

NOTES
ON
THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

by

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"Things new and old."

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Numbers 32

The fact recorded in this chapter has given rise to considerable discussion. Various have been the opinions advanced in reference to the conduct of the two tribes and a half. Were they right or were they wrong in choosing their inheritance on the wilderness side of Jordan! This is the question. Was their acting in this matter, the expression of power or of weakness? How are we to form a sound judgment in this case?

In the first place, where was Israel's proper portion - their divinely destined inheritance? Most surely, on the other side of Jordan, in the land of Canaan.

Well, then, ought not this fact to have sufficed? would or could a really true heart - a heart that thought, and felt, and judged with GOD - have entertained the idea of selecting a portion other than that which GOD had allotted and bestowed? Impossible. Hence, then, we need not to go further, in order to have a divine judgment on this subject. It was a mistake, a failure, a stopping short of the divine mark, on the part of Reuben and Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh, to choose any boundary line short of the river Jordan.

They were governed, in their conduct, by worldly and selfish considerations - by the sight of their eyes - by carnal motives. They surveyed "**the land of Jazer and the land of Gilead,**" and they estimated it entirely according to their own interests, and without any reference to the judgment and will of GOD. Had they been simply looking to GOD, the question of settling down short of the river Jordan would never have been raised at all.

But when people are not simple, not true-hearted, they get into circumstances which give rise to all sorts of questions. It is a great matter to be enabled, by Divine grace, to pursue a line of action, and to tread a path so unequivocal as that no question can be raised. It is our holy and happy privilege so to carry ourselves as that no complication may ever arise. The secret of so doing is to walk with GOD, and thus to have our conduct wholly governed by His Word.

But that Reuben and Gad were not thus governed, is manifest from the entire history. They were half-and-half men; men of mixed principles; mere borderers; men that sought their own things, and not the things of GOD. Had these latter engrossed their hearts, nothing would have induced them to take up their position short of the true boundary line.

It is very evident that Moses had no sympathy with their proposal. It was a judgment upon his conduct that he was not allowed to go over. His heart was in the promised land; and he longed to go thither in person. How could he then approve of the conduct of men who were not only prepared, but actually desirous, to take up their abode somewhere else? Faith can never be satisfied with anything short of the true position and portion of GOD's people. A single eye can only see - a faithful heart only desire - the inheritance given of GOD.

Hence, therefore, Moses at once condemned the proposition of Reuben and Gad.

True, he afterwards relaxed his judgment and gave his consent. Their promise to cross the Jordan, ready armed, before their brethren, drew from Moses a kind of assent. It seemed an extraordinary manifestation of unselfishness and energy to leave all their loved ones behind, and cross the Jordan, only to fight for their brethren. But where had they left those loved ones? They had left them short of the divine mark. They had deprived them of a place and a portion in the true land of promise - that inheritance of the which GOD had spoken to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And for what? Just to get good pasture for their cattle. For an object like this did the two tribes and a half abandon their place within the true limits of the Israel of GOD.

And now let us look at the consequences of this line of action. Let the reader turn to Joshua 22. Here we have the first sorrowful effect of the equivocal conduct of Reuben and Gad. They must needs build an altar - "**a great altar to see to**" lest in time to come their brethren might disown them.

What does all this prove? It proves that they were all wrong in taking up their position on this side of Jordan.

And only mark the effect upon the whole assembly - the disturbing, alarming effect of this altar. At the first blush, it wore the aspect of actual rebellion.

"And when the children of Israel heard of it, the whole congregation of the children of Israel gathered themselves together at Shiloh, to go up to war against them. And the children of Israel sent unto the children of Reuben, and to the children of Gad, and to the half tribe of Manasseh, * into the land of Gilead, Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, and with him ten princes, of each chief house a prince throughout all the tribes of Israel; and each one was an head of the house of their fathers among the thousands of Israel. And

they came unto the children of Reuben, and to the children of Gad, and to the half tribe of Manasseh, unto the land of Gilead, and they spake with them, saying, Thus saith the whole congregation of the Lord [Did not the two and a half belong to it?] what trespass is this that ye have committed against the God of Israel, to turn away this day from following the Lord, in that ye have builded you an altar, that ye might rebel this day against the Lord? Is the iniquity of Peor too little for us, from which we are not cleansed until this day, although there was a plague in the congregation of the Lord, but that ye must turn away this day from following the Lord and it will be, seeing ye rebel to-day against the Lord, that to-morrow he will be wroth with the whole congregation of Israel. Notwithstanding, if the land of your possession be unclean, then pass ye over unto the land of the possession of the Lord, wherein the Lord's tabernacle dwelleth, [what burning words] and take possession among us: but rebel not against the Lord, nor rebel against us, in building you an altar beside the altar of the Lord our God" (Joshua 22:12-19).

