

What’s the first thing that you noticed in this chapter?
What does God think about this arrangement?
What does the LORD say to Moses?

The LORD says nothing.

What does this mean?

All through the book of Numbers we have heard the words:
“And the LORD said to Moses...”

And all through the book of Numbers we have heard in reply:
“And Israel did all that the LORD had commanded Moses.”

Some would say that Moses *failed* to inquire of the LORD –
but the text of Numbers doesn’t say that.

Rather in verse 31, Gad and Reuben say,
“What the LORD has said to your servants, we will do.”

Tonight we are looking at “compromise and obedience.”
When God calls you to do something,
is it okay to settle for something else?
Does the question shock you?

It should –
because this is *exactly* what Reuben and Gad are doing.

God said that Israel was to inherit the Promised Land.

Reuben and Gad want an inheritance outside the Promised Land.
That’s at least somewhat distressing.
In Numbers 34, God will describe the borders of the Promised Land –
and he draws a line from the Sea of Galilee, down the Jordan River,
to the Dead Sea.

Reuben and Gad want to stay on the east side of the Jordan River.
Moses wants them to come with Israel into the Promised Land.

They reach a compromise.
How should we think of this?

Is compromise always wrong?

Sometimes a compromise can be reached on the basis of a principled moderation.

Other times a compromise can repudiate principle entirely.

Of course, some principles matter more than others!

We saw this morning that Paul allows for *no compromise* on the principle of sexual fidelity.

The body is for the Lord and the Lord for the body.

Sexual immorality is sin.

Paul will never “negotiate” with the Corinthians on that point!

But Moses *does* negotiate with the Gadites and Reubenites on the question of their inheritance, and in so doing, he teaches us some important lessons about

“compromise and obedience.”

The literary structure of Numbers 32 is impressive.

The five key terms are all used seven times.

- | | |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1) Gad and Reuben | 1, 2, 6, 25, 29, 31, 33 |
| 2) possession/inheritance | 5, 18, 19, 22, 29, 30, 32 |
| 3) pass over/cross the Jordan | 5, 7, 21, 27, 29, 30, 32 |
| 4) armed troops | 17, 20, 21, 27, 29, 30, 32 |
| 5) before the LORD | 20, 21, 22, 22, 27, 29, 32 |

And you can see from the outline that the whole narrative fits into a basic chiasm – with the acceptance of the compromise at the heart of the text.

1. Reuben and Gad Request the Cities of Gilead (v1-5)

Now the people of Reuben and the people of Gad had a very great number of livestock. And they saw the land of Jazer and the land of Gilead, and behold, the place was a place for livestock. ² So the people of Gad and the people of Reuben came and said to Moses and to Eleazar the priest and to the chiefs of the congregation, ³ “Ataroth, Dibon, Jazer, Nimrah, Heshbon, Elealeh, Sebam, Nebo, and Beon, ⁴ the land that the LORD struck down before the congregation of Israel, is a land for livestock, and your servants have livestock.” ⁵ And they said, “If we have found favor in your sight, let this land be given to your servants for a possession. Do not take us across the Jordan.”

It’s worth noting that Reuben is named first only in verse 1 (undoubtedly because he is the firstborn).

But Gad plainly takes the lead in this enterprise, and for the rest of the passage, Gad is named first!

The point of verses 1-5 is that Reuben and Gad want to opt out of the conquest.

They want to stay on the east side of the Jordan.

And they do not want to cross the Jordan.

They don't want the land on the west side of the Jordan –
and so they don't see any reason why they should have to fight the Canaanites.

And they make their case based on the premise that “the LORD” struck down this land,
and left it open for settlement.

It's here – we're here – let us settle down on the east side of the Jordan.

We followed Moses – but we don't want to follow Jesus.

(Remember that “Jesus” is simply the Greek version of the Hebrew “Joshua.”)

We'll settle for an inheritance over here – we don't want the Promised Land.

Perhaps that helps explain Moses' response!

Moses hears the request of Gad and Reuben,

and he hears echoes of 39 years ago –

when Israel refused to enter the Promised Land!

2. Moses: Not Again! You Will Increase the Anger of the LORD against Israel! (v6-15)

⁶ But Moses said to the people of Gad and to the people of Reuben, “Shall your brothers go to the war while you sit here? ⁷ Why will you discourage the heart of the people of Israel from going over into the land that the LORD has given them? ⁸ Your fathers did this, when I sent them 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 people of Israel from going into the land that the LORD had given them. ¹⁰ And the LORD's anger was kindled on that day, and he swore, saying, ¹¹ ‘Surely none of the men who came up out of Egypt, from twenty years old and upward, shall see the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, because they have not wholly followed me, ¹² none except Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite and Joshua the son of Nun, for they have wholly followed the LORD.’ ¹³ And the LORD's anger was kindled 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.

