

Sermon Outline

“AND THE LORD GAVE THEM REST”:
A CHRISTIAN READING OF THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

THE CASE OF THE ALTAR

JOSHUA 22:10-34

I. Introduction

II. The New Altar (Joshua 22:10)

- A. The building of a massive altar is the main event in this section.
- B. The altar was also built “in the land of Canaan” and “by the Jordan.”
—The eastern/Transjordanian tribes built their altar on the Israelite mainland, somewhere along the banks of the Jordan River.
- C. This altar was a potential problem because at this particular point of history, the building of an altar in Israel was no small issue.
 1. In our New Testament age, you and I have great freedom to worship God wherever we are. People set up churches everywhere.
 2. In those days, Israel was a theocratic nation in the Promised Land, with a centralized altar to the Lord.
 3. In such a context, the setting up of another altar could mean that you were setting up a rival religion (Josh 18:1).
 4. In 18:8, we see that Shiloh was the place where God’s will for the nation could be found. If you wanted to know what the Lord’s national will was, you went to Shiloh.
 5. With those facts in mind, how would the establishment of another altar have looked like? It would have looked like mutiny. It be like as if you were setting up a rival government or a rival Parliament.
 6. James Boice explains, “An altar other than the altar at Shiloh, where the tabernacle of the Lord stood, symbolized a break with worship of the true God. It meant apostasy” (Boice, *Joshua*, 117).
 7. From an outsider’s perspective, these tribes were setting up a new religion that competed with the Lord’s appointed place of worship at Shiloh.
- D. The news of the new altar eventually reaches the people of Israel (v 11).
- E. Israel responds by gathering at Shiloh to prepare for war (v 12).
- F. We should be impressed with their zeal to honor the Lord.

1. This is an Israel that has learned all too well the lessons of the golden calf (Ex 32) and Achan (Josh 7).
2. Furthermore, a central theme in Joshua is Israel's faithfulness to the Lord. Thus, when the Israelites get ready to make war on the eastern tribes, this was not out of character with the ethic that has been taught in Joshua.
3. If your loved one is threatened, wouldn't you seek to respond to protect him or her? Well, Israel loves the Lord.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) What did the eastern tribes do to stir anger in the tribes of mainland? (2) Why would a new altar be deemed a threat to the nation? (3) Why do we believe that the mainland tribes were acting appropriately when they readied themselves for war?

III. When War Is Loving

- A. Let us be clear: *Not every act of war comes out of love.* In fact, most conflict today arises from sin. People go to war for all kinds of wicked, selfish reasons (cf. Jas 4:1-3).
- B. But as long as we live in a world where there are truly evil people who want to inflict injury on others, there will be times when the loving response is to load one's rifle and kill the enemy.
—If we don't fight (and kill) our enemies, they will kill those who are weak and defenseless.
- C. Although war should always be the final options, and the Christian's heart must always be one of love and peace, there are times when we must pick up arms and fight because that really is the loving thing to do.
- D. In the spiritual life, the same rule applies.
 1. Lovers of God must resist their sinful desires and ambitions.
 2. Lovers of God must resist false doctrine. False religion and false ways of worshiping God and exalting man must be revealed for what they are.
- E. Christians must always be vigilant.
 1. Don't believe everything that enlightened scholars and government officials tell you.
 2. Be ready to fight in defense of the honor of our Lord—the Lord who has saved us from our sins that we might love him.
 3. The weapons that God has given us are not physical swords and guns, but his life-giving words that shatter spiritual and ideological prisons that hold people in slavery (cf. 2 Cor 10:4).

***Questions for reflection:** (1) When would combat or war be loving?? (2) How do Christians conduct holy warfare today?

IV. Confrontation (Joshua 22:13-20)

- A. A delegation is sent to meet with the eastern tribes. It comprised Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest and the ten tribal chiefs (vv 13, 14).
- B. The delegation confronts the eastern tribes saying, “Thus says the whole congregation of the LORD,”—this statement is key because it shows that the delegation represents the entire Church of Israel—“What is this breach of faith that you have committed against the God of Israel in turning away this day from following the LORD by building yourselves an altar this day in rebellion against the LORD?” (vv 15, 16)
1. These words indicate the perspective of the tribes of the mainland concerning this new altar that had been built.
 2. By building a new altar for themselves, the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh were seen as committing a “breach of faith”; and were “turning away this day from following the LORD.”
- C. The Israelite elders were reminded of the sin of Peor in the action of the eastern tribes.
1. “Have we not had enough of the sin at Peor from which even yet we have not cleansed ourselves, and for which there came a plague upon the congregation of the LORD, that you too must turn away this day from following the LORD?”
 2. Here lies the most immediate concern: “And if you too rebel against the LORD today then tomorrow he will be angry with the whole congregation of Israel” (vv 17-18).
 3. The sin at Peor is recorded in Numbers 25 where the women of Moab seduced Israelite men to worship Baal, which prompted the Lord to send a plague upon the Israelites.
 4. Just as the Lord judged the whole nation for the sins of a few, the Israelites now are concerned that the Lord would judge the whole nation once again on account of the sins of the eastern tribes.
- D. But the delegation was willing to give the eastern tribes the benefit of the doubt: “But now, *if the land of your possession is unclean*, pass over into the LORD’s land where the LORD’s tabernacle stands, and take for yourselves a possession among us” (v 19).
- E. The only thing the eastern tribes must not do is “rebel against the LORD or make us as rebels by building for yourselves an altar other than the altar of the LORD our God.”
- F. If the eastern tribes need further convincing, they only need to consider events of a more recent history: “Did not Achan the son of Zerah break faith in the

matter of the devoted things, and wrath fell upon all the congregation of Israel? And he did not perish alone for his iniquity” (v 20)

- G. So all things considered, the delegation was urging the eastern tribes not to:
 - 1. turn away from the Lord
 - 2. bring condemnation upon the rest of the nation by their sin.

- H. But they also tried to give them the benefit of the doubt. In the event that they needed to build an altar because the land east of Canaan was ritually impure, they could always relocate to the mainland and join the rest of their brothers in worship.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) Who goes to confront the eastern tribes? (2) What were some urgent concerns that the delegation raised to the eastern brethren? (3) How did the delegation give the eastern tribes the benefit of the doubt?

V. The Response (Joshua 22:21-29)

- A. In response, the eastern tribes appeal to the Lord God in their defense.
 - 1. They make a twofold declaration of the Lord’s Name: “The Mighty One, God, the LORD! The Mighty One, God, the LORD!”
—This shows that the eastern tribes have a very high regard for the Lord. They recognize him as the supreme King whom they worship.
 - 2. Then having invoked the Name of the Lord, they acknowledge that the Lord knows if they have indeed broken faith with him and will punish them if they do (vv 22, 23). The eastern tribes knew full well the Lord’s requirements!

- B. The eastern tribes present an explanation for their actions. As it turns out, their actions were motivated by fear—specifically fear of being ostracized by later generations of Israelites (vv 24-26).

- C. According to their own words, this altar is “not for burnt offering, nor for sacrifice, but to be a witness between us and you, and between our generations after us, that we do perform the service of the LORD in his presence with our burnt offerings and sacrifices and peace offerings, so your children will not say to our children in time to come, ‘You have no portion in the LORD’” (vv 26, 27).

- D. The altar was to be a witness between the eastern and mainland tribes (v 28).

- E. They reaffirm their love for the Lord: “Far be it from us that we should rebel against the LORD and turn away this day from following the LORD by building

an altar for burnt offering, grain offering, or sacrifice, other than the altar of the LORD our God that stands before his tabernacle!” (v 29).

***Questions for reflection:** (1) What do they say about the Lord? What does this show about their attitude to the Lord? (2) What were the intentions of the eastern tribes concerning the altar? What did they hope the altar could do for future generations of Israelites?

VI. Whew! (Joshua 22:30, 31)

- A. The delegation responds favorably: “When Phinehas the priest and the chiefs of the congregation, the heads of the families of Israel who were with him, heard the words that the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the people of Manasseh spoke, *it was good in their eyes*” (v 30).
- B. Phinehas says to the people of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh, “Today we know that the LORD is in our midst, because you have not committed this breach of faith against the LORD. Now you have delivered the people of Israel from the hand of the LORD.”
- C. Phinehas was willing to take the explanation at face value. There was no further speculation of ill intent.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) How did Phinehas and the tribal chiefs receive the explanation of the eastern tribes? (2) How did they *not* respond?

