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## PROBLEM PASSIONS

Genesis 49:1-7

By

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Genesis Lesson 80

## PROBLEM PASSIONS Genesis 49:1-7

"Camelot" is the classic story of King Arthur and his "Knights of the Roundtable." There was a happy kingdom until his leading knight, Sir Lancelot, fell passionately in love with Arthur's queen, Guinevere. Lancelot and Guinevere's unbridled passion, which seemed to promise fulfillment to the lovers, resulted in the ruin of that happy kingdom.

That plot has been played over and over in millions of homes, many of them Christian homes. The initial happiness and potential for lifelong joy is shipwrecked on the rocks of uncontrolled passion. Often it is the passion of lust. Just as often it is the passion of anger. Both of these powerful passions can ruin families. Some of you may be struggling with those problem passions.

In Genesis 49:1-7, we encounter three men whose personal and family lives suffered because of uncontrolled lust and anger: Reuben, Simeon, and Levi. The dying patriarch Jacob calls his twelve sons to his bedside to give them a final blessing (49:28), which is also a prophecy of things to come (49:1). I believe that Jacob was speaking under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit as he predicted what would happen, not only to his sons, but to the tribes which issued from them. By devoting so much space to these prophecies, it is clear that Moses saw these dying words of Jacob as significant in explaining the history of God's covenant nation.

At first glance you might think that these first three blessings sound more like a curse. Jacob strongly rebukes his sons for past sins and predicts that those sins will have far reaching consequences in the future of the tribes. And yet, properly understood, corrections and warnings are blessings. While these are prophecies, they are based upon Jacob's long, careful observation of his sons' character and personalities. Jacob's words served to warn his sons and their descendants of the areas of weakness where they especially needed to be on guard. And, as

we'll see, the tribe of Levi, while fulfilling the prophecy concerning them, actually turned what sounds like a curse into a blessing as they turned to the Lord.

The warning, which can become a blessing if we'll heed it, is:

Uncontrolled passions lead to personal and family ruin.

Reuben (49:3-4) shows us the lesson of uncontrolled lust; Simeon and Levi (49:5-7) show us the lesson of uncontrolled anger; and, the history of the tribe of Levi teaches us how a seeming curse can be turned into a blessing.

## 1. The passion of uncontrolled lust leads to ruin.

Three observations from Jacob's words to Reuben:

A. Great potential can be ruined by uncontrolled passion.

Jacob begins by building up the great potential which Reuben enjoyed as the firstborn, only to yank the rug out from under him by bringing up an incident from over 40 years before, the time when Reuben had lain with Jacob's concubine, Bilhah (35:22). Reuben, the firstborn, should have received a double portion of the inheritance. He should have been the leader among his brothers. He, above all his brothers, should have been the one to defend his father's honor, not defile it. But his one act of indulgence robbed him of his privileges as the firstborn. Like King David after him, he paid a terrible price for a night of pleasure.

All the potential in the world won't benefit you if you don't develop self-control, especially in the area of sexual temptation. Satan has plenty of time to wait for you to fall. He just sets his traps and bides his time. Eventually, he knows that he's going to trip you up. You may be preeminent in dignity and power. But if you're as uncontrolled as water, it's only a matter of time until your potential is swept away by the flood of lust. The Hebrew word translated "uncontrolled" means "reckless." The picture is of water that floods its banks and goes wildly out of control.

It seems that Reuben had never checked his lust, but just let it rush recklessly from one situation to the next. Who knows how many times he had glanced furtively at Bilhah? Perhaps she noticed and liked the attention, so she flirted with him. Besides,

Reuben was angry at his dad for the favoritism he had shown to Joseph and Benjamin. Perhaps going to bed with Bilhah was Reuben's way of getting back at his father.

Some of you have tremendous potential in the Lord. But you've got a habit of flowing downstream with lustful thoughts. It's all in your head at this point. No one else knows and no one has gotten hurt--yet. But, *great gifts are worthless without godly character*. I know many gifted pastors who are out of the ministry because they did not judge their lust. If you aren't learning to take every thought captive to the obedience of Jesus Christ, it's only a matter of time before your great potential is ruined by reckless lust.

