

INTRODUCTION TO NUMBERS CHAPTER 32

In this chapter we have,

- I. The humble request of the tribes of Reuben and Gad for an inheritance on that side Jordan where Israel now lay encamped, **#Nu 32:1-5.**
- II. Moses's misinterpretation of their request, **#Nu 32:6-15.**
- III. Their explication of it, and stating it aright, **#Nu 32:16-19.**
- IV. The grant of their petition under the provisos and limitations which they themselves proposed, **#Nu 32:20-42.**

Ver. 1. thru Ver. 15.

Israel's tents were now pitched in the plains of Moab, where they continued many months, looking back upon the conquests they had already made of the land of Sihon and Og, and looking forward to Canaan, which they hoped in a little while to make themselves masters of. While they made this stand, and were at a pause, this great affair of the disposal of the conquests they had already made was here concerted and settled, not by any particular order or appointment of God, but at the special instance and request of two of the tribes, to which Moses, after a long debate that arose upon it, consented. For even *then*, when so much was done by the extraordinary appearances of divine Providence, many things were left to the direction of human prudence; for God, in governing both the world and the church, makes use of the reason of men, and serves his own purposes by it.

I. Here is a motion made by the Reubenites and the Gadites, that the land which they had lately possessed themselves of, and which in the right of conquest belonged to Israel in common, might be assigned to them in particular for their inheritance: upon the general idea they had of the land of promise, they supposed this would be about their proportion. Reuben and Gad were encamped under the same standard, and so had the better opportunity of comparing notes, and settling this matter between themselves. In the first verse the children of Reuben are named first, but afterwards the children of Gad (**#Nu 32:2,25,31**), either because the Gadites made the first motion and were most forward for it, or because they were the better spokesmen and had more of the art of management, Reuben's tribe still lying under Jacob's sentence, *he shall not excel*. Two things common in the world induced these tribes to make this choice and this motion upon it, the *lust of the eye* and the *pride of life*, **#1Jo 2:16**.

1. The *lust of the eye*. This land which they coveted was not only beautiful for situation, and pleasant to the eye, but it was good for food, food for cattle; and they had a great multitude of cattle, above the rest of the tribes, it is supposed because they brought more out of Egypt, than the rest did; but that was forty years before, and stocks of cattle increase and decrease in less time than that; therefore I rather think they had been better husbands of their cattle in the wilderness, had tended them better, had taken more care of the breed, and not been so profuse as their neighbours in eating the *lambs out of the flock* and the *calves out of the midst of the stall*. Now they, having these large stocks, coveted land proportionable. Many scriptures speak of Bashan and Gilead as places famous for cattle; they had been so already, and therefore these tribes hoped they would be so to them, and whatever comes of it here they desire to take their lot. The judicious Calvin thinks there was much amiss in the principle they went upon, and that they consulted their own private convenience

more than the public good, that they had not such regard to the honour and interest of Israel, and the promise made to Abraham of the land of Canaan (strictly so called), as they ought to have had. And still it is too true that many *seek their own things* more than the *things of Jesus Christ* (#Php 2:21), and that many are influenced by their secular interest and advantage to take up short of the heavenly Canaan. Their spirits agree too well with this world, and with the things that are seen, that are temporal; and they say,

"It is good to be here,"

and so lose what is hereafter for want of seeking it. Lot thus chose *by the sight of the eye*, and smarted for his choice. Would we choose our portion aright we must look above the things that are seen.

2. Perhaps there was something of the *pride of life* in it. Reuben was the firstborn of Israel, but he had lost his birthright. Several of the tribes, and Judah especially, had risen above him, so that he could not expect the best lot in Canaan; and therefore, to save the shadow of a birthright, when he had forfeited the substance, he here catches at the first lot, though it was out of Canaan, and far off from the tabernacle. Thus Esau sold his birthright, and yet got to be served first with an inheritance in Mount Seir. The tribe of Gad descended from the first-born of Zilpah, and were like pretenders with the Reubenites; and Manasseh too was a first-born, but knew he must be eclipsed by Ephraim his younger brother, and therefore he also coveted to get precedency.

II. Moses's dislike of this motion, and the severe rebuke he gives to it, as a faithful prince and prophet.

1. It must be confessed that *prima facie--at first sight*, the thing looked ill, especially the closing words of their petition: *Bring us not over Jordan*, #Nu 32:5.

(1.) It seems to proceed from a bad principle, a contempt of the land of promise, which Moses himself was so desirous of a sight of, a distrust too of the power of God to dispossess the Canaanites, as if a lot in a land which they knew, and which was already conquered, was more desirable than a lot in a land they knew not, and which was yet to be conquered: one bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. There seemed also to be covetousness in it; for that which they insisted on was that it was convenient for their cattle. It argued likewise a neglect of their brethren, as if they cared not what became of Israel, while they themselves were well provided for.

(2.) It might have been of bad consequence. The people might have taken improper hints from it, and have suggested that they were few enough, when they had their whole number, to deal with the Canaanites, but how unequal would the match be if they should drop two tribes and a half (above a fifth part of their strength) on this side Jordan. It would likewise be a bad precedent; if they must have the land thus granted them as soon as it was conquered, other tribes might make the same pretensions and claims, and so the regular disposition of the land by lot would be anticipated.

2. Moses is therefore very warm upon them, which is to be imputed to his pious zeal against sin, and not to any peevishness, the effect of old age, for his meekness abated not, any more than his natural force.

(1.) He shows them what he apprehended to be evil in this motion, that it would discharge the heart of their brethren, #Nu 32:6,7.

"What!"

(says he, with a holy indignation at their selfishness)

"shall your brethren go to war, and expose themselves to all the hardships and hazards of the field, and shall you sit here at your ease? No, do not deceive yourselves, you shall never be indulged by me in this sloth and cowardice."

It ill becomes any of God's Israel to sit down unconcerned in the difficult and perilous concerns of their brethren, whether public or personal.

(2.) He reminds them of the fatal consequences of the unbelief and faint-heartedness of their fathers, when they were just ready to enter Canaan, as they themselves now were. He recites the story very particularly (#Nu 32:8-13):

"Thus did your fathers, whose punishment should be a warning to you to take heed of sinning after the similitude of their transgression."

(3.) He gives them fair warning of the mischief that would be likely to follow upon this separation which they were about to make from the camp of Israel; they would be in danger of bringing wrath upon the whole congregation, and hurrying them all back again into the wilderness (#Nu 32:14,15):

"You have risen up in your fathers' stead to despise the pleasant land and reject it as they did, when we hoped you had risen up in their stead to possess it."

It was an encouragement to Moses to see what an increase of men there was in these tribes, but a discouragement to see that it was withal an increase of sinful men, treading in the steps of their fathers' impiety. It is sad to see the rising generation in families and countries not only no better, but worse than that which went before it; and what comes of it? *Why, it augments the fierce anger of the Lord;* not only continues that fire, but increases it, and fills the measure, often till it overflows in a deluge of desolation. Note, If men did but consider as they ought, what would be the end of sin, they would be afraid of the beginnings of it.

Ver. 16. thru Ver. 27.

We have here the accommodating of the matter between Moses and the two tribes, about their settlement on this side Jordan. Probably the petitioners withdrew, and considered with themselves what answer they should return to the severe reproof Moses had given them; and, after some consultation, they return with this proposal, that their men of war should go and assist their brethren in the conquest of Canaan, and they would leave their families and flocks behind them in this land: and thus they might have their request, and no harm would be done. Now it is uncertain whether they designed this at first when they brought their petition or no. If they did, it is an instance how often that which is honestly meant is unhappily misinterpreted; yet Moses herein was excusable, for he had reason to suspect the worst of them, and the rebuke he gave them was from the abundance of his care to prevent sin. But, if they did not, it is an instance of the good effect of plain dealing; Moses, by showing them their sin, and the danger of it, brought them to their duty without murmuring or disputing. They object not that their brethren were able to contend with the Canaanites without their help, especially since they were sure of God's fighting for them; but engage themselves to stand by them.

I. Their proposal is very fair and generous, and such as, instead of disheartening, would rather encourage their brethren.

1. That their *men of war*, who were fit for service, would go *ready armed before the children of Israel* into the land of Canaan. So far would they be from deserting them that, if it were thought fit, they would lead them on, and be foremost in all dangerous enterprises. So far were they from either distrusting or despising the conquest of Canaan that they would assist in it with the utmost readiness and resolution.
2. That they would leave behind them their families and cattle (which would otherwise be but the incumbrance of their camp), and so they would be the more serviceable to their brethren, **#Nu 32:16**.
3. That they would not return to their possessions till the conquest of Canaan was completed, **#Nu 32:18**. Their brethren should have their best help as long as they needed it.
4. That yet they would not expect any share of the land that was yet to be conquered (**#Nu 32:19**):

"We will not desire to inherit with them, nor, under colour of assisting them in the war, put in for a share with them in the land; no, we will be content with our inheritance on this side Jordan, and there will be so much the more on yonder side for them."

II. Moses thereupon grants their request, upon consideration that they would adhere to their proposals.

1. He insists much upon it that they should never lay down their arms till their brethren laid down theirs. They promised to go armed *before the children of Israel*, **#Nu 32:17**.

"Nay," says Moses, "you shall go armed before the Lord, **#Nu 32:20,21**. It is God's cause more than your brethren's, and to him you must have an eye, and not to them only."

Before the Lord, that is, before the ark of the Lord, the token of his presence, which, it should seem, they carried about with them in the wars of Canaan, and immediately before which these two tribes were posted, as we find in the order of their march, **#Nu 2:10,17**.

2. Upon this condition he grants them this land for their possession, and tells them they shall be *guiltless before the Lord and before Israel*, **#Nu 32:22**. They should have the land, and neither sin nor blame should cleave to it, neither sin before God nor blame before Israel; and, whatever possessions we have, it is desirable thus to come guiltless to them. But,
3. He warns them of the danger of breaking their word:

"If you fail, you *sin against the Lord* (**#Nu 32:23**), and not against your brethren only, and *be sure your sin will find you out*;" that is, "God will certainly reckon with you for it, though you may make a light matter of it."

Note, Sin will, without doubt, find out the sinner sooner or later. It concerns us therefore to find our sins out, that we may repent of them and forsake them, lest our sins find us out to our ruin and confusion.

III. They unanimously agree to the provisos and conditions of the grant, and do, as it were, give bond for performance, by a solemn promise: *Thy servants will do as my lord commandeth*, #Nu 32:25. Their brethren had all contributed their assistance to the conquest of this country, which they desired for a possession, and therefore they owned themselves obliged in justice to help them in the conquest of that which was to be their possession. Having received kindness, we ought to return it, though it was not so conditioned when we received it. We may suppose that this promise was understood, on both sides, so as not to oblige all that were numbered of these tribes to go over armed, but those only that were fittest for the expedition, who would be most serviceable, while it was necessary that some should be left to till the ground and guard the country; and accordingly we find that about 40,000 of the two tribes and a half went over armed (#Jos 4:13), whereas their whole number was about 100,000.

Ver. 28. thru Ver. 42.

Here,

1. Moses settles this matter with Eleazar, and with Joshua who was to be his successor, knowing that he himself must not live to see it perfected, #Nu 32:28-30. He gives them an estate upon condition, leaving it to Joshua, if they fulfilled the condition, to declare the estate absolute:

"If they will not go over with you," he does not say "you shall give them no inheritance at all," but "you shall not give them this inheritance which they covet. if their militia will not come over with you, compel the whole tribes to come over, and let them take their lot with their brethren, and fare as *they fare; they shall have possessions in Canaan*, and let them not expect that the lot will favour them."

Hereupon they repeat their promise to adhere to their brethren, #Nu 32:31,32.

2. Moses settles them in the land they desired. He gave it to them for a possession, #Nu 32:33. Here is the first mention of the half tribe of Manasseh coming in with them for a share; probably they had not joined with them in the petition, but, the land when it came to be apportioned proving to be too much for them, this half tribe had a lot among them, perhaps at their request, or by divine direction, or because they had signalized themselves in the conquest of this country: for the children of Machir, a stout and warlike family, had taken Gilead and dispossessed the Amorites, #Nu 32:39.

"Let them win it and wear it, get it and take it."

And, they being celebrated for their courage and bravery, it was for the common safety to put them in this frontier country. Concerning the settlement of these tribes observe,

(1.) They built the cities, that is, repaired them, because either they had been damaged by the war or the Amorites had suffered them to go to decay.

(2.) They changed the names of them (#Nu 32:38), either to show their authority, that the change of the names might signify the change of their owners, or because their names were idolatrous, and carried in them a respect to the dunghill-deities that were there worshipped. Nebo and Baal were names of their gods, which they were forbidden to make mention of (#Ex 23:13), and which, by changing the names of these cities, they endeavoured to bury in oblivion; and God promises to take away the names of Baalim out

of the mouths of his people, [#Ho 2:17](#).

Lastly, It is observable that, as these tribes were now first placed before the other tribes, so, long afterwards, they were displaced before the other tribes. We find that they were carried captive into Assyria some years before the other tribes, [#2Ki 15:29](#). Such a proportion does Providence sometimes observe in balancing prosperity and adversity; he sets the one over-against the other.