

# JOSHUA—WEEK 14

## LEARNING SABBATH REST



F. Michael Slay

*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

*Joshua, Week 14 — Learning Sabbath Rest*  
*The Cover Picture is by Jean Fouquet (1420–1477)*  
*On display in Paris at the Bibliotheque nationale de France.*

At last they can rest.

But no. As soon as they can take a break from war, they get ready to start another one over a perceived violation of God’s law. Fortunately, the elders jump in and bring some adult supervision into the situation.

They quickly learn the truth about this apparent violation and everyone calms down. Case closed.

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T. M. Moore, Principal  
[tmmoore@ailbe.org](mailto:tmmoore@ailbe.org)

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1 Joshua 21:27–45

*Also to the children of Gershon, of the families of the Levites, from the other half-tribe of Manasseh, they gave Golan in Bashan with its common-land (a city of refuge for the slayer), and Be Eshterah with its common-land: two cities; and from the tribe of Issachar, Kishion with its common-land, Daberath with its common-land, Jarmuth with its common-land, and En Gannim with its common-land: four cities; and from the tribe of Asher, Mishal with its common-land, Abdon with its common-land, Helkath with its common-land, and Rehob with its common-land: four cities; and from the tribe of Naphtali, Kedesh in Galilee with its common-land (a city of refuge for the slayer), Hammoth Dor with its common-land, and Kartan with its common-land: three cities. All the cities of the Gershonites according to their families were thirteen cities with their common-lands.*

*And to the families of the children of Merari, the rest of the Levites, from the tribe of Zebulun, Jokneam with its common-land, Kartah with its common-land, Dimnah with its common-land, and Nahalal with its common-land: four cities; and from the tribe of Reuben, Bezer with its common-land, Jahaz with its common-land, Kedemoth with its common-land, and Mephaath with its common-land: four cities; and from the tribe of Gad, Ramoth in Gilead with its common-land (a city of refuge for the slayer), Mahanaim with its common-land, Heshbon with its common-land, and Jazer with its common-land: four cities in all. So all the cities for the children of Merari according to their families, the rest of the families of the Levites, were by their lot twelve cities.*

*All the cities of the Levites within the possession of the children of Israel were forty-eight cities with their common-lands. Every one of these cities had its common-land surrounding it; thus were all these cities.*

*So the LORD gave to Israel all the land of which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they took possession of it and dwelt in it. The LORD gave them rest all around, according to all that He had sworn to their fathers. And not a man of all their enemies stood against them; the LORD delivered all their enemies into their hand. Not a word failed of any good thing which the LORD had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass.*

This completes the allotment of cities to the Levites and land to the other eleven tribes. They're done. *The LORD gave them rest all around, according to all that He had sworn to their fathers.*

God kept His promise. After forty years of wandering, and a season of war, they finally find rest.

*“For forty years I was grieved with that generation,  
And said, ‘It is a people who go astray in their hearts,  
And they do not know My ways.’  
So I swore in My wrath,  
‘They shall not enter My rest.’ ” — Psalm 95:10–1*

That rest (Sabbath) has been the goal all along.

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Sabbath rest is the endpoint of the week of creation and a central theme.

2 Joshua 22:1–9

*Then Joshua called the Reubenites, the Gadites, and half the tribe of Manasseh, and 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 commanded you. You have not left your brethren these many days, up to this day, but have kept the charge of the commandment of the LORD your God. And now the LORD your God has given rest to your brethren, as He promised them; now therefore, return and go to your tents and to the land of your possession, which Moses the servant of the LORD gave you on the other side of the Jordan. But take careful heed to do the commandment and the law which Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, to love the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways, to keep His commandments, to hold fast 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 half the tribe of Manasseh Moses had given a possession in Bashan, but to the other half of it Joshua gave a possession among their brethren on this side of the Jordan, westward. And indeed, when Joshua sent them away to their tents, he blessed them, and spoke to them, saying, “Return with much riches to your tents, with very much livestock, with silver, with gold, with bronze, with iron, and with very much clothing. Divide the spoil of your enemies with your brethren.”*

*So the children of Reuben, the children of Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh returned, and departed from the children of Israel at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan, to go to the country of Gilead, to the land of their possession, which they had obtained according to the word of the LORD by the hand of Moses.*

Notice how this exactly parallels what Joshua asked them to do way back in Chapter 1.

*And to the Reubenites, the Gadites, and half the tribe of Manasseh Joshua spoke, saying, “Remember the word which Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, saying, ‘The LORD your God is giving you rest and is giving you this land.’ Your wives, your little ones, and your livestock shall remain in the land which Moses gave you on this side of the Jordan. But you shall pass before your brethren armed, all your mighty men of valor, and help them, until the LORD has given your brethren rest, as He gave you, and they also have taken possession of the land which the LORD your God is giving them. Then you shall return to the land of your possession and enjoy it, which Moses the LORD’s servant gave you on this side of the Jordan toward the sunrise.” — Joshua 1:12–15*

The two-and-a-half tribes stepped up to their obligation under God’s covenant to give the sons of Israel the promised land. Everyone now gets to rest, and that includes them.

For these soldiers, they get to go back to their families—a long awaited reunion to be sure.

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Notice that while this is a Sabbath rest, it’s not retirement. They’re just going back to their day job.

It’s a Sabbath from war.

3 Joshua 22:10–12

*And when they came to the region of the Jordan which is in the land of Canaan, the children of Reuben, the children of Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh built an altar there by the Jordan—a great, impressive altar. Now the children of Israel heard someone say, “Behold, the children of Reuben, the children of Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh have built an altar on the frontier of the land of Canaan, in the region of the Jordan—on the children of Israel’s side.” And when the children of Israel heard of it, the whole congregation of the children of Israel gathered together at Shiloh to go to war against them.*

The Israelites on the west side think the altar on the east side will be a functioning altar—to be used for sacrifices. Since crossing the Jordan is no easy task, this makes sense. This would, however, violate the single altar standard set in Leviticus.