#### B. Position and power aren't gained by grabbing.

Position, power and illicit sex are often intertwined. Part of Reuben's motive behind his sin with Bilhah may have been to grab for power over his father and his father's favorite sons. I'm basing this on two factors. The first is the timing of the incident. Reuben went in to Bilhah shortly after the death of Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife, the mother of the favored sons, Joseph and Benjamin (see context, 35:22). Why then? I think that Reuben was trying to make sure that Jacob didn't take Bilhah, Rachel's maid, and elevate her above Leah, Reuben's mother.

The second factor may not be valid, in that I am reading a later custom back into this situation. But later in Israel's history, if a son took his father's concubine to bed, it meant that he had assumed his father's place of power. Absalom did that with his father David's concubines when he rebelled (2 Sam. 16:21-22). Later, Solomon's brother, Adonijah, tried to grab the throne by securing one of David's concubines as his wife (1 Kings 2:13-25).

So I think that Reuben, in taking his father's concubine, was seeking to secure first place for himself. He didn't want to lose his inheritance to Rachel's or Bilhah's sons. But the very act by which Reuben tried to grab power resulted in his losing it. The first shall be last. Those who seek to gain their life will lose it. Position and power, in God's sight, aren't gained by grabbing.

Reuben should have been and wanted to be the leader over his brothers. But you don't become a leader by grabbing for power while at the same time violating God's moral law. True power stems from character and integrity. That's why, when Paul lists the

qualifications for leadership in the local church, he never mentions personality or gifts but, rather, character qualities (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9). And in the home, men, you don't lead spiritually by barking orders and throwing your weight around. You lead by demonstrating the character of Christ who showed His love by laying down His life for us.

C. Uncontrolled lust always has consequences which go beyond us.

Jacob now makes it clear that this sin, though committed years before, would deprive Reuben and his descendants of their rights as the firstborn. His one sin affected thousands of his descendants for hundreds of years after!

You may complain, "That's not fair!" But that is in fact how God deals with sin, and we dare not challenge His righteous judgment. We need to burn into our thinking the fact that sin always has consequences and those consequences are never just private. Present actions shape the future. Character flaws and sins that we let go unchecked can affect our children and grandchildren after us for many generations (Exod. 20:5). We may think that nobody else knows and that no one will get hurt. Maybe it was a one night fling in another town when you were on a business trip. But what if that woman had AIDS and you get it and pass it on to your wife? That can have rather severe consequences for your whole family! And don't presume that God is going to protect you because you're under grace. In the book written to defend God's grace Paul wrote, "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life" (Gal. 6:7-8).

So Reuben's life teaches us that the passion of uncontrolled lust leads to both personal and family ruin. Simeon and Levi teach us that ...

2. The passion of uncontrolled anger leads to ruin.

When Jacob says that these men are brothers, he doesn't mean just biological brothers. He means that they are two of a kind. Brothers and sisters can either encourage one another to righteous

living or to sin. These brothers plotted how they would get even with the Shechemites because the prince of Shechem had raped their sister. They used God's covenant of circumcision, which should have been a channel of blessing, as the means of deceiving and slaughtering all the men in the town. Here Jacob distances himself from their treachery and pronounces a curse upon their anger. Four observations about anger from this text:

A. Be careful with so-called righteous anger.

Simeon and Levi probably would have defended themselves by saying that they were righteously angry. When Jacob scolded them about what they did, they shot back, "Should he treat our sister as a harlot?" (34:31). They argued that they were avenging the wrong done to their sister, defending her honor. But really, they were only defending their own pride. They went far beyond the bounds of righteous anger. The brothers were quite right to be angry about their sister's rape and Jacob was wrong to be so apathetic about it. But they were very wrong in the way they dealt with their anger.

Not all anger is sin, but we must be very careful when we are righteously angry not to cross the line into unrighteous anger. That's why Paul wrote, "Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity" (Eph. 4:26-27). Even when we are righteously angry, it's so easy to step over the line into wounded pride, giving the devil a foothold in our lives. Whenever you begin to plot vengeance under the guise of righteous anger, you're out of line. The Bible is clear that vengeance belongs to the Lord. While He later commanded Israel to execute His judgment on the Canaanites, He gave no such command to Simeon and Levi.

