

Genesis 49: 1-12; “He Whom His Brothers Praise”, Sermon # 116 in the series – “Beginnings”, Delivered on November 25th, 2007, and repreached by Pastor Paul Rendall on July 6th, 2024.

Jacob is now giving his last words to all of his sons and they are prophetic blessings. They were blessings that relate, as Jacob says, to what would befall them in the last days. The last days, here, are the days which would come to their descendants after them, leading up to, and including, the coming of their promised Messiah. He says to all of them – “Gather together, that I may tell you what shall befall you in the last days.” “Gather together and hear, you sons of Jacob.” This is mentioned to us twice according to the will of the Holy Spirit by which he prophesied, so that you and I might understand how important prophecy was to them, and how important it is to us as well.

There is a real connection between what we do, in our obedience or disobedience to God’s Word, that affects the outworking of history. It will not only affect ourselves, but it will also affect generations to come. This does not at all mean that God’s purposes will ever ultimately be thwarted. But it shows us the importance of our having a close walk with God, so that many other people, our descendants and others, might think about the importance of their obedience. When we are faithful to God, many other people are affected in a good sense because of it. And thereby Christ’s kingdom is forwarded upon the earth, and God is glorified in us.

As we look at this chapter, we see that there were certain sins, which were committed by Jacob’s sons Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, which affected God’s blessing to themselves, and to their descendants for many generations. These sins would have affected them forever, and brought them down to hell, except that they came to believe in the prophetic promises and blessings that were given to Judah. But the sovereign mercy of God which was promised to Judah, and through him, to all of his brothers; the prophecy of the sending the Lord Jesus Christ to be their Savior, would, when they believed in the promise, take away the guilt of their sins and bring about a desire in them for a new obedience in the way that they lived their lives.

So let us ask ourselves what were the sins which destroyed the greatest blessings of some of these brothers? And how did they come to find forgiveness even though they were so vile in their sin? When we discover the answer, it should show us that no matter how great our sins have been in the past, that we also may find forgiveness. Let’s look at the sins which these brothers committed in the light of the promises of God which are given to the tribe of Judah, so that we might learn from them and repent, so that we might receive the blessings of eternal life.

1st of all – Let’s look at the sin of instability in Reuben. (verses 1-4)

“Reuben you are my firstborn, my might and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity and the excellency of power.” This is how we are to look at our firstborn male children. They are the beginning of the showing forth of our strength. Every good natural characteristic and every good spiritual thing that is placed within us by God, we desire those things we desire to be seen, as an extension, in our eldest son. He is the one to carry on the family name. But he also is the one to show forth the strength of character, the excellency of dignity, and the excellency of the power of the teaching of what is right and wrong, that we as his parents have given to him.

There is a holy expectation on the part of godly parents that their children will take everything of the teaching of what is right in accordance with the Scriptures, which they have taught them, and that they will live it out in a way which will make a difference for the cause of Christ. This is what the godly father would like to see in all of his children, but especially in his firstborn son. But here, Jacob is led to declare to his son, to his face, upon his death bed, that there was a sin that kept this from ever taking place in the life of Reuben, his firstborn. It was the case of his incest with Bilhah. It was his going up to his father’s bed to lay with his father’s concubine wife, the handmaid of Leah.

This sin, which came to be known by everyone in the family was a scandalous sin and it soiled and ruined the reputation of Reuben. Because of it, he could not be known as the excellency of dignity and power. Indeed the birthright was transferred from him to Joseph because of this gross sin. In Leviticus chapter 18 this sin of incest came to be written down in the book of the Law. Verse 6 says – “None of you shall approach anyone who is near of kin to him, to uncover his nakedness; I am the Lord.” “The nakedness of your father or the nakedness of your mother you shall not uncover.” “She is your mother; you shall not uncover her nakedness.” “The nakedness of your father's wife you shall not uncover; it is your father's nakedness.”

We are living in a day when the sexual moral boundaries which have been clearly written down in the Bible are being challenged and destroyed. It is up to you and I who know the Law of God to speak up and to speak out about what is an abomination to God. The sin of Reuben falls under the seventh commandment of the law of God; that is – “You shall not commit adultery”. When tempted to sin, a young unmarried person must ask themselves whether they are willing to wait until marriage to have sex with the one person that they will commit themselves to, for life.

