

Joshua 22. Nassau. 18 April 2015.

I want us this evening to sit in as spectators on the events of Joshua 22.

You will not need me to tell you much by way of background. On the whole, things had gone very well. Israel's Holy War – or better 'the war of the Lord'¹ – which lasted about 7 years² was more or less now over. Israel had successfully invaded the land of Canaan and had broken the backbone of the nations that dwelt there.

The Canaanite forces were now significantly weakened, scattered and dispirited. And all that was left was a mopping-up operation – or it should have been.³

The 2½ tribes had earlier settled on the East of Jordan with Moses permission.⁴ So we read in verse 4 of our chapter of 'the land of your possession, which Moses the servant of the Lord gave you on the other side of the Jordan'. This particular territory had once belonged to two pagan kings, Sihon, king of the Amorites, and a rather large gentleman from Bashan graced by his parents with the enchanting name of 'Og'.⁵ Both kings had been roundly defeated – and the land they had ruled now belonged to the 2½ tribes.

The 2½ tribes had agreed with Moses that they would go 'armed for war, before the Lord (before the children of Israel) to battle' – an expression occurring, in one form or another, seven times in Numbers 32. According to Joshua chapter 1, three days before Israel crossed the Jordan to confront the Canaanite nations, Joshua had therefore drafted the 2½ tribes in on a temporary basis for the duration of the Canaan campaign. He held them to their earlier promise; saying, 'you shall pass before your brethren armed, all your mighty men of valour, and help them' – which met with their ready response, 'All that you command us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go'.⁶ And they were as good as their word – they did just that – not only fighting under the national banner, but, according to chapter 4, leading the way both across the Jordan and into the plain of Jericho.⁷ And now the war was virtually over, the 2½ tribes were given an honourable discharge, were blessed, and dismissed.⁸

Our story begins properly after the 2½ tribes had left the rest of the nation at Shiloh,⁹ and had reached their own territory on the other side of the Jordan.¹⁰

So let us read the *inspired* account of what happened then ...¹¹

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

And the children of Israel heard it said, 'Behold, the children of Reuben and the children of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh have built an altar in front of the land of Canaan, near the region of the Jordan, near the region of the children of Israel'. And when the children of Israel heard of it, the whole assembly of the children of Israel gathered together at Shiloh to make war against them.

Then the children of Israel sent to the children of Reuben and the children of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh ... Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, and with him ten chiefs, of each father's house a chief, out of all the tribes of Israel ...

And they came to the children of Reuben, the children of Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh, in the land of Gilead, and spoke with them, saying, 'Thus says the whole assembly of the Lord, What is this trespass which you have trespassed against the God of Israel in turning away this day from following the Lord, in that you have built yourselves an altar this day in rebellion against the Lord?

'Is the iniquity of Peor too little for us? ... that you must turn away this day from following the Lord? And it will be that, if you rebel against the Lord today, then tomorrow He will be angry with the whole assembly of Israel.

'Howbeit, if the land of your possession is unclean, pass over into the land of the Lord's possession, where the Lord's tabernacle stands, and take possession among us. But do not rebel against the Lord or rebel against us by building for yourselves an altar other than the altar of the Lord our God.

'Did not Achan the son of Zerah commit a trespass in the devoted thing, and wrath fell upon all the assembly of Israel? And he did not perish alone because of his iniquity'.

Then the children of Reuben, the children of Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh said in answer to the heads of the thousands in Israel, 'The Lord, the God of gods! The Lord, the God of gods! He knows; and Israel itself shall know!

'If it was in rebellion or in trespass against the Lord (save us not this day!) that we have built an altar to turn away from following the Lord, or if it is to offer burnt offerings, grain offerings or peace offerings on it, let the Lord Himself require it.

'But we have done it from fear that in time to come your children may 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 children of Reuben and children of Gad. You have no portion in 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 ... so that your children may not say to our children in time to come, You have no portion in the Lord. And we said, If this should be said to us or to our future generations, we will say, Behold, the pattern of the altar of the Lord, which our fathers made, not for burnt offering, nor for sacrifice, but as 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 is before His tabernacle!'

And when Phinehas the priest and the chiefs of the assembly ... heard the words which the children of Reuben and the children of Gad and the children of Manasseh spoke, it was good in their eyes.

And Phinehas ... said to the children of Reuben and the children of Gad and the children of Manasseh, 'This day we know that the Lord is among us, because you have not committed this trespass against the Lord. Now you have delivered the children of Israel out of the hand of the Lord'.

And Phinehas ... and the chiefs, returned ... out of the land of Gilead, to the land of Canaan, to the children of Israel, and brought back word to them.

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

Clearly, some keen-sighted individual in Israel observed that, having reached their own territory on the other side of the Jordan, the 2½ tribes immediately set about erecting an altar – and some altar it was – 'an altar of grand appearance' – literally, 'an altar great to sight'.¹² The man who spotted the impressive altar was horrified, and raced off to Shiloh to spread the disturbing news. But then he didn't know what lay behind the action of the 2½ tribes – he didn't know their purpose and intention when they built the altar. But we do – because we have the benefit of having read verses 21 to 29. After they had left the 9½ tribes at Shiloh, the 2½ tribes had been forced to do some hard thinking. It had not been easy getting home, because of the geographical layout of the area. The Jordan river ran through a deep valley about 1,300 feet *below* sea level, and, on each side, mountain plateaux rose over 2,000 feet *above* sea level. This 3,500 foot gorge formed a daunting natural 'boundary', as the 2½ tribes describe it.¹³

As they made their way home, the 2½ tribes became increasingly concerned that a future generation of the 9½ tribes, encouraged by this natural 'boundary', would disown any link, any association, with their descendants.¹⁴ They concluded that their own children would need some very convincing argument if they were to satisfy the descendants of the 9½ tribes that they did, in fact, serve the same God and that they formed part of the same nation.¹⁵ But with what persuasive evidence could they possibly provide their children? And then someone had a brainwave ... they would build an altar – but not just any altar – not an altar built to their own design or specification. Certainly not!

They would build it, as later made clear in verse 28, according to the 'pattern' of the Lord's altar at Shiloh. It would be a replica, a facsimile, an exact copy of that altar. The idea was nothing short of brilliant, because the altar at the tabernacle at Shiloh was the very centre and focus for the life of Israel. All males in Israel were required to visit God's dwelling place three times every year.¹⁶ Everyone was familiar therefore with 'the pattern of the altar'. And, in any case, the idea of building monuments as a reminder of some great event or of something else was well understood. This would be number six in the book¹⁷ – and, as in the case of the first (the twelve stones taken out of the Jordan near Gilgal)¹⁸, this altar would be for the benefit and education of their children. Their altar was to serve as silent evidence that the 2½ tribes were indeed part and parcel of the nation.

There was no question of the altar ever being used for sacrifice or offering, such as were the altars linked to the golden calves set up some 470 years later¹⁹ by Jeroboam at Bethel and Dan.²⁰ Perish the thought – nothing could have been further from their minds. Their altar would never feel the heat of a flame, or bear the weight of a sacrificial victim. Indeed, as we read, later they were absolutely horrified at the very idea ... as witness their

repeated and emphatic denials – four times they insist that it was not for burnt offering or sacrifice.²¹ Far from being a rival altar – it would simply be a memorial altar, to serve as a symbol of the unity of the nation – acting, metaphorically, as a bridge over the Jordan.

The altar would be – and was – therefore deliberately built where it was, clearly visible to the tribes on the other side of the Jordan,²² and was deliberately built on a larger scale than the altar at Shiloh. Why else should far fewer people want a bigger altar? Obviously they wanted it to be seen from a distance. And if in future some bright spark from the other side said, ‘You’re nothing do with us’, their children had only to respond, ‘Come and have a look at this altar then. Where do you think our fathers got this design from?’

But it was not only a *brilliant* idea²³ – it was a highly *commendable* idea – because it was the very first thing they set about doing on their return home. It showed their very real concern both for the future of God's work and for the spiritual well-being of generations to come.

Their priority wasn't to erect some great monument to commemorate their own recent exploits in the forefront of the many battles in Canaan. And what tales they must have had to tell!

Nor was their first priority to enjoy their possessions.²⁴ Back in chapter 1, Joshua had promised that, when the Lord had given ‘rest’ to all the tribes of Israel following the Canaan campaign, the 2½ tribes could ‘return’ to their possession and ‘enjoy it’.²⁵ And now the Lord had given ‘rest’ to the whole of Israel – a point made three times from chapter 11 to chapter 22²⁶ – and so they (the 2½ tribes) were *entitled*, not only to ‘return’ to their inheritance, but there to ‘enjoy’ it.²⁷

Nor was their first priority to share their spoil with those who had remained at home, even though Joshua had explicitly spoken of their plunder in terms of very large quantities of cattle, and of silver, gold, bronze, iron, and ‘very much clothing’, and told them to divide this rich booty with their brethren.²⁸

Nor was their first priority to celebrate their return to their families with a time of comfort and ease. We need to remember that they had been away from home for no less than seven years. What welcome-home parties await them.²⁹

They had been the first tribes to have their inheritance allotted to them, but they were the last to enjoy it. They had once promised Moses, ‘We will not return to our homes until every one of the children of Israel has received his inheritance’.³⁰ And they were men of their word.

But now that they had finally made it home, top of the list – their very first priority – was to build this altar. Full marks to them.

But then came their mistake – and it was a *colossal* mistake. They didn't tell anyone else what they had in mind.

True, they were able to report later that at the time they had ‘said’,³¹ but this, we note, was only among themselves. They didn't breathe a word to Joshua, to Phinehas, or to anyone else from the 9½ tribes about what they were proposing, or the reason for it. And why was this, we may well wonder? Was it too much effort to go back across the Jordan? I think not.

I think it more likely that they found it too embarrassing an issue to raise with their brethren – because their very concern could easily have been interpreted as calling in question the spirituality of the 9½ tribes – either in terms of the adequacy of the education the fathers would give to their children about the identity of the 2½ tribes, or in terms of their children's understanding and grasp of this.

This would certainly have been a delicate matter to raise. But their failure to come out into the open and to discuss it was highly dangerous, and proved almost totally disastrous. They were taking an action, which, if they cared to think about it, was – to say the least – open to easy misunderstanding.

Well, the man who first spied the altar scurried off to Shiloh, where the news was received with great consternation! In no time, the 9½ tribes were ‘up in arms’ (literally) – ‘the whole assembly of the children of Israel gathered together ... to make war against them’.³² In one way, this was commendable zeal for God's honour and for the purity of His worship, coming as it did from the children of those who had once worshipped the molten calf.³³ Israel had come a long way since then – and at least they were prepared to address the problem – they didn't ignore it as of no importance or attempt to sweep it under the carpet. They cared sufficiently about the future of the testimony that they were willing to risk their lives in battle, and that after only recently concluding the seven-year Canaan campaign.³⁴

The problem was that, without realising it, they had jumped to an unwarranted conclusion.

But then to them everything seemed so cut and dried. After all, what could an altar be for if not for sacrifice and worship? Obviously the 2½ tribes weren't planning to invite them to a barbeque! From the words of verse 19, 'if the land of your possession is unclean', it seems that the 9½ tribes assumed that the 2½ tribes had come to view their inheritance as somehow defiled,³⁵ and so planned to cleanse and sanctify it by means of sacrifice. But this would be, in effect, rebellion and 'trespass' against the Lord. And this, *not only because* they – the nation – had been directed by God to destroy all foreign altars³⁶ ... *but because* it would be a clear violation of the Lord's commandment that, when He gave them 'rest' from all their enemies 'round about',³⁷ all offering and sacrifice was to be centralised in the one and only acceptable place – in the place which the Lord God chose.³⁸

And now the Lord had indeed 'given rest' to all twelve tribes.³⁹ It followed that they – the people – were therefore now to offer no sacrifices other than at the central sanctuary – at this time, the tabernacle located at Shiloh.⁴⁰

It therefore seemed clear to the 9½ tribes that *either* the 2½ tribes had forsaken the Lord for another god or gods, *or* they were introducing division and schism into the worship and service of the one true God.⁴¹ Either way, to set up a rival worship centre was an act of blatant apostasy. The 9½ tribes knew their Bibles, and they were determined to be loyal to the word of God. But, without realising it, the 9½ tribes were reading an awful lot into the little that they knew.

Spiritual wisdom would have dictated a *very* different procedure. The first step should have been to establish the facts – to check out the rumour. For the Spirit of God emphasises that at this stage all was based on hearsay – they 'heard it said'. Yes, in this case, the rumour happened to be true. But it might easily not have been. And many a brother or sister's reputation has been smeared and tarnished in our day by false or exaggerated reports.

The second step should have been to pray. According to verse 12, the assembly of Israel met at Shiloh, where 'the tabernacle of meeting' was situated. And verse 13 stresses that Phinehas was the son of Eleazar. That is, that he was the son of the then High Priest, who enjoyed the facility of the breastplate, with its Urim and Thummim, by which he was able to discern the will of God for the people. Indeed, according to Numbers 27, Moses had said of Joshua: 'he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall ask counsel for him after the judgment of Urim before the Lord'.⁴² You would have thought therefore that the 9½ tribes would have availed themselves of the golden opportunity that this gave them.

Surely, they should have learned from the bruising they had received back in chapter 9 in connection with the Gibeonites. The Gibeonites were those Canaanites who had fooled Joshua and Israel with their dry and mouldy bread, their rent wine bottles, and their old garments and shoes. Appearances had been deceptive and Israel had burnt their fingers badly, and this, we are told, because 'they did not ask counsel from the Lord'.⁴³ In chapter 9, they had spared those whom they ought not; now they came perilously close to annihilating those whom they ought not.

The third step should have been to seek an explanation, and then – and only then – to take the fourth step – to decide on an appropriate course of action and discipline.⁴⁴

But, oh no – not Israel! To them, everything was so straightforward and plain,⁴⁵ and their knee-jerk reaction was to issue a call to arms.⁴⁶ In next to no time, the combined forces of the 9½ tribes were poised to attack and destroy the 2½ tribes, and, according to verse 33, to devastate their land. You can almost hear them ... 'If they are going to worship and sacrifice like Canaanites, they can jolly well perish like Canaanites!'⁴⁷

You would have thought that they would have recalled their brethren's past companionship and fellowship ... that they would have taken account of the way in which all twelve tribes had stood shoulder to shoulder against a common foe until only a short time before ... that they would have reminded themselves that for seven long years the 2½ tribes had kept all the commandments' of Moses, Joshua, and the Lord.

When the Allies liberated Paris in 1944, church bells, silent throughout the four-years of German occupation, rang out joyously across the city.⁴⁸ But I read recently that no bells rang out from one church, Saint-Philippe du Roule. The Parish Priest, Jean Muller, was inundated with calls from his parishioners, wanting to know why, following an official radio announcement that church bells *should* be rung, their bells were silent.

In church on the following Sunday, Muller thanked all who had called him. He then added, 'I should like to remind you of something you all forgot in your excitement that day. There are *no bells in the belfry of Saint-Philippe*'.⁴⁹

I guess that, given that it had been four years since any church bells had been heard in Paris, it is excusable that many of the parishioners had forgotten that there weren't any bells in their church.

But the 9½ tribes had no such excuse. And the way in which the 2½ tribes had *recently* risked their lives in God's service should have alerted the 9½ tribes to the fact that there was probably more to this than met the eye.⁵⁰

It was frightening just how fast the perilous situation developed. One moment the 2½ tribes returned home showered with compliments and praise ... the next they faced the threat of annihilation at the hand of Israel's formidable war machine.

Thankfully, the resolve of the 9½ tribes to wipe out their brethren was followed by a moment's calm reflection. Deuteronomy 13 envisaged a very similar situation (albeit that of a city) – 'if you hear ... that worthless men have ... drawn away the inhabitants of their city, saying, 'Let us go and serve other gods' ... then you shall inquire and make search and ask diligently. And behold, if it be true and certain' – then you hit them – hard!

The first step therefore should have been to conduct a careful investigation to establish if the story was true. It is a great pity that the 9½ tribes had not launched an investigation sooner than they did. They would have saved themselves a lot of trouble and embarrassment. But better late than never! And I note that they stood united in their proposed disciplinary action. Each tribe was represented by a man who commanded respect and in whom they had confidence.⁵¹ These were men who were able therefore to speak for 'the whole assembly of the Lord'.⁵² And I note that the 'ten chiefs' included a chief from the half tribe of Manasseh in the west!⁵³ The 9½ tribes were not going to let family ties and connections influence or interfere with their judgement.

Yet even now the delegation weren't going to find out whether their suspicions were correct – they weren't going to seek explanations. They took it for granted that they were in the right. They were going to sort their brethren out – to persuade them to mend their ways ... or else! Although I suppose we need to give them the credit at least for trying – albeit at the last moment – to conquer their brethren by words rather than by swords.

But, speaking of words, we can hardly miss the 'charming' way the men on the delegation expressed themselves, revealing their terribly smug and arrogant attitude.⁵⁴ Their opening words, 'What is this trespass', set the tone for all that followed. These were strong words indeed. And, in the space of just four verses, the delegation managed to accuse their brethren of 'trespass' (of 'treachery', of 'breaking faith') once;⁵⁵ of 'turning away from following the Lord' twice; and of 'rebellion' no less than four times. They charge them with wickedness to be classed with 'Peor', with, that is, the Ba'al worship and its associated orgies instigated 'through the counsel of Balaam' in Numbers 25.⁵⁶

It is, I guess, not surprising that they referred to this particular incident. Firstly, Beth-Peor had been in Moab, and was now in the possession of the 2½ tribes. Secondly, it was then that Phinehas, the head of the delegation, had distinguished himself as the great defender of the faith – whose holy zeal had saved the whole nation from God's judgement.⁵⁷ It was not surprising therefore that Phinehas, as the spokesman, should refer back to the occasion. And I can't help wondering if the good man now carried a spear with him – ready to deal with the ringleader if he could identify him, just as he had at Peor.⁵⁸

Thirdly, the Ba'al Peor incident was relatively recent – having come at the end of the wilderness wandering, just prior to the seven-year Canaan campaign – and was therefore still very much alive in the memory of Israel.

And fourthly, it was not only the last spiritual departure before Israel entered the land ... it was one of the vilest, most heinous, incidents ever to stain their history – meriting mention by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 10 – 'neither let us indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did'.⁵⁹

Separately, on the basis of their experience with Achan at the *beginning* of the conquest of Canaan, the 9½ tribes were terrified that the whole nation would suffer as a result of the sin of the 2½ tribes – for, as they pointed out ominously in verse 20, Achan did 'not perish alone because of his iniquity'.⁶⁰ The delegation spoke therefore in terms of the 2½ tribes rebelling 'against us' as well as 'against the Lord'.⁶¹

It hardly needs to be said that such words weren't calculated to endear them to the 2½ tribes, nor to pave the way for speedy reconciliation. The delegation accused their brethren of trespass ... of turning away from the Lord ... of rebellion – of just about every sin in the book.

And yet there was *one* redeeming feature in their message. This was heralded by the 'Howbeit' – the 'Nevertheless' – of verse 19. For, in spite of the atrocious sin which they then believed their brethren had committed, they made what amounted to an extremely generous and self-denying offer. They told the 2½ tribes that they were welcome to come back across the Jordan – that they, the 9½ tribes, were willing each to move over a bit to make room for them – meaning, of course, less territory for themselves. And yet chapters 13 to 21 had all been devoted to the account of how they had recently carved up and apportioned the land.⁶²

And that dividing of the land had not proved at all easy. As it was, the tribes of Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh) had complained that they did not have enough space, because they – a 'great people', as they saw themselves – had been given only one lot and portion as their inheritance.⁶³ Not that they got much sympathy from Joshua, even though he himself was from the tribe of Ephraim. 'If you are a great people', he had responded, 'then go up

to the forest' and clear ground there – where the giants were – and also drive out the Canaanites with their iron chariots in the valley. In effect, he told them to stop moaning and to get on with it.

Yet now the 9½ tribes stood ready to rip up all their maps and plans if it proved necessary – to go back to the drawing board, and to start all over again. They were prepared to fall over backwards, as it were, to avoid any trouble and conflict. They cared so much about their future as God's people that they were prepared to forfeit their own possessions if that would help.

By the time we reach verse 20, the situation was highly explosive. Remember that it had all been one huge misunderstanding. Just imagine for a moment that we had been in the sandals of the 2½ tribes. A group of our brethren, for whom we have previously done a great deal (indeed for whom we have even risked our lives) ... a group of our brethren suddenly storm in, and, without so much as a 'by-your-leave', charge us with a catalogue of serious offences of which we are entirely innocent. How would we react?

How did the 2½ tribes? It was desperately important that they kept calm. One unwise, one hasty, word would have sparked off a civil war which would have made the battle with the tribe of Benjamin at the end of the book of Judges seem like a tea party.

And it is nothing short of thrilling to note the calm and composed way in which the 2½ tribes responded to the broadside which they suffered.⁶⁴ They did not interrupt their brethren's lecture – even though it was no less painfully repetitive than it was plainly outrageous.

When many of us would have been sorely tempted to file a lawsuit for slander, they listened patiently. And, when they were finally permitted to speak – when they were able to get a word in – they didn't take their brethren to task for their lack of confidence in them – they didn't tell them to mind their own business and to skedaddle back across the Jordan.⁶⁵

Yet they were clearly aghast at the charges levelled against them,⁶⁶ as witness the forceful and repeated calling on God as their witness.⁶⁷ And in just two sentences, the 2½ tribes rebut all three charges levelled against them.⁶⁸

They point out that their only motive and intention had been to avoid – indeed, to guard against – the very division they were now accused of causing!⁶⁹ As the Greek Old Testament expresses it, 'We have done this as a precaution against this very thing'. Clearly, all twelve tribes were in agreement in fearing any division among the people of God.⁷⁰ And the 2½ tribes conclude with an expression of horror at the very thought of rebelling against the Lord.⁷¹

In the event, as a result of their courteous attitude and detailed explanation, everything was sorted out amicably and peacefully. Initially the delegation,⁷² and subsequently the whole 9½ tribes,⁷³ were fully satisfied that everything was alright after all – 'it was good in their eyes'.⁷⁴

And so the chapter ends with Israel's *God* blessed, and Israel's *swords* sheathed.⁷⁵ A disastrous feud had been averted; Israel had pulled back from the brink of disaster – but it had been a *very* close shave!

So much for history! But we have it on the highest authority that 'these things happened to them by way of example; and they are written for our instruction'.⁷⁶

Since the days of Joshua, an incredible – and alarming – amount of trouble, division and misery has been caused by 'misunderstandings',⁷⁷ by the failure to consider others and to consult with them, and by jumping to hasty conclusions. Would to God that all such differences and misunderstandings in our day might end as happily as did those in the days of Joshua.

To that end, let me collect the *key* lessons we need to take home with us from our passage this evening?⁷⁸

First, on the plus side ...

From the concern of the 2½ tribes about the spiritual well-being of future generations. From their desire to maintain and preserve the unity of God's people. And from their first priority – not building any memorial for themselves or seeking their own comfort and enjoyment. The Lord came first.

From the concern shown by the 9½ tribes for the purity of the worship of the people of God. From their refusing to ignore an obvious problem. From their unity in their planned discipline, refusing to let family ties influence their actions. And from their willingness to suffer personal loss if this would further the interests of the people of God.

But there were undoubtedly faults on both sides.

From the 2½ tribes we learn that serious problems can arise from a breakdown in communication, from failing to inform others what is in mind when embarking on something new.⁷⁹

From the 9½ tribes, we see the danger of being ready to act on mere hearsay ... of jumping to hasty conclusions⁸⁰ ...of ignoring the past faithful service of our brethren ... and of speaking to others in a harsh and smug manner.

But the end of the episode reflected credit on both sides.

From the 2½ tribes we learn the importance of self-control, and of being willing to hear out what others have to say, before patiently explaining the true situation.

And the 9½ tribes can give us a much-needed lesson in admitting our mistakes, and not attempting to justify either ourselves or our own wrong actions.

I leave the last word with the apostle Paul: 'With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, earnestly striving to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace'.⁸¹

Endnotes

¹ Num. 21.14.

² See Josh. 14. 7-10. That is, there were 45 years between Numbers 13 and Joshua 14. Thirty-eight years (Deut. 2. 14 with Num. 21. 12) were spent before Israel entered Canaan, leaving 6-7 years for the Canaan Campaign. Caleb was forty years old at Kadesh Barnea (Joshua 14. 10), and eighty-five years old when the conquest ended (Joshua 14. 10). Forty-five years less thirty-eight years of wandering leaves seven years.

³ However, pockets of resistance still remained and it was the responsibility of each tribe to drive them out.

⁴ Moses' agreement with the two-and-a-half tribes' request to stay east of the Jordan was a concession, but one which God Himself confirmed. It has often been claimed that 'the boundary of Canaan was not the Jordan, but rather the mountain-range of Gilead, which separated it from the desert lying beyond'. Yet where is evidence for this? In favour of seeing 'the promised Land' as consisting of Canaan only, note Gen. 17. 8; Deut. 1. 7-8; 6. 18; Josh. 21. 43-45 ('the Lord gave Israel *all* the land which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they possessed it'); Ezek. 20. 42; 48. 29 (the millennial fulfilment). Also, for Gen. 15. 18; Deut. 1. 7; 11. 24, see 1 Kings 4. 21; 2 Kings 24. 7: 'Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the River to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt', 1 Kings 4. 21; 2 Chron. 9. 26.

Gen. 15. 18 details the northern and southern extremities of 'the land' – not the western boundary. See also Josh. 1. 2-4 – only 'over Jordan'. Again, see Josh. 22. 19: 'the land of *your* possession' (cf. vv. 4, 9) contrasted with 'the land of *the Lord's* possession, where the Lord's tabernacle dwells'.

⁵ See NIDOTTE, volume 4, page 677.

⁶ Josh. 1. 16.

⁷ Josh. 4. 12-13.

⁸ Josh. 22. 1-6. Although Joshua released the two and a half tribes from military obligations, he imposed upon them other obligations of a spiritual character. Also Joshua instructed them, saying, 'Divide the spoil of your enemies with your brethren', those that had remained at home to guard their belongings. Moses had set a precedent years before when he had avenged the children of Israel of the Midianites, Num. 31. 6-27. And centuries later this was the principle upon which David commanded his men, 1 Sam. 30. 24.

⁹ Josh. 22. 9. It is about 20 miles (as the crow flies) from Shiloh to the River Jordan via Gilgal.

¹⁰ Joshua 22. 11 (Septuagint): 'Behold, (they) have built an altar at the borders of the land of Canaan at ... Jordan, on the *opposite side* to the children of Israel'.

'Now when the tribe of Reuben, and that of Gad, and the Manassites *were passed over the river*, they built an altar on the banks of Jordan as a monument to posterity, and a sign of their relation to those that should inhabit on the other side. But when *those on the other side* heard that those who had been dismissed had built an altar ...', Flavius Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, Book 5, Chapter 1, Paragraph 26.

'The altar was built on their side [that of the 2½ tribes], or those in the land of Canaan would have known of the building of it, and have seen them at it, and not come at the knowledge of it by hearsay only ... "Built an altar over against the land of Canaan" ... clearly shows it was on the other side of Jordan'. Dr. John Gill's Exposition of the Bible.

Malcolm's argument in favour of the eastern side: Had the altar been built on the west side of the Jordan, surely the first thing that would have gone through the mind of Phinehas and the minds of the 9½ tribes was 'why on earth would the 2½ tribes build an altar on which to offer sacrifices on this (our) side of the Jordan? If the natural border of the Jordan (or any other factor) prevents them from taking part in worship on this side of the Jordan, it is absurd to construct another altar on which to worship on this side'. (Obviously, the 9½ tribes assumed that the altar was for sacrifice, because they subsequently heaved a sigh of relief when they discovered that it wasn't!)

Also, in verse 25, the 2½ tribes imagine descendants of the 9½ tribes pointing to the Jordan as a boundary between them. Surely, erecting a facsimile altar on the east side of that boundary makes more sense.

I also suggest that the 2½ tribes had no right to build on any other ground than their own.

The Hebrew text of verse 11 can be translated, 'over against ('in front of', TWOT; K&D; 'on the front of', BDB – as 8. 33; 9. 1) the land of Canaan ...near the region/border/coast of the children of Israel'.

For quite detailed notes on the Hebrew text, see ... <http://kukis.org/Joshua/Joshua22.htm>

¹¹ Josh. 22. 9-34.

¹² Josh. 22. 10.

¹³ Josh. 22. 25. This is a section of 'the Rift Valley that stretches from the Sea of Galilee down to the southern tip of the Dead Sea', NIDOTTE, article 'Arabah', vol. 4, pages 406-407.

¹⁴ Josh. 22. 24-25. That is, that the River Jordan would come to represent not only a physical separation between them, but a spiritual one as well.

¹⁵ When the Reubenites etc had made their request to be permitted to dwell on the east of the river, clearly they had not foreseen this possible difficulty.

¹⁶ Deut. 16. 16.

¹⁷

Joshua 4. 20	Gilgal (twelve stones)	A monument to God's faithfulness in bringing Israel safely across the Jordan into the Promised Land
Joshua 7. 26	over Achan	A reminder of Israel's potential for unfaithfulness and of the dire consequences that result
Joshua 8. 28–29	over the king of Ai	A monument to Israel's restoration
Joshua 8. 30–32	Joshua engraves a copy of the law	A reminder of Israel's duty to live in obedience to the divine "Torah," or "instruction"
Joshua 10. 27	over Amorite kings at Gibeon	A monument to God's gracious action in defending Israel's covenant with a Canaanite city
Joshua 22. 34	In the land of Gilead	A witness to the unity of the 2½ tribes with the 9½ tribes west of the Jordan
Joshua 24. 26–27	covenant renewal at Shechem	A reminder of Israel's duty to serve the Lord, who fulfilled every promise in bringing them into the land

¹⁸ Josh. 4. 6-7, 19-24. The Reubenites, the Gadites, and those from Manasseh apparently felt that as a stone memorial witnessed to their children of their miraculous entering into Canaan, so an altar memorial should witness to their children that, though they dwelt the other side of the Jordan, they were very much one with those on the west side.

¹⁹ From 1399 BC to 931 BC.

²⁰ 1 Kings 12. 28, 29.

²¹ Joshua 22. 23, 26, 28, and 29. This was not for sacrifice and worship, to rival that of the tabernacle, like the altars attached to the calves at Bethel and Dan (1 Kings 12. 28, 29).

²² Josh. 22. 11.

²³ F B Meyer thinks not: 'It was a great mistake. No pattern for its shape had been received from God, nor any direction as to its construction: whilst if they had obeyed the divine instruction, that three times in the year all their males should appear before God in Shiloh, there would have been no need for this clumsy contrivance. In their view the unity of the people could not be preserved by a merely spiritual bond, but by an outward and mechanical one. The common ties of the altar at Shiloh were insufficient; there must be in addition the great altar of Ed', *Joshua and the Land of Promise*, page 189. But sticking by the text of Joshua 22, I respectfully disagree with Mr Meyer.

²⁴ They had previously built sheepfolds and fortified towns – to shelter their children from the inhabitants of the land, Numb. 32. 16,17, 24.

²⁵ Josh. 1. 15.

²⁶ Josh. 11. 23; 21. 44; 22. 4.

²⁷ Josh. 1. 15.

²⁸ Josh. 22. 8.

²⁹ As these men remind themselves what their wives looked like – and catch up with how much their children had grown.

³⁰ Num. 32. 18.

³¹ Josh. 22. 24, 26, 28.

³² Josh. 22. 12. At Shiloh. Partly because this was where the main body of Israel was gathered, Josh. 22. 9; cf. 18. 8-9. 'Shiloh was the mustering place; for it seemed as if an offence had been perpetrated against that holy shrine', F B Meyer, *Joshua and the Land of Promise*, page 191. As if the 9½ tribes said, 'they fought well for us; we will try how they can fight for themselves', Joseph Hall, *Contemplations on the Historical Passages of the Old and New Testaments*, page 104.

³³ Exod. 32. 4-8.

³⁴ Even though this time there was no idol to be worshipped.

³⁵ Perhaps because it boasted no tabernacle and altar.

³⁶ To cleanse the whole of their inheritance from all forms of pagan worship; Deut. 12. 1-3.

³⁷ Deut. 12. 9-10.

³⁸ Lev. 17. 1-9; Deut. 12. 1-28; cf. Exod. 20. 24; Deut. 27. 1-2, 5.

³⁹ Josh. 21. 43-44.

⁴⁰ Josh. 18. 1; 19. 51; 22. 9.

⁴¹ On the contrary, it was intended to prevent those very evils. It was erected to preserve the unity of the nation.

⁴² Num. 27. 19.

⁴³ Josh. 9. 14.

⁴⁴ This was the procedure which spiritual wisdom would have followed – without which (spiritual wisdom), our zeal for God can easily lead us from God, as it did the 9½ tribes.

⁴⁵ In effect, they considered their brethren to be guilty until proven innocent.

⁴⁶ Josh. 22. 12.

⁴⁷ Even the size of the altar should have caused the 9½ tribes to pause and to think. Why should less people want a bigger altar? Surely the only likely motive was that they wanted it to be seen from a distance. Unless therefore the 2½ tribes were being deliberately provocative, the large dimensions of the altar needed some explanation.

⁴⁸ The 14 ton bell of the South Tower of the Cathedral of Notre Dame rang out joyously, it was followed by the bells of Sacre Coeur, then by the tiny Church of Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre and the oldest Church in Paris, Saint-Germain-des-Pres. All the Church bells of Paris were ringing, all except one, the Church of Saint-Philippe du Roule just off the Champs-Elysees.

⁴⁹ Larry Collins and Dominique Lapiere, '*Is Paris Burning?*', page 258.

See <http://www.avondhupress.ie/20131226/christmas2013/liberation-of-paris-1944-the-bells-ring-out-S48996.html>

⁵⁰ If we ever come across a case where someone does something of which we disapprove, but which we know is entirely out of character. We should hold fire on forming any quick judgement. There may well be factors of which we know nothing.

⁵¹ Josh. 22. 14.

⁵² Josh. 22. 16.

⁵³ Josh. 22. 14.

⁵⁴ Joshua 22. 16-19.

⁵⁵ The Hebrew word occurs twice. That is, 'What is this trespass which you have trespassed against the God of Israel?' or 'What is this treacherous act by which you have acted treacherously against the God of Israel?'

⁵⁶ Num. 25. 1-18, 31. 16. They were accused by Phinehas of a sin like that at Peor – which led to God's 'anger', v. 18. This may have rung a bell in that the 2½ tribes had earlier been accused by Moses of discouraging the people just as had the 10 spies, when the Lord's 'anger' had been directed against Israel, Num. 32. 6-15.

⁵⁷ He was the man of whom the Lord Himself said that he 'turned back my wrath from the children Israel, because he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so I did not consume the children of Israel ...', Num. 25. 11. Compare Paul's, 'Oh, that you would bear with me in a little folly ... For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ', 2 Cor. 11. 2 (Greek as LXX). It is necessary to differentiate between spiritual and carnal zeal. Phinehas drew a javelin, and was approved; Peter drew a sword and was rebuked.

⁵⁸ Num. 25. 7-9 (Zimri). 'Phinehas was a man who knew how to use a javelin', C A Coates, '*Outline of Joshua*', page 92. 'A large degree of wisdom is evinced in the choice of Phinehas. It was during a sad period of apostasy that he first distinguished himself ... without doubt Phinehas would maintain the honour of Jehovah's name ... Furthermore, no more favourable choice could have been made for the two and a half tribes. To be exonerated by so zealous an individual as Phinehas would be a complete justification of blamelessness, and would result in an immediate restoration of confidence and national unity', A W Pink. Certainly, he was very well suited to the task.

⁵⁹ 1 Cor. 10. 8. When 23,000 died in one day, and 24,000 died in all, Num. 25. 9.

⁶⁰ For he brought death to his whole family, and to thirty-six of Israel's warriors slain by the men of Ai, Josh. 7. 5, 24-25.

⁶¹ Josh. 22. 19.

⁶² That is, the earlier chapters record, not a case of 'divide and conquer' but of 'conquer and divide'!

⁶³ Josh. 17. 14-18.

⁶⁴ The sword is laid aside for the olive-branch.

⁶⁵ There was no trace of the 'Who made you rulers and judges over us?' attitude. See Acts 7. 27.

⁶⁶ No words can suffice to express the horror of the two and a half tribes at the sin of which they have been supposed guilty. The forceful way in which they call on God as their witness is without parallel in the Old Testament.

⁶⁷ 'The Lord, the God of Gods', Josh. 22. 22: 'Jehovah, El, Elohim'. 'No translation can do justice to the vigour of the original', *The Pulpit Bible*. 'He knows' – the omniscient God, the searcher of all hearts.

