

Judah: A Story of Struggles and Salvation

Jochem Hale

In Genesis, we read about the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We read about their lives, and the things that happen to them. And we can draw a many lessons from them. As the narrative continues, it goes into the story of Joseph. There are a lot of chapters dedicated to Joseph's life — ultimately he becomes a type of Christ. But we don't read much about his brother Judah. Yet there's a lot to learn from his life as well.

We don't focus on Judah too much perhaps because he's somewhat un-relatable: his circumstances are so extreme that he becomes very hard to relate to. He grows up in a family where his father is married to two sisters, one of them being Judah's mother. So Judah's mother and his aunt are both married to his dad. Then Judah sells his own brother as a slave. That's pretty extreme. He also condemns his own daughter-in-law to be killed by burning. That's even more extreme. So he's so hard to relate to as a person.

But if we look at Judah as an individual, as a man, and we look at some of the things that happened in his life, we actually see that he becomes very relatable. He is a person that grows up in a family that has messy, awkward problems. He has issues with anger, with jealousy. He struggles with his emotions. He lies and deceives those around him. He runs away from his problems. He's afraid. He gives into his lusts and desires.

Look at him in that way, and we see he actually becomes a very relatable person.

Over a couple of articles we are going to take a closer look at the life of Judah, particularly to see if there are practical lessons we can draw from his life. We're going to start off looking at the first half of his life in this first article, and in the second article, we're going to look at the later part of his life. We're going to see that he becomes a very changed man, completely different than the angry, hateful, and jealous man that we see in the earlier years of his life.

Family Life

When we pick up the record of the life of Judah in Genesis 37, we start to read about him personally. Before that we don't really read much about him specifically. We know some of the circumstances of how he was raised, and what he grew up with, but we only really see him and learn about him when he's probably in his late twenties, or early thirties. We know this because his brother Joseph was 17 years old, and Judah was probably 10 to 15 years older than Joseph.

Now, Jacob lived in the land where his father had sojourned, in the land of Canaan. These are the records of the generations of Jacob. Joseph, when seventeen years of age, was pasturing the flock with his brothers while he was still a youth, along with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought back a bad report about them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic. (Gen 37:1-3)

We immediately see that there is some fertile ground here for some good sibling rivalry: their father loved their brother Joseph more than the other brothers. That is difficult to live with. And Joseph doesn't really help himself with telling on his brothers and giving bad reports about them. It may have been justified, but in their eyes he would have been telling on them. The rivalry between siblings develops into the brothers hating Joseph — their own brother:

His brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers; and so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms. (Gen 37:4)

I don't know if that's something that you've experienced, being so angry and hateful towards someone that you couldn't talk to them on friendly terms anymore. I experienced it a number of years ago. I had a supervisor and we didn't get along. It's safe to say that we had a strained relationship. It became so bad that eventually I had to leave that office, and started working out of a different office. But even after I stopped reporting to him, whenever I would see an email from him (because I still worked with him), I would start getting angry or would tense up and go a little red in the face and my palms would start to get a little sweaty. And whenever I had to speak to him on the phone, it inevitably turned into an argument. We could not speak to each other on friendly terms anymore. I hated this man. And I know it takes two to tango — I'm fully aware that I was part of the problem. But we had such hatred toward each other that every

time we spoke to each other, it just turned into an argument. And that is what these brothers feel like. They just hate him so much that they can't speak to him on friendly terms anymore.

Unfortunately, Joseph doesn't really help the situation. He keeps adding fuel to the fire because he relates dreams that God has given him to his brothers. First,

Then Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said to them, 'please listen to this dream which I have had; for behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo, my sheaf rose up and also stood erect; and behold, your sheaves gathered around and bowed down to my sheaf.' Then his brothers said to him, 'Are you actually going to reign over us? Or are you really going to rule over us?' So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words. (Gen 37:5–8)

And then he keeps adding more,

Now he had still another dream, and related it to his brothers, and said, 'Lo, I have had still another dream; and behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.' He related it to his father and to his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to him, 'What is this dream that you have had? Shall I and your mother and your brothers actually come to bow ourselves down before you to the ground?' His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind. (Gen 37:9–11)

Now the brothers have grown from being hateful towards him, to also being jealous of him. Such feelings and emotions are learned behaviors. The brothers had seen this in their own family as they grew up. Perhaps you know the story of how this family ended up in this situation. Jacob deceived his own father and his brother. And because of that, he had to flee to his uncle Laban — his own brother wanted to kill him.

