

Numbers 32: Strife Between Brothers

By

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“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, the children of Gad and the children of Reuben came and spoke to Moses, to Eleazar the priest, and to the leaders of the congregation, saying, “Ataroth, Dibon, Jazer, Nimrah, Heshbon, Elealeh, Shebam, Nebo, and Beon, “the country which the LORD defeated before the congregation of Israel, is a land for livestock, and your servants have livestock.” Therefore 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 over the Jordan. Therefore 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 over the Jordan.”

-Numbers 32:1-6

This is the final narrative account for the book of Numbers, the rest of the book is more or less a preamble for the book of Deuteronomy where Moses delivers the law again to the new generation before he passes away and Joshua leads Israel into the promised land. However, before this can happen, there is one small squabble amongst the tribes of Israel. The tribes of Reuben and Gad, upon seeing land that Israel had previously conquered, desired to stay in this land and not occupy land west of the Jordan river with the rest of the nation of Israel.

By making this request there is a small fight that happens between Moses and the leaders of Reuben and Gad. Moses is afraid that their desire to stay in the land east of the Jordan means that they won't participate in the wars against the Canaanites, which would in turn lead the rest of the nation to succumb to fear like they did forty years prior and have to remain in the wilderness.

Reuben and Gad allay the fears of Moses and tell him that not only will they fight with the rest of the nation of Israel, they will actually serve as the vanguard of the Israeli army and not settle into their land until after the rest of the tribes settles in the land that God had promised to them. Moses accepts the terms of their request, and the chapter ends with half the tribe of Manasseh joining Reuben and Gad in planting cities east of the Jordan.

This is a rather innocuous story whose tension relies solely on a miscommunication and once the miscommunication is cleared up the tension dissolves and the story comes to a close. However, in spite of the relatively low stakes of this particular account it can teach us several things. Remember that symbolically the promised land represents the eternal promise of God to His people, a return to Eden. While the nation of Israel won't be literally like Eden, it will be symbolically Eden, the only place on earth in which the people can dwell "with God", since God's presence would fill the Tabernacle of Meeting which would find a permanent home in the nation of Israel.

Because of this, the nation of Israel has been, in a sense, has had to confront the various penalties of the fall, from the giants that occupy the land, to the flood waters of the Jordan river, and now the battle between brothers that has been prevalent throughout human history since Cain killed his brother Abel. And like the other difficulties, the nation of Israel will confront these issues and emerge victorious. We will talk about the merits of this particular argument and even the wisdom of Reuben and Gad for making this request, but the primary thing that we can learn from this story has to do with familial conflict and how to resolve this conflict without violence in order to achieve one of the highest Christian ideals, unity.

"I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

-Ephesians 4:1-3

Judge Not

"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you."

-Matthew 7:1-2

The first principle that we can pull from the conflict between Moses and the tribes of Reuben and Gad is the often misunderstood Christian ethic to not judge our fellow man. The above verse might be one of the most difficult to understand and misquoted verses in the entirety of the New Testament. It is usually used to support the ideal that we should, in essence, keep out of each other's business and never come to moral conclusions about other people's behavior. I don't have time to illustrate how self-contradictory this position is, but for the purpose of this paper, I would just point out that this idea is foreign to the Bible.

Throughout the Scriptures God is judging people for their behavior and even empowering human institutions to carry the judgement of God towards their fellow man. However, we also can't ignore this passage. Clearly Jesus is forbidding a particular behavior and we have to be intentional about discovering what this behavior is lest we practice it in our relationships. While I believe that this ethic is more complex than what I am about to say, the account that we are studying I think is a prime example of this.

To judge a person means to come to a conclusion about their behavior and their character. While there are minor ways that we can do this, there is an ultimate way that we are being prohibited. This is why Christ tells us that we shouldn't do this, "*lest you be judged*". Meaning that relationships can't actually function if we arrogantly believe that we can come to a final conclusion about another person, which is something that only God can do.

We can look at this principle in two primary ways, in a temporal fashion and a psychological fashion. To judge someone in a temporal fashion would be to treat someone as if they are incapable of change. So for instance, if someone lied to you and apologized, to judge them would be to deny their ability to change or repent. In such a case, if I have already judged someone to be a liar, any apology that they offer to me would be met with distrust and anything that they claimed to do to make amends would be met with equal amounts of incredulity.

To treat relationships in this matter would mean that any sin would irrevocably destroy a relationship since forgiveness and repentance could have no place in a relationship filled with this kind of judgement. This is why Jesus has this interaction with His disciples about forgiveness:

"Then Peter came to Him and said, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.'"

