

INITIATIVE OR INERTIA?

by Doug Goins

The first twelve chapters in the book of Joshua cover seven years of Israel's movement into the land. They focus on military battles, strategy, and conquest. Chapters 13-24, in contrast, focus not on military battles but on the military administration of allocating territory and settling the pacified land of Canaan. Joshua himself as the leader has had to shift roles from being the commander-in-chief of the united armies to being the military overseer of the settlement process, which will end up taking thirteen years.

In the passage we're going to look at now, Joshua will confront two serious problems that arise during the settlement of the tribes into their inheritance. The first problem will be self-centered complaining by the tribes of E'phraim and the half of Manas'sseh settling west of the Jordan, about the size of their tribal territories. The second problem will be the procrastination of seven other tribes in clearing the land and confronting the Canaanite resistance in their respective territories.

The good news is that these two problems will be bracketed by two wonderful, encouraging responses of faith by people who are willing to possess the land. We're first going to meet five orphaned sisters, the daughters of Zeloph'ehad, who stand together and claim the inheritance of their father. And at the end of our passage we'll be encouraged by the bold faith of Joshua himself at the conclusion of this process of allotment, claiming his own inheritance and then vigorously rebuilding a city that has been in ruins.

Throughout these three chapters we're going to hear two contrasting words for our own lives: initiative and inertia. There is the excitement of taking initiative in our Christian living, and there is the problem of having difficulty moving into all the good things that God has for us. In this passage are two groups of people who look at the same set of circumstances—possessing the land, claiming the inheritance. For one group of people it represents problems and results in inertia. For the other group of people it represents opportunity and results in the joy of taking initiative.

The context for the four stories that we're going to look at spans chapters 16-19. In chapter 16 the tribe of E'phraim is given their territory across the middle of the land. In chapter 17 the half-tribe of Manas'sseh is settled north of E'phraim.¹ In chapter 18 the tribe of Benjamin is settled below E'phraim. Then in chapter 19, the tribe of Simeon is given its territory below Judah; and in the north the tribes of Zebulun, Issachar, and Asher are settled above Manas'sseh. Farther north, above the Sea of Galilee, is the settlement of the tribe of Naphtali. And the last tribe to be settled is Dan, in the middle of the country between E'phraim and the Mediterranean coast.

Faith and courage

The first story is that of the faith of the five daughters of Zeloph'ehad, at the beginning of chapter 17 in the account of the settling of the tribe of Manas'sseh. Verses 3-6:

Now Zeloph'ehad the son of Hopher, son of Gilead, son of Machir, son of Manas'sseh, had no sons, but only daughters; and these are the names of his daughters: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. They came before Elea'zar the priest and Joshua the son of Nun and the leaders, and said, "The Lord commanded Moses to give us an inheritance along with our brethren." So according to the commandment of the Lord he [Joshua] gave them an inheritance among the brethren of their father. Thus there fell to Manas'sseh ten portions, besides the land of Gilead and Bashan, which is on the other side of the Jordan; because the daughters of Manas'sseh received an inheritance along with his sons. The land of Gilead was

allotted to the rest of the Manas'sites.

In the nation of Israel there were laws of property and inheritance. It was always the sons who inherited the property from the father. But these five women of faith were going to see to it that daughters weren't discriminated against. They appealed to Moses, and now twenty years later they remind Joshua of the decision that Moses made. So we need to go back to Numbers 27:2-8 for this wonderful story of the courage of five sisters, who stood before the entire nation, the religious leadership, and the leadership of Moses:

And they [the daughters of Zeloph'ehad] stood before Moses, and before Elea'zar the priest, and before the leaders and all the congregation, at the door of the tent of meeting, saying, "Our father died in the wilderness; he was not among the company of those who gathered themselves together against the Lord in the company of Korah [a rebellious movement against Moses and his leadership], but died for his own sin; and he had no sons. Why should the name of our father be taken away from his family, because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father's brethren."

Moses brought their case before the Lord. And the Lord said to Moses, "The daughters of Zeloph'ehad are right; you shall give them possession of an inheritance among their father's brethren and cause the inheritance of their father to pass to them. And you shall say to the people of Israel, 'If a man dies, and has no son, then you shall cause his inheritance to pass to his daughter.'"

In response to the faithful initiative of these sisters, God told Moses to change the law of property in the nation. And now after waiting in faith for probably twenty years, these sisters stand before Joshua and the leaders of the nation. The appeal they make is to the word of God spoken through Moses, which was recorded in the book of Numbers, which Joshua has in his possession. Joshua responds in faith and validates the judgment of Moses. He assures these daughters that the land will stay in their family. In essence, these women are reminding the male leadership of the nation of Israel that God is committed to inheritance rights for women. They are like the woman we met in the last message, Achsah the daughter of Caleb, who boldly went to her father and asked him for the spring in Debir, which was the best part of the land. These daughters of Manas'seh have the faith and courage to ask for their inheritance. The result is an amazing measure of equality with the sons of Manas'seh.

There are two spiritual principles in our passage on which we'll build as the other three stories unfold. The first one is that God wants to give all of us, men and women alike, all of our spiritual inheritance—the fullness, completeness, and richness of what he has determined for us. We don't have it, more often than not, because we don't try to obtain it, we don't ask. There's a wonderful boldness on the part of these sisters. They're not afraid to ask for what is rightfully theirs. The apostle James wrote (4:2), "You do not have, because you do not ask."

The other spiritual principle that we'll amplify as we go along is this: In Jesus Christ all believers are one. We are all equally the heirs of God, and race, gender, and other distinctions have nothing to do with it. The apostle Paul said in Galatians 3:26-28: "...For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith [men and women alike, you are all heirs]. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." In the Lord's eyes, male and female are equal and both have rights. Neither is by arbitrary power to lord it over the other, or by clever manipulation, to selfishly try to get his or her own way. We see both principles at work in the first story of faith and initiative of these daughters who boldly claim the inheritance they know is theirs from the Lord. For them possessing the land isn't a problem but an opportunity.

Complaints and excuses

But now Joshua, the narrator, pointedly draws an embarrassing contrast between the faith of the daughters of Zeloph'ehad and the faithlessness of the sons of Joseph. The problem is that of inertia, unwillingness to change circumstances. Two tribes, E'phraim and western Manas'seh, complain to Joshua about their inheritance. Look at 17:14-18:

And the tribe of Joseph spoke to Joshua, saying, "Why have you given me but one lot and one portion as an inheritance, although I am a numerous people, since hitherto the Lord has blessed me?" And Joshua said to them, "If you are a numerous people, go up to the forest, and there clear ground for yourselves in the land of the Per'izzites and the Reph'aim, since the hill country of E'phraim is too narrow for you." The tribe of Joseph said, "The hill country is not enough for us; yet all the Canaanites who dwell in the plain have chariots of iron, both those in Beth-she'an and its villages and those in the Valley of Jezreel." Then Joshua said to the house of Joseph, to E'phraim and Manas'seh, "You are a numerous people, and have great power; you shall not have one lot only, but the hill country shall be yours, for though it is a forest, you shall clear it and possess it to its farthest borders; for you shall drive out the Canaanites, though they have chariots of iron, and though they are strong."

In simple terms, these two tribes are complaining that God hasn't given them enough room. Remember, as we've seen through this period of settlement, God is sovereignly at work through the casting of lots. The territory they received is his decision. So their issue is not with Joshua, but with God himself.

We know from the records that at this point in their history, the population growth of these two tribes is not out of bounds relative to that of the other tribes. All the tribes have been growing through the birth of children. So is this claim about not having enough space legitimate? The map makes clear that it really isn't, and Joshua refuses to humor these people. He's not fooled by this smoke screen about numbers.

Verse 15 exposes two issues that they're really struggling with, if you look at it again carefully. First, they're not interested in the hard physical work of clearing this heavily forested hill country. And second, they're afraid of the Canaanites. Per'izzites are mentioned, as are the Reph'aim, the giants. They are occupying the land these tribes really want in their territory. The Jezreel Valley is a huge, beautiful, fertile plain, and the area of Beth-she'an is at the north end of that valley. But there are giants there, and these tribes are afraid to drive them out. They don't want to work, and they don't want to fight. They've come to enjoy the status quo after the conquest. They've had the security and comfort of living together with all the tribes on the plains around Jericho and Gilgal, on the banks of the Jordan River. Possessing their possessions means that they'll have to split up and head off in different directions, and it's going to involve effort.

The response these tribes give to Joshua in verse 16 is incredibly self-centered and whiny. They are basically saying, "We don't want to do it. It's too hard, we can't. We don't even think we should have to do it." There's a hint in this conversation that they view themselves as deserving special treatment as the sons of Joseph. Joshua himself is a son of Joseph, an E'phraimite. So there may be a subtle appeal to him as one of their tribesmen, hoping that he'll show favoritism to them somehow.

But in verses 17-18 Joshua tells his tribesmen that if they're such special people, now is a great opportunity to prove it. Let them do what Caleb did, go up and claim the mountains, defeat the giants. And then he says that the need they sense for expanded territory will be met. They won't have to go outside their allotment if they claim the territory they already have. It will involve discipline on their part, in terms of preparation and persevering through the struggle. But in these verses are the strong indicative statements, "You will triumph, you will clear the land, you will claim it all the way to the borders of your allotment." There is great emphasis on the outcome that has been determined-God will do this.

The spiritual issue for us is to not complain about our circumstances, but ask, "Lord, how can I maximize the place where you've put me?" I was remembering this week the times that I've complained to the Lord about not receiving fair treatment. I've wanted something more or something different than God saw fit to give me in his timing. More times than I care to remember, I've whined my complaints to God. But he gave me back the same words that Joshua speaks to these people of the tribes of Joseph. He told me to faithfully use the resources he gave me, to bloom where I was planted, to quit complaining about my lot in life. He made it clear that if I spent half the energy I use rationalizing and complaining to do something constructive by faith in him, then things would radically improve.

I've been thinking about my own complaining in contrast to the attitude of a godly woman who is going to be here to minister among us in a few weeks, Joni Eareckson Tada. When she was a vivacious, outgoing, athletic

teenager almost thirty years ago, she dove into Chesapeake Bay and came up with her neck broken, a quadriplegic. Whenever I'm tempted to complain about circumstances, I ought to think about her. I know Joni has low days and periodic struggles, but she has allowed God to do tremendous things in her life. She has refused to allow her bed to confine her. Taking the initiative, Joni has taken up a paint brush with her teeth and created beautiful works of art. Trusting God for provision, she has become a great theologian and Bible teacher. Refusing to allow her paralysis to define her, she's grown into a Christian leader of international stature in the field of disability ministry. Far from uttering drab complaints as the sons of Joseph did, Joni sings beautiful music of hope and faith in God's faithfulness in all circumstances. Joni has fully claimed her inheritance in Jesus Christ. She matches up beautifully with the daughters of Zeloph'ehad.

Ingratitude and unbelief

But in contrast to her and these sisters, we're going to come now in chapter 18 to a second example of inertia in this lifestyle of faith, another disappointing encounter that Joshua has with the last seven tribes, which haven't even begun to possess their possessions. I looked up the definition of inertia last week: "A tendency to remain in the state one is in and not start changes." (This definition even fits the sons of Joseph, because all they want to do is complain, rather than claiming their lot in life.)

So far five tribes have been given their inheritance by Joshua, Elea'zar, and the respective tribal leaders. These leaders have been casting lots before the Lord at the tabernacle at Gilgal. But now we're going to see that Joshua moves the camp to Shiloh in the territory of E'phraim. This location is much more central and convenient for the tribes. The physical movement to Shiloh is going to reinforce the confrontation that Joshua has with these seven procrastinating tribes. Let's read 18:1-4:

Then the whole congregation of the people of Israel assembled at Shiloh, and set up the tent of meeting there; the land lay subdued before them.

There remained among the people of Israel seven tribes whose inheritance had not yet been apportioned. So Joshua said to the people of Israel, "How long will you be slack to go in and take possession of the land, which the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you? Provide three men from each tribe, and I will send them out that they may set out and go up and down the land, writing a description of it with a view to their inheritances, and then come to me.

The Hebrew sentence structure in the second sentence (verse 2) of this paragraph implies that a significant amount of time has elapsed since the settlement of the first five tribes. Apparently the remaining seven tribes have grown complacent. They're satisfied with life on the western bank of the Jordan. Some of them have probably migrated into the fertile lands of Manas'seh and E'phraim and Judah, and are enjoying a nomadic lifestyle in those areas. They're not eager to be involved in the warfare required to claim their own respective territories. Again, unlike Caleb, his nephew Oth'ni-el, his daughter Achsah, and the daughters of Zeloph'ehad, these seven tribes are not people of faith, spiritual zeal, and confidence in the Lord. They're really slow to respond to the challenge of possessing their possessions. They're idling in neutral.

Joshua's challenge in verse 3 confronts them with two issues. The first is ingratitude, because the land has already been given to them as a gift, and they are not responding. And the second is unbelief or faithlessness, because the promise has been made that they will conquer and possess it. The question for them is, "How long will you put it off? Take the possession that's been promised to you!" It exposes their unwillingness to engage in the difficult struggle involved in possession.

How do we apply this unwillingness to take possession of the land to our own lives? It can parallel our own often limited experience of Jesus Christ, our inability to share in his victory over sin, and the lack of fullness of his blessing in our lives. We tend to shrink from possessing the land because we know it's going to mean self-denial, or the sacrifice of some sinful pattern in our lives. What does the language of spiritual inertia sound like if you listen to yourself carefully? Here are some examples: "I can't get along with my wife." "My husband and I can't communicate." "I can't discipline the kids as I should." "I just can't give up the affair I'm having." "I can't stop overeating." "I can't find the time to pray." "I can't quit gossiping." "I can't control my temper." And so on and so on.

Joshua makes some wonderful indicative statements in 17:17-18: "You are numerous, you have great power, it shall be yours." He refers to a promise in 18:3: "this possession which God has given." There's a parallel between these statements and what the New Testament teaches us about our life in Christ. If Jesus Christ is our Savior and our Lord, then we are the recipients of limitless ability to change, incredible strength to do battle personally with destructive habits. Listen to the good news the New Testament gives us. Paul writes, "I can do all things through Him [Christ] who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). Paul writes again, this time the Lord Jesus speaking to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Paul responds immediately, "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me" (2 Corinthians 12:9). And he writes in another place, "For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father...that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man" (Ephesians 3:14, 16). Finally, the apostle Peter says, talking about Jesus, "...He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, in order that by them you might become partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). Here is the antidote to inertia in Christian living.

Patience and initiative

The final story that we come to in chapter 19 exemplifies this confident conviction that God is the God of change and initiative. This story comes at the end of the allotments, and is about how Joshua claims his own inheritance. Two things are going to stand out about the faith of Joshua: first, his patience in believing, and second, the initiative he takes. These are not contradictory ideas at all. Look at 19:49-51:

When they had finished distributing the several territories of the land as inheritances, the people of Israel gave an inheritance among them to Joshua the son of Nun. By command of the Lord they gave him the city which he asked, Tim'nath-se'rah in the hill country of E'phraim; and he rebuilt the city, and settled in it.

These are the inheritances which Elea'zar the priest and Joshua the son of Nun and the heads of the fathers' houses of the tribes of the people of Israel distributed by lot at Shiloh before the Lord, at the door of the tent of meeting. So they finished dividing the land.

If you haven't already been impressed with Joshua's patience, notice that he waits until everyone else in Israel has claimed their inheritance before he claims his own, serving the nation, being committed to the common good, with amazing personal humility. Joshua claims no special privilege for himself—he is the embodiment of servant leadership. He allows everybody else to have the best land, and he is willing to take what's left. Think about the way people high up in leadership commonly demand a corner office and their own parking space. But Joshua is willing to wait and trust God to meet his needs, taking his portion as a gift from his people.

Joshua's initiative is demonstrated in verse 50, in the choice he makes about the specific city that he wants for his own, the city of Tim'nath-se'rah on the slopes of Mount E'phraim. This city is eleven miles north of Shiloh, set in heavily forested land that has never been cleared or cultivated. Joshua takes a city that is lying in ruins, that must be rebuilt. He acts on his own advice to the complaining tribes of Joseph: "You have great power...the hill country shall be yours, for though it is a forest, you shall clear it and possess it." Joshua believes the guaranteed outcome as he moves into this area to claim it, settle it, and develop it. This is a tremendous initiative of faith. He rebuilds an uninhabitable city and makes it habitable. He settles in, makes himself at home, and fully enjoys this inheritance. It's really easy to follow a leader who lives out his faith that way, isn't it?

As you've thought about these four stories, would you say you're a son of Joshua, a sister of the daughters of Zeloph'ehad? Do you know the excitement of taking the initiative of faith in your Christian living? Or do you have to identify more with the complaining tribes of E'phraim and Manas'sah, or the procrastinating seven tribes? Do you struggle with inertia in your Christian living?

In the New Testament the apostle Paul was the great champion of initiative, of possessing the land, living by faith, claiming our full inheritance in Christ. He wrote to somebody who struggled a lot with paralysis and inertia, young Timothy. Timothy was a man of faith and a pastor, but he had been given a tough pastoral

assignment in Ephesus. On top of that Timothy struggled with chronic illness, which is demoralizing for anyone. He was also shy and timid by nature, not a natural leader. Apparently he was struggling with a sense that he was too young for the job; older people in the church didn't trust Timothy's leadership. All of that is daunting.

Let's look at 2 Timothy 2:1-3, 5-13 in this context and hear this as a final, wonderful call from the Lord himself if we are struggling with inertia:

You therefore, my son, be strong....

There's the call to take the initiative, to live the life of faith.

...In the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

Don't try to be strong in your own resources, your energy and intellect and willpower. The resources and grace of Jesus Christ are what will make you strong.

And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.

There are images of warfare and athletic competition:

Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus...And also if anyone competes as an athlete....

There's the issue of discipline and preparation for the conflict.

The hard-working farmer ought to be the first to receive his share....

Yes, it will involve work.

Consider what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.

These are hard things to work through and understand. We don't like to look at ourselves. But God guarantees that it will make sense to us if we want to understand it.

Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David, according to my gospel, for which I suffer hardship even to imprisonment as a criminal; but the word of God is not imprisoned. For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory.

Look at Jesus, how he persisted and prevailed by faith. Look at the kind of life Paul led-he wasn't overwhelmed by the enemy.

It is a trustworthy statement:

For if we died with Him, we shall also live with Him....

If we belong to him and we have been buried into his death, then we have the promise of his life to be lived out through us, to empower us. This is not just life when we die. It's a quality of life right now that's ours.

If we endure, we shall also reign with Him....

That's a guarantee.

If we deny Him, He also will deny us....

There is the frightening prospect of absolute renunciation. If we totally, finally, completely write him off and reject the grace of God at work in our life, he has no choice but to agree with our denial of him.

If we are faithless, He remains faithful....

Faithlessness is weak faith, the problem of inertia, the inability to get moving. But even in the face of inertia we have a God who has no inertia problem whatsoever. He is faithful. He will take initiative with us to change us.

...For He cannot deny Himself.

The point is that God is committed to changing us from complaining, procrastinating tribes of Israel to enthusiastic, zealous daughters of Zeloph'ehad and sons of Joshua. He'll change our inertia into initiative.

In Psalm 138 David writes of how he called out to the Lord out of weakness and fearful inertia:

"When I called, you answered me;

and you made me bold and stout-hearted."

That's initiative in faith. David said, "Lord, do it," and God did it. And he will do it for each one of us no matter what circumstances we find ourselves mired in.

JOSHUA-THE ADVENTURE AND VICTORY OF FAITH

Catalog No. 4470

Joshua 17:1-19:51

Seventeenth Message

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September 8, 1996

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