

Daughters of Zelophehad

Sermon Preached by Phil Kayser at DCC on 2021-11-21

I. Five daughters with a passion for covenant succession

The daughters of Zelophehad were such remarkable women that I thought I could not leave them out of this series. I believe they can be models of faith to us on several levels - especially when we see their passion for covenant succession, which is going to be the main theme today. We will see that they were driven by God's promises for the future. You can also see the importance of their impact on *Israel's* history simply by the fact that there are three long sections of Scripture devoted to rehashing this history and spelling out the implications: There are eleven verses in Numbers 27, thirteen verses in Numbers 36, and six verses in Joshua 17. So God Himself (by this repetition) is indicating that these *were* important women, and they contributed to the beautiful picture of what Biblical patriarchy looks like. So we need to understand a little bit about their thinking, their passions, and their vision for the future.

A. Their lineage from Joseph (27:1a)

And it shouldn't be surprising that these women had a passion for covenant succession, given their lineage. Verse 1 of chapter 27 traces their history back to Joseph - one of the heroes of the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11. So verse 1 is setting the stage for the theme of covenant succession. Might there have been breaks of unfaithfulness in this lineage? Yes, there might have been. But God's promises to Joseph are being lived out several generations later. Verse 1 says,

Then came the daughters of Zelophehad the son of Hopher, the son of Gilead, the son of Machir, the son of Manasseh, from the families of Manasseh the son of Joseph.

Yes, their *own* father was part of the generation that failed to believe God's promise, and the daughters will later allude to that individual sin. But the sisters absolutely deny that their father had the unbelief or rebellion of Korah. And we will get to that in a bit.

B. Their names: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah (27:1b)

But even their *names* may indicate the journey of faith for the parents - that is, if the names represent stages in Israel's wandering (which is one hypothesis). The firstborn, Mahlah, means sickness or disease, and may reflect one of the judgments that the Israelites received in the wilderness. Maybe she was born during one of those plagues. The second name, Noah, means rest or comfort, and may indicate a stage in the parent's walk with God where they found healing and rest by looking to the Lord. Hoglah means Partridge and may reflect the scene of God's provision of food. Milcah means counsel and may reflect the parents learning from the repeated counsel that came from Moses. And Tirzah means pleasantness - perhaps an acceptance of their walk with God. There does seem to be a progression from

negative to positive in the meaning of the names. Now, we can't read *too* much into names, but people do point out that parents in the Bible usually had a good reason for the names they gave to their children. But whether the parents had faith in God's promises for the future or not, we will see that *these* girls did.

C. Numbers 27 shows a passion for covenant succession and Joshua 17 shows the outcome of this passion

In Numbers 27 we see that they are convinced that Israel will inherit Canaan in the near future. They aren't there yet, but they are already acting as if they are going to be there. Their request has nothing to do with the present reality of being in the wilderness and has everything to do with that future promised inheritance in Canaan. That shows faith. They were so strongly driven by that promise of a *future* that they boldly approach Moses *now*.

In fact, Numbers 27 shows that these five daughters appealed to Moses concerning *four* very important faith issues: the issue of property (which they didn't have yet because they hadn't crossed the Jordan River yet), the issue of marriage (which none of these daughters had yet because they were perhaps too young), the issue of inheritance (which in their case was a future inheritance - it shows a huge future orientation that makes them take action), and then fourth - the issue of covenant succession (which shows their faith that they will indeed have children and property to pass on to those children). All four issues show enormous faith on the part of these girls. I love the story of the daughters of Zelophehad! They were definitely women of faith and God blessed their faith by not only giving them the inheritance that they sought, but also giving them remarkable covenant succession - *so* remarkable that many dictionaries and conservative scholars believe that three cities in the region that they later lived in were named after three of the five sisters - the cities of Tirzah, Hoglah, and Noah.¹ And I placed the location of those three cities on the map that is in your outlines. Now, if indeed those cities were named after these women, it shows the incredible honor and respect that their descendants had for them. They appreciated their fore-mothers' passion for covenant succession. And if those commentators are correct, then this means that there are another sixteen verses in Scripture that memorialize at least three of those five women.

II. An overview of their story (Numb. 27, 36)

So with that as a background, let's dive into this story. This is yet another passage that corrects the slanders that have been brought by feminists against patriarchy - true Biblical

¹ Several scholars have made this identification. John Barry states, "The city of Tirzah is sometimes identified with the clan founded by this Tirzah. This is supported by a mention in the Semitic Ostraca of a district that shares her name along with districts that could be named after several of her sisters (Noah and Hoglah)." John D. Barry et al., eds., "Tirzah, Daughter of Zelophehad," *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

patriarchy that is seen from Genesis 1 to the end of the Bible. Father rule is an incredible blessing to women when it follows all the contours of the Bible unapologetically, and hyperpatriarchy is simply ignoring some of God's patriarchal instructions that paint a fuller picture. But this story is intriguing since it deals with women who have lost their patriarch - in other words, their father. And then, after giving an overview, I'll try to systematically apply it to ourselves under a few more points.

