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Joshua #13

Sermon Summary #13

The Subversive Power of Unwarranted Suspicion Joshua 22:1-34; 2 Corinthians 1:12-24

[A brief word is in order about **the final three chapters** of Joshua. Each of them begins with a summons by Joshua for all or part of Israel to gather together so that he might address them – see 22:1; 23:2; 24:1. The purpose in each instance is so that he might both encourage them and exhort them to remain faithful to God, to continue in their love and obedience as the proper response to God's gracious protection and his provision of the land.]

How many otherwise good relationships have been destroyed by unwarranted suspicion? How many life-long friendships have crumbled because someone misjudged the motives of another? How many times have you heard about, seen, or perhaps even personally experienced the devastating consequences of ill-informed presumption about why someone acted in a particular way?

These may seem like strange and even irrelevant questions given the fact that we are studying the book of Joshua. After all, this book is the story of miracles and military battles and the conquest of the promised land by the people of Israel. So what does all that have to do with the practical and personal consequences of misjudging someone's motives and misinterpreting their actions? That's obviously a good question. Let's look at Joshua 22 for a really good answer.

The time has finally come for the 12 tribes of Israel to return to their inherited allotments of land and begin their settled lives in fulfillment of God's promise.

It's important to understand the **background** of Joshua 22. When Moses was still alive, the tribes of Reuben and Gad, together with half of the tribe of Manasseh, requested of him that they be allowed to settle in the land east of the Jordan River. They believed that it would be more suitable for the large quantity of livestock they owned.

Moses was afraid that this was their way of abandoning the remaining tribes, but it wasn't. They promised to fight alongside the other 9 ½ tribes until the land of Canaan was under Israel's control. And they had faithfully fulfilled their promise. This is what Joshua affirms in 22:2b-3.

There is considerable *wisdom* in Joshua's approach. Note how he commends before he commands. That is to say, he praises them and thanks them for being true to their word before he issues a call for their obedience in other matters. His exhortation to them in vv. 4-5 comes in the form of six short commands:

- (1) keep the commandment and law of Moses
- (2) love the Lord your God (yes, love can be commanded!)
- (3) walk in all his ways
- (4) obey his commands
- (5) cling to him
- (6) serve him with all your heart and soul.

In accordance with Moses' original command and now that of Joshua too, we read in vv. 6-9 how they cross over the Jordan and begin to establish themselves in the land on the other or east side of the river.

This had to have been ***an extremely emotional and somewhat painful departure on their part***. They are saying good-bye to brothers in arms. Think of the blood, sweat, and tears that had been shed as they fought side by side in their battles against the pagan Canaanite people. The love between these 2 ½ tribes and the others was deep. The bonds were genuine and sincere. As we all know, when you endure great hardship with someone else or when you fight alongside others there is a close knit unity that emerges, a deep affection that is cultivated in everyone's heart.

If you doubt this, go ask the veterans of WWII or the Korean War or the Viet Nam War or the Iraqi War or the on-going conflict in Afghanistan.

Well, almost immediately upon arrival in their new home and the reunion with their families, *they begin to feel the pain of loneliness and isolation*. There's a good reason for this. It was **the Jordan River**. This river was a *formidable natural barrier* that heightened their feelings of being cut off and even abandoned. "Out of sight, out of mind!"

So they begin to think about how best to keep alive the ties and the spiritual bonds that had been forged by those long years of united struggle against the Canaanites. What could be done to symbolize their oneness with their fellow Israelites who lived on the west side of the Jordan? The answer they came up with was: "*Let's build an altar as a visible witness and reminder of our unity with God's people across the river.*"

Unfortunately, though, when the tribes on the west side of the Jordan heard about it, they were enraged and determined that they would launch an attack against their brothers on the east side.

Why?

The answer is found in **Deuteronomy 12:1-14**. There Moses commanded the people of Israel to be sure that when they entered the promised land they destroy every altar and every last vestige of pagan Canaanite religious practice. He told them to be certain that they never build an altar or offer sacrifices on it except in the one place that God designated. So when they heard what the 2 ½ tribes had done, they thought they had apostatized from the faith! ***They jumped to the conclusion that these tribes had rebelled against God and were setting up a rival religious faith devoted to the idols and deities of the Canaanites.*** See especially Leviticus 17:8-9 and Deuteronomy 13:12-15.

