## Hold Onto the Lord

Joshua 22

Key Verse: 22:5

**“But be very careful to keep the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the Lord gave you: to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to keep his commands, to hold fast to him and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul.”**

In this passage we learn the importance of loving God and walking in obedience to him, and loving him with all our heart and all our soul. This a repeating theme in the Bible, in both the Old Testament, and New. We are reminded here again of this command. At this time the conquest of the land of Canaan was now complete. There must have been a great relief, and much anticipation to start a new life, a new life without war, and a prosperous happy one. We might have seen the historical movie footage of great celebrations that happened in the streets of America when American soldiers came home from World War II, which was a long difficult war. There was lots of joyful celebrating, people hugging, confetti everywhere, and spontaneous dancing. And there was a time that followed shortly after this where there was a huge population explosion, a sign that there was peace, people could settle down and raise a family. What a huge contrast, going from war to this post war era. But it was at this time they needed to be especially careful - Joshua told them to be **very** careful. We will learn more about how they should be careful. While they were settling down in their new homes a miscommunication arose between the tribes of Israel which almost caused a civil war. Fortunately the matter was resolved and the unity among his people was preserved. From this we learn a lesson about avoiding conflicts and also about resolving them.

**Part I – Hold Onto the Lord**

At the beginning of the passage Joshua summoned the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh and commended them for being faithful servants. Look at verses 2 and 3, **“You have done all that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded, and you have obeyed me in everything I commanded. For a long time now – to this very day – you have not deserted your fellow Israelites but have carried out the mission the Lord your God gave you.”**  The people of these two and a half tribes had upstanding character, the kind of character only present in genuine servants of God. They did everything Moses commanded, and obeyed their leader Joshua. God was pleased with them, they did it without grumbling, very difficult things too like the mission they had to complete given by Moses. The acknowledgment they received from God is one we long to hear as well, don’t we? To receive even one commendation from God is enough for eternity. Billy Graham was asked what he hopes to hear Jesus say when he enters heaven, and he said he hopes to hear him say “**Well done my good and faithful servant**.” Quoting from Matthew 25. Billy Graham preached the gospel faithfully for most of his 99 years on this earth, and never wavered or stumbled even once, all the while managing the fame he unintentionally received. His autobiography is very inspiring. He preached simply and clearly and always talked about Jesus and salvation. No doubt God said to him “**Well done my good and faithful servant**.”

What was their mission that was given to them? Their mission was to accompany their fellow Israelites into battle to conquer the promised land, not abandon them. They had already found land they wanted on the east side of the Jordan river and they sent their families to go occupy it already. They probably wanted to go join their families and become a baby boomer generation. And have a house with 2.5 kids, and a pet dog. But instead they turned and readied themselves for battle in order to keep their end of the deal in an agreement they made. There was probably quite a bit of nervousness for some, to face a warlike people, as the people of Canaan were known for being. They had walled cities that were difficult to breach and that was also a challenge. Serving God is not always about warm fuzzy feelings. But they held onto God at this time, knowing he is with them. This calmed their fear greatly. Fear is a normal reaction, but what we do with our fear is what really matters. As we know from Revelations chapter 21 God greatly despises cowardice, as those who are cowards are the first on the list of those who will receive eternal judgment. It is a form of wicked disobedience, and either directly or indirectly can result in others to losing their lives. One example is a police officer who did not challenge a shooter in Florida. The officer was a few weeks away from retirement, where he would enjoy a big pension in a state with nice weather year round. So the shooting continued on his watch because he was afraid to enter the building. He was fired from his job and faced criminal charges and jail. The 2 and a half tribes were the opposite of this, they had character pleasing to God because they did not abandon their fellow Israelites.

Our relationship with God has a vertical component between us and God, but it also has a horizontal component which involves our relationship with others. Loving our fellow brother or sister, and standing with them, supporting them, being loyal and willing to fight side by side with them in their struggles, and being concerned if they are perishing - these things are very important. That is why Jesus calls us the salt of the earth, because what would happen to the world if there were no people willing to do these things for others? The world would be a bitter place for sure. Each of us has a mission to serve God and be salt of the earth. Jesus said in John 13 verse 34, **“A new command I give you, love one another as I have loved you**.” Loving others is a command that Jesus gave, not an option a *command*. So we must obey it. This encompasses his mission for each of us. To love others is obedience to God’s command.