A. These girls are not intimidated by power (v. 2)

The first thing that I see is that these girls are not intimidated by power. Male rule does not bother them at all. They are secure in it. Indeed, they appeal to it. Verse 2 says,

And they stood before Moses, before Eleazar the priest, and before the leaders and all the congregation, by the doorway of the tabernacle of meeting, saying:

This is sort of like speaking up at a state legislature or before the Congress during a hearing. It can be intimidating. So there is boldness. But it also shows that women did not keep to the kitchen. They had access to their leaders. Now, granted, theirs was an unusual situation since they had no man to go to bat for them. But it doesn't seem at all like these leaders thought this was out of place. The fact that women are under authority does not mean women cannot appeal to authority. We have seen in other sermons in this series that women have the right to appeal to the elders if they are facing injustice in their family. And that is exactly what these girls are doing. They are finding beautiful guidance and help within the Biblical system of patriarchy.

B. They argue their case (vv 3-4)

In the next verses they argue their case very systematically. It's obvious that they weren't talking off the top of their heads. They had already strategized together on how to phrase everything; and everything was phrased well.

The first part of their argument explains why *they* are coming for judgment rather than their *father* - "Our father died in the wilderness." They were orphans, with their mother apparently having died as well.

The next part of their argument explains why their father should not be denied an inheritance. And some commentaries point out that this argument implies the truth of both patriarchy and covenant succession.

but he was not in the company of those who gathered together against the LORD, in company with Korah, but he died in his own sin.

In other words, though he was a sinner (like all of us are), he was not one of those who had been disinherited because they joined the rebellion of Korah. Zelophehad was not one of the rebels. He was not guilty of their sin. And the implication is that just as every other dead family head was about to inherit a portion of Canaan, Zelophehad should be able to inherit as well. All the other heads of families have died off too, other than Joshua and Caleb. So since death did not disqualify *them* from passing on an inheritance, it should not disqualify Zelophehad. These girls are not asking for charity; they are asking for justice. They are

basing their arguments on the justice of the law of God. The modern church needs to learn to do the same. Instead, the modern church has been casting off God's law in the name of liberty. But you can't cast off the perfect law of liberty without inheriting bondage.

The next phrase shows why justice is about to be violated - "and he had no sons." So far in the discussions of the future division of the land, the land was being divided up only among sons. The girls do not object to that. This would be the normal practice of keeping land within the tribe - and Numbers 36 will address that unique issue. But since there are no sons to inherit a portion of the promised land, this will mean that the land will be taken away from Zelophehad's heirs and will become the property of someone else. So they say,

Why should the name of our father be removed from among his family because he had no son? Give us a possession among our father's brothers."

So again, their argument is going back one generation - to their father. Every other non-Korah-type father who died in the wilderness is going to receive a portion of the land on behalf of his family. Why should Zelophehad be an exception? Since the mother was dead, there was no way of applying the Levirate law of Deuteronomy 25 in order to raise up a seed to Zelophehad and to keep the land in the family name. The *spirit* of that Levirate law applied, but not the letter of the law. In other words, there was no precedent in the law that applied to their case.

Now, Gary North points out that there are ceremonial aspects to this situation that were unique to Israel and that didn't apply before Israel was a nation and didn't apply when Israel was in exile. But even though there are ceremonial aspects to this story, the general equity principles of this story do apply and are a key to solving problems that have existed for females for thousands of years in other countries. And I will use Africa as an illustration since I grew up there.

In some African nations, land is only owned by males, period. A woman and her husband may have worked tirelessly for years to clear land and make it productive, but if the husband dies, an uncle can come in the next day and take the land away from the widow and the children, leaving them destitute beggars. It's not just. The Africa Bible commentary says that if this law of Moses was implemented throughout Africa, it would massively improve the rights of women. The women would inherit the land from their husband, and it would be a strong negotiating point for further marriage if they so desired. Anyway, this African commentary says,

Zelophehad's daughters protested to Moses that it would be unjust if their family were forced to forfeit all claim to land just because their father had not had a son (27:3-4). If the law insisted that only the males would inherit the land, the needs of women and children would be overlooked and their position undermined. Deprived of any means to support themselves, widows and unmarried daughters would be reduced to poverty and possibly even to slavery or prostitution. This pattern is sometimes seen in Africa when widows are evicted from their husband's land because his male relatives claim it...

The church in Africa needs to learn from this incident about its role as an advocate for laws that resonate with Christian teachings. It should call attention to laws that contradict the gospel message, such as those on widow inheritance (see article on this topic) and those that allow only men to inherit land.²

We will look in a bit at how God provided for women who didn't inherit land - and most did not. But this law gave these daughters some leverage and protection since they were not married - that's the key to this unique situation. In God's law, *everyone* was provided for - male and female. They were provided for in different ways, but they *were* provided for. And I'll explain that in a bit more detail later because there is a lot of misunderstanding on the Biblical inheritance laws.

