

Real Grief, Real Grace

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[0:00] You may be seated. Good morning. My name is Matthew Capone and I'm one of the pastors here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church and it's my joy to bring God's word to you today.

We're continuing our series in the book of Genesis. You'll remember that Genesis is the first book in the Bible. It is the origin story of God's people Israel.

And this summer we've been in the story of Jacob found in chapters 25 through 36 and we are now coming to the end of the Jacob story. We're tying up loose ends. We only have this week and next week left. Then we're going to return to Romans, pick back up where we left off starting chapter 9. Now last week you'll remember God calls Jacob away from sin and back towards true worship. This week we look at a problem that comes afterwards. That is even when we return from failure there are still ripple effects.

Even when we come back and return to God there are still consequences that face us. And so our question this week is what is our hope as we face the enduring effects of sin?

[1:15] What's our hope even after we've returned when the dividends are still being paid out? Now we have two points this morning which you'll see on page 8 of your worship guide is our sermon title which is Real Grief and Real Grace.

Now these are not going to be linear. We're not going to talk about real grief and then real grace. But it's going to be sort of back and forth throughout this entire passage. And we are also going to spend a lot of time on Reuben's sin in verse 22 even though it's only one verse because it takes a lot of explanation for it to begin to make sense.

Okay. With that I invite you to turn with me to Genesis chapter 35 starting at verse 16 which you will find on page 7 of your worship guide.

Remember that this is God's word and Isaiah chapter 40 tells us the grass withers and the flower fades but the word of our God will stand forever.

And so that's why we read now Genesis chapter 35 starting at verse 16. Then they journeyed from Bethel. When they were still some distance from Ephrath Rachel went into labor and she had hard labor.

[2:26] And when her labor was at its hardest the midwife said to her do not fear for you have another son. And as soon as her soul was departing for she was dying she called his name Ben-Oni but his father called him Benjamin.

So Rachel died and she was buried on the way to Ephrath that is Bethlehem and Jacob set up a pillar over her tomb. It is the pillar of Rachel's tomb which is there to this day.

Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder. Verse 22. While Israel lived in that land Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine.

And Israel heard of it. Now the sons of Jacob were 12. The sons of Leah, Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun.

The sons of Rachel, Joseph, and Benjamin. The sons of Bilhah, Rachel's servant, Dan, and Naphtali. The sons of Zilpah, Leah's servant, Gad, and Asher.

[3:36] These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan Aram. And Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre or Kiriath Arba, that is Hebron, where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned.

Now the days of Isaac were 180 years. And Isaac breathed his last and he died and was gathered to his people old and full of days.

And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him. I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word. Our Father in heaven, we do thank you and we praise you again for calling us together.

For speaking to us in your word. We come asking for your help. That you would send your Holy Spirit in a powerful and extra special way here and now.

That you'd speak to us clearly in your word. That we'd be able to understand it. We'd have the faith to believe it. We'd have the tenderness of heart to receive it and act on it.

[4:42] And most of all, that you would show us Jesus. That you'd grow our love and our affection for him as we see his great mercy and his grace. We thank you that we don't need to earn or deserve these things.

In fact, we know that we haven't. And so instead we ask for them in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen. There is one phrase that I've heard people say throughout my life that maybe baffles me more than most.

And it's when someone will say to you, especially as they're getting on in life, they'll say, you know, as I look back on my life, I have no regrets. And especially when Christians say that, I think, what does that mean?

Does that mean that you think that you've never sinned? Does that mean that you're glad that you sinned? That you don't think you've made any mistakes? Does it mean you've never had a reflective or self-aware moment in your life?

Because true honesty, especially as you progress in life, as you get closer to the end, is being able to say a couple things. First, you're able to say, look, this is where I had success.

[5:50] This is where God honored my obedience. This is where God used me, on the one hand. And then on the other hand, this is where I really messed things up. This is where my sin got in the way.

This is where I failed. And so when people say, I have no regrets, I think, what is this? Is this a strategy for avoiding grief? Is it a refusal to look in the mirror?

Because as we live life, if we're honest as humans, of course, we make mistakes constantly, right? We sin every day in many ways. So it makes me think of this quote you'll see on page 7 of your worship guide from East of Eden by John Steinbeck.

He says, a man, after he has brushed off the dust and chips of his life, will have left only the hard, clean questions. Was it good or was it evil?

Have I done well or ill? And of course, it's not one or the other. It's both, right? There's places where we've honored God, places where we haven't.

[6:54] All of us, the longer we live our lives, the more the rent comes due. The longer we live our lives, the more the dividends get paid out. The dividends of our decisions, whether it's decisions in our finances, our health, our relationships, our family.

