

Text: Genesis 49:1-7

Title: "The Legacy of Unconfessed Sin"

Time: October 18, 2009 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: On the site of the first bridge ever built across the Connecticut River in 1785 now stands a bridge built some time later by Charles Vilas, known as the Bellow Falls Vilas Bridge. The bridge connects Vermont and New Hampshire, and it bears a plaque with a portion of a poem called "The Bridge Builder" by a lady named Will Allen Dromgoole. The poem is about the importance of a person's legacy:

An old man, going a lone highway,
Came at the evening, cold and gray,
To a chasm, vast and deep and wide,
Through which was flowing a sullen tide.
The old man crossed in the twilight dim-
That sullen stream had no fears for him;
But he turned, when he reached the other side,
And built a bridge to span the tide.

"Old man," said a fellow pilgrim near,
"You are wasting strength in building here.
Your journey will end with the ending day;
You never again must pass this way.
You have crossed the chasm, deep and wide,
Why build you the bridge at the eventide?"

The builder lifted his old grey head.
"Good friend, in the path I have come," he said,
"There followeth after me today
A youth whose feet must pass this way.
This chasm that has been naught to me
To that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be.
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;
Good friend, I am building the bridge for him."

[Cited from William J. Bennett, *The Book of Virtues*, 96.]

What comes after us, caused by the way we have lived, is our legacy. In Genesis 49 Jacob gathers his sons around him so that he can communicate to them the prophetic word that God had given him about their legacy. He explains what would come after them, in part because of the way they had lived. Now a man can build bridges during his lifetime that are a blessing to the generations that follow, and he can burn bridges during his lifetime as a curse and hindrance to those who follow. Both categories are represented among the sons of Jacob, the second of these coming first. The lives of Reuben, Simeon, and Levi leave the negative legacy of unconfessed sin.

I. Reuben: potential wasted and privilege betrayed (vv. 3-4).

Illustration: 1780 was a difficult year for the Colonial Army fighting the Revolutionary War. Perhaps the greatest setback that year was the betrayal of Benedict Arnold. Arnold was a respected general that had been wounded in the leg during an unsuccessful campaign against Quebec. He was instrumental in keeping Fort Ticonderoga out of the hands of General Burgoyne in 1777. In 1780, he was a Colonial general whom Washington had learned to depend upon.

So when Arnold agreed to sell out the colonials at West Point for £6,300 and an officer's commission in the British Army, Washington was forced to ask, "Whom can we trust now?" Benedict Arnold once asked a colonial prisoner of what he thought the Americans would do to him if they captured him, and the soldier responded: "They would cut off and bury with honors your leg that was wounded in Saratoga and hang the rest of you." Arnold's failure was potential wasted and privilege betrayed. Jacob feels this way about his son Reuben.

A. Reuben's preeminent position (v. 3).

Application: This preeminence centers on Reuben's position as Jacob's firstborn. More was expected of him, because he held the position of greater blessing. Luke 12:48 was a verse that I always read very solemnly as a kid growing up in a Christian home, a

good Bible-believing church, and a Christian school: "For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more." We who have greater privilege also have greater responsibility. And failure is always more tragic for the firstborn. Did you know that if you are a Christian, you bear the responsibilities of the firstborn (Heb. 12:23)? We are a church of firstborns or firstborn-ones. It is a preeminent privilege to be a part of the church. When we fail to fulfill the responsibilities this privilege entails, our failure is truly tragic.

B. Reuben's unstable character (v. 4).

Application: Reuben did what he did because he was who he was. Our character will determine what we do. The specific flaw with Reuben's character was that it was unstable as water, or we might call it "wishy-washy" today. In what sense is water unstable? Well, water is unstable in the sense that a liquid is less stable than a solid. Water is always following the dictates of some other outside force or pressure. In a stream, water rushes downward with gravity, while the rocks stay put and resist that downward pressure. Water follows the path of least resistance.

People who have a character that is unstable as water do what they do, not because of an internal commitment to right over wrong no matter the consequence, but because they are feeling pressure of some kind from the outside. They want the easiest path rather than the right path.

Don't be wishy-washy in the work of the Lord. Don't be here today, gone tomorrow, depending on some outside pressure you face. Instead, "be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, for as much as you know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58*. The church today is in need of steady, stable, solid, abounding testimonies for Christ. Instability can lead to tragic failure and ruined legacies.

C. Reuben's unconfessed sin.

Application: All of the sons of Jacob knew what it was to seriously fail, with the exception of Joseph and perhaps Benjamin. The sins of Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, however, determine their legacy in a way the others do not seem to. I believe that the reason this is so is that these three brothers never allowed their father to have the last word on the sin they committed against him (Gen. 35:22; 34:30-31).

The last word comes in chapter 49 in the form of a curse, because it was never properly and contritely dealt with prior to this time by the brothers. After his great sin which rivaled that of Reuben's, David assures us all in Psalm 51 that "the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou will not despise" (v. 18). Reuben, Simeon, and Levi never experienced the broken and contrite heart of repentance over their sin and failure. They had reasons for it, excuses for it, justifications of it, and may have even tried to forget it; but they did not know repentance from it.

The Bible speaks of the gift of repentance as the key that opens the lock of the devil's snare (2 Tim. 2:26: "In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; and that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.") Don't let your sin persist unconfessed, justified, excused, forgotten. Receive the gift of repentance, the broken and contrite spirit.

II. Simeon and Levi: pagan violence (vv. 5-7).

Illustration: When we read these verses that remind us of Simeon and Levi's violent acts of brutality against the men of Shechem, our minds immediately go to the news headlines of recent days in a way they did not back when we were studying chapter 34 last March. I refer, of course, to the senseless acts of brutality inflicted on the Cates family in the town just south of us here.

There have been a number of admirable efforts to help bring some healing and support to this very painful situation. One

website I saw seeking to do just that has been entitled “We are better than this”.com. When I looked nearly 25M people had taken the time to express their condolences on that website. Though admirable in its desire to help and care, its title saddened me when I saw it, as I thought about what hope the world around us has to cling to when confronted with evil in this way. Can we really say, “We are better than this”? Is that really where our hope lies?

The website makes the following statement of faith: “In NH and across the world, we choose to believe that we are better than this, and that we refuse to evolve backwards. We choose to show the world that we are full of love and compassion.” Well, our purpose today is not to denigrate and criticize an effort to help, but I must confess that my confidence in the truth of this statement is not very high. Although there is much that is admirable in human nature, there is also much that is very much like those four boys. I say that as a human, not someone who pretends to be superhuman. We need a hope that is greater than human nature. Pagan violence is, and has been since the fall of man, a part of human nature. Notice four things about pagan violence.

A. Pagan violence is serviced by the gang (vv. 5-6a).

Application: Simeon and Levi are unique as recipients of a blessing/curse prophecy, because they are the only example of two linked together in this way. Our text emphasizes the importance of the relationship between them to the act that they committed: “brethren” (v. 5), “secret” (v. 6), “assembly” (v. 6). There is something about pagan violence that receives the support of the gang in a pagan society.

The Book of Proverbs warns young people against succumbing to this kind of peer pressure (Prov. 1:10-19). In a pagan society, violence has an easier time gaining political momentum. Certainly, one application must be to our young people. We need to be careful about the influences they are exposed to at school, on the phone, and on the computer. They need to be willing to stand against violence.

But who can deny that abortion is an act of violence? I think we would all agree that the violent nature of that act is such that for me to go into detail describing how it is done right now would be inappropriate. But it is accepted because the practice has obtained political and monetary momentum in our pagan society. As God's people in a pagan society we have to be willing to not be part of the gang, and we have to be willing to not be a part of a political mainstream that promotes acts of violence.

