

*"Give me a present;
Since you have set me in the land of the south,
give me also pools of water."*

Everyone has truths they know but do not acknowledge, ideas that they have been taught but do not emphasize. The Lord wants us to reclaim those ideas, ask Him to join them to a life of charity, and take responsibility for living that life while seeing all good and truth as His alone. The story of Achsah teaches us how to return to the Word, and the truths that lead to eternal happiness.

In this brief repeated story we get three connected scenes: Caleb and Othniel; Othniel and Achsah, and Achsah and Caleb. Othniel conquering on behalf of Caleb is reclaiming truths, Achsah beseeching Othniel for a field is desiring good from those truths, and Caleb giving Achsah water is the mandate to see the line between ourselves and the Lord.

The story of Achsah is also a positive story; it is, in fact, a ‘happily ever after’ story, one of the few in the Old Testament. Previously, Joshua defeated all the armies and cities in the Land of Canaan, but the settlement of the land remains to be accomplished by the various tribes. Caleb, Joshua’s fellow spy during their time in the wilderness, is securing his own promised city, Hebron. Othniel will be the first judge, and our story today is the prologue to the stories of his leadership and all the following judges. Here at the beginning, everything is good; think of this story the way we might the Garden of Eden or Solomon building the Temple.

Our first scene depicts Caleb having just claimed the Canaanite city of Kiriath Arba and renaming it Hebron. Around the larger city of Hebron there are smaller cities that remain unconquered, one such being Kiriath Sepher, which means ‘City of Books’ or ‘City of Records’. As we might expect in a fairy tale, he promises his daughter’s hand in marriage to whoever conquers this smaller city on the edge of the southern desert,

and his kinsman Othniel takes up the challenge and conquers the city – and is married to Achsah. The city then is renamed ‘Debir’.

This is a picture of us re-examining and hopefully reclaiming truths we know but have perhaps forgotten.¹ Everyone has truths they were told, either last week or as an eight-year-old, that have faded from focus. These cities in the Holy Land, full of enemies, are a picture of ideas and systems of thought – man-made cities – that do not serve us but can be reclaimed. The ideas themselves are worth reclaiming, but they need to be rearranged and renamed. This is why Caleb and Othniel rename their cities.

Can we think of a truth we know, but haven’t given due attention, a truth that needs reclaiming? It could be one of the Ten Commandments, a principle from the Sermon on the Mount, or wisdom from Divine Love and Wisdom. For example, if we remember that we should not covet, but last considered this years ago – or never – we have a truth that needs to be reclaimed. Our understanding of coveting may even have twisted into a bad idea, such as vague condemnation of others who seem unhappy. This isn’t what coveting is, but our ideas may have been infested with our own evils and we have turned a commandment of love and happiness into an excuse to discount and condemn others.

Caleb and Othniel conquer these ideas. Caleb’s name can mean both ‘dog’ as well as ‘whole-hearted’, and he symbolizes our commitment to the Lord, a dogged enthusiasm to follow him. With a commitment to obeying the Lord, we refocus on and consider the truth in question. This is how Caleb conquers Kiriath Arba and transforms it into Hebron.

¹ AC 2907, 2909, 2981

More specifically, it is Othniel conquering Kiriath Sepher that shows us how we revive truths we may have abandoned. The city itself, the ‘City of Records’ is these ideas we have stored in our memory, our record, that no longer serve us. They can be good ideas, even truths, but they have been forgotten or put aside. Othniel’s name means ‘the power of God’, and this shows how we reclaim ideas: we don’t. We provide the commitment in Caleb, and Othniel will show up and restore to us our ‘city of records’. He will conquer it and transform it into ‘Debir,’ which means, quite literally, ‘the Word’. ‘Debir’ is also used as the name of the ‘Holy of Holies’ in the Temple Solomon will make. This city, Kiriath Sepher, mere ideas, is reasserted as the Word and the truth is back in our life. If we think over and remember what we have been taught, perhaps we can find a truth to reclaim our ‘historical faith’, and the Lord will show us how this truth speaks for Him.

What results is Achsah. Her name means ‘anklet’ and refers to jewelry one would wear on the leg or foot.² She symbolizes the delight we feel and appreciation we notice when we consider basic truths.³ We aren’t talking about a refined and enlightened awareness of complicated doctrinal ideas or sublime perspectives. No, Achsah is our enjoyment of truths because they make our life easier today. To return to our example, when we refocus on ‘do not covet’ we may see that it helps us live a day with less resentment and anxiety. Achsah is the daughter of Caleb and is married to Othniel, just as our delight comes from our commitment and becomes joined to the Lord’s power in our life. Achsah was always going to live in Debir, just as our delight in truths will always reside in the Word.

