



Joshua - Chapter Twenty Two

Summary of Chapter Twenty Two

In this chapter, the eastern tribes of Reuben, Gad, and eastern Manasseh are released to return to their homes, having fulfilled their duties to their fellow Israelites west of the Jordan. Their construction of a symbolic altar on the bank of the Jordan is at first misunderstood, and a disaster is narrowly averted. The reader does not learn the eastern tribes' motive until vv.21-29, which creates suspense. It is to the credit of the western tribes that they make a generous offer (v.19) and then listen to the explanation and accept it. Both sides are determined to be faithful to their calling as Israel, and the account shows things working out right. The key word *serve* occurs three times. Before their departure, Joshua charges the eastern tribes to serve the Lord <<*with all your heart and with all your soul*>> (v.5). In v.27, they insist that they <<*do perform the service of the Lord*>>, literally 'serve the service.'

IV Joshua 22:1-24:33 - Serving the Lord in the Land

Each of the preceding three major divisions of the Book of Joshua receives its impetus from a divine initiative. The Lord instructs; Israel under Joshua's leadership responds; and the land is entered, taken, and divided. This final section lacks such a beginning. The Lord has already fulfilled all his <<*good promises*>> (Joshua 21:45). Now it is Israel's turn to respond. In his old age, Joshua charges the people to be united and exclusive in serving the Lord alone.

IV.a Joshua 22:1-34 - One nation, under God

Refer to the chapter summary above.

IV.a.i Joshua 22:1-9 - The Eastern Tribes Return to Their Territory

Now that the land was at rest, the two and a half tribes that had been allocated land in Transjordan but who had continued to fight with their fellow Israelites west

of Jordan are released from their oath and permitted to return to their homes. Joshua blesses them and reminds them of the need to be faithful to God.

¹ Then Joshua summoned the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh, ² and said to them, ‘You have observed all that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you, and have obeyed me in all that I have commanded you; ³ you have not forsaken your kindred these many days, down to this day, but have been careful to keep the charge of the Lord your God. ⁴ And now the Lord your God has given rest to your kindred, 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.

Joshua 22:1-4

You have observed all that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you. In the seven or so years they had been with Joshua, helping the tribes west of the Jordan to conquer their enemies, the eastern tribes had been completely obedient and helpful to Joshua. This is what they were commanded under Moses in Numbers 32:20-25.

You have not forsaken your kindred these many days. They had gone out and fought on behalf of their brethren, even though they already had their own inheritance, just as God commanded them to do.

And now the Lord your God has given rest to your kindred. The two and a half eastern tribes are now free to go to their territories beyond the Jordan to enjoy the peace that God had promised the nation: <<*He said, ‘My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest’*>> (Exodus 33:14).

Therefore turn and go to your tents in the land where your possession lies. Now that the land was conquered and fully distributed to the tribes, they could go back to their families and lands on the eastern side of the Jordan.

Which Moses the servant of the Lord gave you on the other side of the Jordan. Once again, the reader is reminded that the Transjordan land was agreed during the time Moses was the leader of the people and before they crossed over into the Promised Land.

⁵ Take good care to observe the commandment and instruction that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you, to love the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to keep his commandments, and to hold fast to him, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your

soul.’⁶ So Joshua blessed them and sent them away, and they went to their tents.

Joshua 22:5-6

Joshua tells the eastern tribes to take good care to keep to the Word of God, probably here mostly in the sense of carefully hearing it and knowing it. He tells them to love the Lord. This is a matter of the heart, but it can still be commanded. He tells them to obey God with all they have, to keep his commandments, and to hold fast to him in a personal sense, and to serve him with their entire being. The order here should be noted here. First a person should take care to hear God. Then they give him their love. Next comes a walk of obedience. To mix this order up is to drift into heresy (loving without hearing), or legalism (obeying before loving).

Sadly, the people of God did not heed these words over many generations and frequently drifted away from the Word of the Lord: <<Yet you did not call upon me, O Jacob; but you have been weary of me, O Israel!>> (Isaiah 43:22), and: <<You have said, ‘It is vain to serve God. What do we profit by keeping his command or by going about as mourners before the Lord of hosts?’>> (Malachi 3:14).

