

# The Life of Joseph

## (18) Jacob Blesses Reuben

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The Christianity of the Bible is about salvation from sin through Jesus Christ so that the saved can live to the glory of God. Salvation is about forgiveness of sins and renewal of life on the basis of what Jesus has done for us. Of course, there is more to be said, but that is a fairly accurate summary. One of the goals of salvation is that the saved become better people – not that they become worthy, but their lives are changed so they become more like Jesus Christ. As a result of their salvation in Christ, the saved are changed by God's grace to become more like human beings were designed to be by God when he created us. This is an important part of the message of the Bible. There is a lot in the Bible about the goal of our salvation being lives that are more holy and more righteous and more obedient and more virtuous and more moral. We are going to look at Jacob's final blessing on Reuben this evening in the light of this overall perspective that one of the great goals of the gospel is that we will live better lives to the glory of God.

Now Jacob's blessing for Reuben does not sound much like a blessing. Jacob's prophecy for Reuben is that he will "not have preeminence." Jacob is prophesying about the future for his 12 sons whose offspring will become the 12 tribes of Israel. What Jacob says about Reuben is that he has been a huge disappointment and because of that he will not have preeminence among his brothers and his tribe will not have preeminence among the twelve tribes. That does not sound like a blessing.

But verse 28 calls it a blessing. Verse 28 at the end of all the blessings for the 12 sons says, "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." So even though Jacob's prophecy concerning Reuben is that he will not have preeminence among his brothers, the text itself calls it a blessing. It is a blessing in two ways. It is

a blessing because Reuben is still counted as one of the 12 patriarchs of Israel. It is a blessing because Reuben is not excluded from being the head of one of the 12 tribes of Israel. As we saw last week, in the heavenly Jerusalem there are twelve gates and on those gates “the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel are inscribed” (Revelation 21:12). So even though the blessing that Reuben receives is a prophetic word that he will not be preeminent, the fact that he is included in this list as the head of one of the twelve tribes of Israel is a wonderful blessing which highlights the wonderful marvelous grace of God.

There is another way that Jacob’s prophecy concerning Judah is a blessing. Reuben does not have what it takes to be a leader. Reuben has demonstrated in his life that he was “unstable as water.” It was a blessing both for him and for the people of Israel as a whole that Reuben would never have a position of preeminence. Reuben was the firstborn son of Jacob. Normally the firstborn son would be the leader among the other brothers. But Reuben had been demoted from that position because of the weakness of his character. We will explore that as we proceed because it is very instructive. But it was clearly a blessing for all involved, including Reuben himself, that he and his offspring would never hold a leadership role among the tribes of Israel. It is never a blessing when someone who is not suited to leadership is in a position of leadership.

Now in the Bible, no one is inherently worthy of leadership over God’s people because we are all sinful and seriously flawed in all kinds of ways. The Bible has a lot to say about how weak and how sinful we all are. And yet, by grace, some followers of God become the kind of people who are equipped for leadership. Among Jacob’s sons Judah and Joseph have been shaped by God’s grace in their lives to become leaders among the other brothers and the other tribes. Reuben is not leadership material. It would have been a disaster for him and for Israel if he had been elevated to a leadership position simply because he was the firstborn. People who are characterized as being “unstable as water” do not good leaders make.

This is why Paul gives qualifications for elders and deacons in the NT. Those who are called to be elders and deacons are sinners saved by grace. They are men with weakness and shortcomings. And yet Paul instructs existing leaders to seek out men who have certain characteristics that equip them for leadership in the church. The qualifications are listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Even though we are all alike sinners worthy of death, by God's grace in Christ some men attain a sufficient measure of the strength of character that indicates that God is calling them to serve as elders and deacons in his church.

The example of Reuben reminds us that it is never a blessing for the church if unqualified men are ordained to the offices. A leader who has been equipped and called by God to his office is a blessing to the church. People who are called to office who do not meet the qualifications will suffer themselves and will harm the church more than help it. The fact that God ensured that Reuben would never be preeminent was a blessing for Reuben himself and for the tribes of Israel. This is why Paul is so careful to spell out what kind of men should be leaders in the church.

So, there are two reasons that Jacob's prophecy concerning Reuben was a blessing. First there is the fact that he is even on the list. And second it was a blessing both for himself and for Israel that he and his tribe never be in a position of preeminence in Israel.

