The Tribes of Reuben and Gad Ask to Settle East of the Jordan River

Numbers 32:1-19

Numbers 32:1-19 - *"Now the children of Reuben and the children of Gad had a very great multitude of livestock; and when they saw the land of Jazer and the land of Gilead, that indeed the region was a place for livestock, [2] the children of Gad and the children of Reuben came and spoke to Moses, to Eleazar the priest, and to the leaders of the congregation, saying, [3] "Ataroth, Dibon, Jazer, Nimrah, Heshbon, Elealeh, Shebam, Nebo, and Beon, [4] the country which the LORD defeated before the congregation of Israel, is a land for livestock, and your servants have livestock." [5] Therefore they said, "If we have found favor in your sight, let this land be given to your servants as a possession. Do not take us over the Jordan."*

[6] And Moses said to the children of Gad and to the children of Reuben: "Shall your brethren go to war while you sit here? [7] Now why will you discourage the heart of the children of Israel from going over into the land which the LORD has given them? [8] Thus your fathers did when I sent them away from Kadesh Barnea to see the land. [9] For when they went up to the Valley of Eshcol and saw the land, they discouraged the heart of the children of Israel, so that they did not go into the land which the LORD had given them. [10] So the LORD's anger was aroused on that day, and He swore an oath, saying, [11] 'Surely none of the men who came up from Egypt, from twenty years old and above, shall see the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, because they have not wholly followed Me, [12] except Caleb the son of Jephunneh, the Kenizzite, and Joshua the son of Nun, for they have wholly followed the LORD.' [13] So the LORD's anger was aroused against Israel, and He made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until all the generation that had done evil in the sight of the LORD was gone. [14] And look! You have risen in your fathers' place, a brood of sinful men, to increase still more the fierce anger of the LORD against Israel. [15] For if you turn away from following Him, He will once again leave them in the wilderness, and you will destroy all these people."

[16] Then they came near to him and said: "We will build sheepfolds here for our livestock, and cities for our little ones, [17] but we ourselves will be armed, ready to go before the children of Israel until we have brought them to their place; and our little ones will dwell in the fortified cities because of the inhabitants of the land. [18] We will not return to our homes until every one of the children of Israel has received his inheritance. [19] For we will not inherit with them on the other side of the Jordan and beyond, because our inheritance has fallen to us on this eastern side of the Jordan."

Background Notes

In Numbers 32, the Israelites were located on the plains of Moab. The 40 years of wilderness traveling were over, and Israel was ready to cross the Jordan River and possess the Promised Land. The old generation had died, and a new generation was prepared to conquer the Land.

A considerable amount of fighting had already taken place up and down the area, and Israel had already conquered a lot of land on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Although Israel didn't fight the Edomites, the Moabites, or the Ammonites because they were distant relatives, they did fight the Amorites and the Midianites on the east side of the Jordan . These enemy forces had considerable strength, but they were no match for Israel, who had the Lord on their side. When you have the Lord on your side, the enemy is no match - then and today!

Deuteronomy 3:4-5 says that during this time period Israel fought and captured 60 walled cities that belonged to King Og of Bashan. *"And we took all his cities at that time; there was not a city which we did not take from them: sixty cities, all the region of Argob, the kingdom of Og in Bashan. [5] All these cities were fortified with high walls, gates, and bars, besides a great many rural towns."* King Og was an Amorite king who controlled the northern portion of the land east of the Jordan, including what today is called the Golan Heights. 60 walled cities! So Israel had done a lot of fighting, and they were now ready to cross the Jordan and conquer the land of Canaan.

It was at this point that the tribes of Reuben and Gad came to Moses and said*, "If we have found favor in your sight, let this land be given to your servants as a possession. Do not take us over the Jordan."* The tribes of Reuben and Gad were blessed with large numbers of flocks and herds (v1) and they wanted to live on the eastern side of the Jordan River because it had good grazing land for their cattle. Later in this chapter half of the tribe of Manasseh joined Reuben and Gad in their request to settle on the eastern side of the Jordan River.

Doctrinal Points

1. God desires His people to cross the Jordan.

1 Corinthians 10:1-10 says, *"Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, [2] all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. But with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.*
Now these things became examples for us, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted. And do not become idolaters, as were some of them. As it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to

play. Nor let us commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and in one day twenty-three thousand fell; nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed by serpents; nor complain, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer."

The first ten verses of 1 Corinthians 10 speak about some of the experiences of the children of Israel in their journey from Egypt to Canaan, and then verse 11 tells us that "*all these things happened to them as **examples**, and they were written for **our admonition**…* " The Greek word that is used for "examples" (v6 &11) is often translated *"types."* "*Types"* are Old Testament spiritual pictures of New Testament truth. So the whole journey of Israel from Egypt to Canaan is a spiritual picture, or a *"type,"* of the Christian life.

In the Old Testament spiritual picture that God has given to us, crossing the Jordan represents entering *"the heavenlies,"* or *"heavenly places."* Not "heaven," that believers enter when the die, but the *"heavenly places"* that believers can enter now, as taught in the epistle to the Ephesians. The *"heavenlies"* is the sphere of spiritual blessings and spiritual battles that God wants the believer to enter, as a result of our new life in Christ.

Spiritually speaking, all believers have applied the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Passover Lamb, to their lives, and are thus they have been delivered from the bondage and penalty of sin. All believers have "left Egypt" (spiritually speaking). Egypt is a spiritual picture of the world of slavery to sin, from which we have been delivered. But some believers have not "crossed the Jordan," spiritually speaking. Some believers are content to wander in the wilderness of Christian experience.

And some believers are like the 2 ½ tribes, who preferred to live on the border of the Land rather than cross the Jordan. They're willing to enter the Land occasionally, and fight a few spiritual battles (as we see here in this spiritual picture), but they really want to dwell with their families on the wilderness side of the Jordan! Why? Because, from their worldly perspective, that's where the good life is!

But God desires **all** His people to enter the Promised Land! In the spiritual picture, the *"heavenlies"* is the Promised Land that flows with milk and honey. That's where the believer's spiritual blessings are appreciated and enjoyed (read Ephesians 1). And yes, that's where the enemy concentrates his forces in spiritual warfare, but we are guaranteed victory if we walk with the Lord and arm ourselves with His armor (read Ephesians 6). Too many Christians are content to enjoy only the physical blessings of this life. They don't appropriate their **spiritual blessings**, and they never experience the thrill of spiritual victory, because they never enter really into spiritual warfare! God desires His people to cross the Jordan.

Which of the following options would you choose? Would you like to inherit a million dollars - or would you rather enjoy seeing the salvation of the unsaved friend for whom you've been praying? If you can't have both, which one would you choose? A lot of Christians are like the 2 ½ tribes. They want to just enter into the Land periodically, do a few battles, but pull back and dwell the "good life" (as they see it) on the other side. God desires His people to cross the Jordan!

2. God does not force His people to cross the Jordan.

Because the 2½ tribes didn't want to cross the Jordan, Moses called them "a brood of sinful men" (v14)! Moses was afraid that their compromising attitude would discourage the rest of the nation and bring the Lord's anger upon all of them. Moses was concerned that this was an act of unbelief, and it would result in another generation wandering and dying in the wilderness. "*For if you turn away from following Him, He will once again leave them in the wilderness, and you will destroy all these people" (v15)*. But after the 2½ tribes promised that they would send their military men across the Jordan to fight alongside the other tribes until the Promised Land was conquered, Moses finally agreed: "You can settle your families on this side of the Jordan if that is what you want. The Lord would rather have you cross the Jordan with the other tribes, but He won't force you to cross." And this was not just Moses' decision - it was the word from the Lord. *"Then the children of Gad and the children of Reuben answered, saying: "As the LORD has said to your servants, so we will do."*

The spiritual lesson for us is that God doesn't force His people to "cross the Jordan" - then or today. If you would rather not be a fully committed Christian, and would rather seek the so-called "good life," far from the spiritual battles, God will allow you to have your will. God is even willing to bless you as much as He can under those conditions - but you will never know the joy of a close walk with the Lord! You will never fully appreciate the spiritual blessings that are yours in Christ, and you will never really come to appreciate and know the thrill of victory in spiritual warfare.

I know a number of believers who are willing to live their Christian lives under these conditions. They're believers, and they're on their way to heaven, but they want to enjoy the "good life" that this world has to offer while they are on this earth! Where are you living? Have you "crossed the Jordan"? God doesn't force His people to cross the Jordan River.

Practical Application

Beware of too many cattle!

What caused the 2½ tribes to make this bad decision? "*The children of Reuben and the children of Gad had a very great multitude of livestock; and they saw the land of Jazer and the land of Gilead, that the region was a place for livestock…" (v1).* The land on the east side of the Jordan was good grazing land, and Reuben and Gad had a lot of cattle.

Do you see the obvious application? Beware of having "too many cattle"! You may not have a lot of literal cattle, but what about all the other things you have? Do you have so much "stuff" that you can't follow the Lord's directions and do what the Lord calls you to do? Are many of your decisions based on protecting and keeping your material possessions? Maybe of us are not free to do what the Lord is calling us to do because we have acquired too many cattle - way too much unnecessary "stuff." And we're unwilling to give it up! Here's a suggestion: have a big garage sale, get rid of the excessive "stuff," and then begin to make lifestyle decisions that are more in line with the Word of God!