

JOSHUA

Lesson 23 - Chapter 22

Today we begin Joshua chapter 22. This chapter could easily and legitimately become a multiple week sermon in addition to a teaching lesson if I wanted it to be; it is that rich in information and theology and practical instruction for the Believer.

But I'm going to focus on just a few of the important principles contained herein; those that I think we as part of the body of modern day people of God can probably identify with best. This entire section of Joshua (that eventually takes us to the end of the book of Joshua) is framed by a concern for those parts of the people of God who live OUTSIDE of the Promised Land; for those who live away from Israel proper, away from the sanctuary of God, and away from the priesthood of God.

But there are also several deep and critical questions asked (and answered) in this chapter that will be faced by worshippers in every Biblical generation including our current one, and among those questions are: 1) what is proper worship of God? 2) Where is the proper worship of God to take place? 3) Who are God's people?

But for me the single question (one that is dealt with in this chapter) that has perplexed and annoyed the church perhaps as much or more than any other is: does my heart-felt sincerity and good intentions as a Disciple of Jesus trump God's written and clear commands? I don't know that we'll get fully satisfactory answers to just those 4 of the many questions this exquisite chapter of Joshua raises but I'm going to at the least try and give us grist for the mill and maybe a framework to think about it.

Turn your Bibles to Joshua chapter 22.

READ JOSHUA CHAPTER 22 all

When we ended last week we saw that the Land of Canaan was at rest from war. The Land was by no means called "Israel", yet. The newest residents of the land were just a loose confederation of 12 related tribes, and not a politically cohesive nation. The huge Israelite army had defeated and destroyed the combined military force of some northern Canaanite kings, as well as an entire separate army that was the combined military force of some southern Canaanite kings. Israel had also concluded many peace treaties with other and smaller Canaanite lords and potentates (a thing that was expressly against God's instructions, but it did provide in the short term for a sustained cessation of hostilities).

With those more formidable foes of Israel that held most of the Mediterranean coast of Canaan, and with those who also held much of the coastal plain and other clusters of cities and villages scattered throughout the Promised Land, there existed something like what we might term cold war going on with Israel. Israel knew full well that these remaining enemies were dangerous and not to be trusted; and the remaining enemies knew full well that at some point Israel would likely decide to try and annex their territory because Israel's well known theology demanded it (this was no military secret). But for now both sides were satisfied to not be engaged in bloody battles with one another and thus they co-existed side-by-side in an uneasy but nonetheless peaceful arrangement.

This lack of hostilities permitted Joshua to finish dividing the land among the final 7 tribes who had yet to accept their land inheritance; and once that was accomplished the Levites could be given cities to live in. And once that was accomplished the Cities of Refuge for accidental manslaughter could be established and set into operation. And once that was accomplished there was no further need for a combined army of 600,000 men from all the 12 tribes of Israel. Look: God is mysterious almost beyond measure, but mankind is anything but. Mankind is generally predictable and fairly simple in our behaviors and reactions; our problem is that we tend to deny our own predictability and thus history is doomed to repeat itself. A whole series of events had to happen among the Israelites and their Canaanite enemies, all in very logical and very visible and very customary ways, so that man would do what was obvious for him to do as he moved from one typical step to the next.

God full well knows that, and even though much of what He KNOWS we'll do is wrong and cowardly and disobedient and self-destructive, He still is able to use that to achieve His purposes. And that is what was happening in the Promised Land then, just as it still is in our era.

The initializing event of Joshua 22 is that the troops of Gad, Reuben, and ½ of the tribe of Manasseh that took their land possession on the east side of the Jordan River in the Trans-Jordan are really no longer needed to serve in the army because the reason for their participation (the conquest of Canaan) has been accomplished. So since they have been true to their word Joshua will be true to the promise made to them. And that promise is that they may KEEP that land on the east side of the Jordan River as their own, but, they had to send a sizeable number of troops to help the other 9 ½ tribes seize Canaan.

Turn your Bibles back a few pages to the beginning of the book of Joshua. Let's read a section of chapter 1.

