

Dr. David Howard, Joshua-Ruth, Session 20, Joshua 22 Farewell to Transjordan Tribes

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This is Dr. David Howard in his teaching on the books of Joshua through Ruth. This is session 20, Joshua 22, Farewell to Transjordan Tribes.

Hello again. We are now at the point to consider the final chapters of the book of Joshua. There are three of these chapters and these are, and we might loosely gather them together under the heading of these are farewells. These are Joshua's farewells to the people now who are settled in the land of inheritance and there are some continuities among the three.

In chapter 22, Joshua bids farewell to the Transjordan tribes, the ones east of the Jordan on the map. They're the ones in the red across that way. Then in chapter 23, he bids farewell to the entire nation, urging them to follow the Lord.

And then in chapter 24, he does a similar thing. He bids farewell to the nation again. It appears to be in two different places.

Chapter 23 appears to be at Shiloh and then chapter 24 appears to be at Shechem. And then finally the book ends with three notices of people's deaths, of important people, Joshua and then Joseph, his bones, and then Eleazar the priest. Joshua's own personal leadership in the three final events is pretty clear.

In three separate addresses, he blesses the people. He urges them to follow the Lord. He warns them of the consequences of disobedience.

He reviews God's faithfulness to them and challenges them to follow. He reaffirmed the covenant with them. And so, as we mentioned early on, when Joshua finally dies, he is for the first time in the book given the title, Servant of the Lord.

So, it's as if almost, you know, as Jesus talked about, well done, now good and faithful servant, one of his parables. That seems to be the way the book of Joshua is presenting this man. He is Moses' aid.

He is obviously Moses' successor and blessed in many ways, but he doesn't get that title until the very last verses of the book. All three chapters kind of review the past, but they also look ahead to the future. And the focus at the beginning here is going to be on the settlement of the tribes east of the Jordan.

So, we're going to start by looking at chapter 22. And this is Joshua's farewell to the Transjordan tribes, namely the tribes across the Jordan. That's the meaning of the word trans.

And if you read in some of the commentaries, there's this kind of awkward term called the Cis-Jordan tribes, C-I-S Jordan. That's basically the tribes west of the Jordan, what we think of as the main body of Israel. I was a chemistry major in college and my vague memory is cis and trans were used to talk about electrons spinning one way or another in atoms, something to that effect.

And it looks like that's been taken over into geographical terms as well. Anyway, the backdrop to chapter 22, the first six verses, is from chapter 21 verses, I'm sorry, from chapter 1 verses 13 to 15, where Joshua is addressing the Transjordan tribes. And remember back in the book of Numbers, they had asked Moses to be able to settle there.

They liked this land. The wandering in the wilderness had taken them all throughout and partly up here apparently. And these tribes liked this land.

It was good for their cattle. And so they asked Moses to settle here. Moses originally was very angry about this, thinking that they were wanting to avoid responsibility for the conflicts that were ahead.

And they assured Moses that no, they were going to do their job, do their bit with everyone else, and then come back. And so, Moses, God through Moses, sanctioned this. Joshua chapter 1, Joshua reminds them of their obligations to be with everyone else.

And they, along with everyone else, affirm that yes, everything you command us we will do. And so on, chapter 1 verses 16 to 18. So that's all the backdrop here to the episode in chapter 22.

The first six verses show us that they did follow through and they were faithful to their promises and their commitments. So, verse 1, Joshua 22 verse 1, Joshua summons these two and a half tribes, the tribe of Reuben, Gadites, and the half tribe of Manasseh. And they said, you have kept all that Moses, the servant of the Lord commanded you and obeyed my voice and all that commanded you.

You've not forsaken your brothers. And it goes through in those first five verses. And it's a wonderful example of faithful obedience on the part of these tribes.

So, one of the themes that we've tried to highlight in the book is obedience. And we certainly see this group as an example. Just an incidental little story.

Years ago, I was preaching through the book of Joshua and was in chapter 1, the beginning of the series. And the second Sunday, I was preaching on the passage about these Transjordan tribes, chapter 1 verses 10 to 18. And that Sunday happened in this particular church, Communion Sunday.

