



Joshua 22 We Had Good Intentions

As the book of Joshua comes to a close it's time for a difficult good-bye. You know the type: a bitter farewell to people you've known for so long mixed with the excitement and wonder of what the future holds. It's the feeling of graduation when young men and women are excited to be free from school, but sad to leave so many good friends. It's the feeling of the service member returning from deployment – glad to see their family, and yet full of memories made with those who became their 'family' while serving overseas. You feel it at the end of the sports season, or at the end of a big work project.

It's time to move on, but there's a sort of pain mixed with nostalgia in these moments of transition. There's gratefulness for what was, mixed with uncertainty of what will come. What you were part of was so big it shaped the way you lived your life, what do you now that it's over and gone? How do you move on? How do you return to 'normal?' and what is 'normal' anyway?

That's where we find Israel at this point in history. The men we're reading about grew up together in deserts on the backside of Israel, living in tents, wandering around from place to place as the LORD directed, while being told stories of what God had promised, and why they were here. "Some day," they were told, "God is going to lead us into the Promised Land and settle us down in a place that is rich and bountiful, and we'll live in peace, in *shalom*, and everyone will know our God."

And then, that day came. Moses had died, Joshua had been appointed leader of the nation, and God said, "It's time to go." Some of the people had asked if they could stay where they were on the Eastern side of the Jordan – if this could be their place, and God, through Moses, said yes as long as they helped the rest of the nation claim their territory on the Western side.

So they all set off together – two and a half tribes of Israel left their wives and kids behind and went with the other nine and a half tribes across the river to follow God, drive out the Canaanites, and take possession of the land.

And over on the other side, they saw God do amazing things. They saw God bring a city to its knees with nothing but trumpets and shouts. They saw God fight for them using weather like hail to bring down their enemies. They saw God lengthen the hours in a day so a battle could continue and be won. Like any great unit or team, they faced down incredible odds, and experienced things they could hardly believe were possible and it went on like this for at least five years.

You forge some pretty tight bonds during a season like that, don't you? You've got some great memories, great stories to tell. But now, the job is done, the mission is accomplished,

the season is over, and it's time to move on to the next thing. So Joshua calls the men together

Joshua 22:1 Then Joshua called the Reubenites, the Gadites, and half the tribe of Manasseh, 2 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 commanded you. 3 You have not left your brethren these many days, up to this day, but have kept the charge of the commandment of the LORD your God. 4 And now the LORD your God has given rest to your brethren, as He promised them; now therefore, return and go to your tents *and* to the land of your possession, which Moses the servant of the LORD gave you on the other side of the Jordan.

It's their final formation, their final team meeting, their last locker room speech, and Joshua commends them for the job they've done. They've kept their word, they've honored their commitment, they've "kept all" that they have been commanded.

They didn't leave early, they didn't cut corners. They weren't the ones asking: "Are we done yet? Can we go? Is this enough?" You've experienced that, haven't you? People who say they'll help, but they don't have the endurance for the long haul. These men already had their land, their families were already settled somewhere else, but you walk away from these first four verses with the idea that these were honorable, noble men, faithful to their word. Joshua doesn't mention any critique of their performance or attitude.

But ask yourself the question: did God need them to make this happen? Was having their additional manpower the decisive factor in victory? Did they bring a particular skill set or ability or knowledge to the team that no one else had? No.

God could have left them behind on the Eastern shore and still gotten things done just fine. So why did He make them come? Because He wanted to create unity among all the people – He wanted to give them a common experience, to make the nation of Israel one people, in one place, with one God. So, He involved everyone in the work that needed to be done.

And that might be something you need to hear – that God involves everyone. It's tempting to be a spiritual consumer in churches today. It's easy to show up and be on the receiving end of everything that's happening. Sit in the chairs someone else put out, read the bulletin someone else printed, drink the coffee someone else brewed, listen to the worship someone else practiced, and hear the sermon. It can, and maybe it does, all happen without you. But God actually wants to involve you in the ministry.

