

Jacob's Prophecies about Reuben, Simeon and Levi

Genesis 49:1-7

Genesis 49:1-7 - *"And Jacob called his sons and said, "Gather together, that I may tell you what shall befall you in the last days: ² "Gather together and hear, you sons of Jacob, and listen to Israel your father.*

³ *"Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity and the excellency of power. ⁴ Unstable as water, you shall not excel, because you went up to your father's bed; then you defiled it— he went up to my couch.*

⁵ *"Simeon and Levi are brothers; instruments of cruelty are in their dwelling place. ⁶ Let not my soul enter their council; let not my honor be united to their assembly; for in their anger they slew a man, and in their self-will they hamstrung an ox. 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."*

Background Notes

When Jacob realized that he was about to die, he called his twelve sons together for the Patriarchal Blessing. This was Jacob's final act, because when Jacob had finished speaking to his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed, breathed his last, and was "gathered to his people."

Genesis 49 recounts Jacob's final blessing on each of his twelve sons, and on the tribes that would descend from these sons. Each son was individually addressed and blessed. In some cases there doesn't seem to be much blessing at all, but just a prediction of the future for that tribe. So Genesis 49 is actually a "prophetic oracle," or a prophecy, because these tribal divisions continue to live on in the DNA of the Jewish people, and these tribes will be part of our Lord's kingdom when He returns to this earth. (Read Ezekiel 48 in this connection.)

The word "blessing" is emphasized in verse 28, which is a summary verse of this prophetic oracle: *"All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father spoke to them. And he blessed them; he blessed each one according to his own blessing."* Blessing is emphasized.

In verse 1, notice the mention of "the last days." *"And Jacob called his sons and said, "Gather together, that I may tell you what shall befall you in the last days."* The thought here is that what he said of each of the tribes would be fulfilled in the future, and that future would stretch all the way to "the last days." Therefore parts of these prophetic blessings have already been fulfilled, but some parts of these blessings are still waiting to be fulfilled in the future.

Jacob's prophecy about Reuben is in verses 3-4. Reuben was Jacob's firstborn son, and therefore he was in the place of privilege and spiritual leadership of the family. But Reuben lost that place of privilege and leadership, and his birthright

was given to Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Why? Verse 4 gives us the answer: "*Unstable as water, you shall not excel, because you went up to your father's bed; then you defiled it— he went up to my couch.*"

The account of that event is found in Genesis 35:22, "*And it happened, when Israel dwelt in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine; and Israel heard about it.*" Not much is said about Reuben's sexual sin in Genesis 35, but here in Genesis 49 we see that the consequences of sexual sin were very *serious* – and they were *long lasting*.

Doctrinal Points

1. Uncontrolled lust disqualifies a believer from spiritual leadership.

Reuben, as Jacob's firstborn son, had a lot going for him. He had great potential. "*Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity and the excellency of power*" (v3).

In that day, the firstborn son had great privilege. He also had the responsibility to be the spiritual leader in the family. However, Reuben lost his place of spiritual leadership because of his uncontrolled sexual lust. The phrase "*unstable as water*" conveys the idea of water boiling over. That is a good description of uncontrolled sexual lust! It's not under control - it's not stable. It can easily boil over and results in sexual sin.

As a consequence of Reuben's sin, he was told that his tribe would not excel - and that certainly came true. How many prophets, judges, kings, or ancient heroes in Israel came from the tribe of Reuben? **Not even one!** **No** spiritual or governmental leaders came from the tribe of Reuben.

What is the spiritual truth that God is teaching here? Uncontrolled lust disqualifies a believer from spiritual leadership. 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 list the qualifications for spiritual leadership in the Church today. In both passages we see that the reputation of the spiritual leader in the area of sex must be irreproachable. Spiritual leaders must be godly models in this area.

Probably every one of you knows of at least one situation, maybe even in your home church, in which a spiritual leader was disqualified because of sexual sin. There is no doubt that Satan will try to attack spiritual leaders in this area, because Satan knows it disqualifies even a very gifted person from spiritual leadership. It is **very** important for us to pray for our spiritual leaders, especially in reference to this hard-to-control danger zone.

A believer who fails in the area of sexual sin does not lose his or her salvation, and God can certainly pick up the pieces and use that believer in other areas. However, that person's potential for **spiritual leadership** is lost. Uncontrolled lust disqualifies a believer from spiritual leadership.

