

The Scepter Given to Judah

Devotional Reading: Numbers 24:2–9, 15–17

Background Scripture: Genesis 35:22b–26; 38:12–19, 24–26; 49:8–12

Genesis 35:22b–26

22b Now the sons of Jacob were twelve:

23 The sons of Leah; Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, and Simeon, and Levi, and Judah, and Issachar, and Zebulun:

24 The sons of Rachel; Joseph, and Benjamin:

25 And the sons of Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid; Dan, and Naphtali.

26 And the sons of Zilpah, Leah's handmaid; Gad, and Asher: these are the sons of Jacob, which were born to him in Padanaram.

Genesis 38:24–26

24 And it came to pass about three months after, that it was told Judah, saying, Tamar thy daughter in law hath played the harlot; and also, behold, she is with child by whoredom. And Judah said, Bring her forth, and let her be burnt.

25 When she was brought forth, she sent to her father in law, saying, By the man, whose these are, am I with child: and she said, Discern, I pray thee, whose are these, the signet, and bracelets, and staff.

26 And Judah acknowledged them, and said, She hath been more righteous than I; because that I gave her not to Shelah my son. And he knew her again no more.

Genesis 49:10–12

10 The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be.

11 Binding his foal unto the vine, and his ass's colt unto the choice vine; he washed his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes:

12 His eyes shall be red with wine, and his teeth white with milk.

Key Text

The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be. —Genesis 49:10

God's Exceptional Choice

Unit 1: God Call's Abraham's Family

Lessons 1–4

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the structure of Jacob's family.
2. Explain the connections among the three sections of the lesson text.
3. State a way to overcome a family dysfunction for increased service to the Lord.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. The Royal House
- B. Lesson Context

I. Jacob's Family (Genesis 35:22b–26)

- A. Twelve Sons (vv. 22b)
- B. Four Mothers (vv. 23–26a)
- C. One Father (v. 26b)

Judging Ancestors

II. Judah's Humbling (Genesis 38:24–26)

- A. Tamar's Situation (v. 24)
- B. Tamar's Revelation (v. 25)
- C. Tamar's Righteousness (v. 26)

III. Judah's Ruler (Genesis 49:10–12)

- A. The King's Reign (v. 10)
- B. The King's Abundance (vv. 11–12)

A Vision Fulfilled

Conclusion

- A. Wrecks into Royals
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Bilhah *Bill*-ha.

Ephraim *Ee*-fray-im.

Ephrath *Ef*-rath.

Gad *Gad* (*a* as in *bad*).

Issachar *Izz*-uh-kar.

Manasseh *Muh*-*nass*-uh.

Naphtali *Naf*-tuh-lye.

Shiloh *Shy*-low.

Tamar *Tay*-mer.

Zebulun *Zeb*-you-lun.

Zilpah *Zil*-pa.

Introduction

A. The Royal House

Eight European monarchs trace their lineage back to one man: George II (1683–1760), king of Great Britain and Ireland. Over the course of 300 years, his descendants intermarried with other European royals, and a complicated web of family relations resulted. Now the monarchs of eight European countries—the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Monaco, and Luxembourg—claim a common ancestor.

In the modern era, a monarch’s power is largely ceremonial. However, this week’s lesson introduces a common ancestor to a royal genealogy, who still reigns in power and has forever changed the course of history.

B. Lesson Context

At the beginning of the patriarchal narratives in Genesis, God promised to make Abraham “a father of many nations” (Genesis 17:5). From these descendants God declared that “kings shall come” (17:6; see 17:16, 20).

However, situations regarding offspring (see Genesis 16:1; 18:13; 30:1) and family conflict (see 16:4–5; 25:19–34; 27:1–41) arose. These situations might have led Abraham’s family to doubt God’s promises. Yet God remained faithful, even repeating His promises (see 35:11).

Abraham’s grandson Jacob fathered 12 sons; the descendants of these sons became the tribes of Israel. Scripture provides two primary methods of counting the tribes. The first method lists tribes with an inheritance of land (see Numbers 1:5–15; 2:3–32; Joshua 13–19). Under this method, Joseph’s sons (Manasseh and Ephraim) were counted as tribes. The descendants of Levi were not included in this numbering of the 12 tribes since they were not to receive an inheritance of land (13:33).

The second method lists tribes by the name of each tribe’s patriarch (Genesis 46:8–25; 49:3–27; Deuteronomy 27:12–14; 1 Chronicles 2:2). Under this method, the descendants of Manasseh and Ephraim were instead listed as the tribe of Joseph.

Through Jacob’s family, God’s promise of royalty would come. He would choose neither Jacob’s oldest son (Reuben) nor his favorite son (Benjamin) to be the ancestor of the royal line. Rather, out of Judah would come an eternal kingdom.

I. Jacob's Family

(Genesis 35:22b–26)

A. Twelve Sons (vv. 22b)

22b. Now the sons of Jacob were twelve.

God had promised *Jacob* (also known as Israel; lesson 3) that his descendants would be like “the dust of the earth” (Genesis 28:14) and “the sand of the sea” (32:12). The existence of Jacob’s *twelve* sons (and their offspring) displayed God’s faithfulness to fulfill these promises.

B. Four Mothers (vv. 23–26a)

23. The sons of Leah; Reuben, Jacob’s firstborn, and Simeon, and Levi, and Judah, and Issachar, and Zebulun.

The listing of Jacob’s 12 sons here is not in overall birth order. Instead, the sons are listed from oldest to youngest according to their respective mothers.

Although *Leah* was Jacob’s first wife, he had not intended to marry her (Genesis 29:23–26). Despite her numerous *sons*, Leah never experienced the love from Jacob that her sister received (29:30).

The scandalous behavior of *Reuben* (Genesis 35:22) caused him to lose the *firstborn* privilege (49:3–4). His descendants would never rise to the same level of importance as would the descendants of his brothers.

Simeon and *Levi* fell out of their father’s favor because of their violence (Genesis 49:5). Upon hearing of profane treatment toward their sister, the brothers had responded with violence (34:25). Jacob was concerned that their actions would cause him to experience poor treatment by the surrounding nations (34:30).

Judah would rise to a position of leadership among his brothers (Genesis 37:25–28; 44:14–18; 46:28). While Judah acted unrighteously at times (see Genesis 38), he was uniquely blessed (49:8–12).

Issachar was conceived during a unique situation involving the use of mandrakes (see Genesis 30:15–18), a plant with seemingly aphrodisiac properties.

Warriors of the tribe of *Zebulun* fought valiantly in the days of the judges (see Judges 4:6; 6:35).

24. The sons of Rachel; Joseph, and Benjamin.

Jacob’s love for *Rachel* was unparalleled (Genesis 29:30). God miraculously worked to allow her to conceive *Joseph* (30:22–24).

The favor that Joseph experienced from his father led his brothers to hate him (Genesis 37:3–4). They would sell him for 20 pieces of silver (37:28). Due to the wisdom God granted him, Joseph rose to a position of leadership in Egypt (41:39–41). In this situation, he was prepared to deal with a famine—for the good of the whole known world, including his family (42:1–2).

Jacob blessed Joseph’s sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, as his own (Genesis 48:5). The descendants of these sons would later be counted as tribes of Israel (Numbers 1:32–35, see Lesson Context).

As the youngest son of Rachel, *Benjamin* received extra concern from his father (see Genesis 42:4). Though Benjamin’s descendants were relatively few in number (see Numbers 1:36), Israel’s first king came from them (1 Samuel 9:21).

25. And the sons of Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid; Dan, and Naphtali.

When Rachel was unable to conceive, she gave *Bilhah* to Jacob to bear him children (Genesis 30:4). Rachel named Bilhah's first child *Dan* (30:6). His descendants, though many in number (see Numbers 1:39; 2:26), were not powerful militarily (see Joshua 19:47; Judges 1:34–35).

Descendants of *Naphtali* were lauded for their valor (Judges 5:18). They joined with descendants of Asher and Manasseh to drive the Midianites from the land (7:23–25).

26a. And the sons of Zilpah, Leah's handmaid; Gad, and Asher.

When Leah was unable to conceive, she allowed Jacob to continue fathering children, through *Zilpah* (Genesis 30:9).

