

# Genesis 48-49

## Joseph and his technicolour family

### Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

Only a fool believes that the things he has done in the past will have no effect on his future. Only a fool would want to live with all the consequences of her past actions.

We all know, don't we, that there is a relationship between our past, our present and our future. Any of us who have read the Bible will be aware that "what you sow, you reap" is a principle taught right throughout the Scriptures. And, I guess, for the most part we recognise that it is a good thing that the consequences of our actions are, generally, fairly predictable. The prospect of a hangover prevents many people from drunkenness, at least Sunday-Thursday! The likelihood of a prison sentence, or a broken wrist, restrains us from lashing out in violence at those whose actions deny us something we want.

Only a fool believes that he can treat his friends like dirt and have a happy life surrounded by jolly companions. Only an idiot believes he can shout at his kids all day and expect them to respect him in years to come. Only the most hopelessly naïve thinks that the string of one night stands won't change the dynamic of his relationship with his new girlfriend.

On the other hand only a fool would want to live with all the consequences of her past actions.

In the world we live in, this world where we all mess up, all the time, only the most arrogant don't long for grace from others to overlook our faults, our weaknesses and our mistakes. When we come to work slightly the worse for wear after a late night BBQ and beer evening with our mates we hope the boss won't fire us. When we punish our kids too harshly we trust that it won't sour our relationship with them. When we don't get that diagnosis right we hope the patient or their relatives won't appoint a fee hungry solicitor to take us to the GMC or through the courts.

A world where we had to live with the consequences of all our folly would be a miserable world. But a world where sinners we didn't have to live with any of the consequences of our stupidity would be an equally miserable world!

In the passage we are studying this morning we are going to see that in God's world the future of all people, and especially of God's people, is chosen by him. This story comes from the very end of the life of Jacob. And in it we are going to see how it is that God chooses our futures in such a way we learn the massive responsibilities that come with being human and that God's people are ultimately protected from their sin and folly.

Our actions shape the future of generations, so we must take responsibility. But God's blessings are gracious, so we need not despair.

The passage begins and ends with Jacob dying. At the beginning of chapter 48 he is entering a final, terminal decline. And the end of chapter 49 Jacob departs this world. In between Jacob passes on his blessings to his children. But this is more than just the story of a loving Dad encouraging his kids to try their best as they gather round his bedside during his last hours. Throughout chapter 48 Jacob is referred to as Israel, showing that he is speaking here as the God-appointed head of the nation that will bear his name.

At the beginning of his adoption and blessing of Joseph's sons, Jacob goes out of the way to remind everybody exactly who he is, 48:3, the one to whom God himself appeared in a vision with a promise that he would be the Father of a great nation who would live in the land of Canaan.

At the beginning of the chapter 49, when Jacob calls all his sons to come for blessing, he announces that the things he is about to say predict what will happen in days to come. Jacob, you see, is not speaking off his own bat. He's not going to make predictions for the boys based on his own assessment of their character and prospects. He's not thinking "well, one son is good with figures so might end up an accountant, and another one is great with kids and might end up a teacher, and another one is good at writing make-believe stories so could be a journalist for a tabloid newspaper."

Jacob is speaking here as God's chosen leader of the family. He is speaking as a prophet, announcing, with divine authority, the futures of his children. Jacob is the one who speaks, who explains, their destinies; but those futures have been chosen by God.

Lots of us, of course, instinctively react against the idea that what happens to us is under God's control. We find it difficult to believe that we are not the masters of the universe, or at least the captains of our own souls. If you are anything like me you will feel an almost reflex reaction that bristles at the Bible's clear teaching that the things that happen to us are controlled by God. Of course when you begin to look at the alternatives they aren't so appealing! Here's the brilliant summary of theologian Bruce Ware:

*"Would you rather see your life as being at the mercy of the God of all knowledge, wisdom, righteousness, goodness and love, who is in control of all that occurs? Or would you rather see your life as being at the mercy of Satan, demons, wicked people and natural forces... bringing disaster and suffering upon you, some of which is entirely pointless in the great scheme of things, while God watches, unable to intervene?"*

Of course I guess most of would say that although we don't want Satan, demons or wicked people to run our lives, we do want to run them ourselves. But the reality is that quite a lot of the time our decision making is dreadful

and the thought that our future could be entirely decided by our own choices is actually pretty terrifying.

No, the comforting reality is that God chooses our future. But he does it in such a way that our genuine and real responsibilities, for our own lives and the lives of other people, are left intact.

### **Don't presume – your actions shape generations**

It is a criticism of Christianity as old as Christianity itself that a faith that is all about God's grace and kindness will only ever encourage people to behave badly. A religion that teaches people that there are no consequences for your sin will lead to the most terrible wickedness. It's what people said 2,000 years ago when the apostle Paul was alive. If God loves forgiving sin, they said, surely we should sin more to make God happy that he'll have more to forgive?

It's a ridiculous argument of course. Mostly because it assumes that God's grace has no power to change our hearts and motivations. But it's also a ridiculous argument because it is simply impossible to read through the Bible and conclude that God never makes us live with the consequences of our actions.

Part of his love for people, part of his grace to us, is that the world God has put us in is a consistent world. Generally speaking if you drop something, it falls to the ground. If you eat only McDonalds your heart packs up and if you tell lies all the time nobody believes you even when you tell the truth.

It's a principle that is illustrated throughout this passage as character after character reaps the just reward for their actions and as the consequences of their decisions live on for generations to come.

Manasseh and Ephraim, Joseph's two sons, born to him in Egypt, are elevated from being Jacob's grandsons to being his sons. There is a very formal adoption ceremony where Joseph is required to state prove their identities. They are promised an extra portion of the land of Canaan, v22, from where Jacob has come and to where he is convinced his descendants will return. These grandchildren will be as much Jacob's children, as, v5, Reuben and Simeon, the two oldest of his natural children are.

Why should such blessing come to these two? Because they are Joseph's sons. Joseph is the one who has graciously kept the whole family alive. Joseph could, in justice, have had all his brothers put to death and acquired for himself and his kids all the inheritance of Canaan that God had promised. But he spared their lives and got them the best pasture and in all Egypt. We know almost nothing about Ephraim and Manasseh. They certainly haven't done anything spectacularly good. They are reaping the good consequences of Joseph's wise and godly life.

On the other hand we have Reuben, 49:3-4. The oldest son could normally expect a double portion of the inheritance in an ancient family. But, because Reuben, many years before, slept with Bilhah, one of Jacob's concubines, he is displaced from the pre-eminence normally given to the first born son. It's not just that one incident of course. His

whole character, we are told, is as turbulent, as unstable, as the waters.

Then there's Simeon and Levi. The brothers who killed a whole city of men and took their wives and children as slaves because one of the men of that city slept with, or probably, raped their sister. They fail to benefit from Reuben being cut out of his position because their anger leads them to be cursed too.

The role of leadership, instead, moves all the way down to Judah, the fourth oldest. These brothers receive blessings that are less than they might have hoped, because of the decisions they have made that live on for generations to come.

Jacob, of course, speaks as a prophet. And some of the failures that affect the blessings handed out to the sons and the tribes they represent haven't even happened yet. In 49:15, for example, we learn about Issachar, who loves the land so much that he is willing to let somebody else rule it as long as he can be there. This doesn't actually happen till nearly 500 years later. In the days of Joshua many of the tribes failed to drive out the child-sacrificing Canaanites as God had told them to. But Issachar seems to have been so poor that they actually ended up as forced labourers for the Canaanite tribes.

There are plenty more examples. But I hope those are enough to persuade you that Jacob's blessings, God's blessings, as not just completely random. The future of the brothers, and their hundreds of thousands of descendants, are bound up with the characters they have formed from the decisions they have made.

But what does that mean for us?

