

A Strong Inheritance

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[0 : 00] So today's reading can be found on page 172 of the Church Bibles, and we are reading the whole of Numbers 36. The heads of the fathers' houses of the clan of the people of Gilead, the son of Machir, son of Manasseh, from the clans of the people of Joseph, came near and spoke before Moses and before the chiefs, the heads of the fathers' houses of the people of Israel.

They said, And when the jubilee of the people of Israel comes, then their inheritance will be added to the inheritance of the tribe into which they marry, and their inheritance will be taken from the inheritance of the tribe of our fathers.

And Moses commanded the people of Israel according to the word of the Lord, saying, The tribe of the people of Joseph is right.

This is what the Lord commands concerning the daughters of Zelophehad. Let them marry whom they think best, only they shall marry within the clan of the tribe of their father.

The inheritance of the people of Israel shall not be transferred from one tribe to another, for every one of the people of Israel shall hold on to the inheritance of the tribe of his fathers.

[1 : 49] And every daughter who possesses an inheritance in any tribe of the people of Israel shall be wife to one of the clan of the tribe of her father, so that every one of the people of Israel may possess the inheritance of his fathers.

So no inheritance shall be transferred from one tribe to another, for each of the tribe of the people of Israel shall hold on to its own inheritance. The daughters of Zelophehad did as the Lord commanded Moses.

For Malah, Terza, Hogla, Milcah, and Noah, the daughters of Zelophehad, were married to the sons of their fathers' brothers. They were married into the clans of the people of Manasseh, the son of Joseph, and their inheritance remained in the tribe of their fathers' clan.

These are the commandments and the rules that the Lord commanded through Moses to the people of Israel in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho.

We're looking at numbers 33 to 36 this morning. As Benji said, it's our last in the series. Let me pray for us as we begin.

[3 : 05] Let's pray. Psalm 19. The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.

The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart. The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. We pray, our gracious Heavenly Father, please would you revive our souls this morning.

Would you make us who are, by nature, simple, wise. Would you rejoice our hearts and enlighten our eyes.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. I want to begin this morning by asking why it is that people drift away from Jesus.

Why is it people harden their hearts towards him? Why does that happen? As I said, this is the final talk in the book of Numbers.

[4 : 10] The New Testament tells us that Numbers is a book we need to listen to and pay attention to because it serves as a warning to us, lest we harden our hearts against God and fall away from Jesus.

Now, I imagine that in a room this size with this number of people, I imagine there are some of us, I guess, who are, if we're honest with ourselves, in the process of doing exactly that at the moment, or we have been in a process of doing that perhaps for some time.

But I guess all of us will know people who have done that already. And it is always such a sadness and such a great tragedy. Perhaps you can think of a friend or a colleague.

Perhaps they once seemed interested in the claims of Jesus. They had a deep sense of their need for forgiveness. They were thrilled to discover that Jesus died for the forgiveness of sins. And yet when it came to the point of following him and putting their trust in him, they did nothing about it.

And they slowly drifted away. Or perhaps someone in the youth group who seems to be following Jesus, and yet they go up to university, life suddenly becomes busy, there's suddenly so many other options, and they fall away.

[5 : 31] Their hearts hardened. Or the person who perhaps once seemed a committed follower, wholeheartedly so, of Jesus.

And yet over the last 10, 20 years, whatever it is, they've been hardened. They've drifted. Why is it that that happens?

Well, I guess it's for the same reason that sports personalities change teams, and people change jobs. It's simply because they get a better offer.

In other words, we come to believe that other things offer a better version of life, or offer me a better version of me, than Jesus offers.

That the good life lies elsewhere. I decide that actually my job offers me more, or a better version of me, than Jesus offers. And so my job comes first.

[6 : 33] Or I decide that my friends and their approval means more to me than Jesus, so I put them first. Or my family and what they think offers more. Or my personal freedom offers more. And so I put that first.

Which means, of course, that if we are not to harden our hearts, and whether that describes us as those who have been committed to following Jesus for years, or whether we're simply here this morning, and we're looking in on the Christian faith, if we are not to harden our hearts, you and I need to be convinced that the promises of Jesus Christ are far more wonderful than anything else.