It might not be here at the church itself, but it's somewhere. If you are a Christian, you are a part of the body of Christ, just like Reuben, Gad and Manasseh were part of Israel. God wanted to involve all the tribes in what He was doing, and if you're a Christian, He wants to involve you in what He's doing today. Somewhere, somehow, He's got a role for you to play. He wants to involve you in what He's doing, just like He involved all the tribes in what was happening in Canaan. Do you know what He wants you to do? And, are you doing it?

The Eastern tribes did, and now that the work is finished, they're moving on. But as they go, Joshua has a strong word of caution for them:

5 But take careful heed to do the commandment and the law which Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, to love the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways, to keep His commandments, 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.

That sounds very much like what Jesus said was the greatest commandment: to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. In other words, to be wholly devoted to Him. It's a good thing to say, great parting words. But, can we stop for a minute and consider that Joshua has just commended these men for their service to God and their fellow countrymen, they've demonstrated their commitment over the years with sweat and blood, and yet he says, "take careful heed to do the commandment."

Take Careful Heed. Why do you have to say that, Joshua?

Because you who have been Christians for a while know there's no such thing as spiritual autopilot. You don't just automatically follow God and keep His commands, do you?

And that should make sense if we stop and think about it. Do you just keep getting more and more physically fit because you *used to* go the gym all the time? Do you just keep getting into a better and better financial situation because you *used to* pay attention to your budget? Do you just keep getting better and better at work because you *once* took this class? No. Of course not. So why do you think you'll just keep growing and growing in Christ because you *once* prayed this prayer, you *once* stood up or walked down to the front of the church, or because you *once* were baptized? Those things are good, but you still need to take careful heed to obey God's commandments.

Joshua warns these men as they go – you can't eat your trophies. The things you've done, the places you've been, the things you've been a part of, they can remind you, they can encourage you, but they can't sustain you. You can't rest on what you used to be, or what you used to do, you've got to keep it alive today. Christian, you can't rest on the time when you used to memorize Scripture, or this one time when you used to go to a small group, you've got to take careful heed to keep praying, keep worshipping, keep serving today. God isn't through with you yet, so keep coming back to Him, and don't rest on your past glories – and listen to me church – especially as you go through transitions in life, as you move to a new location, or new schedule keep your spiritual priorities, don't let them slip.

7 Now to half the tribe of Manasseh Moses had given a possession in Bashan, but to the *other* half of it Joshua gave *a possession* among their brethren on this side of the Jordan, westward. And indeed, when Joshua sent them away to their tents, he blessed them, 8 and spoke to them, saying, "Return with much riches to your tents, with very much livestock, with silver, with gold, with bronze, with iron, and with very much clothing. Divide the spoil of your enemies with your brethren."

The Eastern tribes have received a commendation and word of caution, now we see that they were also compensated. These men who had left everything behind to come and be a part of what God was doing were now going to be bringing home some goods. To the victor go the spoils, and these men were going to be bringing home some great souvenirs for their wives and kids.

So let me make another modern application. When it comes to serving the Lord – we don't do it because of what get out of it, but if you talk to people who have been involved in ministry, they'll tell you amazing stories of what God has done, ways that He has blessed them through amazing 'just in time' provision, or exceedingly abundant provision for something they thought would never happen. Ask a missionary sometime about the blessings they've received, the things God has made possible – rewards and opportunities that came because they were busy serving God.

God won't be a debtor to any man. He won't ever 'owe you' anything. You will never truly miss out because you were busy serving Him. I want to encourage you to consider that, and stand upon it. I want you to stare it in the face and really deal with it. Do you think that making a priority out of God, do you think that serving Him, do you think that following Him will cost you something that He won't repay?

Was there sacrifice involved for the Eastern tribes? Was there time spent away from the family? Were there some opportunities they had to miss or wait to come around again? You bet. But at the end of it all, what did they have? Hearts and souls that were full of the wonder of God, memories of miracles they had seen, and tokens of material wealth to use in supporting their family and starting a new life. What did they lose by taking those years and following God on the other side of the Jordan? Nothing. Nothing at all. It was all gain.