Indeed, Moses uses the same phrases as in Numbers 11-14!

The 12 spies had discouraged the people from going into the Promised Land.

And the anger of the LORD was kindled on that day.

The Promised Land is at the heart of Moses' reply.

He is afraid that they will discourage Israel from going up into

“the land that the LORD has given them” (v7)

just like their fathers were discouraged from going into

“the land that the LORD had given them” (v9)

and so God swore that he would not give the rebels:

“the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob” (v11),

Instead, God made “them wander in the wilderness” (v13)
and he warns them God will “again abandon them in the wilderness” (v15),
which would mean that Reuben and Gad would “destroy all this people.”

Following the LORD results in receiving the Land.
Rebelling against the LORD results in destruction in the wilderness.

Now some might wonder, “is this some form of works-righteousness?”
Do you have to follow the LORD to get the inheritance?

Consider the words of the Lord Jesus,
“if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross,
and follow me.” (Matt 16:24)

It’s not “works-righteousness” –
it’s just following Jesus!

Reuben and Gad don’t want to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Joshua.
If you won’t follow Jesus, then Moses will give you a good tongue-lashing!

As Moses concludes in verses 14-15:

[read]

¹⁴ And behold, 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 again abandon them in the wilderness, and you will destroy all this people.”

Moses is afraid that he is seeing another rebellion –
and at this point, as Moses is about to die –
another rebellion would be catastrophic!

3. Gad and Reuben: Okay, We Will Take up Arms for Our Brothers and Then Return (v16-19)

How do Gad and Reuben respond?

Verse 16 provides an immediate answer,
but with an interesting twist.
It doesn’t just say, “and they said to him...”
It says, “then they came near to him and said...”

This is the language of a lesser party coming before a greater party:
“they came near to him” – they approached him to enter negotiations.

Given that verse 1-2 occurs before all the chiefs of the congregation,

and verses 16ff occur in private,
it seems clear that Gad and Reuben withdrew after hearing Moses' response,
and spent some time reconsidering their approach!

Certainly their offer in verses 16-19 is substantially different from their first offer.

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 will take up arms, ready to go before the people of Israel, until we have brought them to their place. And our little ones shall live in the fortified cities because of the inhabitants of the land. ¹⁸ We will not return to our homes until each of the people of Israel has gained his inheritance. ¹⁹ For we will not inherit with them on the other side of the Jordan and beyond, because our inheritance has come to us on this side of the Jordan to the east."

Certainly the offer of Gad and Reuben is very carefully crafted.

First, they will build sheepfolds and cities on the east side of the Jordan
in order to provide protection for their people while they are gone.
Then they will take up arms "ready to go before the people of Israel" –
in other words, they are offering to take the lead in the attack –
they want to demonstrate that they are "team players."
Third, they will not return home until the rest of Israel has gained his inheritance.
And finally, they will renounce any inheritance on the other side of the Jordan.

We will follow Jesus – but we don't want to live in the Promised Land.
What do you do with that?

It's at this point that we expect to hear that Moses inquired of the LORD.

But we don't.
Moses seems to recognize that Israel's victory over Sihon, king of the Amorites,
and Og, king of Bashan – not to mention the Midianites in the region –
means that this land is at least available to Israel.

The land of Gilead is not part of the Promised Land.
It is not part of the land that God promised to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.
It is separated from the Land by a canyon – and there are only a few crossings.

But Moses also seems to realize that Gad and Reuben are trying to be faithful.
They want to follow the LORD.
And sometimes you need to accept well-intentioned obedience –
even when you know that there is trouble ahead.

Moses accepts the compromise because Gad and Reuben have professed their willingness
to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Jesus.

4. Moses: If You Don't Cross the Jordan before the LORD, "Be Sure Your Sin Will Find You Out" (v20-24)

²⁰ So Moses said to them, "If you will do this, if you will take up arms to go before the LORD for the war, ²¹ and every armed man of you will pass 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 after that you shall return and be free of obligation to the LORD and to Israel, and this land shall be your possession before the LORD. ²³ But if you will not do so, behold, 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 you have promised."

So in verses 20-24, Moses accepts their offer.

But he warns them of the peril of their situation.

Notice that four times in the first sentence he uses the phrase "before the LORD."

"if you will take up arms to go before the LORD...

and every armed man of you will pass over the Jordan before the LORD...

and the land is subdued before the LORD...

then...this land shall be your possession before the LORD."

And it is in this case that we hear the famous phrase:

"be sure your sin will find you out."

You cannot hide from God.

You cannot hide from your sin!