Far more wonderful than anything that this world can offer us. And that is precisely what we're going to see in Numbers 33 to 36 this morning. It's a long section, but it is all about the future inheritance of God's people.

Originally, of course, in the promised land of Canaan. And yet for those who belong to Jesus, it is a glorious anticipation of the new creation, the inheritance to come.

And I hope we'll be excited by these chapters. I think at first they look fairly remote and perhaps impenetrable. I hope we'll be excited that actually they portray, they paint a portrait of heaven itself.

[7 : 54] Firstly, an inheritance to be certain about. Have a look at chapter 33, verses 1 and 2. These are the stages of the people of Israel when they went out of the land of Egypt by their companies under the leadership of Moses and Aaron.

Moses wrote down their starting places, stage by stage, by command of the Lord. And these are their stages according to their starting places. Now, Numbers 33 is a bit like a sort of travel log, or if you're into the Tour de France, then you'll know exactly what the kind of stages are each day, and you'll have a kind of mental map of that, and that's what Numbers 33 does.

It's about the 40-year journey that God's people have been on. So we start in verse 3, in the first month in Egypt, at the Passover, when the Lord God acted in judgment against the Egyptian nation which had enslaved them.

How each family sacrificed a lamb, an unblemished lamb. They took the blood, they painted the blood, around their doorposts, such that when the Lord God came in judgment on the nation of Israel, he passed over those who trusted in his promises.

And then having been delivered from the judgment, they were then brought out of Egypt. And so verses 5 to 15 then recounts the journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai, Mount Sinai, where God met his people, where he declared them to be his people, to be his chosen, treasured possession forever, a holy nation, where he gave them the Ten Commandments, where he gave them his law.

[9 : 35] And then verses 16 and 17, there's the journey from Mount Sinai to the border of the Promised Land, the point you'll remember back in Numbers where they rebelled against God's command to go into the land.

They refused to enter. And then verses 18 to 36, there's the period of 40 years, the period of 40 years wandering in the wilderness. There's the death of Aaron in verses 38 to 40.

And then verses 40 to 49, there's the journey, once again, a second time around, if you like, to the borders of the Promised Land. And that is where we are here in Numbers chapter 33.

Now, you can read about all the staging posts later. But the point is that in all of this, the Lord God has kept his people. He has kept them through all the ups and downs.

And if you've been following this series of Numbers since January, there have been many, many ups and downs. And yet he has kept them through them all, despite their sin, their rebellion. He is committed to being their God, having rescued them.

[10 : 40] He's brought them to himself. He will get them to the land that he has promised. I wonder if, along with 4 million other viewers, you've been hooked by the TV series Race Across the World.

As with all these things, we're slightly behind the curve, so we've just finished series one, despite the fact that the other 4 million short of one or two have finished all three series.

But anyway, if you're not familiar with it, the idea is that teams of two race each other to cover vast distances without being able to use an aeroplane.

And so series one, they have to get from London to Singapore. They're given a budget. And one team in particular in that first series, father and son, Darren and Alex, by the end of day two, they'd only got as far as Prague or something like that, Alex was having a complete meltdown.

He had burst into tears. I can't do this. He sobbed. You know, we're never going to make it. It's all too much. And yet, as they went through kind of stage by stage by stage, their confidence gradually grew as they looked back on where they had come from.

[11 : 52] So, I can't make it. We can't do this. Became, we're going to Singapore. We're going to get there. Now, of course, their confidence was in themselves.

Very different from Numbers 33 where their confidence is in God. But it's the same principle of looking back to see where they've come from and that in turn gives great confidence for the future.

It's why at the end of chapter 33, there's such a note of confidence. Have a look at verse 51. When you pass over the Jordan into the land of Canaan.

Verse 53, You shall take possession of the land. Verse 54, You shall inherit the land by lot according to your clans. God has been faithful to his promises in the past.

