

What can we learn from the tribe of Naphtali?

Israel's tribes were named for Jacob's children. Naphtali, being the sixth son of Jacob, is one of Israel's twelve tribes. In the time of Moses, Naphtali was divided into four clans: the Jahzeelites, the Gunites, the Jezerites, and the Shillemites, named after Naphtali's sons (Numbers 26:48-49). Naphtali was borne by Rachel's maid servant, Bilhah. He was her second and last child with Jacob. When Naphtali was born, Rachel said, "I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won" (Genesis 30:8). Naphtali means "my struggle."

Naphtali 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 moves his neighbor's boundary stone" (Deuteronomy 27:17). Another states, "Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the alien or fatherless or the widow" (Deuteronomy 27:19). Still another: "Cursed is the man who kills his neighbor secretly" (Deuteronomy 27:24). In all, Naphtali helped deliver twelve such admonishments (Deuteronomy 27:15-26).

When Jacob blessed his twelve sons, he said, "Naphtali is a doe set free that bears beautiful fawns" (Genesis 49:21). The image presented is of one who springs forth with great speed and provides good news. Later, Moses blessed the tribe: "Naphtali is abounding with the favor of the Lord and is full of his blessing; he will inherit southward to the lake" (Deuteronomy 33:23). In Joshua 19:32-39, we learn that Naphtali's land was in northern Israel, bordering Asher's territory, and the Sea of Kinnereth (or Galilee) touched the southern portion of its territory.

Despite all their blessings, the tribe of Naphtali failed to obey God's command to drive out all the Canaanites living in their territory. Therefore, "the Naphtalites too lived among the Canaanite inhabitants of the land, and those living in Beth Shemesh or Beth Anath became forced labor for them" (Judges 1:33).

In Judges 4:6-9, we learn that Barak was a Naphtalite. He had been chosen by God to lead a military force of 10,000 of his tribe against their Canaanite oppressors. However, when the time came for action, Barak responded in fear and cowardice, agreeing to fight against King Jabin's army only if Deborah the judge would accompany him. Deborah consents, but she prophesies that the honor for the victory would go to a woman and not to Barak. The prophecy was fulfilled in Judges 4:17-22.

"The Song of Deborah and Barak" (Judges 5) relates that the tribe of Naphtali risked their lives "on the heights of the field" (verse 18) and so was honored in the victory over the Canaanites.

Later, Naphtali responded to Gideon's call to repel the Midianites, Amalekites, and others from the East from their encampment in the Jezreel Valley (Judges 6:35). Along with the tribes of Asher and Manasseh, Naphtali followed Gideon into battle and chased the Midianites to Zererah and Abel Meholah (Judges 7:23).

When the time came for David to assume the throne, the tribe of Naphtali provided "1,000 officers, together with 37,000 men carrying shields and spears," along with a caravan of food, to help him (1 Chronicles 12:34, 40). When King Solomon was building the temple, he hired Huram, a man whose mother was a Naphtalite, to do the bronze work (1 Kings 7:13-47).

In the time of Christ, the land of Naphtali was part of the area of Galilee, and it was viewed by the Jews in Judea as a place of dishonor, full of Gentile pagans (see John 1:46; 7:52). But Isaiah had prophesied that Naphtali would be honored: "In the past he humbled . . . the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan" (Isaiah 9:1). This honor came with the coming of Jesus Christ. All Jesus' disciples but Judas, who betrayed Him, hailed from Galilee, and much of Jesus' ministry took place there. Thus, "on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned" (Isaiah 9:2).

The tribe of Naphtali had its ups and downs. Its history includes incomplete obedience and shades of cowardice, but it also includes bravery under Gideon and a godly support of King David. Probably the greatest lesson we can take from Naphtali is that God exalts the humble. Naphtali (as part of Galilee) was despised, and Nazareth was the lowest of the low. Yet Nazareth was Jesus' hometown, and Galilee was exactly where Jesus chose to begin His ministry. For our sakes, He became "despised and rejected by men" (Isaiah 53:3). The King of kings had the most unpretentious start. He is truly "humble in heart" (Matthew 11:29).