-Matthew 18:21-22

The normal human perspective is that if someone continues to make the same mistake, they must not have meant their apology and therefore they are either unwilling or unable to truly change and repent. By telling His disciples to forgive "seventy times seven", Christ is telling His followers to take seriously any sincere apology and to truly believe that anyone could change. This doesn't mean that we don't use precautions in dealing with people's sins, for instance, if someone has stolen from you, it doesn't mean that if they apologize you immediately trust them with no accountability, it just means you are open to them changing and you will even help them repent if you can.

The other type of judgement, that is far more prevalent, and is actually the impetus for the passage we are studying, is judging someone's spirit, or intentions.

“And Moses said to the children of Gad and to the children of Reuben: “Shall your brethren go to war while you sit here? “Now why will you discourage the heart of the children of Israel from going over into the land which the LORD has given them?”

-Numbers 32:6-7

Upon hearing that the Reubenites and the Gadites want the land east of the Jordan, Moses assumes that this means that they are fleeing from the conflict that lies ahead. By doing so, Moses came to a definitive conclusion about the intentions and the spirit of those he was talking to without considering their actual motives.

“He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him.”

-Proverbs 18:13

A similar thing happens in the New Testament, when the Corinthian church accuses the apostle Paul of acting deceptively towards them in promising to come to them, only to fail to do so. In defending himself Paul says this:

“But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God.”

-1 Corinthians 4:3-5

Paul here affirms that only God is capable of discerning the motives of a person. Paul even admits that he isn't even justified by discerning his own emotions. Meaning that Paul is admitting that even he isn't fully aware of his own motivations and intentions, really only God knows this. This is why Paul tells them to “judge nothing before the time...” Since we are widely unaware of the intentions of others, or even ourselves, we have to wait on God to reveal things to us. The ultimate sense of guilt will be shown at the end of time, but even the temporal guilt of someone is usually only made known in the passage of time.

After Moses acknowledges that he was wrong to assume the motives of the Reubenites and the Gadites he says this:

“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.”

-Numbers 32:23

One of the reasons why this ethic is so difficult to practice is because we don't like being tricked or taken advantage of. We want to *know* if someone means us harm so that we can keep them at arms length and protect ourselves. However, what Moses is acknowledging here is that he has no means of discerning the true intentions of the Reubenites and the Gadites. In order to maintain a relationship with them he has no choice but to trust what they are telling him, but he also says with confidence “your sin will find you out.”

In other words, if they are actually trying to deceive him, Moses is saying that he doesn't have to worry about protecting himself, or judging his deceivers. In the course of time, their deception would be made known to him, and God would judge them for their betrayal. This is the key to avoiding this sin in our lives. If we can trust God to be our defender and trust God to judge the sins of others, we can rest in that knowledge and not keep our walls up and be so judgemental towards those around us.

This doesn't mean we can't walk in wisdom or have boundaries in relationships in which trust has been violated. But it does mean that we must reserve this final judgement. We are told in 1 Corinthians 13:7 that God's love “hopes all things...” To truly love means we have to be optimistic about other people. To judge someone is to form a conclusion about another person that allows us to treat them with skepticism and distrust. Such an attitude might protect us in a material sense, but it also will keep that person at arms length. Trust, after all, is the basis for loving unity, without it relationships are dead in the water.

This is also why we can have a lot of mercy for Moses considering the fact that he has been burned before by the people of Israel. It isn't as though Moses is dealing with a group of people that have been incredibly virtuous and brave, these are the children of the very people who ran away from the conflict in Canaan, which is why he is so quick to judge the motives of the ones making this request. When we are betrayed or hurt by others, it is very easy to create patterns of self-defense designed to keep us safe. We superimpose the past betrayals on current relationships and we treat those around us with levels of distrust and skepticism that are completely unearned.

I can give a simple example. Let's say a person was abandoned by a parent as a young child. This wound can fester over time and teach this person a false narrative, that those around them are looking for the opportune moment to abandon them and leave them in

the lurch. You see, the pain of the *sudden* betrayal and abandonment of the person that they loved and trusted was so painful that they never, ever, want to endure that pain again. So if anything in the relationship feels “off” to them, their minds will jump to an unfair judgement of the other person and they will already treat them as if they are guilty of betrayal when that is not the case.

This issue tends to compound itself since Jesus also tells us that “...*with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you.*” One way to interpret this, is that if we treat other people with disrespect by unfairly judging their behavior and meeting them with constant skepticism and distrust, they will respond in kind. Meaning that if they feel untrusted, they won’t be able to trust us, if they feel emotionally pushed back, they will also push back on us. Also, this is just fair, if we are overly harsh in our judgments of others, it makes sense that they would be equally harsh on us.