The descendants of *Gad* settled east of the Jordan River (Numbers 32:1–33; Joshua 13:8). This land was well suited for raising livestock.

Jacob proclaimed the richness of the food produced by *Asher* (Genesis 49:20). Perhaps this declaration foreshadowed the tribe's settlement of the fertile regions of Canaan (Joshua 19:24–31).

What Do You Think?

How have previous generations of believers informed and influenced your spiritual growth?

Digging Deeper

What steps will you take to influence future generations of believers so that they might spiritually grow and mature?

C. One Father (v. 26b)

26b. These are the sons of Jacob, which were born to him in Padanaram.

Not all *sons of Jacob* were *born* in *Padanaram*; Benjamin was born in Ephrath, which is Bethlehem (Genesis 35:16–19). Perhaps the inclusion of *Padanaram* referred to the location where Benjamin was conceived (compare 35:9).

Judging Ancestors

Through DNA testing and online records, exploring one's ancestry has become quite accessible. One family member traced our family's ancestry back to slave owners in the American South. Despite my disgust, I am unable to change who my ancestors are.

Scripture's genealogies always list people who erred—look at Jacob's family! We would not consider many of their actions to be admirable. God still used them for His plan. Their lives are evidence of God's faithfulness. Will future generations see that *you* were following God?

—C. R. B.

II. Judah's Humbling (Genesis 38:24–26)

The oldest of Judah's sons, Er, married Tamar. However, Er acted wickedly and was struck dead (Genesis 38:6–7). Judah directed his second son to father children with Tamar (38:8). But that son refused and was also killed (38:10).

With two sons dead, Judah sent Tamar to live with her father while waiting for Judah's third son to reach the age of marriage. This placed the marginalized widow in a grievous situation. She had no husband or son to care for her. Years passed, but Judah did not allow his daughter-in-law to marry his third son (Genesis 38:14b).

Tamar took matters into her own hands: she would have a child with her father-in-law. Tamar disguised herself and went to a location where Judah would see her. Judah failed to recognize her and considered her to be a prostitute (Genesis 38:13–16). Before they had intercourse, she requested from him a pledge to confirm his promised payment (38:17a). After he provided these things, Tamar became pregnant by him (38:17b–18).

A. Tamar’s Situation (v. 24)

24a. And it came to pass about three months after, that it was told Judah, saying, Tamar thy daughter in law hath played the harlot; and also, behold, she is with child by whoredom.

Judah had sent a friend to take back his pledge (see above), but the woman could not be found (Genesis 38:22). *Three months* would *pass* before Judah would discover her identity.

Though *Tamar* lived in her father’s household, *Judah* still claimed her as a part of his family. As long as his third son was alive, Judah would take an interest in her well-being, even if from a distance. Since she was widowed and lived in her father’s house, there was no other way she could be *with child* except through immorality.

24b. And Judah said, Bring her forth, and let her be burnt.

Judah’s judgment was striking and harsh. The Law of Moses did not exist during the time of Judah. It would later prescribe being *burnt* as a form of punishment (see Leviticus 20:14; 21:9).

Judah’s declaration highlighted the horrific irony of the situation. He demanded capital punishment for his daughter-in-law because of her presumed prostitution. However, he was the one who had impregnated Tamar. Further, Judah might have considered Tamar’s act to be one of unfaithfulness to his son Shelah, who was still next in line to be given as her husband (Genesis 38:11).

What Do You Think?

How can people respond fairly and in good time to an unjust situation?

Digging Deeper

How would your response differ if you or someone you loved was experiencing the unjust situation?

B. Tamar’s Revelation (v. 25)

25. When she was brought forth, she sent to her father in law, saying, By the man, whose these are, am I with child: and she said, Discern, I pray thee, whose are these, the signet, and bracelets, and staff.

Tamar did not have to state publicly the extent of Judah’s involvement. Instead, she forced *her father in law* to confront his hypocrisy and consider how he had failed to provide for her (see Genesis 38:14b). Tamar had no need to state the obvious. The personal items left behind would reveal *the man* who caused her to be *with child* (38:18).