Please note that this delight, Achsah, has no role in this first scene. The Lord is revealing truths we should revisit. We are granted delight in those ideas

as we see how they are true, but we will see her exercise increasing agency as the scenes progress.

We then move to our second scene: Achsah and Othniel. In this brief scene, Othniel says and does nothing; it is merely Achsah asking Othniel to get more from her father Caleb. This scene of a bride urging her husband to ask her father for more is a picture of our delight asking the Lord for good to come from truth. We don’t see Othniel ask or Caleb agree because that happens apart from our delight or focus. We all know when an idea appeals to us, we want it to guide our life, to see it in our ideas and relationships and lead to growth. This is especially true when we obey a truth.⁴ Achsah wants more than just the city of Debir – she wants land and fields outside the city as well. Geographically, Debir is south of Hebron, on the very edge of the desert extending to the Red Sea. This is the wilderness through which Israel wandered for forty years. On one hand it makes sense for Achsah to want additional land surrounding her new city for grazing or crops, but on the other, should Achsah really be needling Othniel for more than they already have? And ‘needling’ is what she is doing; the verb describing her request comes from the word for ‘thorn’. She is pestering and nudging Othniel to get more.

This is exactly what we should do. We should pray to the Lord continually and ask for good to come from our truth. The field is doctrine, or in other words the conscious changes to our active life that come from understanding truth. In our example, what is the point of having a renewed understanding of covetousness if it doesn’t change how Monday morning or Thursday evening play out? Our rediscovery of truths of our historical faith (and resulting delight) will show us ways it should affect how we treat others and conduct our lives. If we commit to focusing on a truth like coveting, we will see it show up in our life. To continue the example: are you impatient standing in line at the store? Do

² Isaiah 3:16

³ AC 2714, 4382

⁴ NJHD 167, AC 9449

you resent the apparent ease with which others stay employed or married? Have you been fooled, by strangers and technology, into thinking everyone else enjoys more happiness than you? Asking for a field is asking to see how the truth can help in all these scenarios.

We might be surprised that this is a sympathetic image of how we should behave, but our sense of delight in basic, simple truths should constantly be beseeching the Lord to change our behavior. Achsah is a model of how we should behave to the Lord.

In our reading from Luke, we see a widow constantly harassing a judge, even trying to punch him repeatedly, until she gets what she wants.⁵ Jesus offers this example as an explicit lesson in how we should pray. Our delight in the truth should prompt us to ask incessantly and even aggressively for the Lord's help in our lives, both as the widow in Luke and as newly-married Achsah in the Judean desert. If we focus on a truth and refrain from the evil it shows us, the Lord promises that good will replace the evil.⁶

In the third scene we see Achsah exercise her full agency. Here is Achsah and Caleb apparently surveying the land around Debir, presumably after Caleb has agreed to Othniel's request. Achsah and Othniel have the city, they will now have the field, but something is missing: the waters of the southern lands. Once we have reclaimed an abandoned truth, and then from our delight seen how those ideas can bring meaning to our daily life, we must acknowledge what we can and cannot do.

The literal sense in this last scene is brief and mysterious and even jarring. Literally, Achsah is riding a donkey; she takes some downward action; Caleb then asks her what she wishes; and she then asks for pools of water. It seems that the literal

sense is so committed to focusing on Achsah and Caleb that the very plot and setting are subordinated to that focus. It is especially unclear what Achsah does in this pivotal scene (with a word that only appears twice anywhere), but it is a bold, downward motion. Perhaps we can imagine Achsah ranging out with her father, looking at the land, until she stakes the ground from upon her donkey, thus claiming a field.

We see our daily lives like fields surrounding the city of our 'official' beliefs, and we must claim them. We must own them. Is coveting making your life hard? Can you stop doing it? Can you take responsibility for stopping? Picture Achsah, out with her father, riding a donkey, thrusting downward; and then picture our delights, accompanied by our sense of commitment and our memory of the truth, leading us to take spiritual ownership of our repentance and reformation to shun evils.⁷ This is where Achsah is at her most active, and it is a picture of us at our most spiritually active as well.⁸

In the literal sense, she wants water because her newly claimed land and city are on the edge of the desert, and without water her land is worthless. Her phrasing, however gives us a clue that more is going on. She asks for pools (or bowls) of water "since you have set me in the land of the south."⁹