Modern Issues

While this has obviously always been an issue throughout human history, our modern culture struggles with this principle in a unique way because of two primary factors: feminism and modern psychology. Let’s start with modern feminism. When I am using this term I am not criticizing everything about this movement, I am actually fairly sympathetic to historic feminism, especially the early writings of it like those of Mary Wollstonecraft in her book “The Vindication of the Rights of Women”. While I have quibbles with women like her, the overall arguments that women should have equal rights of education and potential within the society I am more than sympathetic to.

When I say feminism I am not criticizing the historic desire for social equality, I am criticizing the more modern waves of feminism that A. project male values upon women and B. harshly criticize men while giving infinite sympathy towards women. The result of the latter problem has led to a societal blindspot towards feminine excesses and a demonization of masculinity in men. For all of human history, the most popular stories showed the excesses of both masculinity and femininity and encouraged young people to deny themselves those excesses so that they could form successful marriages and settle down.

This doesn’t mean that all these stories were perfect, only that they held a wisdom in them that modern stories all but dismiss. To take a popular example of this, let’s look at the story of “Sleeping Beauty”. In the original “Sleeping Beauty”, the problem in the story actually was caused by femininity and a lack of masculine strength. The parents became overly protective of their daughter and therefore raised her to be naive and ill-prepared to deal with any type of malevolence which she is then overcome by in the

form of Malificent. The prince is no better. Because he is young and brash, he casually brushes aside his fathers wishes to be betrothed to a princess and pursues fully a random young maiden he met in the woods. His arrogance and recklessness means that he too falls prey to Malificent's schemes and walks right into her trap. It is only when he is armed by the female fairies that he can confront malevolence in his life, and it is only when Sleeping Beauty is awakened by her masculine prince that they can live "happily ever after".

And yet, in the modern remake by Disney called "Maleficent", all of Maleficent's evil deeds are the fault of her being taken advantage of by the king. As such, all the wicked acts that she does are never really her fault, and all the negativity of the film are caused by the lust of the wicked king. Therefore the excesses of masculinity are demonized and condemned, which is why the king dies at the end and the prince is powerless to awaken Sleeping Beauty, but the feminine faults of Maleficent are glossed over and ultimately redeemed in the end, which is why, though she curses Sleeping Beauty, she also awakens her.

This is just one example, but our culture is filled with them. But what does that have to do with what we are talking about today? When it comes to men and women, this tends to be an excess of femininity and not that of masculinity. The primary excess of masculinity is a lack of empathy, this means that men struggle with emotional shallowness. It is hard for a man to introspect and think about his emotions and so it is equally hard for men to understand the emotions of others.

This is why male bullies use physical strength to get their way and why men tend to be rather oblivious to the emotional desires of those around them. This is also why Peter's one and only exhortation to husbands is:

Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered.

-1 Peter 3:7

It is a difficult thing for men to understand our wives which is why Peter is exhorting us to do so. On the other hand, emotions are a powerful component of the feminine world. Women are far more introspective about their own emotions and are therefore much more adept at understanding emotions and empathizing with others. This is also why female bullies tend to use emotions to tyrannize other girls and not necessarily physical force. As such, this particular sin is actually much easier for women to commit and much more difficult for men. And in our society that has, in essence, turned a blind eye

to the excesses of femininity, it is very hard for us to call out this behavior and treat it as a negative.

We instead make excuses for this behavior and treat the emotions of women as sacrosanct. Meaning that when someone is guilty of this sin and really is judging the motives and the intentions of another person, instead of condemning this behavior, we say things like “well that was her experience”, or “it was true for her...” By granting cover to this behavior we have ensured that it is far more prevalent.

The other issue, which might be even larger in the present day, is modern psychology. Because modern psychology presumes to be able to discern the motives and the intents of individuals, we no longer have the humility necessary to know that this goes beyond our ability. It reminds me of a scene in Fyodor Dostoevsky's classic work “The Brothers Karamozov”. At the end of the novel, a man stands trial for the murder of his father, during the trial multiple psychiatrists are called to testify against him. Each one gives a different impression of his guilt based on his mannerisms in the courtroom.

Dostoevsky is intentionally mocking psychiatrists, not because he believed their practice was completely bunk, but because of the sheer hubris that they had in believing that they could fully account for all human behavior. Dissecting even the slightest bodily movements and assuming that they *knew* exactly why someone would do something and infer and definitive motive from these inferences.

