

Twelve Sons and the History of a Kingdom

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The Bible is written on different levels. It is not a newspaper, which is written for a particular audience at a particular period of time for a particular purpose. The Bible was written to be applicable to all people in all times, and therefore has purpose and meaning on various levels. One level involves whatever the Scripture meant to the original hearers, and the physical and spiritual results of hearing such words. There are spiritual meanings beyond the surface which apply, perhaps in a different way, to people today. One level does not negate or detract from the meaning and value of any other. It is the multiplicity of meaning found in Scripture which makes it unique and timeless.

Isra'el is made up of twelve tribes, the sons of which were born to Ya'akov in this week's parashah. As we look at these twelve sons and the meaning of their names, there will be some interesting meanings found in the different levels in this part of God's Word.

RE'UVEN

The name Re'uven means, "behold a son". He is the first of his family and the start of the next generation. He was the beginning of the twelve tribes of Isra'el. In saying, "behold a son", God was declaring the beginning of His Kingdom manifested on earth through a human kingdom, a nation of people who would be His people, and He their God. Here, with this man, Isra'el as a nation was born.

We are not born with a relationship with God. We are born sinners destined for eternal death. A relationship with God always has a beginning. There is always that first moment one sees who he or she really is and his or her need for God. When a person sees the sin which lives inside them and asks God to cleanse them of such sin, and dedicates his or her life to the service of God, this is what can be called a Re'uven moment. This is when God looks at such a person and by His grace declares, "behold a son", and all heaven rejoices.

"But as many as did receive him, to those who put their trust in his person and power, he gave the right to become children of God, not because of bloodline, physical impulse or human intention, but because of God." (John 1:12-13)

SHIM'ON

Shortly after the birth of Isra'el, they found themselves slaves in Egypt. They were rescued by the hand of God and the leadership of Moshe. God brought His people, this new nation of His own design, through the Sea of Reeds and into the wilderness. Here, Isra'el would be given God's Torah, and learn to rely on Him for their survival. The key to this is listening to God's instructions and obedience to those ways.

Shim'on means, "heard". It comes from a root word, shema, which means, "to hear". Prayer is about communicating with God, however, it is more about listening to God than talking to Him. As important as praise and petition is, it is far more important for God's people to listen to His instructions and well as His words of encouragement.

In the Kingdom of God, God is King. His word is above any other. In order to be a citizen of the Kingdom, hearing and obeying God is vital. God chose Isra'el out of His grace, but they had to listen to Him to learn how to live as the children of God that they were. It was God's intention that Isra'el would be a light to the nations and through them all nations would be blessed. This could not happen unless they had an intimate relationship with Him, which begins with effective listening.

LEVI

"Now if you will pay careful attention to what I say and keep my covenant, then you will be my own treasure from among all the peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you will be a kingdom of cohanim for me, a nation set apart." (Exodus 19:5-6)

Shim'on and Levi are considered brothers in Genesis 49:5. Of course all twelve are brothers, but these two are linked in a more unique way than the other ten. They were violent and had killed many together. Levi means,

“to be joined”. It can be said, then, that upon hearing the Word of God, Isra'el then became joined to Him through the covenant of Law, or the Mosaic covenant. Listening to God and being united with Him would be imperative to their success in the Promised Land.

It would also be the tribe of Levi from which the priesthood would come out of. These would be the representatives of the people to God. They would carry the burden of their own sins and the sins of the people. They would also have the responsibility to perform the service in the tabernacle and the sacrifices at the altar to make atonement for the people so that God could dwell in their midst. It was the priests who had to do what God required of them, even against opposition from others in the community. As the spiritual leaders of Isra'el, they were more of a target for Ha'Satan as well.

Spiritual leaders today face the same opposition and battle the same forces of darkness, as did the descendants of Levi. The kingdom of God is not for cowards. However, it is not for Rambos either. Each person is part of a community, which together fight to maintain their unity with God and combat the enemy under the power and protection of God.

Y'HUDAH

Isra'el was taught faith in the wilderness and would be called upon to exercise their faith in Kena'an. As they trusted God, obeyed His commands, and followed the leadership of those He appointed to lead over them, God went ahead of them, and paved the way for Isra'el's defeat of their enemies. They were only to go to war against an army after, God had already handed that army over to them. Often, God put Isra'el in impossible odds of success to show both Isra'el and the surrounding nations that it was He, and not the people taking possession of the land. This is seen through Rachav, who lived in the thick walls of Jericho. She knew of the slaughter Isra'el's God, not Isra'el, made to other nations and came to fear the God of Isra'el because of it. As a result, when the rest of the wall fell, the section where she and her family lived was spared.

