

Adam Clarke:

Introduction

Joshua assembles, commends, blesses, and then dismisses the two tribes of Reuben and Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh, Joshua 22:1-8. They return and build an altar by the side of Jordan, Joshua 22:9, Joshua 22:10. The rest of the Israelites hearing of this, and suspecting that they had built the altar for idolatrous purposes, or to make a schism in the national worship, prepare to go to war with them, Joshua 22:11, Joshua 22:12; but first send a deputation to know the truth, Joshua 22:13, Joshua 22:14. They arrive and expostulate with their brethren, Joshua 22:15-20. The Reubenites, Gadites, and half tribe of Manasseh, make a noble defense, and show that their altar was built as a monument only to prevent idolatry, Joshua 22:21-29. The deputation are satisfied, and return to the ten tribes and make their report, Joshua 22:30-32. The people rejoice and praise God, Joshua 22:33; and the Reubenites and Gadites call the altar they had raised Ed, that it might be considered a witness between them and their brethren on the other side Jordan, Joshua 22:34.

Verse 1

Then Joshua called the Reubenites, etc. - We have already seen that 40,000 men of the tribes of Reuben and Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh, had passed over Jordan armed, with their brethren, according to their stipulation with Moses. The war being now concluded, Joshua assembles these warriors, and with commendations for their services and fidelity, he dismisses them, having first given them the most pious and suitable advices. They had now been about seven years absent from their respective families; and though there was only the river Jordan between the camp at Gilgal and their own inheritance, yet it does not appear that they had during that time ever revisited their own home, which they might have done any time in the year, the harvest excepted, as at all other times that river was easily fordable.

Verse 5

But take diligent heed, etc. - Let us examine the force of this excellent advice; they must ever consider that their prosperity and continued possession of the land depended on their fidelity and obedience to God; to this they must take diligent heed.

Do the commandment - They must pay the strictest regard to every moral precept.

And the law - They must observe all the rites and ceremonies of their holy religion.

Love the Lord your God - Without an affectionate filial attachment to their Maker, duty would be irksome, grievous, and impossible.

Walk in all his ways - They must not only believe and love, but obey: walk not in your own ways, but walk in those which God has pointed out.

Keep his commandments - They must love him with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and their neighbor as themselves.

Cleave unto him - They must be cemented to him, in a union that should never be dissolved.

Serve him - They must consider him as their Master, having an absolute right to appoint them when, where, how, and in what measure they should do his work.

With all your heart - Having all their affections and passions sanctified and united to him.

And with all your soul - Giving up their whole life to him, and employing their understanding, judgment, and will, in the contemplation and adoration of his perfections; that their love and obedience might increase in proportion to the cultivation and improvement of their understanding.

Verse 7

Then he blessed them - Spoke respectfully of their fidelity and exertions, wished them every spiritual and temporal good, prayed to God to protect and save them, and probably gave some gifts to those leaders among them that had most distinguished themselves in this seven years' war. In all the above senses the word bless is frequently taken in Scripture.

Verse 8

Return with much riches - It appears they had their full proportion of the spoils that were taken from the Canaanites, and that these spoils consisted in cattle, silver, gold, brass, iron, and raiment.

Divide the spoil - with your brethren - It was right that those who stayed at home to defend the families of those who had been in the wars, and to cultivate the ground, should have a proper proportion of the spoils taken from the enemy, for had they not acted as they did the others could not have safely left their families.

Verse 10

The borders of Jordan, that are in - Canaan - This verse can never mean that they built the altar on the west side of Jordan, for this was not in their territories; nor could it be a place for the purpose of public worship to their own people, if built on the opposite side of Jordan; besides, the next verse says it was built over against the land of Canaan. It appears that when they came to the river they formed the purpose of building the altar; and when they had crossed it they executed their purpose.

A great altar to see to - A vast mass of earth, stones, etc., elevated to a great height, to serve as a memorial of the transactions that had already taken place. Probably it was intended also to serve as a kind of watchtower, being of a stupendous height, altare infinitae magnitudinis, an altar of an immense size, as the Vulgate terms it.

