

# Life: Work Through Conflict

June 22, 2015

- *The Bible Studies for Life* lesson for July 5 focuses on Joshua 22:1-12, 15-18, 26-27, 33-34.

Many of us run from conflict in interpersonal relationships. In fact, some of us dislike conflict so much we adopt unhealthy behaviors like lying or compromising our beliefs just to avoid it. Globally, conflict seems to define the way cultures, races and countries relate to one another. The word “conflict” even is commonly used as a euphemism for war. The Apostle Paul writes, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18). Is avoidance or inaction the best response, then, to conflict? Maybe it is sometimes, but not always.

## **A tribal dispute**

After the Israelites successfully conquered the land God promised them, they divided the territory into appropriate sections for each of the tribes. The Reubenites, Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh previously had elected not to claim territory in the Promise Land, but instead to make their home on the east side of the Jordan. After the war to gain the land of Canaan ended, these tribes returned, with Joshua’s blessing, to their homes across the Jordan in Gilead. However, as they approached the river, they built an “imposing altar” to commemorate the bond of all the Israelite tribes, even though a river separated them: “It is to be a witness between us and you and the generations that follow, that we will worship the Lord at his sanctuary with our burnt offerings, sacrifices and fellowship offerings. Then, in the future your descendants will not be able to say to ours, ‘You have no share in the Lord.’” (Joshua 22:27).

When the Israelites on the western side of the Jordan heard the Reubenites,

the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh built an altar on the west side of the river, “the whole assembly of Israel gathered at Shiloh to go to war against them” (Joshua 22:11, 12). First, though, they sent representatives to ask the eastern tribes why they had done something so offensive to the Lord: “How could you break faith with the God of Israel like this? How could you turn away from the Lord and build yourselves an altar in rebellion against him now? ... If the land you possess is defiled, come over to the Lord’s land, where the Lord’s tabernacle stands, and share the land with us. But do not rebel against the Lord or against us by building an altar for yourselves, other than the altar of the Lord our God” (Joshua 22:16-19).

Of course, the three eastern tribes emphatically denied any evil intent regarding the building of the altar. They explained their desire that the altar serve as a “witness between me and you” (Joshua 22: 28). The other tribal representatives were “pleased” with this explanation. They realized that by seeking first to understand the real reason behind the building of the altar, instead of immediately going to war, they averted catastrophe. When they reported their findings to the rest of their leaders, “they were glad to hear the report and praised God. And they talked no more about going to war against them to devastate the country where the Reubenites and the Gadites lived” (Joshua 22:33).

### **A third way**

The western Israelite tribes had several options regarding their response to the altar the Reubenites and Gadites built. First, they could have avoided conflict completely by doing nothing, but the unity of the 12 tribes would have been damaged by this approach. Bitterness and distrust would have accelerated over time as the threatening altar cast its shadow along the shore of the Jordan in the Promise Land. Second, the western tribes could have assumed malevolent intentions on behalf of the other tribes and immediately gone to war. Scripture tells us the results of this approach

would have been destructive for Israel (Joshua 22:31). A third way, however, honored the Lord and was therefore fruitful. Before resorting to violence, the tribal leaders spoke truthfully with each other. Bad assumptions and misunderstandings were cleared up. Trust was strengthened among the tribes when they understood nothing but good was intended regarding the construction of the altar. The Bible tells us “a long time” of peace ensued in which “the Lord (gave) Israel rest from all their enemies (Joshua 23:1).

Christians often can seek a third way in resolving conflict. In our culture of immediate dissemination of short news bites and gossip through social media, intentions as well as facts are easily misunderstood. Sometimes it is best to ignore situations that do not involve us directly or are a trap for hatemongering. However, avoiding conflict often leads to a deterioration of the relationships between people as misunderstanding and bitterness divides them. Conversely, jumping into an online or face-to-face confrontation without knowing the facts usually ends badly. Instead, honest conversation, in which both sides can explain their thoughts and actions, offers an opportunity for God to mend conflict among his children.