

“Mahlah, et. al. vs. Moses”

NUMBERS 27:1-11

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Have we ever spent any time listening to children play? If you have, then you know that it is not long before we hear somebody say, “That’s not fair!” Those of you who work with children probably hear this on a daily basis, because it seems that human beings come with a built-in sense of what is fair and what is not. When it seems as if somebody is getting more than we are, whether it’s more attention, more candy, or more turns on the slide, we feel insulted, we feel as if we are missing out on something, and we feel as if somebody needs to do something to make things right.

I have told you before about going on long car rides in the back seat next to my sister when we were little kids. On those 12-hour trips to Tennessee, we had a keen sense for when the other was taking up even the slightest molecule of our space in the back seat of the car. It even got to the point where my dad got a roll of masking tape and put a line right down the middle of that vinyl seat in that 1979 Plymouth Volaré. In some ways, that helped, and yet as both of us grew up, we learned that there are many times when life itself is not fair. But that sense of fairness is something that seems to develop very early. Of course, as parents, we have developed our own little tricks through the years. When our kids were much younger, we kept on facing the dilemma of how to divide a piece of candy fairly between two children. I mean, this is a serious concern for young parents! And I am sure we learned this somewhere, but we finally discovered the secret: You have one kid cut the candy in half, and then the other kid gets to choose between the pieces. That is absolutely genius! As that cut is made, there is a laser-like focus on getting it right, the second kid gets to choose what seems to be the larger piece, and then the first kid cannot complain about getting the smaller piece, because he cut it! So, in that regard, we found the perfect solution.

But we know, of course, that not all matters of fairness can be navigated that easily. Because again, as we get older, we realize that the world can be a very unfair place to live. And so the sense of fairness seems to mature into more of a sense of justice, and as we age, we realize that there are times when we do need to speak up, not only for ourselves, but also for others. This morning I would like for us to consider the account of five sisters who learned (and also taught) a powerful lesson on dealing with what was clearly a very unfair situation. Their names are Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. They are the five daughters of Zelophehad.

Last March (just over a year ago), one of our Christian sisters turned in a sermon request, and the card simply said, “Zelophehad,” and had a number of scripture references behind it. Well, I put it off for a while, and then I started looking up the references. The first reference comes in Numbers 26:33, and this is what the verse says, **“Now Zelophehad the son of Hepher had no sons, but only daughters; and the names of the daughters of Zelophehad were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah.”** I looked at that verse, and then I said to myself, “My dear Christian sister, she’s messing with me! This is perhaps the most obscure and most meaningless verse in the entire Bible!” I said to myself, “This has to be a joke! What have I done to deserve this? Certainly there is nothing sermon-worthy about some obscure guy in the book of Numbers who had no sons and five daughters with some really weird names.” But then I continued reading in the next chapter and beyond. Zelophehad and his daughters are actually mentioned five times in the Bible. So, there is something about this man and his daughters that must be important. For some reason, God wants us to know about this family. And so this morning, I would invite you to look at their story in Numbers 27:1-11 (p. 267).

This account was actually cited in the *Journal of the American Bar Association* back in February 1924 as an example of one of the earliest lawsuits ever filed. In fact, the article by Henry C. Clark explains that attorneys still turn to this record as an example of the oldest decided case that is “still cited as an authority.” So, it is important for us to consider it.

I don’t know if you realize this, but there are 956 men mentioned by name in the Bible but only 188 women. So, for these five women to be named is actually quite significant. These five women represent 3% of all of the women named in the Bible. And when we think about it, we realize that the scribes certainly could have just referred to them as the “daughters of Zelophehad,” but instead, the scribes made sure to name all five of them, and they did not just name them once, but five times! I would point out here at the beginning that this must have been a rather godly family. The scholars tell us that when a name ends with the syllable “ah,” it is almost always a contraction for the name Jehovah, the Lord God. So, if you will notice, each of these young women had in her name an abbreviated form of the name of God. So, in some way, their parents must have been devout on some level. Their parents, even though they themselves were born and raised in Egypt, decided once they were led out by the power of God, to name their daughters after the one true God of heaven. That right there says quite a bit about this family.

For a little background, I would point out that the book of Numbers is called the book of Numbers because it is a record of the numbering of the people of Israel. They take a count at the beginning of the book (at the beginning of the 40 years in the wilderness), and they take another count at the end of the book (at the end of the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness). And in the middle of the book, we have several very important stories concerning what happened along the way as they traveled from Egypt to Canaan. We have the spies being sent out, we have Korah’s rebellion (which is mentioned in our story for this morning), we have the account of the bronze serpent, we have the prophecies of Balaam, and so on. But the focus of the book is numbers, the two censuses that were taken on each side of the 40 years. By the time we get to the end of the book, as they prepare to cross over the Jordan River, the number of fighting men 20 years old and older is 601,730. Well, that excludes those who are too old to fight, it excludes the children, and the number also excludes all of the women. So, as you can imagine, if we have more than 600,000 adult males who are able to fight, the total number is probably somewhere between 2-3 million people.

The five sisters I mentioned earlier are not married, and I am assuming they are all rather young. The account we are about to study takes place near the end of the 40 years in the wilderness, which means that these women were either younger than 20 years old when the wandering began, or they were born on the journey (which I believe is more likely, considering that none of them are married).

As we get started, I want to give you just a little inside look at what I go through for you people when it comes to selecting an image for the PowerPoint every Sunday morning! Earlier this week I got the process started by doing a Google Image search for “five sisters.” After all, the lesson is about five sisters! You would not believe how many families there are with five sisters!

- There were some rather normal-looking sisters.
- There were some extra-happy sisters.
- There were “The Five Legendary Sisters of the Laughing Dokgebi,” a group of outlaw sisters in Korea who fight a mythical troll. One online source compared them to a cross between the A-Team and Charlie’s Angels.
- There were elderly sisters.
- There were sisters from Southeast Asia.
- There were sisters from India.
- There were sisters who were sisters in more ways than one.
- There were dancing sisters.
- There were sisters who grew up in the 80’s.
- There were sisters who grew up in the 50’s and 60’s.
- There were sisters who were actually in their 70’s.
- There were sisters from the 1870’s.
- There were artistic sisters. The text said that they were holding some kind of instrument. I liked this one, but to me it looked like a giant matchstick, so that was a little too distracting to me.
- So I landed back on this one – artistic, but just generic enough that it will hopefully allow us to picture these five women from Numbers as real women. That is my goal, at least.

So now you know something of what I go through when looking for an image! But with all of this in mind, let us please look together at the account of Zelophehad’s five daughters in Numbers 27:1-11,

¹ Then 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, came near; and these are the names of his daughters: Mahlah, Noah and Hoglah and Milcah and Tirzah. ² They stood before Moses and before Eleazar the priest and before the leaders and all the congregation, at the doorway of the tent of meeting, saying, ³ “Our father died in the wilderness, yet he was not among the company of those who gathered themselves together against the Lord in the company of Korah; but he died in his own sin, and he had no sons. ⁴ Why should the name of our father be withdrawn from among his family because he had no son? Give us a possession among our father’s brothers.” ⁵ So Moses brought their case before the Lord.

⁶ Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ⁷ “The daughters of Zelophehad are right in their statements. You shall surely give them a hereditary possession among their father’s brothers, and you shall transfer the inheritance of their father to them. ⁸ Further, you shall speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘If a man dies and has no son, then you shall transfer his inheritance 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 If his father has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his nearest relative in his own family, and he shall possess it; and it shall be a statutory ordinance to the sons of Israel, just as the Lord commanded Moses.”

As we look at these eleven verses, and as we think about this rather unusual request from one of our Christian sisters, I would like for us to try to come away with several very basic lessons that we can apply to our Christian faith more than 3400 years later.

I. **As we back up and look at what happened here, I would point out first of all, that THESE YOUNG WOMEN SAW A PROBLEM – THEY SAW SOMETHING THAT WAS NOT FAIR, AND THEY HAD THE COURAGE TO SPEAK UP IN A VERY DIPLOMATIC WAY.**

In the previous chapter, the people are numbered for the very last time before they cross over the Jordan River to take the Promised Land, and they take the census so that they can divide the land among the tribes. Remember, though: They only count the men! At that time, women only had property through their husbands. Property rights were handed down from fathers to their sons. Under the Law, women didn't count. They were expected to get married. If they weren't married, they would be cared for by their father or by their brothers, but in this particular case, Zelophehad their father was dead, and he only had daughters. So, these five daughters have apparently been overlooked by the Law. The Law had failed to address this particular situation. So here we have five young women who were very much alone. The entire nation is looking forward to crossing over the Jordan and taking the land. They were looking forward to crossing over and getting settled down, but these five young women realize that they have nothing to look forward to. They will cross over, and they will have nothing. They will have nowhere to go. They cross over, and they will basically be homeless. And without land, they will also be poor, having no way to make a living. Basically, they will find themselves in the same situation that Ruth and Naomi will find themselves in several hundred years later, having no male relatives and forced to go through gleaning the fields after the harvest and basically hoping for the best.

So, with this rather bleak future on the horizon, these five sisters apparently get together to discuss the matter (as sisters will often do), and they decide to take the case to Moses. I would point out: They did not start gossiping from tent to tent about how they were being overlooked, they did not go around with picket signs protesting this particular injustice, there was no harassment involved, they didn't resort to trickery or deceit (like Rebekah had done many years earlier), but the Bible tells us that they stood before Moses and before Eleazar the priest at the doorway of the tent of meeting and very diplomatically laid out their concerns. This, by the way, is the same place where Korah stood in his rebellion several years earlier. And I think this explains why these women explain that their father is dead (he died in his sins just like everybody else in that generation) but that he did not die in Korah's rebellion. In other words, they are basically saying to Moses, "Challenging authority is not something that runs in our family, but we do have a legitimate issue" [paraphrased].

I would also point out that the last woman to challenge Moses was his own sister, Miriam. You might remember what happened to Miriam. She was cursed with leprosy and the entire nation had to stop traveling until she got better. I bring this to our minds to show the kind of courage that it must have taken for these young women to stand up in front of Moses.

Also remember that this is a group of 2-3 million people. We have some very manly and courageous men here at this congregation. We have men who can join two pieces of steel, we have men who can take down a moose with a handgun, we have men who can do some very manly things, but I have seen some very manly men just about lose it when they stand in this podium to say a few words. I have seen knees shake, I have seen the fingernail marks under the edge of this podium. And I say this to emphasize the courage it took for these five young sisters to stand up and take their case to Moses in front of 2-3 million people. That, by the way, is basically the population of the entire city of Chicago.

So, they stood up and made their case in verses 3-4. It is very simple. And notice how they framed the argument. They did not explain it as if THEY were being cheated, but they framed the issue with a powerful question that the men in that audience would appreciate, ***“Why should the name of our father be withdrawn from among his family because he had no son?”*** In other words, “As you are dividing up the land, why should the tribe of Manasseh get less land just because one guy happened to have daughters instead of sons? It’s not fair!” Simple! And then they end with the straightforward request, ***“Give us a portion among our father’s brothers.”***

We have a case study in how to get something done: 1.) State the problem, and 2.) Propose a solution. There is a lesson here: As Christians, let us have the courage to speak up when we need to speak up. To our young people who are students, you know the courage it takes to step in and be a friend to someone who is being picked on at school. To the rest of us, we know the kind of courage it takes to step in and say something to stop an off-color joke. We know the kind of courage it takes to say something when we need to say something. These five young women are an encouragement! If we see something that is not right, let us stand up and tackle the issue.

- II. **There is a second basic idea I’d like for us to notice in this passage, and that is: GOD IS CONCERNED ABOUT THOSE WHO ARE OVERLOOKED – in fact, we might emphasize here that ALL PEOPLE ARE VALUABLE TO GOD – JUSTICE IS IMPORTANT TO GOD.**

So the women approach Moses, and Moses is basically speechless – he makes no argument, he makes no rebuttal, he does not shut them down, because there is no denying that the young women have a valid point. They have stumped the greatest lawgiver of all time – and so Moses turns around and brings their case ***“before the Lord.”*** We have the Lord’s response starting in verse 7, where God says, ***“The daughters of Zelophehad are right in their statements.”*** And the Lord then decrees that they will be given an inheritance in the new land. Not only that, but God’s Law is then amended. Notice, starting in verse 8, God says, ***“Further...”*** and then He goes on to set a precedent so that other young women are never caught in the same trap, so that other young women are never overlooked in this way again. As I mentioned earlier, this case has been cited in our own nation as an example of property rights for women, and so in that regard women who own property today can, to some extent, be thankful that these young women had the courage to stand up.

I am reminded of a young man by the name of Benjamin Coady. You might remember Benjamin as the 13-year old who went on a school field trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City back in 2012. The Met, of course, is one of the premier art museums in the world. Benjamin loves history, and as he was on this field trip browsing through the Byzantine gallery, he noticed what he thought was a mistake with the boundaries on one of the maps. Well, on the way out the door, he told someone at the front desk that one of their maps was wrong. Of course, he’s only a kid, so they kind of brushed it off, but the receptionist made a note of it and passed it on. Several months later, Benjamin received an email from Dr. Helen Evans, the Met’s curator for Byzantine art who informed him that he was correct – that the boundaries were indeed wrong and that they were in the process of correcting it. He was invited back to the Met for a well-publicized meeting with Dr. Evans. It is refreshing when a mistake or oversight is corrected. In a slightly similar way, it is also refreshing to see something that is not fair made right. And that is what we have here in Numbers 27. Because these young women had the courage to speak up, God takes notice and does something to make it right. God was not willing that anybody under His Law should suffer unjustly; therefore, God amended the Law. So we find in this passage that God listens to our concerns and pays attention. That is a valuable lesson, and we can thank the daughters of Zelophehad for the reminder.

III. **There is a final concept I'd like for us to notice in this passage, and that is: All throughout this passage, THESE YOUNG WOMEN HAD AN EYE TO THE FUTURE.**

If we could just try to put ourselves in their position: They have been traveling through the wilderness, and everybody has been constantly talking for the past 40 years about how great it will be to finally cross over the Jordan River and take possession of this land that God has promised. And here are these young women: They are also looking forward to crossing over. Of course, they run into this problem, but the point here is that they were focused on what was coming next. They were looking to the future. They were looking to their inheritance. We might even refer to it as "faith." These young women had heard the promise, and they had faith that they would one day cross over just as God had said, and they wanted to make sure that they had their little part of it. They were determined. They were focused. Their family had been promised some land, they were looking forward to living on it, and they were taking steps to make it happen.

It seems that there is a lesson here for all of us (and maybe for our young women and young men in particular): Are we living our lives in a way that will guarantee us an inheritance in heaven? Right now, even when you are young (in your teens or 20's like these young women), are you making heaven a priority? Do we really have faith that heaven is out there on the horizon, and are we taking steps to make it there? Or are we getting distracted by wandering in the wilderness? Do we surround ourselves with friends who also have as their goal making it to heaven? There are many ways that these young women could have been distracted, but they were not – they were focused on making it across the Jordan to the land that God had promised. In the same way, we also ought to be focused on making it to the land that God has promised to us.

We don't have the time right now, but if we were to turn over to Joshua 17, we would find that when they finally crossed over, the women stood up once again, only this time to Joshua. As the land was actually being distributed, they stood up and said, "***The Lord commanded Moses to give us an inheritance among our brothers***" (Joshua 17:4), and Joshua did just as the Lord had commanded. So we find that these young women were focused on the future, and we find that their faith was eventually realized, just as ours will be as well.

Conclusion:

As we close our thoughts on this passage, I would express a word of thanks to the Christian sister who asked that we study these very interesting young women. I am thankful that your request was not a prank! I am sure that many of us have read about these young women many times through the years, but there is a value to slowing down to take a closer look. Like many children playing today, they saw something that was not fair, they said something about it, and God made it right.

There is something else I haven't mentioned yet, and it ties in to a much more profound lesson concerning the genealogy of Jesus Christ. Most of you know that when we look at the genealogy of Christ in the book of Matthew, the lineage comes down through Joseph. In Matthew 1:16, the Bible says that, "***Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.***" This may seem a little random and unrelated here at the end, but do you see a problem there? The genealogy of Jesus is traced from King David, down through King Solomon, and eventually to Joseph. The problem, though, is that Joseph was not really the Lord's father. Thankfully, though, because Mahlah and her sisters spoke up, the inheritance could also travel down the female side of the family tree. And so for that reason, Luke's account traces the genealogy through Nathan, another son of King David, and appears to trace the bloodline through Mary (as opposed to Joseph). Both genealogies are legal and valid because of what we have studied here this

morning. The inheritance/genealogy continues down through the female side of the family tree – we can thank the daughters of Zelophehad for that.

There were thousands upon thousands of women who wandered in the wilderness, but there are really only five names that we know – Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah – these were women of faith who believed in God and had the courage to stand up and claim their inheritance.

We claim our inheritance today by making an appeal to God for a good conscience. According to the apostle Peter (in 1 Peter 3:21), we do this by allowing ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism. At that point, we are born into the family of God – whether we are male or female – there is no difference – as members of God’s family, we have been promised an inheritance. As Peter commanded on the Day of Pentecost, we must repent and be baptized. If you have any questions, let us know. If we need to pray about something, write it down and pass it to the front. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com