

# BEFORE YOUR TIME IS UP

SERIES: THE STORY OF JOSEPH



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Genesis 49  
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*Genesis 49*

My favorite song in the musical *Hamilton* is the last one: “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story.”

Alexander Hamilton was killed in a duel before reaching the age of fifty. After his death, Eliza, his widow, sings to her husband: “I try to make sense of your thousands of pages of writings / You really do write like you’re running out of time.”<sup>1</sup> In contrast to her husband, Eliza lives another fifty years:

I ask myself, what would you do if you had more time  
The Lord, in his kindness  
He gives me what you always wanted  
He gives me more time.<sup>2</sup>

With more time, Eliza tells her husband’s story and preserves his legacy, but even with another fifty years, she sings, “It’s not enough,” and she wonders, “And when my time is up / Have I done enough?”<sup>3</sup>

What do you want to do before your time is up? In our text today, Jacob’s time is up. Let’s see what he does. Perhaps he will inspire us.

## Jacob gathers his sons

**Genesis 49:1-2:**

**Then Jacob called his sons and said, “Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you what shall happen to you in days to come. “Assemble and listen, O sons of Jacob, listen to Israel your father.”**

Jacob first instructs his sons to “gather” and then instructs them to “assemble.” He first says he will “tell” them things and then instructs them to “listen.” The repetition, with variation, highlights the importance of his forthcoming words.

The words concern the future of Jacob’s sons—for the most part, the future of the twelve tribes that will come from them (Genesis 49:28). The phrase “days

to come” concerns the future deliverance of God’s people, particularly through a king (Numbers 24:7, 14-24). These, then, are words of blessing, as the narrator makes clear in Genesis 49:28.

The conflicts and strivings and difficulties of these men will finally culminate in the reign of the Messiah, whom the New Testament identifies as Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus has come to inaugurate his reign. In light of Jacob’s words, not to mention a host of other biblical words, we can have confidence that our conflicts and strivings and difficulties will culminate in the return of Jesus, who will then consummate his reign and deliver all his followers from all the difficulties of this sin-sick world.

Jacob wants his sons to listen. Let’s listen. This is Jacob’s finest hour.

## More like anti-blessings

**Genesis 49:3-7:**

**“Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, and the firstfruits of my strength, preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power. 4 Unstable as water, you shall not have preeminence, 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; weapons of violence are their swords. 6 Let my soul come not into their council; O my glory, be not joined to their company. For in their anger they killed men, and in their willfulness they hamstringed oxen. 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.**

Jacob’s words to Reuben, Simeon, and Levi are more like anti-blessings. Reuben loses the rights of the firstborn because he had sex with his father’s wife (Genesis 35:22). Simeon and Levi lose their positions as next in line because they raped the city Shechem (Genesis 34). The tribe of Simeon virtually disappears

from the biblical narrative after the conquest of the promised land. The tribe of Levi will have no inheritance of the promised land.

Jacob's demotion of his first three sons serves two primary purposes. First, it makes room for the preeminence of Judah and Joseph. Second, it saves Israel from the kind of reckless, cruel leadership demonstrated by the three men.

When we don't advance in life the way we want, we must trust in the knowledge, power, and goodness of God. Perhaps he is protecting us from ourselves and maybe even protecting others from what we might do to them if we got what we wanted.

Next, Jacob turns his attention to Judah.

## The preeminence of Judah

**Genesis 49:8-12:**

**“Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down before you. 9 Judah is a lion's cub; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down; he crouched as a lion and as a lioness; who dares rouse him? 10 The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. 11 Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he has washed his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes. 12 His eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk.**

The word translated “praise” is usually reserved for God in the Hebrew Scriptures, but Jacob says Judah's brothers will “praise” him. This speaks of the high place the tribe of Judah will occupy among the tribes.

Judah, and more particularly the tribe that comes from him, will subdue his enemies (1 Samuel 18:7).

In Joseph's dreams, his brothers were bowing down to him. In the immediate future, the brothers in fact bowed down to Joseph. In the distant future, the brothers will bow down to Judah, submitting to him.

Jacob pictures Judah as a lion that devours its prey and which is dangerous when roused.

In that the scepter and the ruler's staff will not depart from him, Judah will be the tribe of kings. Although the phrase “until tribute comes” is difficult to translate, it applies to the rise of the monarchy in the tribe of Judah. At some point, the monarchy will reach a climax.

The reign of the final king coming from Judah will be universal, calling for the “obedience of all the peoples.”

The animals identified as a foal and a donkey's colt would be royal mounts. The king coming from Judah will be prosperous: he will tie his animals to the “choice” vine, upon which his animals can feed, and will wash his garments in costly wine instead of water.

Washing his robes in the blood of grapes, the king will be a blood-stained warrior.

The description of the king's eyes (“darker than wine”) and teeth (“whiter than milk”) speak of his attractiveness and power.

## Why Judah?

Why are Reuben, Simeon, and Levi demoted for their sins but not Judah? Morally, Judah failed in multiple ways, culminating when he had sex with a woman he thought to be a prostitute who was in actuality Tamar, his daughter-in-law. Judah was honest about his failure, repented, and sacrificed himself for his father and his brothers, offering to take the place of one of them.

Judah thus serves a fitting forerunner for the first king to come from the tribe of Judah: David. David was called a man after the Lord's own heart not in his moral purity (he failed with Bathsheba just as Judah failed with Tamar) but in his remarkable capacity to confront the truth, even hard truths about himself, and repent.

If we want to be fully available to the Lord, we, like Judah and David, must be willing to confront the truth, even hard truths about ourselves, repent, and sacrifice for others.

## Deepest fulfillment

Judah and David are forerunners of the final king to emerge from the tribe of Judah: Jesus of Nazareth. Jacob's words concerning the future of the tribe of Judah find their deepest and final fulfillment in Jesus, the Messiah.

If Judah's brothers will praise him, all followers of Jesus, and even all creation, will praise Jesus, who is God in the flesh (Hebrews 1:8, Revelation 5:9).

If Judah's hand shall be on the neck of his enemies, God, through Jesus, "disarmed" Satan and his demons and "put them to open shame, by triumphing over them" (Colossians 2:15).

If Judah's brothers will bow before him, "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow" (Philippians 2:10).

If Judah is likened to a lion, Jesus is called "the lion of the tribe of Judah" (Revelation 5:5).

If the scepter and ruler's staff shall not depart from Judah, the writer of Hebrews says of Jesus, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, / the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom" (Hebrews 1:8).

If Judah will receive the obedience of the peoples, Jesus commands his disciples to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19).

If Judah will ride a royal mount, Jesus' approach to Jerusalem evokes these words from the prophet Zechariah: "Behold, your king is coming to you, / humble, and mounted on a donkey, / on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden" (Matthew 21:5).

If Judah will be able tie his animals to the choice vine, Jesus turned water into wine (John 2:1-11).

If Judah will wash his garments in wine, the blood of grapes, Jesus is "clothed in a robe dipped in blood" and will "tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty" (Revelation 19:13-15).

If Judah's appearance will speak of his attractiveness and power, Jesus' eyes "were like a flame of fire," "his face shone like the sun," and "his clothes became white as light" (Revelation 1:14, Matthew 17:2).

## Anticipating Christ

Each word spoken by Jacob concerning Judah, almost two millennia before the coming of Christ, beautifully anticipates the coming of Christ.

If the Hebrew Scriptures so exquisitely envisioned the first coming of Christ, in ways Jacob himself couldn't begin to imagine, then we can have confidence that the New Testament exquisitely envisions the second coming of Christ in ways that we can't begin to imagine. Just as we can now look back at Genesis 49 and marvel, one day we will look back at the New Testament and marvel.

Personally, I can't wait for the day when the Spirit cracks open all the biblical texts that I have only begun to penetrate and shows me the jaw-dropping intricacy of God's story. On the one hand, I wonder if I'll say, "I had no idea!" On the other hand, I wonder if I'll say, "That makes all the sense in the world!" My guess is I'll say both.

The "days to come" are coming, and if they are, then we can marvel—and worship—even now. In light of Jacob's words, we can revel in Jesus Christ our Lord. As the old hymn goes, "I am his, and he is mine."

Next, Jacob turns his attention to Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Asher, and Naphtali.

## Future prosperity

### Genesis 49:13-21:

**"Zebulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea; he shall become a haven for ships, and his border shall be at Sidon. "Issachar is a strong donkey, crouching between the sheepfolds. 15 He saw that a resting place was good, and that the land was pleasant, so he bowed his shoulder to bear, and became a servant at forced labor. 16 "Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel. 17 Dan shall be a serpent in the way, a viper by the path, that bites the horse's heels so that his rider falls backward. 18 I wait for your salvation, O Lord. 19 "Raiders shall raid Gad, but he shall raid at their heels. 20 "Asher's food shall be rich, and he shall yield royal delicacies. 21 "Naphtali is a doe let loose that bears beautiful fawns.**

The central theme of the brief, cryptic prophecies in the Genesis 49:13-21, 27, is the future prosperity of the tribes. As he speaks, Jacob feels what he is saying in a personal way and prays, "I wait for your salvation, O Lord." He is well aware that many forces are working against the future he envisions, not least some of the forces evident in his sons. Jacob speaks of the future he believes in, but he can't make it happen. Only the Lord can make it happen. Therefore, Jacob speaks—and waits.

Many forces working against the future the Scriptures envision, not least forces that seem to be strangely at work in our families and in our churches, so we know: we can't make it happen. We need the Lord. We wait for your salvation, O Lord.

