

# The Bold And The Dutiful

Numbers 27:1-11, 36:1-12 March 5, 2023

Governmental lobbying has always been a controversial activity. There are over 12,000 professional lobbyists working in Washington D.C. right now.<sup>1</sup> Their goal is to influence policy on behalf of a specific group or category of people. For example, the Catfish Farmers Of America spent more than \$300,000 lobbying in 2011. The Balloon Council worked to drum up support for the Helium Stewardship Act. And, the American Dehydrated Onion and Garlic Association used to spend \$300,000 annually to influence US import policy.<sup>2</sup>

In the book of Numbers there is a fascinating account where five sisters come before the Lord to lobby on behalf of themselves and a specific category of people. Their appeal establishes case law for Israel, just before they move into the Promised Land. But it's more than case law. This story demonstrates to us that, in our relationship with God, He desires that we listen to Him and then *boldly* apply faith to our lives. When we do, the world is changed. Let's take a look at this example and see how it might stir our hearts.

**Numbers 27:1-4 - The daughters of Zelophehad approached; Zelophehad was the son of Hopher, son of Gilead, son of Machir, son of Manasseh from the clans of Manasseh, the son of Joseph. These were the names of his daughters: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. <sup>2</sup>They stood before Moses, the priest Eleazar, the leaders, and the entire community at the entrance to the tent of meeting and said, <sup>3</sup>“Our father died in the wilderness, but he was not among Korah’s followers, who gathered together against the Lord. Instead, he died because of his own sin, and he had no sons. <sup>4</sup>Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan? Since he had no son, give us property among our father’s brothers.”**

This is after the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. These five ladies are members of the younger generation that was going into Canaan to receive it as an inheritance from the Lord.

They had been listening to the commands of the Lord and hearing how things were going to work as Moses explained the new laws for the young nation. They heard the regulations and believed the stories of God's power and faithfulness. They were preparing for the next stage. But, at some point, they realized there was a problem: Once *they* got married, they would be joining another family tree and, since they had no brothers, their family would cease to exist.

So, they talk it over. They think it through. And they decide to come and raise the issue to Moses. In fact, they had undoubtedly worked through several layers of bureaucracy before getting to this point.<sup>3</sup> But notice what what verse 2 says. They didn't just come before Moses, but *also* God's high priest, *and* all the leaders of Israel, *and* the entire community, *AND* before the presence of God Himself at the entrance of His Tabernacle. That's *a lot* of pressure.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/257340/number-of-lobbyists-in-the-us/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/washington-whispers/2013/01/28/10-strange-lobbying-groups-that-we-swear-are-real>

<sup>3</sup> *Faithlife Study Bible Notes*

On top of that, scenes like this one didn't *usually* turn out very well in Leviticus and Numbers. When people came to dissent or complain about something, it usually ended with fire falling from heaven or the earth swallowing people up or a plague decimating the camp.

But there's a key difference in this situation. These sisters weren't just complaining that they wanted leeks and garlic. They weren't grumbling against Moses or saying God had failed. Instead, what they're saying is, "We *believe* God. We *believe* the land will be given to Israel and we don't want to sit back and allow what God wants to do to pass us by."

We should be impressed and inspired by their boldness. Here's what we know about the situation: These girls had no parents, they had no brothers, they had no husbands. They were single and on their own. They were of marrying age, so they weren't very young or very old. But, in their time and culture, they didn't have a lot of leverage.

But they realized that God is generous and He is faithful. And they came to the conclusion that God wanted for the same thing for them that He wanted for others.

This is wonderful boldness. They aren't coming in anger. They aren't brash. And they acknowledge that their father wasn't perfect - he was a sinner who had to deal with the consequences of his sin - but, as a family, they weren't rebels. They were on the Lord's side. And they've realized that they were the only ones left to advocate on behalf of their father's family. They nominate themselves to be vessels for God's purposes. "Here we are, send *us* into the Promised Land!"

