

Faithfulness to God: Commended, Commanded and Demonstrated

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[0 : 00] Good. We'll return now in our Bibles to our reading for the evening, and you'll find that in Joshua chapter 22. If you have one of the church visitor Bibles, you'll find that on page 196. So Joshua chapter 22. Now we're coming towards the end of a series in the book of Joshua, and chapter 22 marks the beginning of the final section in the book. And up until this point, Joshua has all been about the Lord's great faithfulness, demonstrated through the conquest of the land and in the carving up of the land as each tribe was allotted its inheritance. And here at the end, Joshua has three great gatherings of the people, and he calls them, in light of God's faithfulness, to be faithful to him. So we're entering a new phase in the book. And I'll just read the very end of chapter 21 from verse 43, which is a great summary, which Willie was reading earlier, a great summary of the first part of the book. So I'll start in Joshua 21 and verse 43.

Thus the Lord gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers, and they took possession of it, and they settled there. And the Lord gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the Lord had given all their enemies into their hands. Not one word of all the good promises that the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed. All came to pass. At that time, Joshua summoned the Rebanites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh. And he said to them, Remember from this morning, these were the two and a half tribes that Moses had given land east of the Jordan on the proviso that they'd gone over the Jordan to help the other tribes in the conquest. And they've now done that. Verse 4,

And now the Lord, your God, has given rest to your brothers, as he promised them. Therefore, turn and go to your tents in the land where your possession lies, that is, east of the Jordan, which Moses, the servant of the Lord, gave you on the other side of the Jordan.

Only be very careful to observe the commandments and the law that Moses, the servant of the Lord, commanded you, to love the Lord your God, and to walk in all his ways, and to keep his commandments, and to cling 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 the one half of the tribe of Manasseh, Moses had given a possession in Bashan.

[3 : 35] But to the other half, Joshua had given a possession beside their brothers in the land west of the Jordan. And when Joshua sent them away to their homes and blessed them, he said to them, Go back to your tents with much wealth and with very much livestock, with silver, gold, bronze, and iron, and with much clothing. Divide the spoil of your enemies with your brothers.

So the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh returned home, parting from the people of Israel at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan, to go to the land of Gilead, their own land, east of the Jordan, of which they possessed themselves by command of the Lord through Moses.

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

And the people of Israel heard it said, Behold, the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh have built the altar at the frontier of the land of Canaan, in the region about the Jordan, on the side that belongs to the people of Israel.

And when the people of Israel heard of it, the whole assembly of the people of Israel gathered at Shiloh to make war against them. Then the people of Israel sent to the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh in the land of Gilead, Phinehas, the son of Eleazar the priest, and with him ten chiefs, one from every tribal family of Israel, every one of them the head of the family among the clans of Israel.

[5 : 21] And they came to the people of Reuben, the people of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh in the land of Gilead, and they said to them, Thus says the whole congregation of the Lord, What is this breach of faith that you have committed against the Lord God of Israel in turning away this day from following the Lord by building yourselves an altar this day in rebellion against the Lord?

Have we not had enough of the sin appear from which even yet we are not cleansed ourselves and for which there came a plague upon the congregation of the Lord, that you too must turn away this day from following the Lord?

And if you too rebel against the Lord today, then tomorrow he will be angry with the whole congregation of Israel. But now, if the land of your possession is unclean, pass over into the Lord's land where the Lord's tabernacle stands and take for yourselves a possession among us.

Only do not rebel against the Lord or make us as rebels by building for yourselves an altar other than the altar of the Lord our God. Did not Achan, the son of Zerah, break faith in the matter of the devoted things and wrath fell upon the whole congregation of Israel?

And did he not perish alone for his iniquity? Then the people of Reuben, the people of Gad and the half-tribe 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.

[7 : 00] 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 that 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 order of the Lord our God that stands before his tabernacle.