READ JOSHUA CHAPTER 1:10 – end

Thus what we see happening is closure in chapter 22. The book of Joshua begins with the enlisting of Reuben, Gad, and ½ of the Manasseh tribe to fight alongside their brethren for Canaan, and the book ends with victory and their honorable discharge from military service. In what must have been some type of formal ceremony, Joshua tells the 3 tribes (2 ½ tribes, technically) that they have kept their word, did as Yehoveh told them to do, and the result of

their obedience is that God has fulfilled His promises in a timely manner. Look at Joshua 1:15; the verse says that the Trans-Jordanian tribes are to remain fighting alongside their fellow Israelites until those other 9 ½ tribes have achieved their “rest” in the Promised Land. Therefore, as a fitting conclusion, we read in Joshua 22:4 that, “Now Yehoveh your God has given rest to your kinsman as He told them He would”.

So the circle has closed, rest from war was promised and given, and so it’s time for these 3 tribes to go to their homes on the east side of the Jordan River and to rejoin their families and those left behind to protect the people and land, and to establish an economy.

Notice one little thing in verse 4: Joshua says that the 3 tribes may “return to their tents”. This very literal translation points out something we must always be on guard for in the Bible; the sayings of common speech within a culture that don’t necessarily mean precisely what they say. The 3 Trans-Jordanian tribes were not living in tents. They were living in villages and cities in permanent housing. It’s just that the language of wanderers (this was the generation of whom most were born in the Wilderness) had become embedded in their everyday thought and so they continued to use words and phrases that Bedouins might use. Just as it is common in our own language to use phrases that really are only understood within our own culture, but we never really think about it, so it was then and we’ll find lots of it in the Bible. Why do we have to be on guard for it? Because otherwise we’re liable to take a string of words as a literal Biblical principle; but in fact it was only a common idiom that meant something else entirely to those who spoke it.

As part of this decommissioning ceremony of the 3 tribes, Joshua enjoins upon them the words of Moses, a goodly part of which comes from Deuteronomy 6 and the blessing known commonly as the Shema Israel. He exhorts the people of Reuben, Gad and Manessah to always follow the Torah of Moses, and to always love Yehoveh with all their hearts and minds.

It’s kind of interesting to me that in verse 7 a historical footnote is included in the Hebrew Scriptures that reminds the reader that Manessah held two separated portions of land, one on the west bank of the Jordan River, the other on the east bank. Now there are a lot of reasons for this that will start to become apparent as we go through this and future lessons; but for now just let me say that without doubt part of the reason that this was inserted was to answer the 3rd question that I told you at the outset would be addressed in this chapter, and that is: at any given time, **who** are God’s people?

As a final kind of combination exhortation/blessing Joshua says that the 3 tribes should take with them livestock, precious metals, and clothing. These items were the spoils of war they had won in battle. I have mentioned in past lessons that it was the norm for this era that every man was allowed to loot and take valuable items from his defeated enemy; this was in lieu of a paycheck. I can only assume that these items had been authorized by God to go to the soldiers and were not set apart as His holy property. In any case there was an enormous amount of it in their possession, and it was necessary for Joshua to make it clear to the 9 ½ tribes that would remain in the Promised Land that it was OK for these 3 tribes to take their portion with them when they went home.

Well we have one of those kum-ba-yah moments going on here, or so it seems. Everything is good, everyone seems happy; goodwill is flowing. But just underneath all this is a psychology that is completely normal but problematic for men: suspicion and mistrust of one another. It's all well and good and gracious to hug and kiss one another and call each other brother when we're together; it's quite another to behave that way once we've parted company. The reality is that beneath the surface simmered an "us and them" mentality. There was the "us" of the 9 ½ tribes on the one side of the Jordan, and the "them" of the 2 ½ tribes on the eastern side of the Jordan. This feeling was mutual, and it was going to lead to immediate trouble.

Home for the 2 ½ tribes was not far away; just a few miles across the Jordan River; but it may as well have been a thousand. Because then, as now, the Jordan River was not only a naturally occurring geographical boundary that divided territory, it was seen as a spiritual boundary. To the west of the Jordan was the Promised Land; to the east it was OUTSIDE the Promised Land. Inside the Promised Land was the earthly dwelling place of God; outside of the Promised Land He had no home.