⁶⁸ Of 'rebellion', trespass' and of 'turning away from following the Lord', Josh. 22. 22-23.

⁶⁹ 'In their effort to promote unity, they had almost occasioned a fatal schism', Blaikie, *Expositor's Bible*, page 375. "The very thing you thought we were doing is the very thing that we're trying to avoid".

⁷⁰ How long the altar remained is unknown, but in little more than four centuries, its witness was forgotten, 1 Chron. 5. 25-26 (note the word *מַעֲבָד* in verse 25 – the very same as that in Josh. 22. 16, 31!)

⁷¹ Josh. 22. 29. 'The Lord Himself require it': NIDOTTE, vol. 1, page 723, asserts that this usage of the verb means "investigate" in a legal sense. This repetition of God's name is meant to show the solemnity of their oath. "Far be it from us". This is an emphatic exclamation (cf. 24. 16; Gen. 44. 7; 1 Sam. 2. 30; 14. 45; 20. 2, 9; 22. 15).

⁷² Josh. 22. 30. 'Delivered', verse 31: 'He who prevents an approaching disease or mischief, as truly *delivers* a man from it, as he who cures or removes it after it has been inflicted'.

⁷³ Josh. 22. 33.

⁷⁴ And I note the words of Phinehas in verse 31, 'Now you have delivered the children of Israel out of the hand of the Lord'. Did the good man have in mind, I wonder, what God had said of him back in Numbers 25, 'Phinehas ... has turned my wrath away from the children of Israel ... so that I consumed not the children of Israel'?, Num. 25. 11.

⁷⁵ Josh. 22. 33. They 'spoke no more of making war against them *to destroy (to devastate)* the land where the people of Reuben and the people of Gad were settled'. Taking account of all the devastation which takes place in the book of Joshua, it is remarkable that the common word for this (*לשח*) appears only here in the entire book.

⁷⁶ 1 Cor. 10. 11.

⁷⁷ 'Nor was opposition from the enemies of Methodism among its greatest troubles ... although they increased in number daily, yet ... bickerings and *misunderstandings* began to threaten their very existence'.

The Life and Times of Selina Countess of Huntingdon – volume 1 by C. H. Seymour: page 35.

⁷⁸ Bitter contention often arises from simple misunderstanding. The Israelites were on the verge of a civil war as a result of a simple mistake of judgment. Much unhappiness might be avoided if the lessons of this incident were considered well. **More fully**, the key lessons are :

From the initial actions of the two and a half tribes:

- That their concern lay with the spiritual well-being of future generations – the desire to see them fear and serve the Lord.
- That their desire was to maintain and preserve the unity of God's people.
- That their first priority was spiritual – not building any memorial for themselves or seeking the comfort and enjoyment of their homes. The Lord came first.

From the initial actions of the nine and a half tribes:

- That they showed a great concern for the purity of the worship of the people of God. These men knew their Bibles and were determined to be loyal to the word of God.
- That they refused to ignore the problem; they were determined to deal with the matter.
- That they were united in their planned discipline, and weren't willing to let family ties or connections influence their actions.

- That they were willing to suffer considerable personal loss, willing to forego their own possessions if that would help further the interests of the people of God.

From the faults of the two and a half tribes:

- That serious problems can arise from a breakdown in communication – from the failure to inform others what is in mind when embarking on something new and different.

From the faults of the nine and a half tribes:

- That they were ready to act on mere hearsay.
- That they were quick in jumping to conclusions.
- That too easily they forgot the past loyalty and faithful service of their brethren. Seemingly, the fact that they had stood shoulder to shoulder against a common foe for many years now counted for next to nothing!
- That they spoke in a harsh and smug manner. There was no 'spirit of meekness' here, Galatians 6. 1.

From what the two and a half tribes did to redeem the situation:

- Their exercise of self-control, not losing their temper or reacting in anger.
- Their willingness to hear out what the other party had to say, and then to patiently explain the real position and their motives for doing what they had.

From what the nine and a half tribes did to redeem the situation:

- Their willingness to admit their mistake, and not to attempt to justify either themselves or their actions.

⁷⁹ Do we ever stop to ask ourselves, 'If I do this or that, what are others likely to make of it?' We should be careful to avoid the appearance of evil. These tribes were acting in a way which exposed their conduct to suspicion.

⁸⁰ Love should incline us to view the conduct of others in the best light, 1 Cor. 13. 7.

⁸¹ Eph. 4. 2-3. In context, as a matter of the utmost urgency, he says, v. 3, they – and we – are to be eager – to bend every effort (as the word means) – to preserve that unity *already formed by the Holy Spirit* – in whom both Jews and gentiles have common access to the Father, 2. 18, and in whom they are being built together for a dwelling-place for God, 2. 22. *The Spirit's work* had made them one – but it was *their business* to keep and preserve it in practice. And the *means* of maintaining this unity of the Spirit is, Paul says, the bond – that which holds things together – of 'peace' – the bond which consists of peace, that is – the peace of which he had spoken in chapter 2 – the peace made by the Lord Jesus between believing Jews and gentiles, vv. 13-17. The practical point for us is that, *if the greatest dividing factor* between Christians has been removed – and it has – there is absolutely no excuse for us allowing *other factors* – such as the colour of a person's skin or somebody's social or educational background – to mar and disrupt our fellowship and unity as Christians.