

00-08-27b

We're ready now to resume our study in Genesis 49. We're looking specifically at verses 13 and 14, the oracle that Jacob delivers, regarding Zebulun and Issachar. And it's a strange place to be if you're looking for something from the Word of God to apply because it doesn't sit right on the surface what the value would be.

But we've begun to decipher this for ourselves by recognizing the symbolism of the Old Testament. When you think, well, they didn't have the Old Testament back in Jacob's day. When Jacob gave this oracle, they didn't have the Psalms, and they didn't have Job, and they didn't have Isaiah, the wicked are like the troubled sea, and so forth.

But we have seen chaotic waters associated with evil in Genesis, haven't we? We saw the flood of Noah. And we know that the people of Israel are not associated with sea trade by nature. When God gave them the land, He gave them the Sea of Galilee, which is going to be a great place for the fishing trade as we know from Jesus' disciples.

But even though the nation of Israel has a coast that was generally populated by Philistines, and they never entirely got rid of the Philistines, and the Philistines were sea peoples that had come down from the areas of what became Greece and Crete and some of those places, came down, and they were the ones with boats. Israel has never been known for shipping, have they? They've always had to hire their shipping. When Solomon was going to complete the construction of the temple, and he and David both arranged with Hiram, king of Tyre, to bring lumber and stuff down, they had to contract that out because Israel has never had a fleet of ships or a navy, so to speak, in ancient times.

But Zebulun is going to go dwell by the haven of the sea. He's going to have outposts and begin to traffic and try to take advantage of commerce from the sea. And the idea there is that what you have in the land is insufficient.

The land that God is giving you, the place flowing with milk and honey, there are going to be some things that you're just not satisfied with, and you want to go to the outside world and import some things. And in order to import, you're going to do the shipping. You're going to get into the seaports and try to make a profit and bring in these exotic things that will stimulate and entertain and appeal to the senses.

And this is Zebulun's opportunity but also Zebulun's weakness. Most of these things can be productive and can be good. There's nothing wrong with plying a trade.

There's nothing wrong with importing and so forth. But if this becomes the source of your downfall, if it becomes your occupation and that thing that you concentrate on to the exclusion of the things of God, it becomes something evil. And it's a dangerous place to be on the border.

The border lands of Israel historically were the first places where they fell into apostasy, where they began to worship the false gods, where they began to intermarry and to follow the practices of the Canaanites and the Amorites and the others who dwelt in that land. So Zebulun dwelling by the haven of the sea and becoming a haven for ships, he's going to be a haven for foreigners because the Israelites don't have ships of their own, so they are going to welcome and enter into agreements and relationships with the foreigners who have these ships and that is a potential danger. And we saw at the conclusion of our first lesson this morning that this is an analogy.

It's a picture of an area where we have to be alert and we have to be watchful. Do we compromise in areas of our life? Do we forge relationships and share borders with those from whom we really should separate? This is a difficult call to make. It's a difficult decision to make in some cases to know when we should turn the other cheek, when we should have the soft answer that turns away wrath, when we should do good to those who hate us and pray for those who spitefully use us and speak the truth in love and take advantage of opportunities when we are around unbelievers or we're around believers who are in error or who are sinning against us and that sort of thing.

And it requires discernment. And I will tell you, I don't always know the answer to that question. Sometimes it takes time to puzzle out and figure is this relationship something I should continue or something I should cut off? On the one hand, we're supposed to be flexible and be tolerant.

If we're a little further along in the faith than another believer, we should be the ones to be strong and to be helpful and to not just cut them adrift and let them go off their own way. But then you also have the passages of Scripture that say if your right hand offends, you cut it off. If your right eye offends, you pluck it out.

And that there are times to cut things off. What is the criteria? How do we know when we should sustain relationships or sustain contact such as Zebulun is going to have here with the wicked evil sea and when we should abstain and separate and put a distance between? Well, there is a simple criteria. At the point that we cannot sustain that relationship or that contact without being dragged into sin, if it causes us to sin, if it causes us to stumble, that is the time to separate.

Not just one failure or one flash of anger or one sin of the tongue. And we know this. We know that there are certain people we can get around, certain groups that we can be in, certain environments that we can expose ourselves to, and every time we fall.

Every single time we stumble. We get dragged into gossip. This is one of the real common areas and it's not often talked about, especially in large churches where you have people mingling here and there and it comes up under the form of prayer requests.

Oh, we really need to pray for so-and-so because here's what's going on in their

marriage and here's what's going on with their children running amok. Oh, at the youth meeting the other night, this and that happened in the back of the bus. We really need to pray.

It's all put under the guise of holiness, but it's just gossip. It's just spreading tales. And you can get in a situation where people subject you to this and you try to change the subject and you say, well, you know, let's talk about something else.

Let's talk about something productive and something honorable and something that's worthwhile. Those things like we have up here on the wall, the things that are pure and noble and lovely and of good report. Think on these things so that the peace of God dwells in your heart.

But instead, these conversations constantly turn to who shot John and who was parked out late in front of somebody else's house. Oh, you know, some money missing from the fund for the widows and orphans or whatever it might be. And every time you just get dragged into this, well, you can get dragged into this with email.

Romy and I were talking on the break about getting dragged into stuff with email. And you start getting all these things. Be my friend.

If you love Jesus, forward this to ten people you know. That, by the way, do not ever get stuck with this prove your love for Jesus by forwarding email. If you want to talk about a shallow, insufficient understanding of spiritual things, if you think that you're more spiritual because you forward email, you need to turn your computer off and open your Bible because that is not... well, don't get me started.

There are things that drag us into sin. We have the same thing. Sometimes it says resist the devil and he will flee from you.

And then you have another passage that says flee youthful lusts. Well, when do you stand and resist the arrows with your shield of faith and your breastplate of righteousness? And when do you flee? Well, God will give us the strength and we can quench the fiery darts of the wicked one in a lot of cases. But there are some cases where we do not have the maturity.

We do not have the strength. We have not been called by God to stand in that gap. Every successful army knows when to advance, when to attack, and when to conduct a strategic withdrawal.

And that's what we call it in the Marine Corps. We don't call it a retreat. We call it a strategic withdrawal.

We're going to advance in another direction. And we don't need that piece of ground. Didn't need it anyway.

You can have it. We're busy over here. We're going to go over this way.

We have to have that sense in our spiritual life. And we all know, we can think about people with whom we have conversations, situations that we can get in. Some people should not have cable.

Some people should not have cable TV piped into their house because on that cable comes across things that drag us down, things that get into the Judah side of our soul where your passions get inflamed. And you start seeing things and hearing language and seeing situations even when they're only suggested and they don't actually show the graphic. It corrupts our soul.

It deflects our vision and our concentration into areas that are not productive. You have to separate. Yank that cable out.

You won't miss it, I promise you. There are plenty of other things in life. Just stick an antenna in your attic like we've got and you'll just get little news here and there.

Watch one or two shows for entertainment. Some people throw all the TVs out of their house. Cut off the TV.

It offends me. I think that if you need to, that's fine. But I think it is a better challenge for your soul to have a TV or two in your house and learn to develop the discipline to keep it in its place.

It can be very educational. Some of the best programs I've ever seen on PBS and so forth. Very helpful in keeping abreast of what's going on in the world and so forth.

But Survivor? Give me a break. Or this other thing, Big Brother. Stick cameras in the house and be a voyeur.

They have laws against peeping Toms and things, but then they'd make a TV show out of it. We had a staff retreat. No, what was it? What were we doing? Where was I? Where everybody stopped what they were doing because they had to see the ending episode of that Survivor show.

Had to find out who was the last one on the island. I forget where I was now. But you would have thought, it reminded me of the Kennedy assassination.