Now what Jacob says to Reuben makes it clear that Reuben was a disappointment to Jacob. Listen to the way that Jacob speaks of him in verse 3. "Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, and the firstfruits of my strength, preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power." These words describe Jacob's hope for his firstborn son. If you ponder those words you can almost hear the tender disappointment in Jacob's voice. When Reuben was born Jacob was young and strong. Jacob is referring to his virility as a younger man. Reuben was the "firstfruits of his strength." The idea of firstfruits refers to the choicest fruit. As firstborn he was "preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power." All of this conveys the hope that Jacob had had for his first-born son. But that hope was not to be realized. Sadly, Jacob continues, "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!"

Genesis 35:22 briefly describes this shameful incident. It was shortly after Rachel had died giving birth to Benjamin. After burying Rachel, Jacob travelled on and we are told that he "pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder." And then in verse 22 we read, "While Israel lived in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine. And Israel heard of it." Bilhah had been Rachel's servant. When Rachel was not able to produce children with Jacob, she gave her servant Bilhah to Jacob as a wife. Two of Jacob's sons were born of Bilhah, Dan and Naphtali. This was the woman with whom Reuben defiled his father's couch.

The ESV Study Bible explains the significance of this act. "While Reuben's action may have been prompted by inappropriate lust, it challenged Jacob's position as head of the household. As the firstborn son, Reuben may also have viewed his action as establishing his authority over his brothers." Absalom did something similar when he was seeking to take David's place as king of Israel (2 Samuel 16:17). As Absalom was in the process of trying to take over as king of Israel one of the things that he did to make the claim to kingship was to sleep with some of his father's concubines. This may have been the significance of what Reuben did when he slept with Jacob's concubine.

Now when we read about men having concubines we wonder about the morality of that - as well as the morality of sleeping with someone else's concubines. It is interesting that the Bible does not comment on the morality of men having concubines at least in the OT. Jesus makes it clear that God's will is marriage between one man and one woman and he bases that on God's intention for marriage as expressed in Genesis 1 and 2. It appears that there is a progression in the people of God coming to clarity on this matter within the Bible itself. We know that it has always been God's will that marriage be between one man and one woman. But for some reason the Bible makes no comment on Abraham and Jacob having concubines even as it portrays them as flawed but still faithful followers of God. I'll just leave that at that for now. This is not really what this passage is about.

Clearly this passage is reflecting negatively on Reuben sleeping with his father's concubine. Jacob says that Reuben had defiled his father's bed. And because of that he is stripped of his position of leadership as the first-born son.

I want to focus in more detail on Jacob's assessment of Reuben's character. He says that Reuben was "unstable as water." This is a description of Reuben's character. He had an unstable character. According to Bruce Waltke in his commentary on this passage, the Hebrew word that is translated "unstable" "means to be insolent, proud, undisciplined, reckless, uncontrollable, or unstable."

Reuben had a weak character. He was not firm in obedience to God. He was easily moved by temptation. He was easily influenced by sinful passions. I want us to dwell on this for a while because the outcome of salvation in Christ in our lives is to strengthen our character so that we are not "unstable as water," but rather stable and steadfast in pursuing godliness and holiness. Clearly this description of Reuben as "unstable as water" is a negative assessment. It is held before us as a warning. As people of God, who are chosen to be delivered from the power of sin in our lives through salvation in Christ, this passage is a calling for us to not be "unstable as water," but to be the opposite. Paul describes the opposite of "unstable as water" when he calls us, as people who share in the victory of the risen Christ, to "be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

So, let's look at Reuben as he is presented to us in the book of Genesis and consider how he was "unstable as water" so that we might learn from his negative example. First of all, there is the incident that Jacob mentions as the most serious example of the weakness of his character – his sexual sin with his father's concubine. He showed himself to be "unstable as water" because he gave in to his sexual urges and had sex with someone who was not his wife. Whatever was true about the wrongness of his father having a concubine in the first place, which is something that the text does not address, there is no doubt that it was wrong of Judah to give in to the urge to sleep with a woman who was not his wife.

In God's world, there is only one legitimate place to give in to sexual passions and urges – within the context of marriage as the Bible defines it – the marriage of one man and one woman. As people born in sin with sinful natures, we all have urges for sex outside the biblical context for sex. Because of original sin our sexual urges are disordered. But God calls us to resist the disordered urges. In the Ten Commandments he forbids adultery. In other places he forbids fornication which is all illicit sex. As human beings made in the image of God, we are all called to resist all urges for illicit sex. And as people of God, the work of God in saving us from our sins, gives us the strength to be stronger morally than we are by nature and to make progress is controlling our sexual desires. This is one of the ways that Reuben was “unstable as water.” He had the urge for sex with one of his father's concubines and he did not resist it - he gave into it and he fell into sexual sin.

