

Answering the Battle Cry

Opening Text: Numbers 32:1-7

This passage relates to a crucial time in the history of Israel: 40 years had passed since their departure from Egypt and a new generation is now finally ready to go in and possess the land. They had now arrived at the banks of the Jordan river. This was the starting point of a great conquest. The land was theirs to conquer but there were battles ahead, there was a Jericho on the other side of the river, there were enemies that needed to be defeated. This was no small task and it was going to require the **collective effort** of every one of the 12 tribes of Israel. It had to be teamwork. However, two of the 12 asked not to be taken over the Jordan (v.5: *Do not take us over the Jordan*)

1. Resisting the battle cry

V.1- *Now the children of Reuben and the children of Gad had a very great multitude of livestock; and when they saw the land of Jazer and the land of Gilead, that indeed the region was a place for livestock,*

They considered their interests first, what they had and what they saw:

a) ... **“they had** a very great multitude of livestock.

They had a lot to lose. There was a lot at stake. I am sure they must have feared to step into the unknown, fight battles and in the process lose what they had.

b) *“And when **they saw** the land of Jazer...”*

They saw the lush lands by the edge of the Jordan river. They saw that the place was ideal for their cattle. The plateau east of the river was fertile and its slopes trapped the clouds, causing an abundance of rainfall – just what they needed.

They probably thought, “why going any further?” They probably thought that they were justified in not going any further and in not going to war. After all, there were still another 10 tribes and for sure they were not going to be needed. Also, they were not ‘warriors’. Their ‘gift’ was cattle farming.

Sometimes people can justify and reason themselves out of the plan and will of God:

- For sure God knows that my hands are full,
- For sure someone else will do it (it doesn’t have to be me),
- That is not my gift anyway,
- Perhaps one day...

Some 60 years after this story here in Numbers, Israel had to fight again some enemies. Deborah, their judge and leader at the time, asked for all the tribes to come

together and fight. We read about that in Judges 5. Some tribes immediately made themselves available but, interestingly not Reuben (again). Here's what we read:

Judges 5:15 NIV - *The princes of Issachar were with Deborah; yes, Issachar was with Barak, sent under his command into the valley. In the districts of Reuben there was much searching of heart.*

At a time when the other tribes were ready for war, among the tribe of Reuben there was much “*searching of heart*”, in other words, a lot of thinking! Eventually they reasoned themselves out of going to war.

May we be people who promptly say “yes Lord send me” - without hesitation!

Going back to our story, we see that at a time when they needed to see the big picture, think collectively, seek the common good of the nation, Reuben and Gad showed to be self-centred, independent and not team players.

Not only that - but they displayed the same unbelieving spirit that kept their fathers from the promised land.

2. Their (inherited) *unbelief*

They focused on *themselves*, what they *had* and what they *saw*. Yet God calls us to walk by faith and not by sight! – what that means is that our decisions should never be guided simply by what we see but by faith. Unbelief was the very thing that had kept the previous generation from entering the promise land.

God had another expectation regarding this generation but for a moment Reuben and Gad seemed to embody the unbelieving attitude of their ancestors.

⁶And Moses said to the children of Gad and to the children of Reuben: “Shall your brethren go to war while you sit here? ⁷Now why will you discourage the heart of the children of Israel from going over into the land which the Lord has given them. ⁸Thus your fathers did when I sent them away from Kadesh Barnea to see the land.

Thus your fathers did! For a moment it seemed that they were going to follow in their fathers' footsteps and through their unbelief come short of possessing the promise land.

3. Their independent spirit

“Shall your brethren go to war while you sit here?”

a) *Shall your brethren* – This wasn't just about them.

They probably did not understand their collective responsibility. They probably thought that they were only required to look after their own houses, their children, their families, and their possessions. However God required all hands-on deck. Everyone was needed. This was about teamwork and participation.

Philippians 2:1-2, 4, 20 - 2 *Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, ² fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.*

⁴ Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

²⁰ For I have no one like-minded, who will sincerely care for your state. ²¹ For all seek their own, not the things which are of Christ Jesus.

Having an ‘independent spirit’ is not a value of the Kingdom of God and it is foreign to the spirit of the Great Commission.

b) *...Shall your brethren go to war, while you sit here...*

Going and **sitting** - two contrasting words that could determine the outcome of “operation promise land”.

The outcome of the Great Commission also rests on our choice to either commit and go, or to sit and spectate. Jesus said “go” but we often choose to sit. When we sit, we become spectators, when we go we become participators!

4. **They were a source of discouragement**

⁷ Now why will you discourage the heart of the children of Israel?

Their lack of engagement was also going to be a source of discouragement for the other tribes. Who can conquer discouraged? Who can win battles despondent? There is great encouragement and strength when everyone commits to the same battle.

In the other story I mentioned earlier in Judges 5, the tribe of Reuben didn’t engage, neither did the tribes of Dan and Asher. That passage exposes their slackness but exalts the bravery of tribes like Zebulun and Naphtali:

Judges 5:15-18 (NLT): *¹⁵ The princes of Issachar were with Deborah and Barak. They followed Barak, rushing into the valley. But in the tribe of Reuben there was great indecision. ¹⁶ Why did you sit at home among the sheepfolds— to hear the shepherds whistle for their flocks. Yes, in the tribe of Reuben there was great indecision. ¹⁷ Gilead remained east of the Jordan. And why did Dan stay home? Asher sat unmoved at the seashore, remaining in his harbors. ¹⁸ **But Zebulun risked his life, as did Naphtali, on the heights of the battlefield.***

I believe that heaven will distinguish, honour, and reward every brave warrior of the Lord.

Conclusion:

Thankfully, this is a story that ends well: Reuben and Gad changed their minds. They responded to the battle cry. They acknowledged their responsibility and the role that they had to play in the bigger picture of God.

Numbers 32:17 - *but we ourselves will be armed, ready to go before the children of Israel until we have brought them to their place; and our little ones will dwell in the fortified cities because of the inhabitants of the land. ¹⁸ We will not return to our homes until every one of the children of Israel has received his inheritance.*

20 *Then Moses said to them: "If you do this thing, if you arm yourselves before the Lord for the war, ²¹ and all your armed men cross 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 afterward you may return and be blameless before the Lord and before Israel; and this land shall be your possession before the Lord. ²³ But if you do not do so, then take note, you have sinned against the Lord; and be sure your sin will find you out.*

Indifference, lack of commitment and any form of selfishness is a sin that deeply displeases the Lord.

In conclusion,

- Remember that we are a generation appointed to conquer and possess.
- God requires our engagement and focus on the big picture of God
- Let's embrace responsibility, participation, and warfare. Let us respond to God's battle cry with a prompt, *yes Lord, here I am. Use me.*