- [8 : 41] When Phineas, the priest, and the chiefs of the congregation, the heads of the family of Israel who were with them, heard the words of the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the people of Manasseh spoke, it was good in their eyes.
- And Phineas, the son of Eleazar the priest, said to the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the people of Manasseh, today we know that the Lord is in our midst because you have not committed this breach of faith against the Lord.
- Now you have delivered the people of Israel from the hand of the Lord. Then Phineas, the son of Eleazar the priest, and the chiefs, returned from the people of Reuben and the people of Gad in the land of Gilead to the land of Canaan to the people of Israel and brought back word to them.
- And the report was good in the eyes of the people of Israel. And the people of Israel blessed God and spoke no more of making war against them to destroy the land where the people of Reuben and the people of Gad were settled.
- The people of Reuben and the people of Gad called the altar witness. For, they said, it is a witness between us that the Lord is God.
- [10 : 00] Amen. May the Lord bless the reading of his word to us this evening. Well, please do turn back to Joshua 22 and we'll spend a few moments together now looking at this together.
- Now, the great political crises of our time can often be recalled with just the mention of a word. Watergate. Deflategate.
- That's one for the Super Bowl fans out there. And here in Joshua chapter 22, Altergate. It's cracking stuff, isn't it? But it's perhaps a political crisis that not many of us are that familiar with.
- It's here tucked away at the end of Joshua. We've maybe read it, but it doesn't seem that fresh in our memories. It's a great historical story that draws us in.
- The drama and the tension are almost unbearable at points. The construction of this large altar almost leads to civil war amongst the tribes of Israel.
- [11 : 12] All the hard work of the previous six or seven years of conquest almost undone at the laying of just a few bricks. But it's not just great drama.
- It's not just lessons in how to avoid war and of good diplomacy. No, this is all about, as we'll see, the faithfulness, the passionate, zealous faithfulness of God's people to their God.
- As I said earlier at the reading, this is now the final section of the book of Joshua. The first big section, which ends in chapter 21, charts the record of God's great faithfulness.
- And section 2, these last three chapters, describes the responsibility of God's people in light of all that God has done. God has demonstrated again and again extraordinary faithfulness.
- He's been remarkably faithful to his people again and again. And in response, his people are to be faithful to him.
- [12 : 22] And these final three chapters of Joshua, they consist of three great gatherings of the people. Three times, Joshua summons the people to himself. Verse 1 of chapter 22, verse 2 of chapter 23, and then chapter 24, verse 1.
- Three great gatherings, three great summonings of the people to Joshua. And three times, he sets out the fidelity to God that is expected of the people in light of all that he has done.
- His unwavering fidelity to his people. In light of that, his people are to show fidelity, to show faithfulness to him. Now, chapter 22 is a great chapter.

It's a chapter full of the suspense and drama, but most of all, it's a chapter that shows for all generations of the people of God what it means to be faithful to him.

It shows us what wholehearted allegiance to the Lord looks like. It shows us what real loyalty to God and concern for his glory and for the unity of his people looks like.

[13 : 34] So, three points this evening. Firstly, verses 1 to 9. Faithfulness to God is commanded but not before it's been demonstrated and commended.

Faithfulness to God is commanded but not before it's been demonstrated and commended. Joshua is here at the start of chapter 22 addressing the two and a half tribes that had their inheritance east of the Jordan.

Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh. We were hearing about it this morning and if you remember a few weeks back to the start of January my excellent maps which you could barely see on the screens you had the river Jordan down the middle and to the east these two and a half tribes had their possession.

Several years earlier as we're hearing this morning Moses granted them that land so long as they crossed the Jordan with the rest of the people and helped them to secure the land west of the Jordan.

And that's what we've read about in the book of Joshua up till now the conquest the taking of the land west of the Jordan. Now that was a reluctant concession from Moses and not without consequence for future generations of those that lived now on the east of the Jordan.

[14 : 55] But by this stage the conquest is done and so Joshua gathers those two and a half tribes to himself and he does it in order to discharge them from their duties and to send them back over the Jordan to their inheritance.

And look down at his parting words there in verse 5. Only be very careful to observe the commandments of the law of Moses to serve him to the Lord to love your God to walk in all his ways to keep his commandments to cling to him to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul.

This is what faithfulness to God looks like. Just notice all those verbs in that verse. Observe. Love. Walk.

Cling. Serve. It's a beautiful picture isn't it of what it is to show fidelity to God. But it's not a bare command.

Faithfulness to God is commanded it. But not before it's been demonstrated and commended. Faithfulness demonstrated. Just look back to those words that I read at the very start at the end of chapter 21.

[16 : 11] We read of God's astonishing faithfulness to his people. He had given them rest on every side just as he swore to their fathers. Not one of their enemies had withstood them.

Not one word of all the good promises the Lord had made to the house of Israel failed. All came to pass. God has proved again and again his faithfulness to his promises.