Jesus said something stunning to us. He said, "The harvest is abundant, but the workers are few." That is astonishing when we recognize that every single Christian has been called and commissioned to be a part of God's global work in all sorts of ways. But *many* believers are content to let the opportunities pass them by - content to let others be used by God. These daughters of Zelophehad said, "We do not want to be a footnote on the margin of God's history. We want God's plan and promises and power to be operating in our lives."

### **Numbers 27:5 - <sup>5</sup> Moses brought their case before the Lord,**

This is interesting: For all his wisdom and knowledge and experience, *Moses did not know the answer to this issue!* He had to go and personally dialogue with the Lord about it.<sup>4</sup>

Now, what's going on here? When you read through the Law there are all these meticulous details. God had all of these plans and provisions for each aspect of life in Israel. From the national holidays to the food you eat and the clothes you wear. So, how is it possible that this issue fell through the cracks? Certainly, these sisters weren't the *only* family in this situation.

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

God hadn't messed up. He wasn't surprised by this complication. A great theme of this story is that God wants us to think through His revelation, apply it to our personal lives, develop our understanding of what He wants and how He does things, and seek Him out for more and more wisdom as we walk with Him.

Jesus did this with the parables. He spoke in parables so that those who *wanted* to understand would follow up and draw near and go to Him and say, "Lord, explain this truth to me."<sup>5</sup> Because faith with God isn't like memorizing vocabulary for a quiz and then forgetting everything once you've passed. According to one study, high school students forget 95% of what they've learned after 3 days.<sup>6</sup> That's not what the Lord wants for our spiritual learning.

Moses - the man who spoke to God face to face, the man who stood in the presence of God's glory, a miracle-worker and deliverer of God's people - *he* needed to go to God for leading and understanding. He needed to go and talk with the Lord about it and be directed.

**Numbers 47:6-11 - <sup>6</sup> and the Lord answered him, <sup>7</sup> "What Zelophehad's daughters say is correct. You are to give them hereditary property among their father's brothers and transfer their father's inheritance to them. <sup>8</sup> Tell the Israelites: When a man dies without having a son, transfer his inheritance to his daughter. <sup>9</sup> If he has no daughter, give his inheritance to his brothers. <sup>10</sup> If he has no brothers, give his inheritance to his father's brothers. <sup>11</sup> If his father has no brothers, give his inheritance to the nearest relative of his clan, and he will take possession of it. This is to be a statutory ordinance for the Israelites as the Lord commanded Moses."**

So, wait, they were *right*? Then why not give this stipulation from the beginning? It's because a relationship with God is not meant to be abstract or simply theoretical, but actually applied to our personal circumstances. And sometimes God waits to lay something out for us because, frankly, we're not very interested in it. We read in James, "You do not have because you do not ask."

Now, there was no talk of this family *deserving* the inheritance. They *didn't*. None of the Israelites did. In Deuteronomy 9, Moses would say, "Understand that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stiff-necked people." This was all a work of grace. And we know it's grace because the Lord went beyond what these bold sisters requested.<sup>7</sup> He opened up access to inheritance not just for *this* family but for *any* family in perpetuity that was facing the same hardship.

This is Who our God is! He is not trying to withhold any good thing from you. When they had no where to go, He welcomed them into His presence. When they had no earthly father, He stepped in to be their Father and provide for them, protect them, look to their future.

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<sup>5</sup> Mark 4:33-34

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.mytuition.nz/articles/high-school/students-forget-everything-heres-how-to-help-them-study>

<sup>7</sup> Ronald Allen *Numbers*

What these bold young ladies asked was unprecedented. But we serve a God Who likes to do unprecedented things. Not *unbiblical* things, but new things.

In 1450, Johannes Gutenberg invented his printing press and established a publishing house. Soon after, he produced 180 copies of the only Book that would come off his press: The Bible.<sup>8</sup> God began to do an unprecedented work because this man boldly applied his faith. In The Gutenberg Bible, Johannes wrote these lines:

*“Let us break the seal which seals up holy things and give wings to Truth in order that she may win every soul that comes into the world by her word no longer written at great expense by hands easily palsied, but multiplied like the wind by an untiring machine. Yes, it is a press, certainly, but a press from which shall soon flow in inexhaustible streams the most abundant and most marvelous liquor that has ever flowed to relieve the thirst of man!”<sup>9</sup>*

Through Guterberg’s living faith, God started an unprecedented work of power and grace.

But, here’s the thing: Laws often have unintended consequences. For example, when stricter safety regulations are implemented in a society, individuals tend to engage in more dangerous behavior. It’s called the “Peltzman Effect.”<sup>10</sup>

In the last chapter of Numbers, Zelophehad’s family is back in the spotlight, as some *other* members of the clan realize an unintended consequence of the new statute.

**Numbers 36:1-4 - The family heads from the clan of the descendants of Gilead—the son of Machir, son of Manasseh—who were from the clans of the sons of Joseph, approached and addressed Moses and the leaders who were heads of the Israelite families. <sup>2</sup>They said, “The Lord commanded my lord to give the land as an inheritance by lot to the Israelites. My lord was further commanded by the Lord to give our brother Zelophehad’s inheritance to his daughters. <sup>3</sup>If they marry any of the men from the other Israelite tribes, their inheritance will be taken away from our fathers’ inheritance and added to that of the tribe into which they marry. Therefore, part of our allotted inheritance would be taken away. <sup>4</sup>When the Jubilee comes for the Israelites, their inheritance will be added to that of the tribe into which they marry, and their inheritance will be taken away from the inheritance of our ancestral tribe.”**

When a woman was married, her inheritance would transfer to whatever tribe she was married to. Since the land was inheritance and not purchased, it wouldn’t be transferred back to the original tribe in the year of Jubilee. This is a problem because it could start to disrupt the geographical unity of each tribe’s territory.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.history.com/topics/inventions/printing-press>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.sandiegoreader.com/news/2019/oct/18/literary-gutenberg-bible-advent-printing-press/>

<sup>10</sup> Christopher J. Coyne *Unintended Consequences: How Regulation Influences Behaviour*

<sup>11</sup> Timothy Ashley *The Book Of Numbers 2nd Edition*

Just when we think we've got things figured out, we realize there's always more we don't know. In this life, we need ongoing guidance and leading and wisdom from the Lord. Which is why it's a great comfort to read a section of Scripture like Proverbs 1, where it says, "Here's God's wisdom. It's for your whole life. It's for every day. If you're young and inexperienced, you can learn what to do. If you're already wise and discerning, it will *still* give you yet more wisdom and guidance."

**Numbers 36:5-9 - <sup>5</sup> So Moses commanded the Israelites at the word of the Lord, "What the tribe of Joseph's descendants says is right. <sup>6</sup> This is what the Lord has commanded concerning Zelophehad's daughters: They may marry anyone they like provided they marry within a clan of their ancestral tribe. <sup>7</sup> No inheritance belonging to the Israelites is to transfer from tribe to tribe, because each of the Israelites is to retain the inheritance of his ancestral tribe. <sup>8</sup> Any daughter who possesses an inheritance from an Israelite tribe must marry someone from the clan of her ancestral tribe, so that each of the Israelites will possess the inheritance of his fathers. <sup>9</sup> No inheritance is to transfer from one tribe to another, because each of the Israelite tribes is to retain its inheritance."**

According to the Lord, both the daughters of Zelophehad *and* the sons of Gilead were *right*. In this complicated situation, it wasn't girl vs. boy. They were all on the same side. They were all trying to navigate God's leading and submit themselves to His plans. In this case, two rights made a right.