Despite the several decades of training and instruction and experiences all the tribes of Israel had jointly lived-out in the presence of Yehoveh, the common ways of the world (to which they were all too familiar) clung to these Hebrews like barnacles on a pier. They STILL did not grasp that there was but one god. They STILL did not internalize that God had no physical limitations upon Him and thus He observed no territorial boundaries, as did the rest of the world. For the Hebrews, crossing a river meant that you might be leaving behind the rules and ruler-ship of one god for another.

So suddenly the Trans-Jordanian tribes become anxious; now that they are leaving Canaan, WHERE is their god? Will their brethren on the west bank allow them to continue participation in the all-important worship rituals, or are they left out in the cold once they leave Canaan? The religious center of Canaan had been moved to Shiloh in the tribal territory of Ephraim; and as we discussed in a previous lesson this was not a particularly convenient location even for those tribes who took their land inheritance in Canaan. For those Trans-Jordanian tribes, it was a challenging journey to get to Shiloh to say the least.

Psychologically the 3 tribes of the east also wondered if they'd be remembered: by both the leadership of Israel and by God Himself. In fact, were they still under Joshua's authority, or had the discharge ceremony released them from submission to Joshua? And if they weren't under Joshua's authority, then were they still part of Israel? In other words while joy was abounding all around, this was a time of transition and uncertainty (especially for Reuben, Gad, and the ½ tribe of Manessah). Things were changing, but into what?

Now for you congregation, political, and family leaders in the audience what would you do in this situation? Probably the same thing these 3 tribes did; they had a meeting. The leadership got together, discussed the concerns, and the agreed solution (at least it was part of the solution) was to build an altar to their professed God Yehoveh; a large impressive one verse 10 says. Not a little stone one as a kind of impromptu memorial, but rather something grand and greatly symbolic. Something that would make their people feel better.

Now if you're listening and actually thinking about all this, a good logical question right about now would be, "what in the world does building a grand altar accomplish that comforts the people's worry?" Well, guess what: when the leaders of the 9 ½ tribes of Canaan found out about it, THAT was their response, too. What could possibly be the purpose of building such a grand altar; to their thinking it had to be nothing short of those 3 Trans-Jordanian tribes deciding that they would worship another god.

But just as serious, they built that altar NOT on the east side of the Jordan River (in their own territory), they built it on the west bank.....in Canaan.....the Land of Promise.....in territory that belonged to another tribe (it was probably Benjamin's)!!

When the people living in Canaan heard about all this they went ballistic. The tribes that had disbanded their army instantly got it back together, went to Shiloh (the place of the Tabernacle and from where Joshua ruled), and decided to make war on their rebellious brethren. The same relatives that had stood shoulder-to-shoulder on the battlefield for all those years, giving their lives for one another, were about to go war among themselves!

Oh, could I go in a lot of directions with this one. Look what we do to one another; we'd sooner make war in our own family than we would with an enemy. Here was Joshua, for the last several years pulling his hair out simply trying to get 7 of the Israelite tribes to accept their FREE territorial allotment (a promised gift from God), but they wouldn't do it because it would have meant battling enemies in their territory. Further each tribe would have had to go it alone for the most part because Joshua's army was in process of disbanding; each tribe was now only for itself. A brother Hebrew was getting attacked in a neighboring territory? Too bad, his territory is his burden. A brother Israelite was in desperate need of help to defeat an enemy who was bedeviling him? Too bad, not my problem. But let a brother tribe upset you; let a brother tribe do something that you didn't understand and ALL THE TRIBES ganged up and dropped what they were doing to go and attack them.

What a lesson for us. In fact, so much of what Jesus told us to do within church government is modeled after what Joshua and the leadership of Israel did in response to this dangerous situation, when some wanted to just take the army, assume the worst, and punish the 3 tribes and ask questions later.

At Shiloh Joshua told Pinchas, Eleazar the High Priest's son, to go to the leadership of Gad, Reuben and Manassah to lodge their complaint and to investigate. Along with Pinchas went one leader for each of the 10 tribes who lived in the Promised Land. As an aside: these were NOT the 10 tribal princes. Rather they were 10 chosen clan leaders, one from each tribe, who were to go and represent the whole tribe. They went as a delegation to the east side of the Jordan River, in the land of Gilead, and there confronted the Trans-Jordanian tribal leadership.

