

Text: Genesis 49:13-15

Title: "The promises of Zebulun and Issachar"

Time: 11/8/09 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: The text before us has played a role in American history. When our presidents are inaugurated, they take their oath of office with their right hand raised and their left hand on a Bible. That Bible has often been opened to a favorite passage of the president being inaugurated.

This tradition comes from the fact that our first President was sworn into office in this manner. I am told that Washington simply opened the Bible at random and picked the prophecy of Zebulun without a lot of thought or consideration. Clearly, our country has been blessed with some wonderful coastline that has been a haven for many ships full of weary immigrants. Perhaps Washington's selection was prophetic after all.

A parallel passage to the one we are focusing on this morning is Moses's blessing on Zebulun and Issachar, where we find some of the same themes Jacob emphasizes, and here we also see that the promised blessings of Zebulun and Issachar go together in an important way (Deut. 33:18-19).

A sermon called "The Blessings of Issachar and Zebulun" was preached on Election Day, November 19, 1719 before the Deputies of the Massachusetts General Court, by Benjamin Colman. Benjamin Colman was later the one responsible for publishing and popularizing the early signs of awakening that came to Northampton, MA under the ministry of Jonathan Edwards in the 1730's. He was a leader of the New Lights in Boston as the pastor of the wealthy Brattle Street Church.

His message on that Election Day to his Boston neighbors emphasized the importance of unity between rich merchants like Zebulun, and poor farmers like Issachar. Even in the early days of this country's founding, class envy was a danger to freedom, which God's men needed to address.

The unity of merchants and farmers is certainly one lesson of the blessings of Zebulun and Issachar, but on a higher plain, these promises are less about the unity of differing social classes than they are about the way a sovereign God deals with His people. In a certain sense, these promises tell us more that is significant about the One making the promises than they do about the two tribes who received the promise from Jacob that day.

I want to focus our attention on three themes in that regard from the passage this morning:

I. Promised land – God's sovereign power to bless (v. 13).

Illustration: The Chrysler car company just announced its 5-year recovery plan as the recent recipient of 12 billion dollars worth of tax-payer money. One author for Forbes magazine wrote an article assessing the plan under the title "Chrysler's Big, Big Dreams" [http://www.forbes.com/2009/11/04/fiat-chrysler-cars-business-autos.html?feed=rss_business]. His point in the article is that plans are different than dreams, and he suggests that parts of Chrysler's "plan" may be better described as their "dream." He claims that past experience with this car company proves that the best laid plans of corporate executives are often little more than a hope that some dreams will come true.

Application: When God pronounces a blessing on His people, it is a sovereign unstoppable plan, not a dream that we

hope may come true. The statement Jacob makes to Zebulun in this passage is an amazingly optimistic statement. The promise says that Zebulun will be in a position to be a trading partner with Sidon some day.

Sidon was the Phoenician leader in maritime affairs. During the days of the fulfillment of this promise under the conquests of Joshua, Sidon was called Great Sidon (Josh. 11:8), comparable to our own "Big Apple." By way of contrast, Zebulun did not have much to show for as he stood beside his father's deathbed. Yet Jacob could see what Zebulun could not; God had a plan to bless Him, and that plan could not be stopped.

This was more than a fanciful dream, but it was a plan that took some time and preparation. Zebulun did not become the wealthy trading partner of Phoenicia over night. God prepared his people for this blessing, and when it came they were ready for it. We see some evidence from the history of the tribe of Zebulun that indicates that God had well-prepared them for His blessing:

1. Zebulun was known as a selflessly courageous tribe (Jud. 5:18).

The people of Zebulun demonstrated their readiness for the rich blessing of God in their willingness to live selflessly for causes that were greater than they were. The Apostle Paul tells us of one such cause for us today in Acts 20:24, where he tells his Ephesian pastor friends:

"But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus,

to testify the gospel of the grace of God.” Living for the gospel is more important than living for self.

Are you ready for the blessings of our sovereign God as one who is living for the cause of the gospel, which you count dearer and greater than even your own life? This is what it means to take up our cross and follow Him. It is what it means to lose our lives for Christ’s sake. It is normal Christianity.

