

Homiletics Analysis: Joshua 22

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Joshua 22 narrates the dismissal and return of the eastern tribes (Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh) after their faithful service in the conquest of Canaan. Joshua commends them, blesses them, and sends them home with material wealth. As they return east across the Jordan, they build a large altar near the river. The western tribes receive word of this altar and immediately mobilize for war, interpreting it as apostasy — a breach of the exclusive worship mandated at the central sanctuary. Before war breaks out, Phinehas the priest and ten tribal representatives cross the Jordan to confront the eastern tribes. The eastern tribes mount a passionate defense: the altar was not built for sacrifice or burnt offering but as a *witness* — a visible, permanent testimony that the eastern tribes, though separated by the Jordan, belong to the LORD and share in the covenant with the western tribes. Phinehas and the delegation receive the explanation as satisfying, the war is averted, and the altar is named *Witness* (or *Ed*). The chapter ends with the declaration that the children of Reuben and Gad confirