

JOSHUA

Lesson 24 - Chapters 22 and 23

We'll continue today in Joshua Chapter 22, a chapter that has some quite dramatic theological and practical implications contained in it. And I outlined for you that we'd identify 4 (although there are more) important questions that are addressed in this narrative: 1) Who are God's People? 2) Where is the proper worship of God to take place? 3) What is proper worship of God? And, 4) does our heart-felt sincerity and good intentions as Believers trump God's actual laws and commands?

And these questions are broached in Joshua 22 within the backdrop of an incident whereby 3 of the 12 tribes of Israel (2 ½ actually) were being mustered out of Joshua's army, and allowed to return home to their land inheritance on the east side of the Jordan River (hence the academic name for that region, the Trans-Jordan, meaning "across the Jordan").

On their way back (which was only a short distance of a few days journey), these 3 tribes stopped as they approached the Jordan and before crossing over to their land they built an altar on the western bank of the river. When the 10 (actually 9 ½) tribes of Israel who had decided to take their land inheritance inside the Land of Canaan (The Promised Land) heard of this they took it to mean that these 3 tribes had either decided to worship another god altogether OR that they were establishing an alternative place for worship as opposed to the current one in Shiloh. Either way this was an act of rebellion that so incensed the 10 tribes that they immediately decided that they should band together and go to war against the 3 tribes who built that altar.

Fortunately cooler heads prevailed and Pinchas (often referred to as Phinehas in some bibles) who was the son of the High Priest Eleazar, along with 10 head men representing the 10 tribes of Israel remaining in the Promised Land, formed a delegation to go and confront the leaders of the 3 tribes prior to battle commencing.

The 3 tribes express complete shock at the reaction of the 10 tribes and assure the delegation that their intent was to display unity, not division; and that it was their sincere desire to retain their common identity with Israel that led them to building this altar. Further that while there was no denying that this WAS an altar (in fact they made the point that it was essentially a replica of the Tabernacle's altar) that they did not intend to USE it as an altar. Rather, it would only be a symbol and a reminder of the common beginnings of the 12 tribes. The word used for characterizing the purpose for this altar was in Hebrew, **ed**; **ed** means most literally "a witness". It is the same word used for a witness in a judicial trial.

Let's re-read a short section of Joshua 22 to get our bearings.

RE-READ JOSHUA 22:21 - end

So the 3 Israelite tribes of the Trans-Jordan make it crystal clear that they know no other god than Yehoveh, God of Israel; that Yehoveh is the god of gods; and that they had no intention of performing sacrifices on the altar they built. Rather the building of this altar was their attempt to both show solidarity with their brethren on the west side of the Jordan as well as creating an insurance policy that they would not be removed from being classified as the people of God simply because they chose to live on the east bank of the Jordan River.

Please make a mental note on an important point here: these 3 tribes could have built any number of other monuments to accomplish the same thing. Erecting standing stones as memorials and boundary markers was common among all Middle Eastern cultures, and the Israelites did the same thing (and we read of it in the Torah and in earlier chapters of Joshua). Why did it have to be such a sensitive thing as an altar; something that has such deeply religious significance?

A VERY interesting thing is said in verse 28 that is translated well in some Bible versions, but not in our CJB. It says that the 3 tribes built a REPLICA of the Altar of Burnt Offering in the CJB. Most other versions say they built a "copy" of the Altar of Burnt Offering. The best one though is the old reliable KJB that says they built a "pattern" of the Altar of Burnt Offering.

The Hebrew word is *tabnith*, and copy or replica is not the best choice of words to translate it. It indeed means form, or pattern; the original Altar of Burnt Offering is said to be a *tabnith* of the one in Heaven. The Rabbis and Sages recognize as a self-evident matter that the physical can only approximate the spiritual. Therefore all that the physical can ever hope to do is to follow the form or pattern of the spiritual principle it is demonstrating. So whatever this altar looked like, it didn't look precisely like the one at the Tabernacle, but it did employ the "pattern" in the sense that it embraced God's construction instructions from the Torah (at least in their minds). In fact it could easily have been far more grand than the one at the Tabernacle, and it probably was from the tone of the text and the harsh reaction of the 10 tribes. Remember: the altar for the Tabernacle was made of metal and was portable. The altar that the 3 tribes built near the Jordan would have been ANYTHING but portable, and probably was NOT metal (it could have then been rather easily stolen) and instead was the more typical stone altar.

Let's stop for a moment and talk about this in another light. Did the 3 tribes commit a sinful act by building that Altar? Assuming the leadership had no intent of sacrificing upon it, nor giving it some kind of holy status, had they done something wrong by building it? I suspect if you asked a dozen pastors and clergy you'd get a dozen different answers because this brings us back to what I presented at the outset as the question that was so problematic to the modern church: does my heart-felt sincerity and good intentions as a Disciple of Jesus trump God's written and clear commands?

Even though on the one hand the building of that altar was based on a kind of selfish concern and an unspoken suspicion by the 3 Trans-Jordanian tribes, on the other they were just as aware of human nature as we are and it worried them. These 3 tribes of the Trans-Jordan WANTED to continue to be counted as God's people and they WANTED to be identified with Israel because they deeply valued that identity. They FEARED that not living inside the Promised Land with their brethren would eventually cost them their Hebrew identity. Times change, political climates change, leadership changes, and new agendas and alliances are created; and people forget. In only a few generations they might be seen as aliens, foreigners to Israel. What might they do to avert this awful possibility?

In so many ways this narrative is prophetic of what DID happen when Israel was forcibly exiled from their land; or centuries later when many Hebrew families voluntarily migrated for a myriad of reasons to Europe, Asia, and the Far East. It was NEVER their intent that by leaving the Holy Land they were also leaving behind their Hebrew identity or their God; but in time we find that those who continued living in the Promised Land denied that many of these Hebrew families were even part of Israel any more. Or they may have accepted that there was some ancient attachment but now see those who live outside the Holy Land as lesser Hebrews, not meriting full consideration or citizenship as God's people.

As full of sincerity and good intent as the 3 Trans-Jordanian tribes were, they were also within an eyelash of not only losing their Israelite identity but of being destroyed for doing little more than building an altar. I asked the rhetorical question, did the 3 Trans-Jordanian tribes do anything wrong in this story? Here's the thing: by their own account they were sincere in their desire to worship God. Their good intent was to live outside of the Promised Land (as sanctioned by Moses), but also to continue to be seen as part of the community of God. But the Torah does NOT give them permission to do what they did. They ignored the reality that it was Levites that were to handle all matters of public worship. They ignored that there could be only one altar at one location. So they built an altar (one patterned after the Tabernacle altar) but then said it wasn't really an altar because they didn't intend to worship at it or sacrifice upon it. I wonder how long it would have been before they did?

I can tell you with certainty that within a few years after Joshua conquered Canaan, and the Tabernacle and Altar were set up at Shiloh, horned altars modeled after the Tabernacle Altar popped up in Hebrew homes and in fields all over Canaan, for several of them have been discovered and we'll find many prophets of the Bible complaining about this exact thing happening and warning that this is a great affront to YHWH.

Let me give you an illustration before I make my point about the important principle contained in this episode in Joshua. I don't know anyone who doesn't think they are capable of controlling most aspects of their life. As humans (and especially as YOUNG humans) we often believe we can do dangerous things and come away unscathed. We believe that while others might harm themselves, we're different or immune. People who have become horribly addicted to illicit drugs didn't set out to be addicts. Most of them either believed they could mess around with these drugs and take them or leave them at their will; or they were so careless and immature that they never even considered there was a very serious downside lurking in the shadows.

I also have no doubt that the vast majority of those Israelites in the Promised Land who eventually built home altars didn't do it with the intent to be rebellious. I suspect many began with the same idea as the 3 Trans-Jordanian tribes; the home altar was merely a symbol, a monument to their faith in YHWH. It was maybe the next generation, or the one after that that said, "well it's sure a long way to Shiloh, why wouldn't God accept my sacrifice here at my own altar if He is indeed a loving and merciful God? After all He knows my heart, and that I'm very sincere in my worship of Him".

