

Living in the Land



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Joshua 22; Eph. 6:7; John 7:24; Numbers 25; Prov. 15:1; 1 Pet. 3:8, 9.*

Memory Text: “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (*Proverbs 15:1, NIV*).

Living in a community can, at times, lead to disputes and tension. This is especially true in a community, such as the church, where people from different backgrounds and social strata—and who are sometimes brought up in completely different cultures—live and work together for a common purpose.

This week we will study Joshua 22 and a challenge that arose from a great misunderstanding among the people. At the beginning of the book, Joshua commanded some tribes to cross the Jordan and participate in the conquest, along with the tribes on the west side of the Jordan (*Josh. 1:12–18*). Now that the task is accomplished, they are free to return. However, at the east side of the Jordan, they build an altar that raises concern among the West Jordan tribes.

Why is it dangerous to jump to a rash conclusion about the behavior of others? How can we foster unity in the church? Why is it important to keep in mind the larger scope of our calling and not to get caught up in distractions? These are some of the questions we are going to deal with this week.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 13.

Commitment

Read Joshua 22:1–8. What do these verses tell us about the commitment of the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half tribe of Manasseh?

Joshua affirms that the tribes from the other side of the Jordan have fully satisfied the obligations set out by Moses and himself, which meant a significant dedication to, and sacrifice on behalf of, Israel's common cause. They fought alongside their brothers for "many days," which in reality meant about six to seven years (*compare with Josh. 11:18, Josh. 14:10, Deut. 2:14*). Their wives and children were left at home, on the east side of Jordan, yet they decided to fight loyally along with their brothers, facing the threat of injury and death in war.

These verses indirectly underline the importance of the unity of the nation and that of the land. They also prepare the way for the ensuing story, which is ultimately about unity. Will the Israelite tribes stay united, despite the strong natural border that the Jordan forms between them? Will they allow geography to set its mark on their national identity, or will they let their common worship of the only God keep them as His chosen nation, united and strong under His theocratic guidance?

Joshua explains the only way that such fidelity has been possible: they did not serve their fellow Israelites but Yahweh Himself, who charged them with their mission.

We find this same principle in the New Testament. The apostle Paul admonished Christians to render their service as if they were working for God and not only for human beings (*see Eph. 6:7, Col. 3:23, 1 Thess. 2:4*). What higher calling is there than working for, ultimately, the Creator of the cosmos?

In everyday life, we often face challenges and difficulties that can easily discourage us and make us want to give up the fight. That's easy, at times, to do. Yet, we can call upon the power of the Lord, who promises to be with us and enables us to do what He asks of us. If we keep our higher calling before us, we can be motivated to press on ahead, despite the inevitable challenges and discouragements that are part of our fallen existence here.

Joshua 22:5, 6 reports that Joshua appealed to the departing tribes to remain faithful to the Lord, and then he blessed them. How would our relationships in the church be transformed if we prayed for each other more than we do?

Accusations . . .

Read the story of the returning tribes in Joshua 22:9–20. What accusations do the West Jordan tribes level against the East Jordan tribes? To what extent were these accusations well founded?

In contrast with verse 1, where the tribes on the east side are called by their usual form (Reubenites, Gadites, etc.), here a different expression is used: “sons of Reuben,” “sons of Gad,” and “the half-tribe of Manasseh,” which is in contrast to the “sons of Israel” (*Josh. 22:11, NASB*), thus representing a different entity.

In the narrative, the expression “the whole congregation of Israel” refers only to the nine and a half West Jordan tribes, underlining the rift that developed between the two groups. Indeed, the underlying question of the ensuing story is whether the tribes on the east side of the river can be seen as Israelites.

We would expect a smooth conclusion to the story; however, tension arises as the tribes from the east are reported to have erected an altar at the Jordan. The text here does not offer any reason for the act, nor does it describe the function of the altar or specific activity related to it. The ambiguity concerning the meaning of this altar is increased even more if we observe the flashbacks to the first crossing of the Jordan, in chapters 3 and 4, where all Israel entered the edge of the Jordan to cross the river into mainland Canaan. Here a part of Israel comes to the region of the Jordan, but now to cross the river in the opposite direction.

In both cases, a structure of stones is erected. The first served as a memorial, while the second is perceived to be an impressive altar. The question that inevitably comes to mind is: “What do these stones mean?” (*compare with Josh 4:6, 22*). Is this altar built for sacrifices, or is it only a memorial? Are these other tribes already starting to fall into apostasy?

Lack of consultation with Joshua, Eleazar, or the tribal leaders creates room for a misunderstanding that potentially can lead to terrible conflict.

What are Jesus and Paul referring to when they admonish us to avoid judging others? Read Luke 6:37, John 7:24, and 1 Cor. 4:5. Why is it so easy to jump to wrong conclusions about the motives of others?