I think we have seen this principal most clearly in the current Lindsay Clancy case. To give a brief synopsis of this incredibly disturbing case, a young mother strangled her three young children after sending her husband out of the house to get something from the store and then attempted to commit suicide. The case was not about her guilt or innocence, the evidence of her guilt was incontrovertible and she confessed to the crime. The case was instead about whether or not she was crazy when she carried out the act.

Here we see the true hubris of modern psychology. For weeks we endured the disturbing details about this case as we heard from all these so-called “experts” that she was either crazy or sane based on various factors and behaviors. The problem is that if multiple experts, from the same field, can fundamentally disagree about a case like this, looking at the exact same data, it should at least give us pause when we consider the explanatory power of psychology. As a society, we can judge the actions of this woman, but only God can judge her heart.

We have absolutely no way of knowing what was going on in her mind or her soul when she committed these egregious actions. Was she crazy or evil, malicious or a victim, or some combination? This is beyond mankind's ability to know. We can use our reason to approach something like a conclusion, but we will never know for sure. This is why God only gave the government the right to judge the body of a person, while He alone can judge their soul.

By trying to discern her motive we are stepping out of our capacity, and the fact that the entire country is absolutely certain of their reading on this case, one way or the other, shows us how prevalent this error is in our society. We genuinely believe that we can discern someone's soul and make a final judgement on their motives and their intentions. It is no wonder that our society has become increasingly judgemental and biased towards those who think differently than us, and it is also no wonder why our relationships are so strained nowadays.

"Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand."

-Romans 14:4

Folly and Sin

There is another element to this story that makes it very hard for us to discern, and that is that the decision made by the Reubenites and the Gadites was not immoral, nor was it moral, it was a wisdom that resides in the area of wisdom and therefore it can only be judged by those standards. Within disagreements there are really three primary sources of disagreement, morality, wisdom, and preference.

For moral disagreements, in order for a relationship to work, we have to have high levels of agreement. For areas of wisdom, we can tolerate rather large amounts of disagreement, and for preference, we can disagree about almost everything and still retain a healthy relationship. For instance, if me and my wife disagree about discipline because she simply prefers one type of discipline over what I prefer, this can be dealt with relatively easily. We can agree to disagree over something like this, and she can utilize her preferred method of discipline and I can use mine.

If it was a wisdom issue though, meaning that she thought that the way I was disciplining our kids was unwise and might even be counterproductive, we might be able to move forward with this disagreement, but it would be difficult. However, if she thought that the way I was disciplining our kids was immoral, as in ethically wrong, we can't have unity until we come to an agreement about that. This is hard to admit in conflict though,

we tend to make everything a moral issue so that the discussion is held in terms of black and white, right and wrong.

For the issue in this passage, Moses assumes a moral stance. He disagrees with the Reubenites and the Gadites by assuming a negative motive and then ascribes to them moral wrongdoing by saying that their decision would cause the rest of the Israelites to reject the call of God. However this is not the case. God later on approves of the request made by these tribes:

“So the children of Reuben, the children of Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh returned, and departed from the children of Israel at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan, to go to the country of Gilead, to the land of their possession, which they had obtained according to the word of the LORD by the hand of Moses.”

-Joshua 22:9

While I personally think that the decision of these tribes was wrong, it was clearly not morally wrong, it was simply wrong in the sense of wisdom. This is again difficult for us to do because we want things to be simple, and moral outrage has a certain seductive quality to it, but we must be careful to address things in their proper category.

The Folly of Gad and Reuben

“Whether they were wise in wishing to stay in the wider and more attractive lands which they had seen is another matter. They knew that the God of Israel had designed to plant his people between Jordan and the sea, and they certainly risked a partial severance from his promises and his protection by remaining where they did. The subsequent history of the trans-Jordanic tribes is a melancholy commentary on the real unwisdom of their choice. Yet it would have been difficult for them to know that they were wrong, except by an instinct of faith which no Israelites perhaps at that time possessed.”

-Joseph Exell - “The Pulpit Commentary”

The above quote is from the Pulpit commentary and it gives a brief summation of the point I will make next. While the behavior of Reuben and Gad were not sinful, they were foolish, and their folly can be seen, but not that easily. In order to understand their folly better I will divide this section into two arguments, their decision was impulsive and lustful. Let's start with this concept of lustfulness.

While Reuben and Gad were not forbidden from settling in this land, as we have already seen, we do know that they had already been promised land within the borders of Canaan. This means that when they chose this land they did so without actually seeing the land that God had allotted to them. The reason why they did this, presumably, was

because they were entranced by the land that they had already seen. This story, unfortunately, mirrors another story that happened earlier in the Bible:

“And Lot lifted his eyes and saw all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere (before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah) like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt as you go toward Zoar. Then Lot chose for himself all the plain of Jordan, and Lot journeyed east. And they separated from each other. Abram dwelt in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelt in the cities of the plain and pitched his tent even as far as Sodom. But the men of Sodom were exceedingly wicked and sinful against the LORD.”