9 So the children of Reuben, the children of Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh returned, and departed from the children of Israel at Shiloh, which *is* in the land of Canaan, to go to the country of Gilead, to the land of their possession, which they had obtained according to the word of the LORD by the hand of Moses.

10 And when they came to the region of the Jordan which *is* in the land of Canaan, the children of Reuben, the children of Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh built an altar there by the Jordan—a great, impressive altar.

They wanted to remember this time. They wanted to remember what had been done, what they had been a part of, so they built a memorial. Unfortunately, in their excitement, they rushed into something that could have been done better, because when all the people they had just got wind of it, it didn't come across too well.

11 Now the children of Israel heard *someone* say, "Behold, the children of Reuben, the children of Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh have built an altar on the frontier of the land of Canaan, in the region of the Jordan—on the children of Israel's side."

12 And when the children of Israel heard *of it*, the whole congregation of the children of Israel gathered together at Shiloh to go to war against them.

The tribes on the Western side of the River hear about this memorial and get riled up – they’re concerned the Eastern tribes are doing something that has nothing to do with the way they’re supposed to worship God. They hadn’t mentioned anything about building a new altar, it wasn’t discussed, it wasn’t planned. So the guys on the Western side are trying to figure out, what are these guys from Rueben and Gad doing?

It’s hard for them to believe that their own countrymen would turn their backs on the God they had all just served, but if it was really happening, the Western tribes were ready to go to war over it.

They’re zealous for the holiness of God. They’ve seen what happened before with men like Achan. One man turned his back on God, and at least 40 other people died. The Western tribes don’t want to see anything like that happen again so they all prepare to go to war if need be.

But first, they send a delegation to ask point blank: what is going on?

13 Then the children of Israel sent Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest to the children of Reuben, to the children of Gad, and to half the tribe of Manasseh, into the land of Gilead, 14 and with him ten rulers, one ruler each from the chief house of every tribe of Israel; and each one *was* the head of the house of his father among the divisions of Israel. 15 Then they came to the children of Reuben, to the children of Gad, and to half the tribe of Manasseh, to the land of Gilead, and they spoke with them, saying, 16 “Thus says the whole congregation of the LORD: ‘What treachery *is* this that you have committed against the God of Israel, to turn away this day from following the LORD, in that you have built for yourselves an altar, that you might rebel this day against the LORD? 17 *Is* the iniquity of Peor not enough for us, from which we are not cleansed till this day, although there was a plague in the congregation of the LORD, 18 but that you must turn away this day from following the LORD? And it shall be, if you rebel today against the LORD, that tomorrow He will be angry with the whole congregation of Israel.

Can I paraphrase? Phineas, the son of the priest asks, “What’s up you guys? What’s this all about? Don’t you remember what happened in the past when people try to worship according to their own agenda? If you guys turn your back on God, He might turn His back on us, and we’ll be held responsible. What are you doing?”

It’s kind of like those conversations you hear where one child is telling the others, “Hey, knock it off – if you don’t stop mom and dad are going to get mad and we’re all going to get in trouble.”

So Phineas goes on to propose a solution:

19 Nevertheless, if the land of your possession *is* unclean, *then* cross over to the land of the possession of the LORD, where the LORD’s tabernacle stands, and take

possession among us; but do not rebel against the LORD, nor rebel against us, by building yourselves an altar besides the altar of the LORD our God. 20 Did not Achan the son of Zerah commit a trespass in the accursed thing, and wrath fell on all the congregation of Israel? And that man did not perish alone in his iniquity.’”

Phineas says “Look, if there’s something wrong with your land – if all of this has anything to do with you guys being over there and us being over here, then pack up your stuff and come over here with us, we’ll make room for you. But don’t turn your backs on God, you’ll suffer and we might suffer too.”

And the Eastern tribes say, “No, no, you’ve got it all wrong – this isn’t because we’re turning away from God, it’s so we’ll all remember God!”

