

ENTER AT YOUR OWN REST

Studies in the Book of Joshua

"Full blessing in the Christian life is not bestowed except to eager, hungry people who press in to receive it"

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Text

Joshua 22:1-34

Topic

The two and one-half tribes return to their land on the other side of the Jordan River and promptly set up an altar that almost causes a civil war

Title

"Altar-native Worship"

Joshua 22:9 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.

Joshua 22:10 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.

Joshua 22:11 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."

Joshua 22:12 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.

Introduction

The Israelites quite literally built their lives *around* the Lord.

After exodus-ing from Egypt they camped in very distinct formations on four sides of the Tabernacle. They built their lives around the Lord in that manner for over forty years. Living around the Lord they could easily

participate in the daily, weekly, and annual events taking place at the Tabernacle.

The understanding that the Lord was to be at the center is a key to analyzing the children of Reuben, the children of Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh. As those tribes approached the Promised Land they asked Moses if they could settle outside of the land on the other side of the Jordan River. Moses was righteously indignant at first. He knew it was a bad idea. As they persisted he graciously relented.

For their part the two and one-half tribes promised to cross the Jordan River and help their brothers conquer the Promised Land. They kept their promise and in chapter twenty-two were returning to their homes in the country of Gilead.

While their brothers continued to build lives around the Lord's Tabernacle they would pass over the Jordan River. They would pass by the monuments Joshua had erected that commemorated the miracle of crossing the Jordan into the land of promise. Those monuments, one on the shores inside Canaan and one under the waters of the river, would silently witness to them of their decision to leave the land of promise.

For forty years, really almost fifty if you include the years of conquest, they had camped with the Lord at their center. Leaving the land, their lives could no longer be built around the Lord. By their own choice they had cut themselves off from His Tabernacle.

To try to compensate they built an altar on the shore of the Jordan River. It almost caused a civil war with their brothers. Peace was achieved but the two and one-half tribes remained separated from their brothers and from the Lord.

One very precious lesson suggests itself to us: **You can build your life *around* the Lord or you can build your life to merely *include* the Lord.**

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Be Careful To Avoid The Draw Of Building Your Life To Merely Include Jesus, and #2 Be Honest To Acknowledge The Drawbacks Of Building Your Life To Merely Include Jesus.

#1 Be Careful To Avoid The Draw Of
Building Your Life To Merely Include Jesus
(v1-10)

The confusion we have in analyzing the two and one-half tribes is that Moses gave them permission them to settle on the other side of the Jordan River. Then, after he did, there are no rebukes against them doing so. In fact, their faithfulness to help in the fight is several times commended. You might therefore conclude that their settling outside the land was a good thing.

It wasn't. It's a good example of what is sometimes called the permissive will of God. It was God's will that all His people enter the land and build their lives around Him. He permitted the two and one-half tribes to live outside the land. In His grace He gave them what they desired - even though it was not His desire for them and, ultimately, it was not His best for them.

They ought to have wanted to live in the land, nearer to the Tabernacle. The very presence of God was there in the Tabernacle. During their wilderness wanderings the Lord led them from place to place as His literal Shekinah, His glory, would begin to move. The Tabernacle was the place of worship. It was the center of their social lives.

What could possibly draw the two and one-half tribes away from a life in the Promised Land built around the Tabernacle and thus the Lord?

Good grazing land was the draw! While passing through it on their way to the land of promise they saw that the land outside of Canaan was great for livestock. They were big into livestock. So they persisted in asking permission to settle outside of the land. It was permitted. It was the permissive will of God.

Joshua 22:1 Then Joshua called the Reubenites, the Gadites, and half the tribe of Manasseh,

Joshua 22:2 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.

Joshua 22:3 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.

Joshua 22:4 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.

Joshua 22:5 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."

Joshua 22:6 So Joshua blessed them and sent them away, and they went to their tents.

Joshua 22:7 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,

Joshua 22:8 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."

Joshua 22:9 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.

