

Joshua

November 22, 2009

Joshua 22

I. Ending Sermons

We are now at the end of the book of Joshua. Each of the last three chapters has a farewell speech to the Israelites. Next week, we will look at Chapters 23 and 24 which are composed primarily of two overlapping good-bye speeches to the leadership and tribes west of the Jordan.

This week, the first eight verses of Joshua 22 deals with Joshua's final words to the eastern tribes before they return home across the Jordan River. The rest of the chapter chronicles a misunderstanding that occurred, indicating the general difficulty that the Israelites will have in the land.

In many ways these three chapters resemble Deuteronomy where Moses gives speeches on the past and how they should live in the land. Joshua tells the Israelites how to live once he is gone from this world.

II. Actual Sermon: Josh 22:1-8

22:1-8

1 Then Joshua summoned the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh 2 and said to them, "You have done all that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded, and you have obeyed me in everything I commanded. 3 For a long time now — to this very day — you have not deserted your brothers but have carried out the mission the LORD your God gave you. 4 Now that the LORD your God has given your brothers rest as he promised, return to your homes in the land that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you on the other side of the Jordan. 5 But be very careful to keep the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you: to love the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to obey his commands, to hold fast to him and to serve him with all your heart and all your soul." 6 Then Joshua blessed them and sent them away, and they went to their homes. 7 (To the half-tribe of Manasseh Moses had given land in Bashan, and to the other half of the tribe Joshua gave land on the west side of the Jordan with their brothers.) When Joshua sent them home, he blessed them, 8 saying, "Return to your homes with your great wealth — with large herds of livestock, with silver, gold, bronze and iron, and a great quantity of clothing — and divide with your brothers the plunder from your enemies."

NIV

As with all three speeches, we see that this sermon is primarily a review of the words stated earlier by Joshua, a last reminder. As with earlier events, we are not told the exact timing of this chapter relative to the other events that have occurred, only that the eastern tribes have fulfilled their mission, which probably implies that the major conquests whose chronicle ends in Chapter 11, are concluded. Even that would have likely been seven to ten years. About a third of the men of these tribes participated in the battles implying a possible rotation of their men:

Josh 4:13

13 About forty thousand armed for battle crossed over before the LORD to the plains of Jericho for war.

NIV

Per verses 2 and 3, we see extremely high praise for these tribes as they leave, which makes the desire to go to war with them interestingly after what was likely a short period of time between then and the statement of these verses. Verse 5 is the key verse and a warning not to stray from the LORD.

III. Setting for the Incident: Josh 22:9-12

Josh 22:9-12

9 So the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh left the Israelites at Shiloh in Canaan to return to Gilead, their own land, which they had acquired in accordance with the command of the LORD through Moses. 10 When they came to Geliloth near the Jordan in the land of Canaan, the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh built an imposing altar there by the Jordan. 11 And when the Israelites heard that they had built the altar on the border of Canaan at Geliloth near the Jordan on the Israelite side, 12 the whole assembly of Israel gathered at Shiloh to go to war against them. NIV

Verse 10 Starting at Shiloh, the men of the eastern tribes travel back across the Jordan River. Gilead is probably a reference to the entire eastern territory. (NOTE: The land indicated by the name Gilead is somewhat variable in its usage. At times it appears to be only a part of the territory of Manasseh and Gad, but at others, as here, it appears to stand for all the eastern portion of the land.)

Verse 10 Geliloth is generally considered to be a location near or at Gilgal. Basically, the tribes appear to be crossing the Jordan River at the same point where they originally entered it.

Verse 10 They built an altar west of the river, while they would be living on the east side. Undoubtedly the size was huge to allow it to be seen from the other side.

Verse 11 Apparently, the purpose of the new altar is misconstrued by the 9 ½ tribes, called Israelites here, thereby excluding the 2½ tribes. After the clarification for the purpose of this altar in verse 29, Israel will again refer to all 12 tribes.

Verse 11 The Israelites think that it is an alternate altar to Shiloh and that eastern tribes are perhaps not following God fully. Even though the 2½ tribes have been faithful for years, it appears to only have taken a few days of being apart to lead accusations that they are doing wrong. What a contrast to verses 2 and 3.

How quickly we can see wrong in others, even when there is no wrong to see! If disunity can happen so quickly after years of loyal service, what do you think that a few centuries will bring to the full nation of Israel?

IV. Cooler Heads Prevail: Josh 22:13-14

Josh 22:13-14

13 So the Israelites sent Phinehas son of Eleazar, the priest, to the land of Gilead — to Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh. 14 With him they sent ten of the chief men, one for each of the tribes of Israel, each the head of a family division among the Israelite clans.

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Fortunately, cooler heads prevail. To the defense of the Israelites, their zeal for the LORD is a good thing, just overdone. As with the situation with Gibeon, the Israelites react quickly to any apparent deviation from God's commands by others. Unfortunately, as we saw last week, they are not quite as zealous in always following God fully in their own lives.

In any case, an envoy is sent to the 2 ½ tribes; it is usually a good choice to get some data before resorting to violence. The choice of Phinehas is purposeful. He had already been instrumental in ending one heresy, the one at Peor:

Num 25:6-9

6 Then an Israelite man brought to his family a Midianite woman right before the eyes of Moses and the whole assembly of Israel while they were weeping at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. 7 When Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, saw this, he left the assembly, took a spear in his hand 8 and followed the Israelite into the tent. He drove the spear through both of them — through the Israelite and into the woman's body. Then the plague against the Israelites was stopped; 9 but those who died in the plague numbered 24,000.

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V. Phinehas States the Charges: Josh. 22:15-20

Josh 22:15-20

15 When they went to Gilead — to Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh — they said to them: 16 "The whole assembly of the LORD says: 'How could you break faith with the God of Israel like this? How could you turn away from the LORD and build yourselves an altar in rebellion against him now? 17 Was not the sin of Peor enough for us? Up to this very day we have not cleansed ourselves from that sin, even though a plague fell on the community of the LORD! 18 And are you now turning away from the LORD?

"If you rebel against the LORD today, tomorrow he will be angry with the whole community of Israel. 19 If the land you possess is defiled, come over to the LORD's land, where the LORD's tabernacle stands, and share the land with us. But do not rebel against the LORD or against us by building an altar for yourselves, other than the altar of the LORD our God. 20 When Achan son of Zerah acted unfaithfully regarding the devoted things, did not wrath come upon the whole community of Israel? He was not the only one who died for his sin."

NIV

Phinehas gives the charges, noting Peor and Achan as examples where the sin of one group has led to the entire Israelite nation being punished.

The Israelites are obviously viewing the altar of the LORD at Shiloh as being the only place possible for worship, per:

Deut 12:8-11

8 You are not to do as we do here today, everyone as he sees fit, 9 since you have not yet reached the resting place and the inheritance the LORD your God is giving you. 10 But you will cross the Jordan and settle in the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, and he will give you rest from all your enemies around you so that you will live in safety. 11 Then to the place the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name —

there you are to bring everything I command you: your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, and all the choice possessions you have vowed to the LORD.

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The problem is that in Deuteronomy 12, the place is singular, and the Bible makes no procedure for moving the altar; clearly, later the one place was Jerusalem which was not yet in Israel's hands. Later, Shiloh would be overrun by the Philistines and the ark taken to Ashdod; after a few disaster struck, the ark was returned to Israel, but never back to Shiloh. About 20 years after its return, David has it taken to Jerusalem when the central place for worship is clearly set up. Also, before centralized worship in Jerusalem, we see examples of apparently acceptable altars, such as Gideon's:

Judg 6:24-26

24 So Gideon built an altar to the LORD there and called it The LORD is Peace. To this day it stands in Ophrah of the Abiezrites. 25 That same night the LORD said to him, "Take the second bull from your father's herd, the one seven years old. Tear down your father's altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside it. 26 Then build a proper kind of altar to the LORD your God on the top of this height. Using the wood of the Asherah pole that you cut down, offer the second bull as a burnt offering."

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VI. Explanation and Aftermath: Josh 22:21-34

The eastern tribes provide an explanation that they built the altar, not to offer sacrifices but as a memorial of their service west of the Jordan River and as a reminder that Israel was one nation.

The explanation is accepted. Beginning in verse 29, all the tribes are again referenced as Israel, indicating that the division between them is ended. Phinehas had to report back to the rest of the Israelites, and they also agree. The war is ended. The tribes are united at the end of the chapter.

Verse 31 is interesting. It probably means that since the 2 ½ tribes have not sinned against the LORD, there is no reason for the war or for God to be wrathful to any of them, despite the earlier fears of the other tribes.

VII. Meaning to Us

We are not Israelites, but Christians are called to unity. Oftentimes, that appears to be an elusive goal, despite passages such as John 13:34-35.

Why do we sometimes have disunity? How much of the disunity is caused by our distrust in other Christians? How much is due to our distrust in God?