

Jacob Blesses Reuben

By Jerry Collins

“Reuben, you are my firstborn; My might and the beginning of my strength, Preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power. Uncontrolled 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 49:3-4).

Verse 3—Reuben, you are my firstborn—The patriarch began with his firstborn son, who should have been heir of the promise. He was entitled to leadership and the double inheritance according to Moses. *he shall acknowledge the firstborn...by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the beginning of his strength; to him belongs the right of the firstborn* (Deuteronomy 21:17).

PT—That meant that if a father had 12 sons, he divided his inheritance into 13 parts, and the firstborn received twice the amount received by each of the brothers.

- ***My might and the beginning of my strength***—Jacob began Reuben’s blessing by heaping praise on him, acknowledging his firstborn position in the family.
- ***Preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power***—As the firstborn, Reuben would become the natural leader of his brothers and be preeminent in such dignity and honor. He was entitled to this leadership position and the double portion that went along with it.

Verse 4—Uncontrolled as water, you shall not have preeminence—However, because Reuben had the ungoverned impulse of boiling water, he would fail in leadership. Reuben’s character was as unstable and destructive as raging water and so he would not excel in his leadership.

- ***Because you went up to your father’s bed***—Jacob now publicly revealed the sin which Reuben had committed, recorded in Genesis 35:22. *It came about while Israel was dwelling in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father’s concubine, and Israel heard of it.* By sleeping with his father’s concubine, he would be attempting to take over leadership of the clan—something Absalom foolishly attempted later on in Israel’s history with his father David (2 Samuel 16:21-22).
- ***Then you defiled it—he went up to my couch***—This defiant act of not observing his father’s sacred right meant that Reuben and his family lost the birthright. According to 1 Chronicles 5:1-2, *now the sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel (for he was the firstborn, but because he defiled his father’s bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph the son of Israel; so that he is not enrolled in the genealogy according to the birthright. Though Judah prevailed over his brothers, and from him came the leader, yet the birthright belonged to Joseph).* Essentially, Reuben destroyed his right to inherit. The switch to the third person *he* [Reuben] *went up to my couch* may be the moment Jacob revealed to the brothers Reuben’s shameful deed, or let them know that he, Jacob, knew about it all along.

PT—The family of Reuben would not have the character to lead, and this failure of character was first seen in the ancestor’s sin. Sin is always a compromise that leads to failure.

Observations from the Tribe of Reuben

- Reuben never excelled in his tribal development. In the census of the tribes at the end of the wilderness journey, Reuben’s population had already begun to decrease. In the first census, *their numbered men of the tribe of Reuben were 46,500* (Numbers 1:21). At the end of the wilderness wandering, a second census showed *those who were numbered of them were 43,730* (Numbers 26:7).
- Reuben produced not one single prophet, military leader, judge, or significant person in the history of Israel. Reuben had indeed lost both his birthright and leadership position due to being *uncontrolled as water, you shall not have preeminence*, an example of which was that he *went up to your father’s bed; Then you defiled it—he went up to my couch* (Genesis 49:4). Reuben’s inability to make proper discretionary decisions doomed himself and his descendants to a future of obscurity.
- Reuben had to live with the results of his sin no matter how he had tried to make up for it by attempting to protect Joseph from his brother’s murderous plot (Genesis 37:20-30). James said: *a double-minded man [is] unstable in all his ways.* Long-range tragic effects can result from a fleeting and impulsive act of sin.