

What can we learn from the tribe of Ephraim?

Israel's twelve tribes were named for Jacob's children or, in the case of Ephraim (and Manasseh), his grandchildren. Ephraim was born in Egypt to Joseph's wife, Asenath. Joseph named his second-born son "Ephraim" because "God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering" (Genesis 41:52). When Jacob gave his blessing to his grandsons Ephraim and Manasseh, he chose to bless the younger Ephraim first, despite Joseph's protests. In doing so, Jacob noted that Ephraim would be greater than Manasseh (Genesis 48:5-21).

Throughout the Old Testament, the name Ephraim often refers to the ten tribes comprising Israel's Northern Kingdom, not just the single tribe named after Joseph's son (Ezekiel 37:16; Hosea 5:3). The Northern Kingdom, also referred to as "Israel," was taken into captivity by the Assyrians in 722 BC (Jeremiah 7). The Southern Kingdom, also known as Judah, was conquered by the Babylonians nearly 140 years later (586 BC).

We learn from the tribe of Ephraim (and the other tribes) about our human essence, who we are as people. The history of the early Israelites reflects our universally flawed and sinful nature. As the book of Romans says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

There are several specific events regarding the tribe of Ephraim that we can learn from. While God gifted the tribe as warriors and valiant fighters (1 Chronicles 12:30), Ephraim failed to follow God's order to remove the Canaanites from the Promised Land (Exodus 23:23-25; Judges 1:29; Joshua 16:10).

During the time of the judges, the Ephraimites became angry with Gideon because he had not initially called for their help in battling the Midianites (Judges 8:1). Gideon

wisely displayed godly kindness and extolled the tribe's commitment and willingness to serve the Lord, thus diffusing what could have become an ugly situation (Judges 8:2-3).

However, ugliness did arise later, and again it can be linked to Ephraim's pride, jealousy, and self-centeredness. When Jephthah chose to fight (and defeat) the Ammonites without the aid of the proud Ephraim warriors, a civil war erupted, and 42,000 warriors from Ephraim were killed. As Jesus said in His Sermon on the Mount, we are to seek first the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33). Do not seek glory for yourself; all honor and glory always belong to God, not to man.

Often, God chooses to use us in a manner less glamorous or spectacular than we would like. Do we pout? Do we yearn for glory? Do we control our pride and jealousy and accept God's will? Many of us, like the Ephraimites, have difficulty learning those lessons well. God says that we should accept what happens to us as His will, regardless of how good or bad those circumstances seem to us (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

Other lessons of Ephraim complete the picture of the wide range of human behavior. We see Ephraim turning away from God and doing wicked things (Isaiah 28:1-3), yet we also find the tribe recognizing the need to repent and obey by following the prophet Oded's instructions (2 Chronicles 28:12).

The biggest lesson from the history of Ephraim is that God loves us as the Perfect Father despite our failings. He is patient and merciful beyond our understanding. He hears our cries of anguish, disciplines and guides us, knows our moments of repentance, and yearns for us to be in perfect communion with Him (Jeremiah 30:22; 31:18-20).