

Deuteronomy 21 – Case Law on Inheritance

Weekly Scripture Memory Verse

"A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children, And the wealth of the sinner is laid up for the just." (Proverbs 13:22, NKJV)

Day 1: The Duty of the Father

Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 21:15-16a

"If a man have two wives, one beloved and another hated, and they have born him children, both the beloved and the hated; and if the firstborn son be hers that was hated: Then it shall be, when he maketh his sons to inherit that which he hath..."

Devotional Teaching and Application

As we look at this detailed section of the law, we are dealing with a case law concerning the family. Specifically, it addresses the legal transfer of property and wealth from a father to his children. Notice carefully the assumption the Lord makes in verse 16: "when he maketh his sons to inherit that which he hath." When the divine Lawgiver assumes something, it means this should be a matter beyond debate. It establishes the moral duty of a father, working in close cooperation with his wife, to assign his inheritance.

What do we mean by this? In God's order, in God's way, those who have been blessed with resources have a responsibility to the next generation. Inheritance is important in the family economy because it enables a family to pass on the fruits of its labors and industry. It provides a basis for family prosperity and economic vitality. The Apostle Paul enforces this biblical moral law in the New Testament when he says that parents ought to lay up for their children, not the other way around. A good man thinks about the future. He labors today, in his place of employment, to build a firm foundation so he can bless the generations to come.

Family Discussion and Reflection

God gave the family an important role in the world, and passing down an inheritance is one way we prepare the next generation to serve the Lord.

1. Why does God want parents to carefully plan for their family's future rather than just spending everything they have on themselves today?
2. Parents, ask your children: What are some ways our family works together right now to be good stewards of the things God has given us?

Family Prayer Prompt

Lord, we thank You for the resources and the home You have given us. Give the parents of this household wisdom to manage our wealth biblically, and help us all to work diligently so that we might be a blessing to future generations.

Day 2: God's Law over Human Preferences

Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 21:15-16

"...he may not make the son of the beloved firstborn before the son of the hated, which is indeed the firstborn."

Devotional Teaching and Application

In this specific case law, we see a situation where a man has two wives—one he loves, and one he hates. The temptation for this father would be to let his subjective feelings determine how he divides his wealth. He might want to give the firstborn's inheritance to the son of the wife he prefers. But here we see a strict prohibition. He is not free to be guided by his own feelings on the matter. His actions must be governed by God's commandments.

The principle we must draw from this is clear: there is to be no favoritism in the family. Showing favoritism among children in any sphere is a recipe for disaster. How many disputes over inheritances have divided and embittered families? We see this even in the life of Christ, when a man interrupted Jesus' preaching to demand, "Master, speak to my brother, that he may divide the inheritance with me." It revealed a heart of covetousness and greed. When a father follows God's law, making a just and equitable division of his property without playing favorites, he protects his family from bitter division. We must always treat one another justly, according to God's standard, rather than our shifting emotions.

Family Discussion and Reflection

It is easy to treat people differently based on how we feel about them in the moment. But God calls us to act with justice and equal love.

1. How does showing favoritism in a family or among friends cause hurt and division?
2. Parents, ask your children: Why is it important that we obey what God's Word says about how to treat others, even when our feelings make us want to do something else?

Family Prayer Prompt

Father, keep our home free from the sin of favoritism. Guard our hearts against greed and covetousness. Help us to govern our actions and our treatment of one another by Your holy law, rather than by our own selfish preferences.

Day 3: The Purpose of the Double Portion

Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 21:17

"But he shall acknowledge the son of the hated for the firstborn by giving him a double portion of all that he hath: for he is the beginning of his strength; the right of the firstborn is his."

Devotional Teaching and Application

The law requires the father to formally and judicially recognize the true firstborn son by giving him a double portion of the estate. If a man had four sons, he would divide his estate into five parts, giving two parts to the eldest. But we must understand why this was done. This double portion was not given for selfish consumption. It was not a financial boon so the oldest brother could live in luxury while his siblings struggled.

