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A FATHER'S BLESSING

Genesis 49:22-28

By

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Genesis Lesson 82

A FATHER'S BLESSING Genesis 49:22-28

Several years ago, when Pete Rose broke Ty Cobb's long-standing record for the most career hits, a reporter asked him what he thought about as he stood on base with the whole stadium on its feet cheering wildly. Rose said that he thought that his dad was probably looking down from heaven and was pleased with him. Of all the things Pete Rose could think about at that moment, as a grown man he was still thinking about his father's approval.

God has given those of us who are fathers a unique and powerful role to fulfill with our children. We influence them greatly, either for good or for ill. Some children grow up and vow that they will not be like their dads. They spend their whole lives reacting against their fathers. But even then the father is exerting a strong influence over the child. Hopefully, as Christian fathers, we will bless our children with a rich legacy of the things of God so that they will want to follow Him all their lives.

I want to talk about how we, as dads, can impart God's blessing to our children. If you aren't a dad, the message still applies to you, since what I'm really talking about is relationships. We all have a responsibility to be channels of God's blessing to others. So if you're a mother or even if you don't have children, these things apply to you. But I'm directing my comments to fathers, since our text tells of a father imparting his blessing to his sons.

In Genesis 49, the dying patriarch Jacob imparts his final blessing to his 12 sons. The verses we're considering tell of his blessing on Joseph and Benjamin, his two sons by his beloved wife Rachel. While Judah received the higher blessing in that the Messiah would come from his family line (49:10), the most full blessing is reserved for the beloved Joseph. Jacob pulls out all the stops and the blessings gush forth in a torrent. The words "bless" or "blessing" occur six times in verses 25 & 26. It shows us that ...

God wants us to impart His blessing to our children.

Genesis 49:22-28 shows us four ways we can bless our children:

1. To bless your children, help them interpret life in light of God's perspective.

Derek Kidner observes (*Genesis* [IVP], p. 221) that the thought here "moves from the present, the summer of Joseph's days, back to the stresses of the past, and behind both to God, whose array of titles forms the rich centrepiece of the oracle. Then His profusion of blessings is called down on Joseph, carrying the thought on into the future." Jacob uses the metaphor of a fruitful vine planted by a spring to describe Joseph's present situation. Then he uses the metaphor of an archer under attack to describe Joseph's past trials. The two metaphors are tied together by showing that the reason for Joseph's present fruitfulness was that he had endured past trials in the strength of God, who is described by five different titles as His future blessings are invoked.

Jacob wasn't telling Joseph anything new. Years before, while going through these trials, Joseph had realized that even though his brothers meant evil against him, God meant it for good (45:5-9; 50:20). Even when Joseph was falsely accused, imprisoned, and forgotten, he knew that God was sovereign. Here Jacob affirms Joseph's interpretation of his life from God's perspective. He is saying that Joseph was fruitful because he had endured these trials in God's strength.

He uses the metaphor of a boy whose father is teaching him to shoot a bow and arrow. The boy isn't strong enough to pull the bow back all the way and hold it steady on the target. So the father wraps his arms around the boy, puts his strong hands over the boy's hands, pulls back the bowstring and aims it at the target. The boy is a strong archer because of his father's strength. It's a beautiful picture of being strong in the strength of God our Father. There are three lessons here that we fathers should impart to our children to help them interpret life from God's perspective.

- The lesson of fruitfulness

God wants His children to be fruitful. I believe that as American Christians, we wrongly encourage our kids to be *successful*, which is man-centered. We need to encourage them to be *fruitful*, which is God-centered. Life isn't to be lived for ourselves. Jesus called us to bear much fruit (John 15). Just as Joseph's fruitful vine ran over the

wall, so that the Egyptians were blessed, so we need to teach our children our responsibility to be a blessing to people of other cultures who have not heard the good news of Christ. I encourage you to read to your kids the daily missions story in the "Global Prayer Digest" and to read missionary biographies so that they see examples of fruitful lives.

