

When Good Intentions Are Misunderstood

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One Friday, in February 1674, a certain farmer's daughter, Anne Beaumont, wanted to go to a nearby town, Gamlingay to hear John Bunyan preach. Apparently, Anne had been offered a ride by someone who failed to arrive. It would have been impossible for her to walk because of the weather and some local flooding.

Just then Bunyan himself arrives, passing through on a horse. She stops him and although didn't want to give her a ride on his horse at first, consents to do so. Her father who was not sympathetic to John Bunyan or his preaching had initially refused permission for his daughter to go, but she insisted that she must obey God rather than men, so she went. When she returns (with another woman, this time) he will not let her into the house and she sleeps in the barn for several nights. Eventually they were reconciled, but within a few days her father died. A rumor began to spread through the town. Agnes had been seen riding with Bunyan on his horse, and now her father is dead. The funeral is put off pending an inquiry. Though medical science was crude in 1674, her father's death was declared to be "of natural causes."

The rumor, however, of something improper between Bunyan and Anne Beaumont, was to last for the rest of his life. He writes in the final edition of *Grace Abounding* (1688), "I bind these lies and slanders to me as an ornament; it belongs to my Christian profession to be vilified, slandered, reproached, and reviled."

Good intentions are sometimes misunderstood. And that's the lesson that comes from this particular chapter of Joshua. An incident takes place that some people completely misread. It is almost at the end of this chapter where we find the tribes of Israel at civil war with each other. It is averted only by a whisker.

The battle/war is more or less over. The land has been distributed between the tribes. Some, like Judah, have been given land that takes in Jerusalem, although Jerusalem is not yet theirs; they will have to dislodge the Jebusites. Others, like Asher and Naphtali have been given land far up in the northern hill country. Some, like Dan, have been given coastal territory for whom fishing and sea interests will become important. And then there are allocations east of the Jordan for two and half tribes (Gad, Reuben and the half tribe of Manasseh). In Manasseh's case, half the tribe is west of the Jordan and the other half is east.

These two and a half tribes had asked Moses for this territory *before* he died (Numbers 32). They had cattle, and had seen this land before they reached Canaan, and it was rich and fertile land and they had asked Moses for it.

But back in chapter 1 of Joshua, for the sake of unity, Joshua had insisted that these tribes, too, join with the rest of Israel in the conquest of Canaan, even though they were not themselves to occupy it. Only after all of that was done would they be allowed to return to their land on the eastern side of the Jordan. Now they are heading homewards.

They often say that winning the war is one thing, but gaining the peace is another. And something quite unexpected and of enormous interest now happens.

The first few verses of chapter 22 reads a little like the "Dispatches" following a war. And Joshua is now commending these two and a half tribes for their action and bravery. And they are being sent home with words of exaltation to be faithful to God and faithful to the Law of Moses and to be loyal in their service to the end of their days. Joshua sends them back with booty and plunder for the men who had stayed behind to take care of the women and children. Now the first thing I want us to see is

1. There a sense in which these two and a half tribes are getting second best.

I put it that way quite deliberately. It is often interpreted that way. Moses was certainly angry with them initially for making the request (Numbers 32) for this land that is east of the Jordan. He concedes, eventually, to their request. And now that the warfare is over, they are being sent back home. But is there a sense in which we read this section and say to ourselves, "O, what could have been!"

I think that there might well be a sense in which you can say that. I draw attention to verse 4 in particular, and the words employed are chosen very carefully. And it seems interesting that Joshua is saying to these tribes, with regard to the others who are occupying the land on the west side of the Jordan, that they have not received their "rest." It's a very important word in Joshua. It formed part of the summary at the end of chapter 21: "The LORD gave them rest on every side" (21:44). It picks up on what we read back in chapter 1:15, when Joshua summoned these men to come and aid their brothers *west* of the Jordan, until God had given them rest as he had done to these two and a half tribes *east* of the Jordan.

We have seen the importance of this word "rest." It means much more than a cessation of war and conflict. It carries the idea of safety and security. They have been given rest and they are where God intends them to be. They are part and

parcel of the providence of God in the establishment of the kingdom of God that will eventually come to the birth of Christ and the salvation of sinners. It's all part of that. The book of Hebrews picks it up in chapters 3 and 4 of the book and applies it in a redemptive-historical sense, bringing in the idea of the Sabbath and the rest of the Sabbath, and what that is meant to signify. The Sabbath is a sign and seal of the Mosaic Covenant (Exodus 31:12-18), and pictures for us and promises to us, the rest of heaven that is to come. Every Lord's Day is a little glimpse of heaven. That's the argument of Hebrews 3 and 4, that we are pilgrims waiting for the ultimate "rest" of heaven. [That's why, if we don't like the Sabbath, we won't like heaven either!]

