**Eastern Tribes Return Home**

The chapter begins with Joshua addressing the eastern tribes. He commended them for doing all that Moses had commanded as well as obeying his own commands. He noted that they had devoted a long time of serving God alongside their brothers. They probably spent at least 6 years battling the Canaanites and Joshua said that the western tribes now had rest from their enemies. Joshua dismissed them to return to their homes and admonished them to keep the commandments and the law. He specifically told them to love the Lord, walk in His ways, obey His commands, hold fast to Him and to serve Him with all their hearts and souls. He blessed them and sent them away much richer than they were when they came to Canaan. They had acquired wealth through the plunder that had been taken during the conquests of the kings they had defeated.

The 2 & ½ tribes left Shiloh to return to their base in Gilead. As they neared the Jordan River, they stopped to build a large altar. When the western tribes discovered the altar they prepared to go to war against the eastern tribes. They dispatched Phineas along with leaders from the 10 tribes to confront the eastern tribes. They began their rebuke with asking how they could break faith with God, turn away from Him and rebel against Him. They referred to the sin of Peor, reminded them of what had happened when the Israelites were camped at Shittim. Some of the men were seduced by Moabite women and even worse, they joined in worshipping the Baal of Peor. As punishment, God sent plague that killed 24,000 (see Num. chapter 25). Phineas and the other men with him assumed that the altar was erected for the purpose of idol worship. Next they said that the altar was endangering the entire nation by arousing God’s anger. Finally, they offered the eastern tribes land west of the Jordan if they thought their own land was defiled.

The eastern tribes responded by saying that the altar was not meant for offering sacrifices. They built the altar as a reminder for future generations that although the Jordan River separated the land of the tribes, they still worshipped the same God as the other tribes. The altar was meant as a replica to be a witness to their faith in God. Their explanation was accepted by Phineas and the other men who reported it to the rest of the tribes who were satisfied with the answer given. The chapter ends with the eastern tribes naming the altar “A Witness Between Us that the Lord is God”.

Although the potential conflict was resolved peacefully, both the eastern and western tribes shared blame for almost causing a war. The ire of the western tribes was raised because of God’s repeated warnings about idol worship. In Deuteronomy chapter 12, Moses told the people that God forbade them from worshipping in their own way. Instead they were to seek the place that God would choose. That would be the only place that sacrifices were to be offered. The eastern tribes should have known how repugnant a rival altar would have been to their brothers. Even though they did not intend for it to be a sacrificial altar, they should have explained their motives before constructing the altar.

The western tribes erred in preparing form war with their brothers before hearing them out. They assumed the worst before even meeting with the eastern tribes. This was somewhat softened by sending a delegation to meet with the eastern tribes although they began the meeting by berating rather than listening.

The peaceful reconciliation occurred as a result of honest dialogue. David Guzik wrote that this episode demonstrates the following about conflict resolution:

* Respond with a concern for God’s holiness.
* Respond with the courage to confront in love.
* Respond with an attempt to reconcile before you fight.
* Determine that you are willing to sacrifice to help them; don’t confront unless you are willing to help.
* Determine that you will see the situation from the perspective of the other person.
* Determine that you will believe the best of one another.

Another lesson I think we can learn is the importance of corporate worship. God meant for the Israelites to observe ordinances at the place he would designate that would be supervised by the Levite priests. Small gatherings away from the main body such as home groups have the potential to lead errant teaching.