

Notes on Joshua 22

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I. Tribes East of Jordan Sent Home Build an Altar – Joshua 22

Verses 1-5

1. Who were then sent home? Why?
2. What charge did Joshua give them before they left?

The eastern tribes sent to their inheritance

During Moses' lifetime, Israel had captured the land east of Jordan. The tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh had been granted permission to settle this land for their inheritance. However before they could return home to settle their own land, God had required them to go with the other tribes to help capture the land west of Jordan. Joshua had required these 2½ tribes to keep this agreement. See notes on Num. 32; Joshua 1:12-18.

At the present point in the account, Israel had captured the territory west of Jordan and had been given their designated inheritances. The 2½ tribes had fulfilled their agreement. Joshua here called these tribes to him and praised them for completing the task they had agreed to do. He plainly stated that they had obeyed God's command, so now they should return home to care for their own inheritance.

Before they left, however, Joshua admonished them to obey God's commands, hold fast to them, and serve God with all their heart and soul. These tribes would face special challenges being east of the river. They would be somewhat remote from the rest of Israel. They would be closest in contact with other nations surrounding Israel on the east. This would create military difficulties and could create problems spiritually. They might be tempted to feel isolated from the worship of God and contact with surrounding nations might lead them to be tempted to participate in false worship. So Joshua gave them this special admonition to be faithful.

Verses 6-9

3. What blessing did Joshua pronounce on these tribes?

Joshua's blessing on the 2½ tribes

Before sending them to their inheritance Joshua pronounced a blessing on them. He said that they had gained many spoils in the victory over the nations of the land. They would return with livestock, silver, gold, bronze, iron, and much clothing. These should be divided with the people of their tribes.

So the soldiers departed to go to their inheritance.

Verses 10-14

4. What did these people build on the way, and where did they build it?

The 2½ tribes build an altar

Having reached the river Jordan, the men of Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh built an altar. It was great and impressive. I am not clear which side of the river it occupied, east or west. The account says it was on the children of Israel's side, which sounds west.

This was reported to the tribes west of Jordan, and they became greatly concerned about it. We will see that they feared that the tribes east of Jordan intended to worship God separately apart from the tribes west of Jordan. So all Israel gathered together to go to war against the 2½ tribes.

Before attacking, however, they had the good sense to send a delegation to discuss the matter with the 2½ tribes. They sent Phinehas, son of Eleazar the high priest, and with him they sent a chief ruler from each of the 9½ tribes west of Jordan – a total of ten rulers.

Verses 15-20

5. Describe the accusation made against them by the other tribes? What reasons did they give for their accusation?

The admonition from the 9½ tribes

The delegation from the western tribes warned the eastern tribes not to change the pattern of worship that God had ordained. They warned that building the altar would be rebelling and turning away from God.

To illustrate their concern they referred to recent instances known to all the people in which Israelites had sinned against God. In the matter of Peor the people had worshipped idols and had committed fornication. As a result, many were killed by God in a plague (Num. 25). Achan also had sinned by taking things that had been devoted to God in the fall of Jericho. He was slain (Joshua 7).

But beside their concern for the tribes east of Jordan, the other tribes were concerned that God would be angry with them for not opposing such a departure. They said if the 2½ tribes rebelled, then God would be angry the next day with the whole nation. They evidently remembered the lesson learned from the case of Achan. One man sinned, but the whole nation could not prosper until they punished him. Likewise, they were implying that the nation would be responsible to punish the eastern tribes for their sin or God would hold the whole nation accountable.

They said that they would be willing to give the eastern tribes land where they could settle west of Jordan, if they would at least worship properly. This would be better than taking the inheritance they wanted east of Jordan, if this led them to worship improperly.

Note that they here state plainly their concern. By dwelling in a land so far from the tabernacle of the Lord, the eastern tribes might worship at a separate altar than the one the Lord had designated. They had built another altar, and Israel's concern was that the eastern tribes would not come to the altar at the tabernacle to offer their worship as God had required. So they said for the eastern tribes to move in among the western tribes if necessary to avoid this sin. Note that the sin, which here concerned Israel, did later occur when the northern tribes of Israel separated from the southern tribes of Judah.

Verses 21-29

6. How did the 2½ tribes respond to the accusation of the other tribes?

The explanation of the eastern tribes

The tribes from east of Jordan then responded and explained their purpose in building the altar. They said that they knew it would be wrong to use the altar to worship away from the altar God had designated for offering their various sacrifices. They said if they were to do such a thing as that, then the other tribes would be right in attacking them and God Himself ought to punish them.

But they said their real reason was in essence the very opposite. First, they affirmed several times that they had no intention to use the altar as a place to offer sacrifice of any kind. Instead, the altar was to serve as a reminder to future generations that the eastern tribes were part of Israel and they should be included in the worship of God at His designated place. They feared that future generations might conclude that, since these tribes live east of Jordan, they were not part of Israel's worship to God. People might want to exclude them from worshipping at the true altar. So they built this altar as a witness to remind future generations that they too were servants of God and should worship at the altar in Israel.

Verses 30-34

7. What conclusion was reached?

8. Application: List several lessons we can learn from this event.

Israel accepts the explanation of the eastern tribes

Phinehas and the leaders of the western tribes were glad to hear this explanation from the eastern tribes. They rejoiced that the eastern tribes had not committed treachery against God. In so doing, they had avoided God's displeasure from coming on the nation.

They then returned to the western tribes and explained the purpose of the altar as intended by the eastern tribes. This brought joy to all the people of the western tribes, so they realized they did not need to go to war against their own people.

The Reubenites and Gadites then named the altar "Witness," because that was its purpose: a witness to all the tribes that the eastern tribes recognized the God of Israel as the true God.

Lessons to be learned from this event

1) We must worship God in the way He has commanded. Unauthorized worship is unacceptable, even if it is not specifically condemned in Scripture.

2) People in the congregation must be rebuked and opposed when they sin. If God's people do not rebuke the sin, even if we do not participate in it, God holds us accountable.

3) Before disciplining those who we think might be guilty of sin, we must communicate with them to be sure we understand what has been done and why. We may find that people have not done what we thought they did.

4) If people are not guilty of sin, we should have unity and rejoice in the peace that results.

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