

### The Two and One-half Tribes Explain the Purpose of the Altar

#### Joshua 22:21-34

Joshua 22:21-34 - *“Then the children of Reuben, the children of Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh answered and said to the heads of the divisions of Israel: <sup>22</sup> “The LORD God of gods, the LORD God of gods, He knows, and let Israel itself know—if it is in rebellion, or if in treachery against the LORD, do not save us this day. <sup>23</sup> If we have built ourselves an altar to turn from following the LORD, or if to offer on it burnt offerings or grain offerings, or if to offer peace offerings on it, let the LORD Himself require an account. <sup>24</sup> But in fact we have done it for fear, for a reason, saying, ‘In time to come your descendants may speak to our descendants, saying, “What have you to do with the LORD God of Israel? <sup>25</sup> For the LORD has made the Jordan a border between you and us, you children of Reuben and children of Gad. You have no part in the LORD.” So your descendants would make our descendants cease fearing the LORD. <sup>26</sup> Therefore we said, ‘Let us now prepare to build ourselves an altar, not for burnt offering nor for sacrifice, <sup>27</sup> but that it may be a witness between you and us and our generations after us, that we may perform the service of the LORD before Him with our burnt offerings, with our sacrifices, and with our peace offerings; that your descendants may not say to our descendants in time to come, “You have no part in the LORD.” <sup>28</sup> Therefore we said that it will be, when they say this to us or to our generations in time to come, that we may say, ‘Here is the replica of the altar of the LORD which our fathers made, though not for burnt offerings nor for sacrifices; but it is a witness between you and us. <sup>29</sup> Far be it from us that we should rebel against the LORD, and turn from following the LORD this day, to build an altar for burnt offerings, for grain offerings, or for sacrifices, besides the altar of the LORD our God which is before His tabernacle.”*

<sup>30</sup> *Now when Phinehas the priest and the rulers of the congregation, the heads of the divisions of Israel who were with him, heard the words that the children of Reuben, the children of Gad, and the children of Manasseh spoke, it pleased them. <sup>31</sup> Then Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest said to the children of Reuben, the children of Gad, and the children of Manasseh, “This day we perceive that the LORD is among us, because you have not committed this treachery against the LORD. Now you have delivered the children of Israel out of the hand of the LORD.”*

<sup>32</sup> *And Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, and the rulers, returned from the children of Reuben and the children of Gad, from the land of Gilead to the land of Canaan, to the children of Israel, and brought back word to them. <sup>33</sup> So the thing pleased the children of Israel, and the children of Israel blessed God; they spoke no more of going against them in battle, to destroy the land where the children of Reuben and Gad dwelt.*

<sup>34</sup> *The children of Reuben and the children of Gad called the altar, Witness, “For it is a witness between us that the LORD is God.”*

## Background Notes

Joshua 22 is a good chapter to study whenever misunderstandings arise between believers, whether they are believers in a Christian family, a Christian ministry or within a church congregation. A major misunderstanding took place between the two divisions of the tribes of Israel – the 9 ½ tribes that settled on the west side of the Jordan River, and the 2 ½ tribes that settled on the east side of the Jordan River. It concerned an altar that was built by the 2 ½ tribes by the Jordan River.

The 2 ½ tribes *“came to the region of the Jordan, which is in the land of Canaan, the children of Reuben, the children of Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh built an altar there by the Jordan, a great impressive altar.”* This altar was probably patterned after the true altar of the Lord that was at the Tabernacle at Shiloh, but it was larger and more impressive. Possibly it could have been seen for miles around.

The 9 ½ tribes thought it was a rival altar, and they thought the 2 ½ tribes were setting up a separate system of worship. As far as the 9 ½ tribes were concerned, this was rebellion – apostasy and idolatry! The only course of action was civil war.

Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed. An investigative committee was set up to see what was really going on. In the second half of the chapter, the 2 ½ tribes answered the charges. It turned out that they were not building a rival altar of sacrifice, after all – the altar was meant to be only a memorial replica of the true altar at Shiloh. It was to be a witness to their families for generations to come, that even though they lived on the east side of the Jordan River, they were part of Israel on the west side of the Jordan River. They were one nation under God.

## Doctrinal / Teaching Points

### 1. It is wrong for believers not to think ahead.

That’s where the 2 ½ tribes made their mistake: they didn’t think ahead. They didn’t think through their actions. They didn’t realize the repercussions that could take place. Their motives were good. They wanted the altar to be a witness of the unity between all the tribes of Israel, and what better symbol than an altar? The worship of the Lord is certainly the basis of unity! Unfortunately, the 2 ½ tribes didn’t think ahead to the possible explosive reaction of the 9 ½ tribes, who misread their motives. The 9 ½ tribes would naturally have a negative reaction to a large altar built by the 2 ½ tribes by the Jordan River!

What a lesson for us! We need to think ahead about how others may read our actions -- even though our motives may be good and right! We need to avoid even the appearance of evil.

Not long ago I preached at a church where most of the congregation didn’t know me. I decided to go with a more relaxed, laidback, classroom style of preaching, hoping to relate better to my audience. I thought that everything was going well as

I gave my sermon, but a few days later I received a letter from a woman in the church who was offended at my presentation. She didn't know me, and she thought that I had a low view of the Word of God because I was so casual! She felt I was being disrespectful of God's Word. (Nothing could be further from the truth!) However, this woman felt that I should be more proper and formal when standing at the pulpit, handling the oracles of God.

She had a point! My mistake was that I didn't anticipate this possible reaction from people who didn't know me well. I should have thought through my actions. Now it's true that you can't please everybody! No matter what you do, you're bound to offend someone, even some believers! But try to think ahead about possible wrong reactions to your actions. In fact -- it is wrong for believer to not think ahead!

## **2. It is right for believers not to retaliate.**

When Phinehas and the delegation from the 9 ½ tribes rebuked the 2 ½ tribes, it would have been easy enough and natural enough for the 2 ½ tribes to retaliate. "How dare you accuse us of rebellion? What do you mean we're setting up a separate system of worship? Who are you to judge us anyway?"

The 2 ½ tribes didn't take that attitude. They didn't retaliate. In verses 22-23 they said, "*The LORD God of gods, the LORD God of gods, He knows, and let Israel itself know—if it is in rebellion, or if in treachery against the LORD, do not save us this day. <sup>23</sup> If we have built ourselves an altar to turn from following the LORD, or if to offer on it burnt offerings or grain offerings, or if to offer peace offerings on it, let the LORD Himself require an account.*" Then they give the reasons as to why they set up the replica altar.

What a great attitude! They were willing to be disciplined by the Lord if they were wrong! They didn't retaliate. They were given the chance to explain themselves, and Phinehas and the delegation from the 9 ½ tribes accepted the explanation. There was no civil war.

What a great lesson for us: it is right for believer not to retaliate! Romans 12:19 says, "*Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord.*" Proverbs 15:1 says, "*A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.*"

We all need to have the attitude that David had when he wrote Psalm 139:23-24 - "*Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*" 1 Peter 5:6 says, "*Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time...*" It is right for believers not to retaliate.

In reference to the letter I received from that woman, it was hard for me not to retaliate! "How dare you question my motives and attitudes? I'm on the faculty of Emmaus Bible College! How can you think I have a low view of the Word of God?" But, praise the Lord, I didn't retaliate! Rather, I prayed about it, and I sent her a letter of explanation and an

apology for offending her. I believe that I followed the biblical principle that is taught here in Joshua 22. It is right for believers not to retaliate.

## Practical Application

### What kind of message are you sending to the next generation?

The 2 ½ tribes thought they were doing the right thing when they built the large impressive altar, and it was certainly done with good motives. They wanted the next generation to know that they were one nation under God.

However, they were really sending the wrong message to the next generation. You see, God had already built into His Law a safeguard against the different tribes falling away from national unity and worship of the one true God. Do you know what that was? Turn back to Deuteronomy 16:16-17: *“Three times a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, at the Feast of Weeks, and at the Feast of Tabernacles; and they shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed.”*<sup>17</sup> *Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the LORD your God which He has given you.”* We read the same thing in Exodus 23:17 *“Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord GOD.”*

God had chosen a place for a central sanctuary in the Land, where the Tabernacle and later the Temple would be located -- the city of Jerusalem. Three times a year, on three of the feast days, all the male population was to come to Jerusalem to worship. Women could come, too, but males were required to come.

If the 2 ½ tribes had thought ahead, they would have realized that if they simply obeyed this command of the Lord there would be no need for an altar as a memorial. The younger generation would catch the right message as they saw their parents, their grandparents, and everyone from all the tribes going up, together, three times a year to worship the Lord God at the Temple in Jerusalem!

I think that the application is obvious for us. If we in the older generation will faithfully follow and worship the Lord, then those in the next generation will receive the right message. A Christian man I know is to be commended for the way he supports various Christian ministries with substantial gifts of money, including Christian camps for the next generation. But he rarely attends his home church, and he rarely studies God’s Word. He wants the younger generation, the next generation to follow the Lord -- but he’s sending them the wrong message with his own life!

What kind of message are you sending to the next generation?