



## *Life Group Study Series*

Joshua: Week Eleven

2nd April 2017

### *Bible*

Joshua 23:1-34 (NIV)

Eastern Tribes Return Home

**1** Then Joshua summoned the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh **2** and said to them, “You have done all that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded, and you have obeyed me in everything I commanded.

**3** For a long time now—to this very day—you have not deserted your fellow Israelites but have carried out the mission the Lord your God gave you. **4** Now that the Lord your God has given them rest as he promised, return to your homes in the land that Moses the servant of the Lord gave you on the other side of the Jordan.

**5** But be very careful to keep the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the Lord gave you: to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to keep his commands, to hold fast to him and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul.”

**6** Then Joshua blessed them and sent them away, and they went to their homes.

**7** (To the half-tribe of Manasseh Moses had given land in Bashan, and to the other half of the tribe Joshua gave land on the west side of the Jordan along with their fellow Israelites.) When Joshua sent them home, he blessed them, **8** saying, “Return to your homes with your great wealth—with large herds of livestock, with silver, gold, bronze and iron, and a great quantity of clothing—and divide the plunder from your enemies with your fellow Israelites.”

**9** So the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh left the Israelites at Shiloh in Canaan to return to Gilead, their own land, which they had acquired in accordance with the command of the Lord through Moses.

**10** When they came to Geliloth near the Jordan in the land of Canaan, the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh built an imposing altar there

by the Jordan. **11** And when the Israelites heard that they had built the altar on the border of Canaan at Gilead near the Jordan on the Israelite side, **12** the whole assembly of Israel gathered at Shiloh to go to war against them.

**13** So the Israelites sent Phinehas son of Eleazar, the priest, to the land of Gilead—to Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh. **14** With him they sent ten of the chief men, one from each of the tribes of Israel, each the head of a family division among the Israelite clans.

**15** When they went to Gilead—to Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh—they said to them: **16** “The whole assembly of the Lord says: ‘How could you break faith with the God of Israel like this? How could you turn away from the Lord and build yourselves an altar in rebellion against him now? **17** Was not the sin of Peor enough for us? Up to this very day we have not cleansed ourselves from that sin, even though a plague fell on the community of the Lord! **18** And are you now turning away from the Lord?’

“If you rebel against the Lord today, tomorrow he will be angry with the whole community of Israel. **19** If the land you possess is defiled, come over to the Lord’s land, where the Lord’s tabernacle stands, and share the land with us. But do not rebel against the Lord or against us by building an altar for yourselves, other than the altar of the Lord our God. **20** When Achan son of Zerah was unfaithful in regard to the devoted things, did not wrath come on the whole community of Israel? He was not the only one who died for his sin.”

**21** Then Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh replied to the heads of the clans of Israel: **22** “The Mighty One, God, the Lord! The Mighty One, God, the Lord! He knows! And let Israel know! If this has been in rebellion or disobedience to the

Lord, do not spare us this day. **23** If we have built our own altar to turn away from the Lord and to offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, or to sacrifice fellowship offerings on it, may the Lord himself call us to account.

**24** “No! We did it for fear that some day your descendants might say to ours, ‘What do you have to do with the Lord, the God of Israel? **25** The Lord has made the Jordan a boundary between us and you—you Reubenites and Gadites! You have no share in the Lord.’ So your descendants might cause ours to stop fearing the Lord.

**26** “That is why we said, ‘Let us get ready and build an altar—but not for burnt offerings or sacrifices.’ **27** On the contrary, it is to be a witness between us and you and the generations that follow, that we will worship the Lord at his sanctuary with our burnt offerings, sacrifices and fellowship offerings. Then in the future your descendants will not be able to say to ours, ‘You have no share in the Lord.’

**28** “And we said, ‘If they ever say this to us, or to our descendants, we will answer: Look at the replica of the Lord’s altar, which our ancestors built, not for burnt offerings and sacrifices, but as a witness between us and you.’

**29** “Far be it from us to rebel against the Lord and turn away from him today by building an altar for burnt offerings, grain offerings and sacrifices, other than the altar of the Lord our God that stands before his tabernacle.”

**30** When Phinehas the priest and the leaders of the community—the heads of the clans of the Israelites—heard what Reuben, Gad and Manasseh had to say, they were pleased. **31** And Phinehas son of Eleazar, the priest, said to Reuben, Gad and Manasseh, “Today we know that the Lord is with us, because you have not been unfaithful to the Lord in this matter.

Now you have rescued the Israelites from the Lord's hand."

**32** Then Phinehas son of Eleazar, the priest, and the leaders returned to Canaan from their meeting with the Reubenites and Gadites in Gilead and reported to the Israelites. **33** They were glad to hear the

report and praised God. And they talked no more about going to war against them to devastate the country where the Reubenites and the Gadites lived.

**34** And the Reubenites and the Gadites gave the altar this name: A Witness Between Us—that the Lord is God.

## *Sermon Summary*

As we saw last week, the allotment of the land to the twelve tribes of Israel forms the theological heart of the book of Joshua, as it demonstrates the Lord's faithfulness to his promises and invites the people of Israel to be faithful in response. The closing chapters of Joshua are primarily concerned with the topic of faithful living.

In Joshua 22 the Transjordan tribes (Reuben, Gad and 1/2 of Manasseh who had inherited land on the eastern side of the Jordan) are sent home by Joshua. They had been faithful to their promise, given to Moses and Joshua, to fight with their brothers in Canaan until their fellow Israelites had possessed the land. Now that this is done, they are able to return home. Joshua sends them off with a blessing and a warning against unfaithfulness. On the way, however, just before they return to their land, they build a large altar. When the rest of Israel hears about this, they fear the worst; the Transjordan tribes have rebelled against the Lord's command to only worship in one place (Deuteronomy 12:1-14) and gather for war against these tribes. Before launching an offensive, they send a delegation led by Phineas the priest to confront them. When the delegation arrives and presents its accusations the Transjordan tribes respond by saying that they had no intention of offering sacrifices on their altar (the reason behind the prohibition of worshipping anywhere they wanted), but had built a replica so that the tribes on the western side of the Jordan could never say that the Transjordan tribes had no share in the Lord. This answer relieved the delegation who returned home with the good news that their brothers on the eastern side of the Jordan were still faithful to the Lord.

This story about faithfulness suggests several fruitful avenues for discussion on faithful living. To begin with, it is important to recognise that past faithfulness does not guarantee future faithfulness. The story begins with Joshua's affirmation of their faithfulness. However, this does not exclude the Transjordanians from future unfaithfulness. To some degree, we are only as faithful as our last decision.

This leads to a reflection on the bias of our decisions. The altar was not wicked in and of itself, but the tribes in Canaan saw that it was not a neutral action either. The presence of this second altar could lead to idolatrous practices and this bias led to the confrontation. Are we aware of the bias of our actions? Do we consider whether our decisions lean towards God or away from Him?

A third point of reflection is on the tendency to focus on unfaithfulness rather than faithfulness. We are certainly to be alert to unfaithful actions and to confront them too. However, if we are only on the lookout for unfaithfulness we may miss opportunities to encourage faithfulness.

Fourthly, we can see the value of the past for encouraging faithfulness. The Israelites refer back to the sin at Peor and the sin of Achan as examples of unfaithfulness and their impact. We can, and should, learn from the past – both our failures, but also our successes.

Finally, it is intriguing that the people of Israel in Joshua 22 are dealing with faithfulness in times of peace. Faithfulness to the Lord in times of difficulty has its own challenges, but faithfulness in times of peace is equally challenging. See Deuteronomy 8:6-18 for Moses' warning about faithfulness in the midst of ease.

Each of these points of reflection (and there are others) are valuable places for us to stop and think about our own faithfulness and how we respond to one another as we all seek to follow the Lord.

## *Questions*

These questions are a guide for conversation. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a LifeGroup discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

You might want to have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Opening Discussion: Throughout history the Christian faith has often thrived in the face of adversity or persecution. Whilst the battles most of us face in a modern, western context look different now, they still exist. What are the 'battles' we face in our lives today? What are the challenges to our faithfulness to God and His plans and purposes? Share your thoughts with the group.
2. Take some time to read Joshua chapter 22. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that 'jump out at you'. What are they? (Try to resist the urge to explain why it jumped out – this is about observing, not judging, allowing God to show you something). Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to that word or phrase. Take some time to share what what you've been lead to.
3. Why is it easier to focus on unfaithfulness in others than faithfulness?
4. What keeps us from confronting unfaithfulness in others? How might we begin to allow this kind of accountability?
5. The building of the altar was not in itself wicked, but it had the potential to lead the Israelites into idolatrous practices. List some of the decisions you may have made this past week. What contributes to a decision leaning towards God, or one that leans away?
6. Whilst this may be challenging for some, take some time to share one example of faithfulness in another's life that encourages you. If you're not sure you know anyone in your group well enough to do this, share an example of faithfulness in the life of someone you do, that may be external to the group.

# *Prayer*

Take some time to reflect on each other's answers to question 6, praise God for those characteristics and the way He has been at work growing them in each other. Continue to pray for each other that God would help us to discern and engage in practices that will encourage greater faithfulness in our lives.