

## Daughters of Zelophehad: Numbers 27

God Said They Were Right

Grace Baptist 6.6.25

### I. Introducing the Book of Numbers and the Daughters of Zelophehad

Most of us probably haven't heard about these daughters of Zelophehad before? How many of you have read the book of numbers?

Did you know there is a book in the Bible called Numbers?

A modern day title of this book could be "spreadsheets"... It is called numbers because There are two census's in the book of numbers. There are census lists of the twelve tribes of Israel found in chapters 1 and 26. Now I know that most of you just decided to stop paying attention at the mention of numbers, spreadsheets, and census... am I right?

### II. Thinking about Laws

I often hear Christians say the Old Testament is mostly a long list of laws—and that's not entirely wrong. In fact, there are 613 different commandments in the Torah alone. Some people approach the Bible as a kind of *rulebook*—a set of regulations to follow.

But that's not the only way to read it.

Another way of reading scripture sees it as a collection of stories—stories that help us understand what these early followers of YHWH were like and *what God is like*. And in the case of our story this week of the daughters of Zelophehad, we're given both: a law *and* a story. It's a law about property, yes—but also a bold and beautiful story of women who spoke up when that law was unfair... and its a story about a God who listened.

### III. What Laws Meant Then: Sacred Covenant

When a people step into freedom, they don't just need land—they need a way to live together.

The Israelites had left behind the brutal laws of Pharaoh. But they couldn't simply exist as a lawless group in the desert. If they were going to become God's people—a new kind of community—they needed more than just manna in the wilderness.

They needed structure.

They needed shared expectations.

They needed a way to handle disputes, divide resources, and preserve dignity.

That's what the laws of the Torah provided: a **sacred framework** for communal life. And those laws weren't just civil policies—they were understood as a *covenant* with God.

To break a law wasn't just to mess up—it was to break relationship with God. See they didn't have a Pharaoh who was imposing the laws, they were trying to create a community around their shared God.

These laws shaped every part of life:

- economics,
- family inheritance,
- gender roles,
- worship,
- even identity itself.

And these laws were also administered and interpreted by humans—by Moses, by priests. And, as the daughters of Zelophehad show us, even divine law could have blind spots.

IV. What Law Means Now: Human-Made, flawed, and changeable.

We live in a different world.

We don't see most laws as divine. We know they're made by people. And because of that—we also expect that they *can* and *should* be changed when they no longer serve justice.

But here's the connection:

Even when laws today aren't sacred, they still shape who belongs, who matters, who gets access to safety and opportunity—and who is left out.

In the U.S., we have a foundational document that outlines our collective life together: **the Constitution.**

But laws—whether constitutional, statutory, or local—are always being debated, challenged, reinterpreted. That's the work of democracy.

I tried to find out how many laws exist in the U.S., and the answer is... no one really knows. There are too many—federal, state, local ordinances—and no single record keeps track of them all.

I've often wondered: how does law enforcement even know which laws to enforce? And what about the ones that technically still exist but are no longer enforced—who decides that? When and how does a law just fade out?

In theory, the purpose of laws is to establish standards, maintain order, resolve disputes, and protect people's rights. Ideally, the law serves as a guidepost for the minimum standard of what's acceptable in society.

And many laws do protect us:

- How food is sold and labeled.

- Requirements for driver's licenses and seat belts.
- That your surgeon must be certified before picking up a scalpel.

Some laws are written in anticipation of what *could* go wrong. Others are passed because of what *already* went wrong—what caused harm, exposed injustice, or revealed a blind spot. You've probably heard the phrase, "There's a name behind every rule."

But here's the key thing: **just because something is legal doesn't mean it's fair.**

And just because something is illegal doesn't mean it's wrong.

Laws are made by people in power. And often, they protect the interests of those who put them in place.

For people of faith, we're not just asking: "*Is it legal?*"

We're asking: "*Is it just?*"

Which brings us back to the laws of the Old Testament. For many modern readers, they seem outdated, irrelevant, even oppressive. AND they were also the standards that held a community together in covenant—guiding how people related to God and to one another. They gave structure to a newly freed people trying to figure out how to live as neighbors,

And if we take them seriously—not literally—we can still learn something about justice, relationship, and what it means to live in community with others.

## V. Real estate law in Ancient Israel.

Now begins our crash course in ancient Israel real estate law...and the story of the Zelophehad sisters

By the time we get to Numbers 26–27, the Israelites are standing on the edge of the Promised Land.

They’ve left Egypt, wandered in the wilderness, and are now preparing to settle so they have to divide the land—their “long-awaited inheritance from God.”

But here’s the thing: in ancient Israel, land wasn’t just a place to live. It was everything.

**Land = identity. Land = security. Land = legacy.**

They’re camped on the plains of Moab, with the Jordan River in sight. A second census has just been taken—counting only men over 20 who are able to fight. Women and children aren’t even included in the count.

The land is being divided by tribe. Bigger tribes get bigger portions. But the **location** of each plot is determined by casting lots—kind of like drawing names out of a hat. It was considered a fair and God-guided way to assign property.

A huge priority was placed on keeping land in the family. In fact, every 50 years there was a Jubilee year, where all land was returned to its original owners. So land was passed down from father to son—not just to keep families stable, but to keep tribal boundaries intact.

But here’s the catch: **what if a man had no sons?**

Enter the five daughters of Zelophehad—Malah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah.

Their names are listed—which is rare for women in Scripture. And their story? Even rarer.

These five women walk straight to Moses, right up to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. This is the sacred space—where Moses speaks with God, where the tablets from Mt. Sinai are kept. It’s the holy of holies. This is not a place women were expected to be. This was the smoke-filled room where men made

decisions. And yet—they show up. Maybe would be like walking up to the Vatican City - and knocking on the Popes door.

They weren't supposed to be there.

They weren't supposed to speak.

But they did both.

"Our father died in the wilderness," they say.

"He had no sons. Why should his name—and his legacy—be erased from his clan just because he had daughters? Give us property among our father's brothers."

They appeal to the values the law is supposed to uphold: justice, dignity, belonging.

And here's what's amazing: it works.

Moses doesn't dismiss them. He doesn't say, "Sorry, the law is the law."

He brings their case before God.

And God says:

**"The daughters of Zelophehad are right."**

"Give them their inheritance."

"And change the law so that daughters can inherit if there are no sons."

In other words: *God agrees with them.*

God changes the law—maybe **because they asked?**

**We will talk another time about how - they weren't asking even asking for land for themselves but for land to keep in their fathers name.**

But what they did was revolutionary.

They challenged a law that excluded them.

They confronted male power in a male space.

And they expanded the vision of justice—even *"God's justice."*

Here's what we learn:

- **These laws in their covenant community are not absolutes.**
- **Justice is not static—it responds to real people in real situations.**
- **When the law fails to serve the people, the law must be re-examined.**

The daughters of Zelophehad help transform the law into something living and dynamic.

They show that we are part of a continuously evolving story.

They change not only Moses' understanding—but ours.

They're like the Ruth Bader Ginsburgs of ancient Israel—creating change through precedent, through what we might call biblical case law.

It started with five daughters and a question: *"What about us?"*

And it led to a shift that rippled through generations.

It was a faithful, grounded, courageous act that changed everything.

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Thinking about real estate laws in ancient Israel this week got me thinking about what type of real estate laws we inherited...in the American south.

## **1. Heirs 'Property & Black Land Loss in the American South**

The story: After emancipation, many Black families bought land but did not leave formal wills—so the land was passed down informally (called *heirs 'property*). Without clear titles, families couldn't use their land as collateral, qualify for federal aid, or prevent it from being sold out from under them. Developers and corporations often take advantage of this loophole by pressuring one family member to sell their share—forcing the sale of the whole property.

Modern injustice: This has led to the loss of over 90% of Black-owned farmland in the U.S. over the past century.

Why it connects: Just like the daughters were at risk of losing their father's legacy due to a legal gap, modern Black families are losing generational land due to legal structures that were never designed to protect them.

## **2. Redlining and Racial Zoning Laws**

The story: In the 1930s, the U.S. government and private banks used color-coded maps to decide who was "safe" to lend to. Neighborhoods with Black or immigrant populations were outlined in red—*"hazardous."* Residents there were denied loans, insurance, and investment.

Modern injustice: The effects of redlining are still felt. Many of those neighborhoods have lower home values, underfunded schools, and less generational wealth. Even though redlining is now illegal, its legacy still drives racial wealth and housing gaps.



Why it connects: Like the daughters of Zelophehad, families were cut out of the land distribution process because of who they were, not what they had done.

### **3. LGBTQ+ Housing Discrimination (Still Legal in Many States)**

The story: In over 20 states, landlords and property sellers can still legally refuse to rent or sell to someone based on their sexual orientation or gender identity—especially if no local nondiscrimination protections exist.

Why it connects: The daughters of Zelophehad were denied land simply because they were women. Many LGBTQ+ individuals face modern versions of the same: being denied access to security, stability, and belonging.

### **4. Indigenous Land Sovereignty & Stolen Land**

The story: In both the U.S. and Canada, Indigenous peoples were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands through broken treaties, manipulated laws, and legal trickery. To this day, many are still fighting for the return of sacred sites or the enforcement of treaty rights.

Why it connects: **The question “Who gets to own the land?” is still deeply contested. And like the daughters, Indigenous leaders continue to petition systems of power for justice long denied.**

Currently there is a bill that has already passed the house but is authorizing the sale of thousands of acres of federal public land,

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Sometimes we think that our faith is mainly about attending worship, having a quiet prayer time each day - but what you will see if you do read through scripture is that over and over again - our faith calls us to action on behalf of others, especially those who are marginalized. Our faith calls us to respond to injustices in the world. Christianity is more than a belief system to memorize, it is a way of life that advocates for and works for God's grace and justice here on earth as it is in heaven.

My question for all of us today...is it important to know the history of the how groups of people/countries /communities decided "who gets to own the land?"

## Invitation to Respond....

maybe we can be like the daughters—

asking bold questions, telling the truth about what's broken,

and refusing to be silent in a system that wasn't built for us.