Scottish hymnwriter George Matheson said, "There are times when I do well to be angry, but I have often mistaken the times." There are times when it is proper to be angry, but we need to be very careful not to cross the line into wounded pride.

B. Venting your anger without control doesn't relieve the anger or help others.

There are people who say, "Well, I'm just being honest with my feelings. I just blow up and then it's all over." So does a bomb, but look at the devastation it leaves behind. Simeon and Levi blew

up and a whole village got slaughtered. But it didn't solve their anger problem. Here, over 40 years later, Jacob characterizes them as angry men. He doesn't say, "Cursed be their anger, for it *was* fierce, and their wrath, for it *was* cruel." He says it *is* fierce and cruel. They were still angry men.

Uncontrolled anger results in senseless destruction of people and property. Think of the families these men ruined by murdering all the fathers. They hamstrung some of the oxen, an act of senseless waste. The word "self-will" (49:6) has the nuance of doing as they pleased. They weren't concerned about anybody's feelings except their own. Most anger stems from selfishness. "I didn't get my way and I want my way! I demand my rights!" But that kind of anger doesn't help anybody, not even the person who is angry.

According to the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the number one predictor in cardiovascular disease--more important than cholesterol--is mismanaged anger (in *Los Angeles* magazine, March, 1988, p. 124). It also states that anger arousal is toxic to the body and that 90 percent of anger is unjustified. So, contrary to popular thought, it isn't healthy to vent your anger.

Neither is it healthy to deny that you are angry when you are. Many Christians, who don't want to admit their sinful anger, smile and say, "I'm not angry" when really, they're seething inside. They won't admit it, even to themselves. Another wrong response is to clam up by holding your anger in and not showing it. You realize that you're angry, but you try to cover it from others. But sooner or later it blows out somewhere, often over trivial things.

Let me make two other observations about anger and then I'll mention briefly how to deal with it.

### C. Uncontrolled anger creates distance in relationships.

That's not news, but it needs to be said. If you want close relationships, especially in your family, you've got to bring your anger under the control of God's Spirit. Jacob here distances himself from these two angry sons (49:6) and prophesies that they will be dispersed and scattered in Israel. That was fulfilled as the tribe of Simeon later inherited land scattered throughout Judah's territory (Josh. 19:1-9; see also 1 Chron. 4:28-33, 39, 42). The tribe

of Levi became priests, who had no inheritance, but were scattered throughout the rest of the tribal lands.

The point is, you can't get close to angry people. It's like snuggling up to a time bomb--you never know when it's going to explode and tear you to bits. So you learn to keep your distance in order to survive. If you want to have a close family, you've got to learn to deal with your anger in a godly manner.

D. Uncontrolled anger is passed on in a family.

Jacob here isn't just talking about his sons, but about their descendants. Anger gets handed down from generation to generation. It's interesting that Moses was a descendant of Levi. What problem kept Moses from beginning his work at first and then from entering the promised land? Anger! He got angry and murdered the Egyptian who was mistreating the Hebrews and had to flee to the desert for 40 years. Then he got angry at the people and struck the rock to bring forth water, when God had told him to speak to the rock. For that sin, God prevented Moses from entering Canaan. Moses was the son of Levi.

I've told you before about how the Lord nailed me with this truth. Christa was a toddler, barely talking. She was in her car seat and I came around a bend in the road and almost rear-ended a car that had stopped to look at the scenery. As I slammed on my brakes and hit my horn, I yelled, "You stupid jerk!" From the back seat came a little voice, imitating daddy, "You stupid jerk!" It was like a sword piercing my soul! My sweet little girl tainted by my sin!

Christian counselor Jay Adams has estimated that sinful anger is involved in 90 percent of all counseling problems. It's a major problem. How should we deal with our anger? I can't be thorough, but let me give a sketchy outline.