* As though the two tribes and a half were actually detached from the nation of Israel.

Now all this serious misunderstanding, all this trouble and alarm, was the result of failure on the part of Reuben and Gad. True, they are able to explain themselves and satisfy their brethren, in reference to the altar. But then there would have been no need of the altar, no demand for explanation, no cause of alarm, had they not taken up an equivocal position.

Here was the source of all the mischief; and it is important for the Christian reader to seize this point with clearness, and to deduce from it the great practical lesson which it is designed to teach. It can hardly be questioned, by any thoughtful, spiritually minded person who fully weighs all the evidence in the case, that the two tribes and a half were wrong in stopping short of the Jordan, in taking up their position. This seems to us unquestionable, seen on the ground of what has already come before us; and if further proof were needed, it is furnished by the fact that they were the very first to fall into the enemy's hands. See I Kings 22:3.

But it may be that the reader is disposed to ask, "What has all this to say to us? Has this piece of history any voice, any instruction for us?" Unquestionably. It sounds in our ears, with accents of deep solemnity, "Beware of falling short of your proper position - your proper portion - of being content with the things which belong to this world - of taking any stand short of death and resurrection - the true, the spiritual Jordan." *

* No doubt there are many sincere Christians who do not see the heavenly calling and position of the Church - who do not enter into the special character of truth taught in the Epistle to the Ephesians - who are, nevertheless, according to their light, earnest, devoted, and true-hearted; but we feel persuaded that such persons lose incalculable blessing in their own souls, and fall very short of the true Christian testimony.

Such, we conceive, is the teaching of this portion of our book. It is a grand point to be whole-hearted, decided, and unequivocal in taking our stand for CHRIST. Serious damage is done to the cause of GOD and the testimony of CHRIST, by those who profess to be Christians denying their heavenly calling and character, and acting as though they were citizens of this world. This

is a powerful engine in the hands of Satan.

An undecided, half-and-half Christian is more inconsistent than an open out-and-out worldling or infidel. The unreality of professors is more injurious by far to the cause of GOD than all the forms of moral pravity put together. This may seem a strong statement; but it is too true. Christian professors who are only mere borderers - men of mixed principles - persons of doubtful deportment - these are the men who most seriously damage the blessed cause, and promote the designs of the enemy of CHRIST. What we want, just now, is a band of whole-hearted, thorough-going, unmistakable witnesses for JESUS CHRIST - men who shall declare plainly that they seek a country - earnest, unworldly men.

These are the men for the present crisis. What can be more deplorable, more saddening and discouraging, than to find those who make a lofty profession, who talk loudly of death and resurrection, who boast of their high doctrines and heavenly privileges, but whose walk and ways give the lie to their words? they love the world and the things of the world. They love money and are eager to grasp and hoard as much as possible.

Beloved Christian reader, let us see to these things. Let us honestly judge ourselves as in the very presence of GOD, and put away from us everything, no matter what, that tends to hinder the complete devotion of ourselves in spirit and soul and body to him who loved us and gave Himself for us.

May we, to use the language of Joshua 22 so carry ourselves as not to need any altar to see to, nor anything to declare where we belong to, where we worship, whose we are and whom we serve. Thus shall everything about us be transparent and unquestionable, our testimony shall be distinct, and the sound of our trumpet certain.

Our peace, too, shall flow like an even river, and the entire bent of our course and character shall be to the praise of Him whose name is called upon us.

May the good Lord stir up the hearts of His people, in this day of hateful indifferentism, lukewarmness, and easy-going profession, to more genuine self-surrender, true consecration to the cause of CHRIST, and unshaken faith in the living GOD. Will the reader join us in pleading for all this?

~ end of chapter 32 ~

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