Everybody had to go get to a TV to see what was going to happen. And I thought, gracious sakes, what is my interest in what... And it turned out to be some gay guy, I guess, was the winner of this island thing. I saw it on the news.

Anyway, we have all kinds of borders with Sidon. We have all kinds of contact with the wicked, troubled sea, just like Zebulun. And the challenge for us is to know when to stand and resist the devil with our shield of faith, with our breastplate of righteousness,

our helmet of salvation.

And when we need to get out of there and separate, cut off the hand or the foot or the eye that offends and causes us to stumble. That is the criteria. If we find a pattern of sin and a pattern of failure in being in certain situations, getting around certain people, having access to certain things, that's the time to flee.

That's the time to separate. Maybe all the TVs do need to go out of the house. If you can't watch it without being dragged into sin, then get it out of the house.

If you have a ritual of going to the movies every other week or something and the movies you wind up seeing corrupt your thinking, stop that ritual. Develop a new one. Go to the library.

Read to each other. Spend some time in the lost art of conversation. It's ten times better conversing with people than watching a movie with them.

But this is Zebulun. His border adjoins Sidon. It can be a place of production and a place of profit.

It can also be a place to be dragged down. It's very interesting to trace the later history which we'll do here in a minute. Let's take a look at verse 14.

Issachar is a strong donkey lying down between two burdens. He saw that rest was good and that the land was pleasant. He bowed his shoulder to bear a burden and became a band of slaves.

Well, there are word plays and things going on here in the Hebrew that I won't go into. But the strong donkey, we've already talked about the donkey up in verse 11. Binding his donkey to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine.

A donkey, as we saw with Judah, is a sign of prosperity. They were a valuable animal. They were the pack animals.

I told you about seeing these artillery pieces being taken over the mountains on the backs of donkeys, even in World War I when we had motorized things. They were a valuable animal. They were a sign of wealth.

You go over to the book of Job. Job has all of these she-asses and so forth. These are donkeys.

And it was a sign of his great wealth. I think that's Job 1.3 or 1.4 where it talks about that. But here, Issachar is a strong donkey.

And before you say anything else, it doesn't say he's a wild ox or he's a bull of Bashan or anything else. It says he's a donkey. And this means he is owned.

He's bearing someone else's burden. And he lies down between two burdens. You try to balance the load and put something on each side.

And he lies down. Well, here's the question. Why would a donkey lie down? You've seen these little humorous things in movies where you have a donkey or a jackass or something and they're trying to pull it and it won't go.

It just sits down on its haunches and won't budge at the critical time when you really need it to move. It doesn't. Well, the question here is why is this donkey lying down? Is this out of fatigue? Is it just tired? It doesn't want to go any further? Is it stubborn and just contrary? It doesn't want to go? You try to make it go and it lies down? Is it lazy? Is it just not concerned with where the burden has to go and lying down? Why is this donkey lying down between its two burdens? Well, it tells us in the next verse, he saw that rest was good and that the land was pleasant.

These words for good and pleasant, keep your finger here in Genesis 49 and turn back with me to Genesis 3. Genesis 3, verse 6. When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eye, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her and he ate. This was the great downfall of the human race.

Looking at something, seeing that it's good and pleasant and choosing it at the expense of obedience to the Word of God. Here in Genesis 49, verse 15, Issachar, the donkey, the burden bearer, that's his lot in life. That's his function.

That's his identity. He's the burden bearer. But he plops down.

Why? Rest is good. The land is pleasant. Historically speaking, what happens to the tribe of Issachar in later history, if you get down into the period of the judges and the period after Joshua, is that in the tribal region, this is up in the area of Shunem.

If you picture the land of Palestine in your mind, you've got the land there shaped kind of like an upside-down keystone, a little narrower at the top than it is at the bottom. You've got the Sea of Galilee up toward the north. You've got the Jordan River and then the Dead Sea down below.