A *signet* was an engraved stone that would leave a unique imprint when pressed on a surface (see Exodus 28:11). Signets were worn as rings (see Jeremiah 22:24; Daniel 6:17) or could have been on *bracelets* or chains around Jacob’s neck. A *staff* was a necessary tool when working with herds. A staff’s owner would sometimes be identified by an inscription on it (Numbers 17:2). Tamar’s shrewdness revealed her intentions. She had requested and retained these items not because of their financial value, but because of their identifying capabilities.

C. Tamar’s Righteousness (v. 26)

26. And Judah acknowledged them, and said, She hath been more righteous than I; because that I gave her not to Shelah my son. And he knew her again no more.

The revealing of the personal items would have brought great shame on *Judah*. To his credit, he *acknowledged* the items and their implications regarding his own failures. Whether because of his own shame or to hide his immoral act, Judah turned the discussion to Tamar.

His statement that *she hath been more righteous than I* did not fully justify her. Rather, the statement indicated that Judah's behavior was relatively worse. He had acted unfaithfully and unjustly toward Tamar by preventing his son *Shelah* from marrying her (Genesis 38:1–14). He failed to care for his widowed daughter-in-law. Tamar was in the right to want Judah to honor his obligations. She desired just treatment and forced Judah's hand so that she would receive it. But that doesn't mean that the end justified the means.

That Judah *knew Tamar again no more* indicates that he had no further sexual relations with her. Tamar gave birth to sons (Genesis 38:29–30) who would continue the line of Judah (Ruth 4:12). Both Judah and Tamar were counted in a later genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:3).

What Do You Think?

How should a person respond when confronted with their unrighteous or sinful decisions?

Digging Deeper

How might confrontation differ when with believers (see Matthew 18:15–20)?

III. Judah's Ruler (Genesis 49:10–12)

At the end of his life, Jacob called together his sons and described their future (Genesis 49:1–2). Much of what he stated would unfold when the descendants of his sons settled in the promised land centuries later.

Jacob's lengthy speech regarding Judah spoke to that son's preeminence. Judah's brothers would someday praise him and bow down to him (Genesis 49:8). Judah would become like a lion, bringing fear to those "who shall rouse him up" (49:9). Jacob's words began by addressing Judah directly, but shifted to talk *about* Judah and his descendants.

Visual for Lesson 4. Have this visual displayed prominently as a backdrop as you discuss the Scripture passages in the Conclusion.

A. The King's Reign (v. 10)

10. The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be.

Jacob's dying proclamation demonstrated his trust in the Lord's promise that kings would come from his descendants. A *sceptre* symbolized the presence of royalty and authority (see Esther 4:11; 5:2; Isaiah 14:5; Zechariah 10:11; Hebrews 1:8).

The declaration described Jacob's hope: a ruler would come from his descendants (see also Numbers 24:17, 19). Specifically, this ruler would come *from Judah* (1 Chronicles 5:2; compare Psalm 60:7). The ruler and His kingdom would be permanent and would *not depart*.

This prophesied individual would be in a position of leadership and authority—a *lawgiver* for the people. He would be so because God himself is the ultimate "lawgiver" (Isaiah 33:22; James 4:12).

The underlying Hebrew word translated here as *feet* is used elsewhere to refer indirectly to genitalia (Ezekiel 16:25) or the womb (Deuteronomy 28:57). The royal authority would come from Judah's offspring.

The phrase *until Shiloh come* provides unique translation challenges. A major reason for this comes from the fact that the original Hebrew text was written without vowels. Later scribes added notation in the text to indicate vowel sounds. Different vowel notations can result in different readings of the text.

One possible reading of the text includes a mention of the city Shiloh. The city was the location of the tabernacle (Joshua 18:1; contrast Psalm 78:60) and the place for key administrative decisions (Joshua 18:9–10; 19:51). Shiloh did not maintain importance during the era of the kings when the tribe of Judah would exhibit prominence.

However, a different vowel notation (and word break) leads to a different possible translation. The text could refer to the timing of the arrival of the royalty. The prophet Ezekiel alludes to this translation when proclaiming the rightful heir, following the destruction and exile of the tribe of Judah. The prophet proclaimed that the crown “shall be no more, until he come whose right it is” (Ezekiel 21:27).

