

The Controversial Altar Built Near the Jordan River Joshua 22:1-20

Joshua 22:1-20 - *“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.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.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.”*

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.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.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.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.”

Background Notes

In verse 12 we learn that there was a threat of civil war in Israel. The 9 ½ tribes on the west side of the Jordan River were about to go to war with the 2 ½ tribes on the east side of the Jordan River. Why? What's the background here?

Turn back to Numbers 32. As the children of Israel were about to enter the Promised Land, the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh came before Moses and said that they wanted to settle on the east side of the Jordan River (v5-7). After Moses rebuked them for their lack of full commitment and their unwillingness to go all the way into the Land of Promise, the 2 ½ tribes promised Moses that they would come over the Jordan and fight the battles with the other tribes. However, after the battles were over, they would return to their families and their flocks and settle on the east side of the Jordan River (v16-19). So the 2 ½ tribes were given permission to settle on the east side of the Jordan River as long as their armies went over and fought with the rest of Israel until the Promised Land was conquered (v20-22).

Well, the 2 ½ tribes kept their word and sent their armies across the Jordan River with the rest of Israel. They fought the battles, and now here in Joshua 22, the conquest was over and they were going home. Some of these soldiers had been away from home for a long time, since the conquest of Canaan took seven years!

Joshua commended the men of the 2 ½ tribes for their good service, and they were given an honorable discharge. So the men of the 2 ½ tribes departed, but before they crossed over the Jordan River they did something very unusual: they built a large altar (v10). When we come to the second half of the chapter, we will learn that the 2 ½ tribes did not build this altar for sacrifice. They built it as a symbolic witness to their children and future generations that they were united with the 9 ½ tribes on the west side of the Jordan -- they were all one nation under God!

Unfortunately, the 9 ½ tribes misjudged the motives of the 2 ½ tribes. They thought that the men of the 2 ½ tribes were wrongly setting up another altar of sacrifice. Thus the 9 ½ tribes were ready to go to war to put an end to what they thought was rebellion and apostasy.

Doctrinal / Teaching Points

1. It is wrong for believers to judge the motives of other believers.

The 9 ½ tribes wrongly judged the motives of the 2 ½ tribes. They jumped to the conclusion that Reuben, Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh were setting up an altar of sacrifice and another system of worship -- but they were wrong! The 2 ½ tribes were actually setting up a symbolic and memorial replica altar as a witness for their families that the tribes of Israel were one nation under God.

Now the 9 ½ tribes were right in being concerned for the holiness of God. In Deuteronomy 12 God had said that when they came into the Land there was to be only **one** place of sacrifice, and that one place was at the tabernacle at Shiloh. So the 2 ½ tribes would certainly have been wrong if they had been setting up another altar of sacrifice.

The 9 ½ tribes were right to be zealous for the holiness of God. The 9 ½ tribes were right in pointing out that God didn't take a light view of disobedience to His commands. So the 9 ½ tribes were right in being concerned with what the 2 ½ tribes were doing when they built this impressive altar.

It certainly looked like the 2 ½ tribes were rebelling and disobeying the Lord. But the 9 ½ tribes were wrong in so quickly jumping to conclusions and judging the motives of the 2 ½ tribes, and quickly arming themselves for civil war!

Here's our doctrinal point: It's wrong for believers to judge the motives of other believers. In the Sermon on the Mount our Lord Jesus said, *"Judge not, that you be not judged"* (Matthew 7:1). The point is that we are not to judge motives.

Sometimes we must judge wrong or sinful behavior, as in church discipline and family discipline -- but we should always check out the motives before we take action. For example, if a student cuts one of my classes several days in a row, I shouldn't jump to the conclusion that this student doesn't like me, or that the student is unspiritual! There may be a very good reason why this student has missed these classes, and I should check it out before assuming that this student has a bad attitude.

It's wrong for believers to judge the motives of other believers. We all need to learn this lesson. If we did, a lot of unnecessary friction between believers could be prevented.

2. It is right for believers to investigate before taking action.

That's exactly what the 9 ½ tribes did. Before going to war, they sent a delegation of ten men, headed up by Phinehas the priest, to investigate what the 2 ½ tribes were up to (v13-14). This was good! They asked before assaulting. They wanted to hear the whole story. Phinehas, by the way, was the same priest that God used to intervene and stop the plague in Numbers 25. Phinehas was a godly man, and he was a good man to head up this investigating committee.

Look at the magnanimous offer that the 9 ½ tribes made to the 2 ½ tribes so this problem could be straightened out. Look at verse 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."* What a great attitude! The 9 ½ tribes were willing to give up some of their land to get the situation straightened out! Let me ask you, how much material possession would you – would I - be willing to give up in order to straighten out problems in our own congregations?

In the secular world, we have civil courts to investigate before punitive action is taken, but do we investigate before taking action when something or someone in our church bothers us? Watch out for hasty and misguided zeal! There are many sad stories of action taken before investigation. Problems should be corrected, and the church must discipline sinful behavior, but not before the situation is thoroughly checked out.

What about problems in your family? Do you discipline your children before investigating the problem thoroughly? It is right for believers to investigate before taking action.

Practical Applications

1. Give credit where credit is due.

When Joshua sent the 2 ½ home, he gave credit where credit was due. Look back at verses 2-3. No wonder Joshua was a good and beloved leader -- he gave credit when credit was due! As Christians, we should do the same -- especially when we're in leadership positions.

We need to give credit to good behavior in our families. I need to give credit with my students. Church leaders need to do give due credit, too, especially to encourage the younger generation -- even if their style is different than ours!

Give credit where credit is due. And younger generation, you need to do the same for the older generation! Give credit when credit is due to your parents and to your spiritual leaders. Give credit where credit is due!

2. Don't forget to share!

When the 2 ½ tribes departed with the booty of war, Joshua said to them "*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.*" Some of the men of the 2 ½ tribes, of course, had remained on the east side of the Jordan to protect the families and property. Now the troops returning from the front lines were to divide the spoils of war and share with their brethren who had remained to care for the families.

We need to do the same. We all have different jobs to do for the Lord, and every job is important. Some people have great needs, and some people have received greater material blessing. Remember this principle of being established in the Land the Lord has given us: Don't forget to share!