It sounded great! **But it wasn't.** They were leaving the land God had promised them for a land of their own choosing. They were leaving the presence of the Lord. To compensate they decided to build an altar.

Joshua 22:10 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.

We'll hear their reasons for building this altar in a moment. They sound almost reasonable on the surface. But God had not prescribed any altars be built inside or outside of the Promised Land. It was their way of trying to include the Lord in their lives rather than building lives around Him.

For the two and one-half tribes it was their livelihood, their careers, that had the more powerful draw upon them than the Lord. They elevated the world to be equal with their worship.

The list of things that are a draw away from the Lord are as individual and unique as each believer. It's up to each of us to be careful to understand we sometimes bargain with God to get His permissive will to our own spiritual detriment. Then we build altars to try to compensate.

I don't want to set up any of my own altars. I want to know God's perfect will, not demand His permissive will. *So do you!* And since we do it is important we survey our lives for any altars we've built or are building.

#2 Be Honest To Acknowledge The Drawbacks Of Building Your Life To Merely Include Jesus

(v11-34)

There were obvious drawbacks to living away from the Tabernacle:

- Crossing the Jordan River was never easy and was sometimes impossible.
- You were farther from the center of Jewish social life.
- You'd be last to hear what God was instructing the nation.
- You'd also be closer to your enemies and the first to be attacked and overrun by them.

Besides these and other drawbacks, as we follow the conversation between the tribes we can also identify some indicators we might be building merely to include the Lord.

Joshua 22:11 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."

Joshua 22:12 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.

Why such a radical reaction? **Because altars were what the pagan cultures built to worship idols.** The two and one-half tribes looked exactly like their pagan neighbors.

One indicator we are not building our lives around the Lord is that we look and act just like our non-believing neighbors. If there is nothing to distinguish me as a believer I am probably living too far from the Lord and too close to the world.

Joshua 22:13 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,

Joshua 22:14 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.

You never wanted to get a pastoral visit from Phinehas. He was the guy in the Book of Numbers who saw an Israelite go into his tent with a Moabite woman then followed them in with a javelin, running them through and killing them for their sin. It stopped a plague that had broken out in the camp of Israel on account of their sexual sin of intermingling with the wicked women.

Here's another indicator of how you are building. Would you be someone who could be sent to deal with a spiritual situation? Or someone to whom others are sent? Which end of the conversation are you on?

Joshua 22:15 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, Joshua 22:16 "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?

Joshua 22:17 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,

Joshua 22:18 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.

“Peor” was the place of the aforementioned plague that killed twenty-four thousand Israelites before Phinehas acted.

It's a reminder that we are interconnected as believers. My actions and attitudes affect you and vice-versa. I am therefore never really free to do as I please but, rather, to do what pleases my Lord.

A lot of times you'll hear a believer say that he or she has to do what is “right” for them. I agree - except I'd add that what is “right” for them can't be something “wrong” for the body of Christ, something that will harm others.

Joshua 22:19 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 amazing grace! If you find you've been building in a manner not pleasing to the Lord, just stop and return to the place of blessing.

Notice Phinehas understood the basic issue. They had left "the land of the possession of the Lord, where the Lord's tabernacle stands..."

Joshua 22:20 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.' "

Achan took spoil from Jericho. It led to the deaths of thirty-six Israeli soldiers in the next battle at Ai. Achan perished and brought others down with him.

This is a deeper wrinkle on what we just said regarding our being interconnected. **We must not stumble others by our behaviors.** Before I make a decision I must consider how it will affect my brothers and sisters. Might it cause them to trip and fall in their own walk with Jesus? If so, I'd better think again.

Joshua 22:21 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:

Joshua 22:22 "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.

Joshua 22:23 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.

A lot of what these guys say sounds OK until you really think about it. They sound submissive when they say, "do not save us this day." But then they say, "let the Lord Himself require an account." In other words, we answer to God, not to you.

True, we will stand before the Lord and answer to Him. But He will take into account our lives among our fellow believers. We **do** have responsibilities to one another. We **do** answer to one another as well as to the Lord.

God doesn't put me into situations where obeying Him will hurt other believers. If I find myself saying He has I should stop and reevaluate things.

Joshua 22:24 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?'

Joshua 22:25 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.'

Wait a minute! Who made the border between them? **They did** - when they demanded that they be allowed to settle on the wrong side of the Jordan River. Now they blame it on the Lord.

It's a classic example of blame-shifting. Blame-shifting is always an indicator you are building poorly.

Joshua 22:26 Therefore we said, 'Let us now prepare to build ourselves an altar, not for burnt offering nor for sacrifice,

Joshua 22:27 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." '

Joshua 22:28 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.'

They keep mentioning their "descendants" and their "generations." They're talking about their kids. Living on the wrong side of the Jordan River, outside of the Promised Land, they were trying to figure out a way to raise godly kids. Their kids would never know the joy and privilege of living with God at the center. The Tabernacle would be too distant to be significant. The very fact that their parents chose life outside of Canaan would establish for the kids that God was to be included, if possible, but He was not necessarily to be their top priority.

This, for me, is the saddest part of a decision to live a marginal, borderline Christian life. Kids aren't dumb. They know whether or not God is the real

focal point of your family. It's hard enough to raise right kids in a wrong world without trying to do so living a life of compromise.

They're going to claim that this altar was built as a "witness" to the Lord that will compensate for living outside the land. But what kind of a witness was it?

- It was a witness to their expediency and to their putting their material lives first.
- It was a witness that said good grazing land trumps God every time.
- It was a witness that said you can have the best of both worlds if you just move slightly away from God.
- It was a witness that the world is equal to worship.

Joshua 22:29 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."

"Far be it from us." In other words, we're not capable of what you are accusing us of. Sure, we built an altar; but since it's not for sacrifice, it's no big deal.

Yes, it was a big deal. God never told them to build a replica altar.

How are you at being corrected? If you are defensive, and even offensive, when corrected, it's a good indicator something is wrong.

Joshua 22:30 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.

Joshua 22:31 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."

Joshua 22:32 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.

Joshua 22:33 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.

Joshua 22:34 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."

You almost want to sing *Kum bay ya!* Everything seems to end on such a good note.

But before we break out in song, let me quote Bible commentator Warren Wiersbe:

Phinehas was pleased, the delegation was pleased, and the Children of Israel across the Jordan were pleased; *but was the Lord pleased?* The delegation rejoiced that the purpose of the altar was for witness and not sacrifice, and this seemed to settle the matter... *But the nation was divided, in spite of the "altar of witness."* Like Abraham and Lot (Genesis 13), part of the nation had a spiritual outlook while the other part was concerned with material things.

These tribes were living in the permissive will of God. It's difficult to deal with believers living in God's permissive will. Sometimes the best you can do is reach a compromise with them, so long as it isn't compromising with sin. All you can do is work with them to preserve peace while hoping and praying that one day they will break out of it.

With the tribes of Israel it was obvious whether or not they were building their lives around the Lord or merely to include Him. If you were in the Promised Land you were building around Him. If you chose to settle outside the land, you weren't building lives around Him.

Among us as believers it can seem more difficult to determine how we are building our lives since there is no physical tabernacle. Yet it ought to be easier since we, ourselves, are the tabernacle of God among men. Both individually as Christians and corporately as a church we are His tabernacle.

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit ought to make it easier for us to determine where we're building. Let the Spirit take this Word and search our hearts.

If need be let us, in the words of Phinehas, "cross over to the land of the possession of the Lord, where the Lord's tabernacle stands, and take possession."

A final thought, and it's a precious one at that. When this is all over and we are with Jesus in eternity we are told,

Revelation 21:3 And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God.

Revelation 21:22 But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.

Lives built around Jesus now are a witness to others of what life is meant to be and what it one day will be.