Not one word has fallen to the ground. And it is only off the back of this great and amazing faithfulness to his people that the response of faithfulness to God it's only in light of that that faithfulness is required of the people.

And that is always the way that is always the pattern for God's people. For you and I God has in the biggest way possible demonstrated his faithfulness and he's done it through the work of his son the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is only in light of all that he has done it's only in light of his death his resurrection his ascension that we are called to repent and to live lives of fidelity to him.

[17 : 23] Our faithfulness is only ever a response to his prior faithfulness that is always and will always be the pattern. But it's not only faithfulness demonstrated it's also faithfulness commended look again at those first words of chapter 22 in verses 2 3 and 4 these are just lovely words of genuine commendation from Joshua to those two and a half tribes.

you have kept all that Moses commanded you you have obeyed my voice you have not forsaken your brothers but have been careful to keep the charge of the Lord your God.

These are words of such tender commendation and aren't they just a wonderful and beautiful reminder to us that real obedience obedience to God is a live option.

Many in the church today will think that obedience and faithfulness well they aren't really possible we're sinners after all but that's certainly not what we find here nor in the New Testament.

if you're a Christian you no longer live in the kingdom of darkness but in the kingdom of light. Faithfulness for the Christian is possible and faithfulness for God's people here at the start of chapter 22 is commended.

[18 : 52] It's not that they were perfect of course they weren't but they were faithful and it's not that their faithfulness earned anything but it was a faithfulness to God in response to his prior acts of faithfulness and Joshua commends them.

Their general direction and priorities in life were ordered around God's word what he commanded them to do and that's to be commended. So ought not you and I particularly if you're in some sort of role of oversight or leadership ought not you encourage faithfulness when you see it in others?

It's not that we're to puff up it's not that we are to push people to pride but a quiet word maybe a brief letter or a phone call just to acknowledge someone's faithfulness to the Lord.

Perhaps they've persevered with a friend they've kept inviting them to church over the long run and they've come that's worthy of commendation maybe somebody's been plugging away for years in the Sunday school teaching the young ones that's worthy of commendation perhaps someone is persevering through a tough marriage when the world tells them to walk away from the vows they've made they press on they remain faithful to their vows that is worthy of commendation and here at the start of this chapter faithfulness to God is commanded but not before it's been demonstrated and commended and so with Joshua's words ringing in the ears these two and a half tribes set off home Joshua's been clear about what is expected of them in light of all God's faithfulness he's commended them for their faithfulness up till now and off they go heading back to the

Jordan to take their land on the east side and here is where the story turns and the tension rises the eastern tribes there in verse 10 they build an altar of imposing size and they build it on the west side of the Jordan and the western tribes view it as we read as an act of apostasy how fragile the unity of God's people can be the external threat of the Canaanites is dissipated but internal divisions rapidly emerge and they don't find out and nor do we the real reason for the building of the altar until later in the story and the real and the real reason as we'll see for the altar being built far from being an act of apostasy was to maintain the unity of the people both now and in the future and even though a war is almost started both sides here demonstrate a desire to remain faithful to the

[21 : 59] Lord yes there were initial misunderstandings but in the end clarity is reached and unity is preserved the altar instead of being a place of alternative worship was a witness that pointed people to the one true altar it was there to remind them that they found unity in the one place of sacrifice at the altar at the tabernacle and so our second and third points this evening contain lessons about what faithfulness to the Lord means and looks like in reality so our second point verses 11 to 20 faithfulness to God means attentive concern for true worship in the church faithfulness to God means attentive concern for true worship in the church we see here that fidelity to God results in a passion for right worship in the church because they know the devastating effects of sin on the whole congregation the western tribes they learn of the altar that's been built by the eastern tribes there in verse 11 and things escalate pretty quickly to

DEFCON 3 the troops are assembled at Shiloh they're there prepared for war they fear wholesale apostasy and so wisely they send a delegation of their best men headed by Phineas the son of Eliezer the priest and they come to the eastern tribes and we learn what is at the root of their concerns look at verse 16 here's the question they put to the eastern tribes what is this breach of faith that you've committed against the God of Israel in turning away this day from following the Lord by building yourselves an altar this day in rebellion against God now these are serious accusations aren't they Moses had not too many years earlier expressly condemned this sort of thing you can read about it in Deuteronomy chapter 13 and so with his words fairly fresh in the memory they took this altar building to be a sign of apostasy they perhaps had had their suspicions about those tribes after they were unwilling to settle in the land west of the