-Genesis 13:10-13

In a similar fashion, Lot and his uncle Abraham were having a minor dispute about land, in which neither party was acting sinfully. And yet, Lot made a foolish decision to approach the land east of the Jordan, seemingly the same land that Gad and Reuben desired, even though this land bordered tribes that were incredibly corrupt, namely Sodom and Gomorrah. So, once again, it wasn't that Lot acted sinfully in this decision, which is why Abraham blesses him, but the decision was made out of a lustful desire that ended very badly for Lot.

In a similar fashion, the tribes of Gad and Reuben are so enamored by the land that is in front of them, that they aren't even willing to see the land that God had promised them before making their final decision. There is even minor evidence in the text itself that supports this idea.

“Then they came near to him and said: “We will build sheepfolds here for our livestock, and cities for our little ones...”

-Numbers 32:16

This is a seemingly minor detail that, in the given context, contains a bit of meaning for us. Many commenters have noticed that the tribes of Reuben and Gad mention their flocks before their children. This might have been nothing, but Moses seems to take notice of this and subtly correct them later on:

“Build cities for your little ones and folds for your sheep, and do what has proceeded out of your mouth.”

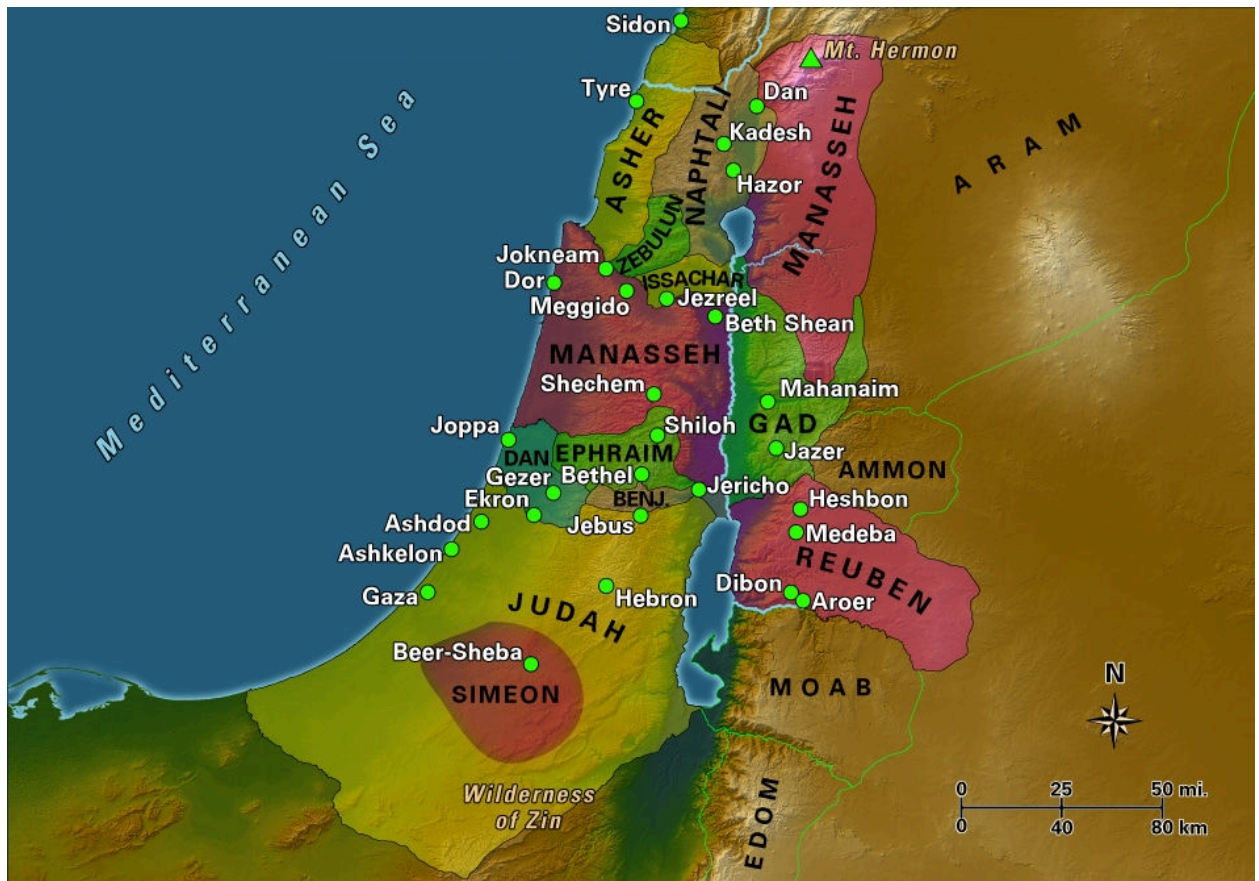
-Numbers 32:24

When responding to their request, Moses corrects the order of their request. Once again a minor detail, but one that stands out in the context of this story and what we

