

# **TRIBES & TRIBULATIONS**

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# CHAPTER 1: REUBEN - THE ERRING BROTHER

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One night Jacob had an unforgettable experience. A man engaged him in wrestling. It very quickly, if not immediately, became obvious to Jacob that this was no ordinary man, but an angelic visitor. In fact, it was a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus Christ. They wrestled until dawn, with the angel finally dislocating Jacob's hip; but still Jacob hung on tenaciously. The blessing he couldn't achieve by wrestling, he finally arrived at by clinging. This was a life-changing experience for Jacob, one which gave him real insight into his own character and lifestyle: this surely had been the intention behind the episode.

Jacob had all his life long struggled to obtain for himself the very things which God had wanted to give him anyway. Instead of battling on in his own strength, Jacob now learnt the secret of clinging in faith to God, and his promises. This life-changing experience was also marked by a name change, for Jacob's name was changed to Israel, meaning 'prince of God'. His twelve sons, the children of Israel, would become the 12 tribes of Israel. These sons can be arranged in three groups. The first four, starting with Reuben the firstborn, were sons of Leah. Her sister, Rachel, had always been Jacob's preferred wife, but she was unable to have children. Rachel's strategy in coping with her barrenness was to follow a cultural custom of those times: she allowed her husband to father children by her female servant – these she would then claim as being her own children. This succeeded, and then Leah also adopted the same technique, meaning that

the next four children were children produced by their two female slaves. Finally, the third set of four children Jacob had were true sons of Leah and Rachel, his wives - the latter finally being able to give birth.

Now the interesting thing is that each of these children - and each of the tribes which descended from them - has a biblically identifiable character. Bible names usually have meanings, of course, but I tend to be a bit reserved about assuming that the person in question lived up to, and reflected, the meaning of their name. But in the case of Israel's twelve sons we really can be so bold, simply because we have the prophecies of Jacob (in Genesis chapter 49) and the blessings of Moses (in Deuteronomy 33) to guide us.

In this book we plan to trace in our Bibles the subsequent history of each tribe which descended from each of these 12 sons, and together we'll see just how remarkably their father's prophecies were fulfilled throughout the entire history of the tribe. For just before he died, Jacob prophesied concerning each of his sons, prophecies which we find recorded in Genesis chapter 49. Then, later in history, on the brink of Jacob's descendants' entry into the Promised Land, we find - in Deuteronomy chapter 33 - a set of blessings which Moses addressed to the twelve tribes.

Moses' blessings, too, give us additional insight about interpreting major events and noticing the impact key descendants made in biblical history. These inspired sayings of Jacob and Moses, as we're going to see, turn out to be so very apt not only for the life stories of Jacob's twelve sons, but they also aptly characterize the overall history of the tribe that came from that son! And from all this, we hope, by God's help, to draw spiritual insights that could shape our behaviours and

even our characters. So let's begin with a focus on Israel's firstborn, Reuben. In Genesis chapter 49, we read that:

"... Jacob called his sons and said, "Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you what shall happen to you in days to come. Assemble and listen, O sons of Jacob, listen to Israel your father. Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, and the firstfruits of my strength, pre-eminent in dignity and preeminent in power. Unstable as water, you shall not have pre-eminence, because you went up to your father's bed; then you defiled it - he went up to my couch!" (Genesis 49:1-4).

So Jacob viewed his eldest son as excellent in dignity and power. How much better it would have been for Reuben had Jacob's words ended there! But Jacob continued by predicting that Reuben, his firstborn, would not, in fact, excel or have the pre-eminence over his brothers - he wouldn't, in fact, live to enjoy the position and prestige which his birth had entitled him to expect. For Reuben, sadly, by his inappropriate behaviour, forfeited his birthright. The blessing that should have been his as the firstborn – the double-portion - passed instead to the two sons of Joseph. Reuben, in fact, lost his father's trust (for example, seen in Genesis 42:37).

What happened to bring this about? The shameful truth is found in Genesis chapter 35 where we read that: "While Israel lived in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine. And Israel heard of it" (v.22). This was, of course, a very serious offence in God's sight, and one which the Law would later speak out against (Leviticus 20:11). It led Jacob to deny Reuben his rightful position. Jacob described him as: "Unstable as water, you shall not have pre-eminence, because you went up to your father's bed; then you defiled it - he went up to my couch!" (Genesis 49:4). That same unstable

or volatile character surfaces again later in the history of the tribe of Reuben. It's exhibited at the time of the rebellion of Korah as recorded in Numbers 16:1-3:

“Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took men. And they rose up before Moses, with a number of the people of Israel, 250 chiefs of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men. They assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, “You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?”

So these Reubenites, Dathan and Abiram, were all too ready to assume greater privilege and honour than was properly due to them. And, very shortly, they were to pay for this rebellion with their lives. We were quoting this example to illustrate the volatile nature of Reuben's character, as prophesied by his father, and to show the same trait was traceable in the tribe's history afterwards. But returning to Reuben himself, it seems as if he may have been convicted of sin (see also Genesis 42:22) – the sin he'd committed in defiling his father's bed (Genesis 35:22). For, by the time we come to Moses' blessing, we read in Deuteronomy 33:1,6: “This is the blessing with which Moses the man of God blessed the people of Israel before his death ... ‘Let Reuben live, and not die, but let his men be few.’”

In other words, Reuben was interceded for by Moses when Moses appealed: “let Reuben live and not die.” Perhaps, we can view that as the human role in the recovery of this erring brother. But there was a divine side too - one which was anticipated right back at the time when Leah gave birth to her first son: “When the LORD saw that

Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben, for she said, "Because the LORD has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will love me" (Genesis 29:31-32).

In the name Reuben, we seem to get the divine side of things, as it would also apply later in Reuben's own recovery. Generally, these children of Jacob were named from some saying of their mother. Unusually, at first sight, the name Reuben seems unrelated to what Leah said. She called his name Reuben which means 'behold, a son'. But the explanation for the name is also given, and is: "Because the LORD has looked upon my affliction". So, it seems there's a double meaning. The word Reuben contains within it the essence of what his mother said. In it, there's a part of the expression 'He looked' and then a letter of Yahweh - the personal name of God - and thirdly a part of the phrase 'upon my affliction'. The whole sentence which results: 'the LORD has looked upon my affliction', has been abbreviated into 'Reuben', which means 'behold a son'. As if to say in total: the LORD has looked upon my affliction; and behold now the consequence, a son!

I wonder if this then fills out Reuben's story - of how after he had corrupted himself morally, and lost the place of honour to which he had been entitled, he later became convicted of his offence as he experienced what it was to be afflicted by the hand of the Lord. Then, because "the LORD looked upon" his affliction - which was the very means the Lord had used to correct him - others too would be able to see the renewed image of a son of God in him. And is it not like that with us when we go astray? How grateful we should be for those who pray for us, interceding with God for us, as Moses did for Reuben. And grateful, too, for a God who hears, and afflicts us as seems best

to him, all the while using it for our correction so that, ultimately, others can see his handiwork in us - which is that we be conformed to the image of God's son. I'm sure there are many times when we can identify with this erring brother in some degree, but what a testimony to God's grace that God should so deal with us that others afterwards can come to see something of God's own Son in us!

## CHAPTER 2: SIMEON – THE WILFUL BROTHER

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**W**e've already seen that each of the twelve sons of Jacob - each of the twelve tribes of Israel - has a character we can identify in the Bible and trace throughout time. We'll find that the brother we're focusing on in this chapter, Simeon, is a wilful brother and it will be interesting to see how God deals with him. Perhaps we can look out for strategies which we, too, can use in dealing with wilfulness - whether in ourselves or in others. Let's begin again with the prophecies of Jacob (in Genesis 49). Jacob's prophecy about Simeon doesn't make pleasant reading:

"Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords. Let my soul come not into their council; O my glory, be not joined to their company. For in their anger they killed men, and in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel" (Genesis 49:5-7).

The word used here for self-will also means pleasure or delight. So it seems there was personal gratification for Simeon in indulging his anger. That suggests to me that there was more to his outbursts of passion than simply avenging wrong-doing. These words of Jacob come as no surprise after what we read in Genesis chapter 34, when, Simeon, together with Levi, drew the sword in treachery against the Shechemites, and slew all their males. Let's remind ourselves of what happened back then:

“Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to see the women of the land. And when Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land, saw her, he seized her and lay with her and humiliated her. And his soul was drawn to Dinah the daughter of Jacob. He loved the young woman and spoke tenderly to her. So Shechem spoke to his father Hamor, saying, “Get me this girl for my wife.” Now Jacob heard that he had defiled his daughter Dinah. But his sons were with his livestock in the field, so Jacob held his peace until they came. And Hamor the father of Shechem went out to Jacob to speak with him. The sons of Jacob had come in from the field as soon as they heard of it, and the men were indignant and very angry, because he had done an outrageous thing in Israel by lying with Jacob’s daughter, for such a thing must not be done. But Hamor spoke with them, saying, “The soul of my son Shechem longs for your daughter. Please give her to him to be his wife...”

The sons of Jacob answered Shechem and his father Hamor deceitfully, because he had defiled their sister Dinah. They said to them, “We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a disgrace to us. Only on this condition will we agree with you - that you will become as we are by every male among you being circumcised ...Their words pleased Hamor and Hamor’s son Shechem. And the young man did not delay to do the thing, because he delighted in Jacob’s daughter. Now he was the most honored of all his father’s house. So Hamor and his son Shechem came to the gate of their city and spoke to the men of their city ...

And all who went out of the gate of his city listened to Hamor and his son Shechem, and every male was circumcised, all who went out of the gate of his city. On the third day, when they were sore, two

of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took their swords and came against the city while it felt secure and killed all the males ... all that was in the houses, they captured and plundered. Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, "You have brought trouble on me by making me stink to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites. My numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me and attack me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household." But they said, "Should he treat our sister like a prostitute?" (Genesis 34:1-31).

That's why I say we're not surprised to find Jacob mentioning anger and wilfulness when he describes Simeon with his weapons of violence. "For in their anger they killed men", is a statement that sums up the violent episode we've just read about. Notice that when their father rebuked them, Simeon with indignation asserted they had been right to do as they had done. Jacob's answer came later in his prophecy. For it continued, and seems to outline a strategy for breaking or shaping that will when he says: "I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel."

In a moment we'll see how that materialized, but first it's worth noticing that Simeon next appears in the story of Joseph. This happened during the visits to Egypt to get grain during the famine. When Joseph's brothers came down to Egypt, and Joseph wanted security that they would bring Benjamin on their next visit, he imprisoned Simeon as a virtual hostage. Maybe, like his father, he saw benefit in keeping Simeon and Levi apart. For Jacob had said: "I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel."

Think for a moment about how a school, for example, might handle wilful behaviour in one of its pupils. One strategy could be exclusion

– excluding the wilful child from the activities and the other pupils that would otherwise be affected. This might also mean that their power-base is weakened if they're separated from those they usually get up to trouble with. Finally, the school could have a mentoring program where they positively link up problem kids with others who will be models for them. Let's see how these principles can be traced back to God's treatment of Simeon. We find Simeon separated from Levi who had been his accomplice. Levi was given special duties to attend to (Numbers 3:6,12), and was soon to be dispersed throughout all the tribes in the Promised Land. Simeon was made to team up instead with Reuben and Gad.