C. With no precedent in the law, Moses seeks God for instruction (vv. 5-11)

Verse 5 says, "So Moses brought their case before the LORD." He didn't have an answer since God had not yet addressed this issue. So he seeks God for more guidance. And without changing His purposes of males inheriting land in order to keep it in the tribal boundaries, God sides with the women. Starting to read at verse 6:

Num. 27:6 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 7 "The daughters of Zelophehad speak what is right; you shall surely give them a possession of inheritance among their father's brothers, and cause the inheritance of their father to pass to them. 8 And you shall speak to the children of Israel, saying: "If a man dies and has no son, then you shall cause his inheritance to pass to his daughter. 9 If he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers. 10 If he has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his father's brothers. 11 And if his father has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to the relative closest to him in his family, and he shall possess it.' " And it shall be to the children of Israel a statute of judgment, just as the LORD commanded Moses.

Unlike monetary inheritances, which sometimes *could* go to both men and women, land almost always went to a male. And we will address that issue in a bit and see why that no longer the has to be the case in the New Covenant (though the general equity still applies). But let's turn to Numbers 36, where a further twist in the story arises.

D. The chief fathers want a clarification of the law so that tribal lines don't get chopped up and eventually obliterated (Numb. 36:1-9)

And we will start with Numbers 36, verse 1.

Num. 36:1 Now the chief fathers of the families of the children of Gilead the son of Machir, the son of Manasseh, of the families of the sons of Joseph, came near and spoke before Moses and before the leaders, the chief fathers of the children of Israel.

² Tokunboh Adeyemo, Africa Bible Commentary (Nairobi, Kenya; Grand Rapids, MI: WordAlive Publishers; Zondervan, 2006), 199.

The reason the leaders of Manasseh made this appeal for clarification is because the daughters are from Manasseh and the potential for Manasseh's boundary lines getting gobbled up by another state and for their states' rights to be eroded gives them definite standing in court. For state leaders to appeal to the federal court they need to have legal standing. They can't bring any case they want to the federal court. Well, they do have legal standing. Verse 2:

2 And they said: "The LORD commanded my lord Moses to give the land as an inheritance by lot to the children of Israel, and my lord was commanded by the LORD to give the inheritance of our brother Zelophehad to his daughters.

So they are not questioning whether this law is just; they just want clarification. They say,

3 Now if they are married to any of the sons of the other tribes of the children of Israel, then their inheritance will be taken from the inheritance of our fathers, and it will be added to the inheritance of the tribe into which they marry; so it will be taken from the lot of our inheritance. 4 And when the Jubilee of the children of Israel comes, then their inheritance will be added to the inheritance of the tribe into which they marry; so their inheritance will be taken away from the inheritance of the tribe of our fathers."

So there are two arguments they give: state sovereignty will be eroded if men from other tribes marry these women. Second, we need clarification that the year of Jubilee will not make the land itself permanently lost to our tribe if the first issue is not addressed. Though the ceremonial aspects no longer apply, you can see why those two issues of tribal sovereignty and tribal territory have applications for all time. Limited sovereignty and territory go together. These women were definitely in the spotlight and under intense scrutiny since they were breaking new legal ground that no one had crossed before and the stakes were high. Verse 5:

Num. 36:5 Then Moses commanded the children of Israel according to the word of the LORD, saying: "What the tribe of the sons of Joseph speaks is right. 6 This is what the LORD commands concerning the daughters of Zelophehad, saying, "Let them marry whom they think best, but they may marry only within the family of their father's tribe.' 7 So the inheritance of the children of Israel shall not change hands from tribe to tribe, for every one of the children of Israel shall keep the inheritance of the tribe of his fathers. 8 And every daughter who possesses an inheritance in any tribe of the children of Israel shall be the wife of one of the family of her father's tribe, so that the children of Israel each may possess the inheritance of his fathers. 9 Thus no inheritance shall change hands from one tribe to another, but every tribe of the children of Israel shall keep its own inheritance."

OK. With that law enacted, the confusion was resolved. Men had certain rights. Women had certain rights. Tribes had certain rights that could not be violated even by national laws. This division of powers is clearly spelled out. And if I were preaching to magistrates, I would make some application to civil jurisdictions and why states must be ultra careful in not overstepping the jurisdictions of a neighboring state, and why there must be a balance between the jurisdictions of family, state, and federal levels.

E. The daughters marry within their tribe, not because intermarriage was unlawful, but to protect the interests of family and state (Numb. 36:10-13)

But let's move on to the next point. Verses 10-13 deal with the daughter's marriages. They followed the law of Moses and navigated the rights and interests of both family and state. Starting at verse 10:

Num. 36:10 Just as the LORD commanded Moses, so did the daughters of Zelophehad; 11 for Mahlah, Tirzah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Noah, the daughters of Zelophehad, were married to the sons of their father's brothers [in other words, they married their cousins. Verse 12]. 12 They were married into the families of the children of Manasseh the son of Joseph, and their inheritance remained in the tribe of their father's family.

This shows that women are not forced to marry against their wills - as verse 6 points out, they can marry whom they think is best. But these verses show that even with highly personal and emotion-charged issues like marriage, choices we make for marriage can be limited by God and must reflect God's kingdom outcomes, not just our personal desires. Even marriage should reflect the four quadrants of ethical decision making that we have looked at in the past. There is much more at stake in marriage than love.