We can think of a thousand examples, right? You ignore your kids when they're young. And then you realize they ignore you when you're old. You abuse your body for years and it works until the moment that it doesn't.

You cheat and you lie and you get away with it. It works for a time until no one trusts you. If you were with us years ago in 2020, you'll remember during the summer we went through the book of Proverbs together.

And there's these consequences of foolishness that take time to appear. You can be foolish for a while. You just can't be foolish forever.

That's what Jacob comes up against here in this passage. Yes, God's been gracious all along and he's not going to outrun his bad decisions.

[8:05] For Jacob, it is the way he has led his family and the dysfunction that that leadership has introduced.

Now, the death of Rachel that we see at the beginning obviously is not a consequence of Jacob's sin. Everyone dies no matter what, but it does set us up for what's going to happen with Reuben. These things are connected.

So we're going to get into the story here. We have at the beginning the birth of Benjamin and the death of Rachel. Verse 16, Rachel goes into labor. When we find out this is challenging labor.

Verse 17, the midwife encourages her to keep going with the news that it's a son that she's giving birth to. And that's an encouragement because you may remember back from chapter 30, a son is what Rachel wants.

But then, no matter how much encouraged she may be, this is for Rachel the end. And so verse 18, as her soul was departing, she calls this son Ben-Oni.

[9:05] If you look at the footnote in your Bible, if you have an ESV, it means son of my sorrow or son of my strength. And so his name is going along with her lament that this is the end for her.

Jacob wants something a little bit more positive, so instead he goes with Benjamin. You notice that same word Ben appears in both, which is son. But Benjamin, if you see the note, is son of the right hand.

In other words, this is the son of my strength. This is the son who's going to accomplish things, the son I rely in. And as we talk about the consequences that play out in Jacob's life, which is the real grief that's throughout this passage, we of course don't want to miss the real grace, which is God's faithfulness over and over again.

There's God's faithfulness in this in that he answers Rachel's prayer. When Rachel gave birth to Joseph in Genesis chapter 30, it tells us she called him Joseph saying, May the Lord add to me another son.

So she prayed for it, chapter 30. She receives it, chapter 35. God is still faithful.

[10:17] It's the faithfulness of God not just to Rachel, but remember his promises to Abraham. He came to Abraham and said, Your offspring will be as the stars of the sky in the dust of the earth and the sand on the seashore.

So there's this real time grief in the death of Rachel, and there's the faithfulness of God.

Real grief, real grace. All of these things intermixed, right? This is the human life as we live east of Eden. That takes us to the scandal of Reuben in verse 22, and although it's not obvious, the death of Rachel is directly connected to Reuben's action here.

It's directly connected to him deciding he's going to seduce Bilhah. In fact, even more than that, Rachel's death is the reason he decides to seduce Bilhah.

That may not make any sense. In fact, I don't expect it to, so I'm going to walk you through it step by step. The bottom line is this, that there is a game of power politics that is being played between four women.

[11:30] Okay, there's this power game being played between Rachel, Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah. And I need to explain to you the power game that's going on here. Otherwise, Reuben's actions are not going to make any sense.

And they don't make any sense in part, because if you're tracking with the story, Bilhah is old enough to be Reuben's mom. So for this to make sense, we have to go back all the way to Genesis chapter 29.

In Genesis chapter 29, Laban gives to Jacob two wives, his two daughters, Leah and Rachel. But he also gives to each daughter a servant.

So Leah gets Zilpah, Rachel gets Bilhah. Two wives, two servants. That then takes us to chapter 30. Remember, Rachel realizes in chapter 30 she can't have children, but Leah is having children left and right.

And so to try to solve that, she gives her servant Bilhah as a surrogate, who then gives birth to Dan and Naphtali. So there's this battle. There's four women, but two teams.

[12:35] There's a battle being fought out between Team Rachel and Team Leah. Rachel's death upsets the balance of power.

Rachel was number one because Jacob loved her more than anyone else. And so while she was alive, she was the first wife. Nothing would change that.

What's going to happen though now that she's dead? Power's been shaken up. Who's going to be in charge? Is Team Leah going to come out on top? Or is Team Rachel going to win?

Is Leah going to come up and be number one wife? Or is Bilhah, Rachel's servant, going to fill Rachel's place?

Okay, you may have experienced this in your own family. When someone dies, suddenly all the dynamics get shaken because we are all interconnected. Who will win?

[13:34] Which team is going to come out on top? By the way, this is not the first time that Reuben has gotten pulled into the drama of his parents.

Remember, he is Leah's firstborn son. And he wants his mom, he wants Leah, to be number one. Which means he also wants him and his brothers to be number one. He wants to be top of the pecking order. And what does he need to do to be top of the pecking order? What has to happen for Team Leah to win?

Well, you got to neutralize the threat. So Bilhah needs to be ruined once and for all. In other words, the seduction of Bilhah is a political maneuver meant to remove her as a threat to Leah.

If he seduces Bilhah, she is disgraced and disqualified from the game. She can't be the top wife.

[14:43] So what happens? That means Team Leah wins. Reuben will have secured his position. Now, if you've been tracking with the story, you know this is not the first time that Reuben has involved himself in the battle between Leah and Rachel.

So chapter 30, Reuben was the one who found the mandrakes. The mandrakes that Leah, his mom, uses to buy time with Jacob from Rachel.

It's all connected. And it is always dysfunctional to involve children in the conflicts of adults.

Always dysfunctional to bring adult problems and have them solved by children. In fact, it's dysfunctional even that there was a competition. Dysfunctional that there was a Team Leah and a Team Rachel.

And so the point is this. Family dysfunction breeds family dysfunction. Reuben grew up in a family of power politics.

[15:49] Reuben grew up in a household of sexuality that does not reflect God's ideal. That's the polygamy that's going on. This polygamy then resulted in favoritism between different wives.

Jacob's favoritism sets his own family against each other when they should be for each other.

Polygamy is a sexual perversion that then breeds sexual perversion.

Great literature, if you're an English major, you know this, it doesn't tell, it shows. And there's this question that comes up sometimes when people study the Old Testament and they say, well, we see the patriarchs, they were polygamists.

Why can't we be polygamists? Doesn't that mean that God approves of polygamy? No. The book of Genesis shows rather than tells.

And what it shows is that polygamy leads to dysfunction upon dysfunction upon dysfunction. Now, don't hear what I'm not saying.

[16:54] Reuben is responsible for Reuben's sin. But Jacob's sin made it possible. Reuben is going to have to answer for what he did.

Jacob set up the environment for this to happen. And then we can add on to that, not just what we've said before, but Jacob's incredible passivity.

The end of verse 22 tells us this, and Israel heard of it. Now, it doesn't mean Israel the nation.

There is no nation of Israel yet. It's saying Israel, Jacob's new name. In other words, Jacob, Israel, heard that his son had slept with one of his concubines.

And what does he do? Nothing. Which should remind us of chapter 34. Remember, we were told he heard what happened with Dinah.

What did Jacob do? Nothing. Nothing. Jacob doesn't do anything. He doesn't protect his children when they're the victim, Dinah.

[18:07] He doesn't intervene with his children when they're the perpetrator, Reuben. And Reuben's actions, not a coincidence, are a direct threat to Jacob's leadership. Why would he feel like he can threaten Jacob's leadership?

Because Jacob doesn't lead. There's almost no leadership to threaten. Of course, he creates more problems inside the family, right?

Who's Bilhah? Bilhah's the mom of some of his brothers. Jacob's favoritism. Jacob's own sexual dysfunction in being a polygamist.

Jacob's passivity sets the stage for Reuben's sin. It's all connected. It's all connected.

There are real consequences playing out in real time because of everything that Jacob has done, his dysfunctional, passive, perverted leadership of his family.

[19:12] We don't escape that in the next scene either. Jacob's sons are listed, starting in verse 23, really the end of verse 22.

And how are they listed? They're listed by their moms. In other words, they are grouped by teams. Team Rachel, team Leah. And this is not disconnected from what's going to come in the Joseph story. Because part of the dynamic of the Joseph story, which we'll come back to hopefully after Romans 9-11, is the different teams of sons fighting it out.

And it's not an accident. Joseph receives what? The coat of many colors because he's his father's favorite. Then in the Joseph story, we run into this problem with Benjamin, who his father also has a special love for.

Or, no coincidence, Joseph and Benjamin, Rachel's sons. Because Jacob is on team Rachel, not team Leah.

[20:25] But God's grace is still there. The listing of the sons reminds us of the dysfunction of the family and reminds us again of God's promise to Abraham.

Promise that his children will be as the dust of the earth, as the stars of the sky, as the sand on the seashore. No matter how dysfunctional, no matter how problematic, no matter how much sin is in the picture, God is moving forward and nothing will stop it.

God is honoring his promises no matter what. Yes, we face consequences, real consequences for the sin of our lives.

Things that we can't outrun and escape, things that cause us real grief. But God's mercy and his grace are more real.

God's mercy and his grace get the last word. Jordan Peterson, the famous figure on the right, says, no one gets away with anything ever.

[21:52] No one gets away with anything ever, which is his way of sort of saying this, hey, all these things that we do, they're going to catch up with you eventually. And I'm here to tell you that Jordan Peterson is both very correct and very incorrect.

He's correct in the sense that at some point your choices do catch up with you. That's what we're seeing for Jacob. Yes, he's coming from God's chosen family. He's a descendant of Abraham.

He carries the promise. Doesn't protect him from his foolishness. Right? So Jordan Peterson's right at some point. Your choices do catch up with you.

God's discipline does mean we face painful consequences. But Jordan Peterson's also totally wrong. Because God's grace is also at work.

Christians actually only face a small slice, the smallest slice, of what we deserve. Jacob actually deserves to be dead in a ditch somewhere.

[22:55] after Reuben's sin and Simeon and Levi's sin in chapter 34, the Abraham family should be over. Not just in a sense of justice, but in a sense of reality.

Remember, Jacob's fear at the end of chapter 34 is that the Canaanites are going to wipe him out. And we find out at the beginning of chapter 35 that that's a realistic fear. What does God have to do?

He supernaturally intervenes to protect Jacob and his family from the vengeance of the Canaanites. God protects him.

God's grace is operating. If if no one gets away with anything ever, then the line of Abraham should end here.

Foolishness, mistakes, sin, create consequences in our lives that we cannot outrun.

[24:03] And, but, they will not stand in the way of God's promises. They will not block God's purposes.

They will not let the curtain fall or end the story. God's grace is more powerful than your mistakes. And God's mercy will outrun your failure. Real grief, real grace.

Reuben's sin reminds us that God did not choose Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob because they were good and perfect.

In fact, quite the opposite. They're dysfunctional and flawed and perverse. But God has mercy and grace. your sins and mistakes, my sins and mistakes, they will catch up with us.

[25:19] But they cannot thwart, they cannot stop the living God. Our sin is great. God's mercy is greater still.

Our consequences will be painful. Being a Christian does not mean we get to escape them, we get to get out of jail free card, at least not fully. And God's mercy always gets the last word.

no matter what the failure is, if you still have breath, as we talked about last week, your story isn't over.

You can still, no matter what mess you've made, you can still apologize and reconcile with your family. And you can expect the Holy Spirit to be at work, at least in you, if you're a Christian.

No matter what mess you've made of your life, you can still, now, turn away from addiction and embrace new patterns. Knowing that God's with you, He hasn't abandoned you.

[26:38] No matter what has happened up to this point in the timeline of your existence, you can now still use your energy, your life, for God's kingdom and honor and glory.

Ephesians 2 is still true for you that God has prepared good works, for you beforehand. Joel 2 from the Old Testament reminds us of the nature of how God's grace works, that God says He can still redeem the years the locusts have eaten.

No one gets away with anything ever. No. God's grace has the last word.

God's grace and faithfulness that take us to the final section here of this chapter, the death of Isaac verses 27 through 29.

I told you we were going to go back and forth between real grief and real grace. This last section is only real grace. Verse 27, Isaac comes to Hebron where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned.

[27:53] He's back in the promised land. God's kept his promise fully from chapter 28 that he would bring him back. Hebron is just 20 miles south of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem where Jesus is going to go and be crucified. One of the major points, if not the major point of the book of Genesis is that God keeps his promises.

And now at the end God has done just that. Despite Reuben's sin, despite Jacob's passivity, despite the failure of his sons, God's promise stands.

God's promise not just to Jacob, but as I've said twice now, God's promise to Abraham that he's going to be the father of many nations. Now what do we have? Twelve grandsons.

Really twelve great grandsons for Abraham. And the final note of grace, verse 29, and his sons, Esau and Jacob buried him.

[29:04] Same thing Isaac and Ishmael did many chapters ago. In other words, the driving conflict, the driving tension of the Jacob story, the tension with Esau is over.

They reconciled. Reconciled after the twenty hard years that Jacob spent with Laban. And so in the end, in the midst of human failure, God's grace wins.

Brings the two warring sons together father, the death of their father, to whom God has kept his promises. God kept his promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

God's kept even greater promises for us, especially his promise to Satan himself in Genesis chapter 3. Remember God said this, Satan can bruise your heel.

That's the real grief. God will crush Satan's head. That's the real grace. Which is more significant, hurting a heel or crushing a head?

[30:34] all of this, by the way, because of God's great mercy and grace. His mercy and grace for you and me, most of all in Jesus Christ, the one who defeats Satan and death once and for all.

So that in the midst of real grief, we know that the grace is more real. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we do praise you and thank you again for your mercy that we do not deserve.

We ask that you would remind us again and again of your faithfulness to your promises. Remind us of what you tell us through the apostle Paul. Even if we are faithless, you remain faithful for you cannot deny yourself.

We ask that you continue to grow us and teach us, help us follow after Jesus, and we ask all of these things in his mighty name. Amen.