

The Altar of Witness
Joshua 22

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Joshua 22: Introduction

Just when everything seemed to be going so well, a near disaster occurs.

The altar seemed like a good idea, but not to everyone. Poor communication, miscommunication, failing to consult the Lord, worrying about the future – can anything good come out of this?

Only if God is in charge. And He is. So, in spite of all the presumptuousness and hasty acting, in the end, the blessing of the people is restored.

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1 Eastern Tribe Dismissed

Read Joshua 22.1-9.

Reflect.

1. Why were the eastern tribes being dismissed? What charge does Joshua lay on them?
2. How can you see in Joshua's charge a kind of reprise of themes we have seen in this book so far?

Think about it.

The work of *conquering* the land is finished, although much remains to be done in *settling* it. Nevertheless, Joshua determined that the eastern tribes – Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh – have fulfilled their duty. So he dismisses them with his blessing, and with a charge that reminds us of the opening chapters of this book. The writer of the book of Joshua is never very far away from his main point.

Joshua, at least, has not lost sight of what God had spoken to him. As we shall see, the people were beginning to waver even during his lifetime, so a reminder of God's calling to the nation was most appropriate here. Love the Lord your God. Keep His commandments. Serve Him "with all your heart and with all your soul." Go with His blessings.

God lavished wealth and possessions on the eastern tribes with which to rejoin their families and begin to settle their own allotments and all their cities and villages. We can only imagine the joy and rejoicing with which they must have returned to their lands.

Meditate and discuss.

1. Joshua publicly commended the eastern tribes. Was that a good idea?
2. How can you see that Joshua kept the Lord in the forefront of this dismissal? How many different ways did he point the people to the Lord?
3. Do you think it's a good idea, whenever we commend someone for a job well done, to include with that commendation a reminder of God's role in it and of His ongoing requirements? Explain.

"He thus releases and frees them from temporary service, that he may bind them for ever to the authority of the one true God. He therefore permits them to return home, but on the condition that wherever they may be they are to be the soldiers of God; and he at the same time prescribes the mode, namely, the observance of his Law." John Calvin, Commentary on Joshua (1509-1564 AD)

Lord, I belong to You, and Your promises belong to me! Help me to gain more of Your precious and very great promises as I...

Pray Psalm 44.1-8.

As you pray, ask the Lord to bring to mind victories and blessings He has provided for you recently. Praise and thank Him for them, and commit yourself to Him anew.

Psalm 44.1-8, 23-26 (*Faithfulness: Great is Thy Faithfulness*)

O God our ears have heard, ancients have taught us,
All that You did for them long years ago,
How by Your hand You defeated the nations,

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And to the promised land let Israel go.

Refrain vv. 23-26

Rise up, awake, O Lord! Hide not Your face from us,
See our affliction, our suffering and pain!
See how our soul is sunk down with oppression;
Rise up and help and redeem us we pray!

Not by their sword did they drive out the nations;
Not by their arm did they settle the land.
Your saving mercy and light triumphed for them:
Victories for us, our King, please now command.

Refrain

Through You shall we all our enemies vanquish;
Them will we trample in Your mighty Name.
We will not trust in our strength or our wisdom;
Jesus will save us; we'll boast of His fame!

Refrain

2 Rocks of Offense?

Read Joshua 22.10-12.

Reflect.

1. Israel's response to a hearsay report seems a bit hasty, don't you think? Why were they so ready "to go to war" against their brethren?
2. How might the two-and-a-half tribes have avoided upsetting their brethren?

Think about it.

After crossing over to the east side of the Jordan River, the people of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh build "a great, impressive altar" in the region of Gilead, in the land east of the middle of the Jordan River. We should understand that this altar would have been visible from the west side of the Jordan. At this point, we're not given any explanation as to why they did this; so, if we didn't know (from previous readings of the book of Joshua), we might wonder: Say what? And we might not think this was such a great idea.

The two-and-a-half tribes might have given their brethren in the west a heads-up on this plan, to avoid any misunderstanding as to their intentions. But they weren't thinking about their brethren, only about themselves.

The "children of Israel" learned of this altar by hearsay, and the report they heard was only half true (v. 11). Immediately, they decide to go to war against the two-and-a-half tribes. Didn't anyone think to check this out first? Or to find out what the tribes had in mind? This will be Israel's chosen course eventually, but I'm struck by the fact that their first response was to go to war. No prayer. No seeking the Lord. No sending a delegation to the tribes east of the Jordan. Just every man to his weapons.