Just as a side note - some people have misused this passage to oppose interracial marriage, but this passage has nothing to do with that. And the proof is that other Israelite women could marry across tribal boundaries, and if they did so, they would be adopted into that tribe. Rahab was adopted into the tribe of Judah from a different nation. But certainly there was inter-tribal marriage without the complicating land issues. This is how Jesus could be a cousin of John the Baptist even though the fathers of both were from different tribes. Either the maternal grandmother of John the Baptist was adopted into the tribe of Levi by marriage or the mother of Mary was a Levite who was adopted into the tribe of Judah by marriage.³ So inter-tribal marriage was not outlawed.

But what about property? If the woman had her own property, it would revert to the husband and/or her male child when she died. So this is only making restrictions of marriage as it relates to inheritance of the land.

Verse 13 gives the timing and the non-negotiable imperative of these commands to Israel. It says,

Num. 36:13 These are the commandments and the judgments which the LORD commanded the children of Israel by the hand of Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan, across from Jericho.

³ Godet favors the latter option, saying, "There was no law to oblige an Israelitish maiden to marry into her own tribe; Mary's father, even if he was of the tribe of Judah, might therefore have espoused a woman of the tribe of Levi." Frédéric Louis Godet, *A Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke*, trans. Edward William Shalders and M. D. Cusin, vol. 1 (New York: I. K. Funk & co., 1881), 94.

F. General observations from these laws

That's as far as we are going to go with the story. And before I give some detailed applications, let me give some general overarching principles from these two sections that we have read. And these are not in your notes.

First, there is the issue of timing. God gave these laws before Israel entered the land. These laws were given in faith that they would possess the land. The point is that *these laws presumed covenant succession*. So there is a certain dimension of eschatology here. They were planning and taking actions based on God's promises of the future, just as we must plan and take actions based on God's promises and warnings concerning the future. That's what it means to live by faith. Living by faith is not a wild leap in the dark. It is taking God's promises seriously.

A second overarching principle is that God gave these laws to help Israel steward the land. The land did not belong to them in an absolute way. It belonged to them as stewards, and they could not handle the land independently of God's law. There were laws against disinheriting family - such as eminent domain - a particular wretched law of the present. There were laws against polluting the land. And there were other laws related to the land that shows they had to handle their land as stewards who were accountable to God. So stewardship of property is an overarching principle throughout. And it is an overarching principle that we need to continue to apply to everything that we have.

Third, private ownership is another overarching principle throughout these two chapters and in Joshua 17. These passages speak strongly against *state* ownership of land. Land always belonged to individuals or to families. It doesn't belong to corporations, elite feudal lords who amass massive amounts of land to themselves, and certainly not to the state. Ezekiel 46:18 says, "the prince shall not take any of the people's inheritance by evicting them from their property; he shall provide an inheritance for his sons from his own property, so that none of My people may be scattered from his property." Family property rights are embedded into these laws. They speak strongly against communism.

The last overarching principle embedded in these passages is that God's law speaks to all of life and regulates all of life. Thus, civic leaders came to Moses to seek wisdom from God's word - and they need to continue to do that. Girls came to Moses for the same wisdom from God's revelation - and girls should learn to come to the Scriptures for guidance. And it is clear that God's Word addressed other issues such as covenant succession. We must look to the Word for our guidance.

So those are some overarching principles embedded within the passage that I won't delve into further. But they are very important.

III. Further applications

But let's end the sermon by looking at some of the practical applications that can be made from the story to the present. What are the abiding principles?

A. Women have legal rights - equal access to the law

The first application that I see is that women have legal rights. They have equal access to the law that men do. We see examples in the Bible of women going to court to secure justice on their behalf. They are not ignored by the courts. Even Christ's parable of the importunate widow implies the right of women to have equal access to the law. This is so universally acknowledged that I won't dwell on it. But it is an important principle when encountering feminist slander against the Bible.

B. Women have property rights

Second, women have property rights. Though property rights were managed differently for women and for men, there were property rights for women that were built right into the law. And because there has been so much confusion on the relationship of women to what parents may pass on, I want to spend a bit more time on this particular point. There is much more flexibility than many people acknowledge.

But we will start with what is unique to the woman. While the bride price went to the parents of the bride for the loss to their economy that the loss of their daughter would bring (and I think that is an implied background law that also factors into this story), the dowry went to the bride herself and was not supposed to be spent by the husband or anyone else. It was like a security for her or an insurance policy should there be death or divorce. It was a kind of inheritance. This is why Rachel and Leah complain that Laban had consumed *their inheritance*. A dowry was a kind of inheritance. Why was it considered an inheritance rather than a gift from the fiancé? Because it was given to her through the father. It presumes patriarchy, or father rule. Genesis 31:4 says, "Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, 'Is there still any portion or inheritance for us in our father's house?'" Laban was robbing them, and that's why they had to flee with what was rightfully theirs. Laban was an abusive, manipulative, suffocating leader, not a true Biblical patriarch. Jesus speaks of a woman who owns ten coins in Luke 15:8-10. She *owns* them; they aren't common property. Those coins were part of a dowry that were strung around the neck as a necklace. Each of those ten drachmas was worth about the price of a sheep or 1/5th of the price of an ox. Sometimes the dowry was land property, though this was rare, and because it was land, the land would revert to a male in the family of that tribe eventually. 1 Kings 9:16 shows that the area of Gezer was given as a dowry to Solomon's wife. And Joshua 15:19 shows Caleb giving his daughter, Achsah, the upper springs and the lower springs as an inheritance of property. Obviously a male child would eventually inherit those springs, since it was land, and land was unique. But ordinarily a dowry was money, jewels, gold, or something else of value that was easier to store. It wasn't usually land, though it could be.