They marched together as one of the divisions of the tribes in the overall procession travelling to the Promised Land, and when they stopped en route, they encamped together. However, on the brink of the Promised Land itself, Simeon was even isolated from Reuben and Gad, his travelling companions. This happened when Reuben and Gad were allowed an inheritance to the east of the Jordan River. It might have seemed natural for all of Reuben's division to stick together, but Simeon was excluded. Jacob's words about dividing and scattering were again being fulfilled.

It's interesting to compare the census we find at the end of the Book of Numbers (26:14) with the one at the beginning (Numbers 1:23). What the record shows for the tribe of Simeon is that their numbers dropped quite remarkably during the forty-year desert experience – from 59,300 fighting men in the wilderness of Sinai down to 22,200 in the plains of Moab (Numbers 1:23; 26:14). This weakening of the tribe numerically (see 1 Chronicles 4:24-27) might correspond to attempts to weaken or even break a strong will as we try to learn positive lessons from this. All these things seem to reflect Jacob's curse

and the omission of any later blessing by Moses for this tribe. Not only had Simeon been weakened, but he'd been separated from Levi first of all, and then also from Reuben and Gad with whom he'd marched all those years in the desert. It's one thing to separate a strong-willed person from the kind of company which isn't helpful to them, but it's another thing - a more positive step - to link them up with better company - company which, hopefully, will influence them for good. This is what we see happening next with the tribe of Simeon: because they're assigned no separate inheritance in the Promised Land, but instead find themselves incorporated within the territory of Judah (Joshua 19:1-9). Their separation from Levi is now virtually complete, for only one city for the Levites was allocated in Simeon's territory (v.7).

Perhaps it's possible to see this as the turning point of Simeon's history. His natural character, as it's presented to us in the Bible, is hard and cruel, but as a result of these various sanctions - and Simeon's response to them - he learns the tough lesson that "the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God" (James 1:20). Passion for justice has to be separated from treacherous and cruel acts of violence. The way God deals with Simeon is instructive: by separating them from their natural associates and diminishing their strength before pairing them with those whose temperament is a better match for theirs. So next in Judges chapter one we read of Judah and Simeon going to war together against the Canaanites - just as praise - which is what the name Judah means - should accompany the recognition of having being heard by God - which is what Simeon means. Still later in history, those of the tribe of Simeon were able to serve God in a more self-disciplined way in carrying out God's judge-

ment on the Amalekites (1 Chronicles 4:43). It's as if, at last, they've learned a hard lesson.

And I hope we, too, can learn a lesson from this: how to channel our energies, and harness our forcefulness, and discipline our wilfulness in a way that's pleasing to God as we come to allow him to work through us.

## CHAPTER 3: LEVI – THE FORCEFUL BROTHER

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We're identifying the character of each of Jacob's sons. The prophecies of Jacob, and the blessings of Moses, on each of the tribes that descended from these 12 sons, give us lots of insight into their respective characters. Often there's a link, too, back to the meaning of their names - which we will emphasize if the tribe's history bears it out. In the last chapter, we saw that the prophecy of Jacob (Genesis 49) treated Levi and Simeon together. Our interest is now in Levi, but we should refresh our memory with at least part of what Jacob said to them both: "Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords ... Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel" (Genesis 49:5,7).

So Levi was set under the same curse as Simeon. The curse might be the same, but the way in which Levi was separated from his brothers was quite different from Simeon's experience: the key difference being the way in which the tribe of Levi was joined to the Lord. This reflects his name, for when Leah gave birth to him, she said: "Now this time my husband will become attached [or joined] to me, because I have borne him three sons." Therefore he was named Levi (which means to join)" (Genesis 29:34).

The capacity Levi had for taking bold action - such as we see in that early sin of slaughtering the Shechemites - was in his case, through his devoted attachment to the Lord, to later become sanctified as a

valuable instrument in the work of the Lord. I don't think it's too difficult to pinpoint the incident which galvanized them. We just need to go back to the time of the giving of the Ten Commandments. That was the time when the Israelites grew impatient waiting for Moses to come back down the mountain, and they built a golden calf to worship. Then we read:

“It came about, as soon as Moses came near the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing; and Moses' anger burned, and he threw the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf which they had made and burned it with fire, and ground it to powder, and scattered it over the surface of the water and made the sons of Israel drink it. Then Moses said to Aaron, “What did this people do to you, that you have brought such great sin upon them?” Aaron said, “Do not let the anger of my lord burn; you know the people yourself, that they are prone to evil. For they said to me, ‘Make a god for us who will go before us; for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ I said to them, ‘Whoever has any gold, let them tear it off.’ So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.”

Now when Moses saw that the people were out of control - for Aaron had let them get out of control to be a derision among their enemies - then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, “Whoever is for the LORD, come to me!” And all the sons of Levi gathered together to him. He said to them, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Every man of you put his sword upon his thigh, and go back and forth from gate to gate in the camp, and kill every man his brother, and every man his friend, and every man his neighbor.’” So the sons

of Levi did as Moses instructed, and about three thousand men of the people fell that day” (Exodus 32:19-28).

It's this action by the Levites that Moses referred to in giving them his blessing: “Levi ... who said of his father and mother, ‘I regard them not’; he disowned his brothers and ignored his children. For they observed your word and kept your covenant. They shall teach Jacob your rules and Israel your law; they shall put incense before you and whole burnt offerings on your altar. Bless, O LORD, his substance, and accept the work of his hands; crush the loins of his adversaries, of those who hate him, that they rise not again” (Deuteronomy 33:8-11).

The fearless spirit of Levi is still there, but notice that something's happened - it's now been sanctified in the service of God. The sons of Levi showed there the kind of impartiality that's one qualification which leadership among the people of God requires. For how wrong it is when Christian leaders treat the sins of their own family members very differently from the sins of others. Levi showed himself fitted for service that day when he was prepared to go so far as to disown his brothers and ignore his children, neither did he regard his father and mother as being in any way exempt from the judgement of God if their actions had truly merited it. That same spirit seems captured by the Lord's words when he encouraged his disciples to love him more than father and mother or brother and sister (Matthew 10:37).

Eli the high priest, and a Levite of course, showed this characteristic in the First book of Samuel, chapter 4, when he heard the terrible news of the capture of the ark and showed more concern and grief over its loss than when he also heard the news that his own wayward

sons had lost their lives as well. And even the wife of one of those sons, similarly, reacted more to the capture of the ark than to the news of her husband's death (1 Samuel 4:19-22). Yes, that same incident that galvanized the Levites (Exodus 32:19-28), down through history, was reflected in the likes of: Phineas, who speared through a Midianite woman and an Israelite man to stop the plague among the people (Numbers 25); and it was also reflected in the unnamed Levite who avenged the wickedness of the people of Gibeah (Judges 19-20); not to mention Samuel (1 Samuel 15) who hewed down king Agag. And what about Ezra going unprotected on his journey to Jerusalem (Ezra 8:22)? That's another example.

In the New Testament, we remember how fearless John the Baptist was. So there is no shortage of Levites whose stern, uncompromising and impartial behaviour reflected the spirit of the sons of Levi, whose descendants they all were (in Exodus 32:20). Because Levi is characterized by bold and courageous action, it's this tribe of Levi which repeatedly comes to the rescue in times of crisis in Israel's history. A few examples spring to mind: like the bold priest Jehoida who braved the wicked queen Athaliah to bring the secret survivor, the boy king Joash, to the throne (1 Kings 11). Then there's the priest, Jeremiah, who brought an unpopular and uncompromising message to kings whose hearts were set on disobeying God (see Jeremiah 1ff.). Not to mention that other priest, Ezekiel.

And then there's the most famous Levite of all, Moses. He set the tone way back in Egypt: with his refusing to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, his forsaking of all that Egypt could offer him, and his lack of fear for the wrath of Pharaoh (Hebrews 11). Moses' boldness is seen in his prayers too. When God offered to wipe out the rebellious Israelites and start again with Moses himself, Moses

declared he was disinterested in personal status - and even willing to sacrifice himself for the very people who appeared to take every opportunity to turn against him as their leader. That's the sort of bold praying that God delights to answer.

What these examples show is the same forceful determination that went back to the days of Levi's joint action with Simeon, but now Levi's boldness is for the sake of others (Exodus 2:15-22; Numbers 12:3) or it's exercised in the cause of justice. The fear of God was now directing the strength of Levite character. Having been separated from his brother, he'd become joined to God. Made lonely, the tribe of Levi learned to live alone with God, and use that characteristic strength of theirs in God's service. But, our own strength, of course, is insufficient. Perhaps we glimpse a recognition of that in the words of Moses: "Of Levi he said, "Let Your Thummim and Your Urim belong to Your godly man, Whom You proved at Massah, with whom You contended at the waters of Meribah" [these references are to the two places where the rock was smitten] (Deuteronomy 33:8).

Was the reference to the "godly man" a reference to Christ? Was it not the Lord who was proved at Massah? The lesson then would be come this: that the Christ that was proved at Massah must be Levi's only hope - as he is ours - a reminder to us that we can only do all things in the Christ who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13).

## CHAPTER 4: JUDAH – THE LEADER BROTHER

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Judah - whose very name means ‘praise’ - maintained the true worship of the LORD when Israel went astray. That fact alone is greatly to their credit. And if the outstanding man of Levi was Moses - as we saw in the last chapter; surely the outstanding man of Judah, in the Old Testament at least, was king David, ‘the man after God’s own heart’ (Acts 13:22) – and because of his many psalms, we certainly do connect David with praising God - praise which is supremely demonstrated in the life of David’s greater son, the Lord Jesus, who sprang, of course, from this same tribe of Judah. The only time it’s ever recorded that the Lord Jesus sang on this earth was the very night he began his walk to the cross (Matthew 26:30) Isn’t that amazing? Jacob, too, touched on the theme of praise as he began his prophecy (Genesis 49): “Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; Your father’s sons shall bow down to you” (v.8).

Jacob emphasises there the triumph, the ascendancy of Judah, seen in the extraordinary increase of this tribe - for Judah was nearly a match for all Israel throughout its history. From Jacob’s prophecy, the tribe of Judah was destined to prevail, and there’s a helpful comment about the tribes at the beginning of 1 Chronicles 5: “[Reuben] was the firstborn, but because he defiled his father’s bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph ... Though Judah prevailed over his brothers, and from him came the leader ...” (vv.1-2).

Judah was to prevail over his brothers - just as his hand was predicted to be on the neck of his enemies - pressing them down by his superior power, subduing them, and causing them to submit to him. This describes the warrior character of this tribe, to which was given the first allotted portion of the Promised Land. The heroic Caleb was the first to lay his hands on the necks of his enemies, and subdue them (Joshua 14:11; 15:1; Judges 1:1, Judges 1:2). Caleb pointed the way for the fuller conquest of the land under David who seems to refer back to this prophecy when, in his eighteenth Psalm (v.40), he praises God, and says (literally): "You have given me the necks of my enemies, that I might destroy them that hate me".

