You Will Receive Your Just Reward

49 Jacob called for his sons and said to them, Gather around so I may tell you what will happen in the days to come. 2 Assemble yourselves, and listen, you sons of Jacob; pay attention to your father Israel. 3 Reuben, you are my first born, my might and the beginning of my strength; excelling in honor, and excelling in power. 4 Boiling over like water, you shall not have the pre-eminence; because you went to your father's bed; and you defiled it. He went up to my couch.

5 Simeon and Levi are brothers; their swords are weapons of violence. 6 O my soul, do not enter into their council; let me not join their assembly; for in their anger they killed a man, and in their self-will they hamstrung an ox. 7 Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce; and their wrath, for it was cruel. I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel.

8 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; you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down, like a lioness—who dares to rouse him? 10 The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs, to him shall be the obedience of the nations. 11 He will tether his donkey to a vine, his donkey's colt to the choice branch. He will wash his garments in wine, and his robe in the blood of grapes. 12 His eyes shall be red with wine, and his teeth white with milk.

13 Zebulun shall live by the seashore; and he shall become a haven for ships. His border shall reach to Sidon. 14 Issachar is a strong donkey, lying down between the sheepfolds. 15 He saw that rest was good, and that the land was pleasant; so he bowed his shoulder to bear the load, and became a servant subjected to hard labor. 16 Dan shall judge his people, as one of the tribes of Israel. 17 Dan shall be a serpent on the roadway, a viper along the path, that bites the horse's heels so that his rider tumbles backward. 18 I have waited for your salvation, O Jehovah. 19 Gad will be attacked by a band of raiders; but he shall repel them and put them to flight. 20 Asher's food shall be rich, he will produce delicacies fit for a king. 21 Naphtali is a doe set free who bears beautiful fawns.

22 Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine by a spring; his branches spill over the wall. 23 With bitterness, the archers attacked him, and shot at him, and persecuted him. 24 But his bow remained steady, and his arms were made strong by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob, by the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, 25 by the God of your father who shall help you, by the Almighty who shall bless you with blessings from heaven above, blessings from the deep that lies below, blessings of the breasts and of the womb. 26 The blessings bestowed upon your father have exceeded the blessings of my ancestors, reaching unto the utmost heights of the ancient mountains, they shall be bestowed upon the head of Joseph, and upon the brow of him who was separated from his brothers. 27 Benjamin is a ravenous wolf; in the morning he shall devour the prey, and at evening he shall divide the spoil.

28 All these are the twelve tribes of Israel; and this is what their father spoke to them and how he blessed them. He gave to each the blessing appropriate to him. (Gen. 49:1-28)
Introduction

There is the story of a medieval king who had his servants place a great stone in the middle of a well-traveled road. Then the servants hid in the bushes, watching to see who would remove the stone. Many of the king's subjects passed along that main thoroughfare only to detour around the stone. Some deemed themselves too busy to move the stone, others viewed such a task as being below their dignity.

Finally, a poor peasant came along. Upon seeing the stone he laid down his own load and proceeded to move the stone, opening the way for the travelers who would come after him. When he had rolled away the heavy stone he noticed a large sum of glittering pieces of gold lying in the middle of the road. When he stooped down to inspect them he discovered a note, which read, “The gold pieces belong to the man who removes the stone.”

The poor peasant was amply rewarded for his deed of kindness; and conversely, the other travelers lost out on the reward (Mrs. Knight’s Book of Illustrations, Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. Grand Rapids MI, p.288.) In each case, they received their just reward; they received what their deeds deserved.

When Jacob issues his final blessing and prophecy concerning his twelve sons, we find the same principle at work: each one receives his just reward. This present passage of Genesis exemplifies the truth that even for those within the covenant of grace, there will be a final reckoning, as the Apostle Paul informs the Corinthians,

> ... we make it our goal, ... to be pleasing to him; 10 because we all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ; so that each one may receive the reward he deserves for the deeds done while living in the body, whether good or bad. (2 Cor. 5:9-10)

Because there will be a day of final accounting, know for certain that you will receive your just reward.

I. You will Receive a Just Reward for Your Misdeeds

Reuben is rebuked for his immoral conduct:

> Reuben, you are my first born, my might and the beginning of my strength, excelling in honor, and excelling in power. 4 Boiling over like water, you shall not have the pre-eminence; because you went to your father's bed; and you defiled it. He went up to my couch. (Gen. 49:3-4)

Jacob addresses his son, Reuben, with a tone of shock, disbelief, and indignation. He is referring to the incident described in Genesis 35:22, “While Israel was living in that land, Reuben went and slept with Bilhah his father's concubine; and Israel heard about it.” Here was an act of immorality with one of his father’s concubines,
an act that Reuben thought was concealed and had gone undetected. Although Reuben occupied the place of pre-eminence by virtue of being the first born, in consequence of his grievous act of sin he is deprived of that honor and position.

Note the following with regard to Reuben. First, his hidden, unconfessed, transgression is exposed and is met with righteous indignation, this is in accordance with the teaching of Hebrews 4:13, “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” Second, Reuben is deprived of the honor that was his possession, that honor is forfeited. But, thirdly, Reuben is not disinherited; he is still a member of the household and has a part in the inheritance.

Simeon and Levi are rebuked for their act of vengeance:

Simeon and Levi are brothers; their swords are weapons of violence. 6O my soul, do not enter into their council; let me not join their assembly; for in their anger they killed a man, and in their self-will they hamstrung an ox. 7Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce; and their wrath, for it was cruel. I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel. (Gen.49:5-7)

Simeon and Levi are described as being “brothers”—they are of a kindred spirit: that spirit is one of violence and giving free reins to their thirst for vengeance, instead of exercising godly self-control over their anger. Jacob is referring to the incident described in Genesis 34:25-27,

On the third day, when the men were sore due to the circumcision procedure, two of Jacob’s sons, Simeon and Levi, Dinah’s brothers, took their swords, attacked the unsuspecting city, and slaughtered all the males. 26They killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the blade of the sword, took Dinah out of Shechem’s house, and left. 27The sons of Jacob came upon the dead bodies and plundered the city, because those men had defiled their sister. (Gen. 34:25-27)

Here is described their act of vengeance against Shechem for raping their sister, Dinah.

Jacob identified their deed as an act of “self-will” (ves.6b.) He pronounces a curse upon their anger, (because of its uncontrolled and unrighteous expression,) and he confers upon them the shame of being divided in the land of Israel—a perpetual reminder of their unholy alliance in taking vengeance.

Note the following with regard to Simeon and Levi. First, the sin addressed is a sin that they justified instead of acknowledging it to be evil and repenting of it, note Genesis 34:31, where we hear them justify their action with the question, “Should he have treated our sister like a harlot?” Second, their anger is cursed, but the curse is not pronounced upon themselves. Third, they suffer the dishonor of being separated in the portions of the land allotted to them—because they were united in an ungodly spirit, they suffer the shame of having to be separated in
their inheritance. But once again, as was the case with Reuben, they are not disinherited; they each remain in the family and receive an inheritance in the Promised Land.

Issachar is rebuked for his slothfulness:

Issachar is a strong donkey, lying down between the sheepfolds. 15He saw that rest was good, and that the land was pleasant; so he bowed his shoulder to bear the load, and became a servant subjected to hard labor. (Gen. 49:14-15)

Issachar is described as possessing an abundance of (physical) strength; he is “a strong donkey.” But he has no ambition to use his God-given abilities and opportunities. On the contrary, he is indolent, choosing rest and inactivity rather than asserting himself in productive activity. Consequently, he is assigned the position of becoming “a servant subjected to hard labor.”

Note the following with regard to Issachar. First, his particular sin is the failure to use his God-given abilities, opportunities, and gifts. He allows himself to succumb to the temptation of indolence rather than exerting himself in God-honoring fruitful activity—his is the sin of omission. Second, he is rebuked for this ungodly attitude and suffers the dishonor of occupying the position of a menial servant. But, thirdly, like his brothers, Issachar is not disinherited; he forfeits the honor and reward that faithful labor would receive, but he does not forfeit the inheritance of the covenant of grace.

We must recognize that even as Christians we will receive a just reward for our misdeeds. Scripture makes a distinction between hypocrisy and what we may term “culpable spiritual immaturity.” Hypocrisy may be defined as an unconverted life, dominated by the works of the old sinful nature, covered with a thin veneer of Christianity. “Culpable spiritual immaturity” may be defined as a converted life, but one that tolerates or ignores the remnants of the old sinful nature, refusing to see such remnants as unacceptable contradictions to the Christian life. The sons of Jacob mentioned above were all guilty of one form or another of "culpable immaturity."

Scripture teaches that the hypocrite will finally be condemned on the Day of Accounting: “then I will declare to them, I never knew you: depart from me, you workers of iniquity” (Matt. 7:23.) Scripture further teaches that those whose lives are characterized by culpable spiritual immaturity “will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames” (1 Cori. 3:15.) For our spiritual well-being and maturity, let us heed the admonition of the Apostle Peter:

... giving all your effort, add virtue to your faith, and add knowledge to virtue, 6and add self-control to knowledge, and add perseverance to self-control, and add godliness to perseverance, 7and add brotherly affection to godliness, and add love to brotherly affection. 8If you possess these qualities
in increasing measure, they will prevent you from being either useless or unfruitful with regard to the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 

Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to authenticate your calling and election; for by doing these things you will never be lost. By following this course the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be made wide open for you. (2 Pet. 1:5-8,10-11)

II. You will Receive a Just Reward for Your Christ-like Deeds

Judah is rewarded for his courageous and sacrificial leadership:

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. 

Judah is a lion’s cub; you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down, like a lioness—who dares to rouse him? 

The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs, to him shall be the obedience of the nations. 

He will tether his donkey to a vine, his donkey’s colt to the choice branch. He will wash his garments in wine, and his robe in the blood of grape. 

