

Joshua 22: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Joshua chapter 22. At that time Joshua summoned the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-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 have commanded you. You have not forsaken your brothers these many days, down to this day, but have been careful to keep the charge of the Lord your God. And now the Lord your God has given rest to your brothers, as he promised them.

Therefore turn and go to your tents in the land where your possession lies, which Moses the servant of the Lord gave you on the other side of the Jordan. Only be very careful to observe the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you, to love the Lord your God, and to walk in all his ways, and to keep his commandments, and to cling to him, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul. So Joshua blessed them and sent them away, and they went to their tents. Now to the one half of the tribe of Manasseh, Moses had given a possession in Bashan, but to the other half Joshua had given a possession beside their brothers in the land west of the Jordan. And when Joshua sent them away to their homes, and blessed them, he said to them, Go back to your tents with much wealth, and with very much livestock, with silver, gold, bronze, and iron, and with much clothing. Divide the spoil of your enemies with your brothers. So the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh returned home, parting from the people of Israel at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan, to go to the land of Gilead, their own land, of which they had possessed themselves by command of the Lord through Moses. And when they came to the region of the Jordan that is in the land of Canaan, the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh, built there an altar by the Jordan, an altar of imposing size. And the people of Israel heard it said, Behold, the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh had built the altar at the frontier of the land of

Canaan, in the region about the Jordan, on the side that belongs to the people of Israel. And when the people of Israel heard of it, the whole assembly of the people of Israel gathered at Shiloh to make war against them. Then the people of Israel sent the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh in the land of Gilead, Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, and with him ten chiefs, one from each of the tribal families of Israel, every one of them the head of a family among the clans of Israel. And they came to the people of Reuben, the people of Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh in the land of Gilead, and they said to them, Thus says the whole congregation of the Lord, What is this breach of faith that you have committed against the God of Israel, in turning away this day from following the Lord, by building yourselves and altar this day in rebellion against the Lord? Have we not had enough of the sin at Peor, from which even yet we have not cleansed ourselves, and for which there came a plague upon the congregation of the Lord, that you too must turn away this day from following the Lord? And if you too rebel against the Lord today, then tomorrow he will be angry with the whole congregation of Israel. But now, if the land of your possession is unclean, pass over into the Lord's land where the Lord's tabernacle stands, and take for yourselves a possession among us. Only do not rebel against the Lord, or make us as rebels by building for yourselves an altar other than the altar of the Lord our God. Did not Achan the son of Zerah break faith in the matter of the devoted things, and wrath fall upon all the congregation of Israel? And he did not perish alone for his iniquity. Then the people of Reuben, the people of Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh said in answer to the heads of the families of Israel, The Mighty One, God the Lord, the Mighty One, God the

Lord, he knows, and let Israel itself know. If it was in rebellion or in breach of faith against the Lord, do not spare us today for building an altar to turn away from following the Lord. Or if we did so, to offer burnt offerings, or grain offerings, or peace offerings on it, may the Lord himself take vengeance. No, but we did it from fear that in time to come your children might say to our children, What have you to do with the Lord, the God of Israel? For the Lord has made the Jordan a boundary between us and you, you people of Reuben and people of Gad. You have no portion in the Lord.

So your children might make our children cease to worship the Lord. Therefore we said, Let us now build an altar, not for burnt offering, nor for sacrifice, but to be a witness between us and you, and between our generations after us, that we do perform the service of the Lord in his presence with our burnt offerings and sacrifices and peace offerings. So your children will not say to our children in time to come, You have no portion in the Lord. And so we thought, if this should be said to us or to our descendants in time to come, we should say, Behold, the copy of the altar of the Lord, which our fathers made, not for burnt offerings, nor for sacrifice, but to be a witness between us and you. Far be it from us that we should rebel against the Lord and turn away this day from following the Lord by building an altar for burnt offering, grain offering, or sacrifice, other than the altar of the Lord our God that stands before his tabernacle.