So subduing enemies is seen in David, but even more so in David's greater son, the Messiah of course, who, in a spiritual sense, has conquered and subdued all his - and all his people's - enemies: enemies like sin, Satan, the world and death. In the book of the Revelation (5:3,4), we read the apostle John wept when at first no-one was found worthy to open the book that was in God's hand on the throne of heaven, and we all must have gone to the place of endless weeping had not the Lord Jesus, the lion of the tribe of Judah been found as the only worthy one. We praise God for the lion of Judah who prevailed where all others failed! Much more could be said from the Bible's inspired history of Judah's supremacy, but we're far from finished - for Jacob's prophecy continued: "Judah is a lion's cub; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down; he crouched as a lion and as a lioness; who dares rouse him?" (Genesis 49:9 ESV).

Here Jacob compares Judah to a young, a growing lion, developing its full strength. But he quickly moves on to describe him as a lion which, after seizing its prey, ascends to the mountain forests, and there lies in majestic quiet, no one daring to disturb it. To intensify

the thought, the figure of a lion is followed by that of the lioness, which is known to be so fierce in defending its young. In this way, it seems the passage indicates Judah taking the lead in the desert, as well as in the wars during the time of the Judges; and then points to the heights Judah reached through the military successes of David. But still Jacob wasn't finished: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. He ties his foal to the vine, and his donkey's colt to the choice vine; he washes his garments in wine, and his robes in the blood of grapes. His eyes are dull from wine and his teeth white from milk" (Genesis 49:10-12).

The sceptre was the symbol of royal command, and in its earliest form it was a long staff, which the king held in his hand when speaking in public assemblies, and when he sat upon his throne, he rested in between his feet. As we've seen, Reuben had lost his birthright because he'd committed incest, and the birthright didn't pass over to either Simeon or Levi who were guilty of the brutal crime against the Shechemites. So Jacob transferred the chieftainship to his fourth son, Judah, having already, by the adoption of Joseph's sons, transferred to Joseph the double inheritance also associated with the birthright.

Judah was to bear the sceptre with victorious lion-courage over his brothers, until, in the coming Messiah - known here as the future Shiloh - the word or name means 'tranquil' - the obedience of the nations would come to Judah, and his rule over the tribes would be widened into the peaceful government of the entire world. The nations, universally, will willingly obey Shiloh or Christ, because as a man of tranquillity he brings them rest and peace. But back at the time of the initial conquest of the Promised Land, Judah - guided by God - opened the attack upon the Canaanites who were still left

in the land (Judges 1:1), as he also did in the war against Benjamin (Judges 20:18). The future supremacy of Judah, was perhaps indicated early in that the first judge, Othniel, a deliverer from the power of Israel's oppressors, was raised up from the tribe of Judah (Judges 3:9).

After that Judah took no lead among the tribes for several centuries, but rather fell back behind Ephraim, until, by the election of David as king over all Israel, Judah was raised to the rank of ruling tribe, and received the sceptre over all the rest (1 Chronicles 28:4). In David, Judah grew strong (1 Chronicles 5:2), and became that conquering lion, whom no one dared to disturb. With the courage and strength of a lion, David brought under his sceptre all the surrounding enemies of Israel. When God had given him rest, and he desired to build a house for the Lord, he received a promise through the prophet Nathan that the Lord would establish the throne of his descendants and kingdom for ever (2 Samuel 7:13.).

So Jacob's prophecy was part fulfilled in David. For Judah had received the ruler's sceptre over the tribes of Israel, and had led them to victory over all their enemies. David had also received through Nathan the divine promise: that the sceptre would not depart from his house, and so not from Judah. The coming of Shiloh was then first anticipated at that time in the peaceful reign of David's son, Solomon.

But Solomon was not the true Shiloh: the peace he knew was not a permanent peace and it extended only over Israel. But this first and limited fulfilment signalled the complete fulfilment in the future. Solomon himself, discerning the typical character of his own peaceful reign, sang of the King's Son, the Messiah, who would have

dominion from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth, before whom all kings will bow, and whom all nations will serve (Psalm 72). And the prophets after Solomon prophesied of the Prince of Peace, who would increase government and peace without end upon the throne of David, and whom the nations would seek (Isaiah 9:5-6; 11:1-10).

And lastly, Ezekiel, when predicting the downfall of David's kingdom, prophesied that this overthrow would last until "He should come to whom the right belonged" (Ezekiel 21:27) – speaking of the rise of Judah from its temporary overthrow to new heights of glory in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 7:14). For he is the one who conquers all his enemies as the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Revelation 5:5), and reigns as the true Prince of Peace, and as 'our peace' (Ephesians 1:14) too, for ever and ever. Jacob finishes his blessing on Judah by picturing the abundance that would be his in the promised land:

"He ties his foal to the vine,  
And his donkey's colt to the choice vine;  
He washes his garments in wine,  
And his robes in the blood of grapes.  
His eyes are dull from wine,  
And his teeth white from milk."

In the time of the Judges, and down to David's time, riding upon asses was a distinction of nobility or superior rank (Judges 1:14; 10:4; 12:14; 2 Samuel 19:27). So in a day still to come, when Judah's conflicts are over, and he's come to rest, he'll bind his donkey to the vine

and enjoy the abundance of his inheritance in peace. Wine and milk, the most valuable produce of the land, will be so plentiful that, as Jacob puts it, he could even, as it were, wash his clothes in the blood of the grape, and enjoy the fruit of the vine so much that his eyes would be inflamed with wine, and his teeth become white with milk.

Before then, and in this age of God's grace, we can trace the very early days of Christian history in the Bible book of the Acts. And it shouldn't surprise us to find that, among the apostles at Jerusalem, none other than James, the Lord's brother - a man of Judah, of course - came to prominence as their leader (Galatians 2:9). In the now continuing story of the New Testament churches of God (described then by Paul as the Israel of God) we praise God for those whom the Lord promotes to lead and influence others under the direction and authority of the Lion of Judah, our Lord Jesus himself.

## CHAPTER 5: ZEBULUN – THE SINGLE-MINDED BROTHER

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**W**e're continuing our look at Jacob's family. He had 12 sons, and each brother, and eventually each tribe, has a character we can identify from Bible history - especially when that search is guided by the prophecies of Jacob, their father, and then is further directed by the words of Moses' blessing upon the twelve tribes. Here, in the case of Zebulun, there seems to be a clear missionary angle - for it's here we find ideas like going forth; despising life; taking possession of the seas and drawing out its abundance.

Even at the mention of these phrases – which are lifted straight from the words of Jacob and Moses, as we'll see - just at the sound of these expressions our thoughts are tempted to run ahead, fast-forwarding to the calling of the first disciples by the shore of the Sea of Galilee, who left their livelihoods and possessions behind. Then there are those stories told in the Gospels about miraculous catches of fish, stories which somehow seem to symbolize features of their new calling as 'fishers of men' (see Luke 5; John 21). So, let's get to the prophecy of Jacob (in Genesis 49) which relates to Zebulun: "Zebulun will dwell at the seashore; and he shall be a haven for ships, and his flank shall be toward Sidon" (v.13).

By the way, from that last reference to Sidon, the general position of Zebulun's territory as bordering Phoenicia, on or near to the northern sea coast of Israel, seems to be well enough indicated. Evidently, they, too, are a sea-faring people - something certainly the Phoeni-

cians were famous for. And, now, turning to the blessings of Moses (Deuteronomy 33), we find he adds: "Rejoice, Zebulun, in your going forth ... they will call peoples to the mountain; there they will offer righteous sacrifices; for they will draw out the abundance of the seas ..." (vv.18-19).

"Rejoice Zebulun in your going forth ... they will draw out the abundance of the seas." It seems overall there's an out-going and sea-faring character depicted here. Surely, the most obvious thing is to remind ourselves that the Greatest Evangelist of all became a resident of Zebulun, as prophesied by Isaiah, when in chapter 9, he said: "But there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but later on He shall make it glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles" (v.1).

What an honour that was paid to this land which had formerly been treated with contempt - when our Lord himself (Matthew 4:13) left Nazareth where he had been brought up and settled in Capernaum by the sea in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali - from Nazareth in Zebulun to Capernaum in Naphtali. Those among whom the Lord dwells, in whose hearts he abides, will surely be the most likely to go out to tell others about him. People - for the most part obscure people, but who, as we'll see, like all of us, have enough pride to ruin themselves, yet by the grace of God can humble themselves. And, yes, there by the seashore of Galilee, Jesus collected his first followers. As we've thought, the phrase "drawing out the abundance of the seas" brings to mind the call of the disciples by the sea of Galilee, and their re-making as 'fishers of men' engaged now in the work of evangelism - as we all must be in some shape or form: we, who are called to be the Lord's witnesses, going out into all the world.

Another important insight into the character of Zebulun can be discovered from the days of the prophetess, Deborah - time when one of the kings of Canaan was oppressing the Israelites. Deborah summoned Barak, and he "... called Zebulun and Naphtali together to Kedesh, and ten thousand men went up with him; Deborah also went up with him" (Judges 4:10). Later, from their victory song we learn more: "Zebulun was a people who despised their lives even to death" (Judges 5:18). This characteristic is well suited to Zebulun's enterprising or missionary spirit. It certainly served the early disciples well, some of whom hazarded their lives or served the Lord in jeopardy of their own lives, not holding their lives as of any account dear unto themselves (see Acts 20:24) if only they might fulfil the Lord's mission in their lives.

Someone, presumably of this tribe, who came to despise his life even to death, but in a much less worthy way was Jonah. Jonah - surely the Old Testament's most famous sea-faring missionary - was the son of Amittai from a place called Gath-hepher which was in the territory of Zebulun (Joshua 19:13-16). In keeping with the predicted character of the tribe of Zebulun, Jonah was a very successful travelling preacher, but he's not so much famous for the great messages he delivered as he is for his personal story - which was a kind of illustrative prophecy concerning the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jonah's story begins with him 'going forth' and setting out from the sea-shore. The story of Jonah, in fact, must be among the most well known in the Bible. It's a popular subject for children's books. Unfortunately, that may encourage some people to regard it as a fascinating tale of adventure but one so incredible that few take it seriously - but fairy tale it most certainly isn't. For in 1927 a man called John Ambrose Wilson wrote an entry in the Princeton University

Journal. It was the account of how a sperm whale had overturned a whaling boat near the Falklands and one of the whalers ended up being swallowed by the whale. The whale was then captured and cut open, and the whaler was found alive inside the whale after surviving for three days. Well, Jonah is best known for preaching about the impending doom of the city of Nineveh. We hardly need to retell the story. God had spared Israel previously, and Jonah, it seems, was afraid God would spare Israel's enemy too! So he jumped on board a ship heading in the opposite direction to the one God had commanded him to go in. But God caused a storm at sea. Jonah at once realized that it was his disobedience that was the cause of the storm and volunteered to sacrifice himself to end the storm. The ship's crew tried everything else, and then as a last resort they threw Jonah overboard.

“But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights” (Jonah 1:17 NIV). From inside the sea-monster, Jonah pleaded with God. Now he was ready to obey. “And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land” (Jonah 2:10 NIV). So finally Jonah went and preached his message of judgement in Assyria's proud capital: “On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned” (Jonah 3:4 NIV).

The citizens of Nineveh heard God's word, repented of their sins and were spared the promised judgement. The very thing Jonah seemed to have been fearing, happened, and he was angry that God had shown mercy to Nineveh - a proud and wicked city of pagans whose military strategy in those days was pure terrorism. It's an up-to-date challenge to each of our hearts as to whether we, too, like Jonah, have exhausted our compassion for those around us in society, especial-

ly any sector of society that we might not easily or naturally relate to. Our own personal agendas, our reputations, our convenience and our prejudices need to remain secondary to our missionary zeal. Yes, pride can affect even a preacher's heart. In the time of King Hezekiah's revival, when couriers went out from Jerusalem to the ten northern tribes appealing to them that they should return to the Lord, some from Zebulun scorned and mocked the messengers, but others, also from Zebulun humbled themselves and went to Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 30:10,11,18). Even those who take the good news to others need just as much to humble themselves and to return again and again to the Lord. And there's a last noteworthy thing about the tribe of Zebulun which we should mention. In 1 Chronicles 12:1 we read:

"... these are the ones who came to David at Ziklag, while he was still restricted because of Saul the son of Kish; and they were among the mighty men who helped him in war ... Of Zebulun, there were 50,000 who went out in the army, who could draw up in battle formation with all kinds of weapons of war and helped David with an undivided heart" (1 Chronicles 12:33).

Fifty thousand foot-soldiers - that was a magnificent contribution towards David's cause - that is, the Lord's cause! But what was equally good about them, if not better, was the fact that they helped David fight his battles 'with an undivided heart'. Those are the kind of evangelists the Lord wants - soldiers of Christ who, in fighting the good fight of the faith, and in contending earnestly for it (Jude 3), will do so in a way that's whole-hearted or single-minded.

## CHAPTER 6: ISSACHAR – THE SERVING BROTHER

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Our task in this chapter is to try to get a clear picture of the character of Jacob's son, Issachar, and to see how that character was reflected in the tribe that descended from him. Because of the prophecies of Jacob - when he described the characters of his sons - it seems indicated that this is a worthwhile thing to do. So what did Jacob say about Issachar? Here's what we find in the 49th chapter of Genesis where we find all these prophecies: "Issachar is a strong donkey, lying down between the sheepfolds. When he saw that a resting place was good and that the land was pleasant, he bowed his shoulder to bear burdens, and became a slave at forced labor" (v.14-15).

Obviously, the first thing that strikes us is the fact that Issachar is described as a strong-limbed ass. I don't suppose we'd appreciate being described in that way! These animals were the standard beasts of burden in Western Asia: still used in the Near East today as they were thousands of years ago. They were proverbial for their attachment to their master, for God says through Isaiah at the beginning of that Bible book that 'the ass [or donkey] knows its master's manger' (1:3). This attachment, this kind of faithfulness, as pictured in the donkey, is something we might expect to look for in the history of the tribe. One example stands out. The tenacity with which the men of Issachar were attached to the inheritance of their fathers is illustrated by the story of Naboth, who persisted in retaining his vineyard, the inheritance of his fathers, despite the offers and demands of king Ahab, and even at the cost of his life (1 Kings 21:3).

Is there a lesson there for us? I believe there Isaiah. Could it be that there're Bible truths we've been accurately taught over many years, but now we're coming under pressure to yield, to compromise? To be like Naboth, to be resolutely attached to those things which we've made our own, assured that they came to us from God, is a positive characteristic to have. Of course, there're some things we don't need to hold onto. Our salvation, for example, is a gift from God, and the apostle Paul said - in a different context - but the principle holds good - 'the gifts and calling of God are without repentance' (Romans 11:29) - in other words God never asks for his gifts back, he doesn't change his mind. Once we've come to Christ in personal faith and received him as our saviour, we're saved from the penalty of our sins - and saved for ever, whatever happens. But, you say, there are verses in the Bible which seem to say we can 'fall away'. There are, but the context is never salvation from the penalty of our sins. What is it then?

Well, if the Holy Spirit has led us into an understanding of Bible truths that regulate our service for God according to his will as expressed in the Bible, then we do need to be careful not to fall away from our steadfastness in these matters. We're told in the Bible that, today, God has an 'inheritance' among those who faithfully try to do his will. Paul writes in these terms to those in the first churches of God - in Ephesians chapter one, he instructed his friends to be focused on God's inheritance in the saints, that is in the believers - not their inheritance in him, notice; but his inheritance in them (Ephesians 1:17,18)! They needed to be like Naboth, that man of Issachar, and not sell out on God's inheritance. But what else is there in this picture of Issachar which at first sight seems less than endearing? Our thoughts so far about Issachar as a donkey, and as such, a working animal, seems related to the meaning of his name. That meaning

is hire or reward (Genesis 30:18), for when: "God gave heed to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. Then Leah said, "God has given me my wages because I gave my maid to my husband." So she named him Issachar" (Genesis 30:17-18).

Could this picture of Issachar as a bearer of burdens, mean he's a hireling by disposition as well as by name? It was in the tribe of Issachar, in Shunem, that a prominent woman received her hire or reward (2 Kings 4:8 ff.). Remember, how Elisha the prophet lodged with her, and she accommodated him to the extent of furnishing a small room for him. Elisha wanted to express his gratitude, but the woman declined various honours. But, to this childless woman, a son was foretold, and born the very next year. Then years passed, before tragedy struck and the son died. The woman went back to Elisha and a notable miracle was performed when the child was raised back to life. So, in a sense, you could say the woman received a double reward.

By the way, you may notice we've moved from the idea of working for hire - reward for service rendered - to the wonder of receiving life again from the dead. I think it's worth pausing there for a moment to remind ourselves of the pattern which existed among Jacob's twelve sons. For the twelve can be divided into three groups of four. First came Leah's four sons; in order of birth, these were followed by four sons who were all born from either Rachel's or Leah's maid-servants. This practice, which was not uncommon then, had been begun by Rachel who was barren - and desperate to have any children she could lay claim to. Finally, Issachar was the first of the third set of four children, all of whom were mothered naturally either by Leah or Rachel herself (he was Leah's fifth).

So there's a sense in which Issachar, himself a workman-like figure, marks the boundary between the bondwomen and the freewomen. With Issachar, the wages of a hireling give way to a birth of liberty. With all that as background, I just want to make it clear that our new birth of salvation and freedom is not the result of our own works. Our working, our serving the Lord, is not in order to secure our salvation, but it's in the liberty that our faith has already brought to us.

Once assured of our eternal salvation by God's grace, we - out of gratitude - give ourselves in the Lord's service - something which, amazingly, he even promises to reward us for also, quite separate from the gift of salvation which we receive through faith alone. Yes, we serve God because we are saved, not in order to become saved! Well, all this was prompted by remembering the prominent woman of Shunem who received her son back from the dead - and it was also in the territory of Issachar, but this time in Nain - as we read in Luke chapter 7:11-17 that Jesus raised up a young man, a widow's son, from the dead. How the Lord eased that widow woman's burden that day! And our Lord's invitation to all those who are heavy-laden to come to him for rest (Matthew 11:28-30) seems to bring us back in thought to this tribe of Issachar. What was it that Jacob prophesied as to his character? "Issachar is a strong donkey, lying down between the sheepfolds" (Genesis 49:14).

The word 'sheepfolds' could mean 'burdens' - which would allow the thought of the donkey lying down between two burdens, being the two sacks or panniers, one on each side of the animal's body; and so now referring to the well-known tendency of the ass, whenever wearied or overloaded, to lie down even with its burden on its back. Our Lord invites his followers to take his yoke upon them, a yoke which is easy or kind, and so to find rest in his service. From what Jacob

goes on to say, it seems Issachar found rest in a pleasant land which he felt to be good: a territory, which, when well looked after, could be very fruitful, for within this tribe's territory were the rich valley of Jezreel, and the fruitful mountains of Gilboa - it was, in fact, a valley between two mountainous regions - and served as the battleground of nations.

And, speaking of battles, in the time of the Judges, Issachar gained a reputation for heroic bravery along with Zebulun (Judges 5:14-15, Judges 5:18). In fact, Issachar is often mentioned alongside Zebulun (Genesis 49:13-15; Deuteronomy 33:18; Judges 5:14,15). It seems this hard-working and valiant tribe could work and fight alongside others, which is a very relevant example to us in our present spiritual service and warfare.

The first Christians were added to churches of God, and these churches were grouped then in provinces and all interlinked together as one spiritual nation, people and kingdom. So serving together is something God puts a high estimate upon ... which brings us back to the song of Deborah where Issachar is praised for the powerful assistance it gave (Judges 5:15). It appears Issachar was a hard-working, valiant tribe, patient in labour and invincible in war (1 Chronicles 7:1-5) - and bearing both these burdens when necessary. It says he bowed his shoulders to bear. Here was a tribe that knew the hardship of ploughing and carrying in the fruits of the earth. He became 'a servant unto tribute', we're told, leading some to wonder if this tribe chose to pay more tribute than others, so that they might often remain at home and attend the business of their fields, at a time when others were called to go to war - possibly even sometimes contenting themselves with material good in a comfortable inheritance.

Moses' blessing did speak of "Issachar, in [their] tents" (Deuteronomy 33:18).

But the phrases, "in your going out" and "in your tents", jointly used of Zebulun and Issachar, may simply refer to the people's daily lives, equivalent to "in your work and in your home." So the command to rejoice meant that these two tribes could expect God's blessing in their daily lives. Finally, Issachar's character was made remarkable by the description found in 1 Chronicles 12:32 that the men of Issachar 'had understanding of the times'. As those who worked the land, they would become skilled in fixing the beginnings of months and years, as well as in the changes of the moon. It appears that in their wisdom, experience, and skill, their brothers had the fullest confidence, and came to seek their advice. If we, too, have an understanding of the times we live in, we will want to be attached to our Master, hard-working in our service for him, valiant for his cause, serving with others, while enjoying the blessings of God. Thank you, Issachar, for rich encouragement!

## CHAPTER 7: DAN – THE ILL-DISCIPLINED BROTHER

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When we come to the prophecy and subsequent history of the tribe of Dan, it appears to be darker than any of the others – surely the most painful of all Jacob’s dying prophecies. Perhaps the cloud that lies over this prophecy can be traced all the way back to the circumstances of Dan’s birth as recorded in Genesis 30:

“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.” Then Jacob’s anger burned against Rachel, and he said, “Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?” She said, “Here is my maid Bilhah, go in to her that she may bear on my knees, that through her I too may have children.” So she gave him her maid Bilhah as a wife, and Jacob went in to her. Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. Then Rachel said, “God has vindicated me, and has indeed heard my voice and has given me a son.” Therefore she named him Dan” (Genesis 30:1-6).

