

What can we learn from the tribe of Zebulun?

Zebulun is one of Israel's twelve tribes. In the time of Moses, Zebulun was divided into three clans: the Seredites, the Elonites, and the Jahleelites, named after Zebulun's sons (Numbers 26:26). The tribes were named for Jacob's children (or grandchildren, in the cases of Ephraim and Manasseh).

Jacob's tenth son, Zebulun, was the youngest of six sons borne by Leah. When Zebulun was born, Leah said, "God has presented me with a precious gift. This time my husband will treat me with honor, because I have borne him six sons" (Genesis 30:20). Zebulun means "dwelling" or "honor."

Zebulun was one of six tribes chosen to stand on Mount Ebal and pronounce curses (Deuteronomy 27:13). By means of these curses, the people promised God they would refrain from certain behaviors. For example, one curse says, "Cursed is the man who carves an image or casts an idol - a thing detestable to the Lord" (Deuteronomy 27:15). Another states, "Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the alien, the fatherless or the widow" (Deuteronomy 27:19). Still another: "Cursed is the man who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out" (Deuteronomy 27:26). In all, Zebulun helped deliver twelve admonishments of this sort (Deuteronomy 27:15-26).

Upon entering the Promised Land, Zebulun failed to drive out the Canaanites living in Kitron and Nahalol, although Zebulun did subject them to forced labor (Judges 1:30). This was incomplete obedience to God's clear command to drive out all the inhabitants of the land (Numbers 33:52). Not responding fully to God's Word, as Zebulun demonstrated, is a trait to which we all can relate. How often do we choose to follow our own paths for various reasons, many of which may not be in concert with God's wishes?

Later, Zebulun returned to God and followed His commands. They participated in the battles led by Deborah and Barak, and they fought valiantly (Judges 4:6; 5:18). The judge Elon was a Zebulunite (Judges 12:11). During the kingdom years, Zebulun joined David at Hebron to transfer Saul's kingdom to David (1 Chronicles 12:23, 33, 40). This, too, provides insight into our behavior. While at times we turn away from God, His love for us, and ours for Him, draws us back into communion with Him and compliance with His will.

Zebulun's territory was located in what later became known as Galilee, in Northern Israel. Moses' blessing on the tribe was that they would prosper in their overseas dealings with Gentile nations (Deuteronomy 33:18-19). Isaiah prophesied, "In the past [God] humbled the land of Zebulun . . . but in the future he will honor Galilee" (Isaiah 9:1). Isaiah's prediction is Messianic: Galilee (including Zebulun) would be honored as the first to hear Christ's preaching, and this would more than compensate for their humiliation at the hands of the Assyrians centuries before.

Numerous verses in the Bible, especially in the Psalms, extol God for His unfailing patience, love, and faithfulness. Indirectly, Zebulun's history reminds us that God is always present when we return to Him. No matter how battered or bruised we may be or how ashamed we may feel about past transgressions, God can still use us.