



# WHEN BROTHERS ARE AT ODDS

*SERIES: IMAGES OF WARFARE AND WORSHIP*

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Joshua 22:1-34

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When disputes arise among people, my natural inclination is to run for cover. I try to avoid contention and confrontation. I love a good fight, but I don't want to be in the middle of one. No matter how hard I try, however, I have found there is no way to avoid disagreements, disputes and misunderstandings. What should we do when Christian relationships go askew? How should we respond when believers are at odds?

The book of Joshua recounts the story of the Israelites' conquering and subsequent occupation and life in the land. As we have already seen, living in the land is analogous to the believer's life in Christ. But life in the land is anything but a Camelot-like experience. It has its struggles. One problem that arises at times is fractured relationships, schisms and divisions. While we agree with the words of the psalm, "It is good and pleasant for brothers to dwell in unity" (Ps. 133:1), there is always potential for conflict. We need to be prepared to handle these situations, because they will inevitably arise.

By the end of the twenty-first chapter of Joshua, the conquest of the land is complete. It has been both conquered and divided. Listen to these words, from 21:43-45:

**"So the LORD gave Israel all the land which He had sworn to give to their fathers...And the LORD gave them rest on every side...Not one of the good promises which the LORD had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass."** (NASB)

We come now to the last three chapters of the book, covering the subjects of retaining and maintaining the land. All three of these chapters relate to some aspect of worship. As we have already noted, this book is, in a sense, a "photo album" made up of snapshots of warfare and worship. Here we find that worship is key to retaining the land, just as we saw it was key to taking the land.

Chapter 22 opens with a farewell address by Joshua to the two and one-half tribes who took their inheritance east of the Jordan but later crossed over to help their brothers drive out their enemies. Now that the enemies have been defeated, these eastern tribes are free to return to their homes.

This must have been an emotional scene, as brothers who had been comrades-in-arms for seven years said good-bye to one another. Those of you who are veterans know how emotional saying farewell to your comrades can be. Here, Joshua makes a speech praising these brothers for their faithfulness and exhorting them to maintain covenant loyalty in the future. In essence, he repeats to them what he had said to Israel in chapter 1, before the conquest of the land.

Joshua tells these tribes to "keep on keeping on." What a great word this is, both for Israel and for us! We are to live

with the same vigilance in peacetime as in wartime. But, unfortunately, we tend to let things slide once the pressure of battle is over and there is clear sailing ahead. If we don't maintain our spiritual life, however, we are asking for trouble.

As we come to our text we find that matters become heated over the building of an altar. Chapter 22:9-10:

**And 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.**

**And 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.**

As the eastern tribes cross into their own land they build a large altar at the Jordan. It is unclear as to exactly where this was erected, but the text says it was a very large and very visible edifice.

The altar was to create a huge problem, as we will see. Verses 11-12:

**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." And 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.**

When the western tribes hear the news about the altar, they begin to prepare for war. They responded in this manner because the book of Deuteronomy expressly forbade the building of any altar other than the main altar for the offering of sacrifices designated by the Lord:

**"When you cross the Jordan and live in the land which the LORD your God is giving you to inherit, and He gives you rest from all your enemies around you so that you live in security, then it shall come about that the place in which the LORD your God shall choose for His name to dwell, there you shall bring all that I command you: your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution of your hand, and all your choice votive offerings which you will vow to the LORD...Be careful that you do not offer your burnt offerings in every cultic place you see, but in the place which the LORD chooses in one of your tribes, there you shall offer your burnt offerings, and there you shall do all that I command you"** (Deut. 12:10-14).

Worship in Israel, therefore, could take place only at the central sanctuary, which was at Shiloh. It was an act of apostasy to offer sacrifices on any other altar. The issue here is doctrinal and scriptural in nature. This was anything but a personality conflict. The western tribes thought that this was a rival altar, and they took that very seriously.

They respond by selecting a delegation. Verses 13-14:

**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, 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.**

These men are selected and sent to confront the situation. Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, already has a good track record. Ten tribal heads are selected, one chief from each tribe.

The delegation confronts these eastern brothers with a number of harsh accusations. Verses 15-20:

**And 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, "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? 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, that you must turn away this day from following the LORD? And it will come about if you rebel against the LORD today, that He will be angry with the whole congregation of Israel tomorrow. If, however, the land of your possession is unclean, 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. 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.'"**

The western emissaries make an accusation to the eastern tribes, setting out the seriousness of the issue at hand. They call the building of the altar an unfaithful act—an act of rebellion. The term "unfaithful act" means to commit a trespass against the Lord. This is the word that was used to describe Achan's sin, in chapter 7. The word "rebel," meaning, to nullify or break a covenant, is used more times in Joshua than any other Old Testament book. The reason this issue was regarded so seriously was that Israel had suffered on previous occasions when someone in the community had acted unfaithfully against God.