know about the fate of these tribes historically. Their minds were more on their wealth and prosperity, than what was necessarily good for the protection of their families.

This leads to the next point, this was a rash decision. Their lust for the land caused them to make a decision before they had all the information that they needed. Just as Moses was wrong to jump to conclusions about the motives of these tribes, so these tribes were wrong to assume that the land that they chose for themselves was better than the land that God had chosen for them.

And here is the biggest mistake present in this decision. By making this land their home, they denied themselves a natural boundary that God had provided for His people. In order to understand this point better I will provide a map to show this problem:



In the above picture you can see how the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh occupied land to the east of the Jordan River. The reason why this was a large tactical error is you can see that the nation of Israel is quite narrow in its width and therefore kind of hard to defend against invaders coming from the East. The northern parts of the land are hilly and mountainous, making it easy for the nation to defend from

high ground, the southern part of the nation is a large wilderness that would be hard for enemy militaries to traverse, and simple for the nation to see them coming, and the western part of the nation is protected by the Mediterranean Sea.

The only defense that the nation had to the East, which was the exact part of the country that Israel invades from, is the Jordan river. Having been to the Jordan River myself I can say that it isn't that impressive of a river, here is an image of it below:



While it is pretty, it isn't that far across. Now for modern militaries, this would be a relatively small inconvenience, but for ancient militaries, they would have to ford their forces across these waters which would be a slow process easy to stop. This is why God parts the Jordan river when the nation of Israel finally invades the land in the book of Joshua.

"...and as those who bore the ark came to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests who bore the ark dipped in the edge of the water (for the Jordan overflows all its banks during the whole time of harvest), that the waters which came down from upstream stood still, and rose in a heap very far away at Adam, the city that is beside Zaretan. So the waters that went down into the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, failed, and were cut off; and the people crossed over opposite Jericho..."

-Joshua 3:15-16

But in their decision to prosper their flocks they ignored a natural protection God had provided for His people and for their children. While it takes a while for this to fully destroy them, these tribes were the most vulnerable to raiding parties and most vulnerable to internal corruption from the surrounding pagan nations. To refuse to share a border with their fellow countrymen they put themselves in an unnecessary amount of danger which eventually led to them being the first tribes in Israel to be conquered and exiled:

“And they were unfaithful to the God of their fathers, and played the harlot after the gods of the peoples of the land, whom God had destroyed before them. So the God of Israel stirred up the spirit of Pul king of Assyria, that is, Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria. He carried the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh into captivity. He took them to Halah, Habor, Hara, and the river of Gozan to this day.”

-1 Chronicles 5:25-26

Poor Communication

“Then they came near to him and said: “We will build sheepfolds here for our livestock, and cities for our little ones, “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. “We will not return to our homes until every one of the children of Israel has received his inheritance.”

-Numbers 32:16-18

We have already spoken of Moses' mistake in judging the intentions of the tribes of Reuben and Gad, but it is important to also note that they did a poor job at properly communicating to Moses their intention. In the context of this story, the nation of Israel is about to invade a hostile territory and experience a period of brutal, drawn out warfare. While not a sinful decision, it would have been wise for these tribes to anticipate the weight of their words and communicate clearly to Moses their intentions from the outset.

To put this point a little more clearly, in the absence of data, it is much easier for people to jump to conclusions. Clear communication from the outset could have prevented this conflict altogether. We also see that this just seems to be a problem for these tribes because when Israel finally takes the land, a similar instance occurs:

“Now the children of Israel heard someone say, “Behold, the children of Reuben, the children of Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh have built an altar on the frontier of the land of Canaan, in the region of the Jordan—on the children of Israel’s side.” And when the children of Israel heard of it, the whole congregation of the children of Israel gathered together at Shiloh to go to war against them.”

-Joshua 22:11-12

Once again, the tribes of Reuben and Gad do something ambiguous, and seemingly wrong, but offer no preemptive explanation for their bizarre behavior, in this case constructing an altar. In my time as a counselor, poor communication might be the primary cause of unnecessary conflict in any given relationship, especially between spouses.