In the ancient world, the double portion was given for responsibility. The firstborn son would assume the leadership of the family circle. More specifically, this extra portion provided the financial empowerment he needed to care for his aging, widowed mother, and perhaps his father if he could no longer work. The rank of the firstborn meant that he was responsible to serve and protect the family. All that is given to us by God comes with responsibility. We are to invest and use what we receive for the kingdom of God and the care of others.

Family Discussion and Reflection

In God's kingdom, leadership always means service. Being given more resources or authority simply means you have a greater duty to care for those around you.

1. When God gives us extra blessings—whether it is money, talents, or authority—what does He expect us to do with them?
2. Parents, ask your children: How can the older children in our family use their age and maturity to help serve and protect the younger ones?

Family Prayer Prompt

Lord, teach us that to whom much is given, much is required. Whenever You bless us with extra resources or put us in positions of leadership, give us a servant's heart to use those blessings to care for others.

Day 4: Daughters and Equitable Division

Scripture Reading: Numbers 27:6-8

"And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 'The daughters of Zelophehad speak what is right; you shall surely give them a possession of inheritance among their father's brothers, and cause the inheritance of their father to pass to them.'"

Devotional Teaching and Application

While our text in Deuteronomy focuses on the sons, the whole counsel of God's Word shows us that daughters are also to receive an inheritance. In Numbers 27, when a man died with no sons, God commanded that the full inheritance pass to his daughters. We also see the righteous man Job, after his great trial, giving his daughters an inheritance in equal portions with his brothers. In the New Testament, Paul speaks generically of parents laying up for their "children"—both sons and daughters.

In biblical times, a daughter's inheritance was often given to her in the form of a dowry when she married. This was money or goods given to her by her father to empower her as she established a new household. The Bible grants a lot of liberty in how and when parents divide their wealth. A father does not have to wait until he dies; he can distribute inheritance to his children at crucial times in their lives, such as marriage or starting a business. The underlying principle is an equitable, just division of wealth to all our children, equipping both sons and daughters to fulfill their callings in God's world.

Family Discussion and Reflection

God's law is just and seeks the well-being of the whole family, equipping both men and women for the dominion tasks He has called them to.

1. Why is it important for parents to help equip all their children—both sons and daughters—for their future families and callings?
2. Parents, ask your children: What are some skills or wisdom you are learning now that will help you when you grow up and have your own household?

Family Prayer Prompt

Father, we thank You that Your laws are good and perfectly designed to help families thrive. We pray for the sons and daughters of this church, that they would be raised in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and equipped to build faithful homes of their own.

Day 5: Our Spiritual Inheritance and the True Firstborn

Scripture Reading: Colossians 1:15, 18 & Romans 8:16-17

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation... And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead... The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ..."

Devotional Teaching and Application

We have been talking about material wealth, houses, and lands. But material inheritance pales and fades to the vanishing point when compared to spiritual wealth. A family can be poor in this world's goods, barely keeping the creditors away from the door, yet be rich in things of eternal value. I would rather be left two pennies from my father and be given a spiritual heritage than to be given two million dollars and none.

In a deeper sense, this Old Testament law of the firstborn is a picture of Jesus Christ. He is the Firstborn of His Father. He has the supreme rank and status, but His status as the Firstborn was one of service—He died for His brethren. As the Firstborn, Christ receives the eternal inheritance. And here is the good news of the gospel: by the amazing love of God, we have been adopted into His family. Because we are His children, we are joint heirs with Christ! The wealth of heaven is divided with us. Our ultimate hope does not stand in earthly houses or lands, but in an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fades not away.

Family Discussion and Reflection

Our greatest treasure is not the money or property we will leave behind, but the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

1. If you had to choose between inheriting a vast fortune without knowing God, or living a humble life with a deep knowledge of Christ, why is knowing Christ the better choice?
2. Parents, ask your children: What does it mean that we are "adopted" into God's family and share in Jesus' inheritance?

Family Prayer Prompt

Blessed be Your name, O God, for the abundant mercy You have shown us. Thank You for our Firstborn Brother, Jesus Christ, who secured our salvation. We pray that the greatest inheritance this family passes down to the next generation would be a deep, abiding love for You and Your Word.