

September 25 Lesson 4 (NIV)

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} Jacob had twelve sons:

²³ The sons of Leah:

Reuben the firstborn of Jacob,
Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar and Zebulun.

²⁴ The sons of Rachel:

Joseph and Benjamin.

²⁵ The sons of Rachel's servant Bilhah:

Dan and Naphtali.

²⁶ The sons of Leah's servant Zilpah:

Gad and Asher.

These were the sons of Jacob, who were born to him in Paddan Aram.

Genesis 38:24-26

²⁴ About three months later Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar is guilty of prostitution, and as a result she is now pregnant."

Judah said, "Bring her out and have her burned to death!"

²⁵ As she was being brought out, she sent a message to her father-in-law. "I am pregnant by the man who owns these," she said. And she added, "See if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these are."

²⁶ Judah recognized them and said, "She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah." And he did not sleep with her again.

Genesis 49:10-12

¹⁰ The scepter will not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
until he to whom it belongs shall come
and the obedience of the nations shall be his.

¹¹ He will tether his donkey to a vine,
his colt to the choicest branch;

he will wash his garments in wine,
his robes in the blood of grapes.
¹² His eyes will be darker than wine,
his teeth whiter than milk.

Key Text

The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his.

—Genesis 49:10

God's Exceptional Choice

Unit 1: God Call's Abraham's Family

Lessons 1–4

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How to Say It

Bilhah *Bil/*-ha.

Ephraim *Ee*-fray-im.

Ephrath *Ef*rath.

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

Issachar /zz-uh-kar.

Manasseh Muh-*nass*-uh.

Naphtali *Naft*uh-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 will 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. Jacob had twelve sons:

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 “like 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 the firstborn of Jacob, Simeon, Levi, Judah, 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 privilege of *the firstborn* (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 shekels 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. The sons of Rachel's servant Bilhah: 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. The sons of Leah's servant Zilpah: Gad and Asher.

When Leah was unable to conceive, she allowed Jacob to continue fathering children, through her *servant 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).

C. One Father (v. 26b)

26b. These were the sons of Jacob, who were born to him in Paddan Aram.

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

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. Her plan worked; Judah failed to recognize her and considered her to be a prostitute (Genesis 38:13–16). Before they had intercourse, she requested a pledge from him as a confirmation of his promised payment to her (38:17a). After he provided these things, Tamar became pregnant by him (38:17b–18).

A. Tamar's Situation (v. 24)

24a. About three months later Judah was told, “Your daughter-in-law Tamar is guilty of prostitution, and as a result she is now pregnant.”

Judah had sent a friend to take back his pledge (see above), but the woman could not be found (Genesis 38:22). *About 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 *pregnant* except through immorality.

24b. Judah said, “Bring her out and have her burned to death!”

Judah's judgment was striking and harsh. The Law of Moses did not exist during the time of Judah. It would later prescribe being *burned* 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).

B. Tamar's Revelation (v. 25)

25. As she was being brought out, she sent a message to her father-in-law. “I am pregnant by the man who owns these,” she said. And she added, “See if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these are.”

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 become *pregnant* (38:18).

A *seal* 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 a *cord* 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. Judah recognized them and said, "She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah." And he did not sleep with her again.

The revealing of the personal items would have brought great shame on *Judah*. To his credit, he *recognized* the items and acknowledged 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 is 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). Judah 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 *did not sleep with Tamar again* 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).

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 dare "to rouse him" (49:9). Jacob's words began by addressing Judah directly, but shifted to talk *about* Judah and his descendants.

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

10. The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his.

Jacob's dying proclamation demonstrated his trust in the Lord's promise that kings would come from his descendants. A *scepter* 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. He would be like a *ruler's staff* and 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.

This verse presents challenges for students of the Hebrew language. A 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.

Older English translations of this verse refer to the city of 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. With this possibility, 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 “will not be restored *until he to whom it rightfully belongs shall come*” (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. He will tether his donkey to a vine, his colt to the choicest branch;

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 *donkey* 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 will wash his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes.

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

12. His eyes will be darker than wine, his teeth whiter than 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). Straight white *teeth* were a desirable physical trait (see Song of Songs 4:2; 6:6).

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 shoot ... from the stump 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!

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!¹