In such cases, the reason for this actually makes sense. It is either a form of projection or a form of conflict avoidance. In the former case, when we are acting without malice or bad intentions, we can be blissfully unaware of how our behaviour might appear to other people, which is what I believe is happening in the account in Numbers.

As an example, imagine for a second that a man has a lunch business meeting with a member of the opposite sex, but since this meeting was strictly business and in a public place, he fails to tell his wife. Then, let's say, either his wife, or a mutual acquaintance sees this meeting take place and assumes something more is happening in this meeting. While a good chunk of the guilt related to this conflict would be due to the presumption of the one who sees the meeting, I would say a larger blame actually rests on the person who fails to communicate properly.

While it is an understandable and relatively innocent error, it is also an unforced error that causes grief to others. While there are far less clear examples I could use that would shift the blame a bit, as a general rule we should try to be aware of how our behavior might appear and communicate clearly with those we love to avoid unnecessary strife.

Another motive that is less forgivable, but more common, stems from pride. Especially in our country, we really value the idea of personal autonomy. We want to do what we want when we want and avoid accountability. While this might kind of work for a single person, if we are in any type of relationship in which someone has to rely on us, we sacrifice a bit of our autonomy to be in a relationship like this.

The big example of this is marriage, but even in our jobs, our families, and close friends this remains true. So again, imagine a wife who wants to bless their child by buying them a large present for their birthday, but because they are afraid that this desire would

be met with rejection or conflict, they fail to communicate this to their spouse and they only find out after the fact. Even if the husband would have fully supported this decision, now they feel untrusted in their marriage and also they might feel uncertain about how money is being spent in the relationship in general. Even if everything is “above board” financially, the subsequent tension and fight came from bad communication.

“The heart of the wise teaches his mouth, And adds learning to his lips. Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, Sweetness to the soul and health to the bones.”

-Proverbs 16:23-24

To be sure, others have a responsibility to be:

“...swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”

-James 1:19-20

But this doesn't absolve us of our responsibility to grow in wisdom and communicate effectively to those we love, in order to preserve peace and harmony within our relationships. The positive thing I can say about the Reubenites and the Gadites in this conflict, is that they are not provoked by the intense words of Moses. In instances like this, when we are wrongfully accused of something that we had no intention of doing, even if we failed to communicate properly, to be provoked by the accusation and become hostile and defensive in the conversation.

When we do this, we have taken an already unnecessary conflict and accelerated it through our knee jerk reaction spurred by anger. As the Proverbs teach us:

“A soft answer turns away wrath, But a harsh word stirs up anger.”

-Proverbs 15:1

This wisdom is so powerful that it can even work even when the conflict isn't baseless. If we can retain our composure, even in the face of bad accusations and wrath, we can diffuse a tense situation, and I can say that Reuben and Gad are excellent examples of this, both in this account and the one from Joshua:

“Then the children of Reuben, the children of Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh answered and said to the heads of the divisions of Israel: “The LORD God of gods, the LORD God of gods, He knows, and let Israel itself know—if it is in rebellion, or if in treachery against the LORD, do not save us this day. “If we have built ourselves an altar to turn from following the LORD, or if to offer on it burnt offerings or grain offerings, or if to offer peace offerings on it, let the LORD Himself require an account. “But in fact we

have done it for fear, for a reason, saying, 'In time to come your descendants may speak to our descendants, saying, "What have you to do with the LORD God of Israel? "For the LORD has made the Jordan a border between you and us, you children of Reuben and children of Gad. You have no part in the LORD." So your descendants would make our descendants cease fearing the LORD.' "Therefore we said, 'Let us now prepare to build ourselves an altar, not for burnt offering nor for sacrifice,27 'but that it may be a witness between you and us and our generations after us, that we may perform the service of the LORD before Him with our burnt offerings, with our sacrifices, and with our peace offerings; that your descendants may not say to our descendants in time to come, "You have no part in the LORD."'

-Joshua 22:21-27

While they could have saved themselves some trouble by leading with these explanations, we have to give them credit for not becoming provoked in these dialogues and instead offering “soft” responses that cooled the conflict.

I would say that as a culture this is becoming an increasingly lost art. Partly I can blame politics, and partly online discourse, but it seems like arguments are more and more about having the last word than about achieving unity. As a result our discourse on a national level is intentionally provocative to the “other side” and responses are more and more reactionary until we find ourselves supporting people and ideas that we fundamentally disagree with.

