

Who was Zebulun in the Bible?

Zebulun was the sixth son of Jacob by his wife Leah and the tenth of all Jacob's sons. Zebulun's birth came during the ongoing rivalry between sisters Rachel and Leah for their husband's attention. So upon Zebulun's birth, Leah said, "God has endowed me with a good gift; now my husband will dwell with me, because I have borne him six sons" (Genesis 30:20, NASB). Leah uses a play on words here: "God has endowed (zabad) me with a good gift (zebed), and now my husband will dwell (zabal) with me." The name Zebulun means "dwell" (also translated "honor") and sounds much like the Hebrew words for "gift" and "endowed."

The Bible does not provide many details concerning Zebulun's life. We know that Zebulun was among the older brothers who conspired to kill their younger brother, Joseph, because of jealousy (Genesis 37:4). In the end, they did not kill him but sold him to some traders headed to Egypt (Genesis 37:26). Zebulun and his brothers had evil motives, but God used their wicked plan to save the entire nation of Israel (Genesis 50:20). Although Zebulun is not mentioned by name in this account, he had an equal part in the deception and was also present decades later when they were reunited with the brother they thought dead.

Jacob pronounced a blessing on each of his twelve sons before he died. To Zebulun he said, "Zebulun will live by the seashore and become a haven for ships; his border will extend toward Sidon" (Genesis 49:13). Zebulun had three sons: Sered, Elon, and Jahleel (Genesis 46:14). Their descendants became the tribe of Zebulun. Centuries later, the tribe of Zebulun was given an allotment within the Promised Land. Their eastern border was the Sea of Galilee, and their western border eventually stretched to the Mediterranean (Joshua 19:10-16).

Before he died, Moses also blessed the tribe of Zebulun, saying, “Rejoice, Zebulun, in your going out” (Deuteronomy 33:18). Once settled in their land, the tribe of Zebulun became traders and sailors and profited much by the seagoing trade.

During the wandering in the wilderness, the tribe of Zebulun was led by Eliab son of Elon, and they numbered 57,400 (Numbers 2:7). During the time of the judges, the prophetess Deborah advised the commander of the army to take men from Naphtali and Zebulun to go against the enemy (Judges 4:4-7). They were considered brave risk-takers (Judges 5:18).

Although Zebulun’s name is rarely mentioned in Scripture, he was part of the foundation God built for a nation that would one day produce His Son, Jesus Christ. The twelve tribes of Israel, founded in Genesis, are still prominent in the book of Revelation. In Revelation 21:12, John describes the New Jerusalem, and Zebulun is represented: “It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel.”

Zebulun’s name is inscribed in heaven, not because of the good he did or the life he lived. He is important in heaven because God chose him to be part of His plan to redeem mankind. We can learn from Zebulun’s life that God’s plans far supersede our ideas of why we are here. Despite our mistakes and rebellion, God’s plans go forward (Isaiah 46:9-11). He is working out His will for His creation, and we are each a part of that grand scheme.