

TRAVELING WITH A HOLY GOD WHO HAS PROMISED AN INHERITANCE Numbers 27:1-11

INTRODUCTION

Do you ever think about what you will inherit upon the death of your parents? My guess is that for most of us, whenever thoughts of inheritance go through our minds we feel guilty and quickly put them out of our mind. It seems greedy and morbid to be thinking about the death of our parents and the loot we will get when they die. I think part of the reason we are squeamish about thinking about our inheritance is due to the urbanized culture in which we live. As city dwellers, most of the inheritance which any of us will receive will be in the form of cash and thus it feels unseemly to spend time thinking about the windfall you will inherit when your parents die. Not only are children reluctant to think about their inheritance but most parents do not speak with their children about the inheritance either. It is simply an uncomfortable subject to talk about.

However, this is not the way inheritance is thought of in farming communities. In agrarian cultures an inheritance is usually in the form of land. The land is not simply something added to your current income and assets but is the source of your future income. Also, the land is more than the source of sustenance for you and your family but is also a source of family pride and identity. Farming parents regularly encourage their children to think about the fact that one day this land will belong to them. They encourage them to live their lives now in view of the fact that one day they will own the farm and make their living from it.

God talks to his children about their inheritance the same way that farming parents talk with their children. From the beginning of creation God has told his people that this land, this world which he made and which belongs to him will one day be ours. After humans lost their possession of God's world, being exiled from the Garden of Eden because of their sin, God made a promise to Abraham and his descendants that one day he would give to them their own land. In making this promise he used the language of inheritance. We saw that language used last week in 26:52-56 which reads in part: "The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Among these the land shall be divided for inheritance according to the number of names. To a large tribe you shall give a large inheritance, and to a small tribe you shall give a small inheritance; every tribe shall be given its inheritance in proportion to its list.'"

In our text this morning this is the central concern. The five daughters of Zelophehad are concerned that their father receives his inheritance in the land of Canaan. These five daughters and their pursuit of their father's inheritance rights are mentioned in the OT four times (3 in Numbers and 1 in Joshua). They were first mentioned in the list of clans of Manasseh in 26:29-34. Their inclusion is highly unusual and would have provoked amazement in any Jewish person who read that list for the first time. All the clans are named after the male descendants of Israel. The only people counted in the census were men 20 years old and up. The land of Canaan was to be divided according to the male descendants of Israel. The entire system of property rights was designed to make sure that all the land given to a particular tribe and to particular clans within the tribes was kept by that tribe and clan forever. This was insured by the property being handed down from fathers to sons. Women received the benefits of the land by belonging to their father's house and then through marriage they received the benefits of the land through their husband's ownership. Thus the mention of the daughters of Zelophehad in the clan lists of chapter 26 and then their being mentioned three more times in relation to the inheritance of property in Israel makes them and their story very important. Their story is about the inheritance of the land of Canaan which God promised he would give to Abraham and his descendants.

God's promise to Israel of an inheritance of the land of Canaan in the OT is taken up by the NT as a foreshadowing of God's promise to give the world to his obedient son and to all those who are united to him by faith. Jesus is God's heir and we are fellow heirs with him. What Jesus will inherit is the universe made new and thus we will inherit that renewed universe with him. Thus as we consider this story of the five daughters of

Zelophehad and their petition to inherit the land we will discover a number of things that are true about that eternal inheritance of the new heavens and the new earth which God has promised to everyone who is counted as a descendant of Abraham by their sharing his faith as Paul writes in Romans 4:13-16, “For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void... That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring--not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all...” Thus all who have faith in Christ are the descendants of Abraham and heirs of the world.

MAIN POINT

God has promised an eternal inheritance which...

I. Is not available to those who reject it and him (v.3)

These five daughters of Zelophehad have come to the front of the Tent of Meeting to present their case before Moses, Eleazer, all the chiefs and the entire congregation of Israel. The importance of their petition is thus illustrated by the fact that the entire community has gathered together to find out how Moses will settle their petition to share in the inheritance of the land. The first thing they have to explain is why it is that they, five women, are requesting the right to inherit the land. The reason is that their father is dead and he had no sons, which is why they are representing themselves. Their self-representation also means they are unmarried (which is confirmed in chapter 36). The fact that they are unmarried would suggest that these five daughters are most likely teenagers.

Look at v. 3 and see what these daughters say about their dead father. He did not die because he was associated with the rebellion of Korah, Dathan and Abiram but he died for his own sin. What does this mean? The fact that he died in the wilderness for his own sin means that he was among that generation of Israelites who were 20 years old and up at Kadesh Barnea who believed the bad report of the 10 spies and so refused to believe and obey God and go into Canaan. He was one of those men who said, ““Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt? And they said to one another, ‘Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.’” He was one of those who talked of murdering Caleb, Joshua, Aaron and Moses so they could pick new leaders and go back to Egypt. He was a part of that rebellious generation about whom the Lord said, “But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD, none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers.... As I live, ...your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness, and of all your number, listed in the census from twenty years old and upward, who have grumbled against me, not one shall come into the land where I swore that I would make you dwell, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun.”