Rachel claimed God had pleaded her cause in the birth of this son. The name Dan, which she gave to her son, is a play on words, for it means to judge, to plead a cause. And Dan would judge his people too - he led the fourth division through the desert (Numbers 1,2) - but is it possible there’s even more significance in the name? Does the darker history Jacob prophesied indicate that the tribe itself was under judgement for Rachel’s ill-discipline – for her lack of submission to the will of God? Certainly, that same lack of discipline and

subjection to God's ways can be traced – at times dramatically – in the following history of the tribe of Dan throughout the Bible. The main thing recorded against the tribe of Dan in the early days of Israel's history in the land of Canaan is found in Judges chapter 18:

“In those days there was no king of Israel; and in those days the tribe of the Danites was seeking an inheritance for themselves to live in, for until that day an inheritance had not been allotted to them as a possession among the tribes of Israel ... And they came to the hill country of Ephraim, to the house of Micah, and lodged there. When they were near the house of Micah, they recognized the voice of the young man, the Levite; and ... said to him, “Who brought you here? And what are you doing in this place? And what do you have here?” He said to them, “Thus and so has Micah done to me, and he has hired me and I have become his priest ... “Then they took what Micah had made and the priest who had belonged to him, and came to Laish, to a people quiet and secure, and struck them with the edge of the sword ... they rebuilt the city and lived in it. They called the name of the city Dan, after the name of Dan their father ... The sons of Dan set up for themselves the graven image; and Jonathan ... [the Levite taken from the house of Micah] ... and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the captivity of the land. So they set up for themselves Micah's graven image which he had made, all the time that the house of God was at Shiloh” (Judges 8:1-31).

This is the great scandal connected with the tribe of Dan. In the beginning of the establishment of Israel in the Promised Land, the Danites established idolatry among themselves. No wonder that, much later, after Solomon's death, Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who's recorded as the one who made Israel to sin, set up a golden calf in that city where idol worship had already taken root (1 Kings

12:25-30). The Danites, even before Jeroboam, had been guilty of making Israel to sin. It seems those Danites who migrated north were a separate section of the tribe, since another part of Dan's inheritance was in the neighbourhood of Joppa, on the first borders of Philistine territory between Judah and the sea. This helps explain why when Israel needed to be delivered from the Philistines, a judge of Dan was chosen to begin the work. The name Samson alone guaranteed that this tribe would become famous.

Before we comment on the life of Samson – and how it typified the tribe as a whole – we should listen in full now to the prophecy about Dan given by Jacob – remember we've already said it's a dark one - this is a tribe under a cloud: "Dan shall judge his people, As one of the tribes of Israel. Dan shall be a serpent in the way, A horned snake in the path, that bites the horse's heels, so that his rider falls backward. For Your salvation I wait, O LORD" (Genesis 49:16-18).

And Moses adds: "Of Dan he said, "Dan is a lion's whelp, that leaps forth from Bashan" (Deuteronomy 33:22). There seems to be two sides to these sayings. First there's a promise of dignity – and we see that in the fact that Dan was captain of the fourth division of the procession of the tribes in their journeys, and so headed up the rear as the tribes travelled through the desert. But, on the other hand, it's significant that Jacob compares the tribe to a snake, and Moses compares it to a lion. Both these comparisons seem unfavourable. There's the cunning of the snake and the strength of the lion in the tribe, but we've seen this has been used against God's people in putting a stumbling-block in their way and tempting them to idolatry. The serpent and the lion are both associated with the Devil in the Bible, and there seems to be that sinister sense again here (see the references to

Bashan in Psalms 22 & 68). In tempting their brothers to idolatry, some of the Danites were acting the Devil's part.

Then there's the case of Samson, that most famous of all Danites. Great strength and cunning are seen in him too, but again the Tempter's power overshadows his life. His strength and ability were typical of the Danites, but its great potential was often misused. Samson's undisciplined life reflects Rachel's outburst against Jacob, and he, personally, was to learn the cost of his failure to submit himself to God's will. Samson was a judge, a man of tremendous strength – a kind of Hebrew Hercules if you like! He intensely hated the Philistines who'd been troubling Israel for 40 years (Judges 13:1), and was prepared to fight them alone. He seems to have been motivated by little more than personal vengeance, yet in the New Testament he's named among the heroes of faith (Hebrews 11:32). He was good-natured, sarcastic, full of humour, and fought with his wits as well as with his fists. The story of Samson's adult life is unique - five remarkable circumstances are recorded:

(1) There was his marriage with a Philistine woman (of Timnah). This forbidden alliance was 'of the Lord' (Judges 14:3) who 'sought an occasion against the Philistines'. Under pressure, she schemed to betray his confidence, at which Samson took revenge on the Philistines, killing thirty of them. Then Samson left her and went home. Not knowing that his bride had been given by her father to his friend, Samson went back later to visit her, and upon discovering what had happened, he took even greater revenge on the Philistines by destroying their crops. When they retaliated and killed his wife, Samson defeated them with a great slaughter.

(2) When he escaped to Etam, the Philistines invaded Judah, and demanded the surrender of their arch-enemy. The men of Judah were willing to hand Samson over to the Philistines, and bound him and brought him to the Philistines, who shouted as they met him. At this, the spirit of God came mightily upon him, so that he broke loose, and seizing an ass's jawbone, he killed a thousand men.

(3) Samson next went down to Gaza, to the main city of the Philistines. He visited a prostitute there, and word spread that Samson was in the city. The Philistines laid in wait for him, having closed the city gate. But Samson arose at midnight, uprooted the gate, and carried it up a nearby mountain as he made good his escape (Judges 16:1-3).

(4) From Gaza, Samson went to the valley of Sorek where he fell in love with another Philistine woman, named Delilah, through whom he lost his spiritual power. That was after the Philistine lords bribed her with a large sum of money to deliver him into their hands by discovering the secret of his strength. Three times Samson deceived her, but at last he explained that he was a Nazirite, and that his uncut hair was the secret of his power. Samson had played fast and loose with his vow to the Lord, and now God left him (Judges 16:4-20). The Philistines seized him, put out his eyes, brought him down to Gaza, put him in chains, and forced him to grind in the prison house. There, his hair began to grow again.

(5) The final incident recorded of Samson is at a feast which the Philistine lords gave in honour of Dagon, their god. They called for Samson so as to mock him. The house of Dagon was full - about 3,000 were upon the roof watching Samson. With the new growth of his hair, his strength had returned to him, and he longed to be

avenged on his enemies. He prayed, and the Lord heard his prayer. Guided by his attendant, he took hold of the of the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and slipping them off their pedestals, the house fell upon the lords and upon all the people inside. “So the dead that he slew at his death were more than they that he slew in his life” (Judges 16:29-30).

We remember Jacob’s final comment on Dan: “For Your salvation I wait, O LORD”. (Genesis 49:18). This first mention of salvation in the Bible at last lightens the darkness! Samson achieved more by his death than he did by his life. He died prayerfully – if only he’d lived that way! Let’s not make the same mistake. Better to judge ourselves than be judged.

## CHAPTER 8: NAPHTALI – THE SHARING BROTHER

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The mention of a hind or gazelle fires our imagination with the thought of something graceful. But also, from various Bible references, we discover that warriors who are sure-footed and swift in their movements are described as gazelle-like (1 Chronicles 12:8, Psalm 18:33). Someone like Asahel, one of the sons of Zeruah, a fearless warrior who was fleet of foot in pursuing the enemy – he’s spoken of as being like a gazelle (2 Samuel 2:18). Now in the prophecies of Jacob (Genesis 49), one of his sons is spoken about like this: “Naphtali is a doe let loose, He gives beautiful words” (Genesis 49:21).

Naphtali, being like a doe or a hind, would be a free, mountain people. One of the first notable persons from this tribe was Barak, a man of Kedesh-Naphtali, a town in the centre of Galilee. Barak lived in the time of the judges, and at that point in time, Deborah the prophetess called on him to go to war against Israel’s enemy. Barak, at first, was fearful - like a hind backing away - when called to go to war by Deborah, but afterwards Barak went to battle with her, and then – with her - gave ‘beautiful words’ in the victory song they sang together. In fact, the song praised the people of Naphtali - those who were of Barak’s own tribe - praised them for risking their lives “on the heights of the field” (Judges 5:18). The actual words were: “Zebulun was a people who despised their lives even to death, and Naphtali also, on the high places of the field” (Judges 5:18).

It was a song that was testimony to the strategic importance of that desperate struggle. The enemy had been the Canaanite king, Jabin, who had troubled the Israelites for twenty years, before God had given command that ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun should go up with Barak to Mount Tabor and he would deliver the enemies into their hand – which he did. On that day, however, Dan, Reuben and Asher volunteered no assistance. For all that Dan and Naphtali were brothers, sons of the same mother, they were as different in character as a snake is from a deer. Hardly surprising then that we find Naphtali often associated, not with Dan, but with Zebulun. Since we're mentioning the heroics of this tribe in battle, we should also say that in the time of David we again read of notable warriors from this tribe of Naphtali who took their stand with David against Saul (1 Chronicles 12:34).

But, if the gracefulness of Naphtali is described in Jacob's blessing, by comparing it to a gazelle, Moses later gave assurance that the same tribe would be satisfied with God's favour and blessing, and promised the tribe an inheritance which would combine the advantages of the sea – advantages like a healthy sea-breeze, I suppose - with the grateful warmth of the south. Here's exactly what he said: "Of Naphtali he said, "O Naphtali, satisfied with favor, and full of the blessing of the LORD, take possession of the sea and the south" (Deuteronomy 33:23).

This blessing describes the location of Naphtali as extending southward to the Sea of Galilee, a fertile area. What's more, it's likely Naphtali would enjoy the favour of men since he himself gave good words – or spoke well - to others, and so might expect the good word of others in return (Genesis 49:21). But experiencing the favour of God is much more important, and it's clear Naphtali would know

that, too, since he was to be filled with the blessing of the Lord. And Naphtali certainly was favoured with a good land - his inheritance was a fruit-bearing one - the fruitful country of Galilee, which gave its name to the sea or lake by it, and which had plenty gardens, with palm, fig olive trees.

But, more significantly, this country was to be favoured with the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ (see Matthew 4:13), for the portion of Naphtali, as we've said, reached from the south of the city of Dan to the sea of Galilee. Christ's main residence was at Capernaum in the region of this tribe (Matthew 9:1; Mark 2:1). In other words, when the Saviour of the world chose a base for his earthly ministry it was in 'Capernaum, in the borders of Zebulun and Naphtali'? (Matthew 4:13,16). This fulfilled the words of Isaiah 9:1: "... in earlier times he treated the land of Zebulun and Naphtali with contempt but later on he shall make it glorious by the way of the sea ... Galilee."

So the early disciples who accompanied Christ must have, in the main, been from the region of this tribe of Naphtali. At the beginning of this chapter, we were mentioning Barak, and Kedesh-naphtali, the famous city of refuge in the uplands of Naphtali which was the home of Barak, and the place where his army was assembled. It's simply called 'Kedesh in Galilee' in the book of Joshua (20:7). So as we think of the people of Naphtali, it's clear we're thinking about Galileans. Now, both men and angels referred to the first Christian disciples as 'men of Galilee' - those, for example, who gave 'beautiful words' on the day of Pentecost were described as Galileans (Acts 2:7).

In Psalm 68 we read about ‘the princes of Zebulun and the princes of Naphtali’ - and the mention of Naphtali there is in the same breath as we read of the royal tribe of Judah and Benjamin – quite an honour surely. And coming back to think again of those early Galilean disciples and apostles by the Galilean lake, can we not think of them as the true princes in Israel at that time? Young men who followed the Galilean Prophet to whom belonged the beautiful words of eternal life.

