

August 19

Scriptures: Read Joshua 22

Key Verse: “The Lord your God had given rest to your brethren, as He promised them; now therefore, return and go to your tents…” (Joshua 22:4)

Overview

After the main battles had been won and God had given rest to the tribes settling in Canaan, Joshua summoned the warriors from the two and a half tribes in Transjordan to thank them for faithfully fulfilling their obligation and promise in helping to conquer Canaan and bring “rest”—peace and safety from any danger (1:14-15; Num.32:17-22).

He honorably released the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh from further military duty and allowed them to return to their families and their land of inheritance on the east side of the Jordan. However, they did not return empty-handed; they were enriched by the dividing of the spoil of war—a reward for their valuable service in the mission they helped to accomplish for the Lord.

Through their military duty was finished, Joshua made it clear that their spiritual duty to the God of Israel would never be completed. Before he gave them leave, he strongly charged them with words like those of Moses, that they were to be very careful to “do” and “keep” God’s commandments, to “hold fast” to Him and “to walk in all His ways”, to “love” Him and “serve” Him with all their heart and soul (22:5). Loving God is more than just an emotion; it is doing, serving, and walking in constant obedience and true loyalty to Him. Jesus said, “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15). History proved that the Transjordanian tribes did not love God in the way they should have, for they fell sadly into idolatry and forgot their first love.

The altar the tribes erected on their way home almost led to a huge war because of misunderstanding. The children of Israel within Canaan were alarmed when they heard about it and jumped to conclusions. They may have associated this new altar with idolatry, or interpreted it as a desire of the eastern tribes to separate from their fellow Israelites; or it may have been thought that they intended to sacrifice to God upon it, for it was made to resemble the true altar in the Tabernacle. This would be a serious transgression of the Law. Moses made it clear there was to be only one place of sacrifice (unless God commanded otherwise, e.g. 8:30-31), and that was at the central sanctuary where God had chosen to put His Name.

It was wise of the western tribes to first send a delegation to discover the facts and to possibly try to turn them away from sin. The zealous Phinehas, son of the high priest Eleazar, was the right person to lead the group. He had previously displayed great zeal for God in purifying the nation when they fell into sin at Baal-Peor (v.17; Num.25:6-13). If these eastern tribes were guilty, he would be the one to see they were punished. As he illustrated with the example of Achan, their guilt would bring collective guilt and God’s wrath upon the whole nation (v.20).

The eastern tribes’ strong denial of any rebellion and their explanation satisfied the delegation. They explained that the altar was not for sacrifice; rather it was built as a “witness” of their

loyalty to God and their desire for lasting unity with the rest of the nation (that was why they built “their” altar on the western banks of the Jordan). Also, because of that altar, their descendants would know that they were one with Israel, worshipped the same God, and had the same right to Him at the Tabernacle.

Erecting this altar was probably a needless thing to do, since God had not ordered it. In fact, history proved it did not serve its purpose in keeping the unity. God Himself had given the plan and the means to keep the unity: in obedience to Him, all the men were to go and appear before the Lord three times a year at His central sanctuary (Ex.23:17). The key to unity, then, was obedience to God, which is a result of love for Him. If we love God the way we should and “walk worthy of the calling... bearing with one another in love”, then unity with our fellow believers would be possible (Eph.4:1-3)

Prayer

Lord God, You desire the unity of Your people. Please make us one as never before. You prayed, Lord Jesus, that Your followers would be one, even as You and Your Father are one. Grant this great blessing to us today and every day, and many others seeing this unity desire to join us in Christ.