In other words, Zelophehad despised and rejected God and the Land of Promise. He believed that slavery in Egypt under the rule of the pagans and their pagan gods was preferable to living with God in his land. He trusted in his own plans and his own strength to achieve what he planned rather than in God’s plans and God’s strength. It was for this sin of his that he, along with that entire generation died in the wilderness. Like Zelophehad and his generation of Israelites, all human beings who live as if the comforts and pleasures of this life are superior to living forever with God in his eternal kingdom will die an eternal death. Those who live as if food or sex or video games or work or children or health or houses or vacations or ipads or friends are better than God and his kingdom will be rejected by God. As that entire first generation that God saved from slavery in Egypt perished so all who refuse to trust in the only one who is able to make you fit for heaven will also perish forever. There is no eternal inheritance but only eternal death for those who despise God’s kingdom by preferring the pleasures of this world and who despise God’s king, the Lord Jesus Christ, by trusting in their own goodness and strength rather than him and his saving work.

II. Is available by his grace to those who believe (vv.1-8)

After admitting that their father was justly killed by God in the wilderness the daughters ask a question: “Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son?” There are two reasons why the name of their father should be taken away. First, he forfeited every right he had to the land by his rejection of God and his land. If you will remember that is exactly what the Lord said to Moses in Numbers 14 in response to the people’s rebellion (14:11-12), “And the LORD said to Moses, ‘How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.’” If God would have acted in perfect justice, giving those Israelites, including Zelophehad, what each one deserved they would all be dead. Justice would have been God disinheriting every Israelite and starting over with Moses and his children. There would be no tribe of Mannaseh or clan Machir or family of Hephher or man by the name of Zelophehad. In fact, if God had acted in perfect justice, if he had done what was fair and right when Israel rebelled at Kadesh-Barnea, these five daughters would not be alive. Therefore, when God grants the daughters request and continues the name of their father by granting them a portion of the land, it is entirely an act of grace, of unmerited favor.

The second reason the daughters should not get an inheritance is because they are women. God has already said that the land will be divided according to the numbers of men belonging to each tribe and clan. The land will belong to the men and pass from father to son so that each tribe will retain the inheritance God assigns forever. It is God’s land and he can do with it as he pleases and he has made it clear that his desire is to pass the land through the men. Thus these daughters have no reason to expect a positive reply to their request. Their only hope rests in the fact that God is a God of mercy and grace. God does not give to people according to what we deserve but contrary to what we deserve. This leads us to observe what is most remarkable about these women.

When these women bring their petition to Moses, Israel possesses no land. They are making their request in response to the census that just took place. They believe that what God has promised, that he will do. They, like the rest of Israel, are camped on the eastern bank of the Jordan River and can see the giant fortified city of Jericho. They know that the land is inhabited by fierce warriors some of whom are giants. Yet, they talk as if the land is already theirs, as if the division of the land is going to take place at any moment. This is one of the chief reasons these women are given so prominent a role in the biblical record. They trust God’s word without wavering.

They stand in the company of a host of women in the Bible who believed God’s word and so received an inheritance from him. There is Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho, who believed that God would not only destroy her people but believed that he would have mercy upon her, a Gentile. She and her family did not perish with the rest of the disobedient residents of Jericho but were saved and became a part of the people of Israel. She became the wife of Salmon and had a son named Boaz who was the great-grandfather of King David, whose greater son is our savior, Jesus. We think of the non-Jewish, Moabite woman, Ruth who left behind her idolatrous family and people and went to live in the land of Israel taking refuge under the wings of Yahweh. By her faith she married Boaz, Rahab’s son and became the great-grandmother of King David, whose Son is our savior, Jesus. We think of the prostitute who came into the Pharisee, Simon’s house and washed Jesus’ feet with her tears and her hair and about whom Jesus said, “Go in peace. Your faith has saved you.”

All who come to Jesus, as these daughters of the sinful Zelophehad came to Moses, trusting in God’s promise to give an eternal inheritance to all who are united to Jesus by their faith, will indeed be rewarded, as these women were with a place among the people of God and a portion in his new heaven and new earth. The only thing that gains you an inheritance is your faith in Christ. Your gender, your race, your politics, your age, your occupation, your hobbies, your economic status, your clothing style, your marital status, your moral performance—none of these things have anything to do with your inheritance “for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith... There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male

and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise (Galatians 3:26-29).” In spite of all your sin and rebellion and indifference towards God you can become his heir, you can inherit the universe made new if you will simply trust that Jesus Christ did everything to make you God’s child and thus God’s heir.

III. His people are eager to obtain (vv.1-4)

It is not only their faith which sets these women apart but their intense desire to have a place in the Land of Promise. They pursue Moses with zeal. They will not be turned back. They long for a place in God’s land. They ignore social convention and do not care whether others approve of their petition or not. They must have a place in God’s land. Their earnestness reminds us of numerous individuals in the gospels who ignored the disapproval of the crowds and the religious leaders in their pursuit of Jesus to help them: the Roman officer whose servant was dying and who wouldn’t let Jesus come into his house because he was not worthy but told Jesus to simply speak and his servant would be healed; the woman with the flow of blood who snuck through the crowd to simply touch Jesus’ garment; Jairus, the synagogue ruler who pursued Jesus to come heal his daughter; the paralyzed man and his friends who dug a hole through the roof of someone’s house to get to Jesus.

The daughters’ zeal to have a place in God’s land remind us of that joyful anticipation for the appearing of Jesus and the establishment of his kingdom that characterizes all true Christians as is frequently mentioned in the NT. Paul describes that eagerness for the coming of Christ in Philippians 3:13-14, “...one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” Or again at the end of his life he writes in 2 Timothy 4:7-8, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.” The people of God, like the daughters of Zelphehad, like Paul are eagerly anticipating their inheritance. We live our lives here in view of the fact that this is not our final destination. We are on a journey to the Promised Land and we will not be truly happy until we have obtained our inheritance there. We do not expect to be made happy while living in these tents on the eastern shore of the Jordan River. We know that our permanent and eternal home is still across the River and so we live here as if that land is truly our home.

This last week as I was taking care of my disabled son Jared I was thinking about the difference knowing this is not my home, that Christ has obtained for me a better inheritance than anything this world has to offer has made in the life of our family. Taking care of Jared takes up a lot of our time. There are a lot of things that we could do and would do if it were not for him. Now we have our days but most of the time we are not resentful or discouraged by our life but happy to provide for him as long as the Lord calls us to do so. It occurred to me, as I was thinking about this, that the reason we are generally content with our situation is because we are living for another world. It is the hope given to us in the gospel of Jesus that enables us to be content. We know that we have been given an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade that is kept in heaven for us. Thus our hope is fixed upon the joy that will be ours in that coming kingdom and not on the loss that we are experiencing here. This is an act of God’s grace in our lives and not due to any strength in us. Just as Moses delivered the good news to the daughters of Zelphehad that they would indeed inherit a portion of the land so we have had the good news delivered to us in the gospel that we will inherit a place in God’s new world through Christ.

IV. God himself secures for each of his people (vv.5-11)

The end of this passage lets us know why the case of Zelphehad’s daughters was of such interest to the entire community of Israel. In a nation with a population of close to 2 million people you can be sure that these were not the only unmarried daughters of dead fathers who had no sons. Thus God, on the basis of these women’s petition establishes a law for all Israel to follow regarding the passing on of the land from one generation to the next. When the head of a household dies, that is, the primary land owner, if he has sons then his property will be divided among his sons and his daughters will share in the benefits of land ownership through their marriage.

However, if a man has no sons then his daughters will receive ownership of the land in his name. The sons of the daughters will carry on their father's name upon the land. However, if a man dies and has no sons and no daughters then the land will pass to his brothers. If he has no brothers then his land will pass to his uncles, his father's brothers. If he has no uncles then it will pass to the nearest male relative. Thus, all the land will remain within the clans to which it was given.

The land belongs to God and he alone determines who will inherit and how they will inherit. He has made a place for all of his people and has made a provision for each one to share in the inheritance in the manner that he desires. There are distinctions in the ways in which all will enjoy the inheritance. So it will be in God's eternal kingdom. He is pleased to give his kingdom to everyone who believes in and obeys the Son. Every believer will receive a piece of property in that eternal kingdom. However, each person's experience of heaven will be distinct, determined by our faithfulness while upon this earth. As Jesus teaches in Matthew 25 and Luke 19 in the parable of the talents each person's reward will vary depending upon how they invested the resources God entrusted to them here. In the words of the parable, some will be in charge of 10 cities, some in charge of five and some in charge of one. There will be distinctions among us in that renewed universe. As Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 there is a proportionality between the sufferings endured with Christ in this age and the glory experienced in heaven. Our good and gracious king is paying attention to our condition and our response to our condition. There is no loss suffered for Christ or with Christ that will not be more than adequately repaid in the new heavens and the new earth. "Therefore, do not throw away your confidence which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what is promised." This is the statute and the rule that God has established for all the heirs of his kingdom.

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