They would each become his spokespersons, charged with sharing this wonderful message, from the uplands of Naphtali and on out into the world – until the message of Christianity would possess the south and reach on, outward across the seas. So the word running and being glorified from its starting place in the highlands of Naphtali is associated with the picture of a hind that’s sure-footed and free on the mountains. And that turns our thoughts to Isaiah’s description of the messenger who would proclaim good news with feet that were “beautiful ... upon the mountains” (Isaiah 52:7): “How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who announces peace and brings good news of happiness, who announces salvation, and says to Zion, “Your God reigns!” (Isaiah 52:7).

Feeding on the delight of their own acceptance by the Prophet of Galilee, the little band of disciples were satisfied with the Lord’s favour. And being full of his blessing, their heart overflowed to bring the beautiful words of eternal life to others, and their feet were swift to do so – heading southwards. Could there be a better description of the early disciples than the one we find in the words of Jacob and Moses as pronounced upon this tribe of Naphtali? We’ve spent time thinking of that epic battle in the time of the Judges which had featured Barak (and, remember, the men of Naphtali were prominent in

it) now as we focus on the early disciples, it's possible to see some parallels with the experiences and conflict of the early Christian messengers as they spread out (mainly westwards in the days that followed) – outward from that mountain in Galilee to which in resurrection the Lord had called them and from there commissioned them to go out with the good news. The end of Matthew 28 says:

“the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated ... And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (vv.16-20).

Was that mountain in Galilee the same as the Mount Tabor in Galilee where Barak had marshalled his forces? And from which point the thousands from Naphtali had exposed their lives to danger and death on the high places of the field? In any case, those early Galilean Christians also knew what it was to expose their lives to danger and death (2 Corinthians 1:8-9; 4:11; 6:9) as they carried about in their bodies the dying of Jesus. Could it be that in their struggles they reflected the name of their tribe – Naphtali whom Rachel named saying: ‘With great wrestlings, wrestlings of God, I have wrestled with my sister and prevailed.’ That comes from Genesis 30:7-8: “Rachel’s maid Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. So Rachel said, ‘With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and I have indeed prevailed.’ And she named him Naphtali.”

Yes, those early Christians knew what it was to wrestle with the hosts of spiritual wickedness (Ephesians 6:12) even as Paul wrote to the Ephesians: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.”

But theirs was the victory – and it’s ours also who believe as they did – and who experience the power of Christ’s resurrection - he who “when he ascended on high...led captive a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men’ (Ephesians 4:8; Psalm 68:18, note v.27). These very words too seem like a far greater echo of still more words from that epic battle-song of long ago: “Arise, Barak, and take away your captives, O son of Abinoam” (Judges 5:12).

## CHAPTER 9: GAD – THE OVERCOMING BROTHER

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I doubt if anyone who has not first experienced opposition and conflict, and in measure defeat, has known God to accomplish a significant work through them. In many of the psalms, the godly speak of being overwhelmed or depressed or brought low by their enemies, the Lord's enemies, before, in an attitude of trusting in God, the psalm climaxes in triumph, as having been brought low, the psalmist lays hold on God for his special help. It seems like something of that kind of experience lies behind Jacob's dying prophecy concerning his son, Gad: "As for Gad, raiders shall raid him, but he will raid at their heels" (Genesis 49:19).

There's a reference to the name of Gad in almost every word of that verse! The name Gad signifies a troop. It's a word used of a troop of invaders, a band of robbers. So we could read this play on words like this – "this troop [meaning Gad], a troop shall troop over him; but he shall troop at the last". So the whole thing is a prediction that this tribe would be a war-like one, and experience the common fate of war - sometimes conquered, and at other times conquering - but it would, at the last, be entirely victorious. Now, the land which the tribe of Gad – along with Reuben and the half tribe of Manasseh – wanted to inherit was on the eastern side of the Jordan River, the area the desert travellers arrived at first when they came from Egypt. Moses, the law-giver, allowed them this portion on one condition: that their fighting men would still cross the Jordan with the remain-

ing nine and a half tribes in order to help them secure their inheritances in the Promised Land proper (Joshua 1:12-18).

This was agreed to, and so Gad – in fact the two and a half tribes – came to settle on the east of the Jordan – separated from their brothers by the Jordan River. Because of this, Gad’s territory was especially exposed to roving bands of attackers from the east, since they didn’t have the Jordan River as a protective barrier. But this more exposed land in the mountains of Gilead was chosen by the tribe of Gad – at least they seem to have taken the initiative (Numbers 32:2, 25,29,31,33) – chosen because of the good pasture land to be found there in Gilead. Being on the other side Jordan, as we’ve said, Gad was exposed to being invaded and plundered by hostile eastern neighbours like the Moabites and the Ammonites – who came upon them like troops of robbers, and seized their possessions and retained them for years. Both in the times of the judges (see Judges 10:7-8), and in later times, we find the Ammonites in possession of Gad’s territory (Jeremiah 49:1). So there’s no doubt that prophecy was proved true: border raids were indeed very often experienced by the tribes – like Gad – who had chosen to settle east of the Jordan River (e.g. 1 Chronicles 5:18-20; 1 Kings 22:3). ‘But he shall overcome at the last’ – was included in the prediction and this proved to be the case, as Gad together with Reuben and the half tribe of Manasseh did overcome as recorded later in the Bible books of Chronicles and Kings (especially the Hagrites etc. see 1 Chronicles 5:18-20; 2 Kings 13,14).

Perhaps the history of the tribe is personalised in one of the Bible’s great characters – someone who was compelled to take refuge in the land of Gilead – we’re not told why, but it’s not hard to guess. We read of ‘Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the inhabitants [or strangers]

of Gilead' (1 Kings 17:1). The fact that Elijah is described as a Tishbite is usually understood as meaning that he was a native of Tishbe, which was a town in Naphtali. But it seems Elijah may have been forced to leave his home in Naphtali and head across the Jordan to the land of Gad – perhaps to escape the persecution of Jezebel, who “cut off the prophets of the Lord” (1 Kings 18:4). As he now throws in his lot with the tribe of Gad, he seems to share the experience that had been predicted for them: that they would be overcome, but would be overcomers at the last. For Elijah knew as well as any other what it was like to be hard pressed by bands of enemies, but he equally knew what it was to gain a complete victory in the end. Here's the Bible account of his last day on earth:

“When they had crossed over, Elijah said to Elisha [the man who was to be his successor], “Ask what I shall do for you before I am taken from you.” And Elisha said, “Please, let a double portion of your spirit be upon me.” He said, “You have asked a hard thing. Nevertheless, if you see me when I am taken from you, it shall be so for you; but if not, it shall not be so.” As they were going along and talking, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire and horses of fire which separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind to heaven” (2 Kings 2:9-11).

In that wonderful ascension, in Elisha, his successor, as well as in his appearance on the Mount of Transfiguration, do we not get a wonderful impression of Elijah's final victory - after all the ups and downs – the running, the hiding and the depression he'd known in his life? In that story in which we read of Elijah being taken from Elisha, we find an ascending master – Elijah - we also find a waiting disciple [that's Elisha], and, thirdly, a descending power – being the double-portion of the spirit which had been upon Elijah. It's reminiscent of

the first Christian disciples waiting between their Master's ascension and the descent of the Holy Spirit in power.

Is this not how we can be overcomers? By looking to our ascended master (Hebrews 12:2) and living in the power of the descended Holy Spirit – remember “greater is he that is in us than he that's in the world” (1 John 4:4). Gad overcame those that spoiled him – at the last. Let's learn from Elijah and others of Gilead – especially if we sense we're overrun with current difficulties - that the promise is still there in the New Testament for us to claim: that we, too, will emerge as overcomers – for our faith is the victory that's overcome the world (1 John 5:4). Now let's check out the blessings of Moses – what did he have to say about Gad? Of Gad he said, “Blessed is the one who enlarges Gad; He lies down as a lion, and tears the arm, also the crown of the head” (Deuteronomy 33:20).

In the Psalms, we find that deliverance out of distress is described by the term ‘enlarging’ (see Psalm 4:1), so Moses' words ‘blessed be he who enlarges Gad’ may refer to God's deliverance of the tribe of Gad – perhaps by the hand of the likes of Jephthah, for example (Judges 11:33). Gad is one of three tribes which are compared to lions. That's understandable enough, for they'd chosen to make their home – just like the natural lions – by the banks of the Jordan in the thickets and on the mountain slopes. They simply had to be fierce and warlike, had to be prepared to run the risk of invasion and learn to hold their own against those attacking bands. Moses' words about them “tearing the arm or shoulder with the crown of the head” seem to mean that no force would be able to stand against them; the ‘arm or shoulder’ representing strength and ‘the crown of the head’ representing leaders or princes. The warrior character of this tribe is shown by the fact that they took the lead in the campaigns to conquer the

Promised Land under Joshua (Joshua 4:12-13). But Moses' blessing isn't finished yet, he says: "Then he provided the first part for himself, for there the ruler's portion was reserved; And he came with the leaders of the people; He executed the justice of the LORD, And His ordinances with Israel" (Deuteronomy 33:21).

The ruler's portion is sometimes translated as the law-giver's portion. It could refer to the fact that Gad – along with Reuben and half of Manasseh – were given their inheritance by Moses, whereas the other tribes received theirs from Joshua. So Gad's was the portion, the first part, granted by the lawgiver, Moses. But Gad kept his promise to go over and fight with all the other Israelites which is probably what it means when it says "He came with the leaders of the people". Then when it says "he executed the justice of the LORD", no doubt it refers first to the conquest of Canaan – executing the justice of the Lord on the 7 occupying nations there. Well, let's close the chapter with some truly inspiring words from the record of First Chronicles:

"From the Gadites there came over to David in the stronghold in the wilderness, mighty men of valor, men trained for war, who could handle shield and spear, and whose faces were like the faces of lions, and they were as swift as the gazelles on the mountains ... [the names of eleven captains are then mentioned] ... These of the sons of Gad were captains of the army; he who was least was equal to a hundred and the greatest to a thousand. These are the ones who crossed the Jordan in the first month when it was overflowing all its banks and they put to flight all those in the valleys, both to the east and to the west" (1 Chronicles 12:8-15).

In our spiritual warfare, if our heads are down, let's persevere by God's grace to overcome - in the end - as those trained for war, with

faces of lions, swift as gazelles, equal to a thousand, capable of swimming the Jordan in its full power ... and so we'll be overcomers at the last!

## CHAPTER 10: ASHER – THE QUIET BROTHER

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Each son of Jacob, each tribe of Israel, has a biblically identifiable character, and in this chapter we're introduced to the quietest and the least conspicuous one among them. Someone who enjoyed the comforts of home, whose preference seemed to be a life of ease whenever he could get it - even if it meant compromising in order to enjoy it – someone who was disposed to peace and quiet rather than war, even if such a war was just. We're talking about Asher, about whom we learn in the prophecies of Jacob: "Asher's food shall be rich, and he shall yield royal delicacies" (Genesis 49:20).