Well, southwest of the Sea of Galilee, that's kind of between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea, a little bit south, a little bit west in there, this is the region of Issachar. And in that region, that includes the town of Shunem. We've seen Shunem, the Shunemite woman and her relationship to the prophet there in Kings.

Later on, Jesus, when he's passing by and they're having the funeral, the woman with her son that's on the stretcher, they're carrying him out to bury him, and Jesus raises him from the dead. All of this is in the region of Shunem. Well, this is in the region of Issachar.

And not in the Bible, but in some extra-biblical records. They've done some archaeology at Tel El Amarna. It's a very famous archaeological site.

They found letters that had been written between various kings in Palestine in the days just preceding and during the time of Saul. Right around that time, the Tel El Amarna letters were written. And they're written on pieces of broken pots, what they call astraka, O-S-T-R-A-C-A.

But they used to use these like notepads. You'd break a big jug and it's just a slightly curved piece of clay. You could write on it with ink.

Well, they found a whole pile of these letters. It was royal correspondence between these city-state kings and letters that they sent down to Egypt and letters that they got back from Egypt and so forth. And in these letters, the king of Megiddo mentions that there are work gangs, what they call corvees, C-O-R-V-E-E.

And these are indentured. These are people who have indentured themselves or agreed to serve as a slave in exchange for their room and board, if you will. And he says that the people from this region of Issachar and also some from Zebulun have indentured themselves.

They've made themselves corvee slaves. And Roland Deveau, who's one of the most famous scholars and archaeologists in the Holy Land from about 100 years ago, this is what he said about that. He said, the people of Issachar chose to live as serfs on good land rather than as shepherds or herdsmen in a poorer district.

The land was good. They had security. They would be taken care of.

And so they traded away their freedom for a good circumstance. They traded away their liberty. And they also gave away their opportunity because now they have to do what they're told.

They're like the donkey that puts its shoulder to the burden and becomes a band of slaves. They voluntarily became slaves in exchange for security and the pleasant land, living in the good land. They could have eked out a living.

I was driving around in West Texas not long ago and I had so much admiration for the people who went out, the pioneers like the Ingalls family, Laura Ingalls Wilder and some of the rest of those who 100 or more years ago came out to some of these barren lands and scratched a living out of the soil, dug their own wells, made their own soap, created their own food by growing things and raising animals. A very, very difficult life full of hardship. But they chose that instead of living back in the towns because they wanted the freedom.

They wanted the opportunity. They accepted the challenge of living on their own out in

these... And we wouldn't have the country that we have today if it were not for those people with that spirit who were willing to endure hardship because there were greater things at stake than just their own personal comfort. Well, this is what Issachar sacrifices.

He's a donkey. He's capable of bearing these burdens on his own, but he sets his burdens down and he's going to put his shoulder to somebody else's load. He's going to enslave himself in exchange for something pleasant.

We often do this. We can become a slave in our employment. We can become a slave to a job or two or three if we let it.

We can be controlled by the need to make a living. We can be controlled and in exchange to have the pleasant things, it can be our consuming passion. There's nothing wrong with making a living.

The Bible says, earn your living by the sweat of your brow. And the New Testament says, work quietly with your hands and support yourself. Don't be a hanger-on and someone who has to be fed with charity and so forth.

We're supposed to work. Many of these things are good. There's nothing wrong with ruling.

There's nothing wrong with being strong and nothing wrong with the priestly function that Levi fulfills. But this oracle from Jacob talks about the pitfalls, the dangers in these different areas. What is the danger when we engage in employment, when we have a vocation or we have a burden to bear? It's that it becomes all-consuming.

It becomes the center of our life. And we look for our pleasant things, the pleasant land and the good land in exchange for our work instead of looking to God. We're relying on ourself and our own efforts and our own relationship with these who have put the burden on us.

And we enslave ourselves. And anything that takes the place of God at the center of our thinking, if we say, well, I'd love to go to church, but my job can't go. I've got to work.

I'd love to spend time. And it's not so much attendance at Bible class. We make that into kind of a symbol for spiritual health.

Well, if I'm going to church, if I'm attending Bible class, then all is well. Really what this gets into is our meditation time, our prayer time. It's one thing to go to Bible class or to know the Word of God or to hear some of it, but it's something else to think about it.

What about Tuesday afternoon and Wednesday evening and Thursday morning and Friday night? Do we do anything with that that we have heard? We need to spend time in

meditation and in reflection. What does that mean to me? Am I falling into the Judah trap? Am I falling into the Simeon and Levi trap? Have I fallen into the Reuben trap? I've got a position of strength, but I'm unstable. To think about the things that we learn requires time and it requires energy.

You can't always do it at the end of the day. I've tried this when I'm just dog tired. I've had my job and had my study and had my family time and I get to 10.30 or 11 o'clock at night and I think well, this would be a good time to kind of pause and reflect.

Well, I wake up the next morning and realize that I fell asleep before I got any reflection or meditation in at all. The morning is an excellent time. David and Daniel both set aside three times a day.

David says evening and morning and evening and at noon will I pray and cry aloud and He will hear my voice in Psalm 55. Daniel, remember he got in trouble and had to go to the lion's den because the princes that were envious of him said look at this Daniel, three times a day he's at his window praying to his God. That time is sacred literally.

It's valuable. We cannot exchange it for work because when we do that we have set down our own burdens and we're picking up someone else's and we're carrying their burdens and we've enslaved ourselves. We've put our well-being and our good and pleasant land ahead of our relationship with God.

And I think that's the danger that's reflected here with Issachar. He's a strong donkey. He's strong, but in a different way than Reuben.

Reuben is strong because he's the beginning of strength. He's the firstborn, but he's unstable. Issachar doesn't have a problem with instability.

He has a problem with motivation. He has a problem with what he's going to work toward. He's working for the good and pleasant land.

We like a good and pleasant social life. We like a good and pleasant financial picture. We like a good and pleasant set of circumstances that we wake up to each morning and retire from each night.

And sometimes we compromise. We say the things that people want to hear at work. We say the things that people want to hear in our family life rather than stick to the principles that define us as believers and as representatives of Jesus Christ.

And when we do that, we're just like old Issachar. It is interesting that the actual territory that's assigned to Issachar in the land, if you go over to Joshua and look at it, Joshua chapter 19, and then look at a map, there is a big mountain range in the middle of Issachar's territory and there is a plain or a valley on each side. The veil of Jezreel is on one side and the veil of Akeslo is on the other.

This is Joshua 19, 17-24 where his territory is defined. And even in the topography of the land, you have this hump in the middle and the flat on either side. It kind of reminds you of a donkey laying down in the middle of the pleasant land.

And it's a reminder every time they looked out their windows, every time they walked down their roads of this oracle, this reminder. Don't let your work define you. Don't enslave yourself to someone else's burdens.

Sometimes in our job, we take on other people's. This happens a lot when you work in the way that some of us have in the past where you contract, someone calls you up because they have a problem. I used to be a computer guy that went out to different people's offices and be sent out there because their server had gone down or their software wasn't working right.

And we've had situations where people had accounting and so forth and they had reports that had to be out and things that were due. There's deadlines. There's pressure to get things done.

Well, they call in outside help to fix this problem. And you run the risk of absorbing and beginning to participate in this pressure and this panic. And sometimes you have to shake your head and say, wait a minute.

This is their business. It's their deadline. They're the ones that are on the line here.

But when you get in that environment, you just soak up the panic and you soak up the fear and the pressure. And you wind up with, as we used to say in the Marine Corps, you're lobbing these sweat grenades everywhere. You lob a grenade, it blows up everybody around you, gets in a sweat because it just feeds on itself.