Haunted by the Past

Read Joshua 22:13–15 again, but now in the light of Numbers 25. Why do the Israelites choose Phinehas as the head of the delegation to the two-and-a-half tribes?

Before giving full credit to the rumors of what might be perceived as a declaration of independence, the nine-and-a-half tribes, labeled twice as “the sons of Israel,” send a delegation to clarify the intent and meaning of the altar. The delegation consisted of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar the high priest, who would succeed Eleazar after his death (*Josh. 24:33*). Phinehas already has gained some visibility as the priest who put an end to the debauchery of Israel at Baal Peor (*Numbers 25*).

“Now when Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose from among the congregation and took a javelin in his hand; and he went after the man of Israel into the tent and thrust both of them through, the man of Israel, and the woman through her body. So the plague was stopped among the children of Israel” (*Num. 25:7, 8, NKJV*).

Phinehas surely had some influence. The other emissaries were representatives of the nine-and-a-half tribes west of the Jordan, each being the head of a tribal family (literally, “head of his father’s house”), within the clans of Israel.

The delegation opens the indictment of sacrilege and rebellion with the official prophetic formula “thus says.” The distinction here is that it is not the Lord speaking but the “whole congregation of the LORD” (*Josh. 22:16, NKJV*). They launch the accusation that Israel committed trespass, treachery, and rebellion. The term “trespass” is the same Hebrew word that was used to describe Achan’s sin (*Josh. 7:1*) and appears several times in the first five books of Moses (*for example, Lev. 5:15; Lev. 6:2; Num. 5:6, 12*). The examples of Achan and Baal Peor serve as precedents: one for treachery and the other for rebellion. They also express the fear of the nine-and-a-half tribes that the act of building an unauthorized altar will lead to apostasy, idolatry, and immorality, which will incur the wrath of the Lord upon the entire nation of Israel.

We all have negative experiences from the past that will shape the way we deal with similar incidents in the future. How can God’s grace help to ensure that the tragedies of our past do not determine the way we treat our neighbors in the present?

A Gentle Answer

Read Joshua 22:21–29 in the light of Proverbs 15:1. What can we learn from the answer of the eastern tribes?

The answer of the accused, as straightforward and powerful as the accusation, constitutes both thematically and structurally the heart of the chapter. So far, the tribes have not replied to the accusations but instead have quietly listened to the allegations against them. Given the seriousness of the charges, their patience is exemplary as they display the true meaning of the proverb: “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (*Prov. 15:1, NKJV*).

The opening sentence of the defense is a string of divine names attributed to Israel’s God: *El, Elohim, Yahweh* (*Josh. 22:22*). It is repeated twice with a growing force, as it becomes a solemn oath in order to dispel the doubts and false accusations that almost lead to a civil war in Israel. They are strongly convinced that God fully knows and understands the situation, and they hope that the present delegation will arrive at the same conclusion. The two-and-a-half tribes also recognize their accountability before the Lord by calling Him to take vengeance (*compare with Deut. 18:19, 1 Sam. 20:16*) if they are indeed guilty.

A surprising revelation follows, which on the one hand proves the basis of the indictment void (an altar cannot serve only as a place of sacrifice) and on the other hand discloses their true motivation. Fear of separation from Israel, rather than apostasy, was the true ground for their action. Thus, the building of the altar is not evidence of apostasy, as had been supposed. Actually, the contrary is true: they have acted out of fear of the Lord, just as the western tribes did. The true basis of Israel’s unity is not geography or the physical extent of the inheritance but their spiritual allegiance to the requirements of the Lord.

The genuine concern of the tribes on the west side of the river also is revealed in their authentic joy as the innocence of the tribes on the east is ascertained. Instead of feeling defeated by the arguments of their brothers, they show sincere happiness that their suspicions turned out to be wrong. Civil war in Israel was avoided and the unity of the nation preserved.

How do you handle false accusations? Share some of the principles that guide your attitude. For inspiration, see Psalm 37:3–6, 34, 37.

Conflict Resolution

Read Joshua 22:30–34. How does this entire incident give us some insights into conflict resolution and ways of ensuring the unity of the church? (Compare with Psalm 133; John 17:20–23; 1 Pet. 3:8, 9.)

The story of Joshua 22 has several principles of communication that can apply to everyday human relationships in the family, church, and community.

