

## The 12 Sons of Israel

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish  
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“When the Lord saw that Leah was unloved, He opened her womb; but Rachel was barren. So Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben; for she said, ‘The Lord has surely looked on my affliction. Now therefore my husband will love me.’” (Genesis 29:31-32)

In Providence the sermon here last week was a perfect introduction to our theme today, that is, the whole progression from natural life to spiritual life, that is, from practical needs to more lofty ideals. Last week the story revolved around Rachel and Leah, Jacob’s two wives. Today we’re considering each of the 12 sons of Jacob and what they represent in this amazing progression. It’s not really a Mothers’ Day theme, but it certainly involves a series of mothers!

Jacob of course had one daughter as well as the 12 sons, and she’s important, but she’s not part of the main series, which has to do with thought, and that is represented by men, whereas affection is represented by women. In the Word the 12 tribes of Israel derived from the 12 sons all represent essential elements of the *doctrine, thought or teachings* about faith and love, which constitute heaven and the church. Of course doctrine, thought and understanding alone do not make the church, but they are vital to the establishment of it.

It goes without saying that the Lord’s love is always flowing into us, giving us life, energy, affection and some sense of purpose. But our conscious reception of it, our appreciation of it, our recognition of the possibilities that this love brings depends entirely on the insights that we get from the knowledge of His Word, that is, from what He teaches us about these things.

So in the Word the church is established with men, and the first of all the sons of Israel – who was known at that time as Jacob – was REUBEN, a name that comes from the Hebrew word, *to see*. Before we can do anything consciously and in freedom to improve our lives we must “see” the truth, at least some truth, about what is good and bad, or what we need to change. Reuben’s name was taken from the circumstances of his mother, Leah’s, life, in that Jacob didn’t really love her. This was an “affliction” to her, and so when she began to have children she said, “the Lord has *seen* (or looked on) my affliction.”

But on the spiritual level the Writings observe that Reuben, being the very first son, represents the very first state of our regeneration, that is, our spiritual growth. It is the state of faith in the understanding. It is a conceptual thing, an intellectual awareness, a conviction of the head or mind. It is a tremendous blessing in itself and yet apart from all the other states and qualities that must follow in our spiritual growth process it is flawed and prone to cause trouble, as Reuben did when he grew up, and just as faith causes trouble when it is separated or removed from charity.

The second son born to Jacob was SIMEON, from the Hebrew meaning “to hear,” because when he was born his mother, Leah, said, “the Lord has *heard* that I am unloved....” Of course the Lord *always* hears our griefs and troubles, but here we see Leah *recognizing* that fact. And in any case, hearing corresponds to obedience (Do you *hear* me?!), and this is the second step or stage of our regeneration. First we see the truth, then we discipline ourselves to obey it.

By the way, on the chart you have, listing the names of all the sons, you’ll notice it works UP from the bottom to the top, to represent an *ascending series* in each of three columns. It’s a lot to take in, but may be useful for further reflection after the service today.

The third son, born after Simeon, was LEVI, from the Hebrew, “to cling,” “to be joined” or “to become attached.” So the mother, Leah, said, “Now this time my husband will cling to me (or become attached to me), because I have borne him three sons.” This is the third step in Leah’s relationship with Jacob, and it represents the third step in our spiritual development, which is that we should enjoy a sense of spiritual love. How? By practicing charity, the inner commitment to do what He teaches us.

Levi, you may remember, became the father of a whole tribe in the land of Canaan which was dedicated to the work of the priesthood. So he (or rather they) represented the affection of charity which is embodied (or institutionalized) in the office of the priesthood. So although the work of a priest is to “teach the truth and lead thereby to the good of life,” what the priesthood really represents is the affection for truth, in the life of genuine charity.

The fourth son in the first sequence of births to Leah was JUDAH, from the Hebrew meaning “to praise,” or more accurately, “to confess.” A mother of four children, Leah is now satisfied, and praises and confesses her faith in the Lord. So, in the progress of our regeneration, we now come to a stage of real fulfilment and faith. It’s not the whole story, of course, it’s just the fourth in the first series of four including *understanding*, *doing* and *cultivating the affection* for what is true, looking to the Lord *and finally acknowledging the Lord* for all His blessings.

But remember, Jacob had TWO wives, and each wife had a handmaid, and Jacob had children by them all. Still, the one he really loved was Rachel. The first wife, Leah, represents an external affection for the truth, whereas Rachel represents a most wonderful, interior affection. This is not something that we get right away in regeneration, nor is it something that bears fruit right away when we get it. Oh yes, as Brian said last week, we long for it, and we are

willing to work hard for it, as Jacob worked seven years to get Rachel, and then seven more until she bore her first son. But in the meantime we have to settle for an external affection, or as it is sometimes stated, an affection for external truth. To illustrate, it's a little like eating your dinner before you get your dessert, practicing before you play for a concert, learning your vocabulary before you read or write books. Regeneration is a process, not an event, and it begins with the Lord reaching down to us in very worldly, self-centred states. Then He works with us, very gradually to lift us up out of those states into the more interior, spiritual states of heavenly love and wisdom. The affection that motivates us in these *early* stages is represented by Leah, and so Leah is the first to bear children, who all represent the insights or acknowledgments we have just reviewed.

But now what? Well, the next two sons were born of Bilhah, Rachel's maid. And the two after that were born of Zilpah, Leah's maid. In the literal sense it's pretty obvious that there was a sort of competition going on! Rachel was getting desperate for a child, but not being ready she presented her servant girl to Jacob as a sort of surrogate mother. And she produced DAN and NAPHTALI. Then Leah, having left off bearing after Judah, became jealous and gave Jacob *her* servant girl, who produced GAD and ASHER. We'll get to the names in a minute.

First, what is a servant girl in the Word? What does she represent in our lives? Well, a girl in the Word is an affection within us. And a servant is a quality or state that serves, that is, a lower or more external, practical quality that is capable of producing some result when higher loves or principles are ineffective. For example, it is unusual for a child to be motivated by real charity toward the neighbour, but as a means to that end she may be introduced to the life of charity by the use of external affection or material rewards. A man may not want to go to work on Monday morning from the love of

his use, but he may be motivated by the need to earn a living and pay the bills. So the servant girls in the story represent the practical affections that can move us forward in preparation for more heavenly states.

The name, DAN, comes from the Hebrew meaning “to judge” and arises from Rachel’s statement that “God has judged my case... and given me a son.” But in this birth we also have a first step in the direction of a more interior affection from the Lord. As an extension of the series beginning with Reuben, Dan represents the capacity we have from seeing the truth in our understanding to *make a judgment* about what is right and wrong and then do what is good. It is, however, still a rather external, practical discipline that often focuses on what is good or bad for other people, or, in our own case, on things that relate to external fairness and usefulness.

NAPHTALI comes from the Hebrew, “to wrestle,” and relates to Rachel’s declaration, “With great wrestlings *I have wrestled with my sister*, and indeed I have prevailed.” Here we see further progress in support of the interior affection, representing the fact that when we begin to act on the judgments just mentioned and to do what is outwardly good we almost invariably get into trouble, that is, into conflict with our old habits and natural concerns. But this is necessary, and is a sign of growth. So Naphtali represents temptations, an inevitable part of the process of change, especially the change from worldly to heavenly perspectives and loves.

GAD is next, and his name means “a troop,” as in a troop of soldiers. This seems an odd name, unless maybe Leah was thinking of her growing brood of children as a troop. But in the spiritual sense it follows perfectly, for it represents the tremendous extent and variety of the good works that we can do – and enjoy doing – once we have overcome the temptations of the previous state. To be sure, Gad represents an external state, borne as he is of Leah’s maid, but

at this point in our spiritual growth it is an external that embodies genuine good will; it is the kind word, the good deed, the just and faithful exercise of one's obligations, the support of charitable organizations, in short, any and all the activity that brings spiritual thought and affection into practical life.

ASHER, then, is the 8<sup>th</sup> son, and the second by Leah's maid. His name means "blessed," as indeed he made Leah feel especially blessed. But he also represents the sense of *blessing* that comes from actually living in harmony with the truths of the Word.

This completes the second series, all sons of servant girls: Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher. And now, finally, Leah's womb is opened once again and she bears Jacob her last two sons. The first comes after a peculiar incident with "mandrakes," apparently some kind of aphrodisiac that Reuben brought to his mother, and so he was named ISSACHAR, which means "hire" or "reward," coming from the idea that Leah used the mandrakes to "hire" her husband to lie with her and give her this child. It seems strange, but in the spiritual sense it represents the idea of reward that seems so important to us as we strive for the love that connects us with the Lord and our neighbors. Remember, now, this is the first in the last series of 4 sons and corresponds roughly to the first son in each of the other two series, Reuben and Dan. In Reuben we "see" and so understand what is true, in Dan we make judgments from that understanding and begin to live a good life. Now in Issachar we reap the reward in feeling the power of love working in our lives.

Leah's last son was ZEBULUN, from the Hebrew, "dwelling together," and was named with the hope that her husband would indeed now dwell with her (and not the other women). So the birth of Zebulun represents the most perfect sense of conjunction that is available to us in our external, natural lives, namely that in marriage. This is said to be an external, natural experience, not because

marriage itself is merely external but because it falls into the most perfect natural form of intimate conjunction between two people. But what it represents is the spiritual conjunction we call the heavenly marriage, the union of what is true with what is good in each of our minds. This doesn't come easily and is only realized after the previous states have been completed. But it gets us really close to a truly spiritual life.

Now, finally, the 11<sup>th</sup> son is born to Rachel, the internal affection for truth, and he is named JOSEPH, which means "increase" because Rachel prophesied when she gave birth that the Lord would *add* to her another son, who of course would be BENJAMIN.

