

Permission for 2 1/2 Tribes to Settle East of the Jordan River

Numbers 32:20-42

Numbers 32:20-42 - *“Then Moses said to them: “If you do this thing, if you arm yourselves before the LORD for the war,²¹ and all your armed men cross over the Jordan before the LORD until He has driven out His enemies from before Him,²² and the land is subdued before the LORD, then afterward you may return and be blameless before the LORD and before Israel; and this land shall be your possession before the LORD.²³ But if you do not do so, then take note, you have sinned against the LORD; and be sure your sin will find you out.²⁴ Build cities for your little ones and folds for your sheep, and do what has proceeded out of your mouth.”*

²⁵ And the children of Gad and the children of Reuben spoke to Moses, saying: “Your servants will do as my lord commands.²⁶ Our little ones, our wives, our flocks, and all our livestock will be there in the cities of Gilead;²⁷ but your servants will cross over, every man armed for war, before the LORD to battle, just as my lord says.”

²⁸ So Moses gave command concerning them to Eleazar the priest, to Joshua the son of Nun, and to the chief fathers of the tribes of the children of Israel.²⁹ And Moses said to them: “If the children of Gad and the children of Reuben cross over the Jordan with you, every man armed for battle before the LORD, and the land is subdued before you, then you shall give them the land of Gilead as a possession.³⁰ But if they do not cross over armed with you, they shall have possessions among you in the land of Canaan.”

³¹ Then the children of Gad and the children of Reuben answered, saying: “As the LORD has said to your servants, so we will do.³² We will cross over armed before the LORD into the land of Canaan, but the possession of our inheritance shall remain with us on this side of the Jordan.”

³³ So Moses gave to the children of Gad, to the children of Reuben, and to half the tribe of Manasseh, the son of Joseph, the kingdom of Sihon king of the Amorites and the kingdom of Og king of Bashan, the land with its cities within the borders, the cities of the surrounding country.³⁴ And the children of Gad built Dibon and Ataroth and Aroer,³⁵ Atroth and Shophan and Jazer and Jogbehah,³⁶ Beth Nimrah and Beth Haran, fortified cities, and folds for sheep.³⁷ And the children of Reuben built Heshbon and Elealeh and Kirjathaim,³⁸ Nebo and Baal Meon (their names being changed) and Shibmah; and they gave other names to the cities that they built.

³⁹ And the children of Machir the son of Manasseh went to Gilead and took it, and dispossessed the Amorites who were in it.⁴⁰ So Moses gave Gilead to Machir the son of Manasseh, and he dwelt in it.⁴¹ Also Jair the son of Manasseh went and took its small towns, and called them Havoth Jair,⁴² Then Nobah went and took Kenath and its villages, and he called it Nobah, after his own name.”

Background Notes

If you read all the commentaries on Numbers 32, you'll find that some Christian writers don't denounce the 2½ tribes for wanting to settle east of the Jordan River. In fact, some writers say that these tribes were just using common sense and looking out for their families. Furthermore, they say, all the land on the east side of the Jordan River was given to Israel anyway.

Why was it a bad decision for the 2½ tribes to settle in this area? It's true that God gave all of the land on both sides of the Jordan River to the Jewish people. Before the children of Israel entered the Land, when Moses got a view of the Land but was not allowed to enter it, the Lord said to Moses: *"Go up to the top of Pisgah, and lift your eyes toward the west, the north, the south, and the east; behold it with your eyes, for you shall not cross over this Jordan. But command Joshua, and encourage him and strengthen him; for he shall go over before this people, and he shall cause them to inherit the land which you will see"* (Deuteronomy 3:27-28). Mount Pisgah is on the east side of the Jordan River, and the Lord told Moses not only to look west, north and south, but east as well. So all this land was given to Israel, and the territory requested by the 2½ tribes on the east side of the Jordan was certainly included.

So why was it wrong for the 2½ tribes to want this land for their possession? Why did Moses denounce them in such strong terms? The reason is that God wanted His people **united** together in the Promised Land on the west side of the Jordan River. They were to conquer the land on the east side of the Jordan (Deuteronomy 2), and they were to begin to possess this territory, but the tribal centers were **all** to live on the west side of the Jordan, in the heart of the Promised Land. God wanted **all** His people to cross the Jordan and enter the land as a **united** people. Until the 2½ tribes made their request there was no suggestion or direction from the Lord that any of the tribes would not cross the Jordan.

However, for selfish reasons, the 2½ tribes fell short of what God desired for them. They didn't consider separation from their brethren to be an important matter. Their attitude showed that they, to some degree, actually despised the Promised Land, and considered the land to the east of the Jordan to be better! They were committed to the will of the Lord - but not fully committed. They were only **partially obedient** to the directions of the Lord.