So Joshua blessed them and sent them away, and they went to their tents. Joshua will not send them away without a blessing; he knows that they cannot do or be what God wants without his blessing in their lives. Perhaps he used the blessing: <<Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them, The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them>> (Numbers 6:23-27).

⁷ Now to 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 fellow-Israelites in the land west of the Jordan. And when Joshua sent them away to their tents and blessed them,⁸ 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 a great quantity of clothing; divide the spoil of your enemies with your kindred.’⁹ So the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh returned home, parting from the Israelites at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan, to go to the land of Gilead, their own land of which they had taken possession by command of the Lord through Moses.

Joshua 22:7-9

Divide the spoil of your enemies with your kindred. In the Bible, as generally in the ancient Near East, both victory in battle and the spoils of victory are regarded as gifts of the deity, in this case the Lord: <<*You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder*>> (Isaiah 9:3). These gifts were to be shared with allies, or covenant partners, irrespective of their actual role in the conflict; refer to Numbers 31:25-31 and 1 Samuel 30:24.

IV.a.ii Joshua 22:10-34 - A Memorial Altar East of the Jordan

When the two and a half eastern tribes came to the Jordan they built an altar in honour of the Lord but their kindred believed they were setting up a rival altar to that of the Lord at Shiloh. Therefore, they sent out the priests and tribal chiefs to challenge their actions, which could have led to war between east and west.

When the eastern tribes explained that they had not departed from the ways of God, nor had they built the altar for burnt-offerings but as a witness that they were all one nation, the leaders of the western tribes were satisfied with the explanation and reported back to the others.

¹⁰ When they came to the region near the Jordan that lies in the land of Canaan, the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh built there an altar by the Jordan, an altar of great size.

¹¹ The Israelites heard that the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh had built an altar at the frontier of the land of Canaan, in the region near the Jordan, on the side that belongs to the Israelites. ¹² And when the people of Israel heard of it, the whole assembly of the Israelites gathered at Shiloh, to make war against them.

Joshua 22:10-12

An altar of great size. Very similar Hebrew terminology is used in Exodus 3:3 to describe the burning bush as a <<*great sight*>>. Apparently, the altar was built on the western shore of the Jordan, on the side that belongs to the people of Israel, but was conspicuous enough to be seen from either side. This was significant not only because of its size, but because of the meaning of an altar. An altar was a place of sacrifice, and both the Israelites and pagans had altars they used for sacrifice.

And when the people of Israel heard of it, the whole assembly of the Israelites gathered at Shiloh, to make war against them. When the news came to the rest of Israel, there is no discussion, there is a simple reaction. They gathered to make

war against their own brothers who built this altar. Notice that Joshua does not need to gather them, they gather of their own accord. It was an automatic reaction. Why did they do this? Because they feared that this altar was a sign of allegiance to the pagan gods of the region. Their readiness to fight this battle shows great courage to confront on behalf of God's truth and holiness. This was a healthy 'body,' able to purge itself of poisons. Their later actions show that they are not happy about taking this action, nor will they do it rashly, but they will do it! Israel reacts according to God's character. Their assembling for war demonstrated God's holiness, but their personal confrontation demonstrated God's love.

¹³ Then the Israelites sent the priest Phinehas son of Eleazar to the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh, in the land of Gilead, ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ They came to the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh in the land of Gilead, and they said to them, ¹⁶ 'Thus says the whole congregation of the Lord, "What is this treachery that you have committed against the God of Israel in turning away today from following the Lord, by building yourselves an altar today in rebellion against the Lord? ¹⁷ Have we not had enough of the sin at Peor from which even yet we have not cleansed ourselves, and for which a plague came upon the congregation of the Lord, ¹⁸ that you must turn away today from following the Lord! If you rebel against the Lord today, he will be angry with the whole congregation of Israel tomorrow. ¹⁹ But now, if your land is unclean, cross over into the Lord's land where the Lord's tabernacle now stands, and take for yourselves a possession among us; only do not rebel against the Lord, or rebel against us by building yourselves an altar other than the altar of the Lord our God. ²⁰ Did not Achan son of Zerah break faith in the matter of the devoted things, and wrath fell upon all the congregation of Israel? And he did not perish alone for his iniquity!"'