B. Pagan violence is serviced by callous anger (6b, "for in their anger they slew a man"; 7a, "Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce").

Application: One of the issues you face when preaching on the crimes of Simeon and Levi in Genesis 34 is that of relevancy or applicability. The temptation when reading of the despicable acts of these men is to conclude fairly quickly that we all who sit in the pew are very far from committing that kind of thing. We are tempted to say that the passage just does not apply.

The Sermon on the Mount disabuses us of those delusions (Matt. 5:21-26). Jesus puts the hatred and anger we feel so quickly and easily in the same category as the violent murders of Levi and Simeon. Jacob does the same thing when he highlights the nature of the anger of these men. He says it was fierce, the unfeeling attitude used to describe a lion in Jud. 14:14 and an invasion force that refused to spare the very old and very young in Deut. 25:50. God's people are called to a very different response to personal wrongs suffered (Matt. 5:38-48). Callous anger over personal injustices suffered has no place in the will of God for His people.

C. Pagan violence is serviced by relativism (v. 6b).

Application: The word translated *self-willed* here basically refers to a motivation that finds impetus for an act in what pleases self. It is the idea that what is right for me might be very different than what is right for you. The term for this is *moral relativism*, and it is a consequence of man's departure from the absolute moral perfections of the holy God of the Bible. How different re-

ally is the assertion “abortion is wrong for you, but not for me” and “murder is wrong for you, but not for me”? If we accept the first assertion as valid, the second must follow. We are not animals who evolve our own personal sense of right and wrong; we are creatures made in God’s image and morally responsible to obey His holy law. As Christians, we need to reject moral relativism and dogmatically assert moral absolutes as absolutely true.

D. Pagan violence will face the retribution of God.

Application: By the time we get to the end of the prophecy about Simeon and Levi, we begin to understand that the *I* and *me* in these verses must be someone other than Jacob. When we are reading about *my glory* and *my soul/life* and *I will scatter*, we are reading about God’s condemnation of the violence of these men. Both Simeon and Levi were to be scattered, and that is what happened. Simeon was dissolved into Judah (Josh. 19:1), and Levi was given no land, only scattered villages throughout the promised land (Josh. 18:7).

The purpose of life is not the survival of the fittest. God defends the helpless and the weak. He is just, and His dealings are just and true. This brings us comfort as we live in a violent pagan society. Every wrong will be made right; every crooked thing straightened out again; every valley and hill made low. Deuteronomy 32:3-4: “For I proclaim the name of the Lord; ascribe greatness to our God! The Rock! His work is perfect, for all His ways are just; A God of faithfulness and without injustice, righteous and upright is He.” We may not be able to say “We are better than this”; but we can say “God is better than this.” He will make it right somehow someday. That is a hope that is sure; that is a hope that cannot fail; that is a hope that has come through before and shall do so again.

Conclusion: The prophecy against the legacy of these three brothers teaches us that we can buck the negative legacy we have been left. In spite of the curses on Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, these tribes produced some godly men and women.

The tribe of Reuben's finest hour was perhaps the resolve he showed to follow his brothers into Canaan to help them fight after requesting territory east of the Jordan (Num. 32:28-32). Note the tone of devotion to the cause of the Lord here. Moses blesses this generation of Reubenites (Deut. 33:6). Moses and Aaron and the priestly line, of course, were all Levites (Exod. 2:1; 32:26). Later in Israel's history, representatives of the tribe of Simeon defected from pagan northern Israel to side with Asa, because Asa was on God's side (2 Chron. 15:8-9).

What this means for each new generation is that not even the negative legacy of a godless ancestor like Reuben, Simeon, or Levi need determine what kind of legacy we leave for those who come behind us. Perhaps God would use you to be the first to build the good bridge over the river to the future, to break the pattern of wasted potential, betrayed privilege, instability, and pagan violence bequeathed to you, so that those who come after you have a more godly example to follow than you had. It has been done before. With God's help, we can do it again.

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching