

A Lack of Loyalty: Reuben

Jacob's eldest son is a lesson in loss. He represents what not to do, who not to be.

To begin with, his name means *See, A Son*. To appreciate this, one must go back into the family history- explaining, among other things, how Jacob wound up with four wives.

Reuben's mother, Leah, had been substituted for Jacob's beloved Rachel by her scheming father on the wedding night. Jacob had no idea anything was wrong until he woke up the next day with a bad hangover and the wrong girl.

Marriage is still marriage, but by bait and switch, Laban, the father in law, got twenty-one years free labor out of a cousin who owed him nothing more than the dowry on one wife. Leah, the unloved spouse, found herself in rivalry with her sister in what should have been the most open and trusting of relationships- marriage. It became so bad the daughters' two servant girls became surrogate mothers. Jacob's bed got rather crowded.

See, A Son was Leah's cry of triumph, declaring herself victor in the battle for her husband's heart. But it was not to be. Even with a son, Jacob still loved Rachel more. But the complacency built into the name was to plague Reuben and his children from then on.

It assumed a lot of things that don't come automatically, that have to be earned, or protected, or sometimes, don't come at all because God didn't give them.

Reuben, thou [art] my firstborn, my might, and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity, and the excellency of power: Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel; because thou wentest up to thy father's bed; then defiledst thou [it]: he went up to my couch...Genesis 49:3-4

A good-looking hunk that just couldn't put the pieces together. Although Reuben occupied a legal position of supremacy as firstborn, the rest of the equation didn't happen. The first and most telling reason was the incestuous relationship with his stepmother. But that was only one issue when there were many. The sin was not as clear-cut as it sounds.

Bilhah was a slave girl, Rachel's maid. By this time Rachel had died and administration of the household was in the hands of Leah, Reuben's mother. With her adversary gone, the tension on Leah would have lessened but old wounds festered, especially as Jacob continued to show preference for Rachel by giving her sons, Joseph and Benjamin favored treatment.

Rachel's slave would have been in a bad position. Jacob never loved any woman but Rachel and the years of trying to keep multiple women happy were taking their toll. While the Bible never forbids polygamy we find a recurring trait—hand wringing. Men

who should be leading in a confident and forthright manner find themselves spectators, offering commentary no one acts upon.

This is manifest in Jacob's life as he bemoans the vengeful actions of his sons and later nags them into purchasing grain in Egypt. We see the same thing in King David after Amnon raped his sister, Tamar. When decisive leadership was needed, David produced hand wringing and complaint.

How the relationship between the neglected concubine and the careless son became sexual could be anybody's guess. Their ages might not have been seriously different, as servant girls began young and Reuben was the oldest child. A lonely, unhappy woman in the household might have found a confidant in a son who wasn't getting out of life what he thought he should either. But whatever the circumstance, the thing that wasn't supposed to happen, did.

Several laws of leadership come into play. First off, Reuben's primacy among his brothers flowed from the authority of Jacob, his father. This sin was a bad career move.

Authority comes from God. A man may commit moral offenses and still receive promotion, but there comes a day when payment's due. The statement from antiquity was, *The mills of the gods grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine...*

Moral compromise produces intimidated, vacillating non-leaders. Reuben's spineless demeanor kept him from ruling his brothers. His wimpy conduct as they threw Joseph into the pit calls forth no life change or emulation in anyone. Tragically, Reuben was the one with the conscience, as he made objections and tried to deliver the boy. The remains of Reuben's leadership mantle hung in tatters, but he knew right from wrong to a greater measure than those around him.

A glaring lack was his unwillingness to go the distance, or lay down his life when he needed to. What would have happened had he stood up boldly to the boys, telling them it was either two in the pit, or none? Instead it was subterfuge, planning to sneak back and rescue the boy—at little personal risk.

The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep. Our Lord's example is the purest demonstration of one worthy to lead others. But even when it doesn't come to death, people realize how far a leader will go for them. Loyalty works both ways. If we see a leader people are willing to die for, we see a leader who has already laid his life down in some fashion. Like begets like. The opportunist will beget an opportunist, and the true shepherd will beget after his kind.

Later, when Joseph is prince over Egypt and causing the brothers some soul searching, Reuben is quick to remind that they should have listened to him. He inherited his father's hand wringing, the one thing he could have done without.

The most telling act, however, occurred when the brothers were to return to Egypt. Joseph decreed that Benjamin must accompany them, something Jacob was loath to allow. Reuben's offer to let his sons be taken hostage, to be killed if anything happened to Benjamin, was egregious. Should the loss of a son be met with the loss of grandchildren? What must Jacob have thought? What did Reuben's sons think? Were they beloved children or bargaining chips in dad's mad grab for power?

Not only did the offer prove to Jacob that this was no man to entrust a favorite son to but it must have driven a wedge between Reuben and his own children, a breach that would never be healed. The tribe of Reuben languished throughout the years. The most memorable Reubenites were Dathan and Abiram, leaders of a rebellion in the wilderness, whom the earth opened up and swallowed. What was the rebellion about? Who should lead. Interesting...

Let Reuben live and not die, and let not his men be few, was the prayer of Moses as he blessed the tribes by name (Deut 33:6). The tribe did live, but as one of the smaller and less distinguished of Israel. They were of the two and a half tribes who took their inheritance on the desert side of the Jordan, forever separated from the main body of the nation and struggling to maintain their identity as Israelites.

While there was no sin in settling where they did, it demonstrated a lack of belief, unwillingness to wait for God's full blessing, an impatience similar to Esau's when he sold his birthright over a few hunger pains. The same short-sighted restlessness that years before had landed Reuben into a bed of adultery.

Some men rise above their birth. Reuben, born at the top, descended. What he failed to rise above was the scheming and jealousy that surrounded his conception. He used people even as his mother attempted to use him for her own advancement. Relationships that should have been nurturing and supportive were violated, producing pettiness and intrigue. It was not God's best.

© 2011 Gary A. Hughes