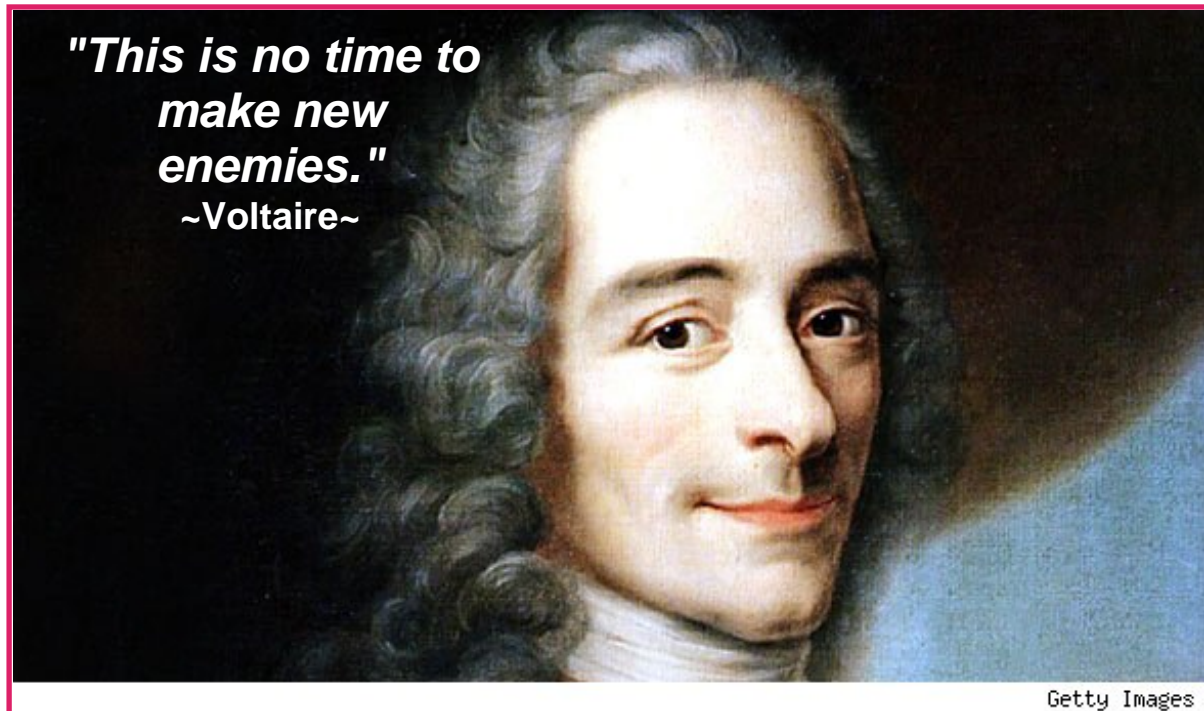


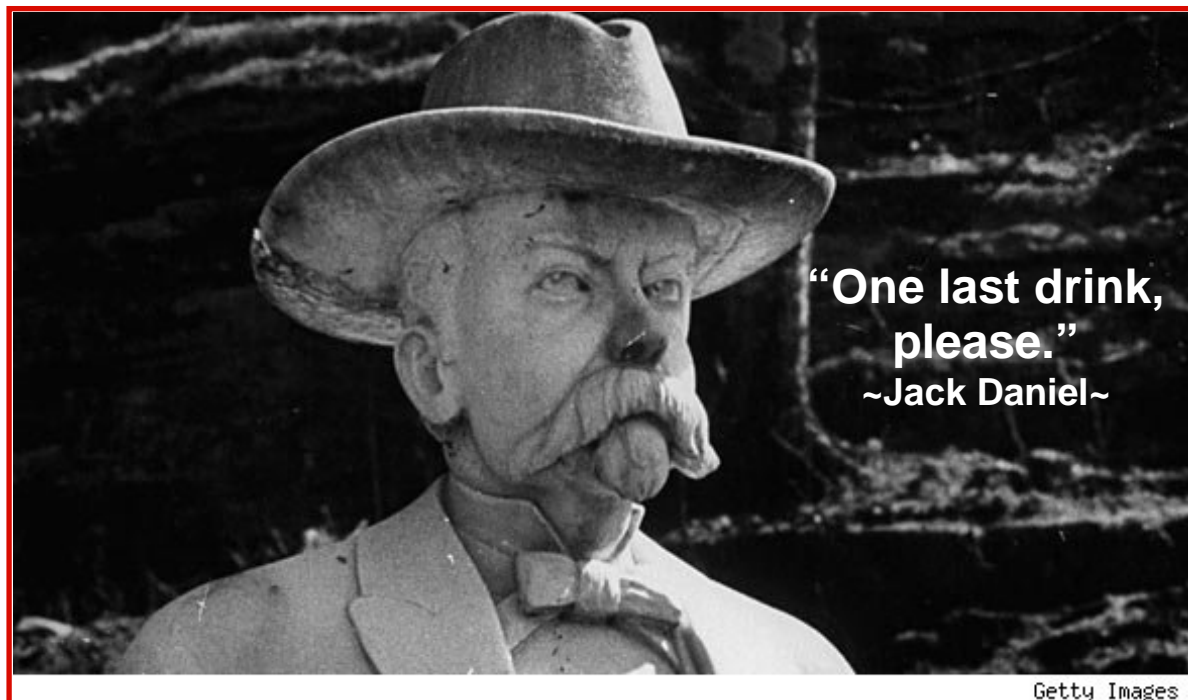
JACOB'S FINAL WORDS

Genesis 49:1-28

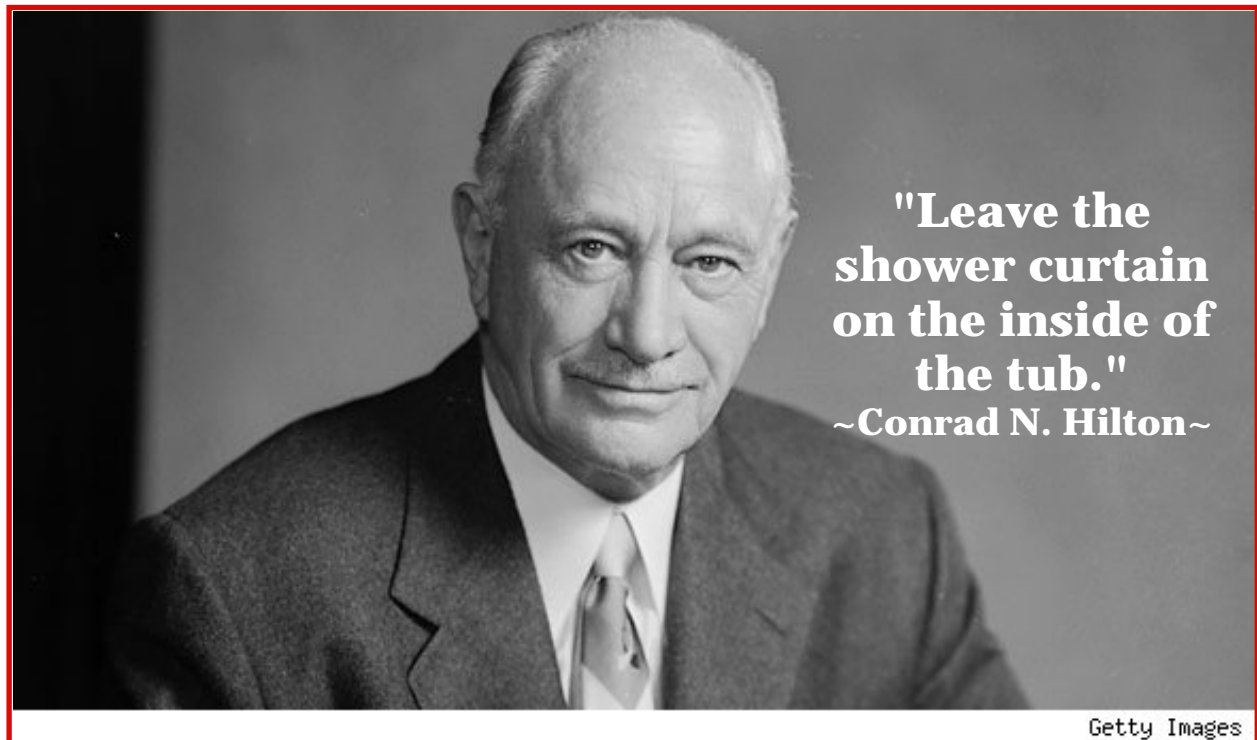
This morning we will be studying the last words of the patriarch Jacob. That prompted me to search for the last words of other notable people. Here's three that I thought were pretty interesting:



The last words spoken by atheist philosopher Voltaire when a priest asked him to renounce Satan.



Jack Daniel said these words just seconds before dying from a blood infection -- a problem that started after he kicked his safe in anger and broke his toe.



The final words of the man who built the Hilton Hotel Empire. The secret of his success?

