

## **The Tribes of Israel and the ministries and gifts of the Holy Spirit**

Let's pause for a moment in our study of Joshua and reflect on what we've learned.

We have seen how the tribes of Israel responded to claiming their inheritance in the Promised Land, battling Canaanites and giants.

The 12 (and later 13) tribes of Israel carry a message for the church.

The tribes sprang from the 12 sons of Jacob. God changed Jacob's name to Israel. Thus the 12 tribes are called the "Children of Israel." The scriptures outline particular characteristics and temperaments of each of these sons, first seen in the meaning of their names, then in prophetic blessing over each one - first spoken by Jacob and later by Moses - and last from the history of the tribes composed of their descendants.

Importantly, Jesus said the apostles would be ruling the tribes:

**Matthew 19:28** - "And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

What does that mean? I think it means the character and personality of the apostles reflect and also "govern" how we interpret the spiritual meaning of the tribes.

### **Family Interactions**

Every family is unique, but if you have siblings, you know that siblings can be easy to love, but also can be easily offended. Childhood experiences can affect how you get along later in life. Each sibling's uniqueness is clarified the older we get.

These diverse tribes of Israel often clashed in jealousies and arguments with each other - as the disciples also did. And like the patriarchs before them, they experienced failures and made mistakes. At other times, they stuck their neck out for one another. (Remember when the other brothers threw Joseph into a pit, Reuben talked them out of killing him). They displayed both selfishness and self-sacrifice.

This should give us comfort and hope as we look at our own journey, both personally and as a church.

### **Twelve Paths**

Israel came out of Egypt in the Exodus as separate tribes, but after crossing the Red Sea they started to become a people in the wilderness.

They failed many tests in the wilderness. One whole generation had to die because of their rebellion before they could enter and conquer the Promised Land.

Still, every one of the tribes had its own particular journey to traverse. Indeed, the Sages teach that the Red Sea split into twelve paths, providing a separate path for each of the twelve tribes.

See [https://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article\\_cdo/aid/1717386/jewish/Twelve-Tribes-Twelve-Paths.htm](https://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/1717386/jewish/Twelve-Tribes-Twelve-Paths.htm)

By incremental steps God then molded them into a unified nation. First they each received inheritances in the Promised Land. Their identity was being forged by how they claimed and occupied their "lots."

We've so far talked mostly about having zeal to claim our own inheritance. But the inheritance is not just for us, or for our tribe. Its purpose is to equip us to cooperate and coordinate with the other tribes as one body, one nation of Israel, one Kingdom of God.

### **Look to the Head**

The troubled times of the Judges showed that the tribes were not able to completely come together to form the nation God had in mind until they all agreed to anoint David as King. David as a type of the Messiah was the unifying factor that allowed their individual strengths and weaknesses, talents and resources to be intertwined into one strong cord that could bind them together.

In the same way, believers each have different talents, interests, strengths and weaknesses, ways of approaching problems, temperaments and quirks, different political opinions and ways of thinking. We each have personality traits that we either value or regret. But all of these factors are there to allow us to somehow fit perfectly together with the other "living stones" that form the spiritual Temple.

Unless we look to the Messiah, though, we'll never come together as a functioning congregation.

All our differences are transformed by the Holy Spirit into ministries and gifts that benefit the Body and the Kingdom of God. Of course, some of God's gifts have nothing to do with our natural abilities. But many of them grow out of our natural dispositions.

This process also redeems the tragedies and mistakes we've made, which are transformed into tools to heal others.

But if we look away from Christ, our differences that are manifested in our gifts and ministries become part of our idolatry instead. We begin to worship them, defend them and use them against each other. Our identity in the Body of Christ can turn into our identity on the high place in the blink of an eye.

So what do the tribes have to show us?

Part of the mystery is hidden in the meanings of their names:

## Jealousies

The tribes are loosely divided according their mothers - Jacob's wives, Leah and Rachel, and his concubines, Bilhah (Rachel's handmaid) and Zilpah (Leah's handmaid). See **Genesis 29—30; 35:16-26**

Jacob really wanted to marry Rachel, but initially he got Leah instead. Leah's six sons and daughter Dinah thus were always sensitive about their heritage and place among the tribes.

The names of Leah's sons reflect this:

Reuben - "see, a son" - "The LORD has surely seen my affliction. Now therefore, my husband will love me."

Simeon - "Hearing" - "Because the LORD has heard that I am unloved, He has therefore given me this son also."

Levi - "Joined; attached" - "Now this time my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons."

Judah - "Yah be praised" - "Now I will praise Yahweh."

Issachar - "Man of hire" - "God has given me my hire [wages] because I have given my maid to my husband."

Zebulun - "Dwelling" - "...now my husband will dwell with me, because I have borne him six sons."

The personalities of Simeon and Levi, for example, likely reflect the sadness and antipathy that surrounds their mother, Leah, which causes them to grow up with strong feelings of anger against any injustice, as they perceive the unfairness in the way their mother is treated. Simeon's descendants manifest all of these attributes in a negative way, while many of Levi's descendants, like Moses and Aaron, become the greatest leaders in Israel's history.

Children by Bilhah, for Rachel:

Dan - "Judge" - "God has judged my case; and He has also heard my voice and given me a son."

Naphtali - "My wrestling" - "With great wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and indeed I have prevailed."

Children by Zilpah, for Leah:

Gad - "Troop; invader"; or, good fortune - "A troop comes!"

Asher - "Happy" - "I am happy, for the daughters will call me blessed."

Children by Rachel:

Joseph - "Joseph" means either 'he adds' or 'he takes away' Rachel interprets it as the Lord "took away" her reproach and "the Lord shall add to me another son."

Benjamin -

**Genesis 35:18** - And it came to pass, as her soul was in departing, (for she died ) that she called his name Benoni: but his father called him Benjamin.

Ramban comments: "[H]is mother called him *Ben Oni*, and she meant to say, "the son of my mourning" . . . And his father made from "*oni*" "my strength," . . . . And therefore he called him *Binyamin*, "the son of power" or of my right hand, "the son of strength." . . . He wanted to call him by the name his mother had called him, for all his children were called by the names their mothers had called them, and he thus translated it to good and to strength."

"The word *oni* in Hebrew means both pain and strength. It is the very nature of holiness to translate pain into strength — even to intuit the strength within the pain, the coherence within chaos." (From '*Genesis — The Beginning of Desire*,' pp. 214-15).

### Some are Followers

Naphtali and Asher seem to fulfill the important roles of dutiful followers of their father and their dominant half-brothers. Throughout history, they are happy to follow; they never rebel or assume leadership positions.

An example is Naphtali's only known descendant, Barak, depicted in Judges as a capable general. Nevertheless, he is willing to lead a battle against the enemy only if accompanied by Joseph's descendant Deborah, the leader/judge of his time. He never becomes the hero; that is a role destined for Deborah.

See the book "*Tribal Blueprints: Twelve Brothers and the Destiny of Israel*," by Nechama Price.

### Skills in Battle

The tribe of Benjamin had one notable talent that is pointed out in scripture. This tribe was known for an elite corps of slingers (**Judges 20:15-16; 1 Chronicles 12:2**), many of whom were left-handed slingers. 700 of them could each "sling a stone at a hair and not miss." Before development of the modern compound bow, ancient slingers were as effective as archers and served as an important part of any military force. Slingers are known to hurl their projectiles as much as 440 yards, or about a quarter mile.

## Some Take the Lead

Judah was prophesied to rule, according to Jacob's blessing in **Genesis 49:10** - "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples."

## Lessons from History

The Tribe of Asher received a hopeful prophecy from Moses in **Deuteronomy 33:24-27** - "And of Asher he said, "Most blessed of sons be Asher; let him be the favorite of his brothers, and let him dip his foot in oil."

But the tribe of Asher mingled with the Gentiles, and by David's day they were weak. The tribe is not even mentioned in a list of leaders of the tribes in **1 Chronicles 27:16-22**.

But the tribe returns to our notice and is redeemed in the New Testament. The prophetess Anna is of the tribe of Asher (**Luke 2:36-38**)

These are just some examples.

The tribes were represented by **precious stones** on the high priest's breastplate. These stones are also represented in the description of the walls of the New Jerusalem.

Tradition says each tribe's **banner** represented a different constellation in the *mazzaroth* or zodiac.

A single stone or a single constellation never stands alone, but is making up part of a greater whole, which would be diminished without it, and possibly could not exist at all.

Even when the 10 northern tribes were taken into exile by the Assyrians and became "lost," survivors and emigres fleeing the disaster became incorporated into the southern kingdom composed of Judah and Benjamin.

Somehow the meaning of the tribes transcends history - going from Jacob's blessing to his sons to the vision of John in the book of Revelation.

See **Revelation 7; 21:7, 8, 12, 13, 24-27; 22:4, 14, 17; Ezekiel 9:1-6**.

## Manifold and Diverse Ministries and Gifts

The casting of lots to determine each tribes boundaries is analogous to the distribution of gifts and ministries in the church. Outwardly we are randomly assigned our personalities and talents, but the Holy Spirit uses us for His purposes.

The list of the tribes and the number changes over time. That suggests that the spiritual lesson lies in the *general idea* of differing traits and talents always being part of God's plan for his Kingdom.

**1 Corinthians 12:4-7** - "Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal."

**1 Corinthians 12:12** - "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ."

We may look at some of our brothers and sisters in Christ and think, "What in the world is that person doing here - what can God possibly do through that screwed up individual?"

But the body is not one member - we're not all the same, in lockstep and always smiling and agreeing about everything. The only agreement we need is with the head of the body, Christ. We are of "one mind" concerning the cross and expressing the character of Christ in our lives. But each expression of that will be different.

Everyone's personality and background are God-given and have a purpose.

**1 Corinthians 12:23-25** - "And those members of the body, which we think to be less honorable, upon these we bestow more abundant honor; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honor to that part which lacked: That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another."

**1 Corinthians 12:28** - "And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues."

All of these are reflected in the 12 Tribes and their histories.

**Romans 12:4-5** - "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and not all members have the same function, so in Christ we who are many are one body, and each member belongs to one another."

**Ephesians 4:15-16** - "But speaking the truth in love, may [we] grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love."

Increase of the tribes came through physical reproduction, producing a multitude of

children. "Making an increase of the body" means spiritual reproduction, and comes as we walk in repentance and display the life of Christ through preaching the cross, opening our hands to the poor, loving our neighbor and giving of ourselves to others.

All this is to say that the study of the 12 tribes settling in the Promised Land shines a light on us and on our claiming our inheritance, for the purpose of working together as one organism, the church.