who hold fast to Christ to the end of life will enter into a world where the effects of sin are gone.

There is a day coming when we will experience the full pleasures of living with God. This reality is infinitely greater than all the pleasures offered by sin and the world. We would be fools to abandon the eternal and infinite pleasures offered by God in order to have the temporary and earthly pleasures offered by sin.

15. How have the promises of God helped you to resist sin and do good?

We can live full of joyful confidence in the future because God’s future for us is beyond our wildest imagination.