Asher received for his inheritance the lowlands of Carmel on the Mediterranean as far as the territory of Tyre, one of the most fertile parts of Canaan, and it was from this land of plenty we assume Solomon supplied the nearby household of king Hiram (1 Kings 5:11). Royal delicacies – in other words, food fit for a king – were also supplied to King Solomon's own table by a man of Asher (1 Kings 4:16). Asher's country answered to his name, which signifies happy or blessed. Cana where Jesus Christ turned water into wine was probably in the area of this tribe, and nearby he talked about the bread of life in reference to himself – surely the best of royal delicacies! Moses among his blessings said: "... of Asher ... Most blessed of sons be Asher; let him be the favorite of his brothers, and let him dip his foot in oil. Your bars shall be iron and bronze, and as your days, so shall your strength be." (Deuteronomy 33:24)

Asher's unobtrusive character would commend itself, making him popular among his brothers. It's harder to fall out with someone of an easy-going or laid-back disposition, isn't it? The expression "dipping his foot in oil" catches our attention as perhaps referring to the process of extracting the oil by foot presses - meaning the territory of Asher was fertile, and well-adapted to growing olives. So "dipping the foot in oil" points to a land flowing with oil (Job 29:6) - in other words, a land fat or fertile throughout, which was what Jacob had already promised to Asher, after all (see Genesis 49:20). To complete the prosperity, however, security and rest were required for the enjoyment of the blessings God had given; and these, happily enough, were also promised (Deuteronomy 33:25). For the blessing predicted that Asher's dwellings were to be castles: secure fortresses made of iron and brass. And yet, no great battles were ever recorded as having been fought in Asher's territory.

His is the least eventful history of the twelve brothers - no great warrior, judge, king or conspicuous person is found among them. This very much contributes to the picture we're building up of his character. But in the time of David, forty thousand from Asher that were expert in war did come to David in Hebron to make him king (1 Chronicles 12:36-38). And, as a rare exception to his peace-loving character, Asher joined Gideon (Judges 6:35; 7:23) in pursuit of the Midianite enemy. Other than that, there's no record that Asher gave assistance in any war that Israel was involved in. Asher's name means 'happy' and it does seem to be the case that he preferred to rest content, rather than warring to obtain more.

This is generally a good nature to have - living in plenty and being willing to share it. It makes a person accepted and popular. But it did have a drawback in Asher's case - or should we say a defect - and a

serious one at that. Their desire to rest content and enjoy their own land, even sharing its good things with others, meant that they tended to leave places God had given them in the hands of their enemies (Judges 1:31-32). Asher's failing was a love of ease. Not only did the Canaanites dwell among them (as with the other tribes); but Asher dwelt among the Canaanites (Judges 1:32). They didn't attempt exclusive possession, but settled down quietly where there was room, content if possible to dwell in peace – the easier option, but not what had been commanded through Moses. And this was a course that Asher persisted in. During a time of national crisis when some other tribes distinguished themselves by fighting side by side for their freedom, the finger is pointed at Asher because they “sat at the seashore, and remained by its landings” (Judges 5:17).

Only when his corn, wine and oil were consumed by the Midianites was Asher finally prepared to go to war as part of Gideon's army (Judges 6:35). This is love of ease carried to excess, and it's worthy of condemnation, but I'd like to think there came a turning-point in the experience of this tribe. What I'm referring to is the revival in the south, in Judah, in the days of good king Hezekiah - when we read that:

“Hezekiah sent to all Israel and Judah, and wrote letters also to Ephraim and Manasseh, that they should come to the house of the LORD at Jerusalem to keep the Passover to the LORD, the God of Israel ... So couriers went throughout all Israel and Judah with letters from the king and his princes, as the king had commanded, saying, “O people of Israel, return to the LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, that he may turn again to the remnant of you who have escaped from the hand of the kings of Assyria. Do not be like your fathers and your brothers, who were faithless to the LORD God of

their fathers, so that he made them a desolation, as you see ... For if you return to the LORD, your brothers and your children will find compassion with their captors and return to this land. For the LORD your God is gracious and merciful and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him.”

So the couriers went from city to city through the country of Ephraim and Manasseh, and as far as Zebulun, but they laughed them to scorn and mocked them. However, some men of Asher, of Manasseh, and of Zebulun humbled themselves and came to Jerusalem” (2 Chronicles 30:1-11).

Asher, the brother that was the most willing to rest in his own inheritance, was the first to humble himself and come to ‘rest in the Lord’ (seen Psalm 37:7). And so now, having come to Jerusalem, that’s where – in the New Testament - we find Anna who was from the tribe of Asher. Unique that mention, really. I believe that of all the ten northern tribes, Asher, in the person of Anna, is the only one who has a named representative in the New Testament. In previous chapters, we’ve tried to focus on a major Bible figure from the tribe in question – one whose life experiences and characteristics sum up that of the tribe as a whole. Well, there’s really only one person in all the Bible we can latch onto as being from the tribe of Asher - only one member whose life we can sketch - and it’s Anna (Luke 2:36-38). But that’s no more than we should expect from this most obscure of all the tribes, this quiet figure among the brothers, the 12 sons of Jacob from whom Israel descended in 12 tribes.

The quiet place of the tribe is suitably represented by this woman – a widow woman of this, the least honoured and least conspicuous of all the tribes. A tribe, it seems, with the character of studying to be

quiet, not taking the lead, remaining at home, and peace-loving. Let's read then the little that's known about Anna:

“And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:36-38).

This was the famous occasion when Mary and Joseph presented the baby Jesus at the Jerusalem temple. There they encountered Anna, who was in the habit of attending the house of God continually - without departing it says. So she was no longer dwelling among the Canaanites, as it were, nor finding rest in the house of her husband - for she was a widow who now found rest in the Lord's service at the resting-place of God. For the solitary, like Anna, or for those set in families, there's one true resting-place, and that is to rest in the Lord. The tribe that had never spoken or fought for Israel before, found its voice in Anna that day - how wonderful for the tribe, through Anna, to find its voice in speaking about the Christ! She, who had departed from her home, did not depart from God's house, and found something to say for Israel and for the glory of God.

Asher was the second son of Zilpah, Leah's maid-servant, whom she bore to Jacob on Leah's behalf. In the birth of Asher, Leah confessed herself satisfied and 'happy'. And Asher's happiness remains throughout: a happiness at the first in finding rest in a fertile part of Canaan, before here, in Anna, finding a much better happiness - from enjoying the fatness of the land to enjoying the fatness of God's house

in Christ. The words Anna spoke on behalf of Asher that day in the temple as she spoke about the baby Jesus were 'royal dainties' of the highest order! No matter how quiet and retiring we are, let's find our tongue in talking of Christ to others. If we're lovers of ease, we can be stirred to exercise ourselves in God's house.

## CHAPTER 11: MANASSEH & EPHRAIM – THE COMPETITIVE BROTHER

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Earlier in this book we've seen how the birthright which should have been Reuben's passed instead to Joseph, the first natural son of Jacob's favoured wife, Rachel. It was the custom in those days that the firstborn received a double portion from his father and the way this works out for Joseph is that his two sons are named in his place among the tribes. These two sons were born to Joseph after he rose from slavery to prominence in the land of Egypt. This meteoric rise is explained in the Bible in terms of the frequently repeated fact that 'the Lord was with Joseph'. Pharaoh honoured Joseph, and gave him a Gentile bride who bore him two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Their names were carefully chosen by Joseph to reflect his life experience.

Manasseh means 'to forget', and Joseph felt at that point that God had made him to forget all his trouble; whereas, more positively perhaps, in the name Ephraim, Joseph was acknowledging how fruitful God had made him to become in Egypt (Genesis 41:51,52). The time came when Joseph's brothers came down to Egypt to get food during the famine - for thanks to Joseph, who had been guided by divine insight, there were plenty reserves stockpiled in Egypt. Finally, after testing his brothers, Joseph disclosed his identity to them and this led to a reunion with his father, as the whole extended family relocated to live beside Joseph in Egypt. There's a touching story of Joseph introducing his father to his sons Manasseh and Ephraim:

“Joseph said to his father, “They are my sons, whom God has given me here.” So he said, “Bring them to me, please, that I may bless them.” Now the eyes of Israel were so dim from age that he could not see. Then Joseph brought them close to him, and he kissed them and embraced them. Israel said to Joseph, “I never expected to see your face, and behold, God has let me see your children as well.” ... Joseph took them both, Ephraim with his right hand toward Israel’s left, and Manasseh with his left hand toward Israel’s right, and brought them close to him. But Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh’s head, crossing his hands, although Manasseh was the firstborn. He blessed Joseph, and said:

“The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, Bless the lads; and may my name live on in them, and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and may they grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.”

When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on Ephraim’s head, it displeased him; and he grasped his father’s hand to remove it from Ephraim’s head to Manasseh’s head. Joseph said to his father, “Not so, my father, for this one is the firstborn. Place your right hand on his head.” But his father refused and said, “I know, my son, I know; he also will become a people and he also will be great. However, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his descendants shall become a multitude of nations.” (Genesis 48:9-19).

So Manasseh was to become great, although his younger brother would be even greater. That being the case, it might seem that bitter rivalry between them would be unavoidable, and indeed there were

jealous clashes between them in the times of both Gideon and Jephthah (Judges 8:1; 12:4). Once, when Gideon led the tribe of Manasseh - albeit supported by others (Judges 6:35; 7:23) - against the Midianites, and had the enemy on the run, he invited Ephraim to assist him (7:24). When they joined in:

“They captured the two leaders of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb, and they killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and they killed Zeeb at the wine press of Zeeb, while they pursued Midian; and they brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon from across the Jordan. Then the men of Ephraim said to him, “What is this thing you have done to us, not calling us when you went to fight against Midian?” And they contended with him vigorously. But he said to them, “What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer? God has given the leaders of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb into your hands; and what was I able to do in comparison with you?” Then their anger toward him subsided when he said that” (Judges 7:25-8:3).

... which is a remarkably gracious and diplomatic answer to give under provocation! Perhaps it was a case then of not answering a fool according to his folly. In any case, Gideon answered mildly, but the same contentious spirit of the Ephraimites against Manasseh spills over later in the story of Jephthah, and he was no diplomat. It was at a time when Jephthah led the Gileadites of Manasseh successfully against the Ammonites. Again there was a reaction from Ephraim: “Then the men of Ephraim were summoned, and they crossed to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, “Why did you cross over to fight against the sons of Ammon without calling us to go with you? We will burn your house down on you” (Judges 12:1).

Talk about shooting from the hip! But they got fighting talk back from Jephthah. He defeated them in battle, and if his men caught them trying to sneak back across the Jordan River by pretending not to be Ephraimites, they would ask them to say ‘Shibboleth’. If they could only say ‘Sibboleth’, then their distinctive way of speaking betrayed the fact that they were really Ephraimites, and 42,000 of them lost their lives! Hasty remarks, bitter family quarrels and a proud spirit are – or can be - devastating things. But Ephraim would eventually gain the upper hand. Remember Jacob said as much, and Moses could only confirm it in his blessing:

“Of Joseph he said, ‘Blessed of the LORD be his land, with the choice things of heaven, with the dew, and from the deep lying beneath, and with the choice yield of the sun, and with the choice produce of the months, and with the best things of the ancient mountains, and with the choice things of the everlasting hills, and with the choice things of the earth and its fullness, and the favor of Him who dwelt in the bush. Let it come to the head of Joseph, and to the crown of the head of the one distinguished among his brothers. As the firstborn of his ox, majesty is his, and his horns are the horns of the wild ox; with them he will push the peoples, all at once, to the ends of the earth. And those are the ten thousands of Ephraim, and those are the thousands of Manasseh” (Deuteronomy 33:13-17).