But even apart from the dowry, women did sometimes receive other kinds of inheritance from their parents. Let me give you some examples. Job 42:15 says, "In all the land were found no women so beautiful as the daughters of Job; and their father gave them an inheritance among their brothers." So righteous Job shared his inheritance among both the brothers and the sisters. Obviously that was before the time of Israel in the land, but it does show that giving an inheritance to worthy daughters is not wrong. Exodus 3:22 speaks of vast plunder from Egypt being given to both sons and daughters as their respective

possessions. Genesis 24:53 shows Abraham's servant giving silver, jewelry, gold, and clothing to Rebekah and giving precious things to her brother and her mother.

So the question comes, why did the land ordinarily have to go to men within the tribe? There are at least two reasons. The first relates to ceremonial law. While there were enduring property-right-issues inherent in these ceremonial laws, they were restricted by tribal claims and the Jubilee ceremonial laws - something that no longer happens. Because of this typological function, Levites could only own property or apartments inside the Levitical cities (Numb. 35:8) or outside the country (Jer. 29:5,28), but they could not own farmland within Israel permanently (Numb. 18:20; 35:2; Deut. 10:9). All tribal land was given as a permanent inheritance to the *other* tribes until the time of Christ, and not to Levites. So that is one interesting limitation. It revolves around ceremonial law.

The second reason is more controversial. But I think it is important to realize that it wasn't just women who couldn't inherit most of Israelite property. *Most men within any tribe* could not inherit the land from their parents. You will see some people arguing otherwise, but it makes no logical or mathematical sense whatsoever. Let me explain. Just imagine Joshua's generation inheriting 500 acres of land per nuclear family in Israel (which would be a way larger inheritance than they would likely have gotten, but let's be generous in our calculations to prove the point). So imagine that each nuclear family got a huge 500 acre parcel. They wouldn't be able to farm that; it would be way too much to plow by hand or by ox. So we are starting with an impossibly large 500 acres. And then imagine that each family had ten sons - which was not unusual in those days. Well, that would mean in the second generation that each of your sons would only inherit fifty of those 500 acres. That's a sizeable reduction. If your sons had ten sons, they would each get five acres. If each of their sons had ten sons, they would each get 1/2th of an acre for their farming - that's a third of the size of my small yard. And that's just within three generations of the first generation. You can see that within just four generations the land would be unfarmable and would not sustain a family. Mathematically it would soon become postage stamp size. So take out of your mind forever the idea that every son got a portion of the land inheritance. It simply was not so. It is mathematically impossible. That was rarely if ever the case. It may have started off that way, but it didn't continue. Don't think it is women alone who didn't inherit land.

Instead, what happened is that the firstborn son (or some other worthy son) was usually the one to inherit the farm. And because he inherited the farm, he would be responsible to take care of the parents in their elderly years. If a father didn't trust a son to take care of him and his wife in his elderly years, he wouldn't give the farm to that son. Or if the parent was not a farmer, the firstborn (or some other worthy son) would get a double portion (you've seen that phrase in the Scripture - a double portion) of the business profits or monetary inheritance (in other words, he would get twice as much financial inheritance) as the other sons.

And here is the beauty of that system: By only allowing one son to inherit the farm, it kept the farm from being broken up into impossibly small patches of yard. But it also forced Israel to prosper through division of labor and specialization among the sons and daughters. The other sons and daughters would learn trades and other skills that would

enable Israel as a whole to prosper exponentially generation after generation. New businesses would fill niches that did not exist before. The way most people misinterpret the inheritance laws, Israel would have remained a stagnant economy and eventually the farms would all go under. The inheritance laws forced industrialization and economic diversity and promoted increasing prosperity. That's not a curse; that's a blessing.

But let's dig into this deeper. Going back to the ten sons and only one of them receiving the farm. Let's compare and contrast the nine non-firstborn sons and *their* inheritance to that of the daughters. This is a more fair comparison between the men and the women. Wealthy people like Job could easily bless sons and daughters alike with inheritance since no one would need to financially care for Job in his old age. He would have plenty of servants and all of his kids would be wealthy enough to care for him just from the businesses that Job gave them a jump start on. Not everyone would be able to do as Job did and give equal inheritance to daughters and sons because not everyone is hugely wealthy.

What would happen with poorer families is that the wife's *main* inheritance would have been the dowry that her fiancé gave to her through her parents. Plus, she would have the financial support of her new husband who had presumably received an inheritance from his parents and was building on that inheritance with his own acquired wealth. Since a man is commanded to provide for his family, the woman would be well-taken care of. Certainly providence could potentially drain her of her dowry (like Laban was trying to do with his daughters), but her husband would likely be equally drained since they would be having each other's backs in those dire circumstances. But through the dowry laws there really was equal provision for both the sons and the daughters of even poor families.

