

JACOB ... Who X-rayed His Sons

JACOB ... Who X-rayed His Sons (GENESIS 49:1-2)

Jacob was approaching death, and desiring to address his family for the last time, he summoned his children from their homes and estates. He sat in a chair beside his bed and surveyed the twelve sons who awaited his final statement. The aged father had much to say and was determined to be heard. With the eyes of a seer, he looked into the souls of his family, and sighed. Collectively, they were a disappointment but, among their number, one son at least shone as a brilliant star on a dark night. Many years later, David surveyed his army and came to an identical conclusion. Some of his soldiers were men of valor, but did not excel as did others. They were capable of leading small groups of men but would never qualify as generals. Centuries afterward, Christ addressed His followers who, like the sons of Jacob, were capable of being both delightful and difficult.

Reuben... The Temperamental Man ... Boiling! (Gen. 49:3-4)

"Reuben, thou art my firstborn, my might, and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity, and the excellency of power. Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel; because thou wentest up to thy father's bed; then defiledst thou it; he went up to my couch" (Gen. 49:3-4). The incident to which Jacob made reference is recorded in Genesis 35:22. "And it came to pass, when Israel dwelt in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine; and Israel heard it . . ." When the patriarch summed up the character of his firstborn, he said he was "unstable as water." Webster's Dictionary explains that the word means: "Not fixed or steady, easily upset; changeable; fickle; emotionally unsettled." That definition revealed Jacob's thoughts concerning his eldest son. Water can boil and scald; become ice and freeze; it can be placid and unattractive; and also quench thirst and maintain life. It can be either helpful or harmful.

It was significant that Reuben was Jacob's "might, and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity, and the excellency of power." He was handsome, dignified and very

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attractive. Perhaps that explains why Bilhah yielded to his persuasion and fell for a false lover. He might have been a leader in the nation; instead he was unimportant. When he "boiled" in his soul his outlook was distorted, and Reuben became the victim of his own passion. He was easily upset, and completely unreliable. Behind and beneath his dignified appearance was a slave to illegitimate desires.

Such people exist in every community. Talented men who would make excellent leaders lose their dignity and honor when, like Reuben, they permit evil to dominate their lives. Illicit attractions are too expensive to purchase! Some men and women cannot be trusted and are unfit for important assignments within the church. Their failure in moments of testing brings dishonor to the cause they represent.

Judah... The Tempestuous Man ... Belligerent (Gen. 49:8-10)

"Judah, thou art he whom thy brethren shall praise: thine hand shall be in the neck of thine enemies; thy father's children shall bow down before thee. Judah is a lion's whelp: from the prey, my son, thou art gone up; he stooped down, he couched as a lion, and as an old lion; who shall muse him up? The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from be-

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tween his feet, until Shiloh come

This man was a warrior, his descendants were the spearhead of Israel's military power. He was as a young lion roaming through a forest in search of prey, and as an older lion which, having devoured its victim, lies down to sleep. As a monarch he ruled the forest. Judah was a leader in his nation, but sometimes, people who love war never enjoy peace! The lust for domination and conquest becomes weakness when fighting is unjustified. Unlimited power makes a man indifferent to the pain of others. This was evident when Judah suggested selling his younger brother to strangers (Gen. 37:26-27). The ancient historian recorded one of the most disappointing episodes in Judah's life (Gen. 3).

Jacob's son had difficulty in admitting his errors; he hid them beneath the thin veneer of his self-righteousness. When he

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was not fighting against other people, he was at war with himself. He would have been extremely uncomfortable had he listened to the words of Christ: "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Matt. 5:44).

Unfortunately, the descendants of Judah may be found in every church; they love to be leaders, and sometimes resent any challenge to their authority. They never make mistakes! Recognition of errors in other people is the fuel which feeds the fire of self-importance; they appear to be God-appointed rulers over all they survey. Prominent at church business meetings, they are very vocal when decisions have to be made concerning other people. As Jacob indicated, they will never change until Shiloh come!

Zebulun... The Thoughtful Man... Businesslike (Gen. 49:13)

"Zebulun shall dwell at the haven of the sea; and he shall be for an haven of the ships; and his border shall be unto Zidon." The ancient boundaries of the tribe of Zebulun are somewhat obscure. The people had outlets to the sea and were interested in commerce and maritime trade. Practical people who were more interested in making money than in conquering their enemies, they supported their brothers in aims and possibly paid for their weapons, but continued trading. Other information concerning these businessmen is scarce, and it may be unwise to read into the text something not there!

It is safer to speak of this type of people who still exist within religious communities. No one could deny that the present generation resembles the tribes of Israel. Much remains to be accomplished before the church fully enters into her inheritance, but some are more interested in making money than in the conquest of the world for Christ. They give donations, but dislike being asked to be active in extending God's kingdom upon earth. Such people seldom pray unless their health and prosperity are threatened. They spend time with their financial reports but are too busy to read the scripture. Men may be

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dying over the border, but nothing should be permitted to disturb the complacency of the man whose God is gold.

Issachar... The Tired Man... Boring (Gen. 49:14-15)

"Issachar is a strong ass couching (lying down) between two burdens: And he saw that rest was good, and the land that it

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was pleasant; and bowed his shoulders to bear, and became a servant unto tribute." The Berkley version of the scriptures offers the translation: "Issachar is a big-boned donkey, lying down between the sheep folds. When he finds rest enjoyable, and the land pleasant, he bends his shoulder to carry loads and submits to servitude."

