**The Transjordanian Tribes**

A co-worker once told me that he considered the tax return he filed each year to be his “first offer” to the IRS. If they accepted it, fine. If not he was prepared to pay more since he had understated his income. While he may have considered this an effective approach, it would not be a wise approach. Such strategies work until they don’t and the consequences can be severe. Often our way of negotiating is to make a low offer with the expectation that the seller will counter. If the seller accepts the first offer, we sometimes have regrets thinking we should have offered less. Conversely, sellers whose asking price is met without negotiation think they may have left money on the table and should have set the price higher. A common questions sellers ask is “Is that your best offer?” In our study of Numbers chapter 32, we see 2 tribes of Israelites who were on both sides of first offers.

The chapter begins with representatives of the tribes of Reuben and Gad going to Moses and Eleazer and asking to be given land east of the Jordan River. They apparently had large herds of livestock, probably as a result of the plunder they had taken in the conquest of the Midianites. The land they desired was between the Arnon and Jabbok Rivers and offered good habitat for grazing. Even now it is utilized by Bedouin shepherds because of its fertile soil which grows thick vegetation. The last line in their request was “Do not make us cross the Jordan”. This roused the anger of Moses who countered with “Shall your countrymen go to war while you sit here?” He added “Why do you discourage the Israelites from going over into the land the Lord has given them”. Moses was concerned that if the Reubenites and Gadites wanted to settle in Gilead, then the rest of the tribes might follow suit. He feared a repeat of the folly of 40 years earlier when the spies he sent to scout the land discouraged the Israelites from going into Canaan. Moses reminded them of God’s judgement on the people; not one man 20 years of age or older survived and the entire nation was forced to wander in the desert for 40 years. Moses warned them that God would again leave the people in the desert and they would be the cause of it.

Their response was that they would leave their women, children and livestock behind and join the other tribes going into Canaan. They promised they would not return to their land until the other tribes had received their inheritances which would not happen until the occupants of Canaan had been defeated. . Moses accepted their proposal, telling them they would be free of their obligation to God and the land they wanted would belong to them. He warned them that if they failed to honor their promise, they would be sinning against the Lord. Moses gave instructions to Joshua and Eleazer that when the land had been subdued, the Reubenites and Gadites were to be given their land so long as they kept their promise. The chapter ends with Moses allocating the land in Gilead among the tribes of Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh which had joined with the other 2 tribes. The tribes of Reuben and Gad camped together so their arrangement was natural. It is not known if the tribe of Manasseh had been part of the plan all along or if they joined later.

Consider the first offer the Reubenites and Gadites made to Moses. They asked to be granted the land they were standing on, offering nothing. Moses rightly and quickly rejected their request after which they “sweetened the pot” by committing to go into Canaan with the other tribes. Some writers think that was their intent all along but one wonders what might have happened if Moses had accepted their first offer. We do know they promised that each man would go into Canaan armed for battle (see v. 27). They failed to deliver on that, sending only 40,000 of the 110,580 men eligible to serve (see Numbers chapter 26 and Josh. 4:13.

In addition to making a weak first offer, they accepted the first offer for *available* land they encountered. They had been wandering from place to place in the desert but they had stayed in Gilead for probably several months, long enough to perhaps consider it as a home. I said the land was the first offered which was available. Actually God had previously made them an offer of land but it was not yet available. The probably thought a bird in the hand is worth 2 in the bush. This reflected their lack of faith in God. They lacked faith that the land he promised was better than the land in Gilead. They also lacked faith that God defeat their enemies in Canaan so they settled for the first offer but rejected the best offer. Matthew Henry wrote that their downfall was the lust of the eye and the pride of life, common elements of sin. They saw that the land was good and they were attracted to it without regard for the greater good of the nation. Henry noted that Lot chose by the sight of his eye and smarted for his choice. One thing the 3 tribes had in common was that their namesakes were first born to their mothers. Reuben had forfeited his birthright (see Gen 49:4). Although Gad was firstborn, he was the son of a servant and so lacked the full rights of a firstborn. While Manasseh was first born, Jacob had chosen to bless Ephraim before him. It may be that the 3 tribes would rather be big fish in a small pond rather than submitting to Judah. They ultimately paid for their sin as their location east of the Jordan made them more vulnerable to attack and so they were among the first tribes to go into bondage at the hand of the Assyrians (see 2nd Kings 15:29).