The word “mission” used in verse 3 reminded me of the upcoming mission Danny and Nek will go on when they go to Thailand. They will preach the gospel in a country that is almost 90% non Christian, no doubt many are perishing there without Jesus. But these men of God said “No I will not just stand and watch..” They want to give up their comfort here in the USA to go and help others in the name of Jesus.

At the time of departure for the two and a half tribes, Joshua told them **“But be very careful to keep the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the Lord gave you: to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to keep his commands, to hold fast to him and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul.”** They had already obeyed the commands they were given. But now it was time to keep the commands. There is no spiritual vacation we can take away from God, not without consequence. So there is a hint of warning in Joshua’s words, he knows human nature well, that they would face this temptation. They were going to go far away on the east side of the Jordan, and be surrounded by pagan people on all sides. They had become prosperous. After much success they could have felt they could take it easy. At the time of being too comfortable is when the devil often tempts us to fall away from God. This complacency can start with minor distractions and even things that are positive, like raising children. Problems start when we lose our focus on God, which can happen when we are blessed and prosperous. Other idols can come in our heart and we can lose sight of God’s commands. Moses said in Deuteronomy chapter 4, 24-25, “**After you have had children and grandchildren and have lived in the land a long time – if you then become corrupt and make any kind of idol, doing evil in the eyes of the Lord your God and arousing his anger, (24) ….you will quickly perish (25).”** At the time of blessing we must be very careful and remember God’s commands, we must pray a lot and stay rooted in God and read his Word to stay strong.

Verses 6 through 8 show the life of blessing and victory we have in God, when we obey his commands. Joshua blessed them and sent them away to their homes with a blessing of great wealth. They were lacking nothing and so they could be a blessing to others. They had gold and silver, bronze and iron, and a great quantity of clothing. The point here is not so much that we automatically become wealthy in God, although that may happen. But the point is that we have enough of what we need and we even have extra and can be a blessing to others. Joshua told them to divide the plunder among their fellow Israelites, because they had so much extra. I particularly identified with the blessing of a great quantity of clothing, because as my children’s sizes were changing when they grew up I gave away great quantities of clothing to other people on a regular basis.

Mostly we are a blessing to others when we have the time and resources to help others know Jesus. We have so much abundant love of Jesus in our hearts we share Jesus with everyone This is a true life of victory and when we do this we are truly rich. This is the best way to spend the spoils of our success, remaining faithful to God and holding fast to him, spreading the love of God and being a blessing to others.

**Part II – Pray and Keep Unity with Others**

In the next part of this passage the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half tribe of Manasseh set out for their new home to the east in Gilead. When they were there they built an “imposing” altar in Geliloth. Other translations describe this altar being “of great size” and also “impressive”. The Israelites received a report about this and thought they had set up their own worship system at the same location where the tabernacle was previously, so it was a holy place. There could only be one altar to offer sacrifices at, and that was the altar where the tabernacle was at in Shiloh. So they assumed the new altar was like a substitute altar - bumping aside the real tabernacle worship spot. Verse 12 says when the Israelites “heard” this they were ready to go to war. Here we see the beginning of a misunderstanding, they heard something and made assumptions. It doesn’t say they knew something it says they “heard” something. What they heard was not first hand information but second hand, it was hearsay in other words. Their zeal and love for God was commendable they wanted to go to war to keep out sin, but they knew they needed more information. Fortunately, prior to going to war they were prayerful and sent a delegation which consisted of Phineas, a priest, and the head of each of the 10 tribes to investigate. The delegates told them that building another altar is to break faith with God and rebel against him. They reminded them of the sin of Peor, that some Israelites fell into idolatry and God sent a plague. At this time they were worried that a plague could break out against them too and that all the Israelites might suffer because of the sins of a few. And similarly, the sin of Achan caused failure in battle and judgment on the Israelites also. So they were concerned about idolatry and disobedience incurring God’s wrath on the whole community. With the intention of helping them they offered them to come back over to “Lord’s land” on the west side of the Jordan, the original promised land. They offered whatever support they could offer, even to share their homes and share whatever they had in order to have them come over and get away from land they thought was defiled. It is good if we see our brother or sister struggling to offer them to come over to the Lord’s land, offering them practical assistance and advice that will help them stay out of sin. Inviting them to church, Bible study, or inviting them to our home are ways to help them get out.

So, how did Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh reply to the heads of the clans of Israel? They could have been indignant and even had reason to be, because they did not commit idolatry or disobedience. But cooler heads prevailed on their side as well, and they did not overreact and they diffused the situation with a calm demeanor. Being accused is no fun, and can escalate a conflict by overreacting. But they were spiritual about this as well and made a confession before God, calling him the Mighty One, the Lord twice! Then they calmly explained about the altar, that it was not an act of disobedience. And they explained they did not build the altar for sacrifices or grain offerings it was more of a monument. They explained that it was in fear that their future descendants would be forgotten about, and they made reference to the Jordan River causing a divide between them, which they felt would make them grow apart one day. It was a baseless thought, but feeling apart from others made them worried anyway.

This is so often the situation with divisions that happen between people. They see small differences between themselves and think they are far apart, and they think the other side is too different. Or they see “tribal” differences of culture and way of life. A microcosm of tribal differences is seen when we look at Cubs fans and White Sox fans who act like they are not supposed to like each other. “I want to like you, but you are wearing that jersey, so no I can’t like you.” We had Cubs and White Sox day at work and I saw a lot of playful tribalism on display, fortunate it was all playful and no real conflict. Often our differences are not really big at all, it is only perception and not necessarily reality. And we see ego can stoke those flames even more, feeding the problem. Often both sides want peace and unity, but miscommunication and prejudices can get in the way. The tribes east of the Jordan did not communicate their intention to build a large altar, even though they meant to build it for benign reasons. We see that these differences are easily resolved when each sides view is heard. So communication is very important. We see that the intention was to go about this matter prayerfully, because the delegation brought Phineas an important man of prayer. They did not bring an army with weapons. So often many people have downward spirals of communication in text message, and it leads to a texting war. I have also seen Facebook debate wars that seem to not end. They start on topic, talking about differences about a certain issue, and quickly degrade into 3rd grade insults. Conflicts should not be resolved in text, or on Facebook but in person. Matthew Chapter 18 discusses how to resolve conflict, if there is a misunderstanding or a sin committed by someone, it says we should **“go to our brother**” to resolve it. It does not say text your brother or email your brother. It says “go to your brother” or we could say “go to your sister.”

The distance between the tribes east of the Jordan and west of the Jordan, causing and misunderstanding sound like a parallel between the distance that is present between God and man without Christ. The famous painting in the Sistine Chapel by the famous Italian artist Michelangelo depicts the relationship between God and man. It shows Adam reaching out to God, but just can’t quite reach God, and there is a gap between their fingers even though they are trying to connect. Without Christ man is lost in his sins, and can’t reach God. God gave a way of obedience, the Ten Commandments, but it required strict obedience and there could only be fear of consequence and judgment if a commandment was broken. So if a command was broken a person would often want to hide from God rather than come to him, like Adam did. God saw this gap and sent his Son Jesus to this earth, to our side, approaching us so humble, leaving the comfortable place where he was in God’s kingdom. He stood in our place, he saw what it is like to be a person, and then he gave his life for us on the cross. Through him we are not condemned and there is no longer gap between us and God. We are saved by the blood of Jesus. Jesus is very personal and wants to be in our lives. He is with us, he is not far he is near. So we now have no miscommunication with God, we can communicate with him anytime. Praise God!

Through this passage we learn a godly example of resolving conflict. We learn it should be done by prayer, love, and positive communication. Not looking at differences but looking at similarities, that we are all brothers and sisters as believers in Christ. With this mindset we can keep unity in a church and serve God as one body. Amen.