The Arcana Coelestia is very clear that the internal meaning of the land of the south, also called the Negev, is a celestial perspective, a heavenly insight, perhaps a surprising realization beyond our natural self to easily comprehend.⁹ When we arrive at this point, where we have staked our responsibility for our spiritual lives, it is only then that we can know and realize we are nothing but vessels of the Lord. This is what it means to be 'set in the land of the south'. Achsah realizes she needs



⁵ Luke 18:1-7

⁶ TCR 437

⁷ AC 2781, 5895, 8078

⁸ DP 44

⁹ AC 1458, 3195

one more thing, and we realize our claim of responsibility, useful and appropriate, itself reveals that we have no power.¹⁰

Furthermore, she doesn't just want wells or even springs. She is very specific: she wants 'pools' or perhaps 'bowls' of water. This rare word is only otherwise used to describe the pillars of Solomon's Temple, in fact the very highest portions of the whole Temple. Anyone familiar with this holy building would hear Achsah's request for these bowls and be reminded of entering the Temple. Please remember that her city already shares the name 'Debir' with the seat of the Ark. Achsah in the south asking for these pools is symbolically asking to enter the Temple, a celestial place where we do not act, but rather than the Temple Solomon will construct centuries later, the Temple as represented in the local geography, with the 'pools outside Debir' being an accurate description of both Temple and desert.

This last gift may be the most important. The Temple belongs to the Lord, and His pools of water most certainly do as well. Our delight with basic truths has brought us to the point of recognizing that while we must act forcefully as if we shun evils and do good, the final realization, in the land of the south, is that we need holy water. All truth belongs to the Lord, and we must acknowledge as much. This doesn't mean we stand limp, arms at our sides; instead, it is the fulfillment of our delight. Only by taking responsibility for our lives can we see that we are vessels of the Lord, and we can be delighted vessels. In our example, when we shun coveting, the Lord can change us, cooperating with our commitment, ideas, and delight. We should take delight that we do not control our spiritual lives even as we act and speak as if we do.¹¹

Caleb gives Achsah this last request and she is complete. She is married; she and Othniel own the city of Debir; they own the fields around their city; and now they own the pools of water in the

south. This may be the closest any Old Testament story gets to a 'happily ever after' ending. Here at the end of Joshua and the beginning of Judges we are shown how we are supposed to reclaim our faith from before and build a life in the light of the Lord's Word. First, the Lord lends His power to our commitment to reclaim ideas we have forgotten or thought lost. Then, we need to ask that these truths inform our daily lives because we see delight in living them. Finally, having taken forceful responsibility for the life that results from this commitment and conjunction, we can joyfully and wisely see that all power and holiness belong to the Lord, and we merely participate as vessels of His Divine love and wisdom. And we can live happily ever after.

Amen.

He turns a desert into ponds of water, a parched land into springs of water. And there he lets the hungry dwell, and they establish a city to live in; they sow fields, and plant vineyards, and get a fruitful yield. (Psalm 107:35)

Judges 1:10-15, Luke 18:1-8, TCR 362.2-3.

¹⁰ AC 88, DP 208, 209

¹¹ TCR 3, 362.3

Judges 1:10-15. And Judah went against the Canaanites who dwelt in Hebron (now the name of Hebron was formerly Kir'iath-ar'ba); and they defeated She'shai and Ahi'man and Talmai. From there they went against the inhabitants of Debir. The name of Debir was formerly Kir'iath-se'pher. And Caleb said, "He who attacks Kir'iath-se'pher and takes it, I will give him Achsah my daughter as wife." And Oth'ni-el the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, took it; and Caleb gave him Achsah his daughter as wife. When Achsah came to Othniel, she needled him to ask her father for a field; and she staked from upon her donkey, and Caleb said to her, "What do you wish?" She said to him, "Give me a present; since you have set me in the land of the south, give me also pools of water." And Caleb gave her the upper pools and the lower pools.

Luke 18:1-8. Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept confronting him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my accuser.' For a while he refused, but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps punching me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not bruise me by continually confronting me.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.

TCR 362.2-3. Whatever a man wills, and whatever he understands, enters into him by influx from without; the goods of love and charity, and the truths of wisdom and faith enter from the Lord, and everything contrary to these from hell. The Lord has provided that a man may inwardly feel as his own what thus enters from without, and consequently give it forth from himself as his own, although nothing of it is his. Nevertheless, it is imparted to him as his own on account of his Free Will, in

which reside his will and thought, and also on account of the knowledge of good and truth imparted to him; for from these he can freely choose whatever is conducive to his temporal and to his eternal life. A man who regards these matters with unsteady or clouded vision may draw from them many irrational conclusions; but a man who considers them fairly and clearly, may draw from them wise conclusions.