Joshua 22:13-20

Having misunderstood the purpose of the imposing altar, the tribes that settled west of the Jordan sent a delegation to confront the eastern tribes. That **Phinehas the son of Eleazar** heads the delegation can only strike fear in the hearts of those familiar with his history of zeal for the purity of Israel's worship; refer to Numbers 25:1-9 for the account.

Phinehas led the group, because he had the authority. He was high priest over the whole nation, including the two and a half tribes on the eastern side of the Jordan. He not only had the authority, he also had the heart of a wise shepherd. He wanted to correct the erring, to protect the nation, and to drive out the dangerous.

What is this treachery that you have committed? Clearly, they thought that the altar at the Jordan represented a rival place of sacrifice and worship, to compete with God's tabernacle, presently at Shiloh. God had clearly commanded that there was one place of sacrifice and burnt-offerings for Israel: *<<And say to them further: Anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens who reside among them who offers a burnt-offering or sacrifice, and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, to sacrifice it to the Lord, shall be cut off from the people>>* (Leviticus 17:8-9). The understanding to be gained from this is that believers cannot worship God any way they please, or justify a manner of worship just because they like it. First and always, their worship must be pleasing to God: *<<God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth>>* (John 4:24).

For those requiring a reminder, the sin at Peor, recorded in Numbers Chapter 25, is explicitly mentioned in v.17, as is the case of Achan in v.20, who did not perish alone for his iniquity (Joshua Chapter 7). Given its corporate responsibility, all Israel can suffer for the sins of a few or even just one. The delegation rightly fears that the Lord may become angry with the whole congregation of Israel (v.18). Phinehas also knew that the sin of these tribes would reflect on the whole nation. He knew that no one really sins unto himself.

At Peor, Israel's men had sex with Moabite women, and they gave themselves over to the worship of the Moabite gods. In judgement, God sent a plague that killed 24,000 people. This incident would be especially meaningful to Phinehas, because he was the one who stopped the plague by making a dramatic stand for righteousness in the midst of gross sin.

Cross over into the Lord's land where the Lord's tabernacle now stands, and take for yourselves a possession among us. To Phinehas, anything was better than seeing these tribes go off in rebellion against God. If there was something unclean in their land, he invited them to come and live with the tribes on the western side of the Jordan. This was an invitation made at great cost. It would have meant a much smaller area of land for the western tribes. However, it did not matter, because they were willing to sacrifice to see their brothers free from this sin. Too many people lack this willingness; they tell other people to stop sinning, but are not willing to help them if there is personal cost involved.

²¹ Then the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh said in answer to the heads of the families of Israel, ²² 'The Lord, God

of gods! The Lord, God of gods! He knows; and let Israel itself know! If it was in rebellion or in breach of faith towards the Lord, do not spare us today ²³ for building an altar to turn away from following the Lord; or if we did so to offer burnt-offerings or grain-offerings or offerings of well-being on it, may the Lord himself take vengeance. ²⁴ No! 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? ²⁵ For the Lord has made the Jordan a boundary between us and you, you Reubenites and Gadites; you have no portion in the Lord.” So your children might make our children cease to worship the Lord. ²⁶ Therefore we said, “Let us now build an altar, not for burnt-offering, nor for sacrifice, ²⁷ but to be a witness between us and you, and between the generations after us, that we do perform the service of the Lord in his presence with our burnt-offerings and sacrifices and offerings of well-being; so that your children may never say to our children in time to come, ‘You have no portion in the Lord.’” ²⁸ And we thought, If this should be said to us or to our descendants in time to come, we could say, “Look at this copy of the altar of the Lord, which our ancestors made, not for burnt-offerings, nor for sacrifice, but to be a witness between us and you.” ²⁹ 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!’ ³⁰ When the priest Phinehas and the chiefs of the congregation, the heads of the families of Israel who were with him, heard the words that the Reubenites and the Gadites and the Manassites spoke, they were satisfied. ³¹ The priest Phinehas son of Eleazar said to the Reubenites and the Gadites and the Manassites, ‘Today we know that the Lord is among us, because you have not committed this treachery against the Lord; now you have saved the Israelites from the hand of the Lord.’

Joshua 22:21-31

The Lord, God of gods! The Lord, God of gods! He knows. They first appeal to God, because he knows for certain their hearts, and they believe that their brothers in the western tribes have misunderstood them. When people are misunderstood, their first refuge is God. He knows the heart, and people must be satisfied with being right before God even if it means they are wrong in the eyes of some others.

If it was in rebellion or in breach of faith towards the Lord, do not spare us today. They also recognised the rightness of what the others were doing in coming against them. The eastern tribes do what people should all do when they are misunderstood: put themselves in the shoes of the other person and try to see what they see. If a person saw what the other person saw, they might respond in the same way.

Fearing the worst, the delegation of western tribes is relieved to hear that the altar built by the eastern tribes is but a copy of the altar of the Lord (v.28). It is not intended to rival the altar at Shiloh but only to serve as a witness between us and you, a visible monument refuting any suggestion, now or in the future, that the eastern tribes have no portion in the Lord (v.25).

The eastern tribes recognised their distance from the centre of worship in Israel, and that there was a natural barrier, the Jordan River, between them and the rest of the nation. So they built the altar as a memorial to link the two segments of the nation together. They built it so big and impressive so that it would last and could be seen from a distance. They wanted it to stand as a memorial to future generations that the tribes on both sides of the Jordan worshipped the same God. The eastern tribes again agree with the concern of the western tribes; but they explain that the western tribes have misunderstood the meaning of the great, impressive altar.

Obviously, Phinehas is both satisfied and relieved by this explanation; yet he deserves credit for being willing to believe his brothers. Phinehas puts himself in the shoes of the eastern tribes now, and so the explanation makes sense.

Today we know that the Lord is among us, because you have not committed this treachery against the Lord; now you have saved the Israelites from the hand of the Lord. Phinehas could see that the Lord was among them, because unity had been restored among the people of Israel. This attitude of heart is reflected in: <<*How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity*>> (Psalm 133:1).

³² Then the priest Phinehas son of Eleazar and the chiefs returned from the Reubenites and the Gadites in the land of Gilead to the land of Canaan, to the Israelites, and brought back word to them. ³³ The report pleased the Israelites; and the Israelites blessed God and spoke no more of making war against them, to destroy the land where the Reubenites and the Gadites were settled. ³⁴ The Reubenites and the Gadites called the altar Witness; 'For', said they, 'it is a witness between us that the Lord is God.'

Joshua 22:32-34

The report pleased the Israelites. Everyone was glad and relieved, and everyone enjoys the blessing of having peace among the people of God.

The Israelites blessed God. This blessing is actually praise raised up to God, praise which is rightly his alone: <<*Then David said to the whole assembly, 'Bless the Lord your God.'* And all the assembly blessed the Lord, the God of their ancestors, and bowed their heads and prostrated themselves before the Lord and the king>> (1 Chronicles 29:20), <<*Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision of the night, and Daniel blessed the God of heaven>> (Daniel 2:19), and: <<*Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel'*>> (Luke 2:28-32).*

Called the altar Witness. This sixth monument in the land bears witness to the unity of the Transjordanian tribes with Israel west of the Jordan. For a list of the other monuments refer to the comment made on Joshua 4:20.

Christians should respond to misunderstanding in the same manner, according to these same principles:

- Respond with a concern for God's holiness.
- Respond with the courage to confront in love.
- Respond with an attempt to reconcile before fighting.
- Determine a willingness to sacrifice to help them; do not confront unless there is a genuine willingness to help.
- Determine to see the situation from the perspective of the other person wherever possible.
- Determine to believe the best of one another.