I think it would be good to resurrect the dowry system. One modern practice that is sort of equivalent, but not quite, is for the man to purchase a large life insurance policy on his own life with his wife as the beneficiary and for that policy to be non-cancellable by the man in case of divorce. It's not entirely equivalent, but it would help. That insurance policy would help to take care of the woman in case of the man's death just like a dowry was intended to do. It's a kind of inheritance - sort of. But it does expire, so it is not the same. And she can't use it if he were to divorce her (at least at the time of the divorce), so in that sense it is not the same. And you have to keep paying premiums, so it is not the same. But at least it is a stop-gap measure of security.

But there is no reason why all children cannot be financially blessed by parents with the one who takes care of them in their old age getting extra. Gary North has written several commentaries that go through all the Biblical evidence, and I want to read a very short summary from one of those commentaries. He says,

The dowry functioned in Israel as an alternative to inheritance by daughters. Sons inherited... Sons had the responsibility of caring for aged parents, not daughters and sons-in-law. To whom much is given, much is expected (Luke 12:47-48). Because the daughter could not inherit, she was not obligated to share in her parents' support. But because she would not share in her parents' support, she was not supposed to receive her dowry from her father's capital, for this would deplete the portion remaining to her brothers. The system was consistent.

...Such a system guaranteed that being a daughter would not be regarded by her family as being an economic liability. The bride price kept daughters from draining the inheritance that normally went to

sons. A daughter did not normally remain economically responsible for her parents; she became responsible for her husband's parents. Why? Because legally she was adopted into the family of her husband. Thus, inheritances in Israel went to sons, who later cared for aged parents, and dowries went to daughters, who extended their original family's ethical standards over time, though not the family's name.

He addresses the situation of sons who are ethically deficient or who are untrustworthy and a daughter who can be trusted to care for her parents. What to do in that situation? Life is not always what it should be, and there are times when only the daughter is worthy of the inheritance. So after looking at several Biblical principles, Gary North summarizes by saying,

Parents must use their wealth to endow those who will carry their religious vision into the future, though not necessarily their names. Covenantally faithful daughters should inherit.⁴

And I agree - especially if the daughter is caring for the parent. In another place North addresses another issue and says,

Should the daughter bring assets of her own to the marriage, they should remain her property in case of a divorce. They are not "community property"; they are her protection. At her death, these assets would normally go to her children.⁵

Unfortunately, some states are community property states. But that is not Biblical. Now, can a husband and a wife voluntarily pool their resources? Of course. But we are talking about minimum provisions, not what you can voluntarily do.

Now, I've spent more time on property rights because there is so much confusion on that subject, and I'm sure I haven't answered every question. We can discuss more aspects of this after the sermon. But all of those other Scriptures are perfectly consistent with what is going on with the daughters of Zelophehad.

C. Marriage rights and liberties - marry whom they think best

But let's move on to marriage rights and liberties. In Numbers 36:6 Moses makes an interesting statement about these young unmarried daughters. He says, "Let them marry whom *they* think best..." This shows an active processing of options by the women and deciding whom they want to marry. They are not passively acquiescing to an arranged marriage. I'm not against arranged marriages, so long as the wife has veto power. And certainly the Bible speaks of the man as usually taking initiative in this process. It speaks of him seeking a wife (1 Cor. 7:27), finding a wife (Prov. 18:22; 31:10) and taking a wife (Gen. 28:1,6; Lev. 21:7,13). It also speaks of fathers giving their daughters in marriage and finding wives for their sons (Jer. 29:6). So parents should be involved. But some people give the impression that women were therefore relatively passive. That's not true. Hopefully we disposed of that idea in the case of Ruth. But there are many other Scriptures that show

⁴ Gary North, *Authority and Dominion*, p. 592

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 558.

how important it is for women to be thinking through options as well. They have rights in this department.

I have three Scriptures here that show that women have the right to veto their dad's suggestions for a husband (Genesis 24:58, Numbers 36:6; Deut. 25:7-9). And certainly *this* passage shows that the law wants women to think about "whom *they* think best" to marry. They need to agree to a marriage or it is not a true covenant. 1 Corinthians 7:39 speaks of a woman who "is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord." So there is that restriction again - the Lord makes some restrictions. Now, granted, both passages show women who were alone. That's not the ideal. But even with the ideal that we have mentioned where fathers are very active,⁶ it still requires the women to make a choice. My book on Biblical Romance teases apart the norms and all the exceptions to the norms. But that book spells out women's rights as they relate to marriage.

D. The character of these women

Well, let's spend some time looking at the character of these women. And this is the part that made me love these women.

1. They were women of faith

First of all, we have already seen that they were women of faith. They had faith that they would get land in the land of Canaan, and they had that faith even before they got to the Jordan River to cross over. This means that they are absolutely convinced that Israel will inherit the land. This makes them stand out as women of faith in stark contrast to the previous generation that lacked faith, and therefore did not enter into the land.