Issachar is a donkey! Jacob's word-picture was enthralling. The bray of a donkey can be heard all over a village, but the animal seldom moves unless it is compelled to do so. This strange creature loves to lie down beside the tasks. He prefers the burden to be his pillow rather than a load on his back! The stupid animal responds more to kicks and curses than to entreaties. The ass seems to ask: "Who wants to work when God has given us sunshine? Work is for the unintelligent; rest should be endless!"

There are many donkeys within the church! They rejoice in the fact that God's love is like sunshine; they agree with everything taught, but they dislike work and responsibility. Labor is for other people. They prefer to supply lemonade to the workers than to roll up their sleeves! Donkeys have no enterprise, ambition or desire to work. They love to sleep. When the pastor preaches a stirring message about the joy of serving Christ, they open one eye, and close both ears. Their philosophy is simple - enough is enough! Even if it were possible, a donkey would never become a hunting dog or a racehorse. That would interfere with the sleeping schedule!

Dan ... The Testy Man... Biting (Gen. 49:16-17)

Webster describes "testy" as being easily irritated. That explains why Jacob said: "Dan shall judge his people, as one of the tribes of Israel. Dan shall be a serpent by the way, an adder in the pair that biteth the horse heels, so that his rider shall fall backward."

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The adder to which the patriarch referred was the homed serpent which had the color of sand, and was marked with white and black spots. The reptile was exceptionally dangerous; its bite was fatal. It lay along the dusty roads where travelers were extremely careful. The snake was known to attack feet, and when a horse reared itself on its hind legs, riders were often thrown to become additional victims for the enemy in the sand. The statement probably referred to the instability of the tribesmen whose love for idols was notorious (Judges 18:27-31). The homed serpent was sly, patient and deadly, and, unfortunately, these characteristics were often seen among the Danites. They were sly; and they attacked from behind.

Probably Paul thought of such people when he wrote to the Romans and mentioned: "Backbiters, haters of God, despiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents.

Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them" (Rom. 1:30-32). People who "bite behind the backs" of other people, have always been a menace within the church. Face-to-face confrontations provide hope of settling disputes, but those who whisper and circulate false allegations are a threat and should be avoided. One bite from that kind of snake can be fatal unless an antidote is applied quickly.

Asher... The Tasting Man... Baking (Gen. 49:20)

Evidently Jacob was not too impressed with his son Asher, what he had to say was expressed in fourteen words! Nevertheless the word picture given was extremely interesting. Asher

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was involved with lush pasture, excellent living, and a passion for "royal dainties"! Jacob said: "Out of Asher his bread shall be fat, and he shall yield royal dainties." When the land of Canaan was divided among the tribes, Asher was given the strip of coastland north of Mount Carmel. It was exceedingly fertile and included some of the best orchards and olive groves in the country. No outstanding military leader came from its people, and prosperity made it selfish and independent. "His bread shall be fat" could suggest over-indulgence, but the next

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statement provides food for thought. It would be interesting to know more about "the royal dainties." Were these provided exclusively for the king? Does the statement imply that Asher specialized in the creating, or obtaining of delicacies? Would they pay and do anything to obtain things which made them fat?

That interpretation may not be justified, but the type of people described can be found in every church. They are the over-fed Christians who need exercise rather than a sumptuous meal, and are called "sermon-tasters." These folk develop a passion for the sweet things of life and dislike what is needed. They go from church to church listening to different speakers; and comparing one with another, they often fail to hear the voice of God. In this respect they are like the tribe of Naphtali of whom Jacob said: "Naphtali is a hind let loose. he giveth goodly words." A hind or deer roams over great distances; is hard to find; feeds on varying pastures, and is easily shot! Every pastor is aware of the members who go from one feeding place to another. They are hard to locate, and are often wounded by hunters. The sons of Jacob have lived a long time!

Joseph... The Thrilling Man... Blessing (Gen. 49:22-26)

"Joseph is a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by a well, whose branches run over the wall." There is a vast difference between a tree planted by a well, and one struggling to survive in the desert. Moisture is indispensable for good growth, but Jacob knew his favorite son was nourished by the unfailing supplies of divine grace. This had always been evident. God overruled the cruelty of his brethren; the lies told in Egypt; the unwarranted imprisonment and subsequent rise to national prominence. It was impossible for bitterness to reside in a forgiving soul, and revenge could not exist within a gracious spirit. Joseph drew his daily supplies from the wells of God's salvation, and as a result "his branches (daughters) ran over the wall." The man's influence had spread beyond the normal outreach of ordinary people; his fame was unprecedented.

There appeared to be no limit to the things God would do for

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His servant. "Even by the God of thy father, who shall help thee; and by the Almighty, who shall bless thee with blessings of heaven above; blessings of the deep that lieth under, blessings of the breasts, and of the womb.. ." (Gen. 49:25).

This remarkable text not only summarized the life of Joseph; it explained the secret of his success. (1) He was special Å "a fruitful bough"; (2) He was sustained Å "by a well"; (3) He was successful Å "whose branches run over the wall"; (4) He was safe Å "made strong by the mighty hands of the God of Jacob."

Blessed is the pastor whose congregation includes people like Joseph. It would be impossible to calculate their value to

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the church of God. It might be refreshing for everybody to ask:

What kind of a church would my church be
If every member were just like me?

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