

What can we learn from the tribe of Reuben?

Each of the twelve sons of Israel / Jacob received a blessing from his father just before Jacob's death. The twelve sons were the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel, and the blessing contained prophetic information about the future of each tribe. In the case of the tribe of Reuben, Jacob prophesied, "Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, the first sign of my strength, excelling in honor, excelling in power. Turbulent as the waters, you will no longer excel, for you went up onto your father's bed, onto my couch and defiled it" (Genesis 49:3-4). In addition to referring to the future of the tribe of Reuben, the prophecy contains within it several lessons for all of us.

Reuben, the firstborn of the twelve sons, was to Jacob his "might, the first sign of my strength" (Genesis 49:3), indicating that to him were all the rights and prerogatives of a firstborn son. At first, he excelled in honor and power, as is fitting the firstborn son, but Jacob declares that Reuben "will no longer excel" (verse 4) due to his sin of incest with Bilhah, his father's concubine wife (Genesis 35:22). Although that sin was committed forty years prior, there was left an indelible spot on Reuben's character and that of his posterity. By committing this uncleanness with his father's wife, there would be reproach upon his tribe and the family, to whom he ought to have been an example and a blessing. He forfeited the prerogatives of the birthright, and his dying father demoted him, although he did not disown or disinherit him. He would still have all the privileges of a son, but not of the firstborn.

Jacob's sad prophecy for Reuben certainly came true. No judge, prophet, ruler, or prince came from that tribe, nor any person of renown except Dathan and Abiram, who were noted for their rebellion against Moses. Reuben's tribe chose a settlement on the other side of the Jordan, a further indication of the loss of godly influence on his brothers to

which his birthright entitled him. Although Reuben was the firstborn, the kingdom was given to Judah and the priesthood to Levi, leaving Reuben's tribe to be small and non-influential.

Further, Reuben was “unstable as water” (some versions translate it “turbulent as water”), and in this phrase we find several lessons for all Christians. For one thing, Reuben’s virtue was unstable; he did not have control of himself and his own appetites. The charge of instability could refer to his being sometimes very regular and orderly, while at other times wild and undisciplined. As Christians, we are to be in control of our flesh and its appetites and desires at all times. Most importantly, we are to be steadfast in our faith and not “tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine” (Ephesians 4:14).

We also learn from Reuben that those who dabble in sin must not expect to save their reputation or maintain a positive influence upon others. Although we know our sins were nailed to the cross and we are forever forgiven for past sins, we may still suffer the temporal consequences of those sins, which often include remorse and a loss of reputation and influence. Reuben’s sin left an indelible mark upon him and his family. As Christians, we must understand that some of our sins will leave a lasting scar.