21 Then the children of Reuben, the children of Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh answered and said to the heads of the divisions of Israel: 22 “The LORD God of gods, the LORD God of gods, He knows, and let Israel itself know—if *it is* in rebellion, or if in treachery against the LORD, do not save us this day.

23 If we have built ourselves an altar to turn from following the LORD, or if to offer on it burnt offerings or grain offerings, or if to offer peace offerings on it, let the LORD Himself require *an account*. 24 But in fact we have done it for fear, for a reason, saying, ‘In time to come your descendants may speak to our descendants, saying, “What have you to do with the LORD God of Israel? 25 For the LORD has made the Jordan a border between you and us, *you* children of Reuben and children of Gad. You have no part in the LORD.” So your descendants would make our descendants cease fearing the LORD.’

They were afraid that because a river was between them, one day the people on the Western side might say, “You don’t have anything to do with us, you’re not a part of us.” So they came up with their own idea:

26 Therefore we said, ‘Let us now prepare to build ourselves an altar, not for burnt offering nor for sacrifice, 27 but *that it may be* a witness between you and us and our generations after us, that we may perform the service of the LORD before Him with our burnt offerings, with our sacrifices, and with our peace offerings; that your descendants may not say to our descendants in time to come, “You have no part in the LORD.”’ 28 Therefore we said that it will be, when they say *this* to us or to our generations in time to come, that we may say, ‘Here is the replica of the altar of the LORD which our fathers made, though not for burnt offerings nor for sacrifices; but *it is* a witness between you and us.’

“Guys,” they say, “we’re not turning our backs on God or on you, we just want to make sure this good thing keeps going and we’re not forgotten. We’re concerned about our kids and their connection with you. We never intended to use this for worship.”

29 Far be it from us that we should rebel against the LORD, and turn from following the LORD this day, to build an altar for burnt offerings, for grain offerings, or for sacrifices, besides the altar of the LORD our God which *is* before His tabernacle.”

30 Now when Phinehas the priest and the rulers of the congregation, the heads of the divisions of Israel who *were* with him, heard the words that the children of Reuben, the children of Gad, and the children of Manasseh spoke, it pleased them.

31 Then Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest said to the children of Reuben, the children of Gad, and the children of Manasseh, “This day we perceive that the LORD *is* among us, because you have not committed this treachery against the LORD. Now you have delivered the children of Israel out of the hand of the LORD.”

“Alright guys,” he says, “I’m glad we talked, I’m glad we got this sorted out. We’ll tell everyone to put their swords away. Let’s all stand down and be thankful it was just a big misunderstanding.”

32 And Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, and the rulers, returned from the children of Reuben and the children of Gad, from the land of Gilead to the land of Canaan, to the children of Israel, and brought back word to them. 33 So the thing pleased the children of Israel, and the children of Israel blessed God; they spoke no more of going against them in battle, to destroy the land where the children of Reuben and Gad dwelt.

34 The children of Reuben and the children of Gad called the altar, [Heb: *ed*] *Witness*, “For *it is* a witness between us that the LORD *is* God.”

Alright, if I can sum all that up – Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh were headed back home to their side of the Jordan River. But as they went, someone had the fear that one day the kids of the guys they had just left behind, would tell their own kids, “You don’t belong here, you’re not part of us, go away.” So they built an altar.

The guys they had just left thought it was going to be used in improper worship which would anger the LORD so they came to confront Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh and were ready to go to war if necessary over the issue. Fortunately, as they talked it out, they discovered it was all just a big misunderstanding, the altar stayed in place as a memorial, and everyone went home.

So, what can we learn from all of this? Let me share some thoughts.

First, we learn to examine our hearts and motives. The Eastern tribes were suspicious of the future. They were afraid another generation would rise up on the other side of the river and want nothing to do with their kids. What was that suspicion founded in? Nothing, as far as we know. It’s just a fearful speculation of what *could* happen.