1. When things go wrong, or seem to go wrong, the best thing to do is to communicate instead of suppressing our observations until they explode. It is good for God's people not to remain indifferent when problems seem to arise. Of course, had the Transjordanian tribes communicated their intent of building an altar, the whole issue could have been avoided.
2. Even if one is convinced about their judgment, do not jump to hasty conclusions. The West Jordan tribes were quick to believe the rumor that reached their ears and to draw the false conclusion that the East Jordan tribes already had apostatized.
3. Talk about the real or perceived problems before you act on your conclusions.
4. Be willing to make a sacrifice in order to achieve unity. The West Jordan tribes were willing to give up part of their allotment to accommodate the other tribes, if being on the other side of the Jordan was the cause of their assumed apostasy.
5. When accused, falsely or rightly, give a gentle answer that turns away wrath. To answer an accusation with a counter-accusation will never lead to peace. Try to understand before attempting to be understood.
6. Rejoice and bless God when peace is reestablished. It is wonderful to see that the main Israelite congregation experienced genuine joy when they learned about the true motivation of the two-and-a-half tribes. They were not so proud of their judgment that they could not admit they were wrong in making it.

Had the East Jordan tribes apostatized, the people of Israel would have applied the requirements of the covenant. Unity can never be an argument to water down truth or give up on biblical principles. However, church discipline should always be the last (and not the first) resort, after attempts at reconciliation and pastoral assistance based on God's Word have failed. How different would our churches look if these simple principles were consistently applied!

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Division of Canaan,” pp. 517–520, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“While it is important on the one hand that laxness in dealing with sin be avoided, it is equally important on the other to shun harsh judgment and groundless suspicion. . . .

“The wisdom displayed by the Reubenites and their companions is worthy of imitation. While honestly seeking to promote the cause of true religion, they were misjudged and severely censured; yet they manifested no resentment. They listened with courtesy and patience to the charges of their brethren before attempting to make their defense, and then fully explained their motives and showed their innocence. Thus the difficulty which had threatened such serious consequences was amicably settled.

“Even under false accusation those who are in the right can afford to be calm and considerate. God is acquainted with all that is misunderstood and misinterpreted by men, and we can safely leave our case in His hands. He will as surely vindicate the cause of those who put their trust in Him as He searched out the guilt of Achan. Those who are actuated by the spirit of Christ will possess that charity which suffers long and is kind.

“It is the will of God that union and brotherly love should exist among His people. The prayer of Christ just before His crucifixion was that His disciples might be one as He is one with the Father, that the world might believe that God had sent Him. This most touching and wonderful prayer reaches down the ages, even to our day; for His words were, ‘Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on Me through their word.’ John 17:20. While we are not to sacrifice one principle of truth, it should be our constant aim to reach this state of unity.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 519, 520.

Discussion Questions:

- ① How can the admonition of Paul to “count others more significant than yourselves” (*Phil. 2:3, ESV*) help us to avoid surmising evil about our brothers and sisters?
- ② Why do we often overreact to a situation because of our past failures or mistakes? How can we avoid this tendency?
- ③ Discuss the significance of listening to the viewpoint of others. How can we develop a culture of listening in our church? (*Compare with James 1:19.*)
- ④ We live in a society in which the requirements of our professional life, family responsibilities, church-related commitments, and other duties can seem overwhelming. How can the principle of doing everything as to the Lord not only make us more responsible but also bring us peace of mind?

Mission: God's Helping Hand

Kim Sun was excited to be sent to a remote area of the Philippines to serve as a missionary for 10 months with the 1000 Missionary Movement. But he wondered how he would spend those 10 months. He remembered that he had argued with his parents about the Bible for five years and gotten nowhere. Now he only had 10 months.

As he prayed, he thought, "If I bring the Bible first, maybe people will reject it like my parents. Maybe I first need to show them the character of Jesus."

Sun decided not to tell anyone that he was a missionary. He wouldn't tell anyone about biblical doctrines. He would just make friends for three months.

Upon arriving at the rural town where he would live, Sun visited each of its 20 to 30 houses to offer to help his new neighbors.

"Do you need help with anything?" he asked the woman at the first house. "I want to serve you. Please let me know how I may be of help."

She happily accepted Sun's kind offer.

News of the helpful new neighbor spread from house to house in the neighborhood. Soon a line of people came by who needed or wanted help. The first woman whose house he visited kindly fed him lunch and supper as he helped 17 people in the neighborhood that first day.

As Sun walked home, he felt tired. But he thought, "I'm a missionary!"

Sun soon had a long list of names of people to visit who wanted his help. From Monday to Friday, he visited two homes in the morning and two in the afternoon.

He also found other ways to be a friend to the townspeople. He grew corn and gave it away. When people asked how much they owed, he replied, "Nothing! The corn came from God. God has paid for you." Once, he saw a boy with a sore on his leg, and he treated the sore with ointment. When the sore healed completely a few days later, the parents came to him and asked, "How can we ever thank you?"



Sun served the townspeople without identifying himself as a missionary for three months. It wasn't a secret; nobody asked him. He prayed about the next three months.

Kim Sun is associate director of the 1000 Missionary Movement, whose headquarters in Silang, Philippines, were constructed with the help of a 1996 Thirteenth Sabbath Offering. Read more next week.