

Sermon on Numbers 32 prepared by Jonathan Shradar

Numbers 32:1-27

As we give ourselves to the Mission of the Kingdom we will experience the provision of Christ.

Ewen plays flag football, and I have always been available to help coach and support the team. But this season, the head coach had to bow out, making me the new head coach.

In my yearly Bible reading I have been in Exodus and I feel a little like Moses then, unprepared, unskilled, don't know what I am doing!

So I have formed an offensive strategy and evaluated the raw talent of our boys. But then we had practice on Monday, and two of the players didn't show up. If we had a bigger team it might not have been that big of a deal. But we have just one more player than you need to have on the field, so we need everyone there to practice and everyone there for our games! To carry out our mission of having a ton of fun, and winning football games.

This matches, to an extent, the vibe of Numbers 32, which is a story kept, I think, to inspire Israel to faithfulness to God, and kept for us, to inspire us as we go on our own journey to promise with Jesus.

They (Israel) - are a people set to conquer a land.

We - are a people equipped to take new territory as Jesus draws hearts to himself.

They all had a part to play just as we all have a part to play in the mission of God.

As we give ourselves to the Mission of the Kingdom we will experience the provision of Christ.

Context: Wilderness journey... 40 years.

Our text is following a holy war. "(31) this battle stands as a foretaste of the conquest of Canaan: not one Israelite was lost (31:39), and the tribes of Reuben

and Gad were allocated land (ch. 32). When facing armies within the land and tempted to fear, the Israelites could look to this past faithfulness of God—his giving them complete victory along with land even outside Canaan—and renew their trust in him.”

Points to what is required for those that are part of Israel coming out of their wilderness experience.

Similarly for us, through our wilderness journeys, answering the call to come to Christ and be part of his kingdom. Likewise see what is required of those that answer that call. That live on mission.

Partnership, propitiation, perpetuity, all paired with provision that is beyond us.

Partnership

Commentators do all kinds of things with this text. Most are negative toward these two tribes, or at best neutral concerning their request. God is silent in this account so it isn't clear. But rather than condemn Gad and Reuben for selfishness/sin, I want to zero in on their essential nature.

Israel is on the way to a land God promised to give his people. A place to be set apart, to broadcast what life with God is like.

It came with the requirement of battle. The census counts always numbered men battle-ready. Rules are given for war. Israel as an advancing force to rid a geography of idol worship. That is what's ahead.

A lot has occurred over these 40 years in the wilderness. Grumbling, plagues, worship, rescue, supernatural care.

Intermingled throughout we see over and over again that all of Israel needs to participate. And a fearful response from Moses shows us why.

These two tribes have a huge number of livestock. And this just-conquered land happens to be perfect for raising and keeping cattle.

So they ask for this to be their inheritance.

Numbers 32:5 “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.” (ESV)

Moses’ response hints at something vital.

And I see trauma shaping his response... Have you ever had a conversation with someone or made a request and their response didn’t seem appropriate, almost like they were responding to something else?

This is how Moses reacts - out of trauma of past experience.

We all have friendships with “church refugees” or are ourselves recovering from difficult situations, lived experiences that harmed or hurt, that shape our perspective, and our future response. Even if our response is not always rooted in truth.

One example is our old readerboard. Some churches used to have such an item up front on display to recount hymnal numbers, last week’s attendance, last week’s giving... metrics for church health. At a previous church they were cleaning out storage and I saved the readerboard, so it could be redeemed. No updating of numbers but Jesus’ declaration that “it is finished!”

A great, redeeming piece of art (that for most of us has blended into the background). But when we first put it up... I kid you not, I had two different individuals approach me and communicate that seeing it was bringing back traumatizing memories.

Part of the point... but trauma is real. And I read Moses’ response thinking he seemed to be responding out of trauma.

How dare they make such a request! He says, “your fathers did this” and it caused 40 years of wandering! Go into a longer discourse on their shared experience. (It wasn’t just Gad and Reuben’s fathers who fell to fear).

But Moses hears their request and ties it immediately to this history. It will surely demoralize Israel. It will ruin us!

Numbers 32:15 “For if you turn away from following him, he will again abandon them in the wilderness, and you will destroy all this people.” (ESV)

If I were coaching Moses I might encourage more of a probing response, “tell me more about your commitment to the cause...”

But the fear is real. They need all of Israel “wholly following Yahweh” to take the land. Israel’s whole identity is that of a royal priesthood set apart for God. They all need to be part of it for his purpose to unfold. Their partnership is essential.

They need them for battle for advancing the mission.

It is the same with you!

We are a small church so you are already experts at being essential! (CM still needs more teachers!) But we are part of this mission and all of us are essential.

“The God of Israel, whose declared mission was to make himself known to the nations through Israel, now wills to be known to the nations through Jesus..“Our mission, in participation with that divine mission, and in anticipation of its final accomplishment, is to work with God in exposing the idols that continue to blur the distinction, and to liberate men and women from the destructive delusions they foster” (165). Chris Wright

Matthew 24:14 “And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” (ESV)

Mark 16:15 “And he said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.” (ESV)

Not based on your gifts-assessment score - it is for all of us that follow Jesus.

1 Peter 2:9–10 “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. [10] Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” (ESV)

From that mercy, as a people, we partner with one another to proclaim the excellencies of Jesus!

Do you get this? You are part of the plan!

But more than just presence, the mission will require our participation.

Propitiation

I could have labeled this point participation, but that is too light of a word! And who doesn't love a good theological word with some weight behind it?!

Propitiation as sacrifice. Usually used to describe Jesus as our atoning sacrifice. But also, following this story, it is a reminder that we have skin in the game.

Gad and Reuben sure do.

