

Joshua

Lesson 17

Chapter 22

The Nation of Israel had crossed the Jordan River a little more than five years before this place in the story. Their camp was in an open area by the city of Jericho. They named the area Gilgal. From there, the nation began the campaign on Jericho and Ai. The two campaigns struck fear in the rest of the nations. The Canaanite kings of the central area formed an alliance to fight Israel. Israel won. Then the Canaanite kings of the southern area formed an alliance to fight against Israel. Israel won. The Canaanite king of the north brought all of his sub-servant kings to fight Israel at Hezron. Israel won. After that, Joshua led the camp at Gilgal to move to a new location. Israel named the new location Shiloh - *rest*. It was about ten miles northeast of Bethel, just off the road to Shechem. It was nothing but an open field. From there, the survey of the northern area was ordered and completed. Upon completion, Joshua, Eleazar, and the chiefs of Israel drew lots and gifted the land to the different tribes, divisions, and families. The writer of Joshua detailed the cities which belonged to each tribe. Each city supported the small villages established and stationed nearby. With only a few exceptions, the homes in all the cities and villages were protected and ready for the Israelite families to move in and start life without living in tents for the first time since leaving Egypt.

Following the gifting of the land to the tribes, Joshua and the leaders gifted the forty-eight Levitical cities to the priests. Those cities included six cities of refuge for the manslayers. Three unique points are noticeably omitted in the writer's full account and are not mentioned.

First, the area of Gilgal was not a city or village and therefore not mentioned in the record as such. Once the camp moved from Gilgal, the campsite remained empty for some years before a small village was established there.

Second, Shechem was only a field when the nation arrived there at the foot of Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. The empty land of Shechem was handed over to the tribe of Ephraim. Joshua and the leaders could not gift the land to Ephraim because it had already been gifted to the descendants of Ephraim by Jacob, who purchased the land before entering Egypt. At the time of the land division to the tribes, no city, village, or houses were there to inhabit. However, over the next decades, the Ephraimites would establish a village at Shechem.

Third, Shiloh was nothing but an open field when Israel arrived there after moving from Gilgal. At Shiloh, the whole congregation of Israel camped, excluding the wives and children of the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half-tribe of Manasseh who remained on the east side of the Jordan River while their men crossed the Jordan to fight with the other tribes. There, the Tabernacle complex was erected and would stand there for approximately three-hundred and sixty years. We would think that Shiloh would be one of the forty-eight Levitical cities, but it is not. It is not mentioned. The place of the holiest structure in Israel's possession was not included. The place where the LORD would reside above the Mercy Seat for the next four hundred years – not included in the Levitical cities. Then the LORD will continue to reside above the Mercy Seat when captured and recovered by King David and be held in Jerusalem until the LORD leaves the Mercy Seat four-hundred and sixty years later in 586 BC. When all the land divisions were completed at Shiloh, the whole camp disbursed to their new homes. But who would remain in Shiloh with the Tabernacle complex and continue to live in tents until permanent homes could be built? It would be the high priests, Eleazar, Ithamar, and their families. Later, a descendant named Eli will be the high priest. Hannah will deliver Samuel at the age of four to Eli in Shiloh, and there Samuel will grow to manhood in the

service of the LORD. Be that as it may, it is still strange that Shiloh was not considered a Levitical city. Possibly, that is because the LORD did not want Shiloh to be inhabited by the unclean and purposefully sinful.

With that as an introduction, at this point in the story, it was time for the whole congregation to leave Shiloh to inhabit their new homes. But it was also time for the faithful warriors of the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half-tribe of Manasseh to return to their families who they have not seen in more than five years.

K. The Return to the East Promised Land (22:1-34)

1. The Tribe's Commendation (22:1-9)

a) The Praising of the Men (22:1-4)

An oath had been fulfilled by the men of Reuben, Gad, and half-tribe of Manasseh. It was time for Joshua to issue the tribe's commendation with the praising of the men. Chapter 22, Verse 1. *"Then Joshua summoned the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh, ² and said to them, "You have kept all that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, and have listened to my voice in all that I commanded you. ³ You have not forsaken your brothers these many days to this day, but have kept the charge of the commandment of the LORD your God. ⁴ And now the LORD your God has given rest to your brothers, as He spoke to them; therefore turn now and go to your tents, to the land of your possession, which Moses the servant of the LORD gave you beyond the Jordan."* (22:1-4)

It would take several days to return to their families. At this point, Joshua desired that the men return to their tents there at Shiloh, gather their belongings, and then return to their families who have been waiting for them for more than five years on the other side of the Jordan River.

b) The Warning to the Men (22:5)

But Joshua was not finished with his instructions to the men. Just as Moses gave a warning to the nation of Israel before he died, Joshua gave the same warning to the men before they left Shiloh. Verse 5. *"Only be very careful to observe the commandment and the law which Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, to love the LORD your God and walk in all His ways and keep His commandments and hold fast to Him and serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul."* (22:5)

These men were not just aware of these warnings. They had heard them five years before from the mouth of Moses in the Plain of Moab. They had heard them from the mouth of Joshua after he had written them on stones on Mount Ebal. They had also heard from both men the consequences upon the whole nation if these men did not keep the commandments of the LORD. The LORD's commandments go back to the basics. One – you shall have no other gods before Me. Two – you shall not make for yourself a carved image ... you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. You know the rest of the Ten Commandments. Breaking any of them or the instructions associated with them will bring catastrophe to the Nation of Israel.

c) The Blessing for the Men (22:6)

The men heard Joshua's warning, then Joshua gave a blessing for the men. Verse 6. *"So Joshua blessed them and sent them away, and they went to their tents."* (22:6)

We do not know what Joshua said to the men in the blessing; however, we know from the blessings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to their sons, Joshua would have spoken to each tribe individually with an encouraging word. More than likely, as with the blessings given by Moses, Joshua's blessing probably was prophetic.

d) The Rewarding of the Men (22:7-8)

The writer then reviews the distribution to the half-tribe of Manasseh with land on both sides of the Jordan River before he records the rewarding of the men. Verse 7. *"Now to the one half-tribe of Manasseh Moses had given a possession in Bashan, but to the other half Joshua gave a possession among their brothers westward beyond the Jordan. So when Joshua sent them away to their tents, ⁸ he blessed them, and said to them,*

“Return to your tents with great riches and with very much livestock, with silver, gold, bronze, iron, and with very many clothes; divide the spoil of your enemies with your brothers.” (22:7-8)

Back at their tents in Shiloh, the spoils of all the warriors were divided. The two and a half tribes that would cross the Jordan River to return to their families received great wealth captured from the Canaanites during their battles. They would arrive home wealthy beyond all their imaginations.

e) The Departing of the Men (22:9)

With their wealth in hand, we see the departing of the men in Verse 9. *“The sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh returned ~~home~~ and departed from the sons of Israel at Shiloh which is in the land of Canaan, to go to the land of Gilead, to the land of their possession which they had possessed, according to the command of the LORD through Moses.” (22:9)*

The word “~~home~~” that is struck through in the text is not part of the original text. The “returned” simply means *left*. Thus, the best translation is *“The sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad and the half-tribe left and departed....”*

Moving directly east from Shiloh across the Jordan River, the men would arrive in the land of Gilead, and from there, some would turn north, and some would turn south to find their families in the east Promised Land.

The two and a half tribes were allowed to leave first. Joshua had not yet released the rest of the tribes to find their homes in the west Promised Land.

2. The Tribe’s Adoration (22:10-34)

a) The Building of an Altar (22:10)

When the men reached the Jordan River, the three groups wanted to offer the tribes adoration to the LORD. They would do so by the building of an altar. Verse 10. *“When they came to the region of the Jordan which is in the land of Canaan, the sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh built an altar there by the Jordan, a large altar in appearance.” (22:10)*

The location of the altar is unknown. It has not survived through the hundreds of years.

b) The Rejection of the Altar (22:11-12)

News of the building of the altar traveled fast. When it arrived at Shiloh, we see immediately the rejection of the altar. Verse 11. *“And the sons of Israel heard it said, “Behold, the sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh have built an altar at the frontier of the land of Canaan, in the region of the Jordan, on the side belonging to the sons of Israel.”¹² When the sons of Israel heard of it, the whole congregation of the sons of Israel gathered themselves at Shiloh to go up against them in war.” (22:11-12)*

We must wonder how the faith of the whole congregation in these men was lost in so few days. But it was. These men had given over five years of their lives away from their families while helping them acquire the west Promised Land for those who are now willing to go to war against them. This makes no sense. Obviously, an unfortunate misunderstanding had occurred. Obviously, the whole camp talked among themselves and fabricated their own opinion for what the men had done. Obviously, as we will see, the camp was dead wrong. Obviously, the five years of war in their blood caused the whole camp to naturally be ready to step into war even against their kin.