[5 : 02] When Phinehas the priest and the chiefs of the congregation, the heads of the families of Israel who were with him, heard the words that the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the people of Manasseh spoke, it was good in their eyes. And Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest said to the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the people of Manasseh, Today we know that the Lord is in our midst, because you have not committed this breach of faith against the Lord. Now you have delivered the people of Israel from the hand of the Lord. Then Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest and the chiefs returned from the people of Reuben and the people of Gad in the land of Gilead to the land of Canaan, to the people of Israel, and brought back word to them. And the report was good in the eyes of the people of Israel. And the people of Israel blessed God and spoke no more of making war against them to destroy the land where the people of Reuben and the people of Gad were settled. The people of Reuben and the people of Gad called the altar witness. For, they said, it is a witness between us that the Lord is God. The land has been apportioned, and now in Joshua chapter 22 it's time for the Transjordanian tribes to return to their land. The book of Joshua, and indeed the entire story of the Hexateuch, has entered its long drawn out stage of resolution, and now various remaining issues are being settled. One of these is the two and a half tribes' completion of their mission.

They had sent over about forty thousand fighting men with the rest of the nation in fulfillment of the vow that they had made back in Numbers chapter 32, verses 16 to 19. Then they came near to him and said, We will build sheepfolds here for our livestock, and cities for our little ones. But we will take up arms, ready to go before the people of Israel, until we have brought them to their place. And our little one shall live in the fortified cities because of the inhabitants of the land. We will not return to our homes, until each of the people of Israel has gained his inheritance. For we will not inherit with them on the other side of the Jordan and beyond, because our inheritance has come to us on this side of the Jordan to the east. Joshua summons the two and a half tribes and commends them for their faithfulness.

The Lord has now given rest to their brothers in the land. They have been fighting alongside their brothers, taking their territory for them, for a period of about seven years. Their full participation in the common task of taking the promised land was extremely important. It expressed and strengthened the unity of the people as a single nation, beyond their tribal divisions. It was also important, as the two and a half tribes didn't receive territory in the promised land, that they should fully participate in the conquest of it. The danger was always that the two and a half tribes would drift away from the tribes that settled in the promised land proper, and fighting with them for that land was one way in which that danger could be mitigated. Joshua charges them to remain faithful in the future. They would settle, as it were, in the sunrise land, the territory of Gilead in the east, but the rest of the nation would settle in the sunset land in the west, the promised land on the western side of the Jordan. As Peter Lighthouse has observed, the occasional description of the different parts of the land in terms of sunrise and sunset presents them in terms of a temporal movement, and a movement from protology to eschatology, from beginnings to consummation. The Lord's people first ascended in the sunrise land, and then they come to rest in the sunset land. On their return to

Gilead, the two and a half tribes erect a huge altar in the region of the Jordan. This action leads to the nine and a half tribes preparing to go to war against them. They are here following the instructions of Deuteronomy chapter 13 verses 12 to 18, including the part about carefully investigating the charge first. If you hear someone in one of your cities which the Lord your God gives you to dwell in, saying, Corrupt men have gone out from among you, and enticed the inhabitants of their cities, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which you have not known, then you shall inquire, search out, and ask diligently. And if it is indeed true, and certain that such an abomination was committed among you, you shall surely strike the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword, utterly destroying it, all that is in it and its livestock with the edge of the sword. And you shall gather all its plunder into the middle of the street, and completely burn with fire the city and all its plunder, for the Lord your God. It shall be a heap forever. It shall not be built again.

So none of the accursed things shall remain in your hand, that the Lord may turn from the fierceness of his anger, and show you mercy, have compassion on you, and multiply you, just as he swore to your fathers, because you have listened to the voice of the Lord your God, to keep all his commandments, which I command you today, to do what is right in the eyes of the Lord your God.

[9 : 43] If one part of Israel breaches the covenant, the entire nation is implicated. The nine and a half tribes can't just write off the two and a half tribes as lost to idolatry. They are all in the covenant together, and they are their brother's keepers. If the Transjordanian tribes have apostatized, everyone will be judged with them. Why was the establishment of an altar such a serious breach of the covenant? The commandment that Israel should have a single sanctuary, and the ordering of their worship around that one sanctuary for the entire nation, had been one of the central messages of Moses' teaching to the nation in the plains of Moab in the book of Deuteronomy. This is unpacked in Deuteronomy chapter 12 verse 14.

