

We have considered the conflict promised Dan and Gad in Genesis 49:16-19 and studied the most famous hero of those strife-ridden tribes: Samson, the hero of faith. Such conflict as Samson faced prompts Jacob to cry out for help in Genesis 49:18, "I look for your deliverance, O Lord." Now this week, we are reminded through the great prosperity of Asher and Naphtali that there are also days of abundance promised God's people. May the Lord encourage us, that "what men meant for evil, God meant for good" (Ge 50:20). We have a God who consistently brings good even out of the most evil of days. Praise be to His Name!

Monday/Tuesday: Read Ge. 49:20-21, Deut. 33:23-24 and Lam. 2:19

Happiness out of Sadness

Asher's name means "happy" or "blessed," and its inheritance designates it as a tribe which enjoyed bliss and happiness under God's hand. The food on its table (Gen. 49:20), is fit for a king! Moses confirms the happy situation of this tribe when he prays in Deuteronomy 33:24 that they would "bathe their feet in oil." Even the favor of his brothers is bestowed on this tribe by Moses! In like manner, Moses echoes Jacob's blessing on Naphtali (Deuteronomy 33:23), predicting that he will "abound in the favor of the Lord" and be "full of blessing." What are we to learn from these almost unbounded blessings on these two sons of Jacob's "slave wives"?

Remember, the slave-girl Zilpah bore Asher when Leah gave her to Jacob to compete against Rachel's slave-girl, who had just finished bearing Dan and Naphtali. For her part, Rachel provides proof of the envious rivalry which clouded the birth of these slave-sons, naming her second son (via her slave Bilhah), "Naphtali," meaning "my wrestling" or "my struggle." Clearly there was much sin involved in both the birth of "the wrestler" Naphtali as well as Asher, who made Leah "happy" because his birth "one-upped" her standing versus her sister Rachel. Nevertheless, God in grace determines to abundantly bless these two sons of slaves. As Bill Harrell writes on this passage, "Such is the power of the Lord's gracious love and just accomplishment of redemption that no one is too tainted by original or actual sin to be beyond the reach of salvation and adoption into the family of God." Amen!

Meditate and Pray: Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved wretches like Naphtali and Asher! Such sovereign grace, by which God humbles kings while lifting up slaves to sit at tables fit for kings, changes the dark despair of this world into hope for unexpected, unconditional salvation. In some circles, such free electing grace is viewed as somehow *narrowing* the opportunity of salvation. It is argued that we should be encouraging men, *in their own strength*, to choose God. This false argument goes something like this, "Don't we discourage the lost from choosing God when we tell them that they are slaves to sin, with wills in bondage and unable to save themselves? Ought we not to appeal to man's self-interest in making the "choice" for God instead of telling them that they are born like Asher and Naphtali into households full of envy and wickedness, dead in sin?" But in point of fact, our emphasis on unconditional grace shown to enslaved sinners like Asher and Naphtali not only makes salvation *more possible*, but even more *probable!* This Hall of Wonders in the Bible, where God sovereignly saves slaves and unwanted children born in sin, actually *increases our confidence* in God's ability to save in our day! *If* God could take offspring like Asher and Naphtali, born to satisfy the jealousy and ambition of Leah and Rachel, and born to the lowliest class of women, who were not really Jacob's wives at all, then shall *we* throw up our hands in despair at the sins surrounding our next generation in the church? No! Let us with confidence "lift up our hands in prayer" as Lamentations 2:19 urges us to do: all the more confident because those for whom we pray are in fact "fainting from hunger at the head of every street" and born, like Asher and Naphtali, into a world of trouble and woe. That's the kind of needy, desperate candidate we seek for the free grace of our Saving God!

Wednesday/Thursday: Read Deuteronomy 33:23 and Judges 4:1-7**Days of Preparation**

Naphtali is an obscure tribe to many of us, whose territory became known as “Galilee of the Gentiles” (Isaiah 9:1), hidden away in the countryside around the Sea of Galilee and often overrun by the enemies of God’s people. Yet, God’s blessings to this tribe were real and came to living fulfillment in real, living heroes of the faith. Just as Dan had Samson as its hero, the tribe of Naphtali had Barak, whose name means “Lightning.” In Judges 4:6, he was called by God, through the prophetess Deborah, to lead God’s people against the most oppressive enemy to date in the history of Israel: Jabin, the king of Hazor, and his terrifying general Sisera, whose 900 chariots “cruelly oppressed” God’s people for twenty years. Does such a call sound easy for this tribe, who is likened to a “doe” in Gen. 49:21, a picture of gentleness and tranquility under what Moses called “the full blessing” of the Lord (Deut. 33:23)? Do you think it would be easy for Barak himself to face such a foe?

As we will see, Barak initially balks at such a daunting task against such a terrible foe. No matter how unprepared Barak feels himself to be, God gives him strength, and his exploits form part of the great song of victory (Judges 5:12): “*Arise, O Barak! Take captive your captives, O son of Abinoam!*” Perhaps the prosperity of this tribe under God’s hand helped prepare Barak for the days of victory which God promised to give him. Interestingly, four times Barak’s father’s name is used in the narrative about Barak. “Son of Abinoam” occurs in Judges 4:6; 4:12; 5:1 and 5:12. What does his father’s name mean? “*My father is delightful!*” Ah, Barak, do you see how God used all those younger days of delight and blessing upon your tribe Naphtali, in accordance with Jacob’s and Moses’ blessings, to make you strong in the day of adversity?

Meditate and Pray: Lord, please use the days of happiness which we have – especially when we are young, strong and optimistic about the future – to make us strong in character and prepared for the trials which will come. Amen.

May hymn # 580 in our hymnal encourage us to use days of prosperity in this preparatory way:

*Lead on, O King eternal,
The day of march has come;
Henceforth in fields of conquest
Thy tents shall be our home.
Through days of preparation
Thy grace has made us strong;
And now, O King eternal,
We lift our battle song.*

*Lead on, O King eternal,
We follow, not with fears,
For gladness breaks like morning
Where'er Thy face appears.
Thy cross is lifted over us,
We journey in its light;
The crown awaits the conquest;
Lead on, O God of might.*

Fri/Sat/Sun: Read Ge 49:20-21, Jdg 4:6-16, 5:17-18 and Gal 6:2**Suffering, Yet with Joy**

Initially afraid to obey God's call to lead Israel against Sisera's army, Barak's faith rallies. Emboldened by Deborah's promise to go with him, Barak advances on the battlefield to rout the enemy. Thus God shows again His ability to change men's hearts, moving them to obey no matter what the cost. As Deborah declares in her song (Judges 5:18), Naphtali and their tribe leader Barak, along with others among God's people, “risked their very lives.” No matter how comfortable a background we may have enjoyed growing up, courage from God crosses all economic backgrounds or family situations. Sadly, there is always the danger that our own comfort

and security may tempt us to hold back when God's people need our help and succor. In the same breath as praising Barak's tribe Naphtali, she rebukes "happy and blessed Asher" (Judges 5:17) for remaining behind, safe in their coastal shelter, refusing to heed the call to risk everything alongside Deborah and Barak for the deliverance of God's people. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." Those who stayed out of the fray failed to sing with joy along with Deborah and Barak in Judges 5:1.

Meditate and Pray: Thank the Lord for the joy which he gave Barak and the tribe of Naphtali both in days of plenty and abundance and in the costly and dangerous calling to suffering and battle. May the Lord in like manner make our lives *increasingly* full of the joy which comes from laying down our blessings in order to fight with both hands the battles which He calls us to. Let us be confident that our happiness in the Lord will not diminish – though conflict with the world rages ever on!

The Calvary road with Jesus is not a joyless road. It is a painful one, but it is a profoundly happy one. When we choose the fleeting pleasures of comfort and security over the sacrifices of mission and evangelism and ministry and love, we choose against joy. We reject the spring whose waters never fail (Isaiah 58:11). The happiest people in the world are the people who experience the mystery of "Christ in them, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27), satisfying their deep longings and freeing them to extend the afflictions of Christ through their own sufferings to the world.

John Piper, *Desiring God*, pg. 286