Now, on top of the legal rules that were being established, there's something very personal going on. Because, the sisters had come and said, "We believe in God's plan. We trust that He's going to do what He promised. We want to be a part of His inheritance." And *now*, they have the opportunity to show if they *really* believe what they said. Was it *really* about honoring God? Was it *really* about their calling and their place in God's plan? Or, was it about owning a parcel of land?

You see, God's response here is: "You can have what you asked for but, if you want it, you must remain within a boundary I'm establishing." They could have their father's inheritance, but to keep it they would have to marry within their own tribe. It was a reasonable ask, but one that required a choice to walk in faith and be obedient to God's command.

Walking with God means keeping within the boundary markers He has given. Now, those boundaries are given for our good and He gives us great freedom *within* His boundaries. Take marriage, for example. God gave these young ladies freedom to marry anyone they'd like, which was a remarkable amount of freedom, but it had to be someone from Manasseh. So, too, you single Christians are free to marry anyone you'd like, as long as they're part of God's family. You *must* marry a Believer in Jesus Christ. It's for your good and it is the boundary that God established in 2 Corinthians 6. We say that we want God's blessing on our relationships and for our future, and the Lord says, "Great. I want that too. And I'm ready to pour out My grace for you *if* you will keep within these generous confines."

So now, the sisters had the chance to practice their faith. Did they *really* care about the higher ideals that they talked about in chapter 27? Or was their lobbying just about wealth?

In Deuteronomy 5, Moses says, "The Lord heard your words when you spoke to me. He said to me, 'I have heard the words that these people have spoken to you. Everything they have said is right.'" Sounds like what the Lord said to these ladies, doesn't it? But then the Lord said, "If only they had such a heart to fear Me and keep all My commands always, so that they and their children would prosper forever."

The sisters could make a choice. They could choose inheritance within the gracious rule of God their Father, or they could choose absolute freedom for themselves and forfeit what God had set aside for them.<sup>12</sup>

**Numbers 36:10-12 - <sup>10</sup>The daughters of Zelophehad did as the Lord commanded Moses. <sup>11</sup>Mahlah, Tirzah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Noah, the daughters of Zelophehad, married cousins on their father's side. <sup>12</sup>They married men from the clans of the descendants of Manasseh son of Joseph, and their inheritance remained within the tribe of their father's clan.**

These ladies are fantastic. No complaining. No suggesting that God was doing something wrong to them. What incredible faithfulness! Not only were they bold, we see they were dutiful and devoted to the Lord. They double down on their trust in Him. "Yes, we believe and we'll do it. And we are not impoverished because You've given us a directive or a boundary, in fact, we're happy to obey our Lord."

This is the very end of Numbers. And it's an incredible ending. Because this is a book that catalogs a *lot* of failure and disobedience. In chapter 11 the people complain to God again and again that they don't like what's happening, that they don't like the food, it leads to judgment. In chapter 12, Aaron and Miriam challenge Moses' leadership because they don't like the woman he married. It leads to judgment. In chapters 13 and 14 the scouts see the land and tell all the people that they *shouldn't* go in. Judgment. In chapter 16, hundreds of people rebel against Moses and are destroyed. It happens over and over. Challenges and complaints and disobediences. You get to chapter 25 and the people start openly worshipping Baal. But here is this one family - these brave, bold, devoted young ladies who have every reason to complain, every reason to give up, but they believe God and know that the point of faith is to apply it to life. And so they close out the book having changed their nation because of their bold and obedient faith.

Their example reminds us that God is a generous Father, ready to move heaven and earth so we can lay hold of the good things He has set aside for us. But He waits to see who is interested. Who *wants* to be used. And, sometimes He waits because we don't ask. When we go to Him, requesting that He move on our behalf, we will then have opportunity to prove whether we're asking with wrong motives, for our own pleasures, or whether we're actually walking by faith, believing what God has promised and joining in His efforts. Walking with Him means keeping within His boundaries. But, that's exactly where we want to be. Being changed and bringing change for our Lord.

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Jamieson *Commentary Critical And Explanatory On The Whole Bible*