Finally, Jacob turns his attention to Joseph and Benjamin.

## Temporary preeminence

**Genesis 49:22-27:**

**“Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring; his branches run over the wall. 23 The archers bitterly attacked him, shot at him, and harassed him severely, 24 yet his bow remained unmoved; his arms were made agile by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob (from there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel), 25 by the God of your father who will help you, by the Almighty who will bless you with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that crouches beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb. 26 The blessings of your father are mighty beyond the blessings of my parents, up to the bounties of the everlasting hills. May they be on the head of Joseph, and on the brow of him who was set apart from his brothers. 27 “Benjamin is a ravenous wolf, in the morning devouring the prey and at evening dividing the spoil.”**

Jacob’s words to Joseph, in contrast to his words to Judah, have a near-term, not a far-term, fulfillment. Joseph is the leader of the brothers, but Judah will be the leader of the tribes.

Joseph is fruitful and expands his territory: he has stored up grain and settled his family in the best of the land. Joseph is resilient, having withstood the attacks of his brothers and Potiphar’s wife. The Lord, called the Mighty One of Jacob, the Shepherd, and the Stone of Israel is with Joseph and his brothers to help them.

The verb “blesses” and the noun “blessings” appear six times in two verses. The Lord blesses Joseph so that he can bless his brothers, providing for them in a time of famine, relocating them to Egypt, and setting the stage for the future of the tribes. Joseph’s temporary preeminence prepares the way for Judah’s permanent preeminence—more particularly, the permanent preeminence of the lion of Judah.

Joseph, then, is like Joseph the not-quite father of Jesus, who sets the stage for his not-quite Son, who is the Son of God. We too, are like Joseph son of Jacob and like Joseph the not-quite father of Jesus: at best, we set the stage for Jesus.

Insofar as God blesses us with fruitfulness, with a certain place, with resilience, with ministry opportunities, within the short time span of our earthly lives, he does so in order that we might exalt Christ and prepare the world for the return of Christ and the consummation of the kingdom of God.

Next, the narrator clarifies for us what Jacob just did.

## Blessing twelve tribes

**Genesis 49:28:**

**All these are the twelve tribes of Israel. This is what their father said to them as he blessed them, blessing each with the blessing suitable to him.**

In case we didn’t know what Jacob was doing, the narrator tells us. He wasn’t so much speaking to twelve men as he was to twelve tribes—the twelve tribes of Israel. This is the first time in the Scriptures we hear of the twelve tribes of Israel. When Jesus called twelve disciples, he was reforming Israel.

What was Jacob doing? He was blessing the twelve tribes, and he was blessing them in a way that was particularly suited to each of them. The apparent anti-blessings to Reuben, Simeon, and Levi are in fact blessings, suitable to each tribe, and contribute to the coming of the Messiah and the submission of the nations to him.

As we come to know people, we can bless them with words that are suitable to them and help them serve the Lord and contribute to the coming of Christ and the submission of all nations to him. Parents especially can do this for their children.

A few years after I started teaching the Scriptures and shepherding high school and college students, several people approached me and wanted me to know that they saw a certain gift in me. Some of them even encouraged me to leave journalism and become a pastor, which in the end is exactly what I did. They blessed me with a blessing suitable to me.

After blessing the tribes, Jacob has one more thing to say to his sons before he dies.

## Burial instructions

Genesis 49:29-33:

**Then he commanded them and said to them, “I am to be gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, 30 in the cave that is in the field at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess as a burying place. 31 There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife. There they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife, and there I buried Leah— 32 the field and the cave that is in it were bought from the Hittites.” 33 When Jacob finished commanding his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed and breathed his last and was gathered to his people.**

Jacob wants to be buried not in Egypt, where he’s living now, but in Canaan, which the Lord promised to Abraham’s descendants. He has a specific place in mind, the land Abraham purchased in order to bury Sarah, his wife. Although the land had been offered to Abraham as a gift, he insisted on paying for it (Genesis 23:4-20). Abraham’s insistence on purchasing land and Jacob’s insistence on being buried there both represent faith in the Lord and what he promises. By insisting for a burial in Canaan, Jacob is charging his sons to believe in the Lord.

It looks as if the Lord had just one more thing for Jacob to do, blessing and charging his sons, because when he’s finished doing so, he dies. Just before he dies, Jacob is able to gather all his sons in order to bless them and urge faith upon them. What a way to go!

Balaam, a pagan, has this assessment of Jacob’s death: “Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his!” (Numbers 23:10)

## Get to know the Lord

What do you want to do before your time is up? Let me offer an answer. Actually, let me offer two answers—one for those who are younger and another for those who are older. (I’ll let you figure out which category you’re in, younger or older, and if you fit into both categories!)

