

# Joseph's Inheritance

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Joshua 17:1–6, 12–18  
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The distribution of land to the tribe of Joseph began in the previous chapter with the land given to Joseph's younger son Ephraim. Chapter 17 turns our attention to his older son Manasseh. Although he was born first, he appears second in the allotment of land because of the favor shown to him in Genesis 48.

Now, Manasseh had only one son named Machir (Gen. 50:23; Num. 26:29), and Machir also had one son named Gilead. The Lord had already given Gilead land on the east side of the Jordan because his father, whom Joshua described in verse 1 as *a man of war*, took it from the Amorites (Num. 32:39). But Gilead had six sons. Their land was on the west side of the Jordan. But one of his sons, a man named Hopher, had only one son who had already died without having a son of his own. He had only daughters. In fact, he had five of them. His name was Zelophehad. This raised an interesting problem: what would happen to his inheritance since he had no sons to receive it? This is the first point we'll consider today from verses 3 through 6.

After that, we'll skip the geographical information in the next few verses and pick up with verse 12. Here we see that the descendants of Manasseh couldn't completely drive out the Canaanites from their land. This created another interesting situation.

And the third thing that we'll consider this evening comes from verses 14 through 18 — two complaints that the children of Joseph made regarding their inheritance. We'll look at their concerns and Joshua's response.

## Zelophehad's Daughters

Let's start with Zelophehad's inheritance. This land issue had already been dealt with by Moses in Numbers 27. Zelophehad's daughters realized that they risked losing their father's inheritance and sought the Lord's will. They said, *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. Why should the name of our father be done away from among his family, because he hath no son?* (vv. 3–4). The Lord assured these women that they had a legitimate claim to receive their father's land. But his response went beyond the original question and became an abiding principle for distributing the land of a man who died without sons. He said, *If a man die, and have no*

son, then ye shall cause his inheritance to pass on to his daughter. And if he had no daughter, then ye shall give his inheritance unto his brethren. And if he had no brethren, then ye shall give his inheritance unto his father's brethren. 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 (vv. 8–11).

Several things stand out here.

First, Calvin correctly observed that the request of Zelophehad's daughters was a powerful demonstration of their faith in God's promises. Here's what he wrote:

Although (the daughters of Zelophehad) plead before Moses for their own private advantage, still the discussion arose from a good principle; inasmuch as they would not have been so anxious about the succession, if God's promise had not been just as much a matter of certainty to them as if they were at this moment demanding to be put in possession of it. They had not yet entered the land, nor were their enemies conquered; yet, relying on the testimony of Moses, they prosecute their suit as if the tranquil possession of their rights were to be accorded them that very day. And this must have had the effect of confirming the expectations of the whole people.<sup>1</sup>

Another commentator says that “Mahlah and her sisters may be our school mistresses to bring us to Christ” because they had the boldness and confidence “to lay hold of God's provisions.”<sup>2</sup> And this reminds us not only to teach our daughters to be bold in Christ, but that we should be just as bold ourselves.

And this goes to the heart of the question Zelophehad's daughters raised, which was whether the inheritance was contingent upon pedigree or faithfulness. What was the condition for the blessings of covenant life? It was faithfulness. Their father hadn't been a rebel, and neither were they. Why, then, should they be excluded from the distribution of land and being part of the covenant community?

Second, note that Joshua carefully recorded the names of Zelophehad's daughters at the end of verse 3. These are the same names that we find in Numbers 27, thus showing that they had a legitimate claim. The Lord had taken care of them. Both Eleazar and Joshua made sure of it.

Third, Zelophehad's daughters expressed their concern directly to *Eleazar the priest* and *Joshua the son of Nun*. That's how these two men are identified whenever land questions are at issue because they had been appointed by God to serve in this role (cf. 14:1; 17:4; 19:51; 21:1). Zelophehad's daughters took their concern to these men, expecting them to carry out the Lord's will in this matter.

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin's commentary on Numbers 27:2.

<sup>2</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *Joshua: No Falling Words*, in *loc*.

Fourth, this passage reinforces the decision already made in Numbers 27, viz., that daughters could inherit their father's land under certain conditions. But it does more than this because Zelophehad's daughters received not just one portion of land to be divided among them, but five portions of land. Verse 5 says that ten portions were given to Manasseh besides the two Gilead received on the other side of the Jordan: five went to the sons of Gilead or their male descendants, and the other five went to his great-granddaughters, the daughters of Zelophehad. This means that Hopher, the sixth of Gilead's sons, received five times as much land as his other sons. Verse 6 says that *the daughters of Manasseh had an inheritance among his sons*.

None of the commentaries I own explain why Hopher received more inheritance than his brothers, and therefore I offer just a couple of thoughts to consider. One is that there is a precedent for this. It's exactly what God did with Joseph's two sons. He gave each of them a portion equal to their uncles. In fact, their portions were greater than most because they had outgrown the other tribes by the time Joshua distributed the land. And further, we must remember that it's the Lord's prerogative to raise up one and put down another. Perhaps he gave such a tremendous blessing to Zelophehad's daughters because of their faith in his promises. Interestingly, their names continued in Israel's history for some time afterward: their clans were named after them, as archaeological evidence shows.

And fifth, to preserve the integrity of family inheritances, Moses later instructed Zelophehad's daughters, and all women in similar situations, to marry only within their own family and tribe. This came up in Numbers 36. Zelophehad's daughters willingly complied, showing once again their tremendous faith in God's Word.

## Canaanites in the Land

The next part of this evening's text tells us that the children of Manasseh couldn't drive the Canaanites from the land, though they eventually consigned them to slave labor.

This is the third time in the book of Joshua that we read about the inability of God's people to drive the inhabitants out of the land. In chapter 15, the children of Judah couldn't remove the Jebusites (v. 63). The Jebusites remained in the land until David conquered them four hundred years later. And in chapter 16, the children of Ephraim couldn't dislodge the Canaanites from Gezer (v. 10).

However, our text is a little different from the two previous incidents. It explicitly says that the children of Manasseh couldn't drive out the Canaanites because they *would dwell in the land*. The NKJV says that they were "determined" to remain in the land. That is, they stubbornly refused to leave, and the children of Manasseh were content to let them stay.

Thus, the three most important tribes by prominence and size — Judah and the two sons of Joseph — failed to remove the Canaanites from their possessions. They had the power to do so, as we saw with Caleb’s defeat of Hebron and Othniel’s victory over Debir, but they chose instead to tolerate wickedness, which ended up hurting them in the long run.

Negatively, this tells us what not to do. Peace with wickedness is never better than fighting for righteousness. How many churches have been destroyed over the years because they have refused to take a stand upon the Word of God? And positively, it reminds us that only one person ever successfully and completely put his enemies to route, and that person is Jesus Christ. The Scriptures tell us that he destroyed the one who had the power of death (Heb. 2:14). He conquered him in a victory that will never be undone.

## Joseph’s Complaints

Beginning with verse 14, the distribution of land to the descendants of Joseph ends with Joseph’s descendants making two complaints to Joshua. Here we’re talking about both Manasseh and Ephraim, which are treated here as one. Joseph’s children used the singular pronouns *me* and *I* when speaking to Joshua: *Why hast thou given me but one lot and one portion to inherit, seeing I am a great people, forasmuch as the LORD hath blessed me hitherto?* And Joshua responded with singular pronouns in verse 15: *If thou be a great people, then get thee up to the wood country, and cut down for thyself there in the land of the Perizzites and of the giants, if mount Ephraim be too narrow for thee.*

Joseph’s descendants, especially those from the tribe of Ephraim, often complained about things. In Judges 8:1 they complained because they hadn’t been called to fight against the Midianites, and in 12:1 they complained because they hadn’t been summoned to fight against the Ammonites. Why were they complainers? Because they thought too much of themselves. Remember that they were children of Joseph, who had been next to Pharaoh in command of Egypt. And not only that, Joseph’s descendants made up the second largest tribe when Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt. Only Judah was bigger. But over the next thirty-eight years, they outgrew even Judah. Joshua mentioned this in verse 15, *If thou be a great people*, i.e., if you’re as great as you think you are, you shouldn’t have any trouble clearing out the land you want.

Now, one thing is missing here. When Caleb asked for his inheritance, he based his request on God’s promise. So did Zelophehad’s daughters. But Joseph’s children didn’t have a promise to cite or a verse to quote. They just wanted the land and thought they deserved it. They were greedy.

Their second complaint in verse 16 exposed their greed even more. They said that all the hill country still wouldn’t be enough for them. Here they also exposed their fear. Although there were a

lot of them, the Canaanites who lived in the plains had one thing they didn't have — chariots of iron. These chariots would have hemmed them in. That's what they believed. Their complaints were the same as those of the spies who brought back a bad report. They didn't think that God was big enough to overcome their enemies.

Joshua didn't have any sympathy for Joseph's descendants, even though he was one of them (Num. 13:8). He simply told them they could have what they wanted, and even more, if they would go take it in their own power because the Lord hadn't promised to help them. But they never did. The story of extra land for them stops here.

Tonight's text is a story of contrasts. On the one hand, we have Zelophehad's daughters, who trusted God to guard their father's name. Faith rang loudly in their ears. It said, "God will lead his people into the land. Not only will he give them an inheritance, but he'll be their inheritance, and they'll be his." And on the other hand, we have the rest of Joseph's family, who didn't trust God enough to drive out the Canaanites, and who quarreled over real estate.

Scripture constantly calls us to faith, asking us which side we're on. Do we get caught up in the unimportant details of our lives, not believing that God really is in control of all things? Do we like to take matters into her own hands? Or maybe we're afraid to do anything because our enemies are too strong for us? Or do we take it on faith that Jesus Christ has given us everything we need in himself? Do we trust that his shed blood is our life, our hope, our purpose and our meaning?

If there's anything we learn from the book of Joshua, it's that we don't ask ourselves these questions just once. We have to ask them all the time. Every challenge, every difficulty, every problem, every opportunity requires us to look at them again, and see if we're still trusting Jesus. Amen.