Y'hudah means, “praised”, and there is no better time for God to be praised than when He delivers you from your enemies and gives you victory over His. Pagan nations and wicked people are not the only enemies of God and His people. Sin is another enemy, which separates God from His people. It is no accident that the Messiah would later come from the tribe of Y'hudah. Messiah Yeshua paid the final sacrifice for sin, to provide a way for all God's people, both Jew and Gentile to conquer sin, enter the “land” God has promised for them, and ultimately give praise to the One who brought such victory.

Z'VULUN

“From this all the peoples of the earth can know that the hand of Adonai is strong, and you can fear Adonai your God forever.”(Joshua 4:24)

As God brought His people into the Promised Land, He fought on behalf of Isra'el, but was also fighting on behalf of His own holiness. The paganism of the people living in the land of Kena'an made them the enemies of God. Their destruction was God's honor. Z'vulun means, “exalted”. God displayed His power as judge and king over the land He called His own. He showed Himself to be the supreme ruler over the land and the gods of the people living there. He had already displayed His power in Egypt with the ten plagues and the Exodus. Now He displays His power again to pave the way for His people to enter the Promised Land.

This gives a twofold message. To the enemy of God, they see that God is more powerful than their god and their might. Before the God of the universe, they are nothing. If repentance is possible, it is necessary to avoid certain destruction. Turn to God or accept the grave. A similar message goes to Isra'el. Live for God, or die by the sword of your enemies. His protection only lasts as long the trust and obedience of His people. Unity with God means that as God is exalted, so are His servants. Nobody is going to harm a small man who has a large, strong, heavily armed warrior behind him defending him. In the same way, as God exalts Himself before the pagans, they are going to respect the people whom God protects.

YISSAKHAR

Yissakhar means, “there shall be recompense”. The picture here is the same as receiving a fair wage or compensation for a day's work. God had done much on behalf of Isra'el, and brought them to the land promised to their forefathers. God had done what He said He would do, now it was time to give back to God the worship and devotion due Him for His faithfulness. Nothing new is being asked of them. They learned God's ways and how to serve Him in the wilderness and on the way into the Promised Land. All they had to do is continue to recognize God as their King and live as the servants of God that they were. Then God would prosper them in the

land and His light would shine out to all nations as God had intended.

Unfortunately, we know this never happened. At least not yet. However, all God's people today need to heed the warning of Yissakhar. God has blessed you in ways you will never know. To ignore that is to ignore the God who has already done much on your behalf and has much more planned for you. As Job found out, much prosperity can easily be taken away, leaving you with nothing but your name, and enemies that once were your friends. Faith brought you to your promised land, and faith is essential to keep you there and enable you to prosper in it.

DAN

“When Adonai raised up judges for them, Adonai was with the judge and delivered them from the hands of their enemies throughout the lifetime of the judge; for Adonai was moved to pity by their groaning under those oppressing and crushing them. But after the judge died, they would relapse into worse behavior than that of their ancestors, following other gods to serve and worship them; they abandoned none of their practices or stubborn ways.” (Judges 2:18-19)

Why would a judge be called upon to save Isra'el? One would think that perhaps a king or a great military leader would do something like that, but why a judge? Notice that in the book of Judges, it was always when Isra'el was in a state of sin and oppression that a judge was appointed to rescue them. Normally, when a person commits a crime, they go before a judge, who evaluates their guilt and assesses a penalty for their crime. A person does not go to a judge to rescue them from the consequences of the crime. It would seem that it would be a judge that would put Isra'el into bondage for their sin, not take them out of it.

The reason why this seems to be a problem is that we think of a judge based on our modern cultural concept of the court system and what a judge does today. However, the use for judge is different in the Bible. Here a judge acted more like a defense attorney, and the real judge is the Judge of the universe, God. Today, if you commit a crime, even if you are clearly guilty, you still go to a defense attorney who will plead with the judge and/or the jury to explain how and why you committed the crime in an attempt to get a lesser sentence or no sentence at all. At the same time, the lawyer is going to use his or her knowledge of the law and the court system to teach you what you need to do to help yourself gain favor with the judge and jury. This is exactly what the judges of Isra'el did.

