

STAY FOCUSED ON THE GOAL

Numbers 32:1, 5-8, 16-18, 20-24; 33:51-53

I'm sure you have heard the expression "If you don't know where you are going, you may wind up just about anywhere." You typically hear this quoted when it comes time to set goals and objectives in a job situation. We can have goals in various areas of our lives. There might be goals for something related to home improvement or perhaps a goal to lose weight which is something that we see in conjunction with New Year's resolutions. If you notice there is a marked increase in exercise equipment and gym membership advertisements and promotions around the first of each year. Usually people will wind up making the same resolutions every year because they did not accomplish the goals they set the year before. In a lot of cases the reason a goal or objective is not accomplished is because we fail to maintain our focus on the goal we set.

The reason we lose focus is that there are distractions that cause us to lose sight of the goal or goals that we were trying to accomplish. The distractions we encounter could be legitimate things that need to be addressed and we may find that we have set goals and objectives in so many different areas of our lives that trying to accomplish the goal in one area interferes with getting the job done in another area. We soon discover that not only do we need to have goals and objectives, we need to have priorities as to which are the most important goals to accomplish. Not only are priorities important but we also need to recognize that we have long-term goal and short-term goals. If we are not careful, we may find that accomplishing the short-term objective is detrimental to the long-term desirable outcome. It seems there is a quote for everything and this is a quote I found several years ago that speaks to this concern: "Short range decisions have a greater and opposite reaction on the long range results." A good example is that going by the Krispy Kreme shop for donuts after you have been to the gym for exercise is likely to be counterproductive to obtaining your long term goal for losing weight.

The Children of Israel were preparing to cross the Jordan to take possession of and occupy the land that was promised to Abraham some 400 years prior to that time. In order to do this they would need to drive out those who lived in the land. This would be a difficult task and would take a concerted effort of all their fighting forces. However, it is not too surprising that some of the people were distracted by opportunities that arose during this time.

Its Not About Just Me and Mine – 32:1, 5-8

¹ Now the sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad had an exceedingly large number of livestock. So when they saw the land of Jazer and the land of Gilead, that it was indeed a place suitable for livestock,

⁵ They said, "If we have found favor in your sight, let this land be given to your servants as a possession; do not take us across the Jordan." ⁶ But Moses said to the sons of Gad and to the sons of Reuben, "Shall your brothers go to war while you yourselves sit here?" ⁷ "Now why are you discouraging the sons of Israel from crossing over into the land which the LORD has given them?" ⁸ "This is what your fathers did when I sent them from Kadesh-barnea to see the land. Numbers 32:1,5-8 (NASB95)

There is no way to know for certain whether this request was an attempt to avoid the rigors of war that would be encountered when the Children of Israel crossed the Jordan and went about displacing and eliminating the inhabitants of the land that God had given to the descendants of Abraham. Nevertheless, that was exactly what Moses thought when he heard the request. Perhaps Moses had some insight and discernment as to what was really behind the request or it could be that he was concerned that what had happened some 39 years earlier when they approached the Promised Land from the western side at Kadesh-barnea was about to be repeated.

One of the basic problems with this request was that the land they wanted to occupy was not part of the promised land. The eastern boundary of the land was the Jordan River. From a practical standpoint, they had participated in the battle that had eliminated the opposition that came from those who were living on the east side of the Jordan. It was good land and from a strictly “economic” point of view this was a good idea. The high plateau had excellent grassland for their herds and if they did not need any land on the west side of the Jordan, then there would be more land for the rest of the tribes of Israel on that side. In a sense, we could say that it was NOT God’s perfect will for the people to be separated by the river; however, it was allowed. As it turned out in the later history of the nation, the Gaddites, Reubenites, and the members of the half tribe of Manasseh (who eventually joined them) were more vulnerable to attacks from the enemies of Israel and seemed to be more open to embracing idol worship and they also turned out to be leaders in the eventual separation of Israel into the Northern and Southern kingdoms. So there was a price to pay for settling for God’s permissive will rather than His perfect will.

How valid was Moses’ concern that the request to settle on the east side of the Jordan and not actually dwell in the land God had promised them would be a discouragement to the rest of the nation regarding going into Canaan? It is difficult to know how much influence our actions have on how others may operate. Is there a parallel in the church today with regard to some who might get distracted by other opportunities and not be fully engaged in what God is trying to accomplish in a local body of believers? For example, several decades ago, Sunday was for going to church and participating in worship and withdrawing from the daily routine of work. If opportunities came up to do something else, it was not acceptable with most people because they had determined what their priorities were. That is no longer the case. There are many opportunities for young people to participate in sports and a lot of the time the competitions are held on the weekend and that would include all during the day Saturday and Sunday. It is not unusual for people to say that they had missed church last week because their son or daughter has a soccer tournament they had to go to. I’m sometimes tempted to ask if they attended church in the town where the tournament was being played. If one family lets such things divert them, then others may be (will be) tempted to do that also and soon it is OK to do whatever the opportunity is rather than be faithful in the time of worship. You could name many different practices that take us away from the striving toward the goal we need to accomplish because of any number of reasons. We do need to set priorities and we need to focus on accomplishing the main thing.

Its About Helping Others, Too – 32:16-18

¹⁶ Then they came near to him and said, “We will build here sheepfolds for our livestock and cities for our little ones; ¹⁷ but we ourselves will be armed ready *to go* before the sons of Israel, until we have brought them to their place, while our little ones live in the fortified cities because of the inhabitants of the land. ¹⁸ “We will not return to our homes until every one of the sons of Israel has possessed his inheritance. Numbers 32:16-18 (NASB95)

After Moses challenged them regarding their intent, they assured him that their intent was **not** to avoid the battles that needed to be fought. In fact, they volunteered to lead the way in the fight and would stick with it until the job was done. There was work to be done and battles to be fought before the promises of the Lord could be experienced.

Some have seen the proposal put forth by the leader of Gad and Reuben as a compromise and a willingness to be outside of God’s inheritance and have likened it to people today who could be characterized as materialistic Christians. In the context of focusing on the goal, we might say that materialistic Christians might let the prospect of getting ahead in their careers or other things take precedence over and above their commitment to the church and being totally

involved. You might see some who are content to get close to what the church is doing, perhaps even contributing large sums of money, but never really committing to be personally involved in the ministry of the church. They may even get involved in special events such as going on mission trips but when the trip is over, they remove themselves from the “land of their inheritance” and go back across the Jordan to a less committed lifestyle.

The tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh were willing to help others in the job that needed to be done, but they did not fully enter into the inheritance God had planned for them by actually occupying the Promised Land.

It's About Fulfilling an Obligation – 32:20-24

²⁰ So Moses said to them, “If you will do this, if you will arm yourselves before the LORD for the war, ²¹ and all of you armed men cross over the Jordan before the LORD until He has driven His enemies out from before Him, ²² and the land is subdued before the LORD, then afterward you shall return and be free of obligation toward the LORD and toward Israel, and this land shall be yours for a possession before the LORD. ²³ “But if you will not do so, behold, you have sinned against the LORD, and be sure your sin will find you out. ²⁴ “Build yourselves cities for your little ones, and sheepfolds for your sheep, and do what you have promised.” Numbers 32:20-24 (NASB95)

We tend to place a lot of emphasis on being responsible people and fulfilling our obligations or “doing what duty demands.” Moses thought that he needed to strongly emphasize the “call to duty” and the responsibility that was incumbent on all the men of fighting age in Israel. They would have to cross over the Jordan and fight with the rest of the tribes in order to receive the land they wanted. If they were faithful in meeting that responsibility, then they would not be considered guilty of turning away from the Lord and abandoning the other tribes. The Lord declared that if they wouldn't be willing to go across and fight, they wouldn't receive their possession on the east side of the Jordan. Moses warned them that failure to do what they had promised to do could not be hidden – your sins will find you out.

They had requested to have some time to “build cities and sheepfolds” so they could secure their families and their herds before going into battle. Some commentators have noted that, based on the amount of time from the request and the time they crossed the Jordan River (about two months), they would have had only enough time to make some minor repairs to the cities and sheepfolds that had been occupied by the former inhabitant. It would seem from a casual reading of the text that all the fighting men of Gad and Reuben and eventually Manasseh would leave all the women and children and their livestock and go into battle on the west side of the Jordan. That idea struck me as being impractical and reckless and it turns out that was not the case. We find in Chapter 26 of Numbers that Reuben had nearly 44,000 men of fighting age, Gad had 40,500 and Manasseh had almost 53,000 men. That was more than 135,000 men of fighting age. In Joshua 4:13 we find that only 40,000 from these tribes actually crossed over and joined the fight. That means that nearly 70 percent of the men stayed on the east side of the Jordan and worked on building (or rebuilding) the cities and the sheepfolds.

Does this mean that the work of the 40,000 who went into battle was more important than the work of the 95,000 that worked on providing shelter and food for their families? The battles to secure the land of Canaan took a long time and many people were needed to support the effort, so not everyone could strap on their sword and shield and engage the enemy. Many helped by creating the infrastructure that would be needed to supply the troop with food and weapons as they took possession of the land that God had given them.

One thing this distribution of numbers would teach us is that not everyone will have the same job to do as the whole group works to accomplish the objective but that each one should be aware of the importance of his or her portion of the work. If each person knows how his efforts

contribute to the completion of the task, then he will have a sense of responsibility in doing his or her part. A lack of understanding of the importance of what we have been called to do may be another reason we tend to lose focus and become distracted from the overall objectives that need to be accomplished. A contributing factor to thinking that your job is not important is when it seems that no one really cares if your job is done or not. You may work very hard and do an excellent job in what you are assigned to do and no one acknowledges what you did. You may neglect your responsibilities for a little while and no one says anything about the job not being done. It only takes about three times for most of us to come to the conclusion that “what I do does not matter.” The problem with thinking this way is that what you do or fail to do may not matter so much today or tomorrow but if the failure continues for a long time, then the consequence will be felt in the future and, by the time anyone notices, it may be too late to recover from the lack of attention to the responsibility that was yours. This type of passivity is a major problem in our churches today and we lose our focus on the main things for which we were saved.

It's About Living As God's People – 33:51-53

⁵¹ “Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘When you cross over the Jordan into the land of Canaan, ⁵² then you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, and destroy all their figured stones, and destroy all their molten images and demolish all their high places; ⁵³ and you shall take possession of the land and live in it, for I have given the land to you to possess it. Numbers 33:51-53 (NASB95)

I think all of us recognize that we can quickly lose focus of whatever goals we may have in life if we take our eyes off the goal and concentrate only on our personal wants and wishes. We have been taught that thinking of others is important and certainly a higher calling when it comes to practical living. We also know that taking care of the responsibilities we have is critical to success and seeing that the goals and objectives get accomplished. Sometimes we find that because we are reminded so often about these two things (putting others first and doing our duty) that when we do that then we think that we have arrived. However, as we see from this last passage that the bigger picture requires more than putting others first and carrying out responsibilities. After the pagans have been driven out and after the idols and pagan symbols and places of worship had been removed, the main purpose was still to be carried out. The goal was to occupy and possess the land as the people of God.

What does it mean to occupy and possess something? As you can that imagine these two words have some overlap in their meaning. As some of the demonstrations that have been in the news lately have shown, people can “occupy” something that they do not own as in the “occupy Wall Street” protests. Since God had given the sons of Israel the land, they were the legitimate owners (as God's representatives) of the land. The ownership of their inheritance was demonstrated by not only taking up space (dwelling or abiding) in the land but by exercising beneficial control as an owner would do, which is what the word “occupy” implies. Before they could do that they had to remove those who had been living there. God had passed judgment on these people and they had been dispossessed (their ownership was cancelled) of the land. The Israelites used military conquests to take possession of what they had been promised. It took action from them to actually possess what God had given them.

The removal of the pagan idols and places of worship was important since the land was to be filled or occupied by the people of God. The pagan sites gave evidence that pagan people lived in the land, so it was important that all such symbolism be removed so that the visible evidence would be agreement with the truth of who was occupying the land now that it was inhabited by God's people.

We can find some parallels for us today when we consider the example of the Israelites possessing and occupying the Promised Land. In one of the parables Jesus had a nobleman who was a type of Christ tell his servants to occupy until he returned. We – the church – are to occupy the land (this world) until Christ returns. If we add to this idea the saying that “the meek shall inherit the earth,” then we could argue that we are to possess (as in claim our inheritance) and then occupy or take beneficial control of that inheritance. I don’t think that most Christians see that as the goal since it would appear that no one is focusing on that. When the Israelites went about their “possess and occupy” process, they removed the influence of those who were not legitimate possessors of the land. We are so far away from that situation in our world today. We have many who will argue that all other philosophies or religions have the right to coexist alongside the church of the living God. We are already at the point that the nation of Israel arrived in that they had allowed places of worship for Baal and they neglected worship of God. Most people don’t even think that we should be a Christian nation and so it is improbable that they will do anything that will move us in that direction. Not only are we not focusing on the goal, we have abandoned the goal.

Jack Hyles has observed that in many churches today we find the following. We still go to church. We just don’t want to fight any more. To be sure, we love our conferences, our worship services, our anthems. We even love Bible studies and deeper-life conferences, yet we never turn a hand to do anything in the battle. We don’t gird on the armor, grasp no sword, hurl no spear, throw no stones, shed no blood, render no sweat and weep no tears. If the church canceled all its visitation programs, we would be angry, but we never show up for one. If our church never baptized anyone, we would classify the church as being dead, but we never lead anyone to the baptistery.

We talk about being crucified with Christ, yet we have no scars in our hands, no spear in our side, no jeering mob, no angry critics, no thorns on our brow. We have no pain. We suffer no heartache. We do not want to be called fanatics, and yet we talk about being crucified with Christ. We want victories with no battles and crucifixion with no pain.

Are we just plugging along in our Christianity, doing just enough to feel like we’ve met the minimum requirement to get into heaven? Or did we come to work for God, to possess and occupy the kingdom that Christ died for?

Losing focus on the goal results in compromising with worldliness. This is what eventually happened with Israel and we see the same evidence in our churches. The remedy is to rediscover the goal and keep our focus on that goal – we are to occupy until Christ returns.