These are the statutes and judgments which you shall be careful to observe in the land which the Lord God of your fathers is giving you to possess, all the days that you live on the earth. You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations which you shall dispossess serve their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. And you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and burn their wooden images with fire. And you shall cut down the carved images of their gods, and destroy their names from that place. You shall not worship the Lord your God with such things. But you shall seek the place where the Lord your God chooses, out of all your tribes, to put his name for his dwelling place, and there you shall go. There you shall take your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, your vowed offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks.

And there you shall eat before the Lord your God, and you shall rejoice in all to which you have put your hand, you and your households, in which the Lord your God has blessed you. You shall not at all do as we are doing here today, every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes. For as yet you have not come to the rest and the inheritance which the Lord your God has given you. But when you cross over the Jordan and dwell in the land which the Lord your God is giving you to inherit, and he gives you rest from all your enemies round about, so that you dwell in safety, then there will be the place where the Lord your God chooses to make his name abide. There you shall bring all that I command you, your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, and all your choice offerings which you vow to the Lord. And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levite who is within your gates, since he has no portion nor inheritance with you. Take heed to yourself that you do not offer your burnt offerings in every place that you see, but in the place which the Lord chooses, in one of your tribes, there you shall offer your burnt offerings, and there you shall do all that I command you. This instruction in the part of the book concerned with the second commandment against idolatry and false forms of worship was incredibly important. Upon the observance of this commandment hung the unity of the nation in faithfulness. If this commandment were breached, Israel could easily drift off into various local cults, each with their own regional flavour of the worship of the Lord, syncretising the worship of the Lord with the worship of local deities and the gods of surrounding nations. Unity and faithfulness went hand in hand. Unity would serve as a spur to faithfulness, and faithfulness would serve as a spur to unity. For instance, when the nation was divided in the time of Jeroboam, Jeroboam felt the need to establish new cultic sites at Bethel and Dan with his two golden calves, precisely in order to avoid the pull to unity with the southern kingdom that worship in Jerusalem would encourage. This can be seen in 1 Kings chapter 12 verses 25 to 33. The nine and a half tribes send a delegation to investigate the claims and to confront Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh. This delegation is led by Phinehas, a man of zeal who acted to stop the plague when Israel joined itself with Baal-Apeor in Numbers chapter 25. He is accompanied by ten chiefs, one for each of the tribes with territory in the promised land. Manasseh, of course, has territory on both sides. It seems that they are taking this with the utmost seriousness and aren't going to allow compromise, which is itself a promising sign. They challenged the two and a half tribes for their apparent breach of the covenant.

They compare this to the sin of that at Peor, where direct intervention had to occur to save the people, and to the sin of Achan, where the entire people suffered on account of the sin of one man.

They encouraged them to join them on the other side of the Jordan, if they will struggle to remain faithful in the Transjordan. The Reubenites, Gadites, and half tribe of Manasseh protest their innocence in response. Their erection of the altar, they argue, had been for very different purposes.

[14 : 27] Indeed, its design was to serve as a spur to faithfulness and to true worship. The altar, they insisted, is not for worship, but as a witness, to ensure that the tribes in the promised land itself recognise the part that the Transjordanian tribes have in the worship of God and don't deny their stake in the covenant. The altar is a replica of the one true altar, not a copy of it or substitute for it for the purposes of worship. Phineas and the elders are satisfied with the response.

We are told that it was good in their eyes. They returned to the land with the report, which satisfies the people, and the plans for war against the two and a half tribes are called off. The tribes of Reuben and Gad then call the altar witness, claiming that it was a witness between the tribes on the two sides of the Jordan, that the Lord is God. Perhaps the big question at the end of this is whether Phineas and the elders were right in their decision, and things aren't entirely clear-cut on that front. On the one hand, a surface reading of the text might lead us to share the delegation's assessment of the situation after their investigation, being satisfied with the explanation that's provided. If they were apostatising and starting worship on their own terms, then it might seem strange for them to have erected the altar in the promised land, rather than in their own territory. This would make it very difficult for them to use it.