The delegation accused the 3 tribes of treachery; and the building of the altar was at the heart of the problem. At least the stated concern of the delegation was that building that altar was a terrible affront to Yehoveh and that every Israelite would wind up being punished for it. They go on to give the historical examples of Achan (who took some spoils of war at Jericho that were supposed to be devoted only for God), and then of the event at Ba'al Peor when Israel

committed idolatry, and said that if only the 3 tribes who built that altar suffered for this sin that would be one thing: but God has shown that ALL Israel will suffer for such enormous offenses against Him. In the case of Ba'al Peor 24,000 Israelites died by divine plague; in the case of Achan his entire household was wiped out in divine wrath. What might God do to the 12 tribes if they allowed the atrocity of KNOWINGLY allowing worship at an unauthorized altar built in an unauthorized place by unauthorized people?

In other words, it is a well-established God-principle that while communal GUILT might not be established upon all for the sins of one, communal BURDEN will be established when God's holiness is attacked and it was caused by negligence or inaction of the group. It's not that Achan's family sinned as Achan did, it's that they suffered because of their association with Achan and thus were burdened with the consequences of Achan's sin. Pinchas and the 10 leaders from Canaan may have been concerned to some degree for the well being of their Trans-Jordanian brothers; but they were terrified for themselves and their families (and rightly so I might add....they had learned those hard lessons in the most devastating fashion).

Then in verse 19, the delegation asks the leaders of the 3 tribes a penetrating and in some ways sarcastic question: if you believe the land you possess (of course meaning the Trans-Jordan) is **unclean** then cross back over into the land that belongs to YHWH. I have to tell you that a Christian philosopher could make a Doctoral Thesis out of this question and what is behind it.

In a nutshell the gist of it is this: the 3 tribes of the east say they want to be identified with Israel and the God of Israel, and are worried that such an identity might be taken away from them; but then they respond by building this illegitimate altar NOT in their own land, but across the Jordan River, back in the Promised Land. If they want their own land to be sanctified, and if they want their land and the people living in their land to be associated with those who live in the Promised Land, WHY wouldn't they build their altar in their own land for their own people to see? And in a kind of sarcasm the questioner provides his own answer to what is really a rhetorical question by saying that the 3 tribes must view their own land as unclean, defiled. Conclusion: if you think your land is so unclean that you won't build your altar there, how can you possibly consider permanently living there?

Then the questioner (which I suspect is Pinchas considering the subject is the altar), continues by saying effectively, you're welcome to move in to the Promised Land along with the rest of your brethren, and we will carve out territory to accommodate you; a VERY generous offer. But then again only a man with authority over more than his own tribe could ever make such an offer, all the more reason to suspect that the person doing most of the talking is Pinchas, a very important and revered priest.

Of course underlying this question about uncleanness of the Trans-Jordan land is a mountain of innuendo. For the priest, Pinchas, to openly suggest that maybe the land of the Trans-Jordan is unclean for the 3 tribes is probably intended to confirm the worst fears that so perplexes the minds of those living there; since the land they have chosen is NOT the Promised Land (and they fully understand that), then perhaps Yehoveh is not there with them either. If He is not with them, then perhaps they will not receive His blessings or His protection.

And if God is NOT there then it MUST be because the land is not sanctified. This is a very serious problem, if their fears are valid.

This idea of living on non-sanctified land will surface again hundreds of years later when the residents of Judah are exiled to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar and they deal with the problem of trying to live a Torah lifestyle in a pagan place on defiled land, breathing defiled air, eating unclean food, because the god of this land is a Babylonian god not Yehoveh. Therefore they live in a perpetually defiled condition, outside the Promised LAND with no Temple to worship in and no priesthood or altar to atone for their sins.

I cannot stress enough something that I have talked with you about on a number of occasions: the 9 ½ tribes lived in the Promised Land by their own choice. The 2 ½ tribes lived OUTSIDE the Promised Land by their own choice. Now it was NOT sin per se that they chose the Trans-Jordan as their home; in fact Moses (and apparently God) allowed it without so much as any kind of recorded warning. However this decision did put them in a precarious situation. God had promised a land of special blessing and protection (accompanied with His personal presence) for His people; but here were some who **claimed** to be his people (3 tribes) who decided it was more economically advantageous to live near the Promised Land, but not in it. People who said no thanks to God's provision; they think a place of THEIR choosing is better than the place of HIS choosing. And on the surface, who could argue with it?