His eyes shall be red with wine, and his teeth white with milk. (Gen. 49:8-12)

Jacob declares that Judah’s brothers shall praise him, honoring him for his role as defender of his people—as seen in his subduing their enemies (vs. 8-9.) Judah is honored for his willingness to offer his own life for the sake of his family. Referring to Jacob’s youngest son, Benjamin, and his taking him to Egypt, Judah said to his father,

Send the boy with me and we will go at once, so that we may live and not die, both we and you and our little children. I myself will guarantee his safety; you can hold me personally responsible for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him here before you, I will bear the blame all my life. (Gen. 43:8-9)

Judah is also honored for his courageous intercession for his brother, Benjamin. Speaking to Joseph as the second in command over Egypt before he made himself known to his brothers, Judah says,

So now, if the boy is not with us when I go back to your servant my father and if my father, whose life is closely bound up with the boy’s life, sees that the boy is not there, he will die. Your servants will bring the gray head of our father down to the grave in sorrow. 

Your servant guaranteed the boy’s safety to my father. I said, If I do not bring him back to you, I will bear the blame before you, my father, all my life. Now then, please let your servant remain here as my lord’s slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers. (Gen. 44:30-33)
Judah receives the honor of possessing the position of pre-eminence that shall finally be exercised by the Messiah (vs. 10); and the honor of receiving abundant blessing in the land of Canaan (vs. 11-12.) Note: The promise, “he will tether his donkey to a vine, his donkey’s colt to the choice branch,” poetically emphasizes the fruitfulness of Judah’s portion in the land. The fruitful grape vines will be so abundantly plentiful in his portion of the land that he does not care if a rambunctious colt pulls on his tether and breaks one of those choice vines.

Note the following with regard to Judah. First, his former sins recorded in Genesis 38, namely, his act of immorality and his failure to fulfill his oath, receive no mention because Judah had acknowledged them and repented of them (Gen. 38:26.) Note, also, that Judah and the rest of the brothers ask for Joseph’s forgiveness for their sins against him: “we beg you, forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father” (Gen. 50:17.) In contrast, Reuben’s noble deed of having spared his brother Joseph when the other brothers intended to kill him (Gen. 37:21-22,) is tarnished by his failure to deal with his “hidden” sin of having committed immorality with his father’s concubine. Secondly, with regard to Judah, we find that he is rewarded for his godly acts of courage.

Joseph is honored for his steadfast faithfulness in the midst of severe trials:

Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine by a spring; his branches spill over the wall. 23With bitterness, the archers attacked him, and shot at him, and persecuted him. 24But his bow remained steady, and his arms were made strong by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob, by the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, 25by the God of your father who shall help you, by the Almighty who shall bless you with blessings from heaven above, blessings from the deep that lies below, blessings of the breasts and of the womb. 26The blessings bestowed upon your father have exceeded the blessings of my ancestors, reaching unto the utmost heights of the ancient mountains, they shall be bestowed upon the head of Joseph, and upon the brow of him who was separated from his brothers. (Gen. 49:22-26)

Joseph is poetically described as a branch of a fruitful vine planted by a spring that serves as an ample supply of water, a vine that climbs over the wall because it is so very vibrant and fruitful (vs. 22.)

Jacob sympathetically acknowledges the ordeals to which Joseph was exposed (vs. 23.) He also acknowledges Joseph’s faithful perseverance in the midst of his ordeals—and attributes his perseverance to the grace of God (vs. 24-25a.) Jacob pronounces upon Joseph the utmost blessing and abundance (vs. 25b-26.)

Note the following with regard to Joseph. First, his perseverance and his faithfulness are attributed to the grace and strength of God; they are not self-produced, not something for which he can take credit. Secondly, nevertheless,
Joseph receives abundant honor, blessing and reward for his faithful Christian life: he receives the reward of grace.

Let us be assured that as Christians we shall, indeed, receive a just—and gracious—reward for our Christ-like deeds. As the writer to the Hebrews reminds us, “God is not unrighteous, he will not forget your work and the love which you demonstrated toward his name” (Heb. 6:10a.) The Apostle Paul expresses this same truth to the Corinthians as follows: “the Lord will bring to light the things hidden in darkness and will reveal the intentions of the hearts, and then each one shall receive from God the praise he deserves” (1 Cor.4:5.) In this instance, “the things hidden in the darkness” are the righteous deeds done for Christ, deeds that went unnoticed and unrewarded in this present world. Likewise, “the intentions of the hearts” are the godly desires and ambitions to serve Christ, which, due to the providence of God, the Christian was unable to carry out—even those unfulfilled desires of Christian service will receive their reward.

Conclusion

As we consider Jacob’s prophecy pronounced upon his sons, we come to see that even for those within the covenant of grace, there shall be a final reckoning. Let us bear in mind the words of 2 Corinthians 5:9-10;

... we make it our goal, ..., to be pleasing to him; [10] because we all must appear before the judgment-seat of Christ; so that each one may receive the reward he deserves for the deeds done while living in the body, whether good or bad. (2 Cor. 5:9-10)

By the grace of God, let us seek to live consistent and fruitful Christian lives.