Jordan and so what else could this building of the altar be than their engaging in the worship of other gods an altar built to compete with the altar at the tabernacle that was their perception of what was going on but they didn't shrug their shoulders at it they didn't just let it go their attentive concern for true worship amongst the people of God meant that they took action they challenged it and they challenged it because they knew that the effects of such apostasy would be devastating for the whole congregation of the people of Israel did you notice those two examples of past sin that they mentioned there in their conversation look down at verse 17 have we not had enough of the sin at Peor from which even yet we've not cleansed ourselves that was years and years before and still they're feeling the effects and then in verse 20 we have the events of

Joshua chapter 8 replayed with the reference to Achan's sin and both those events both Peor and with Achan they both had massive corporate implications sin never just stops with the ones who are actually responsible it spreads it's infectious the western tribes knew that and so they took this very seriously indeed they knew that if this was carrying on that the whole nation of Israel would be under judgment so they take action and that is the great challenge for God's people down through every age isn't it to maintain a watchful attentive concern for true worship in the church it's a good sign that they were so troubled at what they saw it's a good sign that they wanted to go and do something about it to have and to show great concern for true worship in the church is a sign of health to not let willful disobedience go unchallenged to not turn a blind eye to call it for what it is and that is often a costly thing to do we know that as a congregation it cost us a building a few years ago but it remains costly today to pull up a friend someone in the church perhaps who you know is drifting away to have that difficult conversation the one you really wouldn't rather not have that's not easy to see your leaders to see the under shepherds that

God has set over the flock here to see them tackling blatant and unrepentant sin in the life of one or more people in the church that is a good thing it may perhaps shock us if church discipline is actually carried out we live in a culture that would label anything like that as judgmental how dare you do that how dare you tell someone how to live well if the western tribes here had done nothing and if their perception of events had actually been right it would have spelled disaster for the whole nation of Israel and so for God's church today serious sin in the life of the church if unchallenged if ignored it will prove fatal in the end now don't mishear me this is not about everyday sort of minor sin no this was wholesale apostasy that the western tribes feared this was serious stuff a flat rebellion a straight rejection of the one true

[28 : 35] God that's what they feared a deliberate walking away a turning to other gods that is what they feared and that is why they were so willing to take action and so for us do we share that concern their passion for the pure worship of God in the church perhaps you are on the very verge of walking away from the one true gods to turning your back on him can I urge you can I plead with you not to it is no minor thing to walk away from the living God perhaps you have a friend who is in that position you have seen their hearts growing cold to the Lord the lure of false gods seems to be drawing them in maybe it's a relationship a career a holiday home what do you do are you concerned for them are you willing to do something about it to do the hard thing to have that conversation now maybe you're not the best person at this time to have that chat with them perhaps somebody else has better place to talk to them but speak to somebody you trust don't let it go by if someone is turning away from the

Lord it needs to be done something needs to be done you must say something don't let it go those western tribes they could let them go if they go to the other side of the Jordan what does it matter but they didn't stand by and that is what faithfulness to God looked like in that moment for the western tribes faithfulness to God means attentive concern for true worship in the church not that we're to go around witch hunting not that we're to take pleasure in that sort of thing but when we do see things like that when there is blatant disregard and turning away from the Lord we must act faithfulness to God means attentive concern for true worship in the church well that brings us to the end of verse 20 and at this stage the whole thing hangs in the balance the western tribes have made their accusation what's the response from the eastern tribes what do they say well it wasn't just the western tribes who had real concern for faithfulness to

God so verses 21 to 29 faithfulness to God means concern for true unity now and for the future generations we see here that fidelity to God results in great concern for unity amongst the church today and for the generations to come the eastern tribes respond to the accusations and they're emphatic aren't they we are not apostate rather it's the complete opposite their intention in building this altar was to aid faithfulness it wasn't an indication of their abandonment of it just look down at verse 26 to see what they say 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 will not say to our children in time to come you've no portion of the