At the same time, Reuben, Gad and Manessah certainly wanted the same blessings afforded by God's presence as their brothers living in the Promised Land received. They just wanted those blessings to be added to the perceived advantages they saw of living in the Trans-Jordan, outside of the Promised Land. After having spent some years in the Promised Land, fighting and spilling their blood, they sensed something different about Canaan than any other place. But the pull of the worldly advantages of living in the Trans-Jordan seemed to trump what they KNEW deep-down that they ought to do; move into the Land of the Father's rest and provision that He had been preparing for them since Abraham.

So they apparently thought maybe they could get around the problem; they would just build an altar (their own altar) in the Promised Land and that somehow that would buy them something of His favor in THEIR land.

Is that how you live your life? Do you see the blessing of the Promised Land and want it; but the pull of the world outside of the Promised Land is too great to resist. So, you think: maybe I can have both. Maybe I can receive the blessings of those who live within the boundaries of God's Kingdom, while I live outside of it. It never worked out for the 3 tribes of the Trans-Jordan. Their land blessings were short lived; and they also didn't get the blessing of living near to God. **CJB Luke 16:13 No servant can be slave to two masters, for he will either hate the first and love the second, or scorn the second and be loyal to the first. You can't be a slave to both God and money."**

Beginning in verse 21 the tribal leaders of Reuben, Gad and Manessah respond to the accusations from Pinchas and the tone is that they are utterly flabbergasted by what they hear and explain that it's all one big misunderstanding. That in no way are they contemplating

worship of another god, nor (and just as important) are they planning on actually sacrificing on that altar they built.

And in typical Middle Eastern fashion they begin their defense of their actions by glorifying God's name to show their continuing dedication to Him. Our CJB says that the Trans-Jordan tribal leadership proclaimed, "The Mighty One, God, is Adonai". Other versions say, "God, the Lord God". Still others say, "The Lord is God of Gods". In Hebrew it says, "El, Elohim, YHWH". The gist of this is that by saying El, Elohim it is making clear that they are speaking of the highest god of all gods; by saying YHWH they are saying that Yehoveh IS that highest god of all gods. So it leaves no doubt to any listener that they can put to rest any thought that their intention is to change gods.

Further they say that they have not committed rebellion (against Yehoveh), and they also didn't build an altar to sacrifice on it. And although the English translations kind of ruin the drama and detail of it, they say that they are not going to do '**Olah, Minchah, or Shelamim** sacrifices. Those 3 named sacrifices are representative of the entire range of Levitical sacrifices from the mandatory to the voluntary, from sacrificing animals to offering produce; thus it is makes clear that NO kind of sacrifice is going to be performed on that altar. At least that was their intention.

Now, what's the big deal if they DID build that altar not meaning to sacrifice to another god, but they fully intended to perform Torah ordained sacrifices upon it to YHWH (even though they denied it)? Well let's recall several commands contained in the Law about this subject. Sacrifices were to occur ONLY on the Great Altar at the Tabernacle. ONLY God's appointed Levite priests were to perform those sacrifices. The PLACE of the Tabernacle (and thus the altar) was ONLY one place and it had to be where God directed it to be (and that place was currently Shiloh). There were many other associated commandments that made it a terrible offense to sacrifice on any other altar, using any other procedures, even if the intent was to sacrifice to Yehoveh.

Rather the 3 tribal leaders explained, their motive was that they were worried that once they left the Promised Land and returned to the Trans-Jordan that they would no longer be considered God's people (Israelites), and thus would not be included as beneficiaries of the Levitical sacrifices and rituals. They were especially afraid that as time passed, and future generations came and went, that those Israelites who lived in Canaan would deny that Reuben, Gad, and Manessah ever aided the 9 ½ tribes in their conquest, or even that they were all part of the same people and nation: Israel, worshipping the same God, Yehoveh.

So they built this altar NOT as a place of sacrifice, but as a monument of remembrance. Or better as a witness to their loyalty to the God of Israel and to their own heritage. Pinchas and the Israelite leadership accept their explanation, go back to Canaan, tell the people, and war is averted.

We'll continue with chapter 22 next week.