

Genesis 49:22 — Joseph Is a Fruitful Bough

The Wall, the Shepherd of Israel, the Stone, Benjamin Son of the Right Hand, and Fruitfulness for God

Scripture Reading: Genesis 49:22–26

“Joseph is a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by a well; whose branches run over the wall.

The archers have sorely grieved him, and shot at him, and hated him: but his bow abode in strength, and the arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob; from thence is the shepherd, the stone of Israel.

The blessings of thy father have prevailed above the blessings of my progenitors unto the utmost bound of the everlasting hills: they shall be on the head of Joseph, and on the crown of the head of him that was separate from his brethren.”

The Sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin

Of all the sons of Jacob, Joseph and Benjamin were the sons of Rachel — born from a barren womb that God opened. Rachel had cried to Jacob, “Give me children, else I die,” and Jacob’s response was, Am I God? Then we read: God remembered Rachel, and she conceived and bore a son, whose name Joseph means “may he add,” given in the faith that God would add another son. The second son came at the cost of Rachel’s life near Bethlehem. She called him Benoni — son of my sorrow. But Jacob by faith named him Benjamin — son of my right hand.

In these two brothers, the sons of Rachel, we have a picture of the Lord Jesus in two aspects: in suffering and rejection, and in power and glory. Joseph typifies the Lord in his rejection by his brethren, his suffering, his rise to power, and his ultimate ministry of salvation to all. Benjamin typifies the Lord in his resurrection and exaltation — the son of the right hand, who comes through death to glory, whose mother Israel travailed and died in his birth, but who lives at the Father's right hand.

A Fruitful Bough by a Well, Whose Branches Run Over the Wall

The blessing of Joseph in verse 22 begins with this image: a fruitful bough by a well, whose branches run over the wall. The wall is the wall of separation — the middle wall of partition that shut the Gentiles out. We who are Gentiles were strangers to the covenants of promise, without God and without hope in the world, having no claim on the promises given to Israel. We had nothing. And yet the branches of the fruitful bough ran over that wall and reached us.

The Lord Jesus himself speaks of this in John 10:16: “Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one flock, and one shepherd.” The fold was Israel. The other sheep were the Gentiles. The fruitful bough of Joseph's blessing, reaching over the wall to those outside, is the same reality as the good shepherd going to find the other sheep that were not of Israel's fold.

The archers grieved him, shot at him, hated him. Israel would not have their God-given shepherd-redeemer: “We will not have this man reign over us.” Come, let us kill him. The hatred that Joseph's brethren bore him — thrown into the pit, sold to Egypt, falsely accused, imprisoned — is the same hatred that brought the Lord Jesus to the cross. Yet his bow abode in strength. His arms were made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob. From thence is the shepherd, the stone of Israel.

Joseph in Egypt and the Nations: Psalm 22's Enlargement

When Joseph revealed himself to his brethren, he said: do not trouble yourselves, be not angry with yourselves. You meant evil, but God meant it for good — to preserve life, not for one house or one nation, but for all Egypt, for all the land. The fruitful bough. His salvation, reaching out through the suffering of the rejected one, became the life of the nations.

Psalm 22 traces the same arc. After the abandonment on the cross (verses 1–21), comes the declaration in resurrection: “I will declare thy name unto my brethren; in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee” (v.22). Then the enlargement: all the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before him; for the kingdom is the Lord’s, and he is the governor among the nations (vv.27–28). Not only the seed of Jacob raised to praise him, but all nations worshipping. The fruitful bough, by a well, whose branches run over the wall.

The Three Shepherds: Good, My, and Great

From thence is the shepherd, the stone of Israel — from the mighty God of Jacob comes this shepherd-stone. The Lord Jesus is spoken of as shepherd in three ways, each answering to a different aspect of his work.

Psalm 22 gives us the good shepherd who gave his life for the sheep. Psalm 23 gives us my shepherd — the personal relationship, I shall not want, he leads me, he restores my soul. And Hebrews 13:20 gives us the great shepherd of the sheep, brought again from the dead through the blood of the everlasting covenant — the one who will rule among the nations, the restorer of all things, the millennial shepherd of Israel. The same person in all three, but the full scope of his shepherding work only seen when all three are taken together.

Manasseh and Ephraim: Forgetting and Fruitfulness

God gave Joseph two sons in Egypt. The first he named Manasseh — God has caused me to forget my toil and all my father's house. The second he named Ephraim — God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction. Isaiah 8:18 brings this forward in its deepest meaning: "Behold, I and the children whom the LORD hath given me are for signs and for wonders in Israel." The sorrow of Calvary, which we remember, is followed by fruitfulness: behold, I and the children which God has given me — a multitude innumerable, as the hosts of Revelation 7, gathered from every nation.

Jacob's hand of blessing lay upon Ephraim, the younger — fruitfulness. It is God's desire and glory that we bear much fruit. John 15 is plain: herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit. It comes through abiding in the vine. Without me, the Lord says, you can do nothing. The fruitfulness is not ours to produce; it is the life of the vine flowing through the branches as they abide. Our task is to abide. The pruning, the conflict, the putting away of idols, the keeping of short accounts — all of it serves the single purpose that the branches might bear fruit, more fruit, much fruit, fruit that remains.

Joseph is a fruitful bough by a well, whose branches run over the wall.