Verse 12

To go up to war against them - Supposing that they had built this altar in opposition to that which Moses, by the command of God, had erected, and were consequently become rebels against God and the Israelitish constitution, and should be treated as such. Their great concern for the glory of God led them to take this step, which at first view might appear precipitate; but, that they might do nothing rashly, they first sent Phinehas and ten princes, one out of each tribe, to require an explanation of their motives in erecting this altar.

Verse 17

Is the iniquity of Peor too little - See this history, Numbers 25:3 (note), etc., and the notes there. Phinehas takes it for granted that this altar was built in opposition to the altar of God erected by Moses, and that they intended to have a separate service, priesthood, etc., which would be rebellion against God, and bring down his curse on them and their posterity; and, in order to show that God is jealous of his glory, he refers to the business of Baal Peor, which took place in that very country they were now about to possess, the destructive consequences of which he, through his zeal for the glory of God, was the means of preventing.

Verse 19

If the land of your possessions be unclean - The generous mind of Phinehas led him to form this excuse for them. If ye suppose that this land is impure, as not having been originally included in the covenant, and ye think that ye cannot expect the blessing of God unless ye have an altar, sacrifices, etc., then pass ye over unto the land of the possession of the Lord, wherein the Lord's tabernacle dwelleth, the only legitimate place where sacrifices and offerings can be made. We will divide this land with you, and rather straiten ourselves than that you should conceive yourselves to be under any necessity of erecting a new altar besides the altar of the Lord our God.

Verse 20

Did not Achan the son of Zerah - Your sin will not be merely against yourselves; your transgressions will bring down the wrath of God upon all the people; this was the case in the transgression of Achan; he alone sinned, and yet God on that account turned his face against the whole congregation, so that they fell before their enemies. We cannot therefore be unconcerned spectators of your transgression, we may all be implicated in its criminality; let this and the dishonor which we apprehend is done to our God plead our excuse, and vindicate the necessity of the present warlike appearance which we make before you. See the history of Achan referred to here, (Joshua 7:11-26 (note)), and the notes there.

Verse 21

Then the children of Reuben - answered - Though conscious of their own innocency they permitted Phinehas to finish his discourse, though composed of little else than accusations; there was a decency in this, and such a full proof of good breeding, as does them the highest credit. There are many public assemblies in the present day which lay claim to the highest refinement, who might take a very useful lesson from these Reubenites and their associates.

Verse 22

The Lord God of gods - The original words are exceedingly emphatic, and cannot be easily translated. יהוה יהוה יהוה (El Elohim Yehovah), are the three principal names by which the supreme God was

known among the Hebrews, and may be thus translated, the strong God, Elohim, Jehovah, which is nearly the version of Luther, der starcke Gott der Herr, "The strong God the Lord." And the Reubenites, by using these in their very solemn appeal, expressed at once their strong unshaken faith in the God of Israel; and by this they fully showed the deputation from the ten tribes, that their religious creed had not been changed; and, in the succeeding part of their defense they show that their practice corresponded with their creed. The repetition of these solemn names by the Reubenites, etc., shows their deep concern for the honor of God, and their anxiety to wipe off the reproach which they consider cast on them by the supposition that they had been capable of defection from the pure worship of God, or of disaffection to their brethren.

Save us not this day - This was putting the affair to the most solemn issue; and nothing but the utmost consciousness of their own integrity could have induced them to make such an appeal, and call for such a decision. "Let God the Judge cause us to perish this day, if in principle or practice we have knowingly departed from him."

Verse 24

For fear of this thing - The motive that actuated us was directly the reverse of that of which we have been suspected.

Verse 26

An altar, not for burnt-offering, nor for sacrifice - Because this would have been in flat opposition to the law, Leviticus 17:8, Leviticus 17:9; Deuteronomy 12:4-6, Deuteronomy 12:10, Deuteronomy 12:11, Deuteronomy 12:13, Deuteronomy 12:14, which most positively forbade any sacrifice or offering to be made in any other place than that one which the Lord should choose. Therefore the altar built by the Reubenites, etc., was for no religious purpose, but merely to serve as a testimony that they were one people with those on the west of Jordan, having the same religious and civil constitution, and bound by the same interests to keep that constitution inviolate.

Verse 29

God forbid that we should rebel - These words not only express their strong abhorrence of this crime, but also show that without God they could do no good thing, and that they depended upon him for that strength by which alone they could abstain from evil.

Verse 31

We perceive that the Lord is among us - Or, according to the Targum of Jonathan. "This day we know that the majesty of Jehovah dwelleth among us, because ye have not committed this prevarication against the Word of the Lord, and thus ye have delivered the children of Israel from the hand of the Word of the Lord." They rejoice to find them innocent, and that there is no ground of quarrel between the children of the same family. And from this they draw a very favorable conclusion, that as God was among them as the sole object of their religious worship, so he would abide with them as their protector and their portion; and as they were his friends, they take it for granted that he will deliver them from the hands of their enemies.

Verse 33

And did not intend to go up against them in battle - That is, they now relinquished the intention of going against them in battle, as this explanation proved there was no cause for the measure.

Verse 34

Called the altar Ed - The word *Ed* (Ed), which signifies witness or testimony, is not found in the common editions of the Hebrew Bible, and is supplied in Italics by our translators, at least in our modern copies; for in the first edition of this translation it stands in the text without any note of this kind; and it is found in several of Kennicott's and De Rossi's MSS., and also in the Syriac and Arabic. Several also of the early printed editions of the Hebrew Bible have the word *Ed*, either in the text or in the margin, and it must be allowed to be necessary to complete the sense. It is very probable that an inscription was put on this altar, which pointed out the purposes for which it was erected.

From the contents of this chapter we learn that the Israelites were dreadfully alarmed at the prospect of a schism in their own body, both as it related to ecclesiastical and civil matters. A few observations on this subject may not be useless.

Schism in religion is a dangerous thing, and should be carefully avoided by all who fear God. But this word should be well understood. *Ἰσχιζμός*, in theology, is generally allowed to signify a rent in, or departure from, the doctrine and practice of the apostles, especially among those who had been previously united in that doctrine and practice. A departure from human institutions in religion is no schism, for this reason that the

Word of God alone is the sufficient rule of the faith and practice of Christians; and as to human institutions, forms, modes, etc., those of one party may be as good as those of another.

When the majority of a nation agrees in some particular forms and modes in their religious service; no conscientious man will lightly depart from these; nor depart at all, unless he find that they are not only not authorized by the word of God, but repugnant to it. It is an object greatly to be desired, that a whole people, living under the same laws may, as much as possible, glorify God, not only with one heart, but also with one mouth.

But there may be a dissent from established forms without schism; for if that dissent make no rent in the doctrines or practice of Christianity, as laid down in the New Testament, it is an abuse of terms to call it a schism; besides, there may be a dissent among religious people relative to certain points both in creed and practice, which, not affecting the essentials of Christianity, nor having any direct tendency to alienate the affections of Christians from each other, cannot be called a schism; but when professing Christians separate from each other, to set up one needless or non-essential form, etc., in the place of others which they call needless or non-essential, they are highly culpable. This not only produces no good, but tends to much evil; for both parties, in order to make the points of their difference of sufficient consequence to justify their dissension, magnify these non-essential matters beyond all reason, and sometimes beyond conscience itself: and thus mint and cummin are tithed, while the weightier matters of the law - judgment and the love of God - are utterly neglected. If Christians either cannot or will not think alike on all points, surely they can agree to disagree, and let each go to heaven his own way. "But should we take this advice, would it not lead to a total indifference about religion?" Not at all; for in the things which concern the essentials of Christianity, both in doctrine and practice, we should ever feel zealously affected, and earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints.