

Holding each other to God's Promise

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- [0 : 0 0] I've been working through this book, and we've come to the last three chapters tonight. We'll just do chapter 22 tonight, page 234.
- I want to begin tonight by giving you three scenarios. And as I do, I'd like you to just think about how you would react. Would you intervene or wouldn't you?
- So scenario one is this. Imagine you hear a girl at school gossiping and slandering her best friend. Doesn't happen, does it? Would you intervene to stop her?
- Or would you tell her that if she doesn't, she would destroy her friendship? Would you intervene? Scenario two. Imagine you're at Kmart and you see a four-year-old boy using a marker pen to deface the toys on the shelf.
- Like walking through it like that. What's more, mom's looking on and doing nothing. Would you tell the boy to stop or get his mom to stop him?
- [1 : 1 2] Scenario number three. You overhear your colleague lying blatantly over the phone in order to win new business from customers.
- Again, would you confront him or would you tell his boss? Would you intervene? Okay, whatever you've decided, just throw that away for now because we'll come back to that later.
- But right now, let's look at our passage in Joshua. Tonight, we begin the final section, as I said, of Joshua, which we'll cover over two Sundays. And last week, Andrew just covered a large chunk of Joshua, chapters 13 to 21, if you recall.
- There, he explained the significance of the allotment of the land among the 12 tribes. And so we had a map similar to this one. When nine and a half tribes inherited the land on the west of the Jordan, and then with the circle, I've marked out the remaining two and a half tribes on the east.
- The eastern tribes, as we have found in the reading tonight, Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh, are known as the Transjordan tribes. And so chapter 21 ended with this key summary statement, possibly the key statement for the whole book, verses 43 to 45.
- [2 : 3 1] So the Lord gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their ancestors, and they took possession of it and settled there. The Lord gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their ancestors.
- Not one of their enemies withstood them. The Lord gave all their enemies into their hands. Not one of all the Lord's good promises to Israel failed.
- Everyone was fulfilled. God kept all his promises. He showed himself to be faithful and trustworthy. In turn, Israel was to hold to God's promise and to serve and obey him wholeheartedly.
- Now in our final section then, attention now turns to what happens next. It's a bit like Victor and Helen. After spending months and months preparing for their wedding, they're now finally married, and they have to wake up each morning and wonder how to live this life as a married couple.

It's not hard, I'm sure, right? Well, God... I heard a sigh from Victor. No, it's not hard. Well, God has been preparing Israel for more than 400 years.

[3 : 40] Ever since he promised Abraham, he has been preparing them. And now that they're in the land, Joshua wants to prepare them to live well in the land. So in chapter 22, his attention turns first to these Transjordan tribes.

You may think after all the wars that these two and a half tribes have fought, going home would have been easy. It would have been the least complicated thing for them. Except as we read in this chapter, it doesn't pass without drama.

So we have in chapter 22 a record of this drama. And as you can see in my outline, I've divided it into four parts. So let's take a look to understand what actually happened.

Part 1 from verses 1 to 9 involved Joshua summoning the Transjordan tribes where he both commends them for their service and then commands them to keep holding fast to the Lord.

So in verse 2, he commands them for having 1, done all that Moses commanded, 2, obey Joshua in everything, and then 3, not deserted their fellow Israelites. You see, they actually fought with all the other tribes even though they did not stand to benefit from it.

[4 : 51] Their land was on the east and had already been conquered even before they had crossed the Jordan. Now just to give you a bit of context, at the time that this happened, Reuben and Gad had come to Moses, the tribes, and asked for that land to be given to them.

They said it was good for their flocks and herds. But if you read Numbers chapter 32, Moses wasn't actually pleased with that at first. He responded like this in verse 8, which I've got on the slide.

Should your fellow Israelites go to war while you sit here? Why do you discourage... Why do you discourage the Israelites from crossing over into the land the Lord has given them?

You see, Moses thought they were trying to shirk their responsibilities, but said, no, no, no, no, Moses, this is not the case at all. Instead, the men promised to come across to fight with their fellow Israelites.

And they also promised not to return until every tribe had received their inheritance. So with this declaration in chapter 21, we see that this time has now come.