Numbers 32:16–18 “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.” (ESV)

They will build some security for their families then they will go first before Israel to fight to bring them into the land.

Rather than just stop once they settle, there is commitment to sacrifice to leave comfort for the mission. (Moses makes sure it will be all of the fighting men).

Battling in places that don't always feel like home.

Where it would be easy to rest with their affluence (livestock), they covenant to fight, to carry out the mission as partners, willing to sacrifice whatever it takes. Failing to do so would be failing to keep their word, sinning against the Lord.

As apprentices of Jesus we begin to live like him. Giving ourselves away for the good of others and the glory of our King. Moves us beyond routine to action, to battle, to mission.

“This text condemns idleness and self-indulgence. On Sunday some worshipers care only about feeding their souls. Soul-saving is pushed into the background. Unless we shake off that horrible selfishness and feel that the essence of our religion lies in love and that one of the first fruits of it is to care about the salvation of others, then this text solemnly threatens us.” Spurgeon

Some of us have experience of sending those we love off to war. It is not a cozy feeling. This is the commitment of Gad and Reuben. It may look a lot like that for us as we follow Jesus.

More than just invitations handed out to strangers, but commitment to care, journey, give ourselves for others.

Investing emotionally, mentally, financially, and spiritually in the faith of another requires sacrifice. It means you have to give of yourself in order to see them grow.

It is the model Jesus gives us, that all of the apostles give us...

“Paul sacrificed his physical safety for the sake of encouraging and journeying alongside other believers. All of the letters we read in the New Testament were written to believers. Paul talks about giving up his liberties to win others for Christ. He also talks about being shipwrecked, stoned, put in jail and reminds fellow believers he has done this to share the gospel with them and others... I don't imagine that you'll have to endure even half of what Paul endured for fellow believers, but I know you will have to sacrifice something. God just might be asking you to sacrifice something in your life in order to encourage, strengthen, or just be there for another believer. This is part of what it means to be the body of Christ.” Tamara Chamberlin

Israel lived in response to the exodus (freedom from slavery) with hope of the promise. We live in response to the good news of Jesus with hope for eternity with him.

“We aim to impart to other people the full and everlasting satisfaction that we ourselves have in God through Jesus Christ... Evangelism and missions happen when the expansive impulse of joy in God reaches a tipping point, and we overflow in love as we share the gospel, and share our lives.” John Piper

This is why we always go back to the well of grace - of Jesus' sacrifice for us, to rescue us from sin and punishment we deserve. To the new life we have in him. It is to be our defining joy.

That we are loved, accepted, given a place to belong, and promised transformation to be like him. When joy in all of him defines us, we are compelled to give of ourselves for the good of others and his glory.

Romans 12:1 “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” (ESV)

Jesus may be inviting you to sacrifice in unique ways - it's why he made you a partner in the kingdom. It is the best life - lived for others.

And it is a life that goes on...

Perpetuity

Lasting, without end, into eternity.

Tribes agree with Moses, it's significant, “Keep your word” or sin against the Lord and face his punishment.

Moses then communicates the commitment to the leadership of the next generation. He won't be there to enforce their promise, to see to their sacrifice. Eleazar and Joshua will enforce this covenant.

If the tribes don't follow through they will find their inheritance in Canaan.

Numbers 32:31–32 “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.” (ESV)

Their commitment, this sacrifice, their partnership, it will be lasting.

Joshua 22 confirms they did it. Because these tribes carried their commitment into the future, Israel was established. The mission moves on.

It wouldn't be easy, but it would be what they are called to.

When we think of ministry, of life for the long term, some of us are focused on getting through tomorrow! But I wonder if a long commitment might make tomorrow more manageable.

Heading toward resurrection:**Philippians 3:12–14** “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. [13] Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, [14] I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (ESV)

1 Corinthians 15:57–58 “But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. [58] Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” (ESV)

Generations of worship, or mission, of service to the glory of God. This is what he invites us to in faith.

“Faith, however, looks beyond the mud and grime of this world to the far greater glory that God has promised us. Faith is therefore marked by a holy discontentment with this world, not merely when life is going badly but even when life is at its very best. Faith's eyes are always set onward, always looking beyond this world, always straining for a glimpse of the land of promise.” ID

Our partnership, our propitiation (sacrifice), our perseverance, all of it is fueled and matched by the provision of Christ.

Provision

This story is a picture of God's provision for his people - through each other.

“The wise provision of the sovereign Lord for his people is clearly evident in this account. He provides for the needs of the cattlemen; he gives an enlarged inheritance to Israel (more than the west side of the Jordan); he provides warriors to lead Israel in its further conquests.”

Now we follow the managing partner of this kingdom enterprise that is likewise the provision of the Lord for us - Jesus.

He has fought the good fight in our place, so that we merely need to believe in him and follow in his footsteps and trust in his goodness in order to enter in. His obedience is what earned our inheritance; his suffering paid for our sins. And he carries us as we carry out his mission now.

Gave himself to rescue us.

He is an ever present help to us.

He is always empowering us by his Spirit.

He is our source of joy.

Matthew 28:18–20 “And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. [19] Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (ESV)

That repentance and the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to the world.

Acts 1:8 “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (ESV)

All heading to glory.

Habakkuk 2:14 “For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.” (ESV)

From a story of livestock, land, and the Lord, we see a model for the kingdom’s mission.

As partners, giving ourselves because he gave himself for us, playing for the long game, generational commitment.

Commissioned, sustained, super-charged by the provision of Christ.

As we give ourselves to the Mission of the Kingdom we will experience the provision of Christ.

All the players on the field. Apprentices of Jesus all. A promise to be had. Glory to be revealed.

Let’s go!