As we read Genesis 49:1-28 we are reading, literally, the last words of the patriarch Jacob.

Genesis 49:33 (ESV)

When Jacob finished commanding his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed and breathed his last and was gathered to his people.

What is obvious as we read the final words of Jacob is that these words were thought out carefully in advance. Jacob employed Hebrew poetry. His words were prophetic; Jacob revealed “things to come” for his descendants. He did not spell out the future for his sons individually, but as tribal leaders. Jacob was revealing the future of the twelve tribes that would comprise the nation of Israel. Finally, Jacob’s words were a blessing:

Genesis 49:28 (ESV)

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.

All the sons of Jacob were blessed because they were part of the chosen people of Israel. All the brothers and their descendants were included in the Abrahamic Covenant and had an inheritance in the Promised Land. But, as we will see, some brothers/tribes would experience greater blessing than others.

The final words of Jacob teach us that our character and conduct have long term consequences both for ourselves and the family we leave behind. Actually, this is the great value of all prophecy - to teach us to live our lives today in light of the future.

Jacob addressed his first words to his firstborn - Reuben.

Reuben (49:3-4)

Reuben, by virtue of his position as the first-born of Jacob, should have had pre-eminence over his brothers and the double portion of the inheritance, but these were taken from Reuben and given to Joseph because of Reuben’s instability:

Genesis 49:3-4 (ESV)

³ “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!

Years earlier, Reuben had had sexual relationships with Jacob’s wife Bilhah. This was probably less about sexual lust and more about power. To possess a ruler’s harem was to usurp the authority of the ruler. Jacob rejected Reuben as leader of the family.

Like Reuben, Jacob had words of rebuke for Simeon and Levi.

Simeon and Levi (49:5-7)**Genesis 49:5-7 (ESV)**

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 hamstrung 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.

Simeon and Levi were full blooded brothers of Dinah. They had been enraged when Shechem raped Dinah. Rather than controlling their anger they gave full vent and massacred the men of the city of Shechem and also hamstrung the oxen making them useless for farming.

For such out of control tempers Simeon and Levi were both rejected for leadership. Jacob prophesied that the tribes of Simeon and Levi would be divided and scattered in the land and in fact that is what happened: the tribe of Levi was scattered among the other tribes and the tribe of Simeon had territory within the tribe of Judah.

Judah, the next son addressed by Jacob, was no saint (read chapter 38); so you might be surprised by what Jacob said about him.

Judah (49:8-12)**Genesis 49:8-12 (ESV)**

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; 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 (he comes to whom it belongs) ~~tribute comes to him~~; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. The pre-eminence which was taken from Reuben was clearly transferred by Jacob to Judah (cf. also I Chronicles 5:2). He would not only rule over his brothers in the days to come, but he would also prevail over his enemies (verse 8).

Verse 10 is a Messianic Prophecy:

¹⁰ The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until (he comes to whom it belongs) ~~tribute comes to him~~; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.

The tribe of Judah was the tribe from which came the kings of Israel. Jesus was descended from Judah and is the One to whom preeminence and the right to rule belong. Jesus is the fulfillment of this specific prophecy.

Not only would the tribe of Judah be preeminent, it would also be prosperous:

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.

Where we would describe material blessing as a nice big house and a shiny new car; in an agrarian society, thick health grape vines to which a frisky colt could be tied was a measure of wealth. Abundant

wine and milk were also expressions of prosperity. The point is that Judah's tribe would experience material wealth in the Promise Land.

But why, with his immoral past, was Judah blest when Reuben was not? The difference lay in the fact that when confronted with his sin, Judah repented (38:26) and changed (44:18-34).

Jacob had a lot to say about his first four sons; less for the next six.

Zebulun (49:13-15)

The prophecy concerning Zebulun has not yet come to pass:

Genesis 49:13 (ESV)

13 "Zebulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea; he shall become a haven for ships, and his border shall be at Sidon.

Zebulun's allotted land in Joshua 19:10-16 did not reach the coast. Perhaps this prophecy will be fulfilled in the Millennial Kingdom.

Issachar (49:14-15)

Genesis 49:14-15 (ESV)

14 "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.

The tribe of Issachar will become the labor force for the Canaanites.

Dan (49:16-18)

Genesis 49:16-18 (ESV)

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.

