

What can we learn from the tribe of Benjamin?

In Genesis 49 the patriarch Jacob, sensing his impending death, gathers his sons to his bedside to bless them. Each son became the progenitor of one of the twelve tribes of Israel. Benjamin, as the youngest, receives his father's blessing last: "Benjamin is a ravenous wolf; in the morning he shall devour the prey, and at night he shall divide the spoil" (Genesis 49:27). The warlike nature of the small tribe of Benjamin became well known, as exhibited in their swordsmen (Judges 20:15-16; 1 Chronicles 8:40, 12:2; 2 Chronicles 14:8, 17:17) and in their ungodly defense of their extreme wickedness in Gibeah (Judges 19-20).

Benjamin's blessing has three parts. Compared to a wolf, his blessing has two time frames, morning and evening; it has two actions, devouring and dividing; and two outcomes, prey and spoil. This sets up a type of "before and after" experience for Benjamin and his offspring.

Scripture shows that at least four great people came from Benjamin's tribe, even though it was the smallest of the twelve tribes (1 Samuel 9:21). First, Ehud, a great warrior who delivered Israel from Moab (Judges 3:12-30). Next, Saul becomes the first king of Israel (1 Samuel 9:15-27). In later Jewish history, many Jews lived in Persia, God used Mordecai and Esther, from the tribe of Benjamin, to deliver the Jews from death (Esther 2:5-7). Finally, in the New Testament the apostle Paul affirms he, too, came from Benjamin. "I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin" (Romans 11:1). Paul repeats this affirmation in Philippians 3:4-5.

Yet Benjamin's tribe had its dark side. Their warlike nature came out not only in

defense of their country but also in depravity within their country. In Judges 19–21 Benjamin takes up an offence against the other eleven tribes of Israel, and civil war ensues. This period had the reputation of everyone doing what was right in his own eyes (Judges 21:25). What led to the civil war was the horrific abuse and death of an unnamed Levite's concubine (Judges 19:10–28). The eleven tribes turned against the tribe of Benjamin and nearly annihilated them because of their refusal to give up the perpetrators (Judges 20:1–21:25). Eventually, the tribes restored Benjamin's tribe, greatly diminished due to the war, and the country reunited.

In Jewish culture the day begins at evening. Here begins the “after” for Benjamin. Benjamin’s prophecy ends in the evening, the beginning of a new day, in which he will “divide the spoil.” This has two aspects. First, through the apostle Paul, who testifies, “This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief” (1 Timothy 1:15). In the apostle Paul Benjamin’s tribe had a citizen who served God mightily, as he says of himself, “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7).

But Benjamin’s “dividing of the spoil” has another fulfillment yet future. In Revelation 7:8, during the tribulation period, 12,000 men from Benjamin, along with 12,000 from each of the other tribes of Israel, will reach the world’s population with the gospel. The result will be a multitude of the saved “that no man could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands” (Revelation 7:9). The second dividing of the spoil for Benjamin comes in the millennial kingdom when they will have a place in the land of Israel, along with a gate that has their name on it in the city of Jerusalem

(Ezekiel 48:32). They, along with the other tribes of Israel, will find the ultimate dividing of the spoils in the New Jerusalem as each gate has a name of one of the tribes, Benjamin included (Revelation 21:12-13). What a glorious finish! What grace is this!

Benjamin has great truths to teach. First, God doesn't see as men see, for God looks on the heart. God saw a warrior inside of Benjamin. Outwardly, others saw him as the youngest son and his tribe as the smallest tribe. But God saw more, a man who would both devour and divide. The second lesson for us lies in the two Sauls who came from the tribe of Benjamin. King Saul, the epitome of the sin nature and its war against God, and Saul/Paul whose nature was changed by God from a murderous Pharisee to the apostle of grace. Paul is the example of what God does for those who come to Christ in faith.