- The lesson of strength

A second lesson is that our strength comes from the Lord, not from ourselves. Joseph's vine was fruitful because it was planted near a spring. Its roots went down into that moist soil which nourished it even in times of drought. The archer under attack was strong because the mighty hands of God were placed over his hands. We need to teach our children that our strength is not from ourselves, but from the Lord. Our kids need to see that we daily go to God for strength from His Word. They need to see that through prayer we lay hold of God's resources. As a father, you need to pray often with and for your children. Let them see that you are weak, but that the God you trust is mighty.

- The lesson of trials

A godly life does not mean a life exempt from trials. In fact, fruitfulness often comes only through trials. Joseph was the most godly of Jacob's sons, and yet he suffered the most. He was bitterly attacked by his brothers. Potiphar's wife shot at him with her daily temptation to adultery. Potiphar harassed him by putting him in prison when he had done no wrong. The cupbearer forgot his promise to mention Joseph to Pharaoh. And yet Joseph came through it all with a lack of bitterness toward God or toward any of those who had wronged him because he trusted in the sovereign, loving God.

Our kids need to know that while following God has its benefits, it also has its trials. We don't follow the Lord just because of what we get out of it. We follow the Lord because He is the living God and His Word is the truth. We communicate this through our example. Are we committed to the Lord as long as everything is going well, but we fall away when problems hit? Do we complain about people who have wronged us and gripe about the trials we encounter? If so, our kids aren't going to learn to trust in our sover-

eign, loving God. To bless your children, help them to interpret all of life, including life's trials, from God's perspective.

2. To bless your children, walk in personal reality with God.

There's nothing that turns kids away from the Lord more than to have a father who preaches religion but who does not truly walk with God. I'm convinced that the greatest thing we can do to help our children go on with the Lord is for us to walk in personal reality with God. I'm not talking about perfection, but a humble faith that relates God to every aspect of life.

Jacob was far from a perfect father. His relationship with God had its ups and downs. And yet in spite of his problems, Jacob did know God personally. Here he is bold enough to call God "the Mighty One of *Jacob*," "the stone of *Israel*" (Jacob's God-given name), "the God of *your father*" (49:24, 25). Years before, Jacob had referred to God as the God of his father and the God of Abraham (31:5, 42). But now Jacob calls God *his* God. These names of God reflect Jacob's personal relationship with God.

They also show that Jacob had trusted God in the practical situations of life. He had learned who God is by depending on Him in the crises of life. Jacob was a schemer, but God had taught him that his schemes were worthless. God had proven Himself mighty in protecting Jacob from the anger of Esau and Laban, both of whom could have killed him. God again proved Himself mighty in keeping the Canaanites from attacking Jacob after his sons had slaughtered the Shechemites. God had led Jacob as a Shepherd, protecting him from danger and guiding him in the paths of righteousness. (The phrase, "from there" [49:24] is probably an emphatic way of saying that God is the source of everything implied by these various names.) Through the trials of the loss of Joseph and the famine, when he thought he might lose all his sons and even his own life, Jacob had learned to rely on God as a rock, a sure foundation on whom he might stand firm.

Jacob knew that God not only was his help, but also the One who could help his sons ("the God of your father who helps you," [49:25]). That's an important lesson of faith for parents, when you learn that God can be the God of your children and that you entrust them to His care. If you're from a Christian home, you need to learn

the lesson both Jacob and Joseph learned, that their father's God could be their God, too. Each child must at some point in life personalize his father's faith into his own relationship with God.

Jacob also had come to know God as "El Shaddai," God Almighty, the name by which God revealed Himself to Abraham (17:1). Scholars are divided on how to translate that name. Some say it comes from a root word meaning "breast," thus pointing to God as the all-sufficient one from whom we draw our nourishment and sustenance. (The Hebrew word "shad" [breasts] occurs at the end of 49:25.) Others say it comes from a word meaning "mountain," thus pointing to God's strength, stability, and permanence. The name seems to be used in Genesis in situations where God's servants are hard-pressed and needing reassurance (Kidner, p. 129). Thus it emphasizes God's might in contrast with the frailty of man. At this time when Jacob knew that he was dying, he wanted his son to know God as the Almighty who would bless him with all that he needed in the future.