VII. A Happy Ending After all (Joshua 22:32-34)

- A. Phinehas and the ten tribal chiefs return from their conference with the eastern tribes (v 32) and give a good report to the rest of the nation (v 33).
- B. Reuben and Gad name the altar “Witness” (Heb: *ed*)
—The reason: “‘For,’ they said, ‘it is a witness between us that the LORD is God’” (vv 33, 34). And so, the story ends with the point of contention becoming a ground for brotherly love.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) What do Reuben and Gad name the altar? What is the reason for this?

VIII. The Altar of the Cross

- A. The cross of the Lord Jesus Christ has become the ultimate altar, because on it the Son of God gave his own life to God as the ultimate sacrifice to pay for all our sins and to satisfy the requirements of God’s justice once and for all.

- B. The reason we Christians do not build altars to God today is not that altars are primitive. It's that the cross of Christ was the altar to end all altars.
—Upon the cross of Christ, you and I, who are joined to Christ by faith, have offered to God our lives completely and perfectly. That is why we don't perform animal sacrifices anymore, because the cross has satisfied all justice once and for all.
- C. Just as the altar Witness served to unify the tribes of Israel, the altar of Christ's cross unifies all of God's people across the world. Ephesians 2:13-16:
But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.
- D. The cross of Christ is where ultimate reconciliation is achieved.
1. Reconciliation between God and man
 2. Reconciliation between man and man
- E. Why does the cross of Christ reconcile?
1. The cross does not create reconciliation merely because it is a powerful symbol of love and self-sacrifice, true as that may be.
 2. The cross reconciles because on it, the eternal Son of God Jesus really took upon himself all our evil, and absorbed all the punishment that our evil deserves.
 3. If we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and allow his death to be the full punishment of our sins, God will consider our sins punished, forgive us, and reconcile us to himself.
 4. Once God forgives our sins, God will no longer use them against us. We will be at peace with God forever.
—Romans 8:1: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."
 5. But I also challenge us to apply this truth in our own human relationships: If the sins of your brother or sister in Christ have indeed been paid for at the cross, and if God himself is satisfied with that payment, then shouldn't you be satisfied by the payment of Christ as well? Shouldn't you cease your anger and your hatred and your vengeance? You should—because God himself is satisfied.
- F. Thus, the cross of Christ—the supreme altar—has become the unifying force of the whole world. When we trust in Christ to take our sins away, we come under the gravitational pull of the cross. The cross of Christ enslaves us to the life-giving power of Christ.

—Acts 16:31: “And they said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’”

***Questions for reflection:** (1) Why is the cross of Jesus Christ the supreme altar? (2) Why, according to Eph 2:13-16, does the cross of Christ become the supreme sign of reconciliation? (3) How do we receive the benefits of the cross? What must we do to be reconciled to God? See Acts 16:31.

IX. A Holy Zeal Tempered with Knowledge

Even though we are called to be zealous to fight for the glory of God, God also wants us to temper our zeal with knowledge, with truth and wisdom. We need to know how to apply the Word of God to the situation around us, and the people whom we seek to address.

- A. It is necessary to be zealous for God.
 - 1. God does not want his children to be lukewarm.
 - 2. He wants us fully aflame with love for him and his truth.

- B. But zeal or passion is not the only virtue that God requires of his children.
 - 1. Speaking of his Jewish brothers who reject the Gospel, Paul says in Romans 10:2, “For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.”
 - 2. This passage shows us that it is possible to be zealous for God and yet do so in way that is not governed by truth.
 - 3. We see this all the time in various forms of so-called religious fundamentalism.
 - a. Non-Christian religious fundamentalism
 - b. Various Christian fundamentalisms

- C. In the end, we should heed the example of the Israelite leaders.
 - 1. They knew what the Lord’s will was concerning idolatry.
 - 2. They knew where they stood concerning things like false altars.
 - 3. But before they proceeded to punish their Israelite brothers, they made sure they did their homework.

- D. So herein lies an important lesson in applying the Word of God: Knowing Scripture is not a substitute for knowing the world (or the segment of the world) that you wish to address.
 - 1. If we want to properly apply Scripture to a situation, or in this case, the critique of others, we need to know their positions well enough.
 - 2. That entails trying to understand what it is that our detractors or opponents are trying to protect, and what it is that they are afraid to lose.

—In the case of the eastern tribes, they were afraid of being cut off from the rest of the nation.

3. If we can seek to bring Scripture to bear on others, we must first give them the benefit of the doubt and hear them out.
4. In the end, we are not merely trying to win an argument. We are trying to win our brothers and sisters for whom Christ died. We are trying to recover souls.