[5 : 59] All the other tribes have inherited their land. So Joshua commends them that they have kept their word. But then as they prepare to return, Joshua gives them a command.

And actually, it's just a reiteration of the command that he's been giving from the very start. So verse 5 says, 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.

Joshua, as leader, was simply asking them to hold fast to the Lord and his promises. You see, being on the other side, the danger was that they would easily drift away.

You know, it's just like kids in the back row of the classroom. It's the hardest to monitor, right? Or the back pew, in this case. So Joshua reminds them again that even though they were on the other side of the river, they're still part of God's holy people.

The land over there is still part of God's inheritance. God's promise was as much theirs as they were to the Western tribes. And so they are to serve the Lord just as wholeheartedly.

[7 : 16] But in part two of the drama, things take an unexpected turn when they get to Geliloth on the west side of the river, just on the border. There, their actions provoked a confrontation.

The Western tribes feared that no sooner had they departed that they were about to break faith with the Lord. What they did was build an imposing altar. So imposing, I think, that others became aware of it.

And it sent shivers down their spine because it looked at first to be that this was a clear breach of God's law. You see, God in Deuteronomy chapter 12 had commanded that there was only to be one place of worship.

So chapter 12 and verse 5, again, Dietrich, if you could turn the slides, yep. God had said, you are to seek the place the Lord your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his name there for his dwelling.

To that place you must go. There bring your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes, special gifts, what you have vowed to give and your freewill offerings and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. They were not to be like the Canaanites whom they conquered, who built altars wherever they like and sacrifice however they wanted.

[8 : 24] No, there's only one true God and Israel was his people living under one law and inheritors of one promise given to them through Abraham.

And so with that, the other tribes assembled at Shiloh and Shiloh is where actually the tent or the temple was, the authorized place of worship. And there they made ready to go to war with the Eastern tribes.

They did that, I think, to try and bring them into line. But wisely, before they did that, what they did was sent a delegation, a sort of discovery party, as it were, ahead of them.

So Phinehas, which was a priest and an elder from each of the other nine or ten tribes set out for Gelidoth. But when they get there, they took no time in confronting the other tribes.

So verse 16, they say 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 yourself an altar in rebellion against him now?

[9 : 24] Was not the sin of Peor enough for us? Peor, in case you're wondering, is where Israel fell into idolatry. They worshipped the god Baal, one of the gods in Canaan.

And so on that day, they incurred the anger of the Lord and 25,000 of them were struck down. Then continuing in verse 19, they add, If the land you possess is defiled, well, come over to our land.

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.

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.

Now, many of you would know Achan. He was there at the start. He was the one who disobeyed the Lord and kept the spoils of battle when they conquered Jericho. But because of that, the whole of Israel then lost the next battle with Ai.

[10 : 30] And so that was the key lesson for them from that because they witnessed how the sin of just one Israelite could bring punishment upon the whole nation. And so they feared that this could be happening again if the Eastern tribes sinned against the Lord.

Now, you may think that the Western tribes are only doing this to protect themselves. But I think the fact that they were willing to invite the Eastern tribes back to the other side of the land if it was defiled, as in it did not have a temple or a place of worship, showed that actually they had more noble intentions.

They really believed that we are all one people, all 12 of us, all 12 tribes, and that God would bless or punish them together. And so what they wanted to do was hold every tribe accountable to make sure that all Israel kept worshipping the Lord.

And also, I think their first move was to persuade the Eastern tribes and it's only after that that they were willing to go to war. And they were doing that to save God's promises to them. Now, as for the Eastern tribes, when they heard this, they immediately knew that their actions had been misunderstood because rebelling against God was actually furthest from their minds.

In fact, so sure that they could call God as witness in verse 21. Twice they say, the mighty God, the Lord, He knows. If this is rebellion, don't spare us.

[12 : 01] If we build this altar to sacrifice, then let the Lord Himself call us to account. That was how bold and how sure they were. But in fact, the opposite was true.

Far from wanting to break faith, their concern was that they in turn might be excluded from their share of the Lord. So, to the third point or part three of the drama, they tried to explain why they are building this altar.

No, we did it for fear that someday you, your descendants, might say to us, what do you have to do with the Lord, the God of Israel? The Lord has made the river a boundary between you and us.