He will continue to be faithful to his promises and to his people in the future. It is an inheritance they can be certain of. And in just the same way, although of course a far more wonderful way, if we belong to Jesus, we can be confident in our future heavenly inheritance.

[13 : 11] A confidence boosted as we look to the past at God's big plan of salvation. Perhaps think of his promise to Abraham of blessing to the nations or his rescue of his people from Egypt at the time of the Exodus, taking them into the promised land.

Or his promise to raise up an everlasting king in the line of David. And supremely, of course, by looking back to the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And then the amazing spread of the message of Jesus across the globe in the last 2,000 years. But we can also look back in our own lives individually as well.

Here are some words of the Lord Jesus. John chapter 6, Jesus promises, he says, all that the Father gives me will come to me. Whoever comes to me, I will never cast away.

For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him should have eternal life. And I will raise him up at the last day.

[14 : 23] Is that not a glorious promise from the lips of Jesus? I will never cast away. I will raise up at the last day. Perhaps you can look back at how Jesus has brought you to himself, perhaps from a Christian home, perhaps not from a Christian home.

How he's kept you since then through all the ups and downs of life. Disappointments, sadness, poor health, financial difficulties, life perhaps turning out very differently from what we thought life would turn out as.

And actually, through all these things, he has kept us. Through all these things, he has been at work in us. I wonder if that is something you can do to look back, giving you confidence for the future.

If that's not something you've ever done, why not do so later on today and set time aside this afternoon or this evening to do that and to give thanks.

But it does beg the question, doesn't it, why then would you want to harden your heart and let other things which are not certain take you away from Jesus?

[15 : 35] I mean, they may look certain, but of course, they are not certain. You know, the job and the prospects for the future that the job offers or the lifestyle, the relationship, and yet, of course, all those things will pass away.

Most of them, while we're still alive, all of them, once we have died. Those of us with elderly relatives, I guess, will know that actually that's one of the great griefs of old age, that so many of the things which we have accumulated in life, they just slip away and slip out of our hands.

The things which once we thought were secure and certain, they leave us. They melt away. And yet, wonderfully, this is an inheritance we can be certain about.

Secondly, it's an inheritance to delight in. Now, as I said, we're looking at four chapters this morning. It's one of those sermons where we're not going to have time to look at all the details.

We're simply focusing on the big picture. So it'd be really worth reading these chapters in detail if you haven't done so later on today. I know some are in the habit of reading the passage that's going to be preached on Saturday, some on Sunday morning to prepare themselves for church.

- [17 : 02] That's a wonderful thing to do. But if you haven't done that, then do read through these chapters later on today. They are well worth studying. But it is an inheritance to delight in. First of all, there's the promise of a new land, chapter 34. And in verses 1 to 12, there's an outline of the geographical boundaries of the land God's people are going to inherit. and there's a map up on the screen for those who are visually minded. You'll see that you can just go through the borders in verse 3. We have the southern border. In verse 6, the western border, which is the Mediterranean Sea there. Then in verse 7, the northern border. And in verse 10, the eastern border, which is effectively the River Jordan. And then in verses 13 to 19, arrangements are put in place for that land to be divided up by lots between all the different tribes. Verse 13, Moses commanded the people of Israel, saying, this is the land that you shall inherit by lots, which the Lord has commanded to give to the nine tribes and to the half tribe.
- [18 : 14] The significance, of course, of the lot is, of deciding by lots, is that it means that it's the Lord God himself who is apportioning the land to each tribe between the people. And then in verses 16 to 29, there's a list of the men who will actually do all this and divide up the land between the different tribes. Now, in a sense, of course, you might think, well, this is all fairly kind of technical. And yet, I wonder if you could imagine if you are one of God's people, you are on the very edge of the promised land. The River Jordan is in front of you. This wonderful land that God has promised is out in front of you. I wonder if you could imagine at this point, as you're being told how the land is going to be divided out, I wonder if you could imagine the enormous sense of kind of expectation and anticipation. This land is going to be ours. This bit of land is going to be our lands. Now, this is a very unseasonal illustration, but think of Christmas Eve.
- [19 : 21] Think of the kind of tiptoes anticipation of what is going to be happening the next day amongst some members of the family looking forward to what will soon be theirs. Well, how much greater is this? A new land. And, of course, a new land signed and sealed by the Lord God himself. A new land which is not going to be taken away from them. A new land which is written down here for them in the Bible. But as well as being a new land, it is an inheritance in which they will enjoy the presence of God. And that's chapter 35. Now, chapter 35 is about cities. Firstly, cities for the Levites, the priests, to live in. Verses 1 to 3. The Lord spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho, saying, Command the people of Israel to give to the Levites some of the inheritance of their possession as cities for them to dwell in.
- [20 : 27] And you shall give to the Levites pasture lands round the cities. The cities shall be theirs to dwell in, and their pasture lands shall be for their cattle and for their livestock and for all their beasts. Now, this is a reminder that the land of Canaan is completely different from any other country or nation that existed then or, indeed, that has existed subsequently. Because it is holy, it is set apart, it is sanctified by God himself living amongst his people. priests are therefore needed to offer the sacrifices that we saw back in chapters 28 and 29 for the forgiveness of sin, because the shedding of blood by sacrifice is the means of atonement for sin, the only means by which a holy God can then dwell with his people.

So cities for the Levites, but then also cities of refuge as they are called in verses 9 to 11. Have a look at verses 9 to 11.

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall select cities to be cities of refuge for you, that the manslayer who kills any person without intent may flee there.

[22 : 03] The cities shall be for you a refuge from the avenger, that the manslayer may not die until he stands before the congregation for judgment. These cities of refuge are to be places where someone can flee where they've been accused of murder or manslaughter.

A refuge from the avenger, as the verses put it, the next of kin who deserves retribution. And so in verses 16 to 23, and all the lawyers in this room are going to get very excited at this point, the distinction is made and unpacked between deliberate murder and accidental murder or manslaughter so that those who have been accused can be guaranteed a fair trial.

In the case of murder, the punishment is death. In the case of manslaughter, they must remain in the city of refuge until the high priest has died and then they are free to leave.

But amidst all the details, and you can read about all the details later on on your own, it's really easy, I think, to miss the key principle which comes in the last two verses of the chapter, verses 33 and 34.

Let me read them for us. Numbers 35, verse 33. You shall not pollute the land in which you live, for blood pollutes the land.

[23 : 35] And no atonement can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it. You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell, for I, the Lord, dwell in the midst of the people of Israel.

Do you get the point? This is a land like no other, either then or since. The Lord God himself dwells in the land with his people.

The shedding of blood pollutes the land, and so the land mustn't be defiled, because it's where the Lord God dwells with his people. So a new land, enjoying God's presence.

Then chapter 36, enjoying God's presence forever. Now, I wonder what you made of chapter 36 when it was read for us earlier.

I wonder if you were kind of waiting for numbers to go out with a big kind of bang, and if you were, whether chapter 36 felt like a bit of a damp squib when we read about Zelophehad and his five daughters.

[24 : 45] Well, let me persuade you that this is more of a bang than a damp squib. In fact, I hope that we'll see that actually Zelophehad's daughters are great models for us to follow and should be heroes for us.

We've come across them already, actually, in chapter 27, where, back in chapter 27, the issue was inheritance. So, Zelophehad has no, that's difficult, isn't it?

Zelophehad had, but anyway, he had no sons. So, what's going to happen to the land he owns when he dies? He only has daughters.

And therefore, the principle was established that daughters as well as sons can inherit. Just a reminder, of course, of how very countercultural the Bible is when it comes to the rights and freedoms of women.

But fundamentally, it means that the land that's being allotted to each tribe and family is land they'll be able to possess forever because it's not going to be transferred from one tribe, one family, to another.

[25 : 59] And there's a similar issue here in Numbers 36. It's slightly different. What if a daughter marries outside of her own tribe or clan? Verse 2.

The Lord commanded my Lord to give the land for inheritance by lot to the people of Israel. And my Lord was commanded by the Lord to give the inheritance of Zelophehad, our brother, to his daughters.