It isn't that the 9 ½ tribes on the east side of the Jordan were war mongers. They had had enough of battle. They still loved their brothers on the west side, but they loved God more and were fearful that if they let them get away with this it would not only dishonor God but would bring his judgment down upon their own heads. Clearly, then, these 9 ½ tribes were motivated by a holy and godly jealousy and a deep concern for the glory and honor of God.

Contrast these people with so many we see today who minimize the importance of truth and argue for compromise and unity and peace at any cost, even if it means disparaging the name and honor of God.

However, and this is a great big *however*, they had at the same ***time totally misjudged the motivation and intentions of the 2 ½ tribes. They had misunderstood. Their zeal was commendable, but it wasn't according to knowledge. They had prematurely and rashly jumped to the worst possible conclusions about their ex-comrades.***

Thankfully, though, cooler heads prevailed. Wisdom won out over war. How they dealt with this is a pattern for us today. So what did they do? There appear to be 4 steps involved:

First, they formed an investigative committee of spiritual leaders and sent them to the 2 ½ tribes (see vv. 13-14). There may well have been a good number among the 9 ½ tribes who were calling for immediate armed conflict, but responsible leadership in Israel prevailed.

Second, they went directly to the 2 ½ and confronted them face to face with their concerns. Sadly, we tend not to do this today. We go instead to a third party and talk **about** the perceived failures and sins of others rather than talking **to** them directly (a misguided method call *triangulation*). One reason for this is that ***a suspicious spirit is often wedded to a cowardly one.*** In other words, the person who is quick to believe the worst about another brother or sister is generally also afraid of facing the pain of face to face confrontation.

Third, they articulate their fear that perhaps God will judge all Israel, themselves included, for the sins of the 2 ½ (see vv. 17, 18, 20). In v. 17 they refer to the sin at Peor, described in Numbers 25:1-9. There some of the men of Israel engaged in immoral sexual conduct with Moabite women and ended up being led into idolatry by them and bowing down in the presence of their idols. God's judgment came against them and 24,000 Israelis died. They also appeal in v. 20 to the sin of Achan that we read about in Joshua 7. Their

point is that sin and morality among God's people are never private. Religion is never purely personal. It always has corporate ramifications.

Fourth, the 9 ½ were evidently willing to make great sacrifices to preserve the peace. According to v. 19, they told the 2 ½ that if the land east of the Jordan was defiled they were welcome to come back across the river to the west side and they would be provided land on which to live. It's as if they said, "We'll make room for you! We'll clear enough land so you can return to this side of the river. Only please don't start up a rival religion to what God has ordained for us."

We read in vv. 21-23 and following that the 2 ½ tribes are *horrified* that the other 9 ½ thought they were in rebellion against God. With great emotional intensity, they assure them that their motive was pure. "If we're guilty of what you suspect, then go ahead and kill us all! But we are innocent!"

They go on to explain in vv. 24-29 that *they built this altar out of fear of separation*. "We were afraid that being cut off from you by the Jordan River would lead to disaster. We feared that as the years passed our children would be denied access to the true worship of God. Our altar was not for the purpose of offering sacrifices that God had not ordained, but to remind us all that the place for true worship was on your side of the river!"

The *irony* is remarkable: The western tribes fear that the altar is an expression of infidelity and idolatry whereas the eastern tribes viewed it as a means of declaring their faithfulness and loyalty to God!

The eastern 2 ½ tribes were terrified that with the passing of time the Jordan River might come to serve as something of a *Berlin Wall* that cut off both them and their descendants from God's people in the west.

The altar, therefore, far from being a sign of rebellion and disloyalty, was actually a visual token of solidarity and commitment!

A New Testament Illustration
2 Corinthians 1:12-24

There is another illustration of this in 2 Corinthians.

The Apostle Paul had numerous enemies in Corinth, men who were determined to criticize his every move and undermine the confidence of the church in his apostolic credentials. In 2 Corinthians 1:12-24 we detect at least three accusations brought against him: (1) against his conduct in v. 12; (2) against his correspondence in vv. 13-14; and (3) against his course of travel in 1:15-24. I want to focus on the third.