So through these names by which Jacob refers to God, we see that he had learned to know God in a personal, practical way through the trials of life. He had trusted God and found Him faithful. Jacob's God was a big God, the Mighty One, the Almighty, who was greater than the Canaanites' gods, greater than Pharaoh's gods, in spite of what outward appearances may imply. In contrast with the pagan Canaanites, who possessed the land, and the successful Egyptians, Jacob was dying as a poor refugee shepherd, without having realized God's promises concerning the land of Canaan. But in spite of these outward appearances of the apparent success of the world and the failure of God's promises, Jacob went out by handing his sons the torch of faith in a mighty God who would certainly fulfill His promises.

So, to bless your children, help them interpret life in light of God's perspective and walk in personal reality with the Almighty God.

3. To bless your children, observe their strengths and point them out to them.

Jacob saw that Joseph's strength was his fruitfulness that came from trusting God through suffering. He saw that Benjamin's strength was his fierceness against his adversaries, as he compares

him to a ravenous wolf. This was not intended as a put-down, although there is an inherent warning in the metaphor. Jacob has already compared Judah to a lion, Issachar to a donkey, Dan to a snake, and Naphtali to a doe. Each of these metaphors focused on the particular strength of that animal. The lion is powerful; the donkey is a strong worker; the snake, through its subtlety is able to fell a powerful horse; and the deer is graceful and free. Now, Benjamin the wolf is persistent ("morning and evening") and fierce in defeating his enemies.

While each of these blessings was prophetic, they were also based on Jacob's careful observation of each of his sons. He could see their strengths and he built a word picture for each son based on these Spirit-inspired insights. Three applications:

- Know your child.

That may sound obvious, but often parents do not really know their children. They may live in the same household, but with busy, conflicting schedules and very little time together without the TV blaring, many fathers are strangers to their children and their children to them.

The fact is, God has given each child from birth a special "bent" or set of personality traits. Before I had children, I thought that I could shape my child's personality. I didn't realize that they come with built-in software from the womb! While you can shape the child within his basic bent, you can't change the bent.

I've heard parents say, "I don't know where we went wrong with our kids. We treated them all just the same." That's where they went wrong with their kids! Kids are *not* the same! They're all wired differently, they develop at their own rates, and they need to be trained in accordance with their unique personalities. You have to be sensitive to each child's differences.

You also see parents who assume that their child should be just like them. A dad loves sports. He puts a football in his kid's crib. But the kid is artistic and loves music. If that dad loves his son and is smart, he's going to learn to love music for the sake of his son and not push the boy toward a career in the NFL.

Another way we deny the uniqueness of our children and show that we really don't know them is by comparing them with each

other. One child is an organized, motivated student who gets his homework done without prodding. His brother is scatterbrained and laid back. We shout at him, "Why can't you do your homework like your brother?" Answer: Because he's not his brother.

So, get to know your child by spending time with each one, observing him, listening to him, finding out how he or she has been uniquely made by God.

- Tell your children about their strengths and warn them of their weaknesses.

Most of us are better at giving warnings than at giving praise. But we need to focus on strengths whenever we can, to "catch our kids doing something right." It doesn't have to be big things, like making straight A's. Maybe for once they didn't talk back or they didn't fight with their brother. Tell them how much you appreciate it. Don't just focus on behavior, but also on attitudes.

Often, a person's greatest strength is also the source of his greatest weakness. A strong leader can also be very stubborn. An organized person can be too rigid. A compassionate person can be gullible. Here, Benjamin the fierce wolf of a warrior could see, upon reflection, that he must guard against being too combative. In fact, this proved to be the case in the history of this tribe in Israel (see Judges 19-21).

We need to encourage our children by pointing out their strengths, but we also need to give them correction and reproof when necessary. That can be in the form of preventative warnings, based on our observations of their strengths and corresponding weaknesses. When you do have to correct, make sure you do it to help them, not just to vent your frustration. Don't ever correct by putting them down, but rather from the standpoint that you want to help them become all that God wants them to be.

- Recognize the importance of a father's words.

The Bible teaches that words have the power either to build up or to tear down. As someone has said, "To speak of 'mere words' is like speaking of 'mere dynamite.'" That's especially true of a father's words to his children. They're looking primarily to you for a blessing, for words that show acceptance and approval. If your words constantly put them down through criticism or sarcasm, it's like

beating on them over and over with a stick. On the other hand, kind, encouraging words that picture how the Lord can use your children, can have a powerful effect on them.

The great British preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, tells of a time when he was ten years old when a traveling preacher stayed in Spurgeon's grandfather's parsonage. The man took time on three successive days to spend with this boy, telling him of Christ's love and praying, with his arms around the boy's neck, that he might know and serve the Lord. Then, one morning when the whole family was gathered for prayer, this preacher took ten-year-old Charles, sat him on his knee, and prophesied, "This child will one day preach the gospel, and he will preach it to great multitudes. I am persuaded that he will preach in the chapel of Rowland Hill, ..." He called all present to witness what he had said and then gave Charles a coin as a reward if he would learn the hymn, *God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform.*"

Years later, that prophecy was fulfilled. Spurgeon comments, "Did the words of Mr. Knill help to bring about their own fulfillment? I think so. I believed them, and looked forward to the time when I should preach the Word" (*C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography* [The Banner of Truth Trust, 1:28]). He goes on to say that he wasn't even yet converted, but those words spurred him on to seek the Lord's salvation.

I never had anything that dramatic happen to me, but I do remember an old man, Mr. Benton, who was my third grade Sunday School teacher. He used to say, "Steve's going to be a pastor some day." I used to think, "Naw, I'm going to play major league baseball someday." But he was right!

4. To bless your children, impart to them spiritual blessings above all else.

At first glance it may seem as if Jacob is wishing material, not spiritual, blessings on Joseph. He mentions the blessings of heaven above, which refers to the rain and sunshine; the blessings of the deep, which refers to springs and rivers; the blessings of the breasts and of the womb, which refers both to many children and to the multiplication of flocks and herds. Verse 26 probably means that the blessings Jacob is bestowing on Joseph were greater than Jacob had

received from his ancestors. His prayer is that these blessings would be as great as the mountains.

But the implication is that these blessings would not merely be temporal, but as everlasting as these ancient mountains. When you remember that Joseph, as second to Pharaoh, probably had all the material wealth he could want, you can see that Jacob was praying that his son would have the unlimited blessings of the covenant promises of God, in contrast to the riches of Egypt which he now enjoyed. He is saying, "God's promised blessings are greater than anything the world has to offer."

It's tragic when Christians encourage their kids to pursue worldly success ahead of the blessings of God. If we push our kids toward careers that will make a lot of money or bring them status or fame, if we're more concerned that our sons excel in sports and our daughters in beauty than that they excel in the things of God, we're not imparting God's blessing to them. We need to give them as heroes the great men and women of God who have taken the good news of Christ to those who are lost.

Conclusion

Last year, the Arizona Republic (6/15/97) reported that they asked their readers to tell them stories about their fathers so they could write a heartwarming Father's Day story. The problem was, nobody called, except for a few who wanted to tell the paper what jerks their fathers were. That wasn't quite what they had in mind!

Well, that's the world. But what about in the church? Are we as Christian dads imparting God's blessing to our children? Of course, there is no such thing as a perfect human father, because we're all sinners. But perfection isn't the requirement--reality with God is. Our kids need God's blessing imparted through us. We give it to them by walking daily with God and by helping them do the same.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the difference between success and fruitfulness? Is this distinction important in relation to child rearing? Why?
2. Why are so many American men spiritually passive? How can a man overcome this?
3. How can a father who feels inadequate get started in leading his family spiritually?
4. What are some practical ways a parent who struggles with abusive speech can learn to speak words that build up his/her children?

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