

# Pilgrims and Strangers

*Numbers 32 · Joshua 22:1–30 · Daniel 9:3–14*

Ministry — March 2, 2025

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## **Numbers 32**

### **The Two-and-a-Half Tribes: Settling Short of the Inheritance**

The Lord spoke of the kingdom of heaven being like a householder who brings out of his storehouse things new and old, and when we look into God's word we find that to be true. The story of Numbers 32 has a great deal to say to us.

The children of Reuben and Gad had much cattle — a very great multitude — and as they looked at the land of Jazer and Gilead, they saw that it was well suited for their herds. They came to Moses and asked to be given that land as their possession rather than crossing the Jordan. Moses' response was sharp: 'Shall your brethren go to war, and shall ye sit here? And wherefore discourage ye the heart of the children of Israel from going over into the land which Jehovah hath given them?'

This sounds reminiscent of Lot. Lot was a very wealthy man with much cattle, and when the time came to go separate ways from Abraham, what was before his eyes? The well-watered plain. He cast his eyes upon it and chose accordingly. And Lot's history is downward, downward, downward — until his offspring became two of the most implacable enemies of Israel. That is his legacy. It began with where he cast his eyes.

These two-and-a-half tribes were not Lot — but the principle was the same. There was a rich inheritance waiting on the other side of Jordan, attested by every one of the spies who had gone up forty years before. They brought back a cluster of grapes that took two men to carry. Some of these very people had been twenty years old when that happened and were now in their sixties. Did they not remember? Moses brought it plainly before them. There is an inheritance waiting. And yet they looked in the wilderness to find a place to settle — choosing to stay where the enemy was, in dangerous country, knowing they would need to build fortified cities just to protect their families.

They built those cities, and they named them after themselves — which is exactly what Cain's offspring did. They were behaving like the inhabitants of that side of the Jordan rather than like the people of God. Moses rightly called them the offspring of their sinful fathers who had refused to go into the land, and rightly pointed out that they were a discouragement to the rest of Israel. We think that what we do affects only us. But there is always a likelihood that others will imitate me when I am not faithful to the Lord.

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**Joshua 22:1–30**

### **The Altar Ed: One Body, One Worship**

In Joshua 22, after the conquest was complete, Joshua released the two-and-a-half tribes to return to their possession east of Jordan, commending them fully: 'Ye have kept all that Moses the servant of Jehovah commanded you, and have obeyed my voice in all that I commanded you.' He sent them away with his blessing.

But as they came to the districts of the Jordan, they built there a great altar — an altar of imposing appearance. When the rest of Israel heard of it, the whole

assembly gathered at Shiloh to go to war against them. They sent Phinehas the priest with ten princes to confront them: 'What is this trespass that ye have committed against the God of Israel, to turn away this day from following Jehovah?'

The children of Israel were right to act as they did. They cited the sin of Baal-peor and the transgression of Achan, in both of which individual sin had brought judgment on the whole assembly. God saw twelve tribes — there were only ten in the land at that moment, but in God's eyes it was twelve. The whole body was implicated in whatever any part did. Phinehas himself was a man of deep concern for the holiness of the assembly — he had personally judged the man who brought a Midianitish woman into the camp at Baal-peor. He came here with the same character.

The explanation given by the two-and-a-half tribes was accepted: the altar was not for sacrifice, but as a witness for future generations — a monument that their children might point to as proof of their connection to Jehovah and to the altar before His tabernacle. The matter was settled peaceably. But there is something deeply sobering here. They built this altar because they feared that in future, their children would be told by the ten faithful tribes: 'Ye have no portion in the Lord.' They were already anticipating alienation from the centre of worship. They had rationalized their position — and demonstrated that they were fully satisfied with it.

Consider what was on the other side of Jordan: the twelve stones at Gilgal, the tabernacle at Shiloh, the altar, the tables of stone, Aaron's rod that budded, the high priest. Everything to do with the worship of God — all on the other side. God had wrought a mighty miracle to dry up the Jordan to bring them across. And they came back across, satisfied to be separated from all of that. When Jeroboam came along, these tribes went with the ten northern tribes and no longer came to Jerusalem. It was not their children's

children who did it — it was their own hearts, fully manifested at last. They had long ceased to value worship in the place where Jehovah had put His name. These things have their start. It began in Numbers when they cast their eyes upon those plains.

A father may say: there are no young people in our assembly where my children can grow up with Christian friends — and move his family to a larger assembly. Every such reason seems wise and practical. But the Lord can take care of us in a tent in the wilderness. Abraham's children grew up with Abraham's family. We do not have to engineer our circumstances. What these two-and-a-half tribes demonstrated, both in their original choice and in their explanation to Phinehas, was that they were fully satisfied with their disconnection from the place of worship. That satisfaction is the warning to our own hearts.

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**Daniel 9:3–14**

### **Daniel's Prayer: A Pilgrim in Captivity**

A pilgrim is one who is just passing through — a stranger in the land where he finds himself. Daniel was a pilgrim and a stranger in Babylon, but unlike Lot, who chose to be in Sodom, Daniel did not choose to be in Babylon. He was taken there.

His circumstances are not described in detail, except that he had a house to which he went. When his enemies moved against him and he went to his house, he prayed — not simply prayed, but prayed toward Jerusalem. He knew where the centre was. That was his daily habit: three times a day, facing Jerusalem. That is a precious thing for a pilgrim and a stranger. He was so little known that when the handwriting appeared on the wall at Belshazzar's feast, the king's mother had to come and say: 'There is a man in

thy kingdom in whom is the spirit of the holy gods.' Daniel was that unknown. That is how it should be with a pilgrim in a foreign land.

Daniel 9:3–14 records his prayer of confession. He humbled himself before the Lord with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes, and identified himself with the failure of his people: 'We have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled, even by departing from Thy precepts and from Thy judgments... O Lord, righteousness belongeth unto Thee, but unto us confusion of face.' Not: I personally have been faithful. But: we — the people of God — have failed, and I own it as mine.

Our brother Tom once observed that in a sense, in the testimony today, we are in captivity. Paul was in captivity. It is Paul's doctrine that we hold to and say we are walking in. But I fear that I little represent that character of a pilgrim and a stranger that Paul himself represented — that his doctrine would set before us. We may be walking where the Lord would have us in some measure, yet not giving testimony to those around us that we are pilgrims and strangers seeking only the Lord Jesus Christ.

When the two-and-a-half tribes spoke to Moses, they said, 'We will go before the children of Israel.' But Moses, again and again — nine times at least in that chapter — spoke of going before the Lord. That is the difference. A dear Christian at work was constantly cornered by colleagues trying to get him to listen to crude things. He simply walked away. One day they had him surrounded and said: 'You are going to listen to this.' He said quietly: 'Men, I walk before the Lord.' That was the end of it. They dispersed. He honoured the Lord, and the Lord helped him. That is what it means to walk as a pilgrim and a stranger.

There are dear Christians in other lands who are tried unto death for their faith — we heard recently of more than fifty killed in the Congo. We have

not been put in that position. But we have the same Lord and the same calling. May He give us grace to lay hold of what it means to be pilgrims and strangers — to think of Daniel, who was faithful in the midst of captivity, who did not settle down in the land of his captivity, whose eye was on the Lord, and who walked before Him.