*“Also you shall say to them: ‘Whatever man of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell among you, who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice, and does not bring it to the door of the tabernacle of meeting, to offer it to the LORD, that man shall be cut off from among his people.’ ” — Leviticus 17:8–9*

So, the sight of this giant altar on the east side of the Jordan triggers the “Westerners.”

But notice that their instant reaction is war. And this won’t be just any war; it’ll be a war with their kin. That’s ridiculous. The passage in Leviticus only prescribes expulsion, not death. What’s going on here?

Part of this is their war-oriented perspective. These are people who grew up wandering around in the Sinai desert followed by nothing but war. So starting another war doesn’t seem strange to them.

But the other part is the lesson for us—they jumped to a conclusion. And notice that it was a reasonable conclusion. That’s a typical element of this kind of mistake. Far-fetched conclusions usually (but not always) come packaged with a dose of uncertainty. That is supposed to keep violent overreaction in check.

But this is a really big altar; what would they do with it besides use it as an altar?

So, they just assumed.

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The lion’s share of their error isn’t just that they’re wrong (as we’ll soon see) or even that they jumped to this conclusion; it’s that they immediately went for a violent response. What is up with these quick escalations? There are, for example, numerous cases of this in Acts. Arguments never seem to stay civil.

*Now when there arose a great dissension, the commander, fearing lest Paul might be pulled to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them, and bring him into the barracks. — Acts 23:10*

While our civilization tamps down violence, we still get way too riled up over religious disagreements.

Unity in the body of Christ is a very high priority. Pick fights only in cases that absolutely require it.

*Then the children of Israel sent Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest to the children of Reuben, to the children of Gad, and to half the tribe of Manasseh, into the land of Gilead, and with him ten rulers, one ruler each from the chief house of every tribe of Israel; and each one was the head of the house of his father among the divisions of Israel. Then they came to the children of Reuben, to the children of Gad, and to half the tribe of Manasseh, to the land of Gilead, and they spoke with them, saying, “Thus says the whole congregation of the LORD: ‘What treachery is this that you have committed against the God of Israel, to turn away this day from following the LORD, in that you have built for yourselves an altar, that you might rebel this day against the LORD? Is the iniquity of Peor not enough for us, from which we are not cleansed till this day, although there was a plague in the congregation of the LORD, but that you must turn away this day from following the LORD? And it shall be, if you rebel today against the LORD, that tomorrow He will be angry with the whole congregation of Israel. Nevertheless, if the land of your possession is unclean, then cross over to the land of the possession of the LORD, where the LORD’s tabernacle stands, and take possession among us; but do not rebel against the LORD, nor rebel against us, by building yourselves an altar besides the altar of the LORD our God. Did not Achan the son of Zerah commit a trespass in the accursed thing, and wrath fell on all the congregation of Israel? And that man did not perish alone in his iniquity.’ ”*

Looks like the grown-ups are in charge after all. Despite the potentially violent reaction by *the children of Israel* (i.e., the crowds), the leaders act like leaders and launch an appropriate response.

But they don’t pull any punches either. Their questions to “the Easterners” is blunt. *“Thus says the whole congregation of the LORD: ‘What treachery is this that you have committed against the God of Israel, to turn away this day from following the LORD, in that you have built for yourselves an altar, that you might rebel this day against the LORD?’ ”*

They go on to cite examples of how everyone gets punished for the sins of a few. They’re worried that they might end up being punished for sins committed on the other side of the river.

And they’re right. This is important.

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Once again, we see this concept of shared responsibility come into play. Whole nations can be penalized for the actions of one person. We’re all in this together. Inflation hurts everyone. War hurts more.

But what’s important here is that shared responsibility (and shared consequences) are seen by the Israelites as just. That’s a far cry from what we think of things like inflation and war. They’re anything but just. Innocent people are ruined by things they cannot control and do not even support.

Yet, God’s view of mankind is not entirely individualistic. Guilt and consequences are shared.

OK, fine. We know about our sharing in Adam’s sin and we know about our sharing in Christ’s sacrifice.

But what about everything that goes right or wrong in the Church? What about that?

5 Joshua 22:21–29 (ESV)

*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. 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, nor 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!”*

The Easterners have the perfect answer. The altar isn’t for sacrifices; it’s a monument. They know the law and have no intention of breaking it. *“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. Or if we did so to offer burnt offerings or grain offerings or peace offerings on it, may the LORD himself take vengeance.”*

They even have a good reason for setting up this monument. *“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.”*

They built this altar for all the right reasons. *“Far be it from us that we should rebel against the LORD!”*

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This shows a religious misunderstanding handled well. People had serious concerns, and those concerns were voiced honestly, even bluntly. But the accusation was made straight and the response made equally straight. You can feel the air being let out of the tension as this conversation progresses.

And notice what’s missing. The defense, while vigorous, lacks any hyper-defensive counter-attack. We don’t see any whining come-backs like, “I can’t believe you would even think that.” Or, “I’m really hurt.” For all their faults, these people aren’t on that silly “It’s all about me,” wavelength. Instead, they treat the accusation with respect and respond in a way that helps instead of escalates.

So, despite this whole mess starting out on the wrong foot, wiser heads prevail.

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. What do you do to keep the Sabbath and make it holy?
2. Do you have a goal or event you're looking forward too?
3. What do Christians need to stop dividing over?
4. Do you think God might punish our whole nation?
5. When have you seen someone take a fair question wrong?

*Items for prayer:*