

How important it is to sympathize with the saints of old and to enter into their afflictions. After all, do they not enter into our joy at the fulfillment of all the promises that they waited for but did not see realized until the coming of Christ? Hebrews 12:1 speaks of a “great cloud of witnesses” who surround us to cheer us on even though *they* never experienced the promises which we enjoy, but only “welcomed them from a distance” (Hebrews 11:13). Let us go back in time, wearing the shoes of Jacob and his sons, in order to honor their far-sighted faith.

Monday: Read Genesis 49:14-19 and Hebrews 12:7

Crying Out to the Father

The trials prophesied by Jacob in his sons’ lives in Gen. 49:14-19 would include forced labor for Issachar (v. 15, warfare against raiders for Gad (v. 19), and a hard-fought victory against all odds for Dan, who would be reduced to the level of a serpent before seeing the enemy tumble off his horse (v. 17). No wonder Jacob interrupts his prophesy and cries out: “I look (or earnestly wait) for your salvation!” Jacob was driven once again to hope only in God’s mighty hand. Actually, Jacob’s crying out for God’s help is the exact response which these trials were designed to elicit – not just from Jacob, but eventually from his sons too. In the same way, God makes sure to send the necessary trials to make us behave like His sons by crying out to Him as our Father!

Meditate and Pray: Thank God for the way He drives us to cry out to Him in trials, reassuring us that He will never leave us at such times. Use the words from hymn # 250 in our hymnal to thank God for His Spirit’s help in crying out to Him.

*Throned upon the awful tree,
Lamb of God, Your grief I see.
Darkness veils Your anguished face;
None its lines of woe can trace.
None can tell what pangs unknown
Hold You silent and alone.*

*Hark, that cry that peals aloud
Upward through the whelming cloud!
You, the Father’s only Son,
You, His own anointed One,
You are asking “can it be”
“Why have You forsaken Me?”*

*Lord, should fear and anguish roll,
Darkly o’er my sinful soul,
You, who once were thus bereft
That Your own might ne’er be left,
Teach me by that bitter cry
In the gloom to know You nigh.*

Tuesday: Read Genesis 49:18 and Isaiah 39:1-8

Faith for our Children’s Troubles

In yesterday’s reading we sympathized with the trials that anguished Jacob’s aged heart as he cried out to God, “I look (or earnestly wait for) your salvation!” (Ge 49:14-19). Jacob interrupts his prophecy in grief at the prospect of how much his covenant offspring would suffer! Well, in the face of such agony on his death-bed there may be some who wonder, “Why does this aged saint Jacob, whose own life was difficult enough (Gen. 47:9), have to suffer the agonies of his own sons’ future afflictions too? Often our world’s view of “retirement” is that we are to enjoy our hard-earned comfort at such times, no matter what happens to the next generation! Many have the attitude of Hezekiah in Isaiah 39:8 when the future Babylonian invasion was announced: “The word of the Lord is good... There will be peace and security in my lifetime.”

Meditate and Pray: In answer to a world obsessed by personal peace, placidity and comfort, let us thank God that through trials – even in old age – we are reassured that God’s purposes are good. Just as trials in *our lives* reassure us that God has not forgotten us but continues to sanctify us into conformity with His Son, so God will faithfully enable *our children* to say, along with Issachar, Dan and Gad: “It was good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes” (Psalm 119:71).

Wednesday: Read Genesis 49:14-19 and Galatians 5:5

Comforted while Waiting

The same Holy Spirit who enabled Jacob to cry out for future salvation in also brought great peace to Jacob’s heart as he uttered his cry. How do we know? Because that Holy Spirit through whom men like Jacob prophesied is also called the “Comforter,” who would enable Jacob to wait on God with a heart full of confident peace. Galatians 5:5 promises us that “through the Spirit” we will be enabled to “eagerly wait” for our hope of saving righteousness as well as Jacob waited. In pictorial terms, look at that donkey, Issachar, again in Genesis 49:15. In what spirit would he “bend his shoulder to the burden” of slavery? Well, he would find a place of rest even in the toil of forced labor! As William Harrell writes on this passage: “The best and most fruitful service is rendered from one’s vital experience of the peace of the Lord’s grace and the rest that all who are burdened find in Christ (Mt. 11:28-30).”

