

“A Witness”

The eighty-sixth in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”

Texts: Joshua 22:1-34; John 17:11-26

According to Joshua, the “LORD gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers. . . . Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.” With these words that chapter in redemptive history known as the Conquest has come to a close. The people of Israel now possess the land of Canaan which YHWH promised to give to his people. God has kept his promise to his people and they now begin to enjoy fully all the blessings of life in that good land flowing with milk and honey. Now that these promises are fulfilled, we move into a new period of biblical history—the time of the Judges. But before we finish up our study of the Book of Joshua, there are a few loose ends to be wrapped up, including a narrowly averted civil war within Israel, Joshua’s farewell to his people and then a covenant renewal ceremony before Joshua’s death.

As we take up the final section of Joshua (chapters 22-24), we turn to Joshua 22 in which Joshua dismisses those two and a half tribes (Reuben, Gad and a portion of the tribe of Manasseh) so that they might return to their homes in that land to the north and east of the Jordan River in what is now the nation of Jordan. In the coming sermons, we will turn to chapters 23-24, where Joshua will remind Israel of all that YHWH had done for them as well as give Israel instructions as to how to live in obedience to YHWH now that they are in Canaan. And then in Joshua 24, Joshua will give final farewell to Israel before Israel’s covenant with YHWH is renewed yet one more time. As we work our way through these final chapters of Joshua, there is a strong sense of reflection upon all those things YHWH has done to fulfill his promise (past and present), as well as instructions for Israel regarding that next chapter in redemptive history—Israel’s future in the land. As such, these chapters take on a certain poignancy as Joshua prepares to die and as we prepare to take up a study of the Book of Judges.

Recall from the opening chapters of Joshua that these same two and a half tribes (Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh) had contributed at least 40,000 soldiers (cf. Joshua 4:13) to help the other tribes conquer Canaan, land that they would not themselves possess. This was commanded by Moses as a sign of the unity between all twelve tribes, as these tribes would help their brethren gain the promised land. But the inheritance given to these two and a half tribes is in the region known as the Transjordan, which includes that land in Moab where Israel camped before they crossed the Jordan River into Canaan.

Now that Canaan has been occupied by Israel and all the Canaanites have been cast out, and these tribes are dismissed to leave to go back to their homes to the east of the Jordan, the nagging question of their continuing loyalty to other ten and a half tribes remaining in Canaan, as well as their devotion to YHWH becomes a pressing and potentially divisive matter. So much so that a civil war nearly breaks out within Israel over the construction of an altar near the Jordan River. This episode will serve as an important lesson to all of God’s people about the importance of unity as a witness of God’s covenantal faithfulness to those outside the church, as well as an illustration of the need to settle disputes between God’s people in a biblical and God-honoring manner.

We now turn to our text, Joshua 22. As we proceed to work our way through these closing chapters, we will see the focus shift from an emphasis upon God’s fulfillment of his promises to Israel’s need to remain obedient to the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai. This

obedience will be the basis for Israel continuing to live in blessing and not come under curse.

The necessity of obedience to the terms of the covenant and how this obedience will impact Israel's future is immediately apparent in chapter 22. In verses 1-5, Joshua gives the following exhortation to those two and a half tribes who are now free to return to their homes across the Jordan. *"At that time Joshua summoned the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh, 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 have commanded you. You have not forsaken your brothers these many days, down to this day, but have been careful to keep the charge of the LORD your God. And now the LORD your God has given rest to your brothers, as he promised them. Therefore turn and go to your tents in the land where your possession lies, which Moses the servant of the LORD gave you on the other side of the Jordan. Only be very careful to observe the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, to love the LORD your God, and to walk in all his ways and to keep his commandments and to cling to him and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul.'"* As covenant mediator, Joshua praises these tribes for their faithfulness in obeying the command of Moses, which certainly helped the other tribes conquer land in Canaan that they (the two and a half tribes) themselves will not possess.

While no time frame is given here, it appears that these men from the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh spent a number of years (4-6) away from their homes and families fighting so that their brethren might receive that which God promised to them. As the time has come for these tribes to be released from their service to the other tribes of Israel and return to their own homes, Joshua exhorts them to do what the Lord commanded, namely to love YHWH, to walk in his ways and to serve him with everything in them. In effect, this is a summary of the law, and sounds much like the words in Matthew 22:34-40, wherein the greater Joshua gives us a similar summary of the two tables of the law.

At this point, Joshua pronounces a blessing upon these men who have served so faithfully and whom he will never see again in this life. This is his farewell to soldiers who have fought to well under his command. In verses 6-8 we read, *"So Joshua blessed them and sent them away, and they went to their tents. Now to the one half of the tribe of Manasseh Moses had given a possession in Bashan, but to the other half Joshua had given a possession beside their brothers in the land west of the Jordan. And when Joshua sent them away to their homes and blessed them, he said to them, 'Go back to your tents with much wealth and with very much livestock, with silver, gold, bronze, and iron, and with much clothing. Divide the spoil of your enemies with your brothers.'"* From Joshua's comments, it is clear that the people of Israel had accumulated much booty, the spoils of their prolonged war with the various Canaanite tribes. The men from Reuben, Gad and Manasseh were given their share of these spoils to take home, where they were to divide these items among their brethren.

But given the reality of sinful human nature, it wasn't long before the peace of the entire nation of Israel is threatened by its first serious internal challenge—the actions of the two and a half tribes as they returned home brought the nation to the brink of a civil war. The facts behind this crisis is set out in verses 9-12, *"So the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh returned home, parting from the people of Israel at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan, to go to the land of Gilead, their own land of which they had possessed themselves by command of the LORD through Moses. And when they came to the region of the Jordan that is in the land of Canaan, the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh built there an altar by the Jordan, an altar of imposing size. And the people of Israel heard it said, 'Behold, the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh have built the altar at the frontier of the land of Canaan, in the region about the Jordan, on the side that belongs to the people of Israel.' And when the people of Israel*

heard of it, the whole assembly of the people of Israel gathered at Shiloh to make war against them.”

The great irony in all of this is that as they were returning home, the men from Reuben, Gad and Manasseh built a huge altar as a gesture of unity toward their brothers still across the Jordan in Canaan. But the tribes in Canaan saw the construction of this same altar as an act of rebellion against God and as an affront to the entire nation. In fact, those living in Canaan were terrified that the building of this altar would bring down the judgment of God upon the entire nation.

Here’s what went wrong. As we have noted before, Shiloh had become the center of Israeli religious life. Departing from there after receiving Joshua’s blessing, the soldiers from Reuben, Gad and Manasseh stopped near the Jordan River and built a huge (tall) altar, near the stone altar Israel had built earlier from stones taken from the dry floor of the Jordan at Gilgal when the nation first crossed from Moab into Canaan. This imposing stone altar was intended to be a sign of their unity with those tribes back across the Jordan from whence they had just come. Its great height would have allowed their people in the Transjordan to see it from their homes across the Jordan. But while these two and a half tribes intended this altar as a sign of unity, those Israeli tribes living in Canaan heard about this altar and were enraged. For reasons soon to be spelled out in verses 13-20, this act was taken as a great offense, so much so, that those people of Israel living in Canaan were now ready to go to war against their brethren.

The reason for this level of outrage (and fear) on the part of the other tribes is spelled out in some detail in verses 13-20. To get to the bottom of this very explosive situation, those tribes remaining in Canaan will travel into the Transjordan to confront their brethren and demand their repentance. *“Then the people of Israel sent to the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh, in the land of Gilead, Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, and with him ten chiefs, one from each of the tribal families of Israel, every one of them the head of a family among the clans of Israel. And they came to the people of Reuben, the people of Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh, in the land of Gilead, and they said to them, ‘Thus says the whole congregation of the LORD, ‘What is this breach of faith that you have committed against the God of Israel in turning away this day from following the LORD by building yourselves an altar this day in rebellion against the LORD? Have we not had enough of the sin at Peor from which even yet we have not cleansed ourselves, and for which there came a plague upon the congregation of the LORD, that you too must turn away this day from following the LORD? And if you too rebel against the LORD today then tomorrow he will be angry with the whole congregation of Israel. But now, if the land of your possession is unclean, pass over into the LORD’s land where the LORD’s tabernacle stands, and take for yourselves a possession among us. Only do not rebel against the LORD or make us as rebels by building for yourselves an altar other than the altar of the LORD our God. Did not Achan the son of Zerah break faith in the matter of the devoted things, and wrath fell upon all the congregation of Israel? And he did not perish alone for his iniquity.’”*

While the Reubenites, Gadites and half of the tribes of Manasseh thought they were honoring their brethren, their brethren were terrified that they had committed the same sin as Israel had committed back in the days at Peor, when a number of Israelites intermingled with Moabite and Midianite women and were seduced, quite literally into the worship of the Canaanite “god” Baal. Remember that this land (the Transjordan) which was given to these two and a half tribes as their inheritance was in that very same region formerly occupied by the Moabites and Midianites. Everyone living in Israel remembered these events and the consequences of God’s judgment—over twenty-four thousand of their brethren died from a plague which did not end until Phinehas put his spear through a young Israelite man and his Midianite lover. That Israel still felt the stain of sin (as Joshua puts it), is a reference to the fact that the people of Israel still felt the pull toward paganism and false religion. No doubt, the Midianite and Moabite women

were still a problem—the men of Israel were attracted to them. Was this reason why these men built a new altar? Was this a sign of apostasy? Would this bring down God’s judgment upon the nation?

According to Joshua, this action also recalled the sin of Achan. All of Israel remembered how the sinful actions of but one man affected the entire nation and led to Israel’s embarrassing defeat at Ai. If these two and a half tribes had built an unsanctioned altar which would provoke YHWH’s wrath, then these tribes must be destroyed, lest God’s judgment come upon the whole nation. This was not just a personal offense, “they built an altar bigger than ours,” but this was perceived as a real threat—“they built an altar which might bring down the covenant curse and a plague like that which killed over 20,000.”

So, we should not be surprised to learn that one of the people in the delegation coming out to meet with the Transjordan tribes was Phinehas. The son of the high priest Eleazar, Phinehas knew full well what would happen to all of Israel if just a few tribes did something displeasing and dishonoring to the Lord. This would bring down the covenant curses upon the entire nation. Therefore, these eleven men mentioned in this passage came as representatives of all the people of Israel, and their fear is that somehow these Transjordan tribes have turned their backs on YHWH and dishonored the terms of the covenant. They see this act as turning away from the Lord, and therefore tantamount to apostasy. They see the pull to paganism as so great and such a serious danger to the whole nation, that in act of self-preservation, these representatives of the nation are willing to divide up part of their own land (their inheritance) so as to give to these Transjordan tribes a new home in Canaan across the Jordan where they will not be so tempted to do such things. Not only was the unity of the nation at stake, but in the minds of Phinehas and the others, the continued existence of Israel itself was on the line.

And so, the tribes meet together to resolve the crisis. In verses 21-29, the Transjordan tribes inform their brethren of their rationale for building this structure, and it is not what their brethren fear. *“Then the people of Reuben, the people of Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh said in answer to the heads of the families of Israel, ‘The Mighty One, God, the LORD! The Mighty One, God, the LORD! He knows; and let Israel itself know! If it was in rebellion or in breach of faith against the LORD, do not spare us today for building an altar to turn away from following the LORD. Or if we did so to offer burnt offerings or grain offerings or peace offerings on it, may the LORD himself take vengeance. No, but we did it from fear that in time to come your children might say to our children, ‘What have you to do with the LORD, the God of Israel? For the LORD has made the Jordan a boundary between us and you, you people of Reuben and people of Gad. You have no portion in the LORD.’ So your children might make our children cease to worship the LORD. Therefore we said, ‘Let us now build an altar, not for burnt offering, nor for sacrifice, but to be a witness between us and you, and between our generations after us, that we do perform the service of the LORD in his presence with our burnt offerings and sacrifices and peace offerings, so your children will not say to our children in time to come, ‘You have no portion in the LORD.’ And we thought, If this should be said to us or to our descendants in time to come, we should say, ‘Behold, the copy of the altar of the LORD, which our fathers made, not for burnt offerings, nor for sacrifice, but to be a witness between us and you.’ Far be it from us that we should rebel against the LORD and turn away this day from following the LORD by building an altar for burnt offering, grain offering, or sacrifice, other than the altar of the LORD our God that stands before his tabernacle!’”*

First and foremost, it is clear that the Transjordan tribes never intended that this altar would be used to worship other “gods” must less to offer unauthorized sacrifices to YHWH. No, this altar was to be a lasting memorial to their own children, so that they would never forget their ties to those tribes living across the Jordan. They offer a passionate defense of their faith in YHWH, their love and respect for their brethren. They are afraid that as time lapses, the future generations (separated by the Jordan River)

will forget their long-standing ties. No this was not an altar upon which to make sacrifices to any god. This altar was intended to be a witness that these people possessed a covenant with YHWH. This would not only serve as a reminder to their own children, but it would serve as a warning to all the surrounding nations, that these two and a half tribes living east of the Jordan are YHWH's people, every bit as much as those living in Canaan. Therefore, the Transjordan tribes are innocent of all the charges raised against them. They had no intention whatsoever of turning away from YHWH. Their actions would not bring down the covenant curses upon the whole nation.

And so upon hearing these words, the crisis quickly comes to an end. As we read in verses 30-34, *“When Phinehas the priest and the chiefs of the congregation, the heads of the families of Israel who were with him, heard the words that the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the people of Manasseh spoke, it was good in their eyes. And Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest said to the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the people of Manasseh, ‘Today we know that the LORD is in our midst, because you have not committed this breach of faith against the LORD. Now you have delivered the people of Israel from the hand of the LORD.’ Then Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, and the chiefs, returned from the people of Reuben and the people of Gad in the land of Gilead to the land of Canaan, to the people of Israel, and brought back word to them. And the report as good in the eyes of the people of Israel. And the people of Israel blessed God and spoke no more of making war against them to destroy the land where the people of Reuben and the people of Gad were settled. The people of Reuben and the people of Gad called the altar Witness, ‘For,’ they said, ‘it is a witness between us that the LORD is God.’”*

This was not an authorized altar, rather it was a “witness.” It was a testimony to the unity of God's people. It was a testimony to God's covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai. It was a testimony to the watching nations, not to mess with Israel. In effect, this is the Old Covenant version of Jesus' words in John 13:35, *“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”* Once this was reported back to those tribes who remained in Canaan, the crisis is over. There was no need to fear God's judgment. Rather, the news that their brethren had built such an altar to be a witness “was good” in the eyes of the people of Israel.

What then do we take with us from this account of a potential civil war being prevented.

There are two main issues raised in this account. The first is the way in which the people of God are to go about resolving any conflicts which may arise within the church. The second is the importance of Christian unity as a testimony to the watching world around us.

As for resolving conflicts, when word got back to the Israelites in Canaan that their Transjordan brethren had built an altar, they immediately assumed the worse—that this altar was a sign that either the two and a half tribes were conducting illegitimate sacrifices to YHWH, or even worse that they had fallen back into a situation such as that in the days at Peor and were tolerating the worship of Baal. The reaction of the Israelites living in Canaan to this news was outrage. Upon hearing what turned out to be an unfounded rumor, the people who gathered at Shiloh simply assumed the worst about their brethren and were ready to get the troops ready to go to war. Thankfully, cooler heads prevailed.

While nothing is said of Joshua's role in this, we do read that Phinehas and ten chiefs of the congregation left Shiloh and traveled to meet with the leaders of the Transjordan tribes (Reuben, Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh), face to face, before any further action was taken. In this, we see a foreshadowing of Jesus' instructions to the church about how to settle disputes as set out in Matthew 18:15-17, *“If your brother*

sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

The point is, and it is well-illustrated by the actions taken by Phinehas and the others, you cannot take action against your brethren based on mere assumptions or rumors. Instead, you go and talk to the people with whom you are at odds, you hear their thinking about the matter from their own lips. Instead of reacting out of anger and going to war, wisdom prevailed. The men of Israel sat down together and talked to one another face to face. Here’s the point: they didn’t talk about one another, they talked to one another. This becomes an example that we all should follow. We must not react in anger. We must not react based on mere assumptions or rumors. No, we talk directly to those whose actions may have offended us. We do this face to face. Yes, there are two sides to every story, and as Jesus himself exhorts us in Matthew 18, we are in no position to judge anyone else’s motives until we’ve heard the other side, directly from the other party. As Isaiah exhorts us, “come brethren, let us reason together.”

The final point has to do with Christian unity. When the sons of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh built this altar, they did so as a testimony to God’s covenant made with all his people. Biblically speaking, “a witness” is not our personal testimony. It is a corporate act, which demonstrates to all those outside the church that the people of God are one. Not one in the Woodstock sense. Not one in the singing songs around the campfire sense. We are one because together we confess a common faith in Jesus Christ who sanctifies through his word. This becomes clear in Jesus’ high priestly prayer in John 17:11-19. *“Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.”* As Jesus sanctifies us by his word, which is the truth, he makes us one. This is that to which we then “testify.”

The fact that the Transjordan tribes built a monument as a witness to a common faith points us ahead to the consummate covenant mediator, Jesus Christ, who makes us one through a common faith in his shed blood and perfect righteousness. When we assemble together on the Lord’s day, we do so to hear that Jesus has died for our sins, to hear that he was raised for our justification, and then we confess this faith together throughout our worship service. As we do this, we are offering “a testimony” to our children, to our families, to our neighbors, to the pagans around us who don’t understand. As one, we are affirming that God is our Father, that Jesus, his son, is our Savior, and that we being sanctified through word and sacrament. And as we do this together, we are testifying to all those around us that same covenant promise the Transjordan tribes confessed when they built their altar: “I will be your God and you will be my people.” This beloved, is our witness to the watching world.