When you are married, the nakedness of your spouse will be uncovered without any sin being incurred. But in our generation seventh commandment sins have become more prevalent than ever before because of the images and the compromising words and deeds of people which come across the computer and television screens. These often try to tempt young and old alike with exposure to someone's nakedness. These sins we must come to terms with, because God cannot bless us as individuals or as a nation if we cater to them. And if these sins find a lodging place within our hearts and minds, we will fall under the Lord's chastisement or judgment if we will not repent.

And we must further understand that much unhappiness will come to our family and our descendants if we fall prey to committing these sins. Reuben deliberately went up to his father's bed; and he defiled it. The Lord could not bless Reuben because of it, and it is notable that no one great descended from him. Indeed Dathan and Abiram, those who led the rebellion in the Wilderness, were of his tribe. Even the reason that Reuben sinned in this way is even given to us here in this passage. It was because he was unstable as water, it says. Water does not have fixed boundaries unless contained in some way. In Reuben's heart there were no moral boundaries established by grace. It was not that the temptation to sin brought the instability. It was that he had an instable heart which contemplated sin with his father's concubine as something desirable. That was what was really defiling. The heart does not sin unless it is drawn away from the fixedness of its faith and hope in God. An unbeliever does not have this fixedness. It comes only through the grace of Christ.

It is only when we will set the Lord always before us, as it says in Psalm 16: 8, that then He will be at our right hand, and we shall not be moved by temptations. But how easy this is to say, and how hard sometimes it is to do. We can easily forget that it is the Lord who brings every good thing into our lives. He tempts no man. And the Lord would have you to know that, no temptation has overtaken you except such which is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it. (1st Corinthians 10: 13)

You must deliberately cultivate this life of having your heart fixed upon God, upon the stability of your actively engaging your faith upon Christ your Rock. You must deliberately think about the areas of weakness in your soul and life where sin and your enemy Satan might gain the advantage over you. And you must learn to guard your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the issues of this life. You must also remember the victory of Christ; the first of the promises mentioned in verse 8 of our text.

“Judah, you are he whom your brothers shall praise; Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies.” The enemies being talked about here specifically, were those nations which were idolatrous, who lived in the land of Canaan. These enemies needed to be driven out at God’s command. Moses and Joshua were the leaders who would begin this good work and David’s tribe of Judah would complete it. This is why Judah’s brothers would praise him. But it was reserved for the Lord Jesus Christ, of the tribe of Judah, to conquer all of our spiritual enemies. This he did by His perfect obedience and His sacrifice of Himself at the cross.

His hand is on the neck of all of our enemies. This is why your faith in Him is so important. If you forget it; it will be to your dismay in the conflicts of temptation which await you. But if our hand clings to the sword of faith in Christ’s finished work, then your own work in righteousness can and will be established. Judah, here in our text in verse 8, directly refers to our Lord Jesus Christ in His great fulfillment of the law, and His having been overcome sin and death on our behalf. “You are he whom your brothers shall praise.”

2nd – Let’s look at the sins of anger and self-will in Simeon and Levi.

(verses 5-7)

“Simeon and Levi are brothers; instruments of cruelty are in their dwelling place.” “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.” “Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; and their wrath, for it is cruel!” Well, there is the list of their sins which destroyed their blessings to themselves. Simeon and Levi are brothers, all right; they are brothers in sin and crime. They had a council among themselves and this is the self-justifying response that they came to. It involved their seeking revenge and their committing murder.

Jacob here is telling them that their council was great evil. These words are referring to that infamous incident when Jacob and his family were living in Shechem, and Dinah went out to see the daughters of the land. She was seen by Shechem the prince of that town, the son of Hamor the Hivite, and he took advantage of her and raped her. It says of Jacob in verse 5 of Chapter 34, “And Jacob heard that he had defiled Dinah his daughter.” “Now his sons were with his livestock in the field; so Jacob held his peace until they came.” He kept silent about the matter. He did not let the knowledge of what had sinfully been done to his daughter lead him to sinful anger.