Now this subject clearly has something to say to our society. The world has turned this whole biblical teaching about the dealing with sexual urges on its head. For many of the people of our society, our sexual urges define us so that our very personhood is at stake if we suppress them. That is why we are now called by our leaders to affirm those who are sexually attracted to the same sex and who follow their desires wherever they take them. This celebration of giving in to immoral sexual urges is a celebration of being “unstable as water” which this passage condemns.

But God calls us to the opposite. And one of the precious fruits of Jesus' death and resurrection for believers is that we are set free from the bondage to our lusts and immoral urges and given the strength to resist them and so become steadfast rather than unstable. That is why Paul writes in Romans 13:14, “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” It is interesting to note that Joseph was able to be strong in the Lord when he was tempted to have sex with Potiphar's wife. That passage makes it clear that the Lord was with him and God gave him the strength to resist his sinful urges and flee from that evil woman when she propositioned him. The opposite of being “unstable as water” is to have strength of character which enables us to say “no” to sexual temptation when it comes.

The next situation where Reuben showed himself to be “unstable as water” was when his other brothers wanted to kill Joseph. In that situation Reuben proposed a compromise. He suggested that they throw Joseph into a pit instead of killing him. His plan was to rescue Joseph later and “restore him to his father” (Genesis 37:18-24). He was morally in a better place than his brothers at this point, but he was not showing the leadership that he should have been showing as the firstborn. He should have stood up to his brothers. He should have had the backbone to say, “What are you guys thinking? How can you even think of doing such a great evil against God and Joseph and our father?” Instead he showed himself to be “unstable as water” by refusing to stand up for what was right and suggesting a compromise and hoping to work behind his brothers’ backs. He was not showing the strength of character that he should have as the firstborn called to take the lead.

This is something to which we are all called as Christians. The strength that comes from the renewing power of Christ through his Spirit is a strength that enables us to speak the truth in love in situations where that is difficult to do. In Ephesians 4:15 Paul tells us that we are to speak the truth in love. In Ephesians 4:25 Paul says that we are to speak truth to our neighbor. In 1 Thessalonians 5:12, Paul says that we are to “admonish the idle.” Jesus tells us that we are to take up our cross and follow him in Matthew 16:24. That refers to persecution. Jesus died on the cross because he spoke the truth in love. The church is persecuted for the same reason.

If Reuben had spoken the truth in love to his brothers when they were so angry with Joseph that they wanted to kill him, he may well have been killed along with Joseph. But people who reflect the character of God speak the truth even when that will result in hatred and persecution. Many of the prophets were persecuted and killed. Our Lord Jesus was persecuted and killed. And Jesus assured us that we can expect the same if we speak the truth in love to the world.

That is hard to do. It takes inner strength of character to do that. None of us have that on our own, but this is one of the goals of salvation. Jesus died and the Holy Spirit is working in his people to give us strength in our inner being. Paul prays for the Ephesians that God might grant

that they be “strengthened with power through his Spirit in [their] inner being.” That is strength of character that delivers us from being “unstable as water” and makes us able to resist being governed by our desires for ease and comfort.

Another time that Reuben showed himself to be “unstable as water” was when Joseph’s brothers came back from Egypt the first time without Simeon and told Jacob that the next time they went to Egypt for food, they would have to bring Benjamin with them. Jacob is bemoaning his situation. Genesis 42:36 “You have bereaved me of my children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and now you would take Benjamin. All this has come against me.” And then Reuben pipes up. Verse 27, “Kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you. Put him in my hands, and I will bring him back to you.” What a stupid thing to say! Not very helpful in the situation. Can you imagine Jacob saying, “That is very comforting? If you do not bring Benjamin back, I get to kill two of my grandsons?” Reuben here was showing that he was “unstable as water” in yet another way: by speaking without thinking, by impulsive and rash speaking, by empty and foolish words. Reuben showed the weakness of his character here by filling a silence with silly words.

The book of Proverbs has some helpful instruction on this. 10:19, “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.” 17:27, “Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.” 29:20, “Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him.” And Jesus says in Matthew 12:34-35, “<sup>34</sup>You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. <sup>35</sup>The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.”

So, someone who is “unstable as water” blurts out foolishness like Reuben saying that Jacob could kill his two sons if he did not bring Benjamin back and someone who has a stable godly character thinks before he speaks and his words have depth and wisdom.