Second, they had faith that they would have children. Francis Nichol points out that when God commands Moses to give *them* a possession of inheritance among their father's brothers, the "them" is masculine throughout, referring to the sons of these daughters - who don't exist yet. He says,

⁶ Jeremiah 29:6 shows that fathers should take the initiative in trying to find a good spouse for their daughters. God commands the fathers, "find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage." The fathers were very involved in the process, often initiating the process. Though the young man and woman are actively involved in finding a spouse, it is the parents who should ideally determine what that will look like - especially the parents of the bride. Scripture is quite clear that the father has authority over his daughter until the day of marriage (1 Cor. 7:36-40; Ex. 22:17). He even has the authority to refuse to give her in marriage *if he has lawful reasons* (Gen. 24:41; 1 Cor. 3:37-38). When the law uses the phrase, "if he utterly refuses to give her to him," it is implying a father's ongoing authority over his daughter and protection of his daughter until marriage (Ex. 22:17).

In Hebrew the word “them” is masculine, referring to the prospective offspring. The daughters were considered representatives of their own expected sons.⁷

By faith they were already representing their future offspring, planning for their future offspring, and seeking the welfare of their future offspring. And there are other indicators that they had faith that they would be married in the future and would have their own children in the future and that these children would enter Canaan and would eventually get land there. Faith.

2. They were intelligent

Second, they were intelligent. Their arguments were brilliant. They appealed to legal precedent, fit their dad into that legal precedent, showed how their situation would then violate God’s intentions in the law, and respectfully asked for a decision that would alleviate this apparent conflict in the law. You never get the impression from Scripture that guys are smart and girls are dumb. God has made both in His image and these are just five of many intelligent women that we have looked at.

3. They were articulate

Third, they were articulate. Actually, women are often more articulate than men, so that is not a surprise. But here are women speaking before men in the highest court of the nation. Yes there are places where women speaking is said to be out of place - church worship being one of them. They certainly should not rule. But God values articulate women clearly speaking their minds into important situations like this one. Their articulation of the issues benefited men and women for ages to come. In fact, this court case has been referenced in American law books all the way up to the early 1900s.

4. They were strong and assertive of their rights

Fourth, they were strong and assertive of their rights. Sure, they did so with gracious and humble speech. But they knew they were right and they humbly gave reasons why the decision should go their way. We men need to pay attention to the humble way that Moses responded to their request. He took them seriously. He was not dismissive. This is what true patriarchy looks like. What passes for patriarchy in some homes is simply abusive chauvinism.

5. They were united

Fifth, they were united. They had obviously thought through what to say and made sure that they were in total agreement. Though only one of them was probably acting as the spokesperson, the text is clear that this was what all of them were feeling. Being united in a

⁷ Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 1 (Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1978), 922.

request adds weight to the request. But it does force you to think things through carefully ahead of time rather than winging it in frustration.

6. They were confident that they were in the right

Sixth, they were confident that they were right. Being knowledgeable about Biblical law helps women to gain this confidence before others. There is nothing unsubmitive about being confident in your opinions. If things don't go your way, you can still be sweetly submissive. But women are not asked by God to turn off their minds. Women would have to turn off their minds if they couldn't ever disagree with their authority figures. You can disagree and respectfully articulate your disagreement without in any way being unsubmitive. Obviously it would begin to be unsubmitive (according to 1 Peter 3) if the women started nagging, undermining, and spreading discontent. But disagreements do not constitute lack of submission. These girls were confident that they were right.

7. They were purposeful

Seventh, they were purposeful. And their purpose was not just for themselves. They knew that this would set precedent for the nation. Being purposeful is the opposite of blowing up, flying off the handle, or being impulsive.

8. But they didn't complain or rebel

But at the same time, they didn't whine, complain, or rebel. They were respectful.

9. They handled discrimination with poise

Next, they handled discrimination with poise. While they didn't agree with what was happening, neither were they ruffled. They came into the court with poise.

10. They were respectful of their father (he was not part of the rebellion; they don't want his name erased) without putting him on a pedestal (he sinned)

The last characteristic that I noticed is that they were very respectful of their father. Though they didn't put him on a pedestal - even admitting that he had sinned in the wilderness, they did not want him associated in any way with the rebellion of Korah, which means that they were protecting his reputation. The reputation of our ancestors is an important thing to protect. And they did not want his name to be erased from the land divisions that would be happening, which shows that they valued their heritage. It was an honoring of the father for them to ensure that his name would be on the list of those who received an inheritance. And it is sad when children do not honor parents who have poured their lives into them. Modern children could learn from these daughters.

E. Five essentials of covenant succession

But since so much of this story is wrapped up in the theology of covenant succession, I want to end by quickly listing five essentials of covenant succession that we can learn from

these five unmarried girls. Jason Diffner’s book fills out the picture much more, but the seeds of covenant succession can be seen here as well.