But then we look a bit closer, and we recognise that the actual location of the altar is ambiguous. The text could be read in ways that presented as being on either side of the Jordan. We could consider the size of the altar. If they're going to secretly go away from the worship of God, this is not the way to do it. It seems to be a very open way to apostatise. But that, of course, might be what's taking place. Common sense would raise some further questions. Why erect an altar for some purpose other than sacrifice? Why not erect one of the various other kinds of memorial or witness pillars that we read of elsewhere? For that matter, why erect an altar as a witness between the nation on the two sides of the Jordan, and not inform the tribes within the land about the fact? Surely that greatly undermines the purpose. Indeed, the very altar that was supposedly built to testify to the unity of the two sides nearly becomes a cause for tearing the nation apart. Things don't seem to quite add up here. James Bajon has identified a number of further intertextual reasons for wariness.

The words, it was good in their eyes concerning the judgment of Phinehas and the delegation, might sow a seed of uncertainty too. These words have negative connotations elsewhere.

There has already been a case of deception in the book of Joshua, where the Israelites failed to consult the Lord in the case of the Gibeonites. They do not seem to consult the Lord here either. Then there is the fact of another occasion when another witness was erected in Gilead, back in Genesis chapter 31 verses 44 to 52.

[17:16] Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me. So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar, and Jacob said to his kinsmen, Gather stones. And they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap.

Laban called it Jagar-Sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galid. Laban said, This heap is a witness between you and me today. Therefore he named it Galid, and Mizpah. For he said, The Lord watch between you and me, when we are out of one another's sight. If you oppress my daughters, or if you take wives besides my daughters, although no one is with us, see, God is witness between you and me. Then Laban said to Jacob, See this heap and the pillar, which I have set between you and me? This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass over this heap to you, and you will not pass over this heap and this pillar to me, to do harm. The witness in that case manifests lingering distrust between the two parties of Jacob and Laban, and it seems that much the same is the case here. The Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh put words in the mouths of hypothetical descendants of the nine and a half tribes, to the effect that the Transjordanian tribes are not truly members of Israel. However, while this may be rhetorically designed to encourage peace with the delegation, it seems likely to me that they are identifying a tension that is already present, albeit in a largely unspoken form. Indeed, the close of the chapter speaks of the nine and a half tribes as the people of Israel, over against the people of Reuben and the people of Gad. Are the people of Reuben and the people of Gad really members of Israel? We might also think of the connection with the story of Judges chapter 20 and 21, where Phineas is again engaged in an investigation over whether a particular tribe has been grossly unfaithful, and in that investigation a very misleading picture is given of what actually took place. I'm not convinced that we are expected to settle the question of the intent of the two and a half tribes in erecting the altar. However, I do think we are supposed to feel suspicion, and to sense the fracture and distrust that exists within the nation, where neither side is at ease with the other, and where the true state of relations is unclear.

The explanation that satisfies the nine and a half tribes seems pious, but it doesn't adequately address many of the readers' questions. Establishing unity between the tribes will be a great and an ongoing task. The Jordan is a powerful natural barrier between the nine and a half tribes and the two and a half tribes. Preventing the tribes on either side of this natural barrier from drifting apart would be difficult. We should note that it was Reuben and Gad who requested the Transjordan.

The half tribe of Manasseh seems to have been joined to them by Moses. Having a tribe whose territory straddled the Jordan would serve to hold the two sides together that bit more. The tribe of the Levites scattered throughout the various other tribes would also be a means of binding the tribes together.

And of course, unity in worship was the great way in which the nation would be held together. Reuben and Gad are in an ambiguous place. Are they insiders or are they outsiders? What marks the identity of Israel? Is it presence in the promised land? Is it a single shared site of worship? Is it the unity of brotherhood? The altar, while it ostensibly testifies to the unity of Israel in common worship, it starts to represent mutual doubt and distrust. All of this is important because if the unity of the tribes is unsettled, rivalries within the people may push people away from the Lord.

[20 : 56] A question to consider. The connection between unity and faithfulness is crucial in this chapter. The unity must be a faithful unity, lest judgment come upon all. However, faithfulness is spurred by unity and a neglect or forgetfulness of brotherhood can lead to people drifting away from the Lord.

How can such an interplay between unity and faithfulness help us to understand some of our challenges in the life of the church?