It's a fear and panic environment of pressure. Well, do we wind up inheriting and burying and adding to our own load these pressures and panics of others? Do we absorb the fear and absorb the pressure from situations around us? We're supposed to be the calm ones. We're supposed to be stable.

We're the ones who are supposed to have that stability that Reuben lacked and that leadership that Judah is going to exercise and that grip on our emotions that Simeon and Levi lacked. Not to get angry. Not to panic.

Not to fly off the handle. Not to be impulsive. Not to compromise with evil.

But to be a light shining in a dark place. To be the calm at the center of the storm. To keep our heads when everyone else is losing theirs.

Why? Not just because it's a good thing to do in a circumstance, but because it reflects the glory of God. It reflects the fact that there's a power in us from the outside that

solves these problems, that meets these needs, that fills these lacks in the human soul. And that is our greatest testimony.

That is our greatest area of ambassadorship is to let the power of God operate in us and shine forth from us. And it is these circumstances. And we get all caught up in how this situation is going to resolve and how the problem is going to be solved instead of recognizing that this is an opportunity for God to reveal Himself in us.

He reveals Himself to us. He reveals Himself through us. And as we look at each of these brothers and their area of weakness, we can think of circumstances and situations in our own lives where these things are true.

We can be overwhelmed by our failures in these areas. We can think about our lacks and our needs. Or we can concentrate on the presence of Jesus Christ, the things that God has given us to sustain us in those crises.

So whether we are looking at our border with the evil sea, whether we are tempted to bear the burdens of others and to become absorbed in our employment or in our responsibilities, sometimes it's family responsibilities. I know a number of people who care for elderly relatives in one way or another. There are lots of areas where we can have a task that becomes all-consuming.

And it begins to be the definition of us. Oh, I am the person that takes care of this. Or I am the person that solves this problem.

This is my role and this is my function in life. And we lose sight of our spiritual identity. That is the risk for Zebulun.

That is the risk for Issachar. And it's a risk for us as well. Our prayer is that God will show us, give us insight into this.

It's hard to see. We're immersed in our lives, aren't we? When we go forth, we can think about them on Sunday, but it's the middle of the week and it's those odd times of the day when we need to stop. That's why our reflection time is so valuable, because we've got to be awake and aware of the fact that we're not living for ourselves.

We've been bought with a price. And our reason for existing is to glorify God in our bodies, in our daily lives. So hopefully as we go forth this week, when you think back on the Genesis study and you think back on the sons of Jacob, think about both the opportunities and the weaknesses that each one of those sons represents.

And think about those same opportunities and weaknesses in our own souls. It's a great place to begin in prayer to God. We saw Hezekiah in our Luke study Friday night when he got the letter from the Rav Shaka of Assyria talking about how they were going to roll him up and defeat them.

He took that letter to the house of the Lord and laid it out in front of God and said, God, here's the letter that this powerful army that greatly outnumbers us has sent. They say nobody has resisted them. Nobody has been able to defeat them.

And no one else's gods have been able to help. He says, Lord, look at this letter. Look at this situation.

Hezekiah took it and just laid it out in front of God. That's what we need to do when we detect weaknesses and problems and challenges in our own life. Take it before the Lord.

Remember who we are and why we're here. God will be the object of our praise. He says, You will be delivered and You will glorify Me in the process.

That's our great opportunity. It's our great challenge in the days ahead. Let's close here in a word of prayer.

Father, we thank You for the wonderful privilege we have of being called by Your name, of being guided by Your hand, sustained by Your Spirit, fed by Your Word. We thank You that we have the opportunity to be transformed by the renewing of our minds and to each and every day more closely reflect the image of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We pray that the things that we've studied this morning will become a part of the resources in our souls, that we will have the opportunity and take the opportunity to meditate on these things, to remember Your calling and Your claim on our lives so that we can fulfill our purpose and be prepared for that great age to come when the Lord Jesus Christ returns for us and we rule and reign with Him.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.