Contrary to the accusations of his opponents, Paul's change of travel plans was not because he was fickle or unstable, far less because he cared little for the Corinthians but only for himself; indeed, he changed his plans *for their sake*.

Paul had hoped to visit the Corinthians twice: first, on his way *to* Macedonia, and second, on his way *back from* Macedonia (see vv. 15-16). This changed, however, when Timothy arrived in Corinth bearing the letter we know as *First Corinthians* and discovered how bad things were. Upon hearing of this, Paul immediately made an urgent visit to Corinth, a visit that was confrontational, as well as humiliating and bitter for him (cf. 2:1). Paul quickly returned to Ephesus and determined not to make another painful visit to Corinth. Therefore, he called off the double stop he had earlier planned. It was this alteration in his plans that led to *their unwarranted suspicions about his motives* and opened him up to the charge of being fickle and unstable.

Paul's *apparently* arbitrary change of plans, they insisted, was motivated by self-interest and a lack of concern for the Corinthians themselves. He is charged with making plans like a worldly man, according to the mood of the moment (see vv. 17-18).

Paul's vigorously denies that he is a man given to vacillation and insensitive disregard for the people entrusted to his care. He's not the sort who says "Yes" one moment, only to reverse himself on some inexplicable, self-serving whim and then declare "No".

Paul is a man of his word, as is the God whom he loves and serves (v. 18a). The Father doesn't assure us of some great blessing, only to withdraw it, without justification, to serve his own interests. When God makes a promise to his people, he fulfills it in Christ. This, says Paul, is the pattern and principle on which I've based my ministry to you Corinthians. One can almost hear him say, no doubt with great energy and passion: "How could I possibly preach to you the good news of a God who always acts with your best interests at heart and never fails to fulfill his promises, and then turn around and treat you with utter disregard by behaving in a double-minded and self-serving way?"

Of course, in the final analysis Paul cares little what they think of him so long as they put their trust wholly in Christ. It may even be that Paul is telling them here, "If you refuse to believe me, at least remember the truth and consistency of my message concerning God's gracious work in you through his Son. You may consider me untrustworthy, but you can hardly question the veracity and fidelity of God as revealed in Jesus. And ultimately it is only with the latter that I'm concerned."

In any case, Paul will again insist in the remainder of this paragraph that he made his decision based on his undying love for the Corinthians, his concern for their spiritual welfare, and, above all, for the sake of their joy in Jesus (see esp. v. 24).

The bottom line is that *the Corinthians had greatly and unfairly misjudged Paul and his motives*, and Paul models for us how we should respond when that happens.

Now, let's combine what we've seen in Joshua 22 and here in 2 Corinthians 1 and draw some concluding principles.

First, don't be quick to "read between the lines." Unless past indiscretions or the preponderance of evidence indicate otherwise, ***trust your Christian friends***. Give them the benefit of the doubt when they say they are sincere.

Second, ***ask questions before you make accusations*** (see Joshua 22:16-18a). And when you ask questions, make sure they aren't veiled accusations!

Third, ***don't always look for some ulterior and sinister motive*** in what others do simply because things did not turn out the way you wanted them to (see 2 Cor. 1:15-16).

Fourth, if someone has proven himself faithful and devoted in the past, don't be quick to believe accusations brought against him by an outsider. ***Be patient and give him an opportunity to explain himself***. In other words, don't jump to conclusions, for it just may be the case that *you* are the one at fault.

Fifth, don't become frustrated or withdraw yourself from other Christians if they should prove fickle or unfaithful. ***Ultimately, your trust and dependence are not in them anyway, but in Christ who never fails*** (2 Cor. 1:19-22).

Sixth, even if it means suffering unjustly and being slandered, ***avoid unnecessary confrontations***. Don't be too quick to vindicate yourself. ***Be willing to endure what you don't deserve for the sake of peace in the body of Christ***. The opportunity to clear your name will eventually come (v. 23).

Seventh, none of this is to suggest that we gravitate to the other end of the spectrum and yield to ***gullibility and naiveté***. God calls on us to be both discerning and gentle, both wise and loving.