Remember what Moses had taught concerning vows back in chapter 30?

Gad and Reuben have promised that they will be faithful in following the LORD.

If they turn away from following the LORD,

thinking perhaps to escape the dangers of warfare,

then they may be sure that their sin will find them out.

But I think that Moses is saying something more as well:

Gad and Reuben have offered a compromise plan.

Compromise can be a good thing *when you are following the LORD*.

But compromise can also be a bad thing –

when you are using compromise to avoid following the LORD!

Moses does not know their hearts.

But because he knows the deceitfulness of the heart,

he adds this warning – if you are doing this to set yourself up for rebellion –

then be sure your sin will find you out!

If you are distancing yourself from others so as to make your sin easier –

be sure your sin will find you out!

5. Gad and Reuben: Your Servants Will Pass Over before the LORD (v25-27)

The people of Gad and the people of Reuben respond eagerly:

[read]

²⁵ And the people of Gad and the people of Reuben said to Moses, “Your servants will do as my lord commands. ²⁶ Our little ones, our wives, our livestock, and all our cattle shall remain there in the cities of Gilead, ²⁷ but your servants will pass over, every man who is armed for war, before the LORD to battle, as my lord orders.”

This is the center of the narrative.

Gad and Reuben accept the compromise – ratifying the plan –
with all but one of the key phrases used once

“Gad and Reuben” (v25)

“pass over” (v27)

“every man armed for war” (v27)

“before the LORD” (v27)

Only one is missing:

there is no reference to the inheritance.

After all, the central feature of this compromise is that Gad and Reuben
will have no inheritance in the Promised Land.

And that is the chief feature of the compromise that Moses highlights
when he reports on the compromise to Eleazar and the heads of the fathers’ houses.

4’. Moses: If They Want to Inherit Gilead, They Must Pass Over with You (v28-30)

²⁸ So Moses gave command concerning them to Eleazar the priest and to Joshua the son of Nun and to the heads of the fathers' houses of the tribes of the people of Israel. ²⁹ And Moses said to them, “If the people of Gad and the people of Reuben, every man who is armed to battle before the LORD, will pass with you over the Jordan and the land shall be subdued before you, then you shall give them the land of Gilead for a possession. ³⁰ However, if they will not pass over with you armed, they shall have possessions among you in the land of Canaan.”

Verses 28-32 function as the public ratification of the compromise.

Gad and Reuben had given their word to Moses in private.

Now Moses calls on them to declare publicly their intentions.

He starts by stating the terms of the compromise to Israel,
(using the five key phrases of our passage)

If “Gad and Reuben”

go “armed to battle,”

“before the LORD,”

and “pass with you over the Jordan”
then, you shall give them the land of Gilead “for a possession.”
Otherwise, they have to have a possession in Canaan.

That may sound odd.

If they don’t do anything, they get the Promised Land.

If they go to battle, they don’t get anything more than what they have!

(Now, it’s arguable that from an economic standpoint,
they will have much better land in Gilead than in Canaan –
so it’s not as crazy as it sounds!)

But I also think that Moses is warning Gad and Reuben of the peril of their compromise.
Your desire for the good things of this age is perilous.
You could have an inheritance in the Promised Land *for nothing* –
and yet you would prefer this bountiful land?

Where are your priorities?

Please notice:

Moses is not saying that Gad and Reuben are *sinning*.

Just like Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7,

will say that the married man’s interests are divided.

The single man or woman can devote him or herself entirely to Christ.

The married man or woman *must* be concerned about his or her spouse.

It is not a sin to have divided interests.

The problem only comes when you allow your “other” interests
to draw you away from Christ.

Compromise does not have to result in disobedience!

There may be times when you have deeply held convictions –
and yet you find yourself in a situation where someone else doesn’t agree.

One of Moses’ deepest convictions is that Israel belongs in the Promised Land.

Gad and Reuben seem to think that they can still worship God just fine from Gilead.

And verse 31 would seem to confirm their opinion.

3’. Gad and Reuben: What the LORD Has Said We Will Do (v31-32)

³¹ *And the people of Gad and the people of Reuben answered, “What the LORD has said to your servants, we will do. ³² We will pass over armed before the LORD into the land of Canaan, and the possession of our inheritance shall remain with us beyond the Jordan.”*

Now Gad and Reuben publicly declare their acceptance of the terms:

“What the LORD has said to your servants, we will do.”

Wait!

The LORD hasn't said anything!!

Oh yes he has!

The LORD has spoken through his servant Moses.

And the five key phrases all come back again:

“Gad and Reuben” say that they will “pass over” “armed” “before the LORD” while their “possession” will remain beyond the Jordan.

2'. Moses Gave the Cities of Gilead to Gad, Reuben, and the Half-Tribe of Manasseh (v33)

³³ *And Moses gave to them, to the people of Gad and to the people of Reuben and to the half-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 and its cities with their territories, the cities of the land throughout the country.*

Only at the end, in verse 33, do we hear that half of Manasseh also inherits east of the Jordan. Why does the half-tribe of Manasseh only get mentioned here?

I would suggest it is because Manasseh *does* receive an inheritance in the Land. Only a portion of Manasseh settles in the east.

But the land of Sihon and Og is handed over to the 2 ½ tribes as a possession.

1'. Gad, Reuben and Half-Tribe of Manasseh Fortify the Cities of Gilead (v34-42)

³⁴ *And the people of Gad built Dibon, Ataroth, Aroer,* ³⁵ *Atroth-shopan, Jazer, Jogbehah,* ³⁶ *Beth-nimrah and Beth-haran, fortified cities, and folds for sheep.* ³⁷ *And the people of Reuben built Heshbon, Elealeh, Kiriathaim,* ³⁸ *Nebo, and Baal-meon (their names were changed), and Sibmah. And they gave other names to the cities that they built.* ³⁹ *And the sons of Machir the son of Manasseh went to Gilead and captured it, and dispossessed the Amorites who were in it.* ⁴⁰ *And Moses gave Gilead to Machir the son of Manasseh, and he settled in it.* ⁴¹ *And Jair the son of Manasseh went and captured their villages, and called them Havvoth-jair.* ⁴² *And Nobah went and captured Kenath and its villages, and called it Nobah, after his own name.*

In verses 34-38, we hear about how Gad and Reuben “built” various cities.

“Build” does not mean “build from scratch” –
it can also mean “rebuild” or “fortify.”

Most of these cities had been around before (notice verse 38 –
“their names were changed”).

Probably you are not checking back and forth between Num 32 and Josh 13 –
but if you are, you will notice that many of the cities of Gad wind up in Reuben,
and many of the cities of Reuben wind up in Gad.

Here, it says that the people of Gad built certain cities (v34-36)
and that the people of Reuben built other cities (v37-38).
Later, in Joshua 13, after the conquest,
the cities will be apportioned between Gad and Reuben and the half-tribe of Manasseh.

It appears that in Moses' day, they just spread out as they saw fit.
After the conquest, Joshua will make more careful arrangements according to tribes.

Verses 39-42 then explains the presence of Manasseh here.
Machir, the son of Manasseh captured Gilead and dispossessed the Amorites there.
And Jair the son of Manasseh captured the villages around Gilead
and called them "Havvoth-Jair" (the settlements of Jair).
So some of the clans of Manasseh decided to settle on the east side with Gad and Reuben.

In Joshua 22, we hear the sequel to tonight's text.
Because in Joshua 22, Joshua says that Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh
"kept all that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you,
and you have obeyed my voice in all that I have commanded you.
You have not forsaken your brothers these many days..."

Reuben, Gad and the ½ tribe of Manasseh
denied themselves, took up their cross, and followed Jesus.
And since God has given rest to Israel,
now the 2 ½ tribes may return to their possession on the other side of the Jordan.

So they go home – but when they do, they build a large altar by the Jordan River.
And when Phineas hears of it, the ten tribes in the Land go to the 2 ½ tribes
and they say, in the language of Moses,
"Have we not had enough of the sin at Peor
from which even yet we have not cleansed ourselves,
and for which there came a plague upon the congregation of the LORD,
that you too must turn away this day from following the LORD?"
Indeed, they urge them,
"if the land of your possession is unclean,
pass over into the LORD's land where the LORD's tabernacle stands,
and take for yourselves a possession among us." (22:18)

Again, Phineas recognizes that the 2 ½ tribes are living *outside* of the land –
they are living in a dangerous place –
a land that does not have God's blessing upon it.

But the 2 ½ tribes reply that they only built the altar as a witness.
They will not offer burnt offerings or sacrifices on this altar.

They only want this altar to stand as a witness between them
that they will worship and follow the God of Israel.

Even with that “happy ending” –

I think that you are supposed to come away from Numbers 32

(and Joshua 22)

a little conflicted.

It's a good thing that Gad and Reuben are following the LORD.

They obeyed!

Given how rarely that happens in Israel's history,

that's reason to celebrate!

But they are living outside the Land –

away from the promises of God –

away from the altar of the LORD – the tabernacle of God's presence.

Compromise is always dangerous.

But compromise is not always disobedience!

How do you know when to compromise and when not to?

I could just say, “Love God, and love your neighbor”!

Or, to put it slightly differently, “deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus.”

And if you need wisdom, ask God,

who gives generously to all who call upon him!