But the reaction of Simeon and Levi was far different. Verse 7 says – “And the sons of Jacob came in from the field when they heard it; and the men were grieved and very angry, because he had done a disgraceful thing in Israel by lying with Jacob’s daughter, a thing which ought not to be done.” Now I do not believe that their being grieved and angry about what had been done to their sister was wrong in itself. There is righteous anger which comes to the mind and heart when someone we love is hurt or harmed, and when God Himself has been dishonored by sin. But the Bible is very clear that whatever righteous anger comes to our heart, it must not turn to the kind of anger which will seek to take matters into its own hands, and seek its own revenge.

Hamor, Shechem’s father had come telling them that Shechem loved Jacob’s daughter and wanted to marry her. Shechem himself came with his father to speak to Jacob. He said – “Let me find favor in your eyes, and whatever you say to me I will give.” “Ask me ever so much dowry and gift, and I will give according to what you say to me.” “But give me the young woman as a wife.” This young man has sinned grievously, but it is evident that he wanted to do anything that could convince Jacob and his sons that he truly did love Dinah. He was willing to be taught.

This would have been a golden opportunity to have shown the power of Christian love, but Simeon and Levi were not believing men at this time. They were self-willed and filled with a sinful anger that only wanted revenge. They were self-willed in that they did not defer to their father’s judgment. They should have been very concerned to wait and take counsel with their father and to rest under his authority. They should not have taken matters into their own hands.

This kind of anger can come to Christians as well, and it must be guarded against. Ephesians 4: 25 says – “Therefore putting away lying, ‘Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another.’ “Be angry, and do not sin: do not let the sun go down on your wrath.”

But Simeon and Levi fell into all of it. They spoke deceitfully to Shechem and Hamor, because he had defiled Dinah their sister. They actually used their being different as God’s chosen people to convince those men, and all the males of the city, to be circumcised. And then when they complied, they took advantage of their weakness and took their swords and came boldly upon the city and killed all the males of the city. When Jacob questioned their actions by telling them that he had been made odious to all the people of the land because of their slaughter, they said in a very self-justifying way – “Should he treat our sister like a harlot?”

They really did not understand that their anger, and their lying, and their cruel murder were more sinfully wrong than even what Shechem had done to their sister. Sinful anger led them to this place where they treacherously lied and took their own cruel revenge. They were very wrong to be self-willed in this matter. “Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce, and their wrath for they were cruel.” Jacob says to them here on his death bed – “Let not my soul enter their council; let not my honor be united to their assembly.” He could not give them a good prophetic blessing.

Their wicked deeds would have effects down to other generations when they came into the land. He says, “I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel.” This literally came to pass as was recorded in Joshua 19: 9. It says there – “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.” They were not blessed to be able to have their own separate inheritance in the land.

The Tribe of Levi became the priests of the Old Testament Law. They had no inheritance of land. But they did have 48 cities scattered throughout the tribes. The Lord overrode the judgment to bless them in this case. What mercy He showed them. But what can we say that will offset and atone for these sins of self-will and anger which resulted in cruelty? Can Simeon and Levi really be forgiven and find the blessing of the Lord and salvation even so? It is found in verse 9 of our text. “Judah is a lion’s whelp.” “From the prey, my son, you have gone up.” “He bows down, he lies down as a lion; and as a lion who shall rouse him?” This is another reason why Judah’s brothers shall praise him. There was another person who was angry over sin. But He was angry in a perfectly righteous way. He is portrayed as a lion in this verse, and Judah is this lion’s whelp.

The prey that this lion went after was sin itself. And included in the sins of all of those for whom He would die for, were these sins of self will, cruelty, and anger. This lion is the Lion of the tribe of Judah. He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who pursued sin and made it His prey at the cross. He did this for sinners such as Simeon and Levi. He did it for sinners such as you and me. His anger was to be angry with sin. His self-will was to do the will of His Father in heaven. His cruelty was to offer Himself as a sacrifice in the place of sinners so that they could go free; so that they could have an eternal inheritance, so that they could inherit a prophetic blessing. This was our Lord Jesus.