This knee-jerk reaction suggests to me that love for God and love for their neighbors are not the primary operating principles at work among the children of Israel. They do not yet have a heart for God (Deut. 5.29), and, apparently, they didn't have much heart for one another, either. It almost seems as if some resentment had built up against the two-and-a-half tribes, and that perhaps Joshua's dismissing them with commendation, before the land had been completely settled, may have sprung up a root of bitterness in some.

At any rate, the people are not one, and they will rarely *be* one people throughout the remainder of the Old Testament. It takes more than military prowess and equal distribution of land and spoils to make a people one. Only the Spirit of God can do this.

Our hearts sink at Israel's combativeness toward their brethren. Would they look back on this with regret? Would they long in their hearts for some means of living in God's *shalom* as brethren?

Meditate and discuss.

1. In churches today, do we tend to rely more on pragmatic means – programs, staff, facilities, etc. – or on the Spirit of God in building Jesus' Church? Explain.
2. We can be like Israel: Let someone slight us, or let us hear that someone has said something unkind about us, and we're ready to go to war. How can we check this tendency and overcome evil with good (Rom. 12.21)?

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3. Failure to communicate, mistaken assumptions, knee-jerk reactions, thinking the worst rather than the best of others. How can we avoid such things causing divisions in our churches?

“The motive for erecting the altar was right in itself. For the object of the children of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh, was to testify that though they were separated from their brethren by the intervening stream, they were, however, united with them in religion, and cherished a mutual agreement in the doctrine of the Law. Nothing was farther from their intention than to innovate in any respect in the worship of God.” John Calvin, Commentary on Joshua (1509-1564 AD)

Keep me from over-reacting, Lord, when I hear something that might disturb or upset me. Remind me that...

Pray Psalm 133.

Ask the Lord to lead you today so that you contribute to true unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4.3) among the Christians you know.

Psalm 133 (*Tryggare Kan Ingen Vara:Children of the Heavenly Father*)

O behold, how sweet, how pleasant,
When the brethren dwell together;
All in unity abiding
Find God’s blessing there presiding.

Like the precious oil of blessing
Flowing down on Aaron’s vestment,
God’s anointing rests forever
Where His people dwell together.

Like the dew of Hermon’s fountain
Falling down on Zion’s mountain,
So the blessing of the Savior
Dwells where unity finds favor.

3 Delegation of Admonition

Read Joshua 22.13-20.

Reflect.

1. Is it a good idea in judging others to presume to know their motives before you've even talked with them?
2. What is the main concern of this delegation?

Think about it.

Cooler heads prevailed, and plans for war are put on hold. Instead, the tribes on the west side of the Jordan River send a delegation comprised of tribal heads and the high priest. But this is not a fact-finding delegation. The people of Israel have already made up their minds about this altar, and they presume to know the motives of the two-and-a-half tribes in erecting it. They do not come to inquire, but to accuse and admonish.

We note that the delegation comes on behalf of “the whole congregation of the LORD” and not as from the Lord Himself. There is still no indication that anyone has thought to consult the Lord about this matter. The people gathered at Shiloh assume that their brethren east of the Jordan River have been unfaithful to the Lord, have turned away from Him, even that they have rebelled against Him (v. 16). Wouldn't it have been a more brotherly course to begin with a question? “Can you explain to us...?”

This delegation sounds very sanctimonious and self-righteous to me. There's even a hint of self-interest in their admonition: “if you rebel today against the LORD, that tomorrow He will be angry with the whole congregation of Israel” (v. 18). That is, us (cf. v. 16).

They are generous enough, at least, to offer the tribes in the east a place among them west of the Jordan, but even that offer sounds a bit condescending to me, with its implications that somehow the territories east of the Jordan might be “unclean” (v. 19).

This whole situation could have been avoided if people would simply have talked with one another before the “great, impressive altar” was constructed. We're being given a glimpse into the hearts of God's people, and what we see there is discouraging.

Meditate and discuss.

1. In judging others with righteous judgment (Jn. 7.24), we need to guard against false assumptions. How can we do that?
2. Put yourself in the place of the two-and-a-half tribes, hearing this lecture from the delegation. How would you have felt? Would this have endeared you to these brethren? Explain.
3. Overall, we can say that the tribes west of the Jordan River needed to do this, to send this delegation. We commend them for that. But if you could have set out a plan for the delegation to follow, would you have offered them any different advice than what we read in these verses? Explain.

