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Numbers 36

This week at Magdalen Road we finished our short series in Numbers by looking at the final chapter in the book - chapter 36. It's an unusual end to an unusual book as, just outside the Promised Land, Zelophahad's brothers approach the leadership of Israel enquiring about some legal minutiae relating to the marital status and land ownership of some unmarried female members of their family. They're not yet in the land with numerous questions still to be sorted and a long list of things to do such as how are they going to get across the Jordan? How are they going to conquer the land and cities like Jericho? What's the story with leadership - we know Moses won't be taking them into the land and that Joshua will succeed him, but that's not yet come to pass... Of 48 mentions of inheritance in the book, 1/4 come within this chapter - this is a chapter with inheritance as a key theme.

To attempt to grasp why this unusual book ends in this unusual way, we backed up significantly to try and thread key themes through the final third of the book. We focussed on and sought to give an overview of initially chapter 25 (where we saw the final nail in the coffin of the men of generation 1 as they inter-mingled with Moabite women), that then made way for chapter 26 as the second census of the people was undertaken - generation 2. As the story unfolds, the first grouping we then encounter from generation 2 were Zelophahad's daughters - they approach Moses asking, theoretically when they arrive in the land, will they, as unmarried women, inherit any allotment of land (seeing as the land allotment when to men)? Moses says yes - these unmarried women will inherit. This is all theoretical though until chapter 32 when the livestock rearing tribe of Manasseh ask the leaders to be allocated a portion of fertile conquered land just outside the Promised Land - to which the answer from the leadership is essentially yes (though they must send soldiers to help the conquest). This means when we reach chapter 36 and read again of the family of Zelophehad (from Manasseh) what was (in chapter 27) theoretical, is now a live issue as they have land and have still not married...

We then focussed in on the verses in Chapter 36 (still just outside the land) noting their (in the context of Numbers) remarkable obedience. The problem they are envisaging this time is what happens if the land given to Zelophehad's 5 daughters if they then subsequently marry outside of their family or clan? Will the land be lost to this family or secured forever? Even on the Jubilee year it won't theoretically be returned to them because that law only comes into play if the land is sold - this is being transferred through marriage. Again you can see the good framework and thinking behind the questions - they are trusting God to get them there and allocate the land to their family and they're not willing to intermingle like generation 1. Thus they initially enquire of Moses and the leadership (v1-4) what they ought to do (as opposed to complaining and moaning against the leadership as per most of the rest of the book), then they accept what they hear as being from God (v5, 6 and 10) as opposed to doubting that Moses really was God's chosen mouthpiece and finally they simply obey (v10-12). What is remarkable is that this is what ought to have been done all along,

yet throughout Numbers has been pretty scarce.

And so the book ends, with both a hopeful slant and also a realistic element - recognising all that's still to do. As Numbers transitions into Deuteronomy so we see answers about leadership being answered as Moses dies and is gathered to his people. From Deuteronomy to Joshua questions about crossing the Jordan and conquering Jericho are answered. However things then seem to go sour as they people being to walk out on God. With remarkable parallels with Adam and Eve, as they forget God and his word, so they are removed from his place - soon splitting and finding themselves in exile to the Babylonians, Assyrians, Persians and Romans. The questions of Zelophehad's uncles become a moot point, because there is no land for them to inherit.

And so onto the pages of history walk Jesus. In Luke 4 he uses language about 'the year of the Lord's favour' which many commentators see as relating to the year of Jubilee (that v4 of our passage picks up, see for more information and detail Leviticus 25v8-17). The Year of Jubilee was every 50th year and is a good year for the Israelites - especially those poor and outcast who, because of debt, have had to mortgage land or put themselves into slavery and this year will receive it, and their own freedom. This Jesus is the one who brings true jubilee - the one who returns our lost inheritance, securing it himself for us by his death and resurrection on the cross. We finished with Peter's glorious words from the start of his first letter to Christians being persecuted under Nero - 1 Peter 1v3-5:

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, 5 who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

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As always some questions to take and adapt for your group as needed...

What have been your key take-home encouragements from the book of Numbers?

What have been your key take-home challenges from the book of Numbers?

How much do you think your certain inheritance in Christ impacts daily living for him? Why? Why not?

What is surprising about the way Zelophehad's family relate to the leadership in Israel in chapter 36?

Use the context of the final third of the book to back up your answer?

What is their question? What answer are they given?

As the rest of the bible unfolds, what do we see happening to the land Abraham promised his people? Why?

When Jesus walks onto the scene in Luke 4v14-21, why is this such good news for the people (esp the idea of the year of the Lord's favour)? See also Lev 25v8-17.

What is Jesus claiming? What would happen in a year of Jubilee?

Have a look at 1 Peter 1v3-5, how does Peter encourage these Christians under-fire?

How do these verses encourage you?

What 1 thing from Numbers are you going to remember / hold onto / do differently as a result of these last 8 weeks? (more if there are more!)

Thanks MRC - it's been a privilege to help us get to grips with this book these past couple of months.