The judges acted as a mediator between God, Isra'el, and the pagan nations. They defended the people before God by reminding Him of His promises and by pleading for grace. The priests also did this at the altar of incense in their morning and evening prayers. The judges also knew Torah and taught the people how they ought to live, and how to turn back to God in repentance. They also lead Isra'el, under the guidance of God against their enemies who were oppressing them to deliver them from their bondage. The judges acted as spiritual, legal, and political leaders in Isra'el, while maintaining God as their King. The judges also provided accountability to Isra'el to keep them from sin once they were delivered. This is why rebellion did not return until the death of the judge. Without such accountability, the people did what was right in their own eye, which will always lead to sin.

GAD

“You have shed much blood and fought great wars. You are not to build a house for my name, because you have shed so much blood on the earth in my sight.” (1 Chron. 22:8)

If there could be a time when one could point to a turning point in the history of Isra'el, it would be when they decided to have their own king. The time of the kings, especially the time of David, was one of much bloodshed. So much so, that David was not able to build the temple. He was given the design for the temple, but had to pass it and the responsibility for building it to his son, Solomon.

Gad means, “troop”. A troop in Scripture implies an entire army. When you join the Kingdom, you join an army. Failure to battle the enemy leads to sure destruction. God does not need Rambos, neither does He need cowards or deserters. He needs warriors who are strong, wise, connected to a troop of warriors, and willing to fight for the truth and love of God. He needs men and women of integrity and courage who through their own blood, sweat, and tears will build the Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven according to the design of God found in His Word.

Our culture uses things like wealth, occupation, and social status to define worth. Drinking, sex, and sports are

things which define masculinity. Fashion, beauty, and material possessions define femininity. To God, all such things are vanity. They are gifts from Him to be used for His glory not ours. What is important to God is that we seek Him, live according to His will, and treat others with dignity and respect. The qualities God looks for are internal, not external. We can build palaces for our own pleasure and glory, or build the Kingdom of God, which begins inside each of His people. Look within yourself and ask yourself if you are man or woman courageous enough to be counted among one of the warriors of God.

ASHER

“How happy your people must be, how happy these servants of yours who are always here attending you and get to hear your wisdom! Blessed be Adonai your God, who took pleasure in you to put you on his throne, so that you could be king for Adonai your God. Because of your God's love for Isra'el, to establish them forever, he has made you king over them, to administer law and judgment.” (2 Chronicles 9:7-8)

The king in this passage is Solomon. Despite God's disapproval of Isra'el having a human king, He allowed them to prosper through the strength and wisdom He gave to Solomon. In this short time, Isra'el was the center of commerce and political power in the known world. Isra'el had respect even from the pagan nations around her. Through the wealth of Solomon, the original temple was built, as well as a palace for Solomon himself. This prosperity was the blessing resulting from successful defense of the Promised Land and faithfulness to God. This joy and peace that Isra'el experienced, was a small taste of the Messianic Kingdom that is to come. However, here too, the same faith which brought the blessing must be maintained to keep the same blessing. Solomon fell into idolatry, which began the decline of prosperity. With the next king, Reoboam, Isra'el was divided.

Asher means, “happy”, and true happiness and peace comes from the Spirit of God, which dwells within each believer. It is not based on that which is outward, but the Spirit that dwells within. Some of the poorest and most oppressed people in the world are also the most joyful and at peace with the world. Such people have learned to look within for such comfort. Pleasure and wealth are not wrong. They are blessings from the hand of God, but they are also resources to be used for the glory of God, not Man. It is important that in the joy of life, we do not allow the objects of prosperity to get in the way of our devotion to God. If we do, then the peace of Asher, can quickly become the desolation of Naftali.

NAFTALI

“I am about to send you away from the face of the earth – this year you will die, because you have preached rebellion against Adonai” (Jeremiah 28:16)

When God has given much blessing, much faith and obedience is required in return. Here again is where Isra'el failed, and brought about their own destruction. It is one thing to contend with human enemies with God on your side. It is quite another to turn your back on God after He has blessed abundantly, thus putting yourself in contention with God.

Naftali is about, “wrestling”. Wrestling with God is a fruitless activity. If you must wrestle, wrestle with God's Word, but not God Himself. Muscles strengthen as they are worked. Lack of resistance brings atrophy.

Wrestling with God's Word involves seeking understanding and bending oneself to the will and authority of God. Performing God's will is often not easy, and we must wrestle with our own sinful desires while seeking to yield to those of righteousness. As long as our eyes remain on God, ultimately, truth will win and break the bonds of the adversary. God will never abandon a soul who earnestly seeks Him, no matter how much conflict that person might have with His commands.

YOSEPH

Yoseph was the favored son of his father and subsequently betrayed by his brothers, to become a servant in a pagan land, and eventually save the brothers who betrayed him. Approximately four hundred years after the end of the Old Covenant, there came another son from a Jewish man named Yoseph, of the tribe of Y'udah. He would be a servant amongst sinful people, he was betrayed by his brethren, and give up his life to save them and all humanity for their sinfulness. This son was Messiah ben Yoseph, the Son of God. Yoseph means, “increase”, and Yeshua (Jesus) was the “something more” which was necessary to bring hope in our failing struggle with sin before a holy God. As His blood was shed, as the perfect lamb of Pesach (Passover), atonement was made for the sins of all those who would put their faith in Him.

Yoseph did not conquer his brothers, he saved them. Yeshua does not cancel out everything the other brothers of

Yoseph represents, he adds to them to bridge the gap between human effort to reach God, and God's desire for them to be holy, so that they can. Yeshua was Jewish, He was a Torah observant Man from the tribe of Yehudah, descended from King David, yet also the Son of God. In this way, God's promise that Isra'el would be a blessing to all nations is at least partially fulfilled in Yeshua.

Yeshua would also bring an increase to the Kingdom of God. At this point, God's Kingdom is no longer manifested in Isra'el, which no longer exists as the nation it was intended to be. There are no twelve tribes, no temple, no priesthood, and there are pagans living in the land, even on the temple mount. The Kingdom exists today spiritually through faith in Yeshua, and by living a Torah observant lifestyle. Just as Yeshua brings an increase to the Kingdom through His sacrifice, the people of God today have the calling to increase the Kingdom by being a light in a dark world, and leading others, both Jew and Gentile to the Kingdom of Yeshua.

“And the foreigners who join themselves to Adonai to serve him, to love the name of Adonai, and to keep Shabbat and do not profane it, and hold fast to my covenant, I will bring them to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” (Isaiah 56:6-7)

EFRAYIM and M'NASHEH

Isra'el rejected God. Even before Messiah, much hypocrisy, corruption, and division existed within Isra'el. Rejecting Yeshua as the Messiah was just the final straw. With Isra'el's rejection, God turned His focus on the Gentiles. He has not given up on the Jews, in fact, it is His purpose to use the gentiles to eventually turn Jewish people back to Himself, and to faith in His Son as Messiah. When this happens Efrayim, which means “double portion”, and M'nasheh, which means, “to forget”, will reunite as brothers in the one Kingdom with Yeshua and

King as High Priest over both of them. Efrayim is not the Gentiles, and the Gentile believers are not Isra'el. Rather, Efrayim represents the Gentiles as they are the double portion, added to Isra'el, to lead those Jews who have forgotten God, represented by M'nasheh, back to their position as the children of God. Gentiles are able to become part of the Kingdom, but they are still “foreigners in the land”. They do not take part in the Abrahamic

Covenant, as they are not blood relatives of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov. They become part of the Kingdom under the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:30. It is important for both Jews and Gentiles to view each other as the brothers that they are, neither with better standing with God than the other, but both in their own walk with God in the present day, each fulfilling their specified purpose under God, and destined for the same final Kingdom, under Yeshua the Messiah.

BINYAMIN

“He has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God.” (1 Peter 3:22)

Yeshua is the One who sits at the right hand of honor of His Father who dwells in the heavenly Kingdom. Binyamin is, “the son of the right hand.” Some time in the future, Yeshua as Messiah will return as Messiah ben David, the conquering king, wipe out pagans and paganism from the face of the earth, build His Kingdom, and reign in a New Jerusalem for all eternity.

In this day, there will be true shalom (peace) throughout the earth. All nations will look to Isra'el as the true nation of God. The temple will fulfill its purpose as a house of prayer for all peoples. Sin will be no more, and God's Torah will reign supreme in the hearts and minds of His people. Jews and Gentiles under Yeshua will be united as one body, and the world will know warfare no longer. Even Ha Satan will have been cast into the lake of fire, with all those who followed his ways.

Binyamin is the last of the twelve sons who make up the twelve tribes of Isra'el. By now you may have forgotten about Re'uven, but God sees all tribes together at once, as one Kingdom, united under the One true God, assembled for one primary purpose, to glorify Him, and declares for all eternity, “behold, a son”.