c) The Rebuke of the Altar (22:13-34)

(1) The Envoy Sent (22:13-14)

Fired up, the sons of Israel wanted to issue their rebuke of the altar. To do so, the envoy was sent. Verse 13. *“Then the sons of Israel sent to the sons of Reuben and to the sons of Gad and to the half-tribe of Manasseh, into the land of Gilead, Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest,¹⁴ and with him ten chiefs, one chief for each father’s household from each of the tribes of Israel; and each one of them was the head of his father’s household among the thousands of Israel.” (22:13-14)*

Here we learn something that we have not seen in the Bible to this point. When the writer states that Joshua, Eleazar, and the chiefs did so-in-so, the number of chiefs were twelve, one chief for

each tribe. There were ten tribes represented in the west Promised Land. One from each tribe joined Phinehas to in the envoy. Because Caleb was the chief of Ephraim, he would have been included in the envoy.

(2) The Tribe's Accusation (22:15-20)

(a) The Perception of the Purpose of the Altar (22:15-16)

Arriving at the altar, we find the tribes accused by the envoy. Immediately we hear the envoy's perception of the purpose of the altar. Verse 15. *"They came to the sons of Reuben and to the sons of Gad and to the half-tribe of Manasseh, to the land of Gilead, and they spoke with them saying,*¹⁶ *"Thus says the whole congregation of the LORD, 'What is this unfaithful act which you have committed against the God of Israel, turning away from following the LORD this day, by building yourselves an altar, to rebel against the LORD this day?"*" (22:15-16)

The perception of the envoy is, *"What is this unfaithful act which you have committed against the God of Israel, turning away from following the LORD this day, by building yourselves an altar, to rebel against the LORD this day?"* Why did the envoy not first inquire into the matter before making the accusation? Who has sinned here, the men or the envoy?

(b) The Perception of the Result of the Altar (22:17-20)

(i) Remember the Consequences of the Sin at Peor (22:17-18a)

But the envoy was through with the perceptions. From the perception of the altar's purpose, we see the envoy's perception of the result of the altar by remembering the consequences of the sin at Peor. Verse 17. *"Is not the iniquity of Peor enough for us, from which we have not cleansed ourselves to this day, although a plague came on the congregation of the LORD,*¹⁸ *that you must turn away this day from following the LORD?"* (22:17-18a)

What happened at Peor? Here is the story found in Numbers 25.

"While Israel remained at Shittim, the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab.² For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.³ So Israel joined themselves to Baal of Peor, and the LORD was angry against Israel.⁴ The LORD said to Moses, 'Take all the leaders of the people and execute them in broad daylight before the LORD, so that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel.'⁵ So Moses said to the judges of Israel, 'Each of you slay his men who have joined themselves to Baal of Peor.'

⁶ Then behold, one of the sons of Israel came and brought to his relatives a Midianite woman, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation of the sons of Israel, while they were weeping at the doorway of the tent of meeting.⁷ When Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he arose from the midst of the congregation and took a spear in his hand,⁸ and he went after the man of Israel into the tent and pierced both of them through, the man of Israel and the woman, through the body. So the plague on the sons of Israel was checked.⁹ Those who died by the plague were 24,000.

¹⁰ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,¹¹ 'Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned away My wrath from the sons of Israel in that he was jealous with My jealousy among them, so that I did not destroy the sons of Israel in My jealousy.' (Numbers 25:1-10)

The sin of Peor occurred within ninety days of the death of Moses. Even though it had occurred a little more than five years before this point in the story, it was still fresh in his mind because it was Phinehas, the leader of the envoy, who had stopped the LORD from destroying the whole nation by his quick action. We might also state here, that, although the LORD commended Phinehas for his quick action, his action forfeited his right to serve as high priest (Leviticus 21:1-3). He could still serve as a priest, but not a high priest. Instead, he will become a leader of the armies and also of envoys to right any wrongs (Joshua 22).