But, if they are married to any of the sons of the other tribes of the people of Israel, then their inheritance will be taken from the inheritance of our fathers and added to the inheritance of the tribe in which they are to marry.

So they will be taken away from the lot of our inheritance. Can you see the problem? Their land, if they marry outside of their tribe, will be transferred to that tribe.

And so they come up with a solution. Verse 6. This is what the Lord commands. It's the Lord's solution. concerning the daughters of Zelophehad, let them marry who they think best, and they shall marry within the clan of the tribe of their father.

[27 : 09] The inheritance of the people of Israel shall not be transferred from one tribe to another, for every one of the people of Israel shall hold on to their inheritance of the tribe of his fathers.

What's the solution? They can marry whoever they like, but they must marry someone from their own tribe so that they can hold on to the inheritance.

Why? Why is it so important? Because the land they are being given is land they're going to possess forever. Their forever home. Isn't that striking?

You see, these five women, both in chapter 27 and here in chapter 36, they will do whatever it takes to hold on to their inheritance.

Nothing is more important to them than their inheritance to come. In other words, they keep their eye on the prize. Last week, you may have heard it on Radio 4 on Friday morning, there was a wonderful description of Michael Vaughan, the former England cricket captain, and the way which he described walking from the dressing room at Lord's out to the wicket and he described what that kind of feels like, so how you go past the pictures of great players of the past, W.G. Grayson and so on.

[28 : 37] Members of staff, the cleaners, whoever's around, kind of wishing him good luck, then going out onto the pitch and suddenly there's a huge roar from the crowd, the camera people kind of in front of him as he walks out to the wicket taking photographs, taking live film footage and what's he saying to himself?

He said he just kept saying to himself, hit the ball, hit the ball, hit the ball. Completely focused, undistracted by everything going on around him.

His whole mind and body firmly fixed on hitting the ball. Just like Zalofahad's daughters, their eye is very firmly on the prize.

That's the one thing on their inheritance. They used to talk to Benji and Lynn afterwards, but I'm sure that's one of the reasons why they named their daughter Noah.

She's there in verse 11. They had a choice of five names, but actually they go on for Noah. Isn't, I mean, you know, you may well think that it's better than Hogler, but isn't it a great thing to name one of your daughters after Zalofahad's daughters?

[29 : 59] Isn't this what we want for our daughters, those of us who have daughters, to be those actually for whom their heavenly inheritance is the prize, is the prize that they are focused on and those of us with sons?

Isn't it what we want from our sons as well? For them to live as if their heavenly inheritance is the main thing, that their forever home is not here, but is in their God-given heavenly inheritance.

So this really is inheritance to delight in, a new land made holy by God himself, dwelling with his people, forever.

Now, if we belong to Jesus, of course, we too have an inheritance, one that is, it's both similar to this, but of course, it's so very different as well.

A new land, the new creation itself, where God himself will dwell with his people and will do so forever, a new heavens and a new earth.

[31 : 14] We had 1 Peter, chapter 1, verses 3 to 5, read to us earlier on at the beginning of our gathering today. Let me read it again. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

imperishable, undefiled, unfading. So let's come back to that question that we started with.

Why is it that people drift away from Jesus? Why is it that people harden their hearts to Jesus? Why does that happen? Well, for the simple reason that they think that other things offer more.

Or if not more, at least what they offer seems to be more kind of real and more tangible and more immediate. How do we stop that happening?

[32 : 34] Well, we keep our eyes firmly fixed on the Lord Jesus and on our future inheritance. For those of us for whom our gaze has wandered, for those of us who actually in our heart of hearts we know we are drifting or have drifted, then let me plead with you to fix your eyes on the Lord Jesus.

Why not tell a Christian friend, why not pray with them that the Lord would indeed bring you back? And pray that actually by comparison the things of this world, all the other things which we might be tempted to chase after, by comparison would grow dim and pale and pallid.

One of the songs which I remember singing as a new Christian, very memorable, short Christian chorus, turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.

Let me lead us in prayer. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Amen.