Take Donald Trump as the best possible example of this phenomenon. Like him or hate him, it is undeniable that he is intentionally provocative to his opponents. By doing this, he often gets his opponents to support crazy and even evil things without realizing it. A great example would be the current immigration debate. His plan to deport immigrants who are violent criminals might be the least controversial desire a politician has expressed in a long time, and in saner times there would be large bipartisan support, even if they opposed other aspects of his immigration policy. But we are not in sane times, and the political left was provoked into opposing all deportation and ICE in general. While this is a political example, this phenomenon exists across the social spectrum and I believe it is getting a lot worse.

The Blessing of Unity

“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is For brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious oil upon the head, Running down on the beard, The beard of Aaron, Running down on the edge of his garments. It is like the dew of Hermon, Descending

upon the mountains of Zion; For there the LORD commanded the blessing—Life forevermore.”

-Psalm 133:1-3

The reason why this should matter to us is that God desires to have unity amongst His people. Remember that the primary purpose of Eden was to have perfect unity between mankind, God, and nature. It was our initial fall that caused fragmentation in all of these relationships which is exactly why Christ had to become incarnate. God and man having been separated in the fall were reunited in the person of Jesus Christ. He brought together the divine nature and the human nature in His incarnation and He redeemed human nature in the Resurrection. But it is Christ's sincere desire for unity and harmony within the world that caused Him to pray the following before His crucifixion:

“I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.

-John 17:20-21

Christ's prayer for unity amongst His followers is an extension of His great delight in the unity that He enjoys with His Father. As our King and our Savior, He longs for us to enjoy the same unity that He has within His own being, shared between Him, His Father, and His Holy Spirit. He valued this so much that He was willing to suffer a form of separation from His Father in order that we might be united to Him:

“Now from the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” that is, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”

-Matthew 27:45-46

It is at this great cost that we now can have unity with God. And it is for this reason why we should fight to have unity in our own personal relationships. Sometimes this means learning to forgive offenses made against us, sometimes it means working on our communication, sometimes it means repenting of behavior that is causing friction between ourselves and others, sometimes it means working on our connection with other people, but in all things, it means fighting for our relationships with power, integrity, and conviction because our God delights in unity.

But we also have to accept that in this fallen world, perfect unity might not be possible. For sure, God would have preferred that Reuben and Gad simply went with the rest of their countrymen to the land that He had promised, just as He would have preferred that

Lot remained in Canaan with Abraham. But God will often allow for minor divisions to occur that allow for greater unity. Take a well-known break between the apostle Paul and his companion Barnabas:

“Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing.” Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.”

-Acts 15:36-41

This is an admittedly sad story. We would want Paul and Barnabas to make their relationship work and agree on all things. But life isn't that simple. Paul felt that he had good reason to leave Mark, and Barnabas felt equally strong that Mark should come with them. Since they couldn't see eye to eye on that issue, it was better that they split apart in peace than to come to a state of true division. Obviously this type of division is simply not an option for a marriage, but in our other relationships with family and friends, a decision like this might, unfortunately, be necessary.

It is important to note that Moses left things on good terms and blessed Reuben and Gad:

“Let Reuben live, and not die, Nor let his men be few.”

-Deuteronomy 33:6

“Blessed is he who enlarges Gad; He dwells as a lion, And tears the arm and the crown of his head. He provided the first part for himself, Because a lawgiver's portion was reserved there. He came with the heads of the people; He administered the justice of the LORD, And His judgments with Israel.”

-Deuteronomy 33:20-21

And in turn, Reuben and Gad were faithful to fulfill their vows to their brethren:

“And the men of Reuben, the men of Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh crossed over armed before the children of Israel, as Moses had spoken to them.”

-Joshua 4:12

“Then Joshua called the Reubenites, the Gadites, and half the tribe of Manasseh, and said to them: “You have kept all that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, and have obeyed my voice in all that I commanded you. “You have not left your brethren these many days, up to this day, but have kept the charge of the commandment of the LORD your God. “And now the LORD your God has given rest to your brethren, as He promised them; now therefore, return and go to your tents and to the land of your possession, which Moses the servant of the LORD gave you on the other side of the Jordan. “But take careful heed to do the commandment and the law which Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, to love the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways, to keep His commandments, to hold fast to Him, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul.”

-Joshua 22:1-5

So while this might not be the happy ending that we would desire, it is the best that they were capable of with the limited knowledge that they had. And herein is the ultimate wisdom from this passage, we fight with all our strength to attain to the highest degree of unity that is available to us, even if it isn't exactly what we would want. But we do this in humility and confidence in God and His desires for us and our relationships.

“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”

-James 3:13-18