Now I want you to see a contrast here. The two and a half tribes east of the Jordan are said to go back to "tents" (NIV has "homes" but that is entirely misleading; see, 22:4, 6, 8). It's not much to build a doctrine on, is it, but I think Joshua may well be giving a little clue, a little hint that there was something about the existence of these two and a half tribes that is nomadic and restless. When you read Numbers 32, you will discover that they weren't actually living in tents at all but in fortified cities! At least, during the 5-7 years of fighting, that is where they have been. Being farmers, they no doubt moved out of these cities when they returned. Still, "tents" is the word Joshua uses here and it probably signifies something transitory and nomadic about their existence from now on. As though there is something about their existence that is second best. In fact, there will be a restlessness about these tribes from in the future. Postscript: 1 Chronicles 5:25-26 records what happened to these tribes on the eastern side of the Jordan. They were the first taken captive by the Assyrians.

I do not want to make too much of this. Some commentators make nothing of it at all! But I believe that there is something here, a hint that this, whilst permitted, was not what God had intended for Israel. Read Moses' reaction to their request in Numbers 32 and rebuke which he gave them, implying the impure motives on their part and reminding them of the sins of their fathers. They had chosen the land because it was lush and green and good land for their livestock. It reminds us of Lot's choice when he chose to leave his uncle Abraham in Genesis 13 and pitch his tents toward Sodom, because it was fertile and more beautiful. There is something second best about it. Living as they now would be on the eastern side, they were placing themselves on the very edge, and maybe beyond the edge, as we shall see in a moment, of the people of God. And they were placing themselves in the way of temptation and in the way of difficulty, and in the way of hostility that the people of God in Canaan would not be subject to. Let me elaborate a little more. These two and a half tribes are divided in their allegiance

2. These two and half tribes are divided in their sense of allegiance

What it meant was that these tribes would now be living on the borders, far away, divorced from the ritual and cultic life of Israel's worship at the temple. It will be

difficult for them to cross the Jordan, particularly when the Jordan is in full flood. It would make it extraordinarily difficult for them on the eastern side to join in acts of worship and fellowship and communion with the rest of their brethren on the western side. They were placing themselves in the way of temptation and compromise, unable to get the support of the priests and tabernacle and sacrifices that ordered the rest of their brethren to the east.

I think you see something of that in verse 10. We'll come to it in a minute, but as they distance themselves from their brethren, they do something quite remarkable and potentially disastrous on the way home. They have not yet crossed the Jordan, but they build an altar at Geliloth. It's as though they recognized themselves something of the oddity, something of the strangeness, something of the difficulty now of their existence, which they've made for themselves. And they feel themselves that they must do something about it. We are not sure where Geliloth is. The Greek translation of the Old Testament (the one that Jesus and Paul would have known) renders it Gulag, but it may have been further north than that. The central place of worship at this point in the history is Shiloh (and Shiloh would not have been that far away so as to require another altar just 20 miles east of it on the edge of the Jordan River. The fact they build this altar signals their sense of isolation now from their brethren.

Notice that they build this altar on the western side of the Jordan, not on the eastern side where they are living. They are still in Canaan. It's "an imposing altar" so that it can be seen from a distance. But they build in Canaan. Why? Why not build one in the central regions of the Transjordan? After all, they will not be able to get anywhere near it when the Jordan is in full flow after the rains. It's an indication that they should really be on the Western side, in Canaan, isn't it?

It's a bit like having your foot in both camps. They wanted to be on the east, but they set up their altar on the west. It is almost as if they had a guilty conscience! As though they were trying to say, "Well, we know we should have been on this side, but at least we are going to have something to remind us of it." When you read the history this altar never really accomplished anything. It was going to be a relic that was almost immediately forgotten. Now notice,

3. The other tribes are vigilant in jealousy for the lord's honor

I don't know how long it took them to build this structure, but no sooner is it built than word gets back to the other tribes about it. And as soon as they hear that another altar has been built, they think the worst. They see it as trouble. Big trouble! They read into it the worst possible motive. They see it as competition for Shiloh. They see it as a flagrant disregard for what God had established, namely that they were to offer their offerings and burnt offerings at Shiloh. Later, of course, it would be in Jerusalem, but at this point it's at Shiloh. Eventually it would be in Jerusalem, but they have not yet dislodged the Jebusites from

Jerusalem and at this point the central location for the tabernacle is in Shiloh. They see it as these two and a half tribes setting up a way of worship for themselves.