“Just as if it had been known that this second altar was opposed to the one only altar of God, they begin with upbraiding them, and that in a very harsh and severe manner. They thus assume it as confessed, that the two tribes had built the altar with a view of offering sacrifices upon it. In this they are mistaken, as it was destined for a different use and purpose.” John Calvin, Commentary on Joshua (1509-1564 AD)

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Lord, give me a gracious and understanding heart, so that I...

Pray Psalm 141.

Meditate on the people you are likely to see today, and ask the Lord to guard your mouth against sin and to give you grace in all your speech (Col. 4.6).

Psalm 141 (*Truro: Shout, for the Blessed Jesus Reigns*)

O Lord, we call to You in prayer! To us come quickly; hear our cry!
Receive our prayer as incense sweet, our lifted hands as a sacrifice!

Lord, set a guard upon my mouth; let not my heart to evil bend,
Nor let me work iniquity in company with wicked men.

Lord, let a righteous man rebuke – a kindness this shall surely be.
Like healing oil upon my head, Your sweet rebuke shall be to me.

When to the judgment wicked men by God are cast, our words shall tell:
Like broken sod or fresh plowed ground, so shall their bones be cast to hell!

We lift our eyes to You, O Lord, and refuge seek; Lord, save our soul!
From every trap and snare redeem; deliver us and make us whole.

4 The Altar Explained

Read Joshua 22.21-29.

Reflect.

1. What kind of fear is a good reason for taking some action? How should we nurture that fear instead of the fear of people?
2. Does it seem to you that the tribes on the east side of the Jordan River and those on the west trusted one another?

Think about it.

You'd think that, after many long days and even years of fighting side by side, the tribes of Israel would be bonded to one another in love and trust. They were not. In the matter of this "great, and impressive" altar, the tribes on the west imposed false and unbelieving motives on the tribes east of the Jordan River, while those tribes fully expected to be disowned by their brethren before long. Out of sight, out of mind.

There is no evidence that Joshua or the ten tribes indicated a desire to be rid of the two-and-a-half tribes. But the latter were convinced that was likely to happen, and they would be left out of the promises of God. They did not intend to sacrifice any offerings on this altar (v. 27 refers to their making offerings at Shiloh, on the altar there; cf. v. 28). They simply intended it as a *witness*, a reminder to themselves and the tribes across the Jordan River that the people of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh were partners with all Israel in God's covenant and worship.

Was this a good idea? To what does it actually bear witness, if not to a lack of trust and fear of rejection?

Israel may be in the process of settling the land, but there doesn't seem to be much glue – whether social or spiritual – binding them together as one people. From the beginning of their occupying the land, they are suspicious of one another, fearful of others' designs, and looking out for their own interests in the Name of the Lord.

The children of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh explained the altar of witness to everyone's satisfaction, as we shall see. What no one bothered to explain is why such suspicion and fear should be present among the covenant people of God in the first place.

Meditate and discuss.

1. Meditate on Ephesians 4.3. Why does maintaining unity in the Body of Christ require such hard and consistent effort?
2. Among the believers you know, are you a force for unity or a source of suspicion and fear? Explain.
3. What did this "altar of witness" say? To whom did it say it? This "sculpture" conveyed a message that spoke to the people of God. Is there a principle in this that applies to the use we make of culture?

"The children of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh do all that is required for their exculpation, when they declare that they would use the altar only as a bond of brotherly union; and add a sufficient reason, namely, the danger there was, lest, after a long course of time, the ten tribes might exclude the others as strangers, because they did not inhabit the same land. For as the country beyond the Jordan was not at first comprehended in the covenant, a difference of habitation might ultimately prove a cause of dissension."

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John Calvin, *Commentary on Joshua (1509-1564 AD)*

Lord, I want to be a force for unity among my fellow believers. Today, let me sow unity of the faith by...

Pray Psalm 133.

What can you do today to strengthen the unity of the Spirit among your fellow believers? As you pray this psalm and think about the day ahead, listen for the Lord's leading.

Psalm 133 (*Tryggare Kan Ingen Vara: Children of the Heavenly Father*)

O behold, how sweet, how pleasant,
When the brethren dwell together;
All in unity abiding
Find God's blessing there presiding.

Like the precious oil of blessing
Flowing down on Aaron's vestment,
God's anointing rests forever
Where His people dwell together.

Like the dew of Hermon's fountain
Falling down on Zion's mountain,
So the blessing of the Savior
Dwells where unity finds favor.

5 Oh. OK.

Read Joshua 22.30, 31.

Reflect.

1. What should these folks have learned from this situation?
2. Do you see any apologies or requests for forgiveness here? Should there have been?

Think about it.

As I read these two verses, I see crimson faces – those of the ten tribes red with embarrassment – “Oh. OK” – and those of the two-and-a-half tribes flush with resentment – “Yeah, right.”

Building this “great, impressive altar” was not sinful. In many ways, it made good sense. But *how* this was done created offense. The two-and-a-half tribes on the east side of the Jordan River neither consulted nor advised their brethren on the west side. What were those ten tribes to think? Well, they could have thought better of their brethren, and sought the Lord for advice, before calling the people to arms.

In the Kingdom of God, it’s never right to do the wrong thing. Nor is it right to do the *right* thing in the *wrong* way. We must always make sure that we do the *right* thing in the *right* way. But to do this, we must wait on the Lord in prayer, which none of the people in this situation seem to have done.

And where is Joshua in the midst of all this? His name doesn’t even appear after verse 9. He who should have known to seek the Lord in this matter, apparently said nothing.

The impression we’re getting is that, while the land and promises of God are within reach, rifts and divides are showing up among the people of God. In the book of Judges, those divides grow wider, causing the people to panic in 1 Samuel and press the prophet for a king to unite them.

Once again, not a bad idea, but done in all the wrong ways, thus furthering the divides in Israel.

Meditate and discuss.

1. Imagine you are called in to help bring a resolution to this situation. What would you say?
2. Do you find anything lacking in Phinehas’ words to the two-and-a-half tribes? Explain.
3. What lessons do you derive from this situation?

“The example here is worthy of observation. It teaches us that if at any time we conceive offence in regard to a matter not sufficiently known, we must beware of obstinacy, and be ready instantly to take an equitable view.” John Calvin, Commentary on Joshua (1509-1564.AD)

Lord, have I misjudged anyone? Been unfair or unkind to anyone? Show me, Lord, and I will...

Pray Psalm 19.12-14

Read these verses in conjunction with Psalm 139.23, 24. It would be a good idea to memorize these passages, and to pray them regularly.

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Psalm 19.12-14 (*St. Christopher: Beneath the Cross of Jesus*)

Who, Lord, can know his errors? O keep sin far from me!

Let evil rule not in my soul that I may blameless be.

O let my thoughts, let all my words, before Your glorious sight

Be pleasing to You, gracious Lord, acceptable and right!

6 Blessing and Witness

Read Joshua 22.32-34.

Reflect.

1. Do you suppose the people west of the Jordan River were glad they didn't have to go to war against their brethren?
2. The people blessed God. What does that mean? Isn't God supposed to do the blessing?

Think about it.

All's well that ends well, right? The two-and-a-half tribes were pleased to have vindicated themselves, and the ten tribes doubtless breathed a sigh of relief at not having to go to war with their brethren. The people blessed God, and the altar remained as a witness to His faithfulness.

So, overall, despite the clumsy way this situation was handled, the Lord seems to have used it for good. The incident reminds us that while we can be bumbling and inconsiderate as we try to do what seems right to us, God rules over all, and causes all things to work together for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purposes (Rom. 8.28).

The people of Israel had an opportunity to learn a lesson here, but did not. Doing what seems right in our own eyes, without consulting the Lord or taking others into consideration, can get you into big trouble. The book of Judges will show us what can happen when even well-meaning people try to do things their own way and apart from God.

The book of Joshua shows us that laying hold on the promises of God is hard work and often involves missteps and mistakes. God is sovereign and faithful, even over our clumsy and fumbling ways, and if we look to Him and hold fast to His Word, He can overcome all our failings and foibles and enable us to know a fuller measure of His blessings.

And for that, we should indeed bless Him abundantly.

Meditate and discuss.

1. The word "blessed" here (v. 33) is the same word God used in Genesis 12.2 as the foundation of His promises to His people. How does God "bless" us? How do we "bless" Him?
2. The altar, which was intended to keep the people of Israel united, nearly divided them. Why? Do things like this ever happen in churches, or between churches?
3. It took stumbling their way through this brouhaha to get the people blessing and looking to God. What should they have learned from this situation?

"Though they had been suddenly inflamed, they depart with calm minds. In like manner the two tribes and the half tribe carefully exert themselves to perform their duty by giving a name to the altar, which, by explaining its proper use, might draw off the people from all superstition." John Calvin, Commentary on Joshua (1509-1564 AD)

I need to keep focused on You at all times, Lord, because otherwise I...

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Pray Psalm 121.

Let this psalm lead you to look to God and bless Him in all your “going out and your coming in” today.

Psalm 121 (*Duke Street: Jesus Shall Reign*)

I lift up my eyes up to the heights:
Whence comes my help by day, by night?
My help comes from the Lord above!
He made creation by His love!

God will not let our footsteps fall;
He will preserve us all in all.
He does not slumber, does not sleep;
God will His chosen people keep.

You are our Keeper and our Shade;
You have our debt of sin repaid!
You will preserve us by Your might;
Naught shall afflict us day or night.

Lord, You will guard our lives from ill;
You will our trembling souls keep still.
All our endeavors You will guard;
Eternal praise be Yours, O Lord!

7 The Altar of Witness

Review Joshua 22.

Reflect.

1. Why are good intentions not enough when you want to do something good?
2. Do you think this situation was a setback or a step forward for Israel?

Think about it.

The tribes of Israel had fought together for many days, trusting in the Lord and focusing on His promises, as represented in the land they were subduing. Yet no sooner had each tribe received its fair allotment and rest had settled upon the land, than a situation arose which gave us a glimpse into the heart of the nation of Israel – a heart of hastiness and mistrust.

That Israel did not fully trust in God is obvious from this situation: The two-and-a-half tribes trusted their own efforts, rather than God, to keep them from being excluded from the nation of Israel. The ten tribes turned to military force, rather than the Lord, as their first resort for righting what they wrongly perceived as an unjust situation. All the tribes operated on false assumptions toward one another, and none of them thought to consult the Lord until after the situation had been resolved. But even then, their act of acknowledging and blessing the Lord seems like an afterthought.

Why do people who believe in the same God, participate in the same covenant, and hold to the same Scriptures have such a hard time getting along?

It's a question we might well ask of Christ-honoring, Bible-believing, new covenant churches today.

Meditate and discuss.

1. What do you make of Joshua's absence from this story after verse 9? What does this suggest about his role in Israel at this time?
2. Should this altar have been necessary? Why or why not? Do you find it interesting that the Lord Himself is strangely silent throughout this incident?
3. Did any good come out of this situation? What can we learn from this situation to help us as members of the Body of Christ today?

"The history here is particularly deserving of notice, when the two tribes and half-tribe, intending to erect a memorial of common faith and fraternal concord, allowed themselves from inconsiderate zeal to adopt a method which was justly suspected by their brethren. The ten tribes, thinking that the worship of God was violated with impious audacity and temerity, were inflamed with holy wrath, and took up arms to use them against their own blood; nor were they appeased till they had received full satisfaction."
John Calvin, *Commentary on Joshua (1509-1564 AD)*

Keep me from acting presumptuously toward others, Lord; let my heart be devoted to You and tender toward others, so that...

Pray Psalm 145.

This wonderful psalm can help to sharpen your focus on God so that your works might more consistently refract His presence and glory.

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Psalm 145 (*Brother James' Air: The Lord's My Shepherd, I'll Not Want*)

I will extol You, God, my King, and ever praise Your Name!
I bless You, Lord, for everything each day, and e'er the same!
Great are You, Lord, my praise I bring; unsearchable Your fame!

To ev'ry generation we Your wondrous works shall tell.
The splendor of Your majesty we contemplate full well.
We speak of all Your mighty deeds and all Your greatness tell!

Then shall we all the glorious fame of Your great goodness sing –
Your righteousness, Your gracious Name, Your mercy: praise we bring!
Your steadfast love remains the same, mercy our covering.

Your works shall thank You; all Your saints shall bless and praise You, Lord.
Your reign we bless without restraint; Your power fills our words.
Our children we shall educate in all Your splendor, Lord.

Your Kingdom evermore shall be; You reign forever, Lord!
Your works You do so faithfully, according to Your Word.
The falling You uphold and the oppressed You rescue, Lord!

The eyes of all look up to You to meet our needs each day.
Open Your hand, provide the food we need, O Lord, we pray!
Kindness and righteousness You do, O Lord, in every way!

Be near to all who call on You; all those who fear You, bless.
Preserve all those whose love is true; save us in our distress.
Our mouths will speak with praise of You; Your holy Name we'll bless!

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Questions for reflection or discussion

1. This situation almost resulted in fraternal bloodshed. Why? What went wrong?
2. Though no one thought to ask His view of this matter, God was sovereignly at work through it all. How can you see that?
3. Why do people act on false assumptions about one another? How can this be avoided?
4. How would you describe the heart of the people of Israel, as you see it in this situation?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from Joshua 22? How are you putting that lesson to work in your walk with and work for the Lord?

For prayer:

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Thank you.