Doctrinal Points

1. It is possible to practice partial obedience.

The 2½ tribes practiced **partial obedience**. They didn't forsake the Lord or His people. They still wanted to be part of Israel, and they were willing to fight to conquer the Promised Land, but for selfish reasons they weren't fully committed to doing the will of the Lord. They were half-hearted - not whole-hearted - believers. They were "borderland believers." And borderland believers are only partially obedient.

The 2½ tribes were like Lot, when he made his selfish choice in Genesis 13. Lot looked around and saw the "well-watered plains of the Jordan" and he made his choice based on what **Lot** wanted for himself, not based on what **God**

wanted for him. However, despite his selfish choice, Lot never gave up his faith. Even though he actually moved into Sodom, 1 Peter 2 still describes him as “righteous Lot.” Lot and the 2½ tribes were like worldly believers today. Worldly believers are only partially obedient.

Partial obedience is really disobedience, isn't it? Remember the account in 1 Samuel 15, when King Saul **partially** obeyed the Lord? Saul was supposed to remove **all** the idolatrous Amalekites and **all** their possessions from the Land. But Saul was only partially obedient, and said he kept the best animals for sacrifice (or so he claimed!). The prophet Samuel responded with that well-known phrase in verse 22: **“To obey is better than sacrifice.”** As a result of his disobedience, God removed Saul's family from the royal dynasty, and David inherited the kingdom.

Are you a fully obedient believer -- or are you only partially obedient? Are you obedient in your giving to the Lord and how you handle your finances? Are you obedient about studying God's Word with other believers, and encouraging other believers?? Hebrews 10:25 says, *“not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together... but exhorting one another...”*

Are you fully obedient? There are many areas in which believers can practice partial obedience. It is possible to practice partial obedience.

2. There is a price to pay for partial obedience.

The Bible leaves no doubt that there was bad fallout from the partial obedience of the 2½ tribes. In fact, the trouble started even before Israel was settled in the Land. The 2 ½ tribes fulfilled their promise to help with the conquest of the Land, but when they returned home to the east side of the Jordan, they built a large monument of stones near the Jordan River (Joshua 22). This caused a huge misunderstanding with the other tribes, who thought the monument was an altar, and they jumped to the conclusion that the 2½ tribes were starting their own religion! It was only a monument, but because of the misunderstanding, a civil war almost broke out over this incident. This serious misunderstanding was certainly bad fallout from the partial obedience of the 2½ tribes.

And many years later, what tribes were the first to be taken into captivity when Israel was attacked by Assyria? You guessed it - the 2½ tribes on the east side of the Jordan. *“So the God of Israel stirred up the spirit of Pul king of Assyria, that is, Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria. He carried the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh into captivity”(1 Chronicles 5:26).*

The 2½ tribes were the first ones to go into captivity. Why? It all goes back to partial obedience. There is a price to pay for partial obedience.

Do you remember the account of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5? They gave only part of the money that they had received for a piece of property, and pretended they had given it all to the Lord. Ananias and Sapphira were disciplined with death for lying and for their partial obedience. There is a price to pay for partial obedience.

Is it possible that you are practicing partial obedience in some area of your life? No one else is aware of it because you wear a nice mask - **but you know!** Remember - there is a price to pay for partial obedience!

Practical Application

Don't sin by breaking your agreement.

"...*Be sure your sin will find you out...*" (v23). I'm sure you've heard this verse before, but what does it mean? Often it's used as a warning, that if a person commits a sin in secret, they won't get away with it -- the sin will be exposed in the future.

But that's not the main point of the verse. Let's read the whole verse, as it was addressed to the 2½ tribes: "*But if you do not do so, then take note, you have sinned against the LORD; and be sure your sin will find you out.*" "*If you do not do so...*" If you do not do what? If you don't keep your agreement to cross the Jordan to help fight the enemy alongside the other tribes as you promised, be sure that your sin will find you out. If the 2½ tribes failed to keep their agreement, God considered that broken promise to be **sin** - and there would be consequences.

That's the point of the verse. If you break your promise, "*be sure your sin will find you out.*" Breaking an agreement that you've made in good faith is **sin**, and God must discipline sin. Be sure your sin will find you out!

Have you made any agreements lately? Are people depending on you? Have you agreed to serve in some ministry? Are people expecting you to show up and help with a function at the church because you gave your word, or it's expected of you? Don't sin by breaking your agreement or commitment. There will be consequences. Be sure your sin will find you out!

Don't sin by breaking your agreement!