Lord it was of their unity their great concern was that the river Jordan would prove in the long run to be more than just a physical barrier it would in the end prove to be a spiritual one and again as we heard this morning their refusal to settle on the west of the Jordan it was unwise they were vulnerable where they were and they perhaps knew that but they built this large altar and they built it on the opposite side of the Jordan from which they lived now if they really were wanting to make sacrifices to other gods wouldn't they built it in their own land east of the Jordan but they built it on the west it was to be a sign that united the two sides of the Jordan this was not an altar to be used as an altar it was a copy of the real thing it was there to remind them of the one true altar the one place for sacrifice for sin could be made at the tabernacle there in verse 29 that's their reason they want to point people away from this altar to the true altar and it was in the closing words of our passage an altar that was to be a witness between the western tribes and the eastern tribes that the

Lord is God those eastern tribes had a clear eye on the future and they knew that I had to take steps in the present to enable the faithfulness of future generations their intention was to build an altar that pointed future generations to the one and the same God to the one true place of sacrifice for sin and the task for the present generation of the church is the same isn't it we are always to point God's people now and the generations to come to the one place of sacrifice for sins to the cross of Calvary where the Lord Jesus Christ died in our place and for our sin is the faithfulness of our children of the next generation a source of great concern for us not a fearful anxiety but rather are we sufficiently concerned for the generation to come that we are doing something in the now to teach and to equip them that was the concern of those eastern tribes wasn't it their children their children's children how can we safeguard them in the long run and so fathers mothers here this evening are you teaching and pointing your children to

[35 : 11] Christ you don't need to be a special theological doctorate to be able to do that you don't need special theological education to do that task well simple demonstration of right priorities is so important building family life around church life rather than the other way around simple reading of the Bible to them is part of the bedtime routine there's plenty of good stuff out there you can use so as they reach for postman Pat again you can say no hold on let's read the next chapter in the big storybook Bible or something like that let me tell you Pat's changed he flies helicopters now but as they as your children is that part of your routine time in God's words age appropriate material and you don't need to be a superstar

Christian to do that well and that is at least encouraging to me but there's also a note of warning here I think as we think of the bigger picture for those tribes east of the Jordan and this struck me in particular this morning their unwise detachment from the rest of the people their insistence on living on the east side of the Jordan that would in the long run have major implications which the construction of that altar couldn't overcome they could have built many altars and still the consequence of that first refusal to live in the land would not have been successfully mitigated and the warning for us is this no amount of spiritual sticky process can make up for fundamentally unwise decisions for example you might say get a holiday home in the country to which you head off to every other week you can't expect your children to be committed to the

Lord if you're away from church every other weekend you can send them on all the summer camps in the world you can force them to read Calvin by the time they're 13 but you can't undo that fundamentally unwise first decision to sit lightly to be with the Lord's people you can't apply sticky process to fundamentally unwise decisions well that's something of a warning as we consider the bigger picture but we have a responsibility for the next generations perhaps you're not a parent here this evening but we all have responsibilities as we think about the future generations think on the baptism service and the obligations we as a congregation have for the nurturing and the teaching of children here are the words that are read out and addressed specifically to the congregation in the baptism service here's what's said we who are gathered here as the household of faith also bear responsibilities under God for this little one we too are called to play our part in his nurture in the way of Christ by our prayers and our mutual commitment to his parents to encourage them to be steadfast for him you and I all of us bear responsibilities for the unity of the church and for the equipping of future generations that they too may worship the God in true unity with faithfulness and it's a unity that's built on based on founded on only

God's revealed words a unity of right worship of the true God and the strong resistance of apostasy a unity of faithfulness to the Lord and to living out what he has commanded the Lord of Joshua the God of the people of Israel is my God and yours he has demonstrated extraordinary faithfulness to us and not just in our day to day lives not just in the provision of food and clothing and all these basic things but he's demonstrated faithfulness in the ultimate way in the ultimate things he has once and for all dealt with our rebellion against him he has joined us to Christ we are his nothing can shake that nothing can move us from his safe keeping and so in light of his great faithfulness he calls us he calls you to real faithfulness to him and that looks like real concern for true worship in the church and it looks like true concern for the unity of the church both now and in the future as we seek to teach and train and provide for our future generations our God is a faithful

God and he calls us to faithfulness let me pray not one word of all the good promises that the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed all came to pass we thank you heavenly father you are a faithful God and you call us in response to your faithfulness to be faithful to you and Lord that is possible not that we can be perfect but we can be faithful as we lean upon the Lord Jesus he works in us we can demonstrate faithfulness and so would you help us by your spirit to show real concern for the unity of your church and for the future generations help us to be faithful for we ask it in Jesus name

[41 : 58] Amen