He bowed down, and He lay down here in this passage, as a Lion, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, because he succeeded in catching and killing His prey. Just as a lion sits down satisfied with having killed and eaten his prey for a meal, so our Lord Jesus sat down at the right hand of hand having accomplished redemption for all of our sins. Christ has dealt with the guilt of our sins, and He has broken the power of sin over us, if we are trusting in Him. He has overcome our greatest enemies of sin and death. Will you believe in Him now? He is gentle to sinners, but a killer of your sin. Sin is cruel to you now, but you do not know it well. But you shall feel its jaws at your throat if you do not repent.

It will cause you pain and misery and eat you up at the last. But the Lord Jesus will be your sin-slayer if you will throw yourself spiritually into His strong arms. Who shall rouse Him this day? He will undertake for any sinner here today if you will come to Him. Come to Him now and find the defense of your life and the strength of your heart. Come today by faith to the Lion of the Tribe of Judah.

3rd – Let's marvel over the fact that the sins of Judah are not mentioned here in this text at all. (verses 8-11)

As you read verses 8-11 you can see that none of Judah's vile sins are mentioned at all. There is only praise for him from all his brothers. This is because the Messiah who would descend from him has obtained eternal redemption and He should rightly receive all of the glory. Since Judah is "in Christ" there is no need to mention his awful sins. King David is being referred to in verse 10 when it talks about "the scepter not departing from Judah nor a lawgiver from between his feet..." The Old Testament kingdom was established under the righteous rule of David, the man after God's own heart. His was a righteous rule with righteous law.

This rule of kings in Judah, whether under good kings or bad, would not cease until Shiloh came. Shiloh is a word referring to our Lord Jesus Christ. The word comes from a Hebrew root meaning quiet, peaceful, or prosperous. All of these words have reference to our Lord who would bring quietness and rest to each believing heart. He would make peace between God and man. And under His government the kingdom of righteousness and truth would prosper. It is to this One to whom the obedience of the people belongs. The Lord Jesus Christ is worthy not only of our praise and adoration and worship; but He is worthy of our obedience to all of His commands as well.

He "binds his donkey to the vine, and his donkey's colt to the choice vine." That is, He would tie His work of redemption on the cross, to a ministry of giving sinners life. He would be the choice vine and all who would believe in Him would be the branches. It would be His humbling Himself even to the point of death, riding this lowly donkey into Jerusalem as a King, that would pave the way for His sufferings and death. It would be this holy resolve to suffer in our place that would accomplish our salvation.

Your obedience to Him is an obedience of faith, that goes on to attempt to love and keep His commandments in every way. You are not under law, but you are under grace. The moral law is still held by the believer as precious in our love to Him, even though we do not keep it perfectly. We are seen as complete in Him by the Father because of Christ's perfect work. Christ washed his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes, as our text says in verse 11. Wine is that which brings joy to the heart of man. Christ, for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross and despised the shame for all who would believe in Him. His washing His clothes in the blood of grapes is a picture of the shedding of his blood, both in the sufferings of his scourging, and the sufferings that He went through on the cross.

His eyes being darker than the wine refer to His realizing the reality of what it would mean to suffer so much that He would become sin on our behalf. His teeth being whiter than milk speak of the fruitfulness of these sufferings on behalf of sinners. He would partake of these sufferings because of His perfect purity, which is here represented by His white teeth. And so, now because of His purity, we who are sinners are able drink down the pure milk of the Word. His sufferings bring about our nourishment and our feeding upon all good spiritual things.

We are to desire the pure milk of the Word that we might grow in respect to our salvation. I hope that you will see that no matter how great your sins have been in the past; whether it is sexual immorality, anger, self-will, or even cruelty, that you will trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. Judah did; and there was no mention made at all of his sins. And there will be no bringing up of your sins in the day of judgment to condemn you if you are trusting in Jesus. May the Lion of the tribe of Judah roar at all of the enemies of sin in your life.

May each of us come to a true fear of the Lord through his roaring and his tearing of the prey of our sin. May Shiloh come to rule over your life. May you come to true prosperity of soul. May Christ come to be the Choice Vine in your life and you, one of His braches. May He dispense the milk and the meat of the Word to you. May His washing his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes be effectual to save each of us from our sins.