To those who are younger, get to know the Lord as well as you possibly can. We see in Genesis 49 a glimpse of the exquisite way in which the biblical story culminates

in Christ. If the story can take your breath away, how much more the one in whom the story culminates?

Start getting to know the Lord now. Make it your lifelong quest to know him better. I can promise you this: It will not be easy. You may be plagued by doubt and haunted by the fear of missing out. I can also promise you this: Knowing the Lord is worth everything you can give it. In his presence there is “fullness of joy”; at his right hand are “pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11). Do not turn back. Never give up.

Now, there are many ways to go about this, and we teach about these ways all the time, so I’m not going into them now, except to offer one suggestion that emerges from Genesis 49: Listen to those who have walked with the Lord for a long time. Jacob’s sons gathered to him, and they listened to him. Joseph listened, because when he was about to die, he made a similar request to that of his father. Also, ask questions. Read the writings those who know the Lord well. Learn whatever you can.

## Proclaim his greatness

To those who are older, pass on what you know about knowing the Lord to others, especially to your loved ones and to those who are younger.

You may not be able to do everything you want to do before your time is up, but you can do this. As long as there is breath in your lungs, you can proclaim the greatness of knowing the Lord.

You can do this in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, depending on who you’re with. Jacob’s request to be buried in the cave in the land of Canaan was a subtle but powerful, and personal, statement of faith.

Do not complain about the younger generation, as some older people are wont to do. Instead, do what Jacob did: bless the younger generation. Tell them how great it is to know the Lord.

Listen to the heart of the psalmist:

**O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. 18 So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to another generation, your power to all those to come. O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to**

**another generation, your power to all those to come (Psalm 71:17-18).**

## **Marching orders**

Not long after I began as a pastor at PBC, we were planning a pastoral trip to a dangerous place. Doug Goins, one of our pastors who has since gone to be with the Lord, was leading the trip. The trip was originally suggested by Ray Miller, a retired U.S. Army general. Ray was a part of our church and in his eighties at the time.

Ray took Doug by the arm, looked him in the eye, and said, “You have to trust the Lord!” Simple words. Anyone who knows the Lord could have said them. But in that they came from a man who had walked with the Lord for such a long time, they carried a certain weight. Ray spoke as if he expected Doug to follow orders!

We were all blessed by Ray’s simple, strong charge. It turned out to be an amazing trip, which set the stage for several more amazing trips to that part of the world. A few years later, I found myself in a field in that part of the world preaching the gospel to a crowd of 1,000 people one night, 3,000 people the next night, and 5,000 people the final night.

You have to trust the Lord.

## **It’s only a matter of time**

It’s been a hard nine months in our family. In that time, Karen lost her sister and her mother, and, on May 20, just a week and a half ago, I lost my father, who was 94. He suffered a stroke, lapsed into unconsciousness for a week, and died.

One night, in the last week of my father’s life, I sat by his bed and worked on this sermon. As I did so, I told him what I was thinking and writing. As I reflected on Jacob’s blessings to his sons, I thanked my father for all the ways he had blessed me, his son. He gave my two brothers and me a great life and he left us with great stories. My father was unable to do anything in the week before he died, but maybe the Lord had one more thing for me to do before he died, because the morning after I sat by his bedside, he breathed his last and was gathered to his people.

In conclusion, I’d like to read from a letter that Karen’s mother, Paula, wrote to her friends and family just before she died. Our daughters, Christina and Bethany, read it at her funeral. Her words reflect the words of Jacob to his sons. These are words of blessing:

*These are my last words to you. I am saying goodbye to my friends and family.*

*Thanks for being with me here on earth. I hope that remembering the times we spent together will bring you, as it does me, pleasant thoughts. I don’t mind, and I understand, if some of you grieve and sadly miss me for a while, but I want you to know that all my life was a prologue, with many trials and tribulations and wonderful, joyful happenings.*

*Through it all, I always knew . . . that God was watching and waiting in the wings until this day when I could leave with him—to be with him again. I have always waited for this day—looked forward to this time to leave this earthly life to be with God.*

*I started my life feeling lonely. I never lost that lonely feeling. Yet each person I met or spent time with added so much pleasure to my life. I loved you all! Everyone—each with your special ways. My love had no exceptions.*

*Goodbye for now. I leave for a better place with more family and friends who went before me—and my heavenly Father to greet me. How I missed them. I will be so happy to see them again.*

*Goodbye for now. I hope to see you again.*

*With love I leave you.*

*Your friend, Paula.*

And at the end of Hamilton, Eliza sings to Alexander, “Oh, I can’t wait to see you again / It’s only a matter of time.”<sup>4</sup>

## **Endnotes**

1. Original Broadway Cast of *Hamilton*. “*Hamilton: An American Musical*.” Track 23 on Disc 2. Atlantic Records, 2015, compact disc.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.

