

IV. **Retaining the Land** (22:1-24:33)

“The theme of each of these last chapters of Joshua is the need to acknowledge and serve God in peace as well as in war.... For seven long years the people had followed Joshua in an aggressive and far-ranging conquest of the Promised Land.... As far as we can tell, the seven years of fighting had been marked mostly by Israel's faithfulness to God and the task before them. But what of the peace? Nations often lost in peace what they have gained in war: Would Israel abandon its high level of spiritual commitment and integrity and gradually fall into disobedience and paganism? Those questions were on Joshua's mind and heart as he challenged first the eastern tribes, then the leaders, and eventually the entire company of the people.” [Boice, p. 116]

E. **The dismissal of the eastern tribes** (22:1-34)

“The chapter contains a moving farewell, and that leads into what is certainly one of the most instructive incidents in all the long years of the campaign.” [Boice, p. 116]

“...These two tribes and a half had their quota of troops ready, 40,000 in all, which, whenever there was occasion, presented themselves at their respective posts, and now attended in a body to receive their discharge.” [*Matthew Henry's Commentary II*, p. 79]

“Joshua *commended* them {Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh} for their faithful service... He also *commanded* them to obey the Lord and serve Him sincerely. Finally, he *cautioned* them not to become selfish but to share the spoils with their brethren....

“The land was at rest, but the eastern tribes were restless because the Jordan River separated them from their brethren. Would their children grow up and think they were not truly Israelites? They should have considered that when they chose the boundary!

“The building of the altar was at first misunderstood as a declaration of war.... Before you declare war on the brethren, stop to find out what is going on.... Ponder Proverbs 18:13 and James 3:13-18.” [Wiersbe, *With the Word*, p. 139]

1. **Their honorable discharge** (22:1-8)

“The soldiers from the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh must have been especially euphoric when the Jewish conquest of Canaan ended. For over seven years they had been away from their families on the other side of the Jordan, and now the victorious soldiers were free to go home. [Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary II*, p. 75]

a. **Joshua commended them** (22:1-3)

“Though their service was a due debt, and the performance of a promise, and they had done no more than was their duty to do, yet he highly commends them; not only gives them up their bonds, as it were, now that they had fulfilled the condition, but applauds their good services. Though it was by the favor of God and his power that Israel got possession of this land, and he must have all the glory, yet Joshua thought there was a thankful acknowledgment due to their brethren who assisted them, and whose sword and bow were employed for them. God must be chiefly eyed in our praises, yet instruments must not be altogether overlooked.... They had not only done their duty to Joshua and Israel, but, which was best of all, they had made conscience of their duty to God: *You have kept the charge*, or, as the word is, *You have kept the keeping*, that is, ‘You have carefully and circumspectly kept the *commandment of the Lord your God*, not only in this particular instance of continuing in the service of Israel to the end of the war, but, in general, you have kept up religion in your part of the camp, a rare and excellent thing among soldiers, and where it is worthy to be praised.’” [*Matthew Henry's Commentary II*, p. 79-80]

b. **Joshua released them** (22:4)

“In sending away the two tribes and a half Joshua pressed two counsels on them. One was that they were to divide the spoil with those of their brethren that had remained at home. Here, again, selfishness might possibly have found a footing. Why should the men that had incurred none of the labor and the peril enjoy any of the spoil? Would it not have been fair that those who had

borne the burden and heat of the day should alone enjoy its rewards? But, in point of fact, there had been good reason why a portion should remain at home. To leave the women and children wholly undefended would have been recklessness itself. Some arrangement, too, had to be made for looking after the flocks and herds. And as the supply of manna had ceased, the production of food had to be provided for. The men at home had been doing the duty assigned to them as well as the men abroad. If they could not establish a claim in justice to a share of the spoil, the spirit of brotherhood and generosity pleaded on their behalf. The soldier-section of the two and a half tribes had done their part honorably and generously to the nine and a half; let them act in the same spirit to their own brethren.” [Blaikie, p. 724]

c. **Joshua admonished them** (22:5) Cf. Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37

“The other counsel of Joshua bore upon that which was ever uppermost in his heart — loyalty to God... All their prosperity, all their happiness, their very life itself, depended on their being faithful to their God.” [Blaikie, p. 724-725]

d. **Joshua blessed them** (22:6-8)

2. **Their honest concern** (22:9-10)

“The pious care of the separated tribes to keep their hold of Canaan's religion, even when they were leaving Canaan's land, that they might not be as the *sons of the stranger, utterly separated from God's people*, Isaiah 56:3. In order to this, they built a great altar on the borders of Jordan, to be a witness for them that they were Israelites, and as such *partakers of the altar of the Lord*... This altar was very innocently and honestly designed, but it would have been well if, since it had in it an appearance of evil, and might be an occasion of offence to their brethren, they had consulted the oracle of God about it before they did it, or at least acquainted their brethren with their purpose... Their zeal was commendable, but it ought to have been guided with discretion. There was no need to hasten the building of an altar for the purpose for which they intended this, but they might have taken time to consider and take advice; yet, when their sincerity was made to appear, we do not find that they were blamed for their rashness.” [Matthew Henry's Commentary II, p. 80-81]

3. **Their humble submission** (22:11-29)

a. **The alarm** (22:11-14)

“...Who can estimate all the misery that has come in almost every age, in circles both public and private, from hasty suspicions of evil, which a little patience, a little inquiry, a little opportunity of explanation, might have at once averted? History, tradition, fiction, alike furnish us with instances. We recall the story of Llewellyn and his dog Gelert, stabbed by his master, who thought the stains upon his mouth were the blood of his beloved child; while, on raising the cradle which had been turned over, he found his child asleep and well, and a huge wolf dead, from whose fangs the dog had delivered him. We remembered the tragedy of Othello and Desdemona; we see how the fondest love may be poisoned by hasty suspicion, and the dearest of wives murdered, when a little patience would have shown her innocent — shown her all too pure to come in contact with even a vestige of the evil thing,” [Blaikie, p. 726]

“The holy jealousy of the other tribes for the honor of God and his altar at Shiloh. Notice was immediately brought to the princes of Israel of the setting up of this altar, v. 11. And they, knowing how strict and severe that law was which required them to offer all their sacrifices in the place which God should choose, and not elsewhere (Deuteronomy 12:5-7), were soon apprehensive that the setting up of another altar was an affront to the choice which God had lately made of a place to put his name in, and had a direct tendency to the worship of some other God.

“...Their suspicion was very excusable, for it must be confessed the thing, *prima facie* — at *first sight*, looked ill, and seemed to imply a design to set up and maintain a competitor with the altar at Shiloh. It was no strained *innuendo* from the building of an altar to infer an intention to offer sacrifice upon it, and that might introduce idolatry and end in a total apostasy from the faith and worship of the God of Israel....

“Their zeal, upon this suspicion, was very commendable, v. 12. When they apprehended that these tribes, which by the river Jordan were separated from them, were separating themselves from God, they took it as the greatest injury that could be done to themselves, and showed a readiness, if it were necessary, to put their lives in their hands in defense of the altar of God, and to take up arms for the chastising and reducing of these rebels, and to prevent the spreading of the infection, if no gentler methods would serve, by cutting off from their body the gangrened member.... They had but lately sheathed their swords, and retired from the perils and fatigues of war to the rest God had given them, and yet they are willing to begin a new war rather than be any way wanting in their duty to restrain, repress, and revenge, idolatry, and every step towards it....

“Their prudence in the prosecution of this zealous resolution is no less commendable. God had appointed them, in cases of this nature, to *enquire and make search* (Deuteronomy 13:14), that they might not wrong their brethren under pretence of righting their religion; accordingly they resolve here not to send forth their armies, to wage war, till they had first sent their ambassadors to enquire into the merits of the cause, and these men of the first rank, one out of each tribe, and Phinehas at the head of them to be their spokesman, v. 13, 14. Thus was their zeal for God tempered, guided, and governed by the *meekness of wisdom*.” [Matthew Henry’s Commentary II, p. 81]

“Think of it! These men had just parted under the most moving circumstances. They were sick of war and were rejoicing in the long-awaited peace. But suddenly, as soon as they heard that the two and a half tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh were constructing a rival altar, they snatched up their arms again and prepared to march against them.” [Boice, p. 117]

“That is just terrific!... These men had just parted as companions of war.... But now they thought the holiness of God was being threatened. So these men, who were sick of war, said, ‘The holiness of God demands no compromise.’ I would to God that the church of the twentieth century would learn this lesson. The holiness of the God who exists demands that there be no compromise in the area of truth.” [The Complete Works of Francis a. Schaeffer II, p. 284-285]

“The eastern and western tribes did not disagree on their interpretation of the law in Dt. 12:4-14 — both sides assumed that law prescribed that Israel worship only at the central sanctuary. The westerners, however, thought that the easterners were intending to worship the Lord according to their own will, not his. By looking at the way in which the two groups reconciled their differences, we can draw out sound principles for resolving doctrinal differences (cf. Mt. 18:15-20).

“The western tribes, as the offended party, set about mending the rift in the following way:

— they squarely addressed themselves to the problem, and did not sweep it under the rug (11-12a).

— they took apostasy so seriously that they put purity above their own lives, not buying peace at any price.

— they sent their ablest leaders, the priest Phinehas who had shown himself zealous for the Lord in the episode at Baal Peor (Nu. 25:7), and ten chiefs representing all the tribes, to investigate the matter and possibly to restore the offenders, not acting rashly (13-14).

— they addressed the perceived offence objectively as a breach of faith, an act of rebellion against God, not subjectively as a body-blow to their own egos (15-16).

— they argued their case on the conviction that God punishes sin as displayed at Baal Peor (*i.e.* it left them with the seeds of historical guilt and the Lord’s plague, not on expediency – 17).

— they also argued on the conviction that the sin of some affects all, as seen at Baal Peor (27-28) and in the case of Achan (18, 20; see 7:1), and such corporate guilt was not something inconsequential to them.

— they respected their brothers’ consciences and convictions (*i.e.* that eastern Israel was defiled because it lacked God’s holy sanctuary), not ruling their weak consciences out of court (19a; *cf.* Rom. 14:1-23).

— they were willing to sacrifice some of their possessions to restore their brothers to a clean conscience and proper worship, not insisting on their proper interpretation of the law (19b).

— having been corrected by the perceived offenders, they acceded to their creative expression of faith, not barring new and appropriate expressions of faith consistent with God’s Word (30-31).

— finally, the representatives reported to the full assembly for their approval, not over-reaching their authority (32).

“The eastern tribes, the offenders, responded by correcting the misunderstanding by presenting the facts of the situation solemnly, piously and vigorously. They agreed with taking decisive action against apostasy, being willing to die themselves to prevent it (23), and then explained clearly and fully their motivation. They said that they needed some appropriate monument, such as the replica altar, to overcome the natural barrier of the Jordan, as a witness to future generations that their covenant children had an equal right in the worship of God (24-28; see 4:5-7). It was not intended for sacrifices and so was not an apostasy.

“As a result of these sound procedures the brothers separated reconciled with one another and praising God (30-34).” [Waltke, p. 257]

b. The appeal (22:15-20)

“A profound awe and reverence of God are expressed in the form of their appeal: *The Lord God of gods, the Lord God of gods, he knows.* Or, as it might be read somewhat closer to the original, *The God of gods, Jehovah, the God of gods, Jehovah, he knows....* for he is perfectly acquainted with the thoughts and intents of the heart, and particularly with all inclinations to idolatry (Psalm 44:20, 21)... ‘*God forbid that we should rebel against the Lord, as we own we should if we had set up this altar for burnt-offerings; no, we abhor the thought of it. We have as great a value and veneration for the altar of the Lord at Shiloh as any of the tribes of Israel have, and are as firmly resolved to adhere to it and constantly to attend it; we have the same concern that you have for the purity of God’s worship and the unity of his church; far be it, far be it from us, to think of turning away from following God.*’” [Matthew Henry’s Commentary II, p. 83]

c. The argument (22:21-29)

“They fully explain their true intent and meaning in building this altar.... They gave an account of the fears they had lest, in process of time, their posterity, being seated at such a distance from the tabernacle, should be looked upon and treated as strangers to the commonwealth of Israel (v. 24); it was for fear of this thing, and the word signifies a great perplexity and solicitude of mind which they were in, until they eased themselves by this expedient.... Now indeed they were owned as brethren, and were as welcome at the tabernacle as any other of the tribes; but what if their children after them should be disowned? They, by reason of their distance, and the interposition of Jordan, which it was not easy at all times to pass and repass, could not be so numerous and constant in their attendance on the three yearly feasts as the other tribes, to make a continual claim to the privileges of Israelites, and would therefore be looked upon as inconsiderable members of their church, and by degrees would be rejected as not members of it at all.... ‘Therefore, to secure an interest in the altar of God to those who shall come after us, and to prove their title to it, *we said, Let us build an altar, to be a witness between us and you,*’ that, having this copy of the altar in their custody, it might be produced as an evidence of their right to the privilege of the original. Every one that saw this altar, and observed that it was never used for sacrifice and offering, would enquire what was the meaning of it, and this answer would be given to that enquiry, that it was built by those separate tribes, in token of their communion with their brethren and their joint-interest with them in the altar of the Lord.” [Matthew Henry’s Commentary II, p. 83-84]

d. The agreement (22:30-34)

“1. The ambassadors did not call in question their sincerity in that protestation, did not say, ‘You tell us you design it not for sacrifice and offering, but who can believe you? What security will you give us that it shall never be so used?’ No. *Charity believes all things, hopes all things, believes and hopes the best, and is very loath to give the lie to any.*

“2. They did not upbraid them with the rashness and unadvisedness of this action, did not tell them, ‘If you would do such a thing, and with this good intention, yet you might have had so much respect for Joshua and Eleazar as to have advised with them, or at least have made them acquainted with it, and so have saved the trouble and expense of this embassy.’ But a little want of consideration and good manners should be excused and overlooked in those who, we have reason to think, mean honestly.

“3. Much less did they go about to fish for evidence to make out their charge, because they had once exhibited it, but were glad to have their mistake rectified, and were not at all ashamed to own it. Proud and peevish spirits, when they have passed an unjust censure upon their brethren, though ever so much convincing evidence be brought of the injustice of it, will stand to it, and can by no means be persuaded to retract it. These ambassadors were not so prejudiced; their brethren's vindication pleased them, v. 30. They looked upon their innocency as a token of God's presence (v. 31), especially when they found that what was done was so far from being an indication of their growing cool to the altar of God that, one the contrary, it was a fruit of their zealous affection to it...” [*Matthew Henry's Commentary II*, p. 84]

“We have here the good issue of this controversy, which, if there had not been on both sides a disposition to peace, as there was on both sides a zeal for God, might have been of ill consequence; for quarrels about religion, for want of wisdom and love, often prove the most fierce and most difficult to be accommodated. But these contending parties, when the matter was fairly stated and argued, were so happy as to understand one another very well, and so the difference was presently compromised.” [*Matthew Henry's Commentary II*, p. 84]

“...Whereas in most differences that happen there is a fault on both sides, on this there was fault on no side; none (for aught that appears) were to be blamed, but all to be praised.” [*Matthew Henry's Commentary II*, p. 78]