Well actually what is being taught to us here is a vital, but often neglected, part of the Christian message. This is a story about living with the consequences of your actions, consequences that affect not only your life but the lives of those around you and which can echo on, as the history of Israel testifies, for thousands of years after your lifetime.

Many people in our society find it very offensive that in the next book of the Bible, Exodus, God should dare to speak about visiting the sin of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation. What a terrible thing, people say in outraged tones, to make the children suffer for the wickedness of their parents.

It's a comment you hear a lot from liberal children of the 1960s. Which is ironic; because inflicting the massive debts of their pension deficits, free university education, subsidised mortgages and massive future healthcare costs on their children and their grandchildren is exactly what those same people are doing! Will the children of Raoul Moat have to live with the consequences of their father's sin and the tragic last days of his life? Of course they will. Will Rosie and Tom have to deal with the consequences of the decisions Gaynor and I make about money, healthcare, pensions and houses? Of course they will.

If we were not responsible for the consequences of our decisions then something fundamental about what it means to be human would have been taken away from us.

And God does not do that. Through the experiences of Jacob's children and their descendents the Lord shows that he operates in our lives in such a way that what we do now does impact the future.

That's most obviously true in the decision each of us makes, individually before God, about whether or not we will follow Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour. A decision that impacts eternity.

But it's equally true for other decisions. All of Jacob's children were believers. They are the 12 men whose names are written on the foundations of the heavenly city. They are all going to be there in eternity. But should we therefore think that the decisions they made that had profound consequences for them and millions of other people in this life didn't matter? Not at all.

This week you and I need to be aware that part of God's blessing to his people, part of the way he deals with us as a loving heavenly Father, part of his grace is that our actions have consequences that we have to live with. And that means we need to think very carefully about how we live.

Imagine you were an Israelite reading these things about your ancestors. If you were in some of those tribes wouldn't you have wished they'd done things differently? Wouldn't it make you think about how you would deal with sexuality, with anger, with laziness and with many of the others things addressed in these verses?

That's how we should feel too. God in his mercy uses our awareness of what might happen if we live in certain ways to stop us doing things that are damaging to us. We should thank God for that – and use the encouragement of a passage like this to reflect on how kind God is to us.

But there's a problem. Yes it is good that the things that happen in our world are not completely random. That our actions have generally predictable consequences and that God's rule over our lives operates in such a way as to make our decisions meaningful. But who wants to live with all the consequences of our decisions? Who doesn't want the God of grace to bless us in spite of our foolishness and sin?

Well that's why the second thing this passage teaches is not to despair.

## **2 Don't despair – his blessing is gracious**

Jacob's always rebelled against the normal order of things. Even in the womb he fought his brother to be first out and get the extra blessing of the oldest son. Later Jacob got himself embroiled in a terrible family strife in his attempts to acquire the double portion legally due to Esau by fair means or foul.

Now, right at the end of his life, as the two sons of Joseph come to him for blessing and as Joseph carefully stage manages things so that the older son will come under Jacob's right hand the patriarch crosses his arms and gives the greater blessing to the younger son. Jacob had deceived his own blind father to get his inheritance. Now blind himself he makes sure that he gives the greater

blessing to exactly the child he intends to have it. Not because Ephraim is better. Not because he deserves it. But just because that's what God in his grace has chosen.

Throughout Genesis God has done this again and again, choosing the younger over the older. Abel over Cain, Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Perez over Zerah, Joseph over Reuben and now Ephraim over Manasseh. It's exactly what God still does today. He chooses the poor, the have-nots and the ordinary people. He doesn't just want the elite people, the brilliant and the beautiful. God blesses the average and the ordinary.

In history both Manasseh and Ephraim are blessed. Both are numbered amongst God's people. But Ephraim grows larger and more prosperous. So much so that generations later when the nation of Israel splits in two the 10 tribes making up the northern kingdom are often called by the name of this one tribe – Ephraim.

Jacob himself lived much of his life as a deceiver, making foolish choices that divided his family. Yet God granted him a peaceful old age, a long life surrounded by his family, all the wealth of Egypt to enjoy and a good death after he gave blessings to his many sons and, through them, to the whole world.

And then there's Judah. The son described in v8-12, on whom the most extravagant blessings in these two chapters are pronounced. Judah whose descendents will rule the nation of Israel. Judah who will have all the signs and symbols of power and kingship – the sceptre, the lion, the staff, the adoration of nations.

He will be so blessed and wealthy that he won't just be able to take a bath in wine – he'll be able to wash his clothes in it.

Why? Well it's true that Judah showed himself to have admirable qualities of leadership. He is the one who persuaded Jacob to let the other brothers, and especially Benjamin, return to Egypt, at real risk to himself, which resulted in the reuniting of the entire family.

But let's not forget how we were first introduced to Judah as a character; when he abjectly failed in his responsibilities as a Father in law, sent his daughter in law Tamar away, slept with her thinking she was a prostitute, and then tried to have her burned to death on discovering she was pregnant until he realised he was the father.

As messing your life up goes that's pretty spectacular isn't it?! And yet to repentant Judah God gives blessing beyond measure.

Yes God does call his people to live with some of the consequences of their decisions. The Lord does not grant immunity from learning to cope with our sin and folly. But he does that as part of his love for his people. And the main way we see that love worked out in our world is not through painful results of our wickedness and weakness. The main way we see God's love is in the grace that liberates us from such stupidities.

Whatever our past mess ups we do not need to despair. Because God's fundamental attitude towards his people is always one of grace. He gives his people blessing we do not deserve rather than judgment we do deserve.

Even the things in this passage that make the people of God face up to their sin are also blessings. Would we really want someone as unstable as water or a man of short-tempered violence to be the leader of God's people? Would Reuben, Simeon or Levi not have brought misery to themselves and everyone else if they had been put in charge?

Perhaps you are here this morning and you are facing up in your life to some consequence of sin. Perhaps your sin, perhaps someone else's sin. It's easy, isn't it, in that situation to wish that God would just take all the consequences away. To feel that perhaps other people have got away with this sin in a way that you reckon you haven't. To feel that the stupid comment you made shouldn't have had such big consequences of making people cross with you. To feel that the sexual failure you've had shouldn't have had such a terrible impact on your relationships. To feel that choosing the wrong job shouldn't have to make you feel miserable every morning you have to get up and go to do that job.

If that's you it's fine to ask God that, in his mercy, he would give you relief. It's OK to feel crushed by the burden of your sin and failure. But in the midst of those feelings we must remember that God's fundamental attitude to people is one of grace. To the person who does not believe in Jesus he waits only for you to admit your sin and seek his mercy before he will take you in as his child and become your Father. To every Christian God's purpose is to bless you forever with all of his people. Yes he will sometimes make us face the consequences of our sin,

because he longs for us to see how much we need his grace and transforming power.

But in the end he will always give relief to all his people. Every one of Jacob's sons had a great family who made it to the promised land. Every one of God's people is eternally safe in his hands. Because the one to whom the sceptre of Judah belongs, the one who receives the obedience of nations is the same one who died so that none of God's people would ever face the full consequences of our sin.

The lion of Judah, the great ruler, turns out to be God the Son, the lamb who was slain. Jesus Christ, descended from Judah, died on a Roman cross, facing the full and terrible consequences of our sin and rebellion, so that all God's people could be pardoned. Our king paid for us. Our king changed the way God looks at us from wrath and judgment to peace and blessing.

Jesus Christ, the king promised in these verses, is also the God who rules in such a way that no-one need ever face the full consequences of our actions. He is willing to extend his grace and mercy to each of us.

And Jesus Christ rules in such a way that our actions have real significance. The things we choose, for good or ill, have consequences throughout our lifetimes and beyond. But for those who have received his grace, who have trusted in Jesus death for us, those consequences are always limited. We will never have to face the judgment we deserve. And we will never have to deal with more than Jesus, our good king, knows is necessary to bring about the transformation of our lives.

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