The delegation cites two such cases: the iniquity of Peor, and the sin of Achan. In chapter 7 we saw that the sin of Achan led to the defeat at Ai and the death of many of Israelites. The iniquity of Peor refers to an incident recorded in Num. 25, when some Israelites, led by the daughters of Moab, were seduced into idolatry with the deity, Baal-

Peor. Specifically, Zimri took a Midianite woman to be his wife. As a result of his sin, 24,000 Israelites died of a plague which was not checked until Phinehas put a spear through both Zimri and his wife as they lay together. Phinehas seems to indicate that the seeds of this idolatry still remained and that Israel has not purified themselves of this sin.

What the western tribes are attempting to do in this confrontation is avoid the wrath of God. They are aware that the actions of one person could affect the entire nation. We never sin in a vacuum. Our sin always affects others. A man does not "perish alone in his iniquity."

The eastern tribes respond to the delegation by emphatically denying the accusations. Verses 21-23:

**Then the sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh answered, and spoke to the heads of the families of Israel. "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 Thou save us this day! 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."**

The eastern tribes reply with astonishing directness, making their appeal to God, and declaring they would welcome destruction if they had acted unfaithfully. In other words, they agree with the importance of the issue, the truth of the Word, and the consequences of disobedience.

They go on to explain their reasons for building the altar. Verses 24-28:

**"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? 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.'**

**"Therefore we said, 'Let us build an altar, not for burnt offering or for sacrifice; 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, that your sons may not say to our sons in time to come, "You have no portion in the LORD."' 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.'"**

Here we come the center-point of the story. The eastern tribes explain the purpose of the altar, saying it was not intended to be functional, but, rather, a memorial to the altar at Shiloh. It was not meant to mark division but, on the contrary, union among the twelve tribes. They had erected the altar so that in the future, the tribes west of the Jordan would not forget about their relationship with the tribes east of the river. The altar was intended to be a witness to an ongoing relationship, so that the eastern tribes would be able to come into the land and worship at the proper

place in the proper way. It was a copy that pointed to the real thing.

In verse 29, the accusations are denied; and in verses 30-31, they are retracted. The delegation returns to Shiloh (v. 32), and war is avoided (33).

Finally, the altar is named. Verse 34:

**And 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."**

An interesting footnote here is that this story relates to two other stories in the Bible. First, it closely parallels an event that occurred between Jacob and Laban when Jacob and his wives left Laban. The men had a dispute concerning stolen idols, and they ended up erecting a heap of stones on the border of their lands as a witness between them that they would not pass over the border with the intention of harming one another.

Second, we are reminded of another event that took place at the Jordan river, the occasion when John the Baptist appeared, preaching a baptism of repentance. John kept deflecting the light away from himself, pointing to Another who was coming. He was not the sacrifice, and the Jordan was not the altar. Rather, he was a copy, pointing to the true Sacrifice that would be offered on the altar of God. God wanted the purity and the sanctity of the altar to remain so that the altar of the cross could be clearly understood.

At times, we will not be able to avoid situations where we find ourselves at odds with brothers and sisters in Christ. For instance, when I was beginning my ministry with our singles a number of years ago, my first official act was to cancel an appearance by a speaker because of his stand on sexual relations prior to marriage. Our elders have had to confront difficult issues over the years. Many of you have suffered through painful church splits and divisions over doctrinal differences, sin, misunderstanding, and poor communication. The results of these things can be devastating to the body of Christ.

In this story in Joshua we recognize a number of guidelines setting out how to deal with such circumstances. Technically speaking, these guidelines apply to a biblical, sin issue; however, several of them will be helpful in dealing with differences of any kind, whether they occur in the church body, the home or the office.

The first thing we see is this: Be forthright.

Notice that the problem was squarely addressed. There was no attempt to sweep it under the rug. The text says, "All of the congregation of the sons of Israel assembled at Shiloh" (22:12) to discuss the situation. This runs counter to our natural inclination to ignore problems, hoping they will go away. When a difficulty such as this arises, however, the first thing we need to do is face up to it, not shrink from it. The sooner we deal with it, the better.

Secondly: Assess the seriousness of the matter appropriately.

In this instance, the potential apostasy was taken so seriously the western tribes were willing to place purity above their own very lives. They would not settle for peace at any price. They were willing to go to war against brothers they dearly loved. There was no resentment or long-

standing feud. Their willingness to go to war was the correct reaction, according to the law. When a city of brothers fell into idolatry, Israel was instructed in Deuteronomy to "strike the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword, utterly destroying it and all that is in it and its cattle with the edge of the sword" (Deut. 13:15).

Issues of sin demand an appropriate, serious response. Sin in the camp can affect the entire body, as we saw with Achan and the iniquity at Peor. In the N.T., Paul instructed Timothy to not lay hands on new elders too quickly, because of the risk in the sharing of some sin issue. When there is a clear violation of God's Word we need to be serious in our response. But, when there is not a clear sin issue we must evaluate the appropriate seriousness of the matter, based on the Word, and communicate that clearly.

Third: Send the right people.

The western tribes sent their ablest leaders to deal with the problem. They dispatched Phinehas, who had been zealous for the Lord at Baal Peor (Num. 25:7) and ten chiefs, selected from all the tribes, to engage in some straight talk with the eastern tribes.

This is one of the most difficult problems we face in dealing with disagreements. Differences create anxiety, so we tend to delegate our responsibility: We send our secretary or we dispatch an e-mail. We talk to others but fail to confront face to face those directly involved. We hold too many mini-meetings and the issue gets clouded and jumbled, making matters worse. It is extremely important to get all the right people together and talk face to face. Don't send your secretary or someone else to deal with the situation that demands your personal involvement.

Fourth: Focus on the issue.

The delegation from the western tribes was honest and objective. They didn't beat around the bush, but clearly identified the issue as one that concerned the breaking of God's commandment. It was a matter of a breach of faith, an act of rebellion against God, not a subjective attack based on egos or personalities.

When we face sin issues and differences it is imperative that we focus objectively on the matter at hand. This is not an easy task. We can end up getting emotionally entangled when we are dealing with troublesome issues. Self-worth, identity, ego and pride cloud things. We create an emotional web to hide our fears and anxieties, and people get hurt in the process. What we must do is deal with the facts in an objective manner. Matthew exhorts: "And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed" (Matt. 18:15-16).

Fifth: Offer assistance and support to win your brother.

The western tribes respected their brothers' consciences as to the cleanness of the land and were willing to offer some of their own land to restore them. What an offer! In making it, what they were saying was, "We understand the problem. If your land is defiled, and if the traditions in your land are causing you to commit apostasy, then we will give you some of our land." What a demonstration of costly love!

This is the kind of love that wins people to God. This is the love that restores peace and unity among believers. Truth is important, but we need both truth and love. When we practice discipline and confront a brother or a sister we can do this in a self-righteous way that exalts ourselves and drives people away. But if our concern is truly for the brother or the sister, and their relationship to God, then we will offer our own time and money in order to maintain the purity of the brethren.

Paul exhibited this kind of love when he dealt with the issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols, in Corinth. He said that all food was clean and edible. However, certain weaker brothers did not have the freedom to eat meat sacrificed to idols, and if the stronger brothers ate in their presence, it might cause them to stumble. Paul's advice was, "Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, that I might not cause my brother to stumble" (1 Cor. 8:13). Speaking to the same issue in Romans, the apostle wrote, "So then let us pursue the things which make for the peace and the building up of one another ... Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves" (Rom. 14:19; 15:1).

Are we willing to do as Paul says? Are we willing to offer our couch to someone to sleep on so that he or she might be released from an immoral living situation? Are we willing to offer financial help to someone caught in an unethical use of money? It's easy to blast away and condemn, but much harder to be part of the solution.

Sixth: Maintain an open mind.

The western tribes were concerned about what they viewed as apostasy. However, once they understood the motives of the eastern tribes they were not afraid to accept this new expression of faith that could be helpful in maintaining covenant loyalty and brotherhood; so the altar remained in place.

Our tendency is to get locked into an "us versus them" mentality. We think our side has to win. However, if we are dealing with the facts, and if our goal is not to win at all costs, if we can keep an open mind, if we can make the effort to listen, there may be an alternative solution, one that will maintain purity, integrity, and brotherhood.

Seventh: Offer praise and thanksgiving to God.

When the western tribes heard the explanation offered for the building of the altar, they gave thanks that God was in their midst and he had delivered them. Then, when they returned and gave the report to the congregation, the sons of Israel blessed God.

It is not a pleasant thing when relationships go awry. But when they do, and when matters are reconciled at last, don't hush things up and pretend there was never a problem to begin with. Allow these situations to be an occasion for rejoicing, praise, and worship. Share what happened,

and then bless the Lord together. Once things have been worked out, this can result in greater intimacy and oneness in the family of God.

In this story we have a wonderful example of brothers maintaining the purity of truth but also acting in love. Both of these elements are necessary, but they must be held in balance. Christians are called to confront sin, wickedness and evil with the truth of God. But we must never act in a self-righteous manner. We are servants of God, called to love others with the love of Christ, but sin and evil are hurtful to God and to the body of Christ. Let us be so concerned for purity that we are willing to give of our time and our possessions to bring brothers and sisters back in line with the truth of God.

Perhaps you are involved in just such a situation. If you are, God is calling on you to act in a forthright manner. Perhaps he is calling you to reach out to a brother or sister caught in sin, or to shun your pride and give up your demands so that you can save another through an act of costly love. Is God speaking to your heart this morning? If he is, I encourage you to be obedient to his voice.

As members of the body of Christ then, let us face up to difficult situations, remembering that our joy in knowing him and being used by him brings him joy. As we conclude, let us allow the words of Scripture to wash our wounds and bring healing where it is needed.

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is  
For brothers to dwell together in unity (Ps. 133:1).

...being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3).

If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering (Matt. 5:23-24).

And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity (Col. 3:14).

My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins (James 5:19-20).

Lovingkindness and truth have met together;  
Righteousness and peace have kissed each other (Ps. 85:10).

May these words be said of us as we seek to do the Lord's will when disagreements arise among the brethren.

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