Family History

After living with Laban, Jacob wanted to marry Laban's daughter, Rachel. He agreed to work for Laban for seven years, after which he would be allowed to marry Rachel. They had a wedding feast and then, instead of Rachel, he is actually given Leah. So now he is married to Leah. He goes to his father-in-law and says, "What are you doing? I was going to marry Rachel." And Laban gives him this story saying, "Well, yeah, it's our custom that, you know, we don't let the younger one get married until the older one is married as well. You can marry Rachel later,

but you still have to stay married to Leah.” And so Jacob was kind of set up with this problem in his life. But he really wants to marry Rachel, so he works for another seven years. We pick this up in Genesis 29:

Jacob did so and completed her week, and he gave him his daughter Rachel as his wife. Laban also gave his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her maid. So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and indeed he loved Rachel more than Leah and he served with Laban for another seven years. (Gen 29:28–30)

Here we see that he loves one wife more than the other. And he repeats the behavior with the children: he loves Joseph more than all his brothers. Actually, the situation is worse than Jacob simply loving Rachel more than Leah:

Now the Lord saw that Leah was unloved, and He opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. (Gen 29:31)

While the NASB translates it as “unloved”, most translations show that it’s actually the word hated. Leah was hated in this relationship. And God saw that. And so he blessed her and opened her womb, while Rachel was barren. That this is a struggle for Leah shows in how she names her son — they are named according to how she feels about this relationship.

Leah conceived and bore a son and named him Reuben, for she said, ‘Because the LORD has seen my affliction; surely now my husband will love me.’ Then she conceived again, and bore a son and said, ‘Because the LORD has heard that I am unloved, He has therefore given me this son also.’ And so she named him Simeon. She conceived again and bore a son and said, ‘Now this time my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.’ Therefore he was named Levi. (Gen 29:32–34)

Leah is naming these sons to express her longing for the love of her husband. And unfortunately, it wasn’t as if they had marriage counseling as a family, and worked everything out. This hatred, this feeling of being unloved, went on for years and years and years.

And the situation only got worse. In the next chapter, we read that Rachel was affected by the dynamic too,

Now when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she became jealous of her sister; and she said to Jacob, ‘Give me children, or else I die.’ (Gen 30:1)

This is how bad it was. She desperately wanted children. Otherwise she was going to die. And Rachel puts the blame on Jacob here. She's now jealous of her sister. This is a family where there is hatred and jealousy, and it goes on for years and years and years.

You may be familiar with the story of the mandrakes as well. Ruben finds mandrakes and brings them to his mother. When Rachel finds out that Leah has mandrakes, she wants them, hoping that it would make her fertile. But Leah is upset:

But she said to her, 'Is it a small matter for you to take my husband? And would you take my son's mandrakes also?' So Rachel said, *'Therefore he may lie with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes.'* (Gen 30:15)

The family has had eight sons at this point, and perhaps a few daughters as well — we know they at least had one daughter Dinah. So after at least eight or nine children, the wives are still fighting about their husband, and about stealing the husband, and struggling with not being able to conceive. Jealousy and hatred lingered in the family for years, and this is what the boys grew up with. And these strong feelings, these emotions, start to shape their own lives as well. They become filled with this hatred and anger and jealousy towards their brother Joseph, and they now have to release all that energy, that tension of hatred and jealousy.

The brothers deal with their problems like their family has always dealt with their problems — through deceit. Jacob had deceived his father and his brother, Laban had deceived him, and Jacob is dishonest to his father-in-law Laban where — without saying a word, in the middle of the night — he takes his wives, all his children, all his servants, and the shepherds that were with him. He takes them all and just leaves without telling Laban anything. Doesn't tell him where he's going, or anything. And then Rachel deceives her father Laban by stealing the household idols, and then lying after Laban pursues them and asks where the idols are.

Learned Behaviors

So the brothers had learned deceit as a way to deal with their problems. Earlier in their life, their sister Dinah had been assaulted by a man who lived nearby. The brothers were so outraged by what this man had done, even though he said, "I want to marry your sister. And you know, why don't you marry our daughters and we'll marry your daughters. We can become a family. We can live together." The brothers had said, "Sure, that's fine. We can do that on one condition

that you all get circumcised.” But they were planning to kill all these men. And so, after the circumcision, as the whole town is in all kind of in pain from the operation, or perhaps a little drowsy from something they used as a painkiller, the brothers killed all of the men of the town and his whole family. This is how they deal with problems — through deceit. So now, they come up with a plan to get rid of their brother Joseph.

One big lesson in the life of Judah is that children learn from our behavior, from the behavior of the previous generations. I will often tell my kids, “Stop yelling, stop screaming, stop yelling at each other.” However... I specifically remember one time where I was angry for some reason, I’m sure it was a very insignificant reason, and I was angry with my wife, Emily. She was upstairs in the bathroom, blowdrying her hair and singing. And I was in the kitchen doing the dishes, very angry for some reason. I need to say something to Emily, but I couldn’t get her attention because she was in the bathroom while I was stuck in the kitchen. And so I yelled at her. I was just yelling her name at the top of my lungs. “Em! Em!” Just yelling her name. Eventually she’s like, “What?” and I told her whatever really the important message was.

A minute or so later, my youngest son, who was probably about a year and a half at that point and still walking around in diapers, comes to the bottom of the stairs. He glances at me, smiles, and just yells, "Em! Em!"

That was was point I realized that the boys are watching me. They’re learning by what I’m doing. Children — any young people — learn as much by what we do, compared it to what we say (if not more).

And the same happened in the life of Judah. He and his brothers learned what they saw from the previous generations. It wasn’t just their father and mother. It was their aunt and their grandparents. It was a problem with the whole family: that’s what they grew up with and, in turn, they let it influence their own lives.

Now we can’t use this as an excuse. It’s no excuse to say, “Well, this is what my parents did when I was younger, and so therefore I’m doing these things.” We have to take responsibility for our own actions. And my children can’t do it either. Later on in life they can’t blame their emotions and poor decisions on me. They have to make their own decisions. But nonetheless, this life lesson applies to all of us, whether we have children or not: the younger generation looks at you and learns from your behavior as much as from your words.

It is in this context that the brothers come up with the plan to sell their brother. Actually, they first planned to kill their brother, dip his coat in blood, and then deceive their family into thinking that their brother had died naturally. We read of this in Genesis 37,

When they saw him from a distance and before he came close to them, they plotted against him to put him to death. (Gen 37:18)

They said to one another, ‘Here comes this dreamer!’ They don’t refer to him by his name anymore. He has shifted to “dreamer” now, no longer their brother, no longer Joseph.

After they come up with the plan to kill him, Judah convinces them that they should sell him as a slave instead, because there’s no real profit in killing him, and it is their own brother after all. They still follow through the plan to take his coat — the coat that I’m sure they hated. They dip it in blood, and then they take the coat to their father and let him come to his own conclusion that his son has been devoured.

So they took Joseph’s tunic, and slaughtered a male goat and dipped the tunic in the blood; and they sent the varicolored tunic and brought it to their father and said, ‘We found this; please examine it to see whether it is your son’s tunic or not.’ (Gen 37:31–32)

Now keep that word “examine” in mind because that’s going to come back later on in a very significant way in the life of Judah.

Then he examined it and said, ‘It is my son’s tunic. A wild beast has devoured him; Joseph has surely been torn to pieces!’ So Jacob tore his clothes, and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. (Gen 37:33–34)

Jacob is grieving over his son. He puts on sackcloth (a kind of rags) and he mourns, and he refuses to be comforted.

So now, the brothers who wanted to justify their anger and their jealousy and their hatred towards their brother, who sold him as a slave thinking that would perhaps satisfy their anger, they realize now they’ve just gained a new set of problems. Now they have their father who is in such misery. He just refuses to be comforted. He’s mourning day after day after day.

The brothers watch their father mourn and refusing to be comforted. And they know (a) that it’s their fault and (b) they can do something about it. They could fix it, could solve it. They could tell him what happened. But they don’t.

Escaping the Family

Instead they have to live with this now, day in, day out. And maybe that is when Judah can no longer take it. He decides to leave his family. We can read about in Genesis 38, which contains a lot of details on him specifically. The first verse of the chapter is very significant.

And it came about at that time, that Judah departed from his brothers and visited a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. (Gen 38:1)

It is at the time his father is refusing to be comforted that Judah departed from his brothers. Note that it doesn't say where he went to. It says where he went from. He departed from his "brothers", a word that is actually better translated as kinsmen. It's used in Genesis 31 where Laban pursued Jacob after he left in the middle of the night and he says, "You've stolen my household idols." And so Jacob says, "No. You can go through all of my stuff. You can look for anything. If you find anything that's yours, then put it here before my brothers." That word "brothers" there can't refer to his physical brother because he only had Esau, and he was not there at that time. The word "brothers" here means family, tribe, community. And the community that he leaves behind is a community that was called out by God. This family had been called out by God for a very specific purpose. His family had been given the promises. And that is what he departs from.

It's quite easy to see that as parallel to the ecclesia. This is the ecclesia, those who are called out for purpose for God. And that is what he departs from.

Judah departed from his brothers and visited a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; and he took her and went in to her. (Gen 38:1-2)

It's interesting that he saw this woman, takes her and lays with her — it is the exact same thing that they killed Shechemites for when they did the same thing to their sister, Dinah. And now this is something that Judah doesn't really seem to have any problems with.

I'm not going to spend a lot of time on this, but it's interesting that those two names that are mentioned there, Hirah the Adullamite, and the daughter of a Canaanite, whose name was Shua. The name Hirah means splendor or noble, and the name Shua means riches. It almost seems like Judah is trying to use these things to forget about what he left behind. He's trying to

replace them. So he takes this woman. He is aligning himself with splendor and nobility, with riches, almost to forget about the things that were his past.

So as he left the ecclesia, he hoped that he could leave his problems behind him. But in reality, we're going to see that the worst in his life was yet to come. Leaving the ecclesia — leaving the family that had the problems — did not solve any of his problems. It just changed his problems. He got new ones.

The difference between life in the ecclesia and life outside of the ecclesia is that life outside of ecclesia is still a struggle, but with no hope. Life inside the ecclesia is a struggle, but it's a struggle with hope. Sometimes we feel like we maybe want to leave the ecclesia. But it's not going to solve any of our problems. It's just going to give us a different set of problems.

In the next article, we're going to look at the second half of the life of Judah. We're going to see how the worst was yet to come for Judah. But more importantly, we are going to see how Judah turned his life around and became a man who — instead of selling his brother as a slave — actually was willing to give up his own life as a slave for the life of his brother. Judah will teach us about Christ-like behavior.