So they send Phinehas, the priest, and ten men (one from each of the tribes east of the Jordan, including one from the other half tribe of Manasseh!) and they accuse (see 22:16) these two and a half tribes of treachery (breaking faith), backsliding (turning away from the Lord), and perhaps the strongest of all, rebellion (or apostasy).

Now, you have to be taken aback by the contrast between the words of commendation made in the opening verses by Joshua (22:1-5) in which they were praised for their loyalty and obedience, all they've done in the conquest of Canaan, and they are being sent back with all of these goods, gold and silver and iron, and the conquest with all of that with these accusations of treachery, and backsliding and rebellion. The scorching rebuke in this section (22:15-20) that is now being delivered.

Phinehas was a man to be feared. You remember Phinehas. He is the man we read of in the Moabite incident, in Numbers 23 and 25, at Peor, when the Israelite men, how can I put this discretely, had been embroiled in what to all intents and purposes, was an orgy with Moabite women. And 24,000 men in Israel were slain as a consequence of that, and Phinehas was the man who went into a tent of one Israelite man and a Moabite woman, and speared them both together mid episode. Is that delicate enough? I hope so.

The other episode is that of Achan in Joshua 7, where Achan had taken the devoted things, the silver, the gold, the Babylonish garment, and he had seen and coveted and taken and hidden it in his tent. And because of the sin of that one man, the whole nation of Israel had been crippled in their advance against the city of Ai. The consequence of the sin of one man had brought the judgment of God upon the entire nation of Israel, and now these two and a half tribes were doing something similar. They are building, or at least that was the interpretation that the rest of the brethren on the western side and making, they are building an altar in Gilead in competition to Shiloh, and they are bringing the judgment of God upon the whole of Israel.

So they make this generous offer: why don't you come and live with us. If there is something unclean about living on the eastern side, and it seems as though that is what they were saying by building that altar, then why don't you come and live with us. We'll make room for you. It was a generous offer, which they didn't take up.

Let me pause here and make an application. Sometimes God allows bad decisions we made in the past—decisions based on convenience and not principle—and God allows those decisions to stand and to come back and haunt

us. He does that to keep us humble. They remind us of our frailty. Sometimes they stand as testimonies to that fact that we have now grown and would not make that choice again.

God had certainly allowed those two and a half tribes to live where they lived. But there would always be something of a nomadic existence about them, and they were certainly the first to succumb to the Assyrian invasions in generations to come. But there is another point that I want us to see in this passage, and it is this:

4. Sometimes it is possible to misunderstand the intentions of others

And then it all comes out: that their intentions had been utterly different than the rest of the tribes had suspected. They weren't building an altar in competition with Shiloh at all. The concern of the two and a half tribes was about the sons of the rest of the tribes on the west. That in the future they would look at the two and a half tribes on the other side of the Jordan and they would say, "The land of the promise goes only as far as the Jordan River, and those people on the eastern side, they don't belong to us. They're not part of the covenant people of God.

Sometimes it's possible to draw entirely the wrong conclusion from others.

This whole story actually ends wonderfully. Civil war is averted. Phinehas and his men accept their interpretation of what they are doing, that actually what they are doing is erecting a monument so that future generations will look at this monument and say to themselves, "Yes, those two and a half tribes are also part of the covenant community of God." They called that monument "*Ed*"! It's the Hebrew word for "witness". The monument was a witness that the Lord is God.

Princeton seminary was supported by all kinds of scholarship endowments, including one from a brother and sister, Robert and Marian Hall, for \$2,500. When it was suggested that the scholarship be called *The Hall Scholarship*, Marian said, "I dinna wish my worthless name to be remembered after I am dead and gone, but I do wish to do something for the cause of true religion, which shall maintain the truth, as long as the kirk shall lead, and, therefore, I wish the scholarship to be called *Ed*"!

When asked as to the meaning of this strange request, she said, "And dinna ye ken, young man? E'en go and read your Bible." She was referring to Joshua 22:34. The scholarship was to be a witness, a witness to the truth of God.

It stood for an affirmation, and look at the last verse of this chapter, "And the sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad called the altar 'Ed' or witness, 'For,' they said, 'it is a witness between us that the Lord is God.'"

It was a monument that was to stand and say, "The LORD is God," just as we today would say, "Jesus is LORD" (1 Cor. 12:3). It was that confession, according to Phinehas, that had spared them of God's judgment falling upon Israel. That they had confessed that the Lord is God. And you know, it is always that confession, that Jesus is Lord, is always the confession that averts the anger and wrath and judgment of God. It always does.

Let's pray together.

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