

### Another Question about a Woman's Right to Inherit Property

#### Numbers 36

Numbers 36 - *"The family heads of the clan of Gilead son of Makir, the son of Manasseh, who were from the clans of the descendants of Joseph, came and spoke before Moses and the leaders, the heads of the Israelite families. <sup>2</sup> They said, "When the LORD commanded my lord to give the land as an inheritance to the Israelites by lot, he ordered you to give the inheritance of our brother Zelophehad to his daughters. <sup>3</sup> Now suppose they marry men from other Israelite tribes; then their inheritance will be taken from our ancestral inheritance and added to that of the tribe they marry into. And so part of the inheritance allotted to us will be taken away. <sup>4</sup> When the Year of Jubilee for the Israelites comes, their inheritance will be added to that of the tribe into which they marry, and their property will be taken from the tribal inheritance of our ancestors."*

<sup>5</sup> Then at the LORD's command Moses gave this order to the Israelites: *"What the tribe of the descendants of Joseph is saying is right. <sup>6</sup> This is what the LORD commands for Zelophehad's daughters: They may marry anyone they please as long as they marry within their father's tribal clan. <sup>7</sup> No inheritance in Israel is to pass from one tribe to another, for every Israelite shall keep the tribal inheritance of their ancestors. <sup>8</sup> Every daughter who inherits land in any Israelite tribe must marry someone in her father's tribal clan, so that every Israelite will possess the inheritance of their ancestors. <sup>9</sup> No inheritance may pass from one tribe to another, for each Israelite tribe is to keep the land it inherits."* <sup>10</sup> So Zelophehad's daughters did as the LORD commanded Moses. <sup>11</sup> Zelophehad's daughters—Mahlah, Tirzah, Hoglah, Milkah and Noah—married their cousins on their father's side. <sup>12</sup> They married within the clans of the descendants of Manasseh son of Joseph, and their inheritance remained in their father's tribe and clan.

<sup>13</sup> These are the commands and regulations the LORD gave through Moses to the Israelites on the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho."

#### Background Notes

The last verse of Numbers 36 is a summary verse for chapters 22-36, the last section of the book of Numbers. Numbers 22:1 says, *"the children of Israel moved, and camped in the plains of Moab on the side of the Jordan across from Jericho."* Do you remember where Israel was when the book of Numbers began? Numbers 1:1 - *"Now the LORD spoke to Moses in the Wilderness of Sinai... in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt."*

A total of 40 years had gone by since Israel left Egypt, and a whole generation had died because of unbelief. Now the nation was poised to enter the Promised Land.

In our study of the book of Numbers, we've seen a lot of lessons that apply to God's people today. The "sins of the wilderness" - complaining, criticism, rebellion, contempt of God's leaders, and unbelief in God's promises - all these sins

resulted in discipline and loss of blessing for the nation of Israel. When we commit the same sins as “wilderness believers,” we will lose out on the spiritual blessings that God has for us as His people, and we will experience God’s discipline. Let’s learn the lessons of the book of Numbers so that we don’t spend our lives wandering in the wilderness, being disciplined for our sin, and losing out on the spiritual blessings that God has for us.

On the positive side, of course, we see God’s grace written all over the book of Numbers! God graciously provided for His people every day of their long travels. Remember the manna that God provided each day? He faithfully supplied what they needed, in spite of their lack of faith and in spite of their sins of the wilderness? And God graciously guided His people every step of the way. Remember the pillar of cloud by day, and the pillar of fire by night? God has not changed in the ways He graciously works with His people today. Our Heavenly Father deals graciously with His children, and even His discipline is planned with our future blessing in mind.

In the last chapter of Numbers, the new generation of the nation of Israel was ready to cross over into the Promised Land. They were camped on the plains of Moab, across the Jordan River from Jericho. Before they crossed over, however, a last minute question came up about the tribal division of the Land and property inherited by women.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. The women of Israel would inherit family property if they had no brothers.

In Numbers 27 we read about a man named Zelophehad, from the tribe of Manasseh, who had no sons to inherit his portion in the Promised Land. But he had five daughters, so the daughters raised the logical question: could they inherit their father’s portion of the tribal territory of Manasseh when Israel entered the land? The answer from the Lord was “Yes!” In Numbers 27:6-8, *“...the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: “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. 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.’”*

In Numbers 27 we learned that that God listens to the logic of His people. And we also learned that God can’t be labeled a “male chauvinist,” as some critics today try to say! Normally property was passed down to a man’s sons in order to keep the property in the family name, but the Lord said there was no reason why women couldn’t inherit property in the Land if the father had no sons. Even if a daughter was married, and was now living on the property of her husband’s family, she still was entitled to inherit her own father’s land. The women of Israel could inherit family property if they had no brothers.

### 2. The women of Israel would inherit family property if they married within their tribe.

A further question was raised about property that was inherited by the women of Israel. The question was this: What happened to the inherited property if a woman married a man from a different tribe in Israel?

Some intermarriage between the tribes had already taken place, when the tribes were all camped close together during their forty-year wilderness travels - but at that time no property was involved. Now, when they entered and settled the Land, what would happen to the tribal territories in years to come if women with inherited property married outside the tribe? Would the land the woman had inherited go with the woman and become part of her husband's property, or would it stay with her father's tribe? I think you can see all the potential problems. Some tribes would gain more land, some tribes would lose land, and eventually, the tribal territories would be like a patchwork quilt, with very few contiguous tribal properties.

Furthermore, what would happen to the inherited property at the Year of Jubilee? According to Leviticus 25, every 50 years land was to be returned to its original owners. Would the inherited land return to the tribe of the woman's father, or would the land stay with the tribe of her husband?

The Lord's logical answer to these logical questions is found in verses 6-9: *"This is what the LORD commands for Zelophehad's daughters: They may marry anyone they please as long as they marry within their father's tribal clan. No inheritance in Israel is to pass from one tribe to another, for every Israelite shall keep the tribal inheritance of their ancestors. Every daughter who inherits land in any Israelite tribe must marry someone in her father's tribal clan, so that every Israelite will possess the inheritance of their ancestors. No inheritance may pass from one tribe to another, for each Israelite tribe is to keep the land it inherits."*

Notice, by the way, the phrase *"they may marry anyone they please."* Even with arranged marriages of that culture, women did have a say in what man they married!

So the women of Israel could marry anyone they wished. However, in order to keep the tribal territories intact, if the women were in line to inherit (or had already inherited) family property, they had to marry within their own tribe if they wanted to keep the property. The principle here is "freedom within limits," and we see this principle in a number of other places in the Bible. Now I don't know whether any of these unmarried women took the attitude of "land for a man" in order to get the husband they wanted, but you can be sure that a lot of men would be interested in marrying a woman who owned property, or who obviously was going to inherit property! In any case, the women of Israel would inherit family property if they married within their tribe.

## **Practical Application**

**Let's practice the faith and obedience of Zelophehad's daughters!**

*“So Zelophehad’s daughters did as the LORD commanded Moses. Zelophehad’s daughters—Malah, Tirzah, Hoglah, Milkah and Noah—married their cousins on their father’s side. They married within the clans of the descendants of Manasseh son of Joseph, and their inheritance remained in their father’s tribe and clan” (v10-11).*

All five daughters of Zelophehad decided to keep their inherited property. They submitted to the Law, and they didn’t complain or say it wasn’t fair. No, they simply **obeyed the Lord**. They married their cousins. Some people wonder if this relationship between cousins was incest. No, incest is **fornication** between close relatives, not **marriage** between close relatives. There are good reasons why close relatives do not marry today, but marriage between close relatives is not incest.

So we see the **obedience** of Zelophehad’s daughters, but where do we see their **faith**? Remember, Numbers 36 took place when the nation was still on the plains of Moab, on the east side of the Jordan River. But these young women believed **by faith** that Israel would conquer and possess the Land, just as God had promised. They trusted the Lord’s promises about their future inheritance in the Promised Land, and they obeyed the Lord in their marriages.

Do you see the practical application for us? Do we really believe the promises of the Lord about our future inheritance? Do we obey the Lord’s commands in all areas of our lives?

Let’s practice the faith and obedience of Zelophehad’s daughters!