Here's the thing that virtually every generation of God's people, whether they be Traditional Hebrews or Messianic Jews or gentile Christians has struggled with: all proper worship of God **BEGINS** with **obedience** not sincerity. Even if the leaders of Reuben, Gad and Manessah were fully truthful and never intended to worship at that altar nor did they wish to change gods, they should NOT have built that altar to start with.....whether they used it as an altar or not. By all we know from the Scriptures the 3 tribes' intent and sincere desire was to worship God properly and to remain identified with God's people; and this building of an altar was only meant for good. But at the same time the way they chose to go about displaying their sincerity was outlawed by Torah (even though they modified it's purpose just a bit to get around the letter of law to their way of thinking) and it almost cost them their lives and the lives of their families.

Now this issue of sincerity trumping God's commands to the minds of His Believers manifests itself in many ways. One of my pet peeves (because I think the slope is SO slippery and because as humans we are SO predictable in our path) has to do with Christianity's propensity to make symbols of things that the Torah, including the 10 Commandments, outlaws. And before I take this on, do not think that I'm judging you or accusing anyone of idolatry. But I am boldly saying to anyone within earshot that you may well have inadvertently put yourself in the same precarious situation as the tribes of Gad, Reuben, and Manessah did, and you've done it in almost identical fashion; by means of using biblically outlawed symbols albeit for a purpose than you see as sufficiently different than the prohibited one.

God says, "don't make symbols or images of me, and don't make symbols of me or about me using earthly creatures". But we go ahead and do it, and say that it only matters if we worship them. We can make the symbol and use it just as long as we don't bow down to it. The Israelites said to themselves, we could build home altars if we just don't ever sacrifice upon them, or we do a kind of sacrifice that is different than what is to be done on the Tabernacle's altar. The Israelites also said that in the name of peace and love and neighborliness we could participate in the celebrations that honor our pagan friends' gods (those friends who live among us), just as long as we don't call that god our god. Their thought was that we and the people around us (our friends and family) are strong enough to resist the urge to take it to the next step. It's our intent and sincerity that God is looking at, not the actual behavior.

We all know where that led in but a VERY few years among Israel; in less than a decade after this incident we find Israel on a severe downward spiral. In fact that is why this altar incident is central to understanding the book that follows Joshua, which is Judges. Because in Judges we're going to see what happens among God's people when sincerity trumps obedience; when the thing that is dangerously close to sin becomes sin.

There are also other ramifications of the altar incident that are pertinent to the modern followers of the God of Israel. The problem of the altar wasn't only a basic theological one whereby it appeared that Reuben, Gad and Manassah were rebelling against God's priests and priesthood, and therefore against the Law of Moses. On a more earthly practical level the problem was that warfare was threatened because of suspicion and mistrust among the community of God's people, the 12 tribes. The 9 ½ tribes were essentially accusing the other tribes of apostasy. And interestingly it was not a matter of differences in doctrines; it was a difference in place of worship and manner of worship that was at the heart of the problem. Sound familiar?

The good news is that we see this handled in a way that is a model for confronting the inherent difficulties that arise within a dispersed body that holds differing perspectives. Rather than go to war the accuser (Pinchas) listened to the reasoning of the accused (the 3 tribes), even admitting to some degree that it is the accuser who just might be in error. A compromise was reached and a workable format of unity was maintained. Now the WHOLE group, all 12 tribes, could continue to bless the holy name of Yehoveh together (and be blessed BY the God of Israel together), even though they lived in very different places under very different circumstances that would necessarily affect the details of worship procedures.

What I have just described to you is a pretty good picture of the Church struggling to maintain unity in the midst of diversity, is it not? But it is also the struggle of a Judaism who on the one hand wants to be accepted in this gentile dominated world, but on the other does not want to lose it's identity as the people of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.....and of Torah.