*1) I need to confess my anger as sin before God, others, and myself.* Confession of sin and accepting responsibility for it is always the first step toward victory. This means that I stop excusing it and blaming others for it. It may help to analyze your anger. When Cain got angry, God asked him, "Why are you angry?" God didn't need the information; He wanted Cain to think about it (see also Jonah 4:4, 9). Usually I must admit, "I'm angry because I didn't get my way." That's embarrassing, but true!

2) *I must bow before the sovereignty of God.* All anger is ultimately directed at the Sovereign God. You may say, "No, I'm angry at my parents who mistreated me," or, "I'm angry at my mate who is so selfish." But God sovereignly gave you your parents and your mate. If you're mad at them, you're really not in submission to God's sovereign dealings with you. God will use difficult people to make you more like Jesus if you will bow thankfully before Him.

3) *Memorize Scriptures that deal with anger.* As the psalmist said, "Your word I have hid in my heart, that I might not sin against You" (Ps. 119:11). Here's how this works: You've memorized James 1:19, 20: "But let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God." Somebody did something you didn't like and you're just ready to let fly with some choice words, when the Lord brings that verse to mind. You slow down, ask for clarification, and then really listen as the other person explains his point of view. The verse also reminds you of your purpose, to minister God's righteousness to others. By listening, you discover that the other person is an angry person who needs God's love, and you're able to bear witness to him. You avoided sinful anger.

4) *Control your anger by walking moment by moment in dependence on the Holy Spirit.* Outbursts of anger are listed as a deed of the flesh, but love, patience, kindness, and self-control are fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:19-23). You may protest, "I try to control my anger, but I just have a short fuse!" But by saying that, you're not confessing it; you're excusing it. Besides, you *can* control your anger. God's Word says so and you have done it. You're in the middle of a hot argument with your mate when the phone rings. It's someone in the church. They ask, "How are you?" You respond in a cheery voice, "Oh, fine, fine!" You're controlling your anger. We do it all the time when we want to, so it is possible.

5) *Verbalize your angry feelings appropriately.* There is no place for abusive speech (Col. 3:8). We are commanded to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). So you don't need to yell or tear the other person to bits. You may need to confront him with his irresponsibility or need to change his behavior. But he's much more likely to hear you if you don't blast him. "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Prov. 15:1). Proverbs 12:18 says,

"There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing." You want to use your tongue as a scalpel to heal, not as a sword to mutilate! Finally,

6) *Take appropriate action to correct your anger.* If selfishness is at the root of your anger, get involved in serving. If you're bitter, do something kind for those who have wronged you. Paul writes, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor [yelling] and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you" (Eph. 4:31-32). When you turn from your problem passions and begin seeking the Lord, He will bless you:

3. When family members turn to the Lord, a seeming curse can be turned into a blessing.

Jacob predicted that Simeon and Levi would be scattered in Israel because of their anger, and they were. But the tribe of Levi turned to the Lord, and their scattering was a great blessing to them and to others, as they became the priestly tribe, who taught God's ways to the others. Moses and Aaron were Levites, the sons of godly parents. Many other Levites down through Israel's history were greatly used of God: Phinehas, whose godly zeal stemmed a plague (Num. 25:11-13); Ezra, who helped restore the nation after the captivity; John the Baptist, who prepared the way of the Lord. Because the Levites turned to the Lord, this seeming curse was turned into a blessing.

### Conclusion

What God did for them, He will do for you. You and your family can inherit a blessing and become a blessing to others if you will deal with the problem passions of lust and anger. Right now, each of us is either blaming others for our sin and rationalizing it with all sorts of reasons why we are the way we are or, we're confessing it and striving against it in the power of the Holy Spirit, in obedience to Christ. It's always a painful struggle to face up to my own sin and to change. But it's God's way. The pain is worth the gain, as your children and grandchildren will rise up and called you blessed. And your life will bring glory to the Savior who died to free us from every sin.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss: Lust always is entertained in the mind long before it is enacted with the body.
2. It is a sign of spiritual and emotional immaturity to be angry at another person. Agree/disagree?
3. My parents taught me that anger was .... What are you teaching your kids about anger?
4. All anger can and must be controlled. Agree/disagree?
5. Is it always good to verbalize your anger, or is suppression sometimes sufficient?

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