Yes, to Ephraim were the ten thousands assigned. We remember again that Reuben’s birthright was given to the sons of Joseph, and between the two, Ephraim received the chief place. We’ve already thought of Ephraim’s competitiveness against his brother Manasseh, but Ephraim seems also to have a bit of a rivalry going with Judah! Through the desert, while travelling to the Promised Land, Judah marched at the head of the first half of the camp; while Ephraim

marched at the head of the second half. Then, once they were in the land, the Tabernacle was set up at Shiloh and the chief town was at Shechem for a while - both of these places being in Ephraim; but then Shiloh was laid waste (Jeremiah 7) and Jerusalem was preferred to Shechem when Judah became the royal tribe. Ephraim then rebelled against the king in Jerusalem and established a kingdom of ten tribes (1 Kings 12:20) under the leadership of Jeroboam who belonged to the tribe of Ephraim. So, an alternative powerbase was established with Ephraim at the head of the 10 northern tribes.

The Bible exposes what's behind all this in Hosea 13:1, where we read: "Ephraim ... exalted himself in Israel, but through Baal he did wrong and died". The Bible (Isaiah 28:1,3) refers time and again to the 'proud crown' of Ephraim. The same pride that led Ephraim to separate from Judah, ensnared the tribe into idolatry (Hosea 4:17). How terrible the sin of pride is! But there's a way of escape. Joshua, the successor to Moses, and who led the way into Canaan belonged to the tribe of Ephraim. Joshua contrasts sharply with the self-promoting and jealous Jeroboam of the same tribe. Perhaps, the reason why God encouraged Joshua to be "bold and strong" (Joshua 1) was because he was timid and retiring.

We notice Joshua only asked for an inheritance after everyone else had got theirs (Joshua 19:49,50). Any tendency to pride in him seems to be superbly controlled. We read of Joshua being jealous for Moses, and jealous for the Lord, wishing to safeguard their honour (Numbers 11; Joshua 24); but he's not jealous for himself. What had made this difference? Does it go back, I wonder, to the time when Moses used to pitch a tent outside the encampment of the Israelites, and after entering it, the cloud signifying God's presence would descend and stand at the door of the tent and: "Thus the LORD used

to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses returned to the camp, his servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent” (Exodus 33:11).

What an impact those times must have made on young Joshua’s life! He must have stood in awe of God - now that’s the antidote to pride in the human heart. May we, too, draw near to God, that he might draw near to us (James 4:8), and having large thoughts of God, we’ll then have little regard for ourselves, and so be content with a lowly place of service.

## CHAPTER 12: BENJAMIN – THE COURAGEOUS BROTHER

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Finally, we come to perhaps the bravest of the tribes, the tribe of Benjamin, where the emphasis is consistently on personal courage - it's something that is characteristic of Benjamin throughout Bible history. We could begin by mentioning Ehud who was a Benjamite, and a deliverer of Israel during a period of oppression by the land of Moab (Judges 3:15-30). Gaining access alone to the presence of King Eglon under pretence of having a secret message connected with the payment of tribute, Ehud, a left-handed man, drew the sword hidden on his right side, and pierced the king through. Then he calmly went out, locked the doors of the king's chamber behind him, and made his escape. Later, with the Israelites, he overcame the Moabites at the fords of the Jordan, killing about ten thousand of them.

That single-handed act illustrates the personal courage that is quite typical of this tribe - and which was predicted in the dying prophecies of Jacob: "Benjamin is a ravenous wolf; in the morning he devours the prey, and in the evening he divides the spoil" (Genesis 49:27). Sometimes that Benjamite courage was more tragic than heroic, however, as in the case recorded at the end of the book of Judges (19-21). The extraordinary episode there follows the horrible story of a terrible moral outrage which was carried out on another man's concubine. This took place in Gibeah of Benjamin. In a gruesome manner, the man made known this wrong to Israel. Then came the terrible revenge exacted by the other tribes upon the Ben-

jamites, who wouldn't surrender the offenders in their midst to justice. They fought valiantly in the resulting battle, but the hand of God was against them, and only by the most unusual and unorthodox means was the tribe of Benjamin allowed to survive.

No doubt about it, the days of the judges were lawless days when people simply did what they pleased: whatever it was that just seemed right to them. That was Benjamin's darkest hour. Things got a bit brighter in the days of Saul, who was chosen as Israel's first king. Saul of Gibeah was a brave leader (2 Samuel 1:22) - and even in his faults, the courage of Saul - typical of a Benjamite - was absolutely characteristic.

There's an impulsiveness about Saul, whether seen in saving the people of Jabesh-Gilead by an appeal to all Israel, or in hurling javelins at David, or in sentencing priests and his own son to death, or in bursting into tears at David's voice, or in fighting to the death. He's a creature of impulsive passions, and like everyone else, he had his virtues as well as his failings. There's no question as to the noble qualities of Saul. They have been set down in the Bible by the man who knew him best - David - who had no reason to be biased as to Saul's good qualities! The chief among them which David listed were his prowess in war and his generosity in peace (2 Samuel 1). As we've mentioned, that prowess in war was seen in his first call to action which showed typical impulsive bravery (1 Samuel 11:6ff), and drew the lasting gratitude of the citizens of Jabesh-Gilead (1 Samuel 31:11ff) whose city he delivered from the Ammonites. Yes, the same impulsiveness and passion that can produce vices and virtues is best when it's yielded to, and bridled by, God's grace. We'll see that later in the man in the New Testament who shares the name of Saul.

But it would be unfair not to mention Jonathan, king Saul's own son. Jonathan's story demonstrates the character of Benjamin when under the influence of divine grace. Jonathan's bravery shines through in two accounts of his attacks on Philistine garrisons (in Geba, 1 Samuel 13:3 and Michmash, 1 Samuel 14:1-23). On the second occasion, he attacked with no other comrade except his armour-bearer. But then, what about his loyalty to David, his father's rival for the throne? Again and again he braved his father's anger for the sake of David. Courage that at times is misplaced is seen in others like Saul's cousin, Abner, the commander of his army (2 Samuel 2:14-17) and in Shimei who cursed David as he fled from before Absalom (16:5-13), and also in Sheba who drew support away from David (20) - in all of these the wolf-like character of Benjamin is seen.

The courageous resistance of Mordecai, first seen in refusing to bow down to Haman the king's favourite at the Persian court, is another positive example of Benjamite character. For Mordecai was an Israelite of the tribe of Benjamin. His story is told in the book of Esther, and is set at a time after the period of Israelite exile in Babylon. Mordecai's great-grandfather had been carried to Babylon along with Jeconiah, king of Judah (Esther 2:5-6). But for many years, it seems, before the story of Esther took place, the way to Palestine had been once again open to Israelites; but neither his father, nor afterwards Mordecai, had chosen to return to their ancient land - as had been the case with the vast majority of the Israelite people, it has to be said.

His uncle, too, died in Persia leaving Esther to his care. While employed in the royal palace at Susa, Mordecai uncovered a plot to assassinate the king, and for that, he finally received the favourable notice of Xerxes, the Persian king. That recognition came just in time to save Mordecai, Esther and all the Jews from being exterminated by

Haman, the king's favourite at court who was trying to take devastating revenge for being apparently snubbed by Mordecai. Mordecai himself was then raised up to a position of great power in the Persian empire. Few have done more to earn a nation's lasting gratitude than Mordecai, to whom - as well as to Esther - under God, the Jewish people owed their preservation at that time. But, although Mordecai hadn't wanted to return to Jerusalem, it seems, we must go there now, but first let's read from the blessings of Moses: "Of Benjamin he said, "May the beloved of the LORD dwell in security by Him, Who shields him all the day, And he dwells between His shoulders" (Deuteronomy 33:12).

From the record in the book of Joshua of the territory in the promised land which was given to Benjamin - it was land which lay between that of the sons of Judah and the sons of Joseph - we find that the city of Jerusalem actually fell in his territory (Joshua 18:28, see Psalm 68:27). There, between the shoulders of Benjamin, the God of Israel caused his name to dwell. Solomon built the temple there, at the place of God's choice, at Jerusalem which Benjamin shared with Judah. Benjamin was the dwelling-place of the Lord's beloved. The Book of the Acts, in the New Testament, opens with the apostles and disciples giving their witness to the Lord at Jerusalem. It wasn't long before they came under fierce persecution there from a Benjamite, known as Saul of Tarsus. Saul made havoc of the church of God at Jerusalem, attacking the disciples there with all the savagery of a wolf. We can let Paul himself take up the story from his letter to the Galatians:

"For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation

of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it; and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions. But ... God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles" (Galatians 1:11-16).

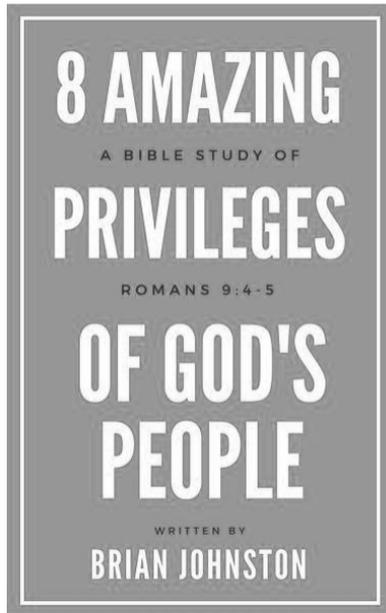
And what a fearless preacher he became! That same misplaced zeal and unbridled passion, we've traced before in the history of the tribe of Benjamin, was then harnessed by the Spirit of God in the cause of Christ, so that with equal tenacity, Saul, now as the apostle Paul, fought the good fight. Once he, reluctantly, responded to his critics like this:

"Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? - I speak as if insane - I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches" (2 Corinthians 11:22-28).

We could do worse than take Benjamin as our example whenever encouraging ourselves to bold and courageous action under God. Those who know their God will have a great boldness for him, and he'll accomplish much through them.



Did you love *Tribes and Tribulations - Israel's Predicted Personalities*?  
Then you should read *8 Amazing Privileges of God's People: A Bible Study of Romans 9:4-5* by Brian Johnston!



The apostle Paul says in Romans 9:4-5: "who are Israelites, to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God, Amen."

Perhaps you hadn't noticed this little gem tucked away in the middle of the letter, but it is a tremendous description of what it meant to be among God's people in the past. We are not so much interested in a history lesson, of course, but in seeing to what extent

each of these eight great can find its answer today in our service for God.

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## **About the Author**

Born and educated in Scotland, Brian worked as a government scientist until God called him into full-time Christian ministry on behalf of the Churches of God ([www.churchesofgod.info](http://www.churchesofgod.info)). His voice has been heard on Search For Truth radio broadcasts for over 30 years (visit [www.searchfortruth.podbean.com](http://www.searchfortruth.podbean.com)) during which time he has been an itinerant Bible teacher throughout the UK and Canada. His evangelical and missionary work outside the UK is primarily in Belgium and The Philippines. He is married to Rosemary, with a son and daughter.



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