2. Uncontrolled emotions deprive a believer of spiritual reward.

Verses 5-7 recount the prophetic pronouncement upon Simeon and Levi, Jacob's second and third sons. They were denounced for their cruelty, their anger, and their violence. When did they exhibit this kind of behavior? In Genesis 34, Simeon and Levi were the men who plotted and carried out the massacre of the entire male population of Shechem, while those men were in pain following circumcision. Genesis 34:25-29 - *"Now it came to pass on the third day, when they were in pain, that two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, each took his sword and came boldly upon the city and killed all the males. And they killed Hamor and Shechem his son with the edge of the sword, and took Dinah from Shechem's house, and went out. The sons of Jacob came upon the slain, and plundered the city, because their sister had been defiled. They took their sheep, their oxen, and their donkeys, what was in the city and what was in the field, and all their wealth. All their little ones and their wives they took captive; and they plundered even all that was in the houses."*

Jacob's prediction in Genesis 49 tells us that Simeon and Levi's uncontrolled passion and rage was inexcusable - even though they thought it was justified because their sister Dinah had been raped by the prince of Shechem. Even their cruel treatment of animals is condemned here. As a result of their sins, Simeon and Levi were given **no** tribal territory in the land of Canaan. Note again the end of verse 7, *"I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel."* The tribes of Simeon and Levi were deprived of reward.

The tribe of Simeon was dispersed in the tribal area of Judah. Joshua 19:9: *"The inheritance of the children of Simeon was included in the share of the children of Judah, for the share of the children of Judah was too much for them. Therefore the children of Simeon had their inheritance within the inheritance of that people."* So the tribe of Simeon did not have an inheritance in the land, but were dispersed in the tribal area of Judah. And the tribe of Simeon was not even mentioned when Moses blessed the tribes in Deuteronomy 33!

The tribe of Levi (the Levites) lived in cities scattered throughout all the tribal areas of Israel, but they had no tribal area of their own. The descendants of Levi redeemed themselves somewhat when they stood with Moses against the sins associated with the worship of the golden calf in Exodus 32. As a result of standing with Moses at that crucial time, God made them the priestly tribe in Israel. However, the lesson for us from Genesis 49 is quite obvious. Simeon and Levi were deprived of reward because of uncontrolled anger and passions. They lacked self-control.

In the same way, uncontrolled passions and emotions will deprive a believer of spiritual reward today. Do you want spiritual reward from the Lord? Can you control your anger and your tongue? 2 Peter 1:5-7 lists the virtues, or character traits, that believers are to develop: *"Make every effort to add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, and to knowledge, self-control..."* The list of virtues continues, but especially notice that **self-control** is listed as important character trait for believers to develop. Continuing with 1 Peter 5:8-11 we read, *"For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble, for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."*

Notice verse 11. It tells us that if we have the virtues listed in 2 Peter 1:5-7, we will receive a reward - and **self-control** is an important character trait on that list! If you can control your emotions, "*you will be neither barren, nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ*" and you will receive reward in "*the kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*" In Galatians 5:22-23, self-control is listed as one of the fruits of the Spirit. Self-control results when we allow God the Holy Spirit to work in our lives. So the questions we must answer are: Do you want to receive spiritual reward? Can you control your passions? Your emotions? Your anger? Your tongue? Uncontrolled emotions deprive a believer of spiritual reward.

Practical Applications

1. Don't ruin your future for momentary pleasure!

For one uncontrolled moment of sexual pleasure, Reuben removed himself and his descendants from the leadership position in Israel. We might say, "That's not fair – that's too harsh a punishment!" But what **we** might say is not what counts. It's what **God** says that counts! God saw Reuben's sexual sin as **very** serious.

Remember King David? For one moment of sexual pleasure with Bathsheba, he suffered the consequences of that sexual sin *for the rest of his days*.

The Bible couldn't say it any more clearly: don't ruin your future for momentary pleasure!

2. Don't associate with hotheads!

Simeon and Levi were hotheads - they could not control their emotions. Notice what Jacob said in verse 6, "*Let not my soul enter their council; let not my honor be united to their assembly...*"

Jacob was very emphatic that he did not want to be associated with people of their character and their uncontrolled, hotheaded actions. Even though Simeon and Levi were his sons, he wanted to separate himself from their uncontrolled emotions.

What is God's teaching here? He's warning us not to associate with hotheads! Avoid them!

When I think of this verse, a couple of Christians come to my mind. Although they are Christians, I keep my distance from these people. I don't associate closely with them. Why? Because they're hotheads! They can't control their emotions. They can't control their anger or their tongues. They tend to fly off the handle. They won't heed good and sensible advice. So I try to keep a safe distance from them, because sooner or later their emotions will get them (and those who associate with them) into trouble.

Don't associate with hotheads!