And one of my personal bugaboos about communion in churches is that too often, it's just sort of an appendage tacked on at the end of a service. We have to do it every first Sunday of the month or every first Sunday of the quarter. And it's not really thought through.

It's not integrated with the rest of the service. And so when I was preparing my message on the Transjordan tribes and Joshua's words with them, I was wondering, how could I tie this in with the communion? And it seemed like a stretch to be able to do that. But then I remembered what Paul said in 1 Corinthians about communion.

He said, that when you gather together, it turns the backdrop to Paul's instructions about communion was that people were gathering in a disorderly fashion. And some people were eating all the food and others were ending up being hungry. And Paul is saying, let's do this decently and in order.

Make sure that everyone partakes and so on. This idea that Paul is trying to talk about in unity in the church fits very well with the message of the unity of the body in Israel of the Transjordan tribes and the tribes west of the Jordan. And so, it worked out very well as a communion sermon.

I would commend that to any of you who are in positions to give lessons or sermons on this. So, Joshua in verse six, blesses them, sends them back away and they go to their tents. And verses seven to nine, he continues the blessing, and they go settle.

And it feels at this point as if the story should end. The book has been moving toward conclusions of things being wrapped up in a well. Chapter 19 ends sort of in a provisional ending.

But in chapter 21, all the promises of the Lord came to pass. Everybody had their own land and so on here. That seems to be confirmed.

Feels like, you know, after verse nine, it's almost like everybody's going to live happily ever after. But we have now a conflict introduced starting in verse 10. And it's triggered by what we see at the end, what we see later in the chapter.

It's triggered by a positive impulse, a commendable impulse by these Transjordan tribes. And so we see it here in verse 10. It said, when they came to the region of the

Jordan that's in the land of Canaan, the people of Reuben, the people of Gad, the half-tribe of Manasseh built there an altar by the Jordan, an altar of imposing size.

And notice what it says, they got to the region of Jordan in the land of Canaan. So they appear to have been interacting with their colleagues, brothers, and sisters across the Jordan and they're going to come across back to where they live. But in the land of Canaan, namely on the western side of the Jordan, they build this big altar.

That's an interesting point. It's a large altar and it's on the other side of the Jordan. It's not on their side.

So that, we learn later the reasons for this. The story is told in kind of an unfolding way. We don't know all the details until the later parts.

But they build this big altar. And immediately, in verse 11, the people of Israel heard this. And notice the terminology here in verse 11.

It says the people of Israel heard this. Now, technically, these trans-Jordan tribes were also part of Israel. They were part of the 12 tribes of the 14 different divisions that we've mentioned before.

But the text through this chapter calls only the nine and a half tribes west of the Jordan, the people of Israel. And it kind of illustrates the potential divide between those to the west and those to the east. And that's at the core, we find out later, that's at the core of the concern of the people east of the Jordan.

That they don't want to be separated. They want to be one with their brothers and sisters for generations to come. But the author kind of highlights that potential separation by calling, doesn't say the people west of the Jordan, it just says the people of Israel.

So immediately in verse 11, they notice this. And they appear threatened by this. So verse 12, they gather together at Shiloh to make war against the tribes east of the Jordan.

And so, they're on the brink of a civil war now. Ironically, they've spent all these years and most of the book of Joshua up to this point fighting the Canaanites. Now there's going to be potential for fighting each other.

So, the next verses kind of talk about some of the negotiations and what's happening. And the tribes west of the Jordan ask the question in verse 10, what is this breach of faith that you've committed against God of Israel in turning away this day from following the Lord by building yourselves an altar this day in rebellion

against the Lord? So, notice the word breach of faith. That's the same word that we've seen in connection with the sin of Achan, chapter 7, verse 1. It's the word we've talked about in terms of the issue of unforgiven, unintentional sin versus intentional sin.

The breaking of covenant, the breaking of trust is what seems to be at issue here. And the building of an altar in rebellion against them. Now in Leviticus, chapter 17, there's a prohibition against building an altar anywhere except in the vicinity of the Tabernacle.

And so that seems to be the backdrop to this passage here. Here the Levites, the trans-Jordan tribes are building an altar near the Jordan, not near the Tabernacle. And the majority of the people of Israel then feel this is a threat, this is an apostasy, these people are becoming like the Canaanites, so to speak.

And so that's the trigger. And so, they continue on. Verse 17, haven't we had enough of the sin of Peor from which even yet we have not cleansed ourselves, for which there was a plague upon the congregation of the Lord.

The sin of Peor goes back to Numbers, chapter 25, when Balaam kind of stirred up the people to commit whoredom, to prostitute themselves with the daughters of Midian, daughters of Moab. And that apparently had lingering effects. And the majority of the nine-and-a-half tribes felt like this was a reversion to that.

We've seen so much in the book about obedience and people trying to do things right by the book, so to speak, trying to put the rebellious generations of the past behind them. And now here they perceive a potential reversion to that kind of sin. So they talk about that sin.

They talk about Achan, verse 20, did not Achan the son of Zabdi break faith? There's the same word that you see back in verse 16. In the matter of the devoted things, wrath fell upon him. So, they're afraid that God's wrath is going to come upon them.

It had broken out in a plague with the sin of Peor in Numbers 25, and it had also affected them when Achan sinned. So, they don't want this to happen again. So, the Transjordan tribes, Reuben, Gad, and Half-Tribe of Manasseh, respond in a really interesting way.

Verse 22, there's this stacking up of names of God, and there's a, it's the greatest concentration of the names of God anywhere in the Old Testament. And it almost kind of, it feels like they're sort of falling over themselves to say, no, we're adherents of the true God. So, they say in verse 22, the mighty one, the God, the Lord, the mighty one, God, the Lord, he knows.

And it goes on. So, they're trying to say, no, no, no, no. We are clearly orthodox brothers and sisters with you, and we worship the same God.

So, he knows and lets Israel itself know if it was in rebellion or in breach of faith against the Lord, don't spare us today for building the altar, et cetera. But no, the reason behind they're doing this is revealed now in verse 24. No, we did it out of fear that in time to come, your children might say to our children, what do you have to do with the Lord out of Israel? Because the Lord has made the Jordan a boundary between us.

Therefore, in verse 26, we said, let us build an altar, not for burnt offering, not for sacrifice. So just to review, the fear of these people is that over time in generations to come, the Jordan River would, obviously form a geographical boundary, but they feared in time to come, there would be less and less interaction between them. And these descendants would eventually say, who are you? You don't belong to us.

And this group wanted to make sure, no, we want to make sure the unity of the body remains. And that kind of goes back to the promises they made back in chapter one. So, they built the altar west of the Jordan, not east.

They built it not for sacrifice. In other words, they're not going to use it for pagan offerings, but rather, verse 27, to be a witness between us and you and between our generations after you and so on. And verse 28 kind of reiterates that.

We thought if this should be said to us or our descendants in time to come, we should say, look, the copy of the altar of the Lord, the altar that they are making is a copy of the true altar, intending to kind of keep that connection. But it's not for sacrifice. It's not for burnt offerings or sacrifice, but to be a witness between us.

And so even the fact, two things. One, it's a very large altar. Sounds like in the beginning, the text emphasizes it's big.

So perhaps it was bigger than a normal altar. And secondly, it was across the Jordan, so it was big enough that they could see it. They weren't coming to just offer sacrifices on it, but it was just to be across the river, say, we remember there's the altar.

That's the copy of the true altar by the Tabernacle. And that's a sign and a witness to our commitment to be brothers and sisters with you. So, verse 30 and following, when Phinehas the priest, and the rest of the congregation heard these things, end of verse 30, it was good in their eyes.

So, there's a happy ending to this story. They backed off and said, today we know, verse 31, we know that the Lord is in our midst because you have not, you have not

committed this breach of faith against the Lord. So, you've, now you have entered the people of Israel from the hand of the Lord.

So now you are part of the people of Israel. First part of the chapter, the people of Israel, according to the author, are the nine and a half tribes. Here now, they are the, they're included with that.

And so, they return home, everybody blesses the Lord, and there's no more threat of civil war. And everybody, it does sort of feel like it's ending happily ever after. They name the place a witness.

It's a witness between us that the Lord is God, verse 34. And that ends that particular episode. Farewell to Transjordan tribes.

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