1. Get married and have lots of kids

The first essential is that most people need to get married and have lots of kids. Simple logic tells you that, right? Without marriage and children you are not going to have covenant succession. And Numbers 36 and Joshua 17 show that they got married and had kids. Even Paul’s passage on the unique calling of singleness makes it clear that singleness was a temporary exception for unusual circumstances. He starts 1 Corinthians 7 by giving the norm, saying in verse 2, “let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband.” That’s the norm. I have seen people who fear the risks and responsibilities of marriage so much that they are forever putting it off. I have seen others who have such lofty expectations for a spouse that I doubt they will get married, or if they do, they will be disappointed. The norm is to get married to sinners who are growing in grace.

I have seen others who get married but don’t plan to have any children. That is not right. The Dominion Mandate of being fruitful and multiplying has never been rescinded, and indeed is repeated in the New Testament when God commands younger widows to “marry, bear children, manage the household” (1 Timothy 5:14). That’s the Dominion Mandate. So to most of you I would say, get married and have lots of kids. You have no future without it.

2. Have faith in God’s promises that the meek shall inherit the earth

But being married and having children is not enough. In my notes here, there are almost as many Scriptures that speak of the curse of the wicked having many children⁸ as there are that speak of the blessings of the righteous having many children.⁹ Fruitfulness is not a blessing in the abstract; it is blessing within the context of covenant faithfulness. For example, Deuteronomy 28:18 tells unfaithful Israelites, “Cursed shall be the fruit of your body.” The blessing of children is within a context of covenantal faithfulness.

So the next essential in having covenant succession is to have faith in God’s promises - including difficult-to-believe-promises such as “the meek shall inherit the earth.” The five sisters expressed their faith by contrasting themselves with the unbelieving families of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram who perished under God’s judgment and refused to possess the land.¹⁰ These daughters had the same faith that Christ called for when He said, “the meek

⁸ See for example, Gen. 3:16; Eccl. 6:3; Is. 49:19-21; Deut. 28:18-19; Ezek. 5:7-8 [KJV]; Jer. 15:9; Job 27:13-15; Luke 23:29.

⁹ On the blessings of having many children see Gen. 17:2,20; 22:17; 26:24; 28:3; 35:11; 48:4; Ex. 32:13; Deut. 7:14; Ps. 17:14; 113:9; 127:1-5; 128:1-6; Prov. 17:6; 1 Tim. 5:14.

¹⁰ Nowell says, “Their protest suggests that, if Zelophehad had been a member of Korah’s faction, his land would have been forfeit under the law of herem. The land (along with all the other possessions) of those condemned to capital punishment was turned over to the

shall inherit the earth.” Without faith in God, baptism is meaningless, and God’s promises of covenant succession will not come to fruition. Since we have already looked at their faith, I won’t say more on that point.

3. A commitment to raise our children in the fear and nurture of the Lord

The next characteristic that is essential to covenant succession is a commitment to raise our children in the fear and nurture of the Lord. Now, obviously this *flows* from an active faith. While faith lays hold of God’s inheritance on behalf of our children, it takes strong character to engage in whatever steps will be needed to see our *children also laying hold of the covenant by faith*. Almost every commentary shows this active taking and passing on of the faith in those five sisters in Numbers 36. When we take baptism vows for our children, we commit ourselves to doing everything we can to make sure that our children embrace the covenant for themselves. It won’t automatically happen. It must be worked at.

4. Embrace God’s law

Fourth, the raising of our children must be defined by God’s Word alone. So the fourth essential of covenant succession is that the parents are willing to embrace God’s law, live by God’s law, and pass that law on to their children. This was stated in Numbers 36:10, which says, “Just as the LORD commanded Moses, so did the daughters of Zelophehad.” It is implied in their contrast with the earlier rebels. When we apply the sign of the covenant to our children, we are committing ourselves to submit to God’s law rather than to rebel against God’s law like Korah, Dathan, and Abiram did.

5. Develop future orientation without depreciating the benefits of the past

The last essential of covenant succession that was illustrated in Numbers 27 and 36 is that the parents must have future orientation without depreciating the benefits of the past. We can get imbalanced if we park exclusively in either direction. Some people live in the past and fail to appreciate the growth of the kingdom in the future. Others are so preoccupied with the new that they neglect their heritage. And covenant theology enables you to maintain that balance between future and past. The past benefit that Numbers 36 focused

priests (see Commentary on 18:8–20) or to the king (see 1 Kgs 21:13–16). Zelophehad’s death as a member of his generation is not the main problem, however; the problem is that he has no sons. His daughters object that his name will be “cut off” from his clan, just as the names of those who were guilty of rebellion or sacrilege: Dathan, Abiram, Korah, Nadab, and Abihu. Their proposed solution is simple: Allow daughters to inherit if there are no sons.” Irene Nowell, Numbers, ed. Daniel Durken, vol. 5, The New Collegeville Bible Commentary (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 115.

on was the inheritance of their father, the law of God, and the faith of Abraham. The future orientation was expressed by most of what we have looked at today.

Well, in the same way, our children can stand on our shoulders and benefit from the spiritual heritage we have given them and from the financial heritage that we pass on. But our children must want that heritage passed on to the next generation. After all, God does indeed promise that He will be a God to us and to our children after us to a thousand generations. And we should hope and pray for growth in each generation - financial growth, spiritual growth, dominion growth. May God give each of our families the passion for covenant succession that the daughters of Zelophehad had. Amen.