

JOSHUA—WEEK 15

A MONUMENT TO GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Joshua, Week 15 — A Monument to God's Sovereignty
The Cover Picture is by Jean Fouquet (1420–1477)
On display in Paris at the Bibliotheque nationale de France.

The controversy over the east bank altar is resolved peacefully and everyone realizes that it's all good. Then Joshua calls the whole nation together to deliver his final words.

Their history is a beautiful and glorious thing. The LORD has been faithful in leading them to this place.

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1 Joshua 22:30–34

Now when Phinehas the priest and the rulers of the congregation, the heads of the divisions of Israel who were with him, heard the words that the children of Reuben, the children of Gad, and the children of Manasseh spoke, it pleased them. Then Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest said to the children of Reuben, the children of Gad, and the children of Manasseh, “This day we perceive that the LORD is among us, because you have not committed this treachery against the LORD. Now you have delivered the children of Israel out of the hand of the LORD.”

And Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, and the rulers, returned from the children of Reuben and the children of Gad, from the land of Gilead to the land of Canaan, to the children of Israel, and brought back word to them. So the thing pleased the children of Israel, and the children of Israel blessed God; they spoke no more of going against them in battle, to destroy the land where the children of Reuben and Gad dwelt.

The children of Reuben and the children of Gad called the altar, Witness, “For it is a witness between us that the LORD is God.”

The explanation for the “altar” (in Joshua 22:21–29) is convincing. The delegation from the west side of the Jordan is relieved to hear it and they give a very complimentary, even effusive, response.

It almost looks like they were embarrassed about the harsh accusation they had made. They had jumped to the conclusion that the western tribes had committed a great apostasy. Now, having heard a compelling explanation that it was all totally innocent, they launch into a flowery description of how great it all is.

But that’s not it; Phinehas’s words should be taken at face value.

“This day we perceive that the LORD is among us, because you have not committed this treachery against the LORD. Now you have delivered the children of Israel out of the hand of the LORD.”

But what does he mean by, “*delivered*”? How could this altar deliver them *out of the hand of the LORD*?

It wasn’t the altar that delivered them; it was their explanation. Phinehas is recognizing the “close call” they just had with almost going to war over a misunderstanding. They missed it by the skin of their teeth.

This all has the unplanned beneficial effect of publicizing the altar and its explanation. Now everyone will know why it’s there and will retell “the legend of the war that almost happened.” This gives the whole misadventure a sense of divine purpose.

With a backstory like that, this altar deserves a name of its own—*Witness*.

This highlights the importance of being slow to start a conflict—something we don’t practice enough. But the takeaway is the official recognition of a close call. They should be celebrated as much as victories.

Imagine the US building monuments to our close calls (e.g., the Cuban missile crisis). We should.

2 Joshua 23:1–13

Now it came to pass, a long time after the LORD had given rest to Israel from all their enemies round about, that Joshua was old, advanced in age. And Joshua called for all Israel, for their elders, for their heads, for their judges, and for their officers, and said to them:

“I am old, advanced in age. You have seen all that the LORD your God has done to all these nations because of you, for the LORD your God is He who has fought for you. See, I have divided to you by lot these nations that remain, to be an inheritance for your tribes, from the Jordan, with all the nations that I have cut off, as far as the Great Sea westward. And the LORD your God will expel them from before you and drive them out of your sight. So you shall possess their land, as the LORD your God promised you. Therefore be very courageous to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, lest you turn aside from it to the right hand or to the left, and lest you go among these nations, these who remain among you. You shall not make mention of the name of their gods, nor cause anyone to swear by them; you shall not serve them nor bow down to them, but you shall hold fast to the LORD your God, as you have done to this day. For the LORD has driven out from before you great and strong nations; but as for you, no one has been able to stand against you to this day. One man of you shall chase a thousand, for the LORD your God is He who fights for you, as He promised you. Therefore take careful heed to yourselves, that you love the LORD your God. Or else, if indeed you do go back, and cling to the remnant of these nations—these that remain among you—and make marriages with them, and go in to them and they to you, know for certain that the LORD your God will no longer drive out these nations from before you. But they shall be snares and traps to you, and scourges on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land which the LORD your God has given you.”

Joshua is worried. He looks into the future, when he won't be around, and he sees Israel slipping.

That's why they built all those monuments. People get old. The eyewitnesses to the miracles die. The next generation doesn't have these things seared into their memories. The nation will forget.

So they built monuments in and next to the Jordan River to commemorate the mighty things the LORD did. Then they built an altar-monument on the east side of the Jordan to remind people how to worship.

But monuments can only do so much. Joshua knows that Israel will slip. So he tells them what will happen when they do. This plants a seed that will sprout when it all comes to pass. They'll remember Joshua's words and notice that he called it.

And so, the next generation will learn the lesson the hard way...

...yet again.

Thus, this book is a monument, too. Stories from Grandpa just won't cut it, certainly without some documentation anyway.

Putting everything down in writing sets up the future lessons in the college of hard knocks.

3 Joshua 23:14–16 (ESV)

“And now I am about to go the way of all the earth, and you know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that not one word has failed of all the good things that the LORD your God promised concerning you. All have come to pass for you; not one of them has failed. But just as all the good things that the LORD your God promised concerning you have been fulfilled for you, so the LORD will bring upon you all the evil things, until he has destroyed you from off this good land that the LORD your God has given you, if you transgress the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them. Then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and you shall perish quickly from off the good land that he has given to you.”

This isn't about you, Israel; it's about God. He has delivered, *and you know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that not one word has failed of all the good things that the LORD your God promised concerning you.*

But that's not the point here; Joshua wants them to think about how bad things can get. This passage is about the curse that awaits *if you transgress the covenant*. Joshua sees this coming, so he wants to scare everyone as much as he can, and the picture he paints here is as stark as it gets.

Just as all the good things that the LORD your God promised concerning you have been fulfilled for you, so the LORD will bring upon you all the evil things, until he has destroyed you from off this good land that the LORD your God has given you.

But this doesn't have to happen. It'll only come to pass *if you transgress the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them.*

But, most importantly, it'll be personal. God will take offense at your lack of appreciation and act accordingly.

Then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and you shall perish quickly from off the good land that he has given to you.

He won't be slow about it either.

This is where Christian messaging often misses the point. We speak of how good some things are, but the stronger case is to note how bad things can get.

The evidence is all around us. The lives of unbelievers, even supposedly “successful” ones, are a mess. They are obviously miserable, regardless of who wins the court case. (I'm talking to you, Johnny Depp.)

What was it exactly that they were trying to accomplish in the first place with all this nonsense? Secularism chases after happiness without ever thinking about what it means to be happy.

But we know.

4 Joshua 24:1–2a

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and called for the elders of Israel, for their heads, for their judges, and for their officers; and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the LORD God of Israel:”

What does, “they presented themselves before God,” mean? Was God there in some special way?

Apparently so. Many special things have happened in Shechem, or on Mount Ebal, just on the north side.

Now Joshua built an altar to the LORD God of Israel in Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the children of Israel, as it is written in the Book of the Law of Moses: “an altar of whole stones over which no man has wielded an iron tool.” And they offered on it burnt offerings to the LORD, and sacrificed peace offerings. And there, in the presence of the children of Israel, he wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written. — Joshua 8:30–31

Shechem is where God promised the land to Abraham’s descendants.

Abram passed through the land to the place of Shechem, as far as the terebinth tree of Moreh. And the Canaanites were then in the land.

Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your descendants I will give this land.” And there he built an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. — Genesis 12:6–7

And Jacob erected an altar there and called it El Elohe Israel (God, the God of Israel).

Then Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Padan Aram; and he pitched his tent before the city. And he bought the parcel of land, where he had pitched his tent, from the children of Hamor, Shechem’s father, for one hundred pieces of money. Then he erected an altar there and called it El Elohe Israel. — Genesis 33:18–20

So, when Joshua calls all the leaders of Israel together, he picks the most holy spot is all the land.

God is there, and they know it.

Joshua begins with, “Thus says the LORD,” (koh ahmar Yahweh כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה). Prophets say this a lot. What’s next isn’t Joshua speaking; it’s the LORD. In the next verses, “I” means the LORD, not Joshua.

But there’s one thing different about Joshua’s use of, “Thus says the LORD.” Usually, when a prophet says this, what comes next is brutal. For example, see the first use of it, which is in Exodus 4:22–23.

“Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD: “Israel is My son, My firstborn. So I say to you, let My son go that he may serve Me. But if you refuse to let him go, indeed I will kill your son, your firstborn.” ’ ’

But here, the LORD isn’t about to light into the audience. He’s going to teach.

5 Joshua 24:2–13

And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the LORD God of Israel: ‘Your fathers, including Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, dwelt on the other side of the River in old times; and they served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from the other side of the River, led him throughout all the land of Canaan, and multiplied his descendants and gave him Isaac. To Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. To Esau I gave the mountains of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. Also I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt, according to what I did among them. Afterward I brought you out.

‘Then I brought your fathers out of Egypt, and you came to the sea; and the Egyptians pursued your fathers with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. So they cried out to the LORD; and He put darkness between you and the Egyptians, brought the sea upon them, and covered them. And your eyes saw what I did in Egypt. Then you dwelt in the wilderness a long time. And I brought you into the land of the Amorites, who dwelt on the other side of the Jordan, and they fought with you. But I gave them into your hand, that you might possess their land, and I destroyed them from before you. Then Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose to make war against Israel, and sent and called Balaam the son of Beor to curse you. But I would not listen to Balaam; therefore he continued to bless you. So I delivered you out of his hand. Then you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho. And the men of Jericho fought against you—also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. But I delivered them into your hand. I sent the hornet before you which drove them out from before you, also the two kings of the Amorites, but not with your sword or with your bow. I have given you a land for which you did not labor, and cities which you did not build, and you dwell in them; you eat of the vineyards and olive groves which you did not plant.’ ”

The LORD, through the mouth of Joshua, teaches an essential lesson to the leaders; He’s had things under control the whole time. Even when it didn’t look like things were going according to plan, they were.

He teaches this by recounting the long and winding road that got them to this point. It had its ups and downs, but they got here safe and sound.

But the deep lesson is that this saga begins with *Terah* serving *other gods*. That’s outrageous. Why start with that?

Because grace is what it’s all about. God’s plucked His chosen people from the darkness of unbelief.

There wasn’t a scintilla of preexisting righteousness for God to base this on.

But even that falls short of the full, glorious truth. Abraham wasn’t just chosen to be the father of faith; he was created to be the father of faith. The same holds for the rest of God’s people.

The LORD didn’t just have everything under control the whole time.

He had it under control before time.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. ?

2. ?

3. ?

4. ?

5. ?

Items for prayer: