

The Daughters of Zelophehad

Matriarchs of Faith

Introduction

If this is your first time hearing of the daughters of Zelophehad, you are in good company. The story describing their actions is brief and snugly tucked in the middle chapters of the Pentateuch. Though worthy of consideration, these unsung women of the Old Testament do not deserve a place alongside the saints of Hebrews 11, nor do they deserve the attention given to other well-known women of the scriptures. For that matter, the women selected for this series of studies all lack the overall renown that other women in the scriptures have. Each of them (with a few exceptions) exemplify a number of admirable qualities which we should emulate, but overall very little is known about them. Initially, I found this fact challenging. But after further prayer and study, the Lord revealed something about these women – or about how I view these women – which revealed a lot about me. I hope to communicate that tonight.

The Story

*“Then came the daughters of Zelophehad, the son of Hopher, the son of Gilead, the son of Machir, the son of Manasseh, of the families of Manasseh the son of Joseph: and these are the names of his daughters; Mahlah, Noah, and Hoglah, and Milcah, and Tirzah. And they stood before Moses, and before Eleazar the priest, and before the princes and all the congregation, by the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, saying, ³ **Our father died in the wilderness, and he was not in the company of them that gathered themselves together against the LORD in the company of Korah; but died in his own sin, and had no sons. ⁴ Why should the name of our father be done away from among his family, because he hath no son? Give unto us therefore a possession among the brethren of our father. ⁵ And Moses brought their cause before the LORD. ⁶ And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, ⁷ The daughters of Zelophehad speak right: thou shalt surely give them a possession of an inheritance among their father's brethren; and thou shalt cause the inheritance of their father to pass unto them. ⁸ And thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel, saying, If a man die, and have no son, then ye shall cause his inheritance to pass unto his daughter. ⁹ And if he have no daughter, then ye shall give his inheritance unto his brethren. ¹⁰ And if he have no brethren, then ye shall give his inheritance unto his father's brethren. ¹¹ And if his father have no brethren, then ye shall give his inheritance unto his kinsman that is next to him of his family, and he shall possess it: and it shall be unto the children of Israel a statute of judgment, as the LORD commanded Moses (Numbers 27:1-11).”***

As the children of Israel reached the edge of the Promised Land, Moses began to make arrangements for dividing it among the Twelve Tribes of Israel. In the previous chapter, he commissioned a census to be taken so that after the conquest of Canaan, Joshua and the elders could rightly divide the land among the tribes, and within each tribe they could allot a portion of the land to each family. This census was extremely important. The allotment of land distributed to each family would become their *permanent property*. Although they could lose ownership of the land temporarily, every 50 years, during the Year of Jubilee, the land would be returned to the family who originally owned it (Leviticus 25:13-17). This ensured that every family and almost every generation of every family would be a partaker of the promise of God to Abraham.

The daughters of Zelophehad arrive on the scene with a unique problem. In ancient times, inheritance rights were passed down through the male line. Since their father had no male offspring, his progeny would not receive an allotment in the Promised Land. Zelophehad was an honorable man in his generation who had simply failed to have a male heir, so his daughters believed his family should still be granted an inheritance in the land of promise. They are evidently permitted to bypass the lower courts in Israel and bring their concern directly to Moses and Eleazar the priest.

Upon hearing their complaint, Moses brings it before the Lord. God honors Zelophehad and the request of his daughters by establishing Israel's inaugural laws on inheritance to include a man's daughters when he has no male heir.

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Supposing the matter to be settled, Moses proclaims God's decree and continues preparing the children of Israel to enter the Promised Land. But the closing chapter of Numbers reveals an unintended consequence of such an arrangement. The elders of Manasseh (the tribe to which Zelophehad had belonged) realize that when a daughter inherits the land of her father but marries outside her tribe, then during the Year of Jubilee, the land will become the permanent possession of that other tribe, because the male heirs will be descendants of their father's tribe.

“ And 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 spake before Moses, and before the princes, the chief fathers of the children of Israel: ² And they said, The LORD commanded my lord to give the land for an inheritance by lot to the children of Israel: and my lord was commanded by the LORD to give the inheritance of Zelophehad our brother unto his daughters. ³ And if they be married to any of the sons of the other tribes of the children of Israel, then shall their inheritance be taken from the inheritance of our fathers, and shall be put to the inheritance of the tribe whereunto they are received: so shall it be taken from the lot of our inheritance. ⁴ And when the jubilee of the children of Israel shall be, then shall their inheritance be put unto the inheritance of the tribe whereunto they are received: so shall their inheritance be taken away from the inheritance of the tribe of our fathers. ⁵ And Moses commanded the children of Israel according to the word of the LORD, saying, The tribe of the sons of Joseph hath said well. ⁶ This is the thing which the LORD doth command concerning the daughters of Zelophehad, saying, Let them marry to whom they think best; only to the family of the tribe of their father shall they marry. ⁷ So shall not the inheritance of the children of Israel remove from tribe to tribe: for every one of the children of Israel shall keep himself to the inheritance of the tribe of his fathers. ⁸ And every daughter,

that possesseth an inheritance in any tribe of the children of Israel, shall be wife unto one of the family of the tribe of her father, that the children of Israel may enjoy every man the inheritance of his fathers. ⁹ Neither shall the inheritance remove from one tribe to another tribe; but every one of the tribes of the children of Israel shall keep himself to his own inheritance. ¹⁰ Even as the LORD commanded Moses, so did the daughters of Zelophehad: ¹¹ For Mahlah, Tirzah, and Hoglah, and Milcah, and Noah, the daughters of Zelophehad, were married unto their fathers brothers' sons: ¹² And they were married into the families of the sons of Manasseh the son of Joseph, and their inheritance remained in the tribe of the family of their father. ¹³ These are the commandments and the judgments, which the LORD commanded by the hand of Moses unto the children of Israel in the plains of Moab by Jordan near Jericho (Numbers 36:1-13)."

Moses acknowledges this dilemma and clarifies the law in these rare situations.

1. If a man has no male heirs, then let his daughters inherit the land (Numbers 26:1-11).
2. For a daughter to retain her inheritance rights, she was required to marry someone within her father's tribe. This ensured that the land given to each tribe would remain the property of that tribe forever (Numbers 36:6-7).
3. If a daughter chose to marry outside her father's tribe, then the land would be given to the next male heir (Numbers 27:5-11).

Lessons from the Story

There are a few notable takeaways directly from this story which are worth mentioning. First, the *motivation* of these women is crystal clear. Their father was an honorable man, unlike the "company of Korah," and they feel that he deserves the same treatment that the other faithful men of that generation received. Furthermore, they are discussing inheritance rights *in anticipation* of a successful conquest of Canaan. These daughters would not personally benefit from the land nearly as much as future generations would. It is apparent that Zelophehad's daughters are primarily motivated by their love for their father and their love for their offspring, not self-interest.

The daughters' initiative to bring this matter to Moses *in anticipation* of a successful conquest reveals a second notable thing about them: they are women of faith. The generation which raised them is used throughout the Bible as a faithless generation (Psalm 78:8-58; Psalm 95:6-11; Psalm 106:6-33; Ezekiel 20:7-17; Jeremiah 7:21-26; I Corinthians 10:1-12). God emancipated them from slavery, miraculously provided them nutritional sustenance for 40 years, divinely instituted a civil and religious law, guided them by fire and cloud, protected them from surrounding enemies, and physically revealed His existence as clearly to them as to any generation in the history of the Old Testament, yet they faithlessly questioned Him for 40 years.

The faith-filled Conquest Generation proved to be the antithesis of the faithless Wilderness Generation; the faith demonstrated by the daughters of Zelophehad are emblematic of the Conquest Generation. Despite the Promised Land being occupied with strong armies and fortified cities, the daughters of Zelophehad were so convinced that God would fulfill His promise that they felt an urgent need to correctly establish the inaugural inheritance laws for a land which had not yet been obtained. These were clearly women of faith.

Finally, these women are visionaries. Undistracted by their immediate circumstances in the wilderness or the forthcoming battles which would later define their generation, these women looked beyond their lives to ensure their descendents would reap the Promises of God. We should likewise seek to have hearts that burn with the urgency of the last hour while also preparing for the possibility that God will delay His coming for a thousand years. Be urgent in spirit, but preparatory in action.

What this Story is Not About

What may be of greater importance is what this story is *not* about. The story of Zelophehad's daughters is not about gender equality or how God values women. To read that into the text is to distort the intent of God's words. But what causes us to do that? Why do well-meaning Christians use every positive interaction between God and a woman as evidence of His affection for women? Why are pastors so afraid to teach that men are the head of the household and women are commanded to submit to their husbands? What do we lose when we reorient the intent of a biblical text to address the ideologies of mainstream culture? If we assume that God's response to Zelophehad's daughters is primarily aimed at demonstrating His affection for women, then we, in a sense, reveal our own belief that God's view on women needs to be vindicated. Or, that at some previous point in the Bible, God has shown favoritism toward men and disdain for women. But that is far from the case!