You have no share in the Lord, so your descendants might cause us to stop fearing or worshipping the Lord. But if they built this imposing altar, which is actually a replica of the one in Shiloh, then it would serve as a witness that they too share in the Lord with them.

It's a bit like when Federer and Serena Williams, when they win Wimbledon, they don't get to take that trophy, they actually don't get to take it home, right? I hope you realize that. Instead, yeah, instead, a three-quarter replica is made for them.

[13 : 15] It serves as a witness, they take it home, show it to their friends and relatives, it serves as a witness that they have a genuine claim on the title, on the trophy, as witness. And so I think it's the sort of same intent here.

Except this replica, because it's imposing, it's actually not smaller than the original. It's actually bigger, I think, than the actual altar. And I think so imposing was it that it was intended to just make a statement.

It's capable of people pointing to it and saying, look, look, this is a witness to you and me that we have a share in the Lord. And I think too that because it's so big, it wasn't actually practical to be used as a sacrifice.

So, you know, the sacrifice you need to preach to be able to put the meat on the altar, if it's imposing, he would literally be climbing up. So, you know, it makes it more believable, I think, what they were saying.

Instead, the altar was something that they and their children could then point to in future generations to show that they had a share in the Lord. They could say, look, this altar is just like yours.

[14 : 24] And so, your God is our God also. God's promise to you is also God's promise to us. Well, the explanation satisfied the delegation.

In fact, Phinehas and Cole were more than satisfied. The Bible says they were pleased. And so, the drama ends with the delegation returning to confirm to the others that their unity in the Lord has been maintained.

And when the rest heard, they too were glad and praised God. Seems like this whole drama is a lot of ado about nothing, isn't it? But I think it shows that both sides were actually zealous for the Lord.

Both wanted all Israel to remain faithful to the Lord. The West wanted to ensure that there was only one place of worship. The East wanted to make sure that they weren't excluded from it.

So, in their own way, each was trying to hold the other to God's promise. They were trying to keep Israel faithful to the Lord. Okay, well, that's the story in a nutshell.

[15 : 30] But what lessons does this story have for us today? How can we apply it? Well, to begin with, let me draw your attention back to those three scenarios I started with.

Now, I wonder how many of you would have intervened in those situations. Show of hands, anyone courageous? Yeah, not majority though. In fact, probably only six or seven hands.

It takes courage, doesn't it? Especially in today's society where we're always being told to mind our own business. What right do we have to tell others what to do? And I think, sadly, this sort of attitude has actually seeped into our church, into the church generally.

We're reluctant to intervene even when we see someone doing the wrong thing by God. We may think, oh, it's just between them and God. We're not perfect.

Who are we to judge? That's our sort of natural inclination, isn't it? But I want to say that just like Israel, we are in Christ, we who are in Christ actually share a very deep connection with each other.

[16 : 36] We share in the same inheritance, which means we ought to care for one another's spiritual well-being. All of us suffer when one falls away from God. Likewise, if someone comes to the Lord, well, it's not just the individual, but everyone, the entire body that's blessed.

But I think our mindset nowadays is so individualistic that we often think that God blesses us like this. So I've got a slide that shows, we think that God blesses us, don't worry about the names, they're just random people.

We think that God blesses us individually, directly. So if Josie, for instance, puts her trust in Jesus, then the blessings flow directly from God to her.

The same with Tiff, Jemima, Marcus, and Esther. And you can put your name there too if you want. But actually, the reality is more something like this on the next slide, that Christ is the one on whom God lavishes all his blessings because he's the only one that has obeyed God perfectly.

And so God's blessings only flow to us as we see on the next slide if we are in Christ. That's why in Ephesians chapter 1 verse 3, Paul says that we are blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

[17 : 55] The blessings are ours only if we are in Christ, only if we put our faith in him and trust him as Lord and Savior. So this is the better way of thinking about our blessings from God.

Where each of us enjoy God's blessings because we are in Christ, we are in his body. I can see you guys trying to look for your names there. They're purely random and I made it really small so you can't actually pick it up, but incidentally, my name's not in there, so don't think I'm singling you out if your name's not there.

But do you see the difference between this and the first slide? The blessings belong rightly to Christ, but in his generous grace, he distributes and shares them to all who come to him.