Meditate and Pray: Thank God for the repose of faith which God gives us as a gift. Like Issachar, we don’t deserve such Divine visitations of peace and comfort, since we are so often compromised like that tribe in willing servitude to the sinful nations of this world. But God’s gifts are “without repentance.” Having made peace with us through the blood of His Son, we can be confident that His peace will find us and guard our minds when we need it the most. Thank Him that He also keeps the hearts of those nearest to our own hearts as well. He is a Good Shepherd.

Thursday: Read Genesis 49:14-19 and Deuteronomy 33:18-19

The Fruit of Fatherly Discipline

Further proof that God used affliction for good in Issachar’s and his brothers’ lives is to see how Moses describes the commitment to worship on the part of these tribes in Deuteronomy 33:19. Pastor William Harrell comments that Issachar is pictured as being diligent in worship and productive at work. Here, then, is a great, positive purpose in trials sufficient to comfort Jacob on his deathbed and to comfort us, thought the future be all unknown. God sends affliction to move us to value His presence, His saints, His Word and Worship. Why, Deuteronomy 33:19 even tells us that Issachar “summoned” other peoples to the mountain of God, there to offer “sacrifices of righteousness.” God grant us also, in our afflictions, such a confidence in our God that we not only worship Him ourselves but also zealously invite other peoples to do so with us! In that vein, please remember the work which our short-term mission trips and long term OPC missionaries have sought to accomplish. May the Lord bring much fruit from such costly service, even years after they have been sent out from our midst.

Meditate and Pray: How we should thank God that, even in bondage and trials, His Spirit is able to give us wisdom for the times in which we live, and feet which *will* travel to the place of worship and meet with the Lord. No burden which men can place on us can stop our willing “donkey-feet” from walking the “way of salvation!” God grant it to be so.

Use William Cowper's words in hymn # 534 from our hymnals, sung to the well-known tune for # 164, *Azmon*.

*O for a closer walk with God,
A calm and heavenly frame,
A light to shine upon the road
That leads me to the Lamb!*

*The dearest idol I have known,
Whate'er that idol be
Help me to tear it from Thy throne,
And worship only Thee.*

*Return, O holy Dove, return,
Sweet messenger of rest!
I hate the sins that made Thee mourn
And drove Thee from my breast.*

*So shall my walk be close with God,
Calm and serene my frame;
So purer light shall mark the road
That leads me to the Lamb.*

Friday: Read Genesis 49:14-19, Deuteronomy 33:20-21 and Philippians 4:12-13

Our Father's Perfectly Balanced Hand

Afflictions from slavery (v. 15) or horse-riding foes and ambushing raiders (vv. 17, 19) could easily make us think that life for Jacob's offspring would be all trial and sorrow. But Moses augments Jacob's words, telling us that Issachar will be known for worship on God's mountain, and even Gad will enjoy the presence of God in "the best of the land" (Deut. 33:20-21). Thus the Scriptures bear eloquent testimony to the perfect balance of God's Providence. Some pictures of the lot of His people convey much sorrow; other pictures of the very same lives convey times of rich blessing and joy. They are both accurate. Thus we learn that God knows how to lovingly mix pain and pleasure in the perfect blend that will prompt us both to depend upon Him and rejoice in His goodness to us. Paul bears witness to this in Philippians 4:12-13: "I have learned the secret of being content in *any* and *every* situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Him who gives me strength."

Meditate and Pray: Ask God to give you the contentment which comes from the strength which He gives our faith, so that we will be able with hymn # 708 to even trace "His rainbow through the rain":

*O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.*

*O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain,
That morn shall tearless be.*

*O Cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from thee;
I lay in dust life's glory dead,
And from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be.*