We don't have to read too far back into history to see division within the Church that has led to the creation of thousands of denominations (most of which want little if anything to do with one another), blood shed, the Inquisition, and wars. We see similar things in Judaism that have led to multiple divisions of the Hebrew faith whereby some sects accuse others of not even being Jews due to their unique set of doctrines and values. Most of us are aware that those Jews who accept their Jewish Messiah, Yeshua, are among those who are considered outcasts and traitors to Judaism and this has even been built-in to the laws of Israel such that it is nearly impossible for a Messianic Jew to become an Israeli citizen.

As intractable a struggle as this has been within Christianity on the one side and Judaism on the other, the unfolding of God's prophetic book in our lifetimes has suddenly thrust these two highly separated tracks of Judeo-Christianity together in a way that was unimaginable even when I was a teenager. We have Christians around the world, of all faiths and denominations, reaching out to the Jewish people, and the Jewish people reaching back. And this infant relationship is uneasy and it's full of anxiety, and it's not always comfortable. We don't know how to behave around each other nor what to expect.

Christians are as the 2 ½ tribes (so to speak) who, although physically living outside of the designated Promised Land and outside of the formal community of Israel, want our identity to be as the people of Israel's God. The formal community of God (the Jews) is as the 9 ½ tribes (so to speak) who physically live in the former Land of Canaan, now called Israel. And they say that they're not opposed to our living within the community of Israel's God but it must be

under the proper kind of worship and that they are the keepers and defenders and determiners of that proper worship.

That part of the Christian community who, like Torah Class, seeks a close relationship with the Jewish people tend to want to adopt symbols and traditions that are Jewish in nature with the sincere intention of using those symbols to declare our identity and solidarity with the Jewish community. And just like the altar erected by the 2 ½ tribes, by using their symbols we Christians have built this monument of good intentions for all the world to see; but we built it on THEIR side of the river and for many Jews they are suspicious and untrusting of our intent.

Some delegations of Jews have come to Christians and now understand that we have no intention of disrupting or polluting their worship or degrading their symbols by our incorporation of them in our Christian worship, particularly as we have attached a new meaning to them. But it remains a source of trouble and it probably will continue until Messiah comes and all human need for symbols is gone.

So this chapter ends with the understanding that all was well, that those who lived on the other side of the Jordan could identify with the God of Israel just as those who lived inside the Promised Land. And just as important: proper worship was also possible without the requirement of physical residence inside the Promised Land. Two very big principles have been established.

Let's move on to chapter 23.

READ JOSHUA CHAPTER 23 all

As the book of Joshua winds down we are here given Joshua's farewell address. Joshua is giving this either at Shiloh, the civil and religious headquarters in this era for Israel; or perhaps he has called these leading men of Israel to his home in ***Timnath-serah*** on the mountains of Ephraim. I suspect it was at ***Timnath-serah*** for Joshua was now very old (approaching 110 years), travel would have been terribly difficult, and he likely would have followed the pattern of Moses who gave his farewell address in the mountains of Moab. Giving an address on the heights of a hill was symbolic of the words carrying much power and authority; in many cases **divine** power and authority. I have drawn the parallel for you in earlier lessons of Jesus' seminal speech that we call The Sermon on the Mount (because it was given on a high hilltop overlooking the Sea of Galilee) to Moses' sermon (that is actually the basis for the entire book of Deuteronomy) that he gave on a hilltop in Moab of the Trans-Jordan.

Moses and Yeshua's speeches were filled with new and wondrous concepts; Joshua's was not. Joshua's speech was a reminder for Israel to follow the ways of God already set down by Moses. Joshua really had nothing to add to what Moses said, and didn't claim that he did. He only meant to exhort Israel to DOING what Yehoveh through Moses said to do.

Because the giving of the Torah (the Law of Moses) was so central to all that would happen in God's redemptive plan, Joshua was emphasizing that just because Israel had gained a new leader when Moses died, and would gain another new leader at Joshua's imminent death,

nothing about the Lord's laws and commands had (or would) change. This is a principle that is in desperate need of revival in the modern Church because the only surviving part of that credo is that God never changes; yet the never changing God apparently changed His laws and commands that He said were forever.