Despite the translation difficulties, Jacob's prophetic intention is evident. *The people* of the nations would be impacted by Judah's descendant. This individual will gather people under His rule and require their obedience (compare Psalms 2:8–11; 72:8; Isaiah 11:10–12; Zechariah 9:10).

B. The King's Abundance (vv. 11–12)

11a. Binding his foal unto the vine, and his ass's colt unto the choice vine.

The king's abundance is on display through the imagery of grape *vine* and livestock (compare Deuteronomy 8:7–8). One can imagine that the king's abundance was so much that he would allow his *foal* and *colt* to be tied to the vine. Even if the animals ate some of the fruit of the vine, the loss would not have been an issue because of the king's bountiful and fertile crops.

11b. He washed his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes.

The king's wealth would be on display because *wine* would be as common as laundry water for *his garments*. His winepresses would be full so that *his clothes* would be saturated in freshly pressed grape juice (compare Isaiah 63:2), *the blood of grapes* (compare Deuteronomy 32:14).

12. His eyes shall be red with wine, and his teeth white with milk.

Prosperity is further evident on the king's face. Some writers of Scripture attribute shades of *red*, like those seen in *wine* or rubies, to a person's physical vigor (example: Lamentations 4:7). *White* and straight *teeth* were a desirable physical trait (see Song of Solomon 4:2; 6:6).

What Do You Think?

How has God's abundance been demonstrated in your life?

Digging Deeper

What spiritual blessings have you experienced?

A Vision Fulfilled

Early in my career I felt called to lead a small Bible college. The college had an aging campus, a shrinking donor base, and a dated curriculum model. If the college could not attract new students, it would not survive. I spent five years leading the college, but found little success. I left the position convinced that someone else was needed for the college to flourish.

Years later the college had relocated, enrollment had increased, and a new curriculum had been established. My successor informed me that the plans made during my tenure had become the blueprint for his administration. The vision that God had given my administration had been fulfilled—just later than I had anticipated.

Generations after Jacob, God fulfilled His promise of a king. We may never understand in this life how God accomplishes His plans. We may sometimes doubt that they'll come to fruition when we don't see immediate results. Which of God's promises provide encouragement during moments of doubt?

—C. R. B.

Conclusion

A. Wrecks into Royals

Promises regarding the royal descendant of Judah were fulfilled in two ways. First, they were fulfilled through the Davidic monarchy. David, a descendant of Judah, ruled Israel in power given by God (see 2 Samuel 7:5–15).

David partially fulfilled the prophecy; his rule was a shadow of the royalty to come. The second way Judah's promises were fulfilled was through the promised eternal king (2 Samuel 7:13, 16; Jeremiah 33:17; see Psalm 45:6). The Old Testament prophets looked for "a rod out of the stem of Jesse" (Isaiah 11:1) who would gather all people (11:10–16). His rule would be one of peace and righteousness from the throne of David (9:7) and the tribe of Judah (Jeremiah 23:5–6; Micah 5:2).

The New Testament writers interpreted these promises to apply to Jesus (see Matthew 2:1–6; Luke 1:32; Hebrews 7:14). As king, Jesus would bring salvation to the world (Luke 2:29–32). His kingdom, inaugurated at His first coming, would be fulfilled in His second coming to earth (see Revelation 2:26–27; 5:5; 19:15).

Judah and his family were by no means ideal ancestors for royalty—they were marked by rivalry, strife, and dysfunction. Judah's life, in particular, was filled with unrighteous acts. He was a wreck and an unlikely choice to be the ancestor of royalty.

However, God's plan of redemption is transformative. He led a dysfunctional family to become the nation of Israel. From this family would emerge the Savior of the world. He turns wrecks into royals!

What Do You Think?

In what ways are this lesson's Scripture texts applicable to modern audiences?

Digging Deeper

How do the other lessons of this unit reinforce the main idea of this lesson's Scripture text?

B. Prayer

God of Jacob and Judah, we praise You for Your kingdom in Christ Jesus. Thank You for inviting us to partake in Your kingdom, despite our failures. Show us how we might live as citizens of Your kingdom. In the name of King Jesus we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God transforms wrecks into royals!