

What can we learn from the tribe of Joseph?

Technically, there is no tribe of Joseph. Instead, Joseph received a “double blessing,” and his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, each became his own tribe (Genesis 48; Joshua 14:4; Ezekiel 47:13). The Bible does, on occasion, refer to a “tribe of Joseph” (Numbers 13:11; 36:5; Revelation 7:8). However, in the contexts, the “tribe of Joseph” seems to be referring to either the tribe of Ephraim or Manasseh, or to the “house of Joseph,” which included Ephraim and Manasseh. When Jacob directed a prophecy toward each of his sons, he gave Joseph one of the longest: “Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine near a spring, whose branches climb over a wall. With bitterness archers attacked him; they shot at him with hostility. But his bow remained steady, his strong arms stayed limber, because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob, because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, because of your father’s God, who helps you, because of the Almighty, who blesses you with blessings of the heavens above, blessings of the deep that lies below, blessings of the breast and womb. Your father’s blessings are greater than the blessings of the ancient mountains, than the bounty of the age-old hills. Let all these rest on the head of Joseph, on the brow of the prince among his brothers” (Genesis 49:22-26). As with all Jacob’s prophecies to his sons, the one to the tribe/house of Joseph contains lessons for all of us.

Joseph, the “prince among his brothers” was the second to the youngest of the twelve. Joseph’s life, the history of his conflict with his brothers, his captivity, and the subsequent victory God brought about through his trials are well documented in Genesis, chapters 37-51. Jacob begins his prophecy by comparing Joseph to a fruitful vine, or young tree. God had made him fruitful in the land of his affliction (Genesis 41:52). Joseph’s two sons were as branches of a vine running over the wall. Then Jacob proceeds to remind the other brothers of their ill treatment of Joseph. They are among the

“archers” who attacked Joseph with bitterness and hostility, along with Potiphar’s wife, whose false accusations sent him to prison for two years (Genesis 39; 41:1).

But through all these troubles, Joseph’s strength is compared to a bow that remained steady. That is, his faith did not fail, but he stood his ground and emerged a conqueror. His arms remained strong and limber, a metaphor for his wisdom, courage, and patience. In short, Joseph maintained both his integrity and his comfort through all his trials, bearing all his burdens with an invincible resolution, and did not sink under the weight of them. The source of this strength was the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob, who was always present to strengthen him. Joseph reminds us that all our strength for resisting temptations and bearing up under afflictions comes from God. His grace is sufficient, and His strength is perfected in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).

From his afflictions, and by the power of God, Joseph fed and supported God’s people—the nation of Israel as it existed at that time in Jacob and his family—during the famine that devastated the land. Joseph could be seen as an illustration of Christ, who was also shot at and hated, but who bore up under His sufferings (Isaiah 50:7-9) and became the Good Shepherd and the Rock and Redeemer of His people.

Joseph’s sufferings also symbolize and foreshadow the church in general, as well as individual believers. The true church of Christ has always been persecuted by Satan, beginning with the extensive persecution of the first century under the Romans. But even in times of relative peace for the church, the enemy still shoots his arrows against the saints, but God protects and strengthens us and will bring us safely home by His power.

Jacob ends the prophecy for the tribe of Joseph with a series of blessings. He

prophecies blessings of the heavens above, the deep below, and the breast and womb, all referring to the temporal blessings of fruitfulness and bounty that was the future for the tribe of Joseph. Years later, Moses gave these same promises of bountiful blessings to the tribe of Joseph (Deuteronomy 33:13-16), reiterating that Joseph was a “prince among his brothers.” Jewish history tells us that the territory of the tribe of Joseph was one of the most valuable parts of the country, and the house of Joseph became the most dominant group in the kingdom of Israel. Joseph reminds us that all blessings, both temporal and spiritual, come from God. “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows” (James 1:17). May we all be as steadfast and strong as Joseph, bearing up under affliction and reaping the reward of God’s eternal blessings.