Meditations on the Book of Joshua

Joshua 22

Altar of Ed

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poor manslayer, that the Aaronic priesthood of Christ should come to an end, linked as we are eternally to Him who is "a Priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec," and who is so by virtue of the work which has obtained for us an eternal salvation.

Joshua 22

THE ALTAR OF ED

We find here again the two and a half tribes of whom we spoke at the close of Joshua 1. They

had gone on armed before their brethren, to fight the enemies of the Lord in the land of promise. Now they receive permission from Joshua to return to their inheritance on the other side of Jordan. They had been faithful to the commands of Moses and Joshua, had kept the commandment of the Lord, and had not forsaken their brethren. Obedience to express commands, and brotherly love had characterised them during all the time that they had been separated from the land of their possession. There was apparently nothing to find fault with in them, but as we saw in Joshua 1, their hearts (I do not say their thoughts) were not set on heavenly things. Their cattle were their starting-point; hence what could be more natural than to seek pastures wherein to feed them? Immediately, at the commencement of their history, a danger arises out of their ambiguous position, and Moses points it out to them (Num. 32); their refusal to establish themselves beyond Jordan might exert its influence upon the rest of the people, and discourage them, so as to bring down the anger of the Lord upon Israel as before, at the mountain of the Amorites. By grace they were preserved from this snare, but the snare still existed. There was a still greater danger; their principles acted on those next to them, who were more exposed to them than the rest of the tribes. Jair, the son of Manasseh, and Nobah, call their towns and their villages after their own names, a thoroughly worldly principle, dating from the commencement of Cain's world. (Num. 32: 41, 42. Of. Gen. 4: 17) Thus we see them in danger by their walk of causing the fall of men of faith, or of bringing them down to their own level, rather than raising them to the level of what is heavenly; added to this, we find them bringing in what is positively of the world into their own families, and this we may say characterises their position.

Joshua's exhortation (Joshua 22: 5) again points clearly to the danger of a lowered Christianity. The real backbone of all the conduct of the Christian was lacking. Obedience to known commands, and brotherly love, are not sufficient to keep us for any length of time. Conduct, obedience, devotedness and service, should flow from love, and unless it

be in exercise our activity soon comes to an end. A child can make a hoop bowl with the first stroke of its stick, but it soon stops unless the impetus be renewed.

But this is not all. When, instead of living by faith, the Christian allows in any measure the principles of the world to govern his conduct, his position necessarily becomes a very complicated one, whereas nothing is more simple than the path of faith. Compare Abraham and Lot; how simple and even, the life of the first; how full of inextricable complications, that of the second. What a succession too of adventures the tormented existence of Jacob presents to us, in contrast with the simple life with God of Isaac his father. In like manner the two and a half tribes found themselves obliged to build sheepfolds for their cattle, and fenced cities for the protection of their families, to abandon their wives and children during many a long year, depriving them too of the blessing of witnessing the marvels displayed by Jehovah in favour of His people. And now, when the warrant goes forth for them to return to their homes, a fresh complication presents itself. The Jordan separates them from the rest of the tribes, and they are uneasy, fearing lest the link of communion between them and their brethren should not be firm enough to resist the force of the river. Their position exposes them to a division, and they see with disquietude that. a moment may come when they will be treated as strangers by their brethren. The danger of their situation obliges them, so to speak, to set up a testimony by which they publicly proclaim that they serve Jehovah, just as on a previous occasion (Joshua 1: 16-18) their doubtful position had compelled them to make a loud profession. So they build a great altar to see to in the borders of Jordan within the limits of their territory. Their own wisdom leads them to set up this testimony. I might venture to call it a confession of faith, a thing in itself perhaps perfectly correct, as was the altar of Ed, and against which for the moment nothing could be said, but which had the appearance, nevertheless, of another gathering-point. This altar, intended as it was in their minds to unite the separated parts of Israel, might be created in opposition to that of the tabernacle of Shiloh. Their confession of faith might become a new centre, and thus by discrediting it, replace the only true centre of unity, Christ. This act, the result of a good intention, savoured of man. Their contrivance for maintaining the unity, gave them the appearance of denying it, and hence arose a new complication. They expose themselves to being misunderstood, to raising the other tribes against them, and to being exterminated.

Dear readers, this is but the history of Christendom from the first, only it has sunk much lower than the two and a half tribes. It has collected for itself a vast number of confessions of faith more or less correct, but

which are not Christ; and then awaking to the fact, that the unity is well nigh disappearing, these confessions are made more and more elastic, until in place of the sought for unity, open infidelity itself is introduced into the midst of the profession of Christianity.

But behind this altar of Ed, which a spirit of worldliness had necessitated, might lie a still graver source of evil. The very fact of its erection might open the door to independence. This was what the children of Israel dreaded, and we see them taking it exceedingly to heart. Independence is on the verge of creeping in, their oneness is threatened, and Phinehas, a pattern of zeal for Christ, is chosen to go with the princes and take note of what is transpiring by Jordan and deal with the two and a half tribes.

He brings before them three cases, closely connected, in which all Israel are responsible.

The first (v. 20) after the crossing of Jordan, is the sin of Achan. He lusted after the things of the world, took of that which God had cursed, introduced it into the midst of the congregation of Israel, totally ignoring the holiness of God — and what was the result? Divine judgment fell on all the people. Achan's sin was the lust of the world, the introduction of the accursed thing into the congregation. In the iniquity of Peor (v. 17) we find a still worse thing, although, alas! in spiritual matters the hearts of the Lord's people are so little concerned at it. It was characterised by corrupt alliance with the religious world, that is to say, the idolatrous world of those days, and the introduction of this worldly religion into the very midst of the congregation of Israel, again to the utter disregard of divine holiness.

Dear reader, is it otherwise with the church? Are not Achan and Peor the two principles of its existence to-day? Moreover, the Satanic artifice at Peor is still more terrible than the accursed thing at Achan. For Balaam, seeing that his efforts to separate Jehovah from His people failed, set another scheme on foot, and attempted, this time successfully, to alienate the people and separate them from Jehovah. When it was a question of God's affection for His people, Balaam was forced to declare that Jehovah had not seen perverseness in Israel, when the faithfulness of the latter was tested, Satan succeeds only too well in separating them from God; and thus "the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel."

The believer's second snare lies then in the thought, that the worship of God can be associated with the religion of the world. It was on this occasion that the zeal of Phinehas first showed itself; he took to heart the dishonour done to Jehovah, and purified the congregation from this defilement.

And now, in the matter of the altar of Ed, this same zeal incited him to stand in the breach. The "senses exercised by reason of use to discern both good and evil, cause him to discern the danger. He feels that this second principle, independence, would be the ruin of the testimony; that the setting up of another altar is nothing less than the sin of rebellion against Jehovah and against the congregation of Israel. (v. 19) The holy zeal of Phinehas meets the danger, which in principle indeed existed, but the intentions of heart were right, and the evil was stayed.

In Christianity, however, the remedy has not been so successful Evil has made steady progress, and what do we see to-day? Independence, the very principle of sin, the natural tendency of our hearts, publicly placarded as a virtue, nay, a duty. Forgetful of the fact that there is but one altar, one table, new ones are established every day on this principle, in rebellion against the Lord, as Phinehas said (v. 16), and in blind contempt, not merely of the unity of the people of God, but of the only centre of unity, the Lord Jesus Himself.

May God keep us, dear readers, from these three principles which bring down His judgment on His house: worldliness, alliance with the religious world, and independence, the most subtle and dangerous of all, because being the principle of sin it lies at the root of all else.

Let us remember the character of Christ as brought out in the epistle to Philadelphia. He is the "Holy and the true," and this church is commended for the maintenance of this holy name, and for dependence on the word. Let us cherish nothing, individually or collectively, in our hearts, our thoughts, our conduct or our walk, which is not in harmony with these characters of Christ; and may we be found walking in holiness and dependence, without which there no communion with Him.