

Revelation 12:1–6

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[0 : 00] Today is a little bit longer than usual, so I'm going to have you remain seated. And that reading again is Joshua chapter 22. At that time, Joshua summoned the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh, and he said to them, You have kept all that Moses, the servant of the Lord, commanded you, and have obeyed my voice in all that I have commanded you.

You have not forsaken your brothers these many days down to this day, but have been careful to keep the charge of the Lord your God. And now the Lord your God has given rest to your brothers, as he promised them.

Therefore turn and go to your tents in the land where your possession lies, which Moses, the servant of the Lord, gave you on the other side of the Jordan. Only be very careful to observe the commandment and the law that Moses, the servant of the Lord, commanded you, to love the Lord your God, and to walk in all his ways, and to keep his commandments, and to cling to him, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul.

So Joshua blessed them and sent them away, and they went to their tents. Now to the one half of the tribe of Manasseh, Moses gave a possession in Bashan, but to the other half, Joshua had given a possession beside their brothers in the land west of the Jordan.

And when Joshua sent them away to their homes and blessed them, he said to them, Go back to your tents with much wealth and with very much livestock, with silver, gold, bronze, and iron, and with much clothing.

[1 : 27] Divide the spoil of your enemies with your brothers. So the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh returned home, parting from the people of Israel at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan, to go to the land of Gilead, their own land of which they had possessed themselves by command of the Lord through Moses.

And when they came to the region of Jordan that is in the land of Canaan, the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh built there an altar by the Jordan, an altar of imposing size.

And the people of Israel heard it, said, Behold, the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh have built the altar at the frontier of the land of Canaan in the region about the Jordan on the side that belongs to the people of Israel.

And when the people of Israel heard of it, the whole assembly of the people of Israel gathered at Shiloh to make war against them. Then the people of Israel sent to the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh in the land of Gilead, Phinehas, the son of Eleazar the priest, and with him ten chiefs, one from each of the tribal families of Israel, every one of them the head of a family among the clans of Israel.

And they came to the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh in the land of Gilead, and they said to them, Thus says the whole congregation of the Lord, What is this breach of faith that you have committed against the God of Israel in turning away this day from following the Lord by building yourselves an altar this day in rebellion against the Lord?

[3 : 00] Have we not had enough of the sin at Peor from which even yet we have not cleansed ourselves and for which there came a plague upon the congregation of the Lord that you too must turn away this day from following the Lord?

And if you too rebel against the Lord today, then tomorrow he will be angry with the whole congregation of Israel. But now, if the land of your possession is unclean, pass over into the Lord's land where the Lord's tabernacle stands and take for yourselves a possession among us.

Only do not rebel against the Lord or make us as rebels by building for yourselves an altar other than the altar of the Lord our God. Did not Achan, the son of Zerah, break faith in the matter of the devoted things, and wrath fell upon all the congregation of Israel?

And he did not perish alone for his iniquity. Then the people of Reuben, the people of Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh said in answer to the heads of the families of Israel, The Mighty One, God, the Lord.

The Mighty One, God, the Lord. He knows, and let Israel itself know. If it was in rebellion or in breach of faith against the Lord, do not spare us today for building an altar to turn away from following the Lord.

[4 : 10] Or if we did so to offer burnt offerings or grain offerings or peace offerings on it, may the Lord himself take vengeance. No, but we did it from fear that in time to come your children might say to our children, What have you to do with the Lord, the God of Israel?

For the Lord has made the Jordan a boundary between us and you, you people of Reuben and people of Gad. You have no portion in the Lord. So your children might make our children cease to worship the Lord.

Therefore we said, Let us now build an altar, not for burnt offering nor for sacrifice, but to be a witness between us and you, and between our generations after us, that we do perform the service of the Lord in his presence with our burnt offerings and sacrifices and peace offerings.

So your children will not say to our children in time to come, You have no portion in the Lord. And we thought, if this should be said to us or to our descendants in time to come, we should say, Behold, the copy of the altar of the Lord, which our fathers made, not for burnt offerings, not for sacrifice, but to be a witness between us and you.