I'm not exactly sure how the tribe of Dan judged the other tribes of Israel. But that the tribe would be a serpent in the way that causes the rider to fall probably refers to the fact that in later years the tribe of Dan became a center of idol worship for the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Verse 18 seems to have been a rather spontaneous outburst from Jacob. Perhaps sobered by the rather dismal prospects of his sons Jacob cried out his hope that God would save his family in the years to come. Jacob, at the end of his life, now knew without doubt that salvation and blessing will not come through his sons and their descendants, but from God.

Gad and Asher (49:19-20)

Genesis 49:19-20 (ESV)

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.

The tribe of Gad would be plagued by marauding neighbors, but they will not be overcome. The tribe of Asher would enjoy fertile land and produce an abundance of good food for the eventual kings of Israel.

Naphtali (49:21)

Genesis 49:21 (ESV)

"Naphtali is a doe let loose that bears beautiful fawns.

Jacob revealed that the future of Naphtali's people would be characterized by freedom and fertility.

Next, Jacob spoke of Joseph of whom he had much to say.

Joseph (49:22-26)**Genesis 49:22–26 (ESV)**

22 “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.

Joseph and his tribe would experience fruitfulness and abundance. The attack refers to what his brothers did to him and his steadiness referred to Joseph's steadfast faithfulness in God. Joseph received the preeminence that was taken from Reuben.

Jacob's final, final words were for his youngest son, Benjamin.

Benjamin (49:27)

Jacob described Benjamin as one who would be fierce and aggressive:

Genesis 49:27 (ESV)

27 “Benjamin is a ravenous wolf, in the morning devouring the prey and at evening dividing the spoil.”

Some Things to Think About

First, the original readers of Genesis, the descendants of the twelve sons of Jacob would have been keenly interested in what Jacob prophesied about their particular tribes. For some, the forecast was positive; for others not so much, but even for those tribes with a less than positive forecast there was still hope as I will explain in a moment.

Second, we must recognize that some of Jacob's prophecies have not come to pass as he predicted. The tribe of Zebulun never dwelt by the seashore. The tribe of Levi was rebuked by Jacob, but experienced the blessing of becoming the priestly tribe. So how do we resolve the fact that not all Jacob's predictions were fulfilled? Part of the explanation lies in the fact that God's program for Israel is not yet complete:

Romans 11:25–27 (ESV)

25 Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. 26 And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, “The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”; 27 “and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.”

Some of the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant were never fully realized in Israel's history; they will be fulfilled in the future. That may include some of these prophecies of Jacob.

God never intended to fulfill every prophecy. Some prophecies are God's warning of what will happen if men do not repent and change their attitudes and actions. But if men will repent, God will not fulfill what He warns. That's why Jonah didn't want to preach to the Ninevites because he knew that if the Ninevites heeded the warning of his preaching, God would not fulfill the prophecy of destruction. Jeremiah explained it this way:

Jeremiah 18:7–10 (ESV)

7 If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, 8 and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. 9 And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, 10 and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it.

So the prophecies of Jacob were not straight-jackets on the twelve tribes. At any time they could choose to wholeheartedly follow the Lord and experience His full blessing.

So what was the purpose of these prophecies for Jacob's sons since they would die long before their descendants would return to Canaan? The prophecies served to remind Reuben, Simeon, Judah and the others that their present actions have future repercussions. They were being reminded that what they are shapes what the nation will be in years to come. If they live godly lives it will lead to blessing for generations to come. If they live godless lives, their descendants will reap the consequences.

And this brings us to consider the value of this passage for our lives. The Scripture is full of prophecy about things that are yet future to us. We can get so wrapped up in trying to put the puzzle of prophecy together that we lose sight of its ultimate application in our lives. Prophecy is given to us so that we live our lives today in light of the future.

We tend to live our lives as though there is no future. If we look at our world today it is discouraging; we must not put our hope in the things and people of this world. We need to keep our hope fixed on the things which God has promised us:

1 Peter 1:3-5 (ESV)

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

This passage also teaches us to live our present lives in light of the future knowing that our character and conduct will have repercussions for our descendants. Prophecy should prompt the pursuit of purity in all our lives.

2 Peter 3:10-13 (ESV)

10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. 11 Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, 12 waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! 13 But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

Finally, prophecy is given to warn us of God's judgment and condemnation:

2 Peter 3:10-13 (ESV)

10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. 11 Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, 12 waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! 13 But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

This prophecy is given so that you might turn from your sin and receive the free gift of forgiveness that God is offering you through Jesus' death, burial and resurrection. Jesus took your judgment on Himself when He died on the cross. Accept His death on your behalf and you will be saved from God's judgment and condemnation. If you turn to Jesus for salvation, this next prophecy will be your future:

Revelation 21:1-4 (ESV)

1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."