(ii) Remember the Consequences of Sin Against the LORD (22:18b-19b)

Phinehas, no doubt the spokesman of the envoy, remembered the consequences of the sin against the LORD with the sin of Peor. Verse 18b. *“If you rebel against the LORD today, He will be angry with the whole congregation of Israel tomorrow.”* (22:18b)

Evidently, the men were still building the altar and had not made a sacrifice on it at the time of the arrival of the envoy. Perhaps, as the verse implies, the men were about to make their sacrifice later that day. Phinehas knew and warned the men that if they sacrificed on the altar that day, the whole camp of Israel at Shiloh would be in jeopardy of the LORD’s wrath the following day.

(a) Forsake the Unclean Land (22:19a)

Then the spokesman made an offer to convince the men not to make a sacrifice on the new altar. He asks them to forsake the unclean land of their inheritance if it was unclean. Verse 19a. *“If, however, the land of your possession is unclean”* (22:19a)

We must wonder, “How would the men know that their land across the Jordan River was unclean because they had not seen it in more than five years?” They were still at the Jordan River on their way.

(b) Return to the Clean Land (22:19b)

In asking the men to forsake their unclean land, the spokesman offered a return to the clean land. Verse 19b. *“...then cross into the land of the possession of the LORD, where the LORD’s tabernacle stands, and take possession among us. Only do not rebel against the LORD, or rebel against us by building an altar for yourselves, besides the altar of the LORD our God.”* (22:19b)

Translation, “If you do not like the land you have received in the east Promised Land, come back to Shiloh, and we will carve out land for you in the west Promised Land.” Then the spokesman begged the men not to rebel against the LORD.

(iii) Remember the Consequences of Sin on the Congregation (22:20)

But the spokesman was not through with his remembrances of the anger of the LORD. He remembered the consequences of the sin on the congregation that occurred at Jericho. Verse 20. *“Did not Achan the son of Zerah act unfaithfully in the things under the ban, and wrath fall on all the congregation of Israel? And that man did not perish alone in his iniquity.”* (22:20)

In Joshua chapter 7, the whole nation of Israel learned of Achan’s sin at Jericho only when more than three dozen soldiers lost their lives in the following campaign against Ai. Those men died, and when Achan was discovered, he died, and so did his whole family. Even though Achan’s sin was about five years before, it was still fresh in the congregation’s minds. When there was no sin in the camp, the whole nation won every victory. When sin was in the camp, the whole camp suffered.

(3) The Tribe’s Reaction (22:21-29)

(a) To the Wrong Perception (22:21-23)

Now we come to the men of the tribe’s reaction to the wrong perception. Verse 21. *“Then the sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasse answered and spoke to the heads of the families of Israel.”*²² *“The Mighty One, God, the LORD, the Mighty One, God, the LORD! He knows, and may Israel itself know. If it was in rebellion, or if in an unfaithful act against the LORD do not save us this day!”*²³ *If we have built us an altar to turn away from following the LORD, or if to offer a burnt offering or grain offering on it, or if to offer sacrifices of peace offerings on it, may the LORD Himself require it.”* (22:21-23)

We notice in the men’s reaction that they believed the envoy could not be further from the truth about their intent. Simply, they knew enough to seek the LORD’s approval rather than that of the envoy.

(b) To the Right Perception (22:24-29)

(i) The Altar as a Reminder (22:24-25)

The men then attempted to lead the envoy to the right perception because they had built the altar as a reminder. Verse 24. *“But truly we have done this out of concern, for a reason, saying, ‘In time to come your sons may say to our sons, ‘What have you to do with the LORD, the God of Israel?’²⁵ For the LORD has made the Jordan a border between us and you, you sons of Reuben and sons of Gad; you have no portion in the LORD.’ So your sons may make our sons stop fearing the LORD.”* (22:24-25)

The men had already discussed the problem they were going to have in the future when the younger generations wondered why most of the nation of Israel lived on the west side of the Jordan River. They were separated from the majority of Israel on the east side of the river. It was not a far leap for them to make because they knew how they thought throughout the past forty years, and they fully expected the generations to come to think about the difference between those who lived on the east side of the Jordan River and those on the west. The men were fully expecting that those on the west would cause a problem for those on the east when the men said, *“So your sons may make our sons stop fearing the LORD.”* The men had turned the blame of the sin around. The problem in the future with the men’s descendants would be because of the actions of the ancestors living on the west side of the Jordan River. The conflict between the tribes on either side of the Jordan might lead the descendants of the men to fall away from the LORD. They needed a way to remember the goodness of the LORD.