2. Zebulun was known as a singularly loyal tribe (1 Chron. 12:33).

These men were especially prepared for God’s blessing in that they did not have a divided heart. They went to help David with a singular purpose. This is very much unlike Jacob’s description of Reuben, which we saw a few weeks ago. Reuben was unstable as water. The men of Zebulun had an undivided loyalty to God’s will. How would you describe yourself – unstable or undivided?

3. Zebulun was known as a tribe of humble people (2 Chron. 30:11).

In the days of the northern kingdom divided from Judah, to celebrate the Passover with Hezekiah and the southern two tribes was tantamount to an admission that the ten tribes of the north had been wrong for a very long time. That admission was rare in the history of the north, and it took humility.

Readiness to admit where we are wrong and acceptance of needed correction are keys to God’s blessing. Are we known for that humble teachable spirit, or have we impressed others as self-defensive and counter-critical when

they have tried to help? The greatly humbled Apostle Peter encourages us: “Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you” (1 Pet. 5:5-7). That humility was the key to Peter’s restored usefulness for his Savior.

And so we have the promised land, God’s sovereign power to bless. Zebulun knew this blessing from the Lord.

II. The promised labor – God’s sovereign power to judge (vv. 14-15).

Illustration: My appreciation for the donkey rose this pass week when I saw an article entitled, “Marines, Mules, and the Middle East: How the U.S. Military is Training to Use Pack Animals in Afghanistan.” The article describes a unique training facility called the Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center in Bridgeport, CA:

“The 47,000-acre training facility is set on the Humboldt-Toiyabe national Forest amid jagged, 10,000-foot-high peaks. The terrain, analogous to the mountainous regions in Afghanistan, is a prime location to teach high-altitude combat skills. The animal-packers course teaches soldiers how to use beasts of burden to carry weapons and supplies for missions in Afghanistan. . . .

“Donkeys and mules are bred for strength and stamina. A one-thousand pound mule can carry a load of one-third its weight or more. Soldiers at the training center are taught how to use the animals in situations where U.S. military

technology is infeasible. In Afghanistan's mountains, there are few navigable roads, the air is thin, and Humvees and helicopters often cannot effectively traverse the terrain."

Application: There is a lot to like about donkeys, and the prophecy promised Issachar referencing a donkey includes much blessing. We read of Issachar's strength and his ability to work the land in these verses. Much of the history of Issachar bears this out. My favorite description of Issachar is what is said about them in 1 Chron. 12:32. There they are described as "men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do." We need men like that today. The times are something we should endeavor to understand as we seek to do God's will.

But there is a contrast in this oracle that is unavoidable. What begins well for Issachar does not end well (v. 15b). The phrase, "a servant for tribute" is a very harsh term, which indicates that Issachar, the proud and free farmer who experienced the rest and pleasantness of the promised land, would one day be forced into compulsory labor or slavery.

Ultimately, this happened for all of the ten northern tribes when God judged them with the Assyrian conquest of the north. The reason God did this is illustrated well by the life of one of the northern kings who was from Issachar, Baasha (1 Kings 15:25-34). On the whole, the north lost its rest and its pleasant blessing in the land of promise because it did evil in the sight of the Lord, and the sovereign holy God, with whom we have to do, is a God who justly judges sin. We must fear and obey Him.

But tragic as this history was, judgment at the hands of Assyria is not the final word on the history of Zebulun and Issachar.

III. The promised light – God’s sovereign power to save (Isa. 9:1-7).

Application: We read Matthew’s description of the fulfillment of this wonderful prophecy in Matthew 4 this morning. Judgment and darkness and the shadow of death is not where the story of Zebulun and Issachar and Naphtali ends. No, “the people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.”

This light shines in the birth of a child, who is God incarnate. He brings everlasting peace as the Prince of Peace, because he came to break the burden born by the shoulder of those condemned and judged for their sin (v. 4). He is the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, and the Wonderful Counselor.

Conclusion: Are you under the burden of that condemnation this morning? Do you sit in darkness in need of the light of Christ? Because of His work at Bethlehem and Calvary, you can have the light of His saving grace and eternal peace and forgiveness shine upon you. We need only open our eyes and look believing. God’s final word for the sinful lands of the kingdoms of the north is His final word for our sinful hearts this morning.

His promise is, “Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Do you need to do that this morning?

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching