

An Altar of Remembrance

Joshua 22

Introduction

In Joshua 22, the Israelites face a critical moment as they grapple with the delicate balance of national unity—a balance that Joshua had painstakingly worked on over years of leadership. This balance is threatened by the actions of tribal leaders, leading to a crucial lesson in the interplay between unity, faithfulness, and the necessity of clear communication among the Israelites.

22.1-8: National Unity Praised

The chapter begins with Joshua summoning the military contingent from the two-and-a-half Transjordan tribes to Shiloh, the central sanctuary of Israel. These brave soldiers, who had fought alongside their brethren in the conquest of Canaan, were now granted permission to return to their designated lands on the eastern side of the Jordan River. It was a moment of celebration and separation—a recognition of their faithful service to the nation and a reaffirmation of their tribal identity and responsibilities.

Before their departure, Joshua underscores the importance of remaining steadfast in their commitment to the law of Moses, urging them to love the Lord with all their hearts and to serve Him with unwavering devotion. His words carry a weight of solemnity, reminding the tribes of their collective covenant with God and the imperative to uphold it daily. In this appeal, Joshua encapsulates the essence of their shared faith and the foundation upon which their unity as a nation rests.

Moreover, Joshua blesses the departing warriors and encourages them to exhibit generosity towards their fellow Israelites. He instructs them to share their spoils of war—livestock, silver, gold, bronze, iron, and clothing—with their tribal brothers, building a spirit of mutual support and solidarity among the disparate tribes. This act of sharing is not merely a gesture of goodwill but a tangible expression of their interconnectedness and interdependence as a community bound by a common destiny.

22.9-20: Problems Arise

The departure of the Reubenites, Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh for the land of Gilead across the Jordan marked a significant transition. In the vicinity of the Jordan, they resolved to construct a large altar—a decision that reverberated far beyond the boundaries of their tribes. Word of the altar's construction quickly reached the ears of the other tribes, sparking concern and dismay. In response, the tribes convened at Shiloh, preparing to march into Gilead and confront their brethren. From a distance, the building of this altar seemed to symbolize defiance—a challenge to the sanctity of the authorized altar at the Tabernacle. The prospect of a second place of worship posed a grave threat, a potential violation of the laws handed down by Moses himself.

Yet, amid the rising tension, wisdom prevailed. A committee comprising ten tribal leaders, led by Phinehas, the high priest's son, was swiftly dispatched to Transjordan to address the situation. Phinehas, renowned for his sincere devotion to Yahweh, carried the weight of previous encounters with apostasy, most notably at Baal-Peor—an incident etched in the annals of Israel's history.

Arriving in Transjordan, the committee could have spent more time confronting their eastern brethren. Their accusations were stern and unequivocal, accusing the Reubenites, Gadites, and Manassehites of an "unfaithful act," a turning away from the path of Yahweh. The construction of the altar, they argued, echoed the transgressions of Peor, casting a shadow of doubt and apprehension over the entire nation. The committee feared divine retribution, warning of the dire consequences should the altar remain standing—a reminder of the collective responsibility borne by all Israelites for the actions of a few.

The committee reminded the eastern tribes of the opportunity to cross the river and assemble among their brethren. However, by persisting in constructing the altar, they were defying God and betraying the brotherhood bonds that bound them to the other tribes. The committee invoked the memory of Achan, whose individual transgression had brought punishment upon the entire congregation—illustrating the gravity of the problem.

The altar's purpose near the Jordan remained a subject of vigorous debate and suspicion. The fears and anxieties of the other tribes were rooted in a genuine concern for the sanctity of their faith and the unity of the nation. The committee's words echoed with urgency, a plea for reconciliation and clarity amidst the shadows of uncertainty. In this moment of crisis, the fate of the Israelite nation hung in the balance, teetering on the precipice of division and discord. Yet, beneath the surface of conflict lay the potential for understanding and resolution—a testament to the resilience of their shared heritage and the bonds of kinship that transcended tribal boundaries.

22.21-34: Tribal Unity Preserved

In the wake of the committee's accusatory stance, the eastern tribes were reeling with shock and dismay. Their intentions, they proclaimed, had been gravely misunderstood—a monument to unity had been misconstrued as an act of rebellion. Far from seeking to establish an alternative place of worship, the altar they erected was meant to serve as a lasting testament to all Israelites' shared heritage and spiritual unity, irrespective of their geographical divide.

Their explanation unveiled a deeper layer of meaning behind the altar's construction, a symbolic gesture intended to bridge the gap between the eastern and western tribes, safeguarding their place within the broader fabric of the nation. Anticipating the possibility of future estrangement, the eastern tribes sought to erect a tangible reminder of their shared history and common destiny. The altar, fashioned in the likeness of the Tabernacle's sacred structure, was a visible affirmation of their unwavering loyalty to Yahweh and commitment to the covenant that bound them together.

The realization that their actions had been misinterpreted as an affront to God filled the eastern tribes with horror and dismay. Their genuine desire was for reconciliation, not discord—a sentiment echoed by the committee's subsequent relief upon hearing their explanation. A crisis had been averted, and the specter of divine wrath dispelled, as it became evident that no transgression had been committed. The

reassuring knowledge that God remained in their midst brought solace and reassurance to the congregation, paving the way for reconciliation and restoration.

Phinehas and his fellow committee members returned from their mission in Gilead, bearing tidings of peace and understanding. The congregation approved their report and marked a turning point as the threat of war dissolved in the face of mutual understanding and forgiveness. The lessons gleaned from this resonated deeply within the hearts of the Israelites, serving as a poignant reminder of the dangers of hasty judgment and the importance of open communication and mutual respect among brethren.

Indeed, the events recounted in Joshua 22 offer a wealth of insights into the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and the pitfalls of miscommunication within a community. The rift that nearly tore the nation asunder stemmed not from malicious intent but from a failure to seek counsel and clarify intentions. This all-too-common scenario continues to plague human relationships to this day.

The importance of seeking approval from congregational leadership and transparently communicating intentions must be balanced. Without clarity, assumptions and misunderstandings thrive, sowing seeds of discord and division among brethren. Joshua 22 serves as a reminder of the necessity of humility, empathy, and patience in navigating the complexities of community life—a lesson that stretches beyond time and cultural context.

As the Israelites emerged from this conflict, they stood united once more, reaffirming their commitment to each other and the divine covenant that bound them together. The eastern tribes named the Jordan altar “Witness” to show that Yahweh is God, 22.34.

What’s In This for Us?

Seek Understanding Before Reacting: Just as the Israelites faced misunderstanding and potential conflict due to misinterpretation, we should seek understanding before jumping to conclusions in our interactions with others. Listening, asking questions, and clarifying intentions can prevent unnecessary conflicts and promote congregational harmony.

Transparent Communication: The importance of transparent communication cannot be overstated. Like the eastern tribes, we should communicate our intentions clearly and openly to avoid confusion and misinterpretation. We can build trust and strengthen bonds with those around us by fostering a culture of openness and honesty in our relationships.

Extending Grace and Forgiveness: Despite the initial misunderstanding, the Israelites extended grace and forgiveness to their brethren, paving the way for reconciliation and restoration. We are called to follow this example by extending grace and forgiveness to those who may have wronged us. By letting go of bitterness and resentment, we free ourselves to experience the healing power of reconciliation and restoration in our relationships, Ephesians 4.29-32.

Remaining Steadfast in Faith: The Israelites remained steadfast throughout the ordeal, trusting in God's presence and guidance amidst uncertainty. Similarly, we are called to anchor our lives in faith, trusting God is with us in every situation, even when things seem uncertain or challenging. By cultivating

a deep and abiding trust in God's providence, we can find strength and courage to navigate life's trials with grace and resilience.

Conclusion

The lessons we gain from Joshua 22 remind us of the fundamental principles that guide our interactions and relationships. We need to follow the example set forth by the Israelites, seeking understanding before reacting, communicating transparently, and cultivating unity amidst diversity.

Thought Questions

1. How can we apply the principle of seeking understanding before reacting in our daily interactions with others? Can you share a personal experience where this principle made a difference in conflict?
2. In what ways can we foster transparent communication in our relationships and communities? What barriers might hinder open communication, and how can we overcome them?
3. Reflecting on the altar erected by the eastern tribes, how can we celebrate and embrace diversity while cultivating unity within our communities? What practical steps can we take to promote inclusivity and mutual respect?
4. Forgiveness played a crucial role in resolving the conflict between the Israelite tribes. How does extending grace and forgiveness contribute to healing and reconciliation in our relationships? Can you think of a time when forgiveness restored a broken relationship?
5. How does faith in God's providence and guidance provide strength and resilience in uncertainty and challenges? Share a personal testimony of how faith has sustained you through difficult times.
6. What lessons can we learn from the Israelites' experience of misunderstanding and reconciliation? How can we apply these lessons to our own lives and relationships?
7. Discuss the role of leadership in promoting unity and resolving conflicts within a community. What qualities make a leader effective in fostering understanding and reconciliation?
8. Consider the importance of humility in resolving conflicts and seeking reconciliation. How can humility help us overcome pride and ego in interpersonal relationships?

9. Reflect on the concept of collective responsibility highlighted in the lesson. How does our interconnectedness as community members shape our actions and choices?

10. How can we proactively prevent misunderstandings and conflicts from escalating within our communities? What strategies can we implement to promote harmony, understanding, and cooperation among diverse individuals and groups?