(ii) The Altar as a Witness (22:26-27)

Therefore, the men had made the decision to build an altar as a witness to remember the LORD. Verse 26, *“Therefore we said, ‘Let us build an altar, not for burnt offering or for sacrifice;²⁷ rather it shall be a witness between us and you and between our generations after us, that we are to perform the service of the LORD before Him with our burnt offerings, and with our sacrifices and with our peace offerings, so that your sons will not say to our sons in time to come, ‘You have no portion in the LORD.’”* (22:26-27)

The altar was not one for offerings or sacrifices; it was an altar that would act as a monument. In the middle of the Jordan River, Joshua set twelve stones as a monument to the crossing on dry ground. At Gilgal, Joshua arranged twelve stones as a monument to remember the blessings and the curses. On Mount Ebal, Joshua arranged twelve stones as a monument to remember the blessings and the curses and built an altar as a monument to remember the worship of the LORD. There, at the Jordan River, these men built an altar to remember all that had happened, so the tribes of the west could never say the tribes of the east had no inheritance.

(iii) The Altar as a Replica (22:28)

In order to ensure the remembrance, the men would build an altar as a replica. Verse 28. *“Therefore we said, ‘It shall also come about if they say this to us or to our generations in time to come, then we shall say, ‘See the copy of the altar of the LORD which our fathers made, not for burnt offering or for sacrifice; rather it is a witness between us and you.’”* (22:28)

What altar did these men replicate at the Jordan River? No doubt, this altar is a replica of the one built on Mount Ebal when the blessings and the curses of Israel were pronounced. It could not be the Brazen Altar at the Tabernacle because it was not made of stone; it was made of wood covered in gold or brass. But, at Mount Ebal, a stone altar was built. During the offering, the meats were cooked on the stone altar instead of the Brazen Altar, even though the Brazen Altar was there. No doubt it is where the continuous fire lit on the day of its consecration by the LORD was drawn to start the clean fire on the stone altar.

(iv) The Altar as a Monument (22:29)

Then, the men described the altar as a monument. Verse 29. *“Far be it from us that we should rebel against the LORD and turn away from following the LORD this day, by building an altar for burnt offering, for grain offering or for sacrifice, besides the altar of the LORD our God which is before His tabernacle.”* (22:29)

In translation, the men had no intent on building a fire on the altar and making sacrifices. It was an altar to be a continual monument of remembrance. The men set the nail in the false coffin of misperception about the altar by stating that the offering was to be performed on the altar in front of the Tabernacle.

(4) The Envoy Relents (22:30-34)

(a) The Decision About the Altar (22:23-31)

The envoy had heard the explanation. Then the envoy relented and made a decision about the altar. Verse 23. *“So when Phinehas the priest and the leaders of the congregation, even the heads of the families of Israel who were with him, heard the words which the sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad and the sons of Manasseh spoke, it pleased them.”* ³¹ *And Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest said to the sons of Reuben and to the sons of Gad and to the sons of Manasseh, “Today we know that the LORD is in our midst, because you have not committed this unfaithful act against the LORD; now you have delivered the sons of Israel from the hand of the LORD.”* (22:23-31)

We cannot tell exactly from this passage, but from the wording of Phinehas when he says, *“Today we know that the LORD is in our midst, because you have not committed this unfaithful act against the LORD; now you have delivered the sons of Israel from the hand of the LORD,”* Phinehas is admitting that it was the envoy that had sinned and not the men. In fact, the men, by their intent and their faithfulness, had saved Israel from the hand of the LORD. They could only be thankful that they asked the men what they were doing before they enacted war against them. If they had attacked the men, surely, the LORD would have brought wrath on the nation.

(b) The Name of the Altar (22:32-34)

Because of the realization of the intent of the men, they were thankful for the men and their altar memorial. The Reubenites and the Gadites named the Altar. Verse 32. *“Then Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest and the leaders returned from the sons of Reuben and from the sons of Gad, from the land of Gilead to the land of Canaan, to the sons of Israel, and brought back word to them.”* ³³ *The word pleased the sons of Israel, and the sons of Israel blessed God; and they did not speak of going up against them in war to destroy the land in which the sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad were living.* ³⁴ *The sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad called the altar Witness; “For,” they said, “it is a witness between us that the LORD is God.”* (22:32-34)

The name of the altar would be *“Witness ... it is a witness between us that the LORD is God.”* It is a name, and it is an explanation. It was a witness that the Israelites on both sides of the Jordan River worship and belong to the same Jehovah LORD God.