Far be it from us that we should rebel against the Lord and turn away this day from following the Lord by building an altar for burnt offering, grain offering, or sacrifice, other than the altar of the Lord our God that stands before his tabernacle.

[5 : 27] When Phineas the priest and the chiefs of the congregation, the heads of the families of Israel who were with them, heard the words that the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the people of Manasseh spoke, it was good in their eyes.

And Phineas the son of Eleazar the priest said to the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the people of Manasseh, Today we know that the Lord is in our midst, because you have not committed this breach of faith against the Lord.

Now you have delivered the people of Israel from the hand of the Lord. Then Phineas the son of Eleazar the priest and the chiefs returned from the people of Reuben and the people of Gad in the land of Gilead to the land of Canaan, to the people of Israel, and brought back word to them.

And the report was good in the eyes of the people of Israel. And the people of Israel blessed God and spoke no more of making war against them to destroy the land where the people of Reuben and the people of Gad were settled.

The people of Reuben and the people of Gad called the altar witness, for they said, It is a witness between us that the Lord is God. This is the word of the Lord. Thank you, God.

[6 : 33] I'm struck this afternoon by the fragility of human relationships.

A fragility that must be acknowledged and of necessity protected. It's true in all relationships.

It's especially important in regard to relationships within the family of God. It doesn't take much in any relationship for things to be ruptured.

A mistake here. A misunderstanding there. A harsh word spoken. Not easily forgotten.

Long remembered. In relationships that have been long bound together in common concerns and in shared life experience are suddenly inflamed and lit and instantly at war and the end is often ruined.

[8 : 00] Nowhere is that more clearly seen in the book of Joshua than chapter 22. This lengthy reading which was given to you today really has three movements that hold it together.

This opening movement undergirded by the words and actions of Joshua 22, 1-9 a relationship that is at rest.

And then that middle movement of the chapter anchored on either end by the aggregate voice of the nine and a half tribes through the lips of Phineas and the voice of Reuben and Gad and half Manasseh demonstrating that relationships at rest are suddenly on the verge of war.

Verses 10 through 29. Then that final movement of the chapter wherein Phineas' sense of the moment brings relationship restored.

So let's take a look at it this afternoon this relationship at rest and what characterizes good godly relationships in the family of God when God's people are at rest.

[9 : 48] Verses 1-4 Words of commendation. That's always the emblem of relationships that are at peace.

There are words of commendation. At that time Joshua summoned the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half tribe of Manasseh. And he said to them you have kept all that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you and have obeyed my voice and all that I have commanded you.

You have not forsaken your brothers these many days down to this day but have been careful to keep the charge of the Lord your God and now the Lord your God has given rest to your brothers as he promised them.

Therefore turn and go to your tents in the land where your possession lies which Moses the servant of the Lord gave you on the other side of the Jordan.

Words of commendation almost the sound in military terms of an honorable discharge. You have served well. You have served long.

[10 : 58] You are now released and can make ready to return home. This event that Joshua refers to concerning something they promised Moses was first heard in our sermon series back in chapter 1 where these two and a half tribes were given a word at the beginning of the great work.

Joshua chapter 1 you might remember in verse 10 Joshua calls them all together after the death of Moses and he says in verse 12 to the Reubenites the Gadites and the half tribe of Manasseh remember the word that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you saying the Lord is providing you a place of rest and will give you this land.

Your wives your little ones and your livestock shall remain in the land that Moses gave you beyond the Jordan but all the men of valor among you shall pass over armed before your brothers and you shall help them until the Lord gives rest.

Verse 16 they answered all that you have commanded us we will do. You see this event that brackets the entire book of Joshua these familial relations arose from a time when they had not yet come into the land and Moses was yet living and while they were near the Jordan the land looked good for livestock and the tribes of Reuben and Gad came to Moses and said you know the promised land lies beyond the Jordan but we're at home Moses taken aback wondered if all of God's people will lose heart as if they did not want to go into conquer it and they said oh no we swear by the God who lives our God we will enter the land all valiant men we will fight until the inheritance comes to them in full but this land we would like to settle in here and

Moses gave them that land so what does that mean now for these words of commendation given by Joshua these years later literally seven years have passed from the opening chapter of Joshua they have fulfilled their vows completely they have labored alongside their brothers that their brothers might secure their rest that's not just a tour of duty or a return to duty that is a long common commitment to the welfare of others a valiant co-laboring a true partnership relationship and Joshua is now calling them and saying you have kept it and you are released from it relationships at rest they are marked by the keeping of covenantal bonds and the laboring on behalf of others wherein words of commendation rise concerning the behavior of

[14 : 46] God's people the second aspect of this relationship at rest is there in our own chapter in verse five you might call it a warning I think it's more of an encouragement because encouraging words are often there in relationships at rest Joshua says only be very careful to observe the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you to love the Lord your God and to walk in all his ways and to keep his commandments and to cling to him and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul relationships at rest among the family of God are grounded in God's word revealed and God's people submitting to it and so he encourages them to keep their love of God strong and to serve him all the days of your life with all that you have being careful to follow the law of

Moses in other words it is the word of God that weds the people of God together their unity is grounded in his revelation and in their commitment to it all of this has come and now he encourages them to remain just as they have been these many years and then finally relationships at rest are characterized by blessing look at verses 6 to 9 so Joshua blessed them and sent them away and they went to their tents the same word of blessing is reiterated at the end of verse 7 and when Joshua sent them away to their homes he blessed them and said go back to your tents with much wealth and with very much livestock there was this not just a word of commendation!

not just let me encourage you along the way there was a pronouncement of blessing while they were parting they were never to be parted and they actually shared liberally in all of the bounty that God had given them these many years what a wonderful picture in those that opening movement of the chapter of relationships within the family of God that have been marked by years of co-laboring together but oh how quickly things can change relationships verses 10 to 29 on the verge of war and ruin and what triggered it it's the actions taken by the two and a half tribes in verse 10 and when they came to the region of the Jordan that is in the land of Canaan the people of

Reuben and the people of Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh built there an altar by the Jordan an altar of imposing size now I love this moment here at a literary level we're not told why they built the altar we're not told why they built it of imposing size we don't get an answer to the intent of their heart until their reply later in the chapter and this is the wonderful thing about the Bible it has these literary characteristics that pull the reader along you're not let in here to the heart of the people think of it this way in contrast to this chapter Job Job opens where the people in the story don't know what's going on but the reader knows because he's seen this scene between God and Satan and then the activity of Job he himself caught up in it without any knowledge of what is going on but not so here here you are left in the dark and I am in the dark and we we the reader are wondering the intent and the action of the people great great literature to read and so they have this this moment in verse 10 which is the trigger of a ruin of relationship and the reasons for which we do not know but there are two data points in this verse that we do know one we know what an altar is for an altar is for the giving of sacrifices the the place that mediates a relationship between God and man which in Israel now rested only in the tabernacle so they built this altar interestingly having labored for seven years tearing down the metaphorical and real altars of those who were not the people of God those who sacrificed to foreign gods suddenly this altar is here and it says verse 10 it was of imposing size it was seen then most likely by the other half tribe of

Manasseh or perhaps members of the tribe of Benjamin because those were the tribes that were closest in the distribution of land to where they would have been going back across the Jordan to their own homes and interestingly word got round as it often does I love the way it says it here in verse 11 first of all after they built it verse 10 it says that they heard it verse 11 and again in verse 12 and when the people of Israel heard of it word began to travel that the two and a half tribes have erected an altar a place of sacrifice of imposing size not some tiny little thing to be hidden away like a bus stop that you might see or might not see this is to be seen and so this action is read by the others as an abdication of the faith a worship of pagan gods and verse 12 they gathered at