He shares it with his body and the church. It's not individually that God blesses us, but he blesses Christ and we, being in Christ, are blessed because we are in him.

So that's why when we baptize Jemima today, we welcome her into God's family, Christ's body. That's why we stood up and affirmed the faith together because we share in that one faith.

[19 : 05] That was also why I asked and I called upon all of you to answer, to promise to play your part, to support Marcus and Esther, to bring up Jemima in the faith.

Those of us who are in Christ are holding the young family to the promises they've made today. Now, this applies for all of us, not just to those being baptized today.

We urge one another to hold fast to Christ, to remember God's promise to all of us. We encourage one another as the second reading says tonight. We don't give up meeting together, encouraging one another, spurring each other on to love and good deeds, to keep faith with the Lord even as we see the day of the Lord approaching.

So friends, if you have simply come here tonight just to see Jemima receive Christ's blessing, thank you for doing that. But let me encourage you as well to share in it with her.

You can do that simply by putting your trust in Jesus and following him wholeheartedly. I'm sure Marcus and Esther would love to talk to you about it. They would be only too glad to share with you what that means.

[20 : 19] So please take that up. But for the rest of us who come here as our church, I have a specific word for you too.

I want to encourage you tonight to be like the tribes of Israel, to hold one another to God's promise, to keep reminding one another of what God has done for us in Christ, all the blessings that we share together because of him.

Now, when this is positive encouragement, I think that's relatively easy. But sometimes, like our story tonight, it involves confrontation as well.

We may be called to stop a brother from sinning or a sister from heading in the wrong direction because they're falling away from Jesus. So if you see a brother at uni behaving at odds with the Christian faith, then think about confronting him over it.

Or if you, as a youth leader, one of your group members starts mixing with the wrong crowd, then speak to him about it. Show them what's at stake. Likewise, if a friend who has no longer got time for God because of work or studies or relationships, in each case, they're drifting away from the Lord.

[21 : 41] And that should concern us deeply. That should grieve us. That should cause us to want to bring them back into the Lord's fellowship. Now, of course, we need to do all this in a loving way, right?

And humbly, not thinking that we are superior to those that we're seeking to correct. But we also need the courage to do it, I think. Particularly as sometimes when we do it, we're not received positively for it.

Now, if on the other hand, you're one of those brothers or sisters here tonight that's being confronted, then can I urge you, don't be defensive as your first response. Nobody likes being told off.

I mean, me least of all, just ask Alyssa. You know, I don't like it when people say I'm wrong, because I'm always right. But no, I'm not. But even if the brother or sister hasn't done it in the most sensitive way or appears judgmental or isn't very understanding, that's between them and God.

They'll have to answer for that. But you, you take the opportunity to see if there's any truth in it. because if there is, then he or she, even though she hasn't done it the right way, may have rescued you from the Lord's hand of judgment.

[22 : 54] Now, just look at the Western tribes. I mean, they weren't very sensitive, were they? They just came and they confronted the Eastern tribe. Not much tact in that, was there? They even misread the whole situation, right?

And yet, God used the entire drama so that by the end, both sides came out stronger in their faith to the Lord. You see, throughout the entire drama, all sides had one aim in mind and that was to hold each other to God's promise, to ensure that no one missed out on their share of the Lord.

And that should be our focus too. God did not just put us all together to be friendly to each other. Yeah, there's nothing wrong with that. We should be friendly to each other. But we're actually united in Christ to share in God's blessings together.

And that requires us to help one another to hold fast to God's promise. So, friends, let's do that with God's help. Let's do our best to make sure no one falls away from the blessings of God's promise or because they fail to hold on to Jesus.

And let's pray right now to ask God to help us do that. Amen. Amen. Amen. Father, we thank you for this story which has a bit of humor in it.

[24 : 17] And yet, we can see through their humanness how you used each one of them because of their sincere faith, because of their zeal for each other to keep them together.

And so, we pray that you might do the same for us, that you might use each of us to keep encouraging each other in the faith. and yes, if need be, to pull each other back in line, back into the body of Christ, back into faithfulness, back into serving you wholeheartedly.

Help us to be humble so that when we are corrected, we will listen to the truth instead of using excuses to avoid doing the right thing.

We pray this and ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.