

The Two Tribes and a Half

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The history of the two tribes and a half has its own instruction for us, and illustrates a peculiar character of mind and walk among the saints of God. They do not stand exactly with Lot of the days of Abraham, though in some respects they remind us of him.

It is wonderful what a variety of mind, character, and of Christian experience, the soul finds before itself in the histories of Scripture. The soul reads itself there very fully; the workings of nature not only in man, but in the renewed man, its conflicts and its strength, giving us to see so much that we know in ourselves; and at times the lights and shades, as well as the distinctive features, are to be traced.

This strikes one here. The two tribes and a half are not Lot, but there is that in them which tells us of him. Like him, their own distinct independent history begins with their seeing the well-watered plains — the plains good for their cattle on the wilderness side of the Jordan. They think of their cattle rather than of the call of God, and the pilgrimage of their brethren. Had their hearts been full of Christ, they would not have seen anything till they had crossed the river. Abraham, their father, had not remained on that side the river; nor did their expectation, when called out from Egypt, stop short of the other side. Neither had Moses said anything to them about these plains in the land of Gilead. But they had cattle, and those plains were suitable to their cattle, and they sue for an inheritance ere they reach the land, which had been their expectation when they set out. This was all. They had no thought whatever of revolting, of sacrificing the portion of true Israelites; but their cattle drew their eyes to the goodly plains of Gilead, and they were for possessing them, though they would do so as Israelites.

How natural! how common! In moral power they came short of the call of God, though they held to the hope of that calling, and claimed fellowship only with those who were the objects of it. They were not in power a risen people, though in faith one with such. They were careful to declare and hold their alliance with the tribes who were to pass the Jordan, though they were led to remain on the wilderness side of it themselves. I do not regard them like Lot, a people of mixed principles, who had deliberately formed their lives by something inconsistent with the call of God; but rather as a generation who, owning that call, and prizing it, and refusing the thought of having any other, are not found in the full moral power of it.

Again I say, How common! This is a large generation. We know ourselves too well to ask, Is there such a people?

Moses at once is made uneasy by this movement on the part of Reuben and Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh. He expresses this uneasiness with much force. He tells them that they bring to his remembrance the conduct of the spies, whom he had sent out years before from Kadesh-barnea, and whose way had discouraged their brethren, and occasioned the forty years' pilgrimage in the wilderness. There was something so unlike the call of Israel from Egypt in the hope of Canaan, in all this suggestion on the part of these tribes, that Moses at once thus resents it. And it is bad when this is produced in the soul of a Moses; when the first instinctive feelings and thoughts of a saint, walking in the power of the resurrection of Christ, are alarmed and wounded by what is seen in a brother; but yet how common! Many a Moses nowadays is called in spirit to challenge what offends, as being out of company with the calling of the saints; for many a thing gets its sanction, or its excuse, from the heart

of a saint, that cannot stand before the judgment of faith.

Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh have to explain themselves, and to give fresh pledges to Moses that they by no means separate themselves from the fellowship and interests of their brethren. And they do this with zeal, and with integrity too. In this they are not with Lot. Lot's conduct separated him for the rest of the journey from Abraham. But not so these tribes. With zeal they assert their purpose to be still with their brethren. Nay, they would by no means have taken the eastern Gilead, had this produced a forfeiture of their identity with those who were to be on the western Canaan. They are ready to give pledges too, that they will be foremost in the actions which still remain, on behalf of their brethren's inheritance. By no means do they contemplate anything like loss of fellowship with them. In this they are above Lot; but still they have stopped short of Canaan. They are not in the full power of the Canaan calling, not in the thoughts of the man of God, a dead and risen people; for they are pausing, ere their promised inheritance be reached, for the sake of their cattle in the wilderness.

Moses, however, does not let them go, as Abraham let Lot go; they are not to be treated in that way. Neither does the judgment of God light on them, as on the unbelieving spies who bring up an evil report of the land. They do not belong to such generations, though their way may savour of such. Moses cannot lose sight of them because they purpose to feed their cattle in the plains of Gilead, while they thus with zeal assert their purposed fellowship with their brethren. They are his, and he is theirs still, I may say, and they hold on together, unlike Lot and Abraham, who never met after Lot became a citizen with the people of the land — practically forgetful, so far, of the call of God.

This is so; but still Moses has to eye them, and remember them, and keep his thoughts somewhat anxiously and uneasily occupied about them; and this is not the best witness for a saint. Happy when the Holy Ghost can leave us and our state alone, to lead us still onwards, and feed us still in the knowledge and with the things of Jesus!

Lot and Abraham never met after the way of the world had drawn Lot into it. Jonathan and David met now and again, and their affection, true and warm, there is communion between them. Obadiah and Elijah met only once, and it is but a poor meeting, reserve marking the way of Elijah and effort that of Obadiah; for they were not kindred spirits, the leathern girdle of the prophet but ill assorting with the livery of Ahab. But the two tribes and a half are above these. They are still the companions of their brethren, and will not think of anything else; and Moses admits their title without reserve. Their desire to have their portion in Gilead makes no difference as to this. But still, they do not go through and through, they do not measure the *whole* of the wilderness, but they linger, and the thought of their cattle being suited in the fields of Gilead attracts them, and there they find an object, though they still accompany the camp.

What shades of difference there are in these different illustrations! What different classes of the people of God! yea, and what differences in the same class do we meet here! Lot and Jonathan and Obadiah are of one class, men of mixed principles, as the expression is, men whose lives are formed by such every-day habits as cannot combine with the pilgrim-character, or the suffering, witnessing-character, to which the call of God leads. Sodom was Lot's place, Saul's court was Jonathan's, and the palace of Ahab, king of Israel, at Jezreel was Obadiah's, while Abraham dwelt in a tent, David in a den or cave of the earth, and Elijah with the provisions of the Lord at Cherith or Sarepta. And yet Jonathan was not either Lot or Obadiah personally, though we have to set them all in one class. Neither was Obadiah Lot exactly. And so between them as a class, and such dead and risen men as Moses and Joshua, we have to bring in the Reubenites, Gadites, and half-tribe of Manasseh — a generation who will by no means admit the thought of their separating themselves from full companionship with the

call of God, but who, nevertheless, exhibit in several actions that which is not according to the full measure of that call. And this is indeed a common case, nay, this is *the* common case, among the saints. One knows it oneself. We own the call, we witness it, even speak of Canaan, of death and resurrection, of hopes and inheritance beyond the river; but nature, and present sense, and present desires, the bleating of the flocks, the lowing of the oxen, as they feed on the plains of Gilead lead to much which makes the more single eye of a Moses, and the more fixed and simple purpose of a Caleb or of a Joshua, to wonder and enquire. (See Num. 32.)

Joshua, who has the spirit of Moses, has them in some anxious and uneasy remembrance like Moses, and he addresses a word of special admonition to them when he takes the conduct of affairs under the Lord and for Israel. For they are still — being the tribes on the wilderness side of Jordan — the occasion of this fear and uneasiness to the more simple and devoted mind of a full-hearted and single-eyed servant of Christ. (See Joshua 1.)

There remains, however, another sight of them still in the progress of the history, and one which has its very striking moral features. I mean in Joshua 22. The ark had gone over. The feet of the priests bearing it had divided the waters of Jordan, and the ark had gone over, conducting and shielding the Israel of God. And it is true that our tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh had gone over with them. But the ark and Israel had *remained* there; that's the difference. The two tribes and a half return, but the ark remains. The place that becomes a ransomed people, a dead and risen people, is left, and they return to *settle* where Israel had but *wandered*.

Joshua, like Moses, instinctively feels all this, and warns and exhorts them on their departure; and as soon as they reach the place they had chosen, they begin to feel it also. They are not fully at ease; and there is something specially significant in that. They raise an altar. The heart of an Israelite in the land of Gilead would just do the same at this day. They are uneasy. Jehoshaphat was uneasy when he found himself in the court of Ahab, and asked for a prophet of the Lord. The renewed mind speaks that language in a foreign land. They raise the altar and call it "Ed," as a witness, a witness that Israel's God was their God. But why all this? Had they remained in Canaan, where the ark and tabernacle of God were, they would not have needed this. But they were not there. Shiloh was not in view, nor could their souls carry the sense of it, that Shiloh was their common centre with all their brethren. They had to give themselves some artificial help, to give their souls a crutch, if I may so speak, to aid the confidence and joy of their hearts, that as Israelites they had fellowship and common interests and calling with their brethren.

All this is very full of meaning, and is constantly experienced to this day. Some witness of our belonging to the Israel of God is needed, and craved by the soul, when we get into a position in the earth which the call of Israel does not fully warrant. The countenance of others, the restless examination of our own state — reasonings with ourselves — remembrances, it may be, of better days with the soul — something that is as artificial of our own device as the altar of "Ed," and which would have been as unneeded too as that, had the soul been more simple and faithful.

All this is still known, and all this is figured here: it is the writing on this pillar on the eastern side of Jordan. And a wonderful pillar it thus is. Lot's wife, the pillar of salt, has a writing upon it which the divine Master Himself has made for us, and, I doubt not, so has this pillar of "Ed," which the Holy Ghost would fain teach us to read, that we may be warned to know what uneasiness and doubt accompany the soul that has retreated to find a *settlement* there, where the Church is, and has been, a stranger. This altar witnessed both *for* and *against* these Israelites. It was just what Jehoshaphat's uneasiness was when he found himself with Ahab and the prophets of Baal. It is just what a saint's

uneasiness here is when he finds himself involved in a world that he ought to have left. For all this bespeaks the saintly or renewed mind; but in such exercises and experiences, as want of simplicity and the grace of God has caused it.

Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh are challenged a second time — by Joshua now, as by Moses before — because of their pillar now, because of their seeking the plains of Gilead before. This is all natural, as common as Christian fellowship is, but all more or less painful and troublesome nowadays as it was then. A great stir is made among the tribes, and a great ambassage is formed to enquire into this matter. Something appeared in the ways of those who were on the other side of the river, which alarmed them as Israelites, as worshippers of Jehovah. It looked to be something which the common call of God could not allow for a moment. It must at least be explained.

What a living picture this is! Are we not at home here? Do we not know this spot well?

The calling and election of these eastern borderers was not made sure to their brethren, who were living in the place of the ark of God. They have to enquire and inspect their condition; and whatever the result of such inspection may be, the need of such a process is but a poor thing at least. I believe the First Epistle to the Corinthians is very much a Phinehas crossing the river to look after a pillar. There were things at Corinth which alarmed Paul. They seemed to be reigning as kings on the earth. His ministry in the meekness and gentleness of Christ was getting despised. The world was fashioning the hearts of saints there, and people were valued because of their place in the world. "The princes of this world," the men of the schools or the ways of the schools, were regaining their place, and saints were returning to *settle* where they ought to be *unknown* and strangers. Paul, in the zeal of Joshua 22, has to cross the river; and whatever the discovery may be, the action is a painful one, and the need of it a sad one in the history of the Church.

The tribes may satisfy Phinehas more than the Corinthians did Paul. All these varieties are known at this hour; but there is this common sorrow and humbling, that the call and election is not made sure; and we have either to take journeys or to occasion journeys, to have our own ways and altars as brethren read, instead of reading together the secrets of God's altar and tabernacle at Shiloh. J. G. B.