God's actions regarding gender are not about value but about order. This arrangement is patterned after a divine arrangement found within the persons of the Trinity. The Bible reveals God as one God, but composed of three independent persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each person of the Trinity is as equally valuable and powerful as the others, but two are *willingly submissive* to the will of One. Just as Jesus' submission to the will of the Father was an example of submitting to God's order, so a woman's submission to her husband is emblematic of obedience to God's design. Why do we see the submission of Jesus to the Father as just and admirable – worthy of our emulation – but the submission of a wife to her husband as oppressive and worthy of our rebellion? This arrangement of headship and submission creates order within the Godhead. If order was assigned among the perfect persons of the Trinity, how much more necessary is order among the corrupt ancestors of Adam?

When God created distinct genders to provide companionship and enrich human life, He assigned each gender responsibility and established order within this institution. Adam was created first and was made the head, and Eve was created after Adam and was commanded to submit to her husband (I Timothy 2:12-13). This design is not flawed and needs no apologetic explanation. Christians do not need to defend God's record on gender equality by using every positive interaction God has with women as evidence of His love for them. God loves everyone! He makes no distinction in a person's value based on race, ethnicity, or gender (Colossians 3:10-11). But in order to accomplish His perfect will, the Father has assigned different roles to each gender, *just like He does the Trinity!*

The modern feminist movement actively seeks to eliminate any distinction between men and women, thereby destroying God's design. They have largely succeeded in our nation, churches, and homes, and the corrosive results are self-evident. These Satanic agendas will continue to succeed if we permit them to subconsciously guide our interpretation of scripture by making every Bible story involving a woman about gender equality.

The story of Zelophehad's daughters exists within a much broader framework than the hollow gender ideologies of 21st century America; and it proves more than God's love for women. The true value of this story, or any story within the biblical narrative, is clear when seen through the larger framework of redemptive history. But, if we manipulate the story of David and Goliath to be about an individual "overcoming the giants in their life," or the story of Mary and Joseph traveling to Egypt to be about "immigrants seeking political asylum," or the story of Zelophehad's daughters to be about "God's desire to treat women fairly," then we will miss the correct and significantly deeper meaning God reveals in these stories. The proclivity of American Christian culture to reimagine every Bible story to a man-centered theme focused on individualism and self-actualization is dangerous. The pride-crushing truth is that the story of your life is not really about you. It is merely the canvas upon which God desires to reveal *His* glory and *His* greatness. If He makes you a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord (Psalm 84:10), the paraplegic son of a fallen king (II Samuel 9:1-12), a no-name maiden of an afflicted general (II Kings 5:1-12), a poverty-stricken widow offering her last two mites (Luke 21:1-4), a blue-collar missionary in a barren field, an elderly grandmother who faithfully prays for her distant grandchildren, a weary-eyed homeschool mom striving to make her children disciples of Christ, or any other rarely celebrated but servant-hearted Christian who uses their life to exalt Christ, then eagerly "*take up your cross, and follow [him]*" (Matthew 16:24)."

The unfolding of human history is ultimately aiming toward the eternal exaltation of the Father (I Corinthians 15:28) and His Son (Revelation 5:1-14). Every story within and without the Bible aids that theme. This includes the hallmark stories which echo throughout our Sunday School classes, as well as the seemingly obscure regulations in the Old Covenant regarding civil and domestic affairs which provided order to the nation of Israel. If we strive to read the Bible through that lens, willing to engage but not subliminally reorient every story toward the culture wars of our day or the man-centric narratives of a Disney-esque movie, then we will discover something far more wonderful than we can imagine – the all-surpassing glory of an infinite God.

Conclusion

We will conclude our lesson where it began. Just as the daughters of Zelophehad don't deserve extraordinary attention within the annals of biblical literature, neither is it likely that our lives will. But that isn't the point. Aiming for extraordinary acts of faith to elicit the praise of men are the bane of a true servant of Jesus Christ. The true goal of our lives is to be faithful. Zelophehad was honored because he remained faithful among a faithless generation. His daughters successfully reaped the fruits of Zelophehad's faithfulness and ensured that future generations would also be blessed by their courageous actions. Let us aim to understand God's Word as He directed it, to live courageously for the glory of God, and to heap upon future generations blessings for walking in our footsteps.