And the guys on the Western side were no better. They went from 0 to ready for war in nothing flat. You don’t hear anyone saying, “No, I know those guys, they’d never do something like that.” I mean, remember, they’re going after men who just spent the past

five years of their lives helping take over the Promised Land, can you give them the benefit of the doubt? On the positive side, they do at least send a delegation to ask what going on instead of shooting first and asking questions later.

Christians, the Bible tells us to be charitable toward one another, hoping the best about one another, believing the best about one another, giving each other the benefit of the doubt – that’s what love does according to 1st Corinthians 13. If you hear of a brother or sister in Christ doing something that doesn’t seem to make sense, don’t rush too quickly into judgment, go, and ask – directly: what is going on?

The answer isn’t to ignore it – to just let it go, no, love says we’re supposed to get involved, we’re supposed to care, but instead of talking about it to others, or instead of assuming the worst, we’re supposed to be bold enough, and loving enough, to go and ask: what does this mean?

We recently had someone come to the elders with some concerns about information on the new website. Or I should say, information that wasn’t there. They were concerned that that the absence of that information could have been taken wrong, and instead of drawing their own conclusions and then spreading it all around and causing discontent, this individual came to the elders, and said, this is what I noticed, and here’s how it might be taken, what happened? And we were able to answer their questions and take action to correct it all. But here’s the point – this individual stayed neutral – they didn’t assume anyone meant any harm, or had been malicious, before drawing any conclusions they came and asked what happened, and we explained it had been a oversight and we fixed it.

And that’s the second thing I want to point out here – this story from Joshua shows us how to love. It shows us the value of confronting people who we fear are going astray. In the greatest sense we’re called to do that through evangelism – we confront people who are living without God and talk to them about it – we warn them about God’s judgment and share with them how to avoid it in Christ.

And we do something similar with Christians. In Matthew 18 Jesus tells us how to handle disputes with other believers. Paul gives us additional instruction in 1 Corinthians. In both cases it involves going to the individual and talking openly, directly, about what’s going on. God has given us a dispute resolution tool and He expects us to work things out inside the church.

The third and final thing that I want to point out is that the two sides were able to come to an agreement because they both cherished God. They found unity and common ground in their mutual honor and worship of God. Notice that the altar was never torn down, once it’s meaning was understood, it was allowed to remain as a reminder to everyone of what God had done.

Friends, the best way to navigate any kind of conflict is to draw closer to God. If you can stand open and unguarded before Him, He’ll take care of how you interact with anyone else. And if two Christians are both in submission to God, it’s nearly impossible for conflict

to remain between them for too long. Sooner or later, one way or another, they find a way to work things out.

Our country and our world are being torn apart right now because people swear allegiance to different things. Everyone looks to someone or something else as their leader, they have different ideas, different values, and because we find ourselves in an interconnected, global community, we're all fighting over who is right and who will get to be in charge. And so we take actions based on fear of what might happen in the coming generations, or we hear about what someone else has done and rush off and prepare for war – politically, legislatively, or actually.

But the only way we're ever going to get along, the only way we're ever going to find peace, is by coming together under a single authority, a single definition of right and wrong – not yours or mine, but a source that's outside of each of us. The two groups of tribes solved their conflict by agreeing under God. The LORD of Heaven and Earth, the King of kings and maker and judge of all that is and was and ever will be – He's the one we should fear, and He's the one we should love and obey and follow. He is the only answer for the horrors and the evil we are confronted with today.

The tribes of Israel made peace with each other by recognizing that an altar was a reminder of the identity of God – who He was and how they both worshiped Him. An altar is a place of sacrifice. It was where animals, and grain, and other things were given over completely to God as an act of worship. But the altar in ancient Israel was only there to point to the fact that one day Jesus would come as the ultimate sacrifice – not just a lamb's blood pouring down a bunch of stones, but the Lamb of God pouring out His blood for our sins.

Sin brings death. Always. But at the cross Jesus took our death and gave us life. So, let the cross loom large in your life, let it be a witness to you, like this altar was to the children of Israel, let the cross remind you who God is, and what He has done, and let Him use you to share that message with the rest of this dark, dying, and desperate world.

Let's pray.