[21 : 27] Shiloh to make war against them so do you see how it happens here you see how fragile relationships are within the family of God an action is taken the intent of the heart is not known and assumptions are made and after the assumption has been made an accusation is leveled and if you look at your text verses 13 to 20 comprise the accusation that is leveled against those two and a half tribes and verse 16 is the key verse 16 thus says the whole congregation of the Lord and notice they're not asking what is the meaning of the altar!

no they're saying what is this breach! faith you have committed the accusation has been leveled complete with examples to be cited just as in human relationships with you and with me when things go south when an action is taken an assumption is made accusations are leveled guess what we have a history of incidents in our past that we can bring forward as examples and so they bring forward to one verse 17 have we not had enough of the sin of payor when we all got in trouble don't you remember when this kind of thing happened or later in verse 20 did not Achan break faith they're pulling on examples to solidify their point and notice in that section of the accusation they're not merely saying you shouldn't do this because

God's wrath will break out against you no their concern is for themselves at payor when a few went this way all the congregation of Israel suffered Achan the action of one man had consequences for all the congregation and now you are building an altar guess what I'm concerned for you that's true but I'm equally concerned for myself that's the way you should see the phrase the very last phrase of verse 20 and he that is Achan did not perish alone for his iniquity an action taken!

Assumptions made accusations leveled examples cited and suddenly in a day in an hour in a moment years of partnership in the family of God stand on the precipice and edge of war just like real life isn't it oh how quickly we can undo commitments to one another so everything is now waiting in verse 21 through 29 for the answer that will be given and of course the answer does come and it's clear that they indicate that this altar was not made for sacrifices it was not meant as an abdication of their faith there was nothing to be burned on it or offered on it or given to it in fact the word altar is a complete misconstrual of what we thought we were doing it would be more like a monument a memorial just as there are the twelve stones that rest as a memorial to the activity of God when he brought us into the land so too we wanted this altar this monument to stand as an indication that we are one with you in our worship of the same

Lord and God and where did this action rise from well there are two factors in the text and the first is fear they made it out of fear for the future you can see it there I wish I could in the text in front of me verse 24 no but we did it from fear that in the time to come your children might say to our children what have you to do with the Lord the God of Israel they were afraid of the future they thought about the next generation they were moving now you know to the other side of the river the other side of the tracks what would happen over days and years and decades would those who had received their inheritance within the apportioned land look at them and say you have no portion in us they were afraid of the future a river now stood as a boundary they did not want to be forgotten as members of the people of

[26 : 52] God separate but not separated geographically distant but remaining within the same family they had this fear and not only that I think they felt a bit inferior there are a couple of hints that make me think that they thought already that they were the outsiders that within God's family there were 12 tribes but there were already emerging hints of the insiders and the outsiders they didn't want to be the outsiders and nobody does today either look at the hints that they already were emerging as outsiders it's embedded in the language of the narrator as he uses language to describe the people of God look at verse 9 so the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh returned home parting from whom the people of

Israel suddenly the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half tribe of Manasseh are no longer referred to as the people of Israel it happens twice in verse 11 and the people of Israel heard it that by that the narrator is saying the nine and a half tribes the end of 11 is incredibly indicting or verse 12 or verse 11 in the region about Jordan on the side belongs to the people of Israel in other words the side we're on belongs to the people of Israel so already in the text there's an inferiority within the family subtly they are made to feel inferior so they say to them their answer has been given we have not done this to leave the

Lord our God we have done this because we're afraid as we look into the future having labored with you and for you these many years the day might come when your children say to my children because we parted you have nothing in us we wonder having given of our valiant men for these many years that you might be planted where you are that will be forgotten and without a share no longer counted as the family of God may this altar be a witness that we were there that we're with you that we love the Lord God and that we are one family well when that answer was given relationship was quickly restored

Phineas and the delegation verses 30 through 31 that is the heads of the families who were with him the delegation of war when they heard these words look at this phrase at the end of verse 20 it was good in their eyes this wonderful Hebrew idiom they thought they looked at it and they knew that everything was fine and right they believed them and that that idiom that embodies their acceptance of the delegation of war goes on to all the other nine and a half tribes so that in verse 33 when they bring back report to the rest of the family it says in verse 33 and the report was good in the eyes of the people of Israel twice used relationship restored don't you love the way it ends verse 33 and the people of