Notice that even in Yeshua's Sermon on the Mount speech when a great spiritual transformation was underway that He too was careful to exhort His listeners to continue following Moses: **CJB Matthew 5:17 "Don't think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete. 18 Yes indeed! I tell you that until heaven and earth pass away, not so much as a yud or a stroke will pass from the Torah- not until everything that must happen has happened.**

The central message in this farewell address of Joshua is contained in verses 6,7, and 8; there Joshua pleads with the people of Israel to lay hold of what kind of a wonderful future awaits them. The Lord will finish driving out the Canaanites from the Promised Land. BUT.....and here is the key..... Israel must be obedient to God and this is secured by following the Torah.

Joshua warns the people against idolatry; because Israel's uniqueness among all the nations of the earth is dependant on their cleaving to Yehoveh their God. While the nations serve many gods Israel serves but one. And the way to idolatry, Joshua says, is contact with the nations that are both still within the Promised Land and those nearby. The issue of succumbing to this horrendous sin is why Joshua says that Israel should not even MENTION the name of their gods, nor invoke their names in an oath, let alone worship them.

You see the thing that Israel just could not grasp even yet was that Yehoveh claimed to fulfill all the functions for which other nations needed a multitude of gods. Every nation outside of Israel had gods who were gods based in nature. They were gods of the various functions of the natural world like rain, fire, wind, storms, and fertility. There was a sun god, a moon god, a god of the oceans and a god of the rivers. The universally accepted understanding of the world in that era was that one not only had to approach a god who was in charge of a particular function in nature for your need, but that every nation had their own and different set of gods to perform those functions.

And in verse 11 is the antidote to all the dangers that awaits Israel if they should think to stray: love God. At the risk of being a broken record let me say yet again: the result of our redemption ought to be to love God, and the result of our loving God ought to be obedience to Him. For God, OBEDIENCE is the love language of His worshippers.

While Joshua's message is at first uplifting, reminding the people that God has fulfilled His promises to them at every step; and that God is ABLE to and wants to and WILL fulfill all of His promises, what follows is a message of doom. Blessing will last only as long as total faithfulness to the God of Israel lasts.

If Israel begins to dabble in other gods; if Israel tries to behave like the other nations around her (who do not have Yehoveh as their god), then God will see them as not the generation through which His promises will come. Worse, they will lose their land inheritance. Back they'll

go into the days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob when they were wanderers looking for a homeland; when they were foreigners no matter where they lay their heads.

God's redemption can be taken back. God's inheritance can be removed and given to another more faithful generation. This is a principle that, as followers of Messiah Yeshua, we must always keep fearfully in the forefront of our minds and never get so comfortable in our relationship with Him to think that God will not act to preserve His holiness and His justice even if it means the ultimate harm to us.

This is expressed in a number of places in the New Testament. Here is one but one:

CJB Hebrews 6:1 *Therefore, leaving behind the initial lessons about the Messiah, let us go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of turning from works that lead to death, trusting God, 2 and instruction about washings, s'mikhah, the resurrection of the dead and eternal punishment. 3 And, God willing, this is what we will do. 4 For when people have once been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, become sharers in the Ruach HaKodesh, 5 and tasted the goodness of God's Word and the powers of the 'olam haba- 6 and then have fallen away- it is impossible to renew them so that they turn from their sin, as long as for themselves they keep executing the Son of God on the stake all over again and keep holding him up to public contempt.*

And here in Romans 11:

B Romans 11:22 *So take a good look at God's kindness and his severity: on the one hand, severity toward those who fell off; but, on the other hand, God's kindness toward you- provided you maintain yourself in that kindness! Otherwise, you too will be cut off!*

The blessings that God has promised are as certain as the rising sun of the morning. Just as certain are that the curses that God has promised will curtail all those blessings and exile all those who serve other masters, other gods. For why if you seek the blessings of another god would the god you have shunned provide them for you?

Israel is without excuse. This generation who has conquered Canaan personally witnessed the Lord God drive out their enemies ahead of them, provide for their every need, and given them rest. Therefore whatever rebellion they commit against Him will be viewed as intentional and with malice. If God is just then He has no choice but to act justly; He must destroy those who were formerly His.

We'll begin the final chapter of Joshua next time.