

The Book of Joshua

Lesson 12: The Altar of Witness by the Jordan -- Joshua 22:1–34

The war is over. After seven long years of marching, fighting, and trusting God against walled cities and iron chariots, the men of Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh are finally going home. These are the eastern tribes, the ones who had asked for land on the far side of the Jordan, back where the pastures were green and wide. Years before, they had made a promise to Moses: they would not settle down to enjoy their inheritance until every one of their brothers had received theirs. Now Joshua stands before them, an old man with battle behind him, and says the words they have been waiting to hear. 'Ye have kept all that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you' (Joshua 22:2). Well done. Go home. And they turn east, toward their families, toward rest, with a blessing ringing in their ears.

But the story does not end at the riverbank. As the eastern tribes reach the Jordan, they stop and build something. Not a house, not a fence, but a great altar, 'a great altar to see to' (Joshua 22:10), rising up tall beside the water. And when word of it travels west, it lands like a thunderclap. The other tribes hear that their brothers have built an altar, and their hearts sink, because they know what an altar can mean. There is one altar, at one tabernacle, where God has said His people will worship. A second altar sounds like a second religion. It sounds like the first crack in the covenant. It sounds like Peor all over again, when sin spread through the camp like fire. And so the whole congregation gathers at Shiloh, ready to go to war against their own brothers.

Stop and feel the weight of this moment. These are not strangers. These are men who fought side by side for seven years, who shared the same God, the same promises, the same scars. And now, over a misunderstanding about a pile of stones, they are an hour away from killing each other. This is how unity dies in the family of God, not always through some great betrayal, but through a rumor, an assumption, a conclusion reached before anyone bothered to ask. The western tribes are right to care about pure worship; that instinct is holy. But they are about to act on a story they have not checked. Thank God, before the swords come out, they send Phinehas.

What happens next is one of the most beautiful pictures of reconciliation in the Old Testament. The delegation crosses the river, the question is finally asked out loud, and the truth comes pouring out. The altar was never for sacrifice. It was a witness, a memorial, a copy meant to say to every future generation: we too belong to the Lord, we too have a part in His altar, do not let our children be cut off from His people. The brothers heard the truth, and 'it pleased them' (Joshua 22:30), and the war that almost was simply dissolved into worship. As we walk through Joshua 22, watch how close zeal can come to disaster without truth, and how a single honest conversation can pull a family back from the edge.

Group Discussion: The western tribes heard a report, drew a terrible conclusion, and gathered for war before ever asking their brothers what the altar was for. Why do you think it is so much easier to assume the worst about a brother than to go and ask him directly, and what does this account teach us about guarding the unity of God's people?

Personal Reflection: Think of a time you reached a hard conclusion about someone and acted on it before you knew the full story. What did it cost, and what would it have looked like to go directly to that person first, the way Phinehas went to the eastern tribes?

Read Joshua 22:1–34

Study Questions

1. When the eastern tribes build their altar, the rest of Israel does not shrug it off; they gather the whole congregation at Shiloh to go to war (Joshua 22:11–12), and Phinehas reminds them of the sin of Peor and the trespass of Achan (Joshua 22:17–20). Why did a second altar provoke such a fierce response, and what does this reveal about how seriously God's people are to guard true and exclusive worship of the Lord?
2. The western tribes were ready to fight for pure worship before they had checked whether their fear was even true. Where in your own life does a right concern, a real conviction about what honors God, tempt you to act harshly or hastily before you have actually understood the situation?
3. Notice the great mercy hidden in this story: before they marched, the western tribes 'sent unto the children of Reuben' a delegation led by Phinehas to ask what the altar meant (Joshua 22:13–16). What does this decision to send and ask, rather than simply attack, teach us about how God would have His people deal with one another when sin is suspected (compare Matthew 18:15; Deuteronomy 13:14)?
4. The eastern tribes had been faithful for seven years, yet a single misunderstood action nearly erased all of it in the eyes of their brothers. When has your reputation, or someone

else's, been threatened by an action that looked wrong but was not, and how does this story shape the way you want to respond when you are the one misunderstood?

5. When the question is finally asked, the eastern tribes answer with a flood of reverence: 'The Lord God of gods, the Lord God of gods, he knoweth, and Israel he shall know; if it be in rebellion, or if in transgression against the Lord, save us not this day' (Joshua 22:22). What does the intensity of their oath reveal about how seriously they themselves took the danger of false worship, and what does it mean that both sides cared so deeply about honoring the Lord rightly?
6. The eastern tribes were afraid that one day the western tribes would say to their children, 'What have ye to do with the Lord God of Israel? ... so shall your children make our children cease from fearing the Lord' (Joshua 22:24-25). When have you worried that you, or those you love, might be treated as if you had no real part among God's people, and how does that fear deepen your compassion for others who feel like outsiders?
7. The eastern tribes explain that the altar was never for burnt offering or sacrifice but was 'a witness between us, and you' (Joshua 22:26-28), a pattern or copy of the true altar of the Lord, built precisely so that no one would ever set up a rival worship. How does their careful insistence on the one true altar at the tabernacle reflect God's demand that He be worshiped only in the way He has appointed (Deuteronomy 12:13-14), and why does that principle still matter for the church today?
8. The whole crisis grew out of a failure to communicate; the eastern tribes built without explaining, and the western tribes concluded without asking. Where in your relationships has a lack of plain, honest communication allowed assumptions to grow into walls, and what would it cost you to be the one who finally speaks, or finally asks?

9. Hold these two truths together as the heart of this lesson. The western tribes were right to be jealous for the pure, exclusive worship of the Lord; division over false worship would indeed have been a deadly thing (Joshua 22:18–20). Yet they nearly committed the grievous sin of making war on faithful brothers because they judged rashly, on an assumption, without going to ask (Joshua 22:30–31). How does this chapter teach us to be fierce in guarding the unity of God’s people and the purity of true worship at the same time, and what does it warn us about the sin of rash judgment that masquerades as zeal (compare John 7:24; Romans 14:13; Ephesians 4:3)?
10. Look back across the whole of Joshua 22, from the homeward blessing, to the great altar by the river, to the war that nearly was, to the worship that finally came. Name one specific way the Lord is calling you to labor for the unity of His people this week, whether by guarding true worship, by going directly to a brother instead of assuming the worst, or by patiently explaining yourself to someone who has misjudged you. What is the one step He is asking you to take?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Matthew 18:15, the Lord’s own command to go directly to a brother who has sinned, rather than spreading or assuming, before involving others; Deuteronomy 12:13–14, the LORD’s demand that His people not offer sacrifice in any place they please, but only in the place He appoints, the very principle the eastern tribes were so careful to honor; John 7:24, Jesus warning us not to judge by appearance but to judge righteous judgment, the exact failure the western tribes nearly fell into; Romans 14:13, Paul calling brothers to stop passing judgment on one another and to pursue peace instead; Ephesians 4:3, the charge to endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, which is the burden of this whole chapter.

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