If we look at the ways that Reuben was “unstable as water” and compare that with what God is working towards in those he is changing by the power of the gospel, it is clear that God is working towards making us people of strong character. The NT exposition of the gospel also uses the imagery of instability and weakness to refer to what we are being changed from and the imagery of stability and steadfastness to refer to what we are being changed to. James 1:3 says that “the testing of [our] faith produces steadfastness.” And in James 1:6-8 he says that we are to ask for wisdom in faith “for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.” Such a person is “a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.”

These are all character words. Those with weak characters are unstable in their inner beings and so winds of temptation or foolishness push them this way and that. Those with strong characters are steadfast and stable who are not easily deflected from what is right and what is wise and what is godly. In the context of the Bible we must understand these differences in the light of sin and grace. We are all weak by nature, but Jesus died so that those who trust in him might be gradually changed to be people of strong character who have learned self-denial and self-control and to “walk by the Spirit” and are learning “not” to “gratify the desires of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16).

Now on the one hand this is the work of God. It is the outworking of the gospel in our lives. But on the other we are involved. The Bible speaks both of what God has done and continues to do for and within his people. But it also exhorts us to grow toward the strength of character that is possible through the power of the resurrection working in us.

One of the ways it does that is by showing us examples of weak characters and the consequences. In our text God shows us Reuben – a man “unstable as water.” He was the firstborn son, but he was demoted because of his sinful weakness. There was so much hope for him when he was born. But that hope was not realized. It is a sad story and by the sad story of a weak man we are encouraged and urged to seek to do better in our lives through the power of Jesus Christ working in us. We are urged to strive for strength in the inner man. That comes from God, but it also comes through our own efforts in the strength that

God provides – nurturing self-discipline, strengthening our hearts through steadfastness in the little things, enduring the disappointments and the sufferings that God uses to produce steadfastness in us and doing all that motivated by trust in and love for our Saviour.

Our focus by nature is on externals. It is on success by worldly standards. God would have us focus on becoming the kind of people who are strong in the Lord and who are not easily swayed from what is right and what is true. The wonderful thing is that this is possible for all of us because of the transforming power of Christ in the gospel. And so, though we may feel that in many ways we are still “unstable as water,” God is not calling us to seek to grow in inner strength on our own. Jesus died so that we might be forgiven for all our sins and failures, but also so that we might become the kind of people who are “steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord.”

Paul puts all of this in a nutshell in Titus 2:11-14, <sup>11</sup>“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, <sup>12</sup>training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, <sup>13</sup>waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, <sup>14</sup>who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.”

## Lord’s Supper Meditation

One of the wonderful things about this text about Reuben is that, while it does not reflect well on him, he remains one of God’s chosen people, the head of one of the twelve tribes of Israel and a member of the people of the promise. No doubt he grew in grace in his latter years. There is indication that all of the brothers had become people of stronger character as the years progressed in the way that they handled the stress of dealing with Joseph before he made himself known to them. There is not a lot there but there is some indication that God had been working in all of the sons through the years.

This is part of the history that leads to Jesus and the gospel and that is why we can study a weak person like Reuben, learn from his mistakes, and yet not write him off. God was at work through all this story to save his people from their sins. The whole story leads to Jesus Christ. Apart from Jesus Christ it makes no sense. If it did not lead to Jesus, it could only lead to wrath and punishment and eternal condemnation.

We stand 2000 years on the other side of Jesus Christ. Just as Israel's history leads to Jesus Christ, the history of the church follows from Jesus Christ. He is the key to the whole story. And that is why in the Lord's Supper we focus on Jesus and particularly on Jesus as the one who died on the cross for our sins. Without that death, there would be no good news – there would be no hope. Jesus himself instituted the Lord's Supper in remembrance of him. He is the ground of our hope. And in the Lord's Supper he wants to assure us of that. What is symbolized here in the Lord's Supper is the heart of the Christian life. Jesus offering himself to us in the symbols of the broken bread and the wine.

One of the wonderful truths that has come to us from the Reformation is that while the Lord's Supper is a memorial, it is more than a memorial. What is symbolized is really happening at a spiritual level. In the tokens of the bread and the wine, Jesus does not just offer tokens, he offers himself. In the receiving of the bread and the wine by faith, we do not just receive the tokens – we receive what they signify – Jesus Christ as our Saviour.

Jesus is not physically present in the bread and the wine, but he is spiritually present so that he truly offers himself and we truly receive him if we receive these elements in faith. And this is both for forgiveness and the renewal of our lives. Our focus in the sermon has been on the renewal of our lives. Salvation is about making us stronger people – steadfast and stable – people who stand firm against temptation and in trials. The Lord's Supper is for that too. To strengthen us so that we will be stronger in our inner being.