

**CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE-
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

DHW BIBLE CLASS

LESSON 19

THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

CHAPTER 32

INTRODUCTION

This chapter relates how the tribes of Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh came to be settled in the land east of the river Jordan. The area is about 240 kilometres from north to south, and 48 to 128 kilometres east to west. Today the major part of the land is the modern state of Jordan. As Paul has taught us, there are many precious spiritual lessons that we can learn and apply to our lives. We shall run and not be weary, and we shall walk through the storms of life and not faint.

The theme of the chapter is summarized in the proverbial saying in verse 23, "Be sure your sin will find you out." These words have been used at many evangelistic meetings, but it was meant for the two and a half tribes of the nation Israel, who opted to settle in the land on the east of Jordan instead of entering into the land God had promised them.

Another lesson we can learn is about church governance. No church is without its own share of problems and troubles. There will always be those who grumble and murmur. They are never satisfied with the way things are done in the church. Their self-interest and standing in the church is more important. We can draw some

principles of how the leaders of a church could tackle its problems.

Once again, Moses' character and conduct in this chapter is an example for us to follow, especially for those who are serving as pastors, elders and deacons in the church. The responsibility and duty of pastors, elders and deacons of a church is to shepherd the flock which God bought with His precious blood, and to defend the faith God has preserved and handed to His people. God's servants must serve Him without fear and favour of men.

The chapter can be divided in five sections:

- (1) The request of the Reubenites and Gadites (vv.1-5);
- (2) The response of Moses (vv.6-15);
- (3) The alternate proposal of the Reubenites and Gadites (vv.16-19);
- (4) The conditional acceptance of the second proposal (vv. 21-27); and
- (5) The ratification of the undertaking made by the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half tribe of Manasseh (vv.28-42).

OUTLINE

A. The Tribes of Reuben and Gad Requested to Settle on the East of Jordan (32:1-5).

1. The Reubenites and Gadites had a great number of cattle and saw that the land on the east side of Jordan was good for cattle (v.1).
2. They approached Moses and Eleazar, and the leaders of the congregation (vv.2-3).
3. The land was pasture land for cattle even before Israel conquered the place (v.4).

4. They graciously requested from Moses the possession of the land (v.5).

B. Moses' Initial Response to the Request of the Reubenites and Gadites (32:6-15).

1. Moses pointed out the unfairness of their request and the discouragement it would cause among the people (vv.6-7).
2. Moses recounted the past experience at Kadesh-barnea (vv.8-13).
3. Moses warned that their action might incur the anger of the LORD toward all the people (vv.14-15).

C. The Reubenites and Gadites Explained Their Proposal and Gave an Undertaking (32:16-19).

1. They approached Moses and told him that they would build fenced cities and sheepfolds for their sheep and their children (v.16).
2. They gave an undertaking that they would arm themselves and cross over to help their brethren to possess the land before they returned to their families on the east side of Jordan (vv.17-19).

D. Moses Consented to Let Them Settle on the East of Jordan (32:20-27).

1. Moses agreed to their proposal on condition they fulfilled all their promises (vv.20-24).
 - a) They would arm themselves and go to war before the LORD (20).

- b) They would fight until all the enemies were driven out (21).
 - c) They would return only after all the land had been subdued (22).
 - d) If they did not keep their promises, their sins would find them out (23).
 - e) Moses called them to do what they had proposed (24).
2. The Reubenites and Gadites promised to fulfil all the conditions imposed upon them by Moses (vv.25-27).

E. The Ratification of the Agreement (32:28-42).

1. Moses announced the agreement reached by Eleazar, the priest, to Joshua, and chiefs of the tribes (vv.28-30).
 - a) Moses informed the appropriate leaders of the agreement (28).
 - b) Moses informed them that the Reubenites and Gadites would pass over with the rest to subdue the land before they returned to Gilead (29).
 - c) If they fail to do so, they must cross over to the land of Canaan with the rest (30).
2. The Reubenites and Gadites promised to carry out their promise as the LORD'S commandment (31).
3. They would fulfil their promise in order to secure their possession of the land on the east side of Jordan (32).
4. Moses consented to give their portion of the land on

the east side of Jordan, and the half tribe of Manasseh was also included (33).

5. The Gadites, Reubenites and the half tribe of Manasseh began building their fenced cities and sheepfolds, and called their villages after their own names (vv.34-42).
 - a) The Gadites built their cities and sheep folds (34-36).
 - b) The Reubenites built their cities and sheepfolds (37-38).
 - c) The half-tribe of Manasseh overcame the Amorite and possessed the land and built their villages (39-42).

COMMENTARY

The Request

God had blessed the children of Reuben and Gad. They had large herds of cattle. When they saw the land on the east side of the river Jordan was great for cattle rearing, they approached Moses, Eleazar and the leaders of the congregation. They said that the land which they had conquered was good for cattle, and they had cattle. They petitioned that the land be given to them and that they be not forced to cross over Jordan.

The Reubenites and Gadites were herders rather than farmers. Therefore it was natural for them to ask to be settled in the land east of Jordan. So far we can only see that their motive was just to settle in Transjordan and to opt out of entering Canaan. But it has to be pointed out that on this eastern side of Jordan, the land was won

from the warring people of Amorites, Moabites and the Midianites by the nation of Israel.

The Rebuke

After hearing the request of the Reubenites and Gadites, Moses responded with a scathing attack against them. Moses saw that it was a very dangerous request. He charged them that it would be unthinkable for them to be comfortably settled in the land east of Jordan when the rest of their brothers had to fight against the Canaanites. Moreover, Moses pointed out that their conduct and action would undermine the morale of the people and discourage them from entering the land the LORD had promised them.

Moses saw their attitude as akin to the incident in Kadesh-barnea. The spies returned and they refused to enter the land which God had told them to do so. Only Caleb and Joshua encouraged the people to trust God and enter the land. Their unbelief incurred the anger of God and as a result they had to wander in the wilderness for forty years when all those who were twenty and above died. In no uncertain terms, Moses rebuked them for behaving like their fathers, "an increase [brood] of sinful men," to heap yet the terrible wrath of God towards Israel! Moses continued that if they turned away from obeying God again, they might be left again in the wilderness, or even worse, they might cause the destruction of the nation of Israel.

Moses was not being too rash in his impassioned response to the request of the two tribes. The land east of Jordan was outside Canaan, the land the LORD promised to the Israelites. The

LORD had commanded them to enter and claim their inheritance. So Moses saw this as another act of rebellion and disobedience against God. God said to cross they said to stay. Moses knew that when the children of Israel entered Canaan they had to go to war to claim the land. The two tribes remaining on the east side of Jordan would reduce the number of military men needed to go to war. This would undermine the morale of the people. It would also be an act of selfishness on their part to be comfortably settled in the land east of Jordan while their brothers, reduced in number by their action, went to war. The two tribes put their self-interest and their immediate gratification above their brethren's needs. Such a request if granted would invite not only discouragement but schism. The other tribes too might be affected.

Moses acted as expected of a true and faithful leader whose responsibility and duty was to look after the well being of the whole nation and not one particular tribe or tribes. He had the welfare of the whole nation at heart. He was forthright in his remarks and he risked being unpopular and rejected. These are the marks of a good leader who is not afraid to tell the truth without fear and favour of men.

The Alternate Request

The Reubenites and the Gadites took Moses' stern rebuke in good grace. That was good. It opened the door for further dialogue and deliberation. The two tribes must have gathered together and discussed among themselves what to do. They came to Moses with an alternate plan. They said that they would build fortified cities

for their women and children, and also sheep pens for their herds and sheep. Then they would enter ahead of the rest into Canaan with their warriors. They would help their brethren to subdue the inhabitants in Canaan, and after they had won the land, they would return to their families.

Moses consented to the alternate plan on condition that they performed their promise to go armed before the LORD, and drove the Canaanites out. They could only return to their families on the east of Jordan after the children of Israel had taken possession of the land. They promised. They got what they wanted, and was willing to pay a price for it. Moses warned them that if they broke their promise, they could be sure that their sins would find them out! If they broke their vow, they could be sure that they could not escape the punishment of the LORD.

The Ratification

Moses next called Eleazar, the priest, Joshua, his successor, and the chief fathers of the tribes, together to witness the agreement he had reached with the two tribes. This was important because Moses would not be around to ensure the keeping of the promise. Joshua, the next leader of the nation, in particular, must watch that the two tribes keep their promise. But if they did not keep their promise, they would all have to dwell in Canaan. The Reubenites and Gadites agreed. At this juncture, they were joined by a half of the tribe of Manasseh. The basic characteristics of a covenant (although the word is not used) were clearly set out. It involved two parties. Both agreed to the terms of the covenant. Keeping the

stipulations of the covenant brought blessings. Breaking the terms of the covenant would incur curses on the guilty party. Moses then formally gave the land to the two and a half tribes. The agreement was ratified.

SUMMARY

A valuable lesson on church governance can be learned from this incident in the history of Israel. Sometimes in a church, a group of its members may want to be separated from the church to form another church or missionary outreach. Like the two tribes, they first approach the Pastor and Session of the church and make known their intention. This action not only recognized the leadership of the church, but it provides opportunities for all who are concerned to discuss, debate and deliberate, like what Moses and the two tribes did.

The leaders can assess and point out the dangers and pitfalls of a proposed project, like Moses who pointed out the danger of their petition and the effect it might have on the people. The group that desires to move out should accept any opposing views graciously. This will encourage further study of the matter and a better solution can result from all the discussions. The party that leaves under these gracious circumstances will be sent off with the blessings of the mother church.

The Reubenites and Gadites, and the half tribe of Manasseh made their choice by sight rather than by faith. Life is a series of choices. The two and a half tribes were satisfied with the immediate benefits and comforts which they

saw. Many Christians behave like them. In the day to day living, they make their choices more by sight than by faith in the promises of God. They go for the immediate benefits rather than wait for God's best, which might entail a period of struggling and striving. But the end result of waiting on the Lord is far better and lasting. If a Christian walks in the Spirit, he shall experience the meaning and purpose of living. But if he walks according to his flesh, guided by sight, sound and feelings, he lives only for a season, and ends up on "the scrap-heap of shipwrecked lives."

Members in a church should seriously consider Moses' rebuke of the tribes, "Shall your brethren go to war, and shall ye sit here?" The Reubenites and Gadites thought only of their prosperity and comfort. They avoided the cost of taking Canaan. They would be spectators on the side line whereas their brethren fought to possess the promised land. Churches today have such "spectator Christians." They come to meetings but they let the "old faithfuls" do all the dirty work. This causes others to do the same. We must not become this kind of Christians. In the Church, each member plays an important and essential role, for each member has been given a gift from God. Do not be a "spectator Christian".

AMEN.

DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

MONDAY: Numbers 32:1-5; Ruth 1:15-22.¹

1. What were the request of the Reubenites and Gadites?

2. Was there anything wrong or wicked about their request?

¹ Ruth 1:15 And she said, Behold, thy sister in law is gone back unto her people, and unto her gods: return thou after thy sister in law. 16 And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, *or* to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people *shall be* my people, and thy God my God: 17 Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, *if ought* but death part thee and me. 18 When she saw that she was stedfastly minded to go with her, then she left speaking unto her. 19 So they two went until they came to Bethlehem. And it came to pass, when they were come to Bethlehem, that all the city was moved about them, and they said, *Is this Naomi?* 20 And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. 21 I went out full, and the LORD hath brought me home again empty: why *then* call ye me Naomi, seeing the LORD hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me? 22 So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter in law, with her, which returned out of the country of Moab: and they came to Bethlehem in the beginning of barley harvest.

3. Why did they need to bring their proposal to Moses?

TUESDAY: Numbers 32:6-15; Proverbs 27:5-6.²

4. What were the motives of the two tribes did Moses presume they had?

5. Was Moses too rash in his response to the request of the two tribes?

² Proverbs 27:5 Open rebuke *is* better than secret love. 6 Faithful *are* the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy *are* deceitful.

6. In responding to the two tribes, whose interest was Moses most concerned with?

WEDNESDAY:Numbers 32:16-24; Nehemiah 4:13-22.³

³ Nehemiah 4:13 Therefore set I in the lower places behind the wall, *and* on the higher places, I even set the people after their families with their swords, their spears, and their bows. 14 And I looked, and rose up, and said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord, *which is* great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses. 15 And it came to pass, when our enemies heard that it was known unto us, and God had brought their counsel to nought, that we returned all of us to the wall, every one unto his work. 16 And it came to pass from that time forth, *that* the half of my servants wrought in the work, and the other half of them held both the spears, the shields, and the bows, and the habergeons; and the rulers *were* behind all the house of Judah. 17 They which builded on the wall, and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, *every one* with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other *hand* held a weapon. 18 For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his side, and *so* builded. And he that sounded the trumpet *was* by me. 19 And I said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, The work *is* great and large, and we are separated upon the wall, one far from another. 20 In what place *therefore* ye hear the sound of the trumpet, resort ye thither unto us: our God shall fight for us. 21 So we laboured in the work: and half of them held the spears from

7. What was the alternate proposal of the two tribes?

8. Were the Reubenites and Gadites careless in presenting their request in the first instance or did they compromise after Moses rebuked them?

9. What does the proverbial statement, "Be sure your sin will find you out," mean?

the rising of the morning till the stars appeared. 22 Likewise at the same time said I unto the people, Let every one with his servant lodge within Jerusalem, that in the night they may be a guard to us, and labour on the day.

THURSDAY: Numbers 32:25-33; Hebrews 9:27-28; Jeremiah 21:8.⁴

FRIDAY: Numbers 32:34-42; Ecclesiastes 5:4-6.⁵

10. Why was it necessary to ratify the covenant in before Eleazar, Joshua, the chief fathers of the tribes of the children of Israel?

12. What principles of Church governance can learn from this chapter?

11. Did the Reubenites, Gadites and Manassites make a wise choice?

⁴ Hebrews 9:27 And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: 28 So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation.

Jeremiah 21:8 And unto this people thou shalt say, Thus saith the LORD; Behold, I set before you the way of life, and the way of death.

⁵ Ecclesiastes 5:4 When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for *he hath* no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. 5 Better *is it* that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay. 6 Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it *was* an error: wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thine hands?