So what sort of *spiritual* increase does Joseph represent? The Writings say it is *the good of faith*, that is, the good that we experience when we have finally learned, accepted and integrated the things of faith into our lives. The Writings sometimes call this "the celestial of the spiritual," but really that's just a fancy term for the good that we find within the truth. In many ways this good is incomprehensible, and certainly mysterious to those of us still working from an external affection for the truth. So, later in the Genesis story, the first 10 brothers find Joseph and his dreams annoying, and they plot to get rid of him. Later, when they go to Egypt to buy food during the famine, they don't even recognize him who has by then become their savior, providing also for their "increase."

As the third in the third series, Joseph correlates with Levi in the first and Gad in the second series, as Levi represents the truth about genuine charity and Gad the whole "troop" of good works that may be done to express that truth. But Joseph now calls to mind the essential goodness that is within the truth, secretly leading and providing for us all along our path to heaven.

So then, who is Benjamin, and what is his role in this drama? As

the last of all the sons and born of the interior affection represented by Rachel, he represents the culmination of all the work of regeneration, bringing us into full conjunction and communication with the Lord. His name means “son of my right hand,” and he represents the truth of good, or the faith that is within the powerful work of genuine charity. The Writings sometimes call this “the spiritual of the celestial” which again is just a fancy term for the new insights into the truths of the Word that come to us when we are actually living in the sphere of the Lord’s powerful love.

Obviously there’s a whole sermon – or series of sermons – in the stories of each of these 12 sons of Israel, and we will draw some parallels with them in next week’s sermon, too, on the 12 disciples of the New Testament. But for now, let’s just pause and take heart from the incredible story of their births, all in a certain order, each representing a specific step or stage in our own spiritual growth which we can now see taking place in the same order, little by little, year after year, through all kinds of adversity and mysterious, even peculiar circumstances. This is the story of our life, our spiritual growth and development, our future in the promised land of heaven. Can we believe it? Can we live it? Can we respect the order and fulfill the promises of each step? The truth is, we don’t really have a choice. This is the way it works. This is the way it HAS TO work lest we get ahead of ourselves and suffer the failures of trying to pre-empt the Lord’s Divine love and mercy for our salvation.

One step at a time: 12 steps, from natural knowledge to a heavenly, spiritual life. Let’s think about it. Let’s see if we can notice where we are on any given day, and ask the Lord to take us to the next step. If we can believe it and co-operate with Him, He will.

Amen.



Lessons: ***Judges***, chapters 13-16 (selections)  
Children's talk on the story of Samson

***Genesis*** 29:31 – 30:24 (selections)  
***Arcana Caelestia*** #3858: section 1

See the next page for the chart that illustrates this sermon.

## THE 12 SONS OF ISRAEL AS THEY REPRESENT THE PROCESS OF REGENERATION

General States in the progression of Regeneration	Means of conjoining Internals & Externals	Resulting States of Conjunction of Good and Truth
<p>L</p> <p style="text-align: center;">4</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>JUDAH</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">“Praise/Confession”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Celestial Love</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(Love to the Lord)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">AC 3880, 3882</p>	<p>Z</p> <p style="text-align: center;">8</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>ASHER</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">“Blessedness”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Happiness</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(Delight of Life)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">AC 3938-39</p>	<p>R</p> <p style="text-align: center;">12</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>BENJAMIN</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">“Son of Right Hand”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Perception</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(Faith from Charity)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">AC 4592, 5411, 5806-22</p>
<p>L</p> <p style="text-align: center;">3</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>LEVI</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">“to Adhere”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Spiritual Love</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(Charity)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">AC 3875</p>	<p>Z</p> <p style="text-align: center;">7</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>GAD</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">“a Troop”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Good Works</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(Uses)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">AC 3934</p>	<p>R</p> <p style="text-align: center;">11</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>JOSEPH</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">“to Add, Increase”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">The Good of Faith</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(Spiritual Growth)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">AC 3969, 5469</p>
<p>L</p> <p style="text-align: center;">2</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>SIMEON</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">“Hearing”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Faith in the Will</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(Obedience)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">AC 3869</p>	<p>B</p> <p style="text-align: center;">6</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>NAPHTALI</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">“Wrestling”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Temptations</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(Natural Resistance)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">AC 3927-28</p>	<p>L</p> <p style="text-align: center;">10</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>ZEBULUN</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">“Dwelling Together”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Heavenly Marriage</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(Marital Devotion)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">AC 3952, 3960</p> <p style="text-align: right;">*</p>
<p>L</p> <p style="text-align: center;">1</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>REUBEN</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">“Seeing, a Son”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Faith Alone</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(Understanding)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">AC 3759, 3863</p>	<p>B</p> <p style="text-align: center;">5</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>DAN</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">“to Judge”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Acknowledgment</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(Affirmation of Truth)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">AC 3902, 3923</p>	<p>L</p> <p style="text-align: center;">9</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>ISSACHAR</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">“Reward, Hire”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Mutual Love</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(Truth Working)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">AC 3952, 3956-57</p>