

FORTY ACRES AND A DESK

A Devotional Meditation on Mattot (Tribes) and Masei (Stages)

Numbers 30:2-36:13; Jeremiah 2:4-28, 3:1-16; Deuteronomy 2:24-25, 3:1-11;
Joshua 5:9-12; Matthew 19:16-30; Luke 21:1-4

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This desk belonged to my grandfather and father. Now it's my desk, and a memorial to the legacy they passed on to their children. (Photo: The Barking Fox, April 3, 2023.)

My siblings and I dealt with a few complications as we settled our father's estate. I'm happy to say that those complications were external to the family. Even though it took a few years to resolve, there was no contention among the three of us. No one tried to make any trouble or grab a larger share of the inheritance. Quite the opposite: we worked together to make sure each of us received equal shares, and that our father's wishes were honored.

One of his wishes was that my brother and I take possession of the old family homestead. That forty acres is all that remains of a much larger holding our ancestors acquired when they settled in

Alabama 200 years ago. Hard times during the Great Depression compelled our grandfather to sell the land to pay the tax bill, but years later our cousin Mary Carolyn redeemed part of the property and restored it to the family. My brother and I haven't yet decided what to do with the land. Perhaps we'll build a house on it, or harvest the timber as our father did, but for now we treasure it as a link to our ancestors, and a reminder that we are playing our parts in the same story in which they played theirs.

Another example of family cooperation occurred with the division of our parents' possessions. Since I was living in another state, and was not sure where we would finally settle down, I gladly let my sister and brother and their children have the pick of the furniture and other precious items. All I really wanted was our grandfather's desk. It is a sturdy wooden desk built around 1901, with many drawers and a large work surface. All of us had played on that desk when we were children, both in our grandfather's apartment, and in our father's basement where it rested for almost half a century. I couldn't take possession of the desk when our father died, so my brother kept it for me. Neither of us expected that it would be five years before I could receive the desk, but it was a joyous time when we made room in our crowded apartment for the time-worn legacy. It was another four years before we bought a house and at last had opportunity to have the desk restored. A good friend and brother from church helped me move it to the restoration shop. When the work was done several months later, he helped me move it into my office.

This desk is much more than a valuable antique. It represents the love our family demonstrated through our cooperation to secure exactly the right inheritance for each of

us. My siblings and I chose to help each other gain our inheritance, just as our cousin had chosen to help our grandfather and father secure their inheritance. My brother from church carried on that process when he helped me with my grandfather's desk. He's not my brother by blood, but we are brothers in Messiah, and therefore family. He gained nothing for his efforts except my enduring gratitude, just as our cousin gained nothing tangible when she redeemed the family farm all those years ago.

What is it that motivates families to do such things for one another? Love, of course – the kind of love that overcomes jealousy and covetousness through the understanding that our own inheritance cannot be secure unless the inheritance of our brother and sister is also secure. That understanding may have been a factor in one of the last matters Moses had to decide. On the eve of Israel's entry into the Promised Land of Canaan, the tribes of Reuben and Gad, along with half the tribe of Manasseh, approached Moses with a request that they receive the land already conquered on the east side of Jordan as their inheritance. When Moses objected, they said:

“We will build sheepfolds for our livestock and cities for our children. But we are prepared to arm ourselves and go ahead of *Bnei-Yisrael* [children of Israel] until we have brought them to their place. Our children will live in the cities fortified against the inhabitants of the land. We will not return to our homes until each one of *Bnei-Yisrael* has received his inheritance. Yet we will not inherit with them on the side beyond the Jordan, since our inheritance has come on the east side of the Jordan.”

Moses said to them, “If you will do this—if you will arm yourselves for battle for *ADONAI*, and if all of you cross the Jordan until *ADONAI* has driven His enemies from before Him and the land is subdued before *ADONAI*—then afterward you may return and be free before *ADONAI* and Israel. Then this territory will be your possession before *ADONAI*.”

“But if you don't do this, behold, you sin against *ADONAI*! Be assured! Your sin will find you out! Build for yourselves cities for your children and pens for your flocks. Then do what has come out of your mouth.”

The sons of Gad and Reuben said to Moses saying, “Your servants will do just as my lord is commanding. Our children, our wives, our flocks, and all of our herds will remain here in the cities of Gilead. But your servants, every one armed for battle, will cross over for the war before *ADONAI*, just as my lord says.”

Numbers 32:16-27 TLV

There is a line of thought that these tribes fell short of what God intended by not taking allotments with the other tribes in Canaan. That's one way to look at it. Another way is to consider that God had commanded Israel to take possession of Gilead and Bashan, the land of kings Sihon and Og east of Jordan. If Reuben, Gad, and half Manasseh had not taken that command to heart, how would those lands have been apportioned, and when? Who would have defended them and kept them in Hebrew hands as the nation focused on conquering Canaan?

These are questions military strategists ask. The biblical record hints that Israel's leaders were thinking strategically about using Gilead and Bashan as a base to support the conquest of Canaan. It's no stretch of the imagination to surmise that Reuben, Gad, and half Manasseh used the farm and pastureland of their inheritance to supply not only

their own expeditionary troops, but the armies and families of the other tribes as well. A seasoned warrior like Joshua would have taken that into account as he planned a campaign of conquest and wondered how he would feed his people after the manna ceased and before they could put the conquered land into production. With that in mind, it seems that, as the two tribes and the half tribe presented Moses with their request for an early inheritance and their offer of help, they were thinking not only of themselves, but also of their brethren.

We touch the heart of our heavenly Father when we put others ahead of ourselves. That's what Yeshua recognized in the poor widow who offered what little she had at the Temple treasury. She could have kept those two small coins and fed herself for a day, but by contributing to the House of God she demonstrated her faith that the God of the House would care for her. Ultimately, that's what we are saying when we help others. Those who grasp all they can at the expense of others have little vision beyond their selfish desires. Those who help others receive what the Creator has set aside for them demonstrate not only selfless compassion, but a vision that exchanges the limited resources of this present reality for the enduring bounty of eternity.