Israel blessed God what a wonderful bookend it opened with Joshua giving his blessing to the two and a half and now all the nine and a half tribes their voices are rising and giving blessing to God relationships at rest easily and quickly on the verge of war the intent of the heart made known and relationship restored now what are we to make of this event in the life of Israel there are the everyday things of human relationships that I probably don't even need to mention if the Bible were merely a handbook on human relationships this would be a wonderful chapter from which to speak be careful of the actions you take be careful of the assumptions you make be careful of the accusations you level be willing to listen to the intent of the heart in an answer all those things are true healthy and if implemented would save even marriages the primary application of the text concerns relationships within the family of

[32 : 57] God it says something concerning unity within God's family this multi tribal family of God that that unity is to be protected and how quickly that unity can be disintegrated and that that unity is grounded in a common commitment to God's word it says something to us about humility unity I mean interestingly all 12 of these tribes will eventually abandon God's word and be hauled off into exile no one loves the Lord their God with their whole heart soul strength and mind and yet we're so quick to think that we are the ones who will hang on and you make sure and you be careful that you do because we'll be there to remind you if you don't the history of Israel demonstrates that the whole family was incapable of living under Moses law the whole family did not give their life and love to the Lord God and that is why the Old Testament ends with them in exile and longing for the people of God to live under the word of God that there might be a ruler of God and Jesus comes and what does he do he appoints twelve new representatives called apostles their significance is emerging out of the topography of texts like Joshua that in Christ we not only have one who fully loves God and fully gave himself to God's word but because of that and through his power and strength he appointed twelve who are the representatives of his new emerging family so that we live under the apostolic witness and we are all members and can trace our lineage to those tribes it's a wonderful thing how

Christ is anticipated in texts even like this interestingly there's that moment in the early church and acts where the whole insider outsider thing is emerging the gospel is breaking through Jewish barriers God fearing barriers geographic barriers cultural barriers racial barriers and suddenly there are those tribes within the family of God who say you know what glad you're in the family but you're not in the family unless you're going to be circumcised and the whole thing escalates again who are the people of God the insiders said you have to conform to the law of Moses in this respect Paul said they've already been given the Holy Spirit the guarantee of their inheritance it doesn't matter if they were born on the other side of the river and outside the promises of

God there is a wonderful linguistic movement in Acts 15 three times in the closing argument and it seemed good to them and it seemed good to them and it seemed good to them not the Hebrew idiom that is here twice and it was good to their eyes but subtly hinted for in the LXX the Septuagint in Esther 1 19 she asks if it pleases the Lord and then later it pleases him both the idiom in the Hebrew language and its equivalent synonym are wedded together they are one and the same thing to say it seemed good in our eyes and it seemed good to us and in the Acts 15 passage three times over just as

Phineas said it is good in our eyes it is good in our eyes so too in Acts 15 the defining moment of the church on the family of God it seemed good to us it seemed good to us identical to Esther 119 and 21 this has something to say about race so don't be thinking that this church South side shouldn't be more fully embracing who is the family let me put it this way too it should say something about how long you've been here I love every founding member I will treasure you for reasons that go to our very history but we don't have founding members and other members we don't have this is one family think of it in regard to our model in the city in which we live think of this in regard to the implications for multi congregational life this congregation from this congregation you sent valiant ones warriors you committed your funds and your money and your prayers and your time some of you your life that others might be planted in the land do not fear don't feel inferior rest as a member of the family of Holy

[39 : 23] Trinity Church there is not a Hyde Park church and a west side church and a downtown church and a north side church there are the people of Holy Trinity church and we will labor night and day to be counted among them until rest and by that I mean your eternal rest comes well I could go on but I shouldn't may the Lord help us to see that relationships within the family of God are very important may we see in a fresh way the fragility and may we live in generosity for the welfare of all to the glory of Christ's name amen