

February 14

Numbers 32, 34 and 35:1-8

Chapter 32 seems to me to be a tragic one. For 40 years Israel has been wandering in the wilderness. Now, by the mercy of God, they are poised on the eastern bank of the Jordan looking over at the plains of Jericho. The apparently significant opposition of Sihon, Og and the Midianites has been swept away as easily as a man sweeps aside an annoying insect. It's time to go and claim the inheritance, and two-and-a-half tribes say, 'Forget about our inheritance in the Promised Land, we like it here.' Gad, Reuben and one-half of the tribe of Manasseh see the great grazing land on the east bank of the Jordan and they look at their herds and they say, 'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. - We'll take this part please.'

Moses' response to this request is not very promising. He begins to harangue them about making the very same mistake their parents had made a generation before. He can see all kinds of dangers of a repetition of the rebellion at Kadesh Barnea. He is placated only when the two-and-one-half tribes promise faithfully to fulfill all of their military responsibilities in settling Israel on the other side of the Jordan, if only their families and flocks can first be settled here in the land of Gilead. It's a bit ironic really - here is Moses, who would do anything just to enter the Promised Land and die there, but who, because of his sin at the second Rephadim, has been denied that privilege - eyeball to eyeball with the leaders of two-and-a-half tribes of his people who have the privilege but don't care to exercise it. No wonder Moses was frustrated!

Well, when the two-and-a-half tribes give their word to support the rest of the nation in battle, Moses allows them to have what they've asked for, but it is a tragedy. You see, God had promised them Canaan - the land on the other side of Jordan - that was what they had been aiming for and reaching toward. And now within sight of the prize, these foolish people are saying, 'we will settle for something less than everything that God has promised us - less than what he has called us to' - that can never be a good thing.

Why did they do it? I'm sure they were tired of marching and they wanted to rest. That would have been a great temptation, and in our own spiritual lives it is a feeling that each of us knows well enough. Perhaps there was still a measure of their parents' fear - "Nephilim-aphobia" or something like that. We can recognize that attitude also - 'We know it's safe here and we're not sure what it is really like out there, so let's stay here.' Most of all, though, I think they just got distracted. The eastern side of the Jordan River had lots of good grazing land. It didn't look like the waterless desert areas in which they had spent so much time during their lives. There was plenty of water here - the grass was green - the land was purged of enemies. It looked like a great place - but it wasn't the place God had promised them! It wasn't the place to which He had called them. I've met a lot of people in my life who might well be the modern descendants of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh. They started out with their eye on the goal - with a clear understanding of what God was calling them to and of what He had promised them - some of them marched a long way toward the goal - but then they saw something - a piece of ground - a fabulous opportunity - a wonderful

relationship - something that distracted them. It looked good, and they decided to settle down and enjoy it instead of pursuing the calling and the promise of God.

I don't think this was God's best for the two-and-a-half tribes who settled there. I say this because of one, Moses' reaction to their request, and two, because in chapter 34, where the boundaries of Canaan are noted, the eastern boundary is still the eastern shore of Lake Kinnereth (that is the Sea of Galilee) and the Jordan River flowing down to the Dead Sea. If God had been pleased with the choice of these people to settle on the eastern side of the Jordan, He would have included it as a part of the land when He decreed its boundaries.

Reuben, Gad and Manasseh got what they wanted, but they robbed themselves of the best that God had to offer them. Their choice put a wedge between them and the rest of the people of Israel (we'll see some evidence of that when we read through the Book of Joshua) and it in all probability contributed to the weakening of their spiritual commitment to the Lord. When we read our next Gospel, we will now know the origin of the people who lived in the region of Gadara. The Gadarene Demoniac was probably a descendent of these people who settled in the lands of Og and Sihon.

When Moses struck the bargain with the representatives of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh regarding this land, he impressed upon them the importance of keeping their commitment to fight for and with the rest of the nation. His stern warning to them has come down to us, and all generations, in the form of a pithy epigram. *"If you don't do what you have said,"* he warned, *"Be sure your sin will find you out."* I know that you have heard that expression a thousand times - now you know it came from the lips of Moses, and it was spoken to the leaders of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh. The familiarity of that phrase is attributable to its accuracy. All my life I have been sinning, and all my life my sin has come back to "bite" me. It has that distressing tendency.

(LA – because Soper has zippo commentary on 34 and 35 I pulled the following out of ESV Study Bible...pretty much verbatim).

Moving on to Chapters 34 and 35 we read about the boundaries of the land and the cities for the Levites. According to the ESV Study Bible "the territory laid out represents the Promised Land, not the subsequently occupied land, of Israel. The boundary is not always clear. Oversimplifying, Canaan consisted of the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan plus modern Lebanon and a portion of Syria. For the Levites, they are basically assigned 48 cities (in reality little villages) and their immediately grazing land. The grazing land stretched for a thousand cubits or 500 yards from the city wall...that is 5 football fields long! This meant that if the "city" was very small, the grazing lands would stretch two thousand cubits in each direction. Among the Levitical cities are six cities of refuge. And then forty-two other cities of refuge had to be chosen elsewhere, to make a total of 48. Big tribes had to have more Levitical cities, and small tribes had to have fewer cities."

This concludes our study in the book of Numbers for a week or so and we will revisit this book later on in the month. Have a happy Valentines Day everyone...and as for tomorrow? Deuteronomy!