

What can we learn from the tribe of Manasseh?

Israel's twelve tribes were named for Jacob's children or, in the case of Manasseh (and Ephraim), his grandchildren. After Jacob wrestled with Him all night, God renamed Jacob "Israel," which means "you have struggled with God and men and have overcome" (Genesis 32:22-30). The name Israel represents not only the modern-day country but also, originally, Jacob's offspring to whom God promised a great nation whose "descendants will be like dust of the earth . . . spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south" (Genesis 28:14).

Jacob's grandson, for whom the tribe was named, was born in Egypt to Joseph and his wife, Asenath, daughter of the priest Potiphera. Joseph named his firstborn "Manasseh" because God had made him "forget all my trouble and all my father's household" (Genesis 41:51).

This tribe provides us with many lessons; chief among them are messages about free will, obedience, faith, and the nature of God.

Early on, we learn that Manasseh is frequently referred to as the "half-tribe" of Manasseh. This designation highlights the choice made by some of the tribe to reside east of the River Jordan (Numbers 32:33; Joshua 13: 29-31). They believed the Transjordan was the more suitable land to raise their flocks. The rest of the tribe settled west of the Jordan, in Canaan, following Joshua's command to enter and possess the Promised Land. As is evident throughout Scripture, God endows His children with the freedom to choose.

Exercising free will can lead to undesirable or even disastrous results, especially if

we disobey God or make selfish choices. Manasseh learned this lesson—painfully—when they failed to obey God's command to destroy the Canaanites. Part of this failure was due to a lack of faith that God would give them strength to overcome a seemingly unconquerable foe. Manasseh illustrates other human failings as well, such as greed and covetousness. The (half) tribe of Manasseh desired more land because they were “a numerous people.” They may have had the numbers, but they were unwilling to follow Joshua's exhortation to clear “the land of the Perizzites and Rephaites” (Joshua 17:12-18).

On the other hand, the tribe of Manasseh at times exhibits faithfulness to God. Gideon, who would later become one of Israel's best judges, questioned God when called to “save Israel out of Midian's hand.” One of Gideon's objections was that his “clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family” (Judges 6:15). Gideon required proof from God—twice—before he acted (Judges 6:36-40). Once convinced of God's will, Gideon moved forward with 32,000 troops to conquer the Midianites. But then God told Gideon that he had too many troops for the job, and God reduced his corps to a mere 300 men. Following God's lead, this paltry force routed the enemy. The battle proved God was with Gideon and the half-tribe of Manasseh.

Other interesting lessons emerge. One is that God is just. Zelophehad, great-great-grandson of Manasseh, had no sons and died in the desert before entering the Promised Land. His daughters petitioned Moses, asking that the practice of male inheritance be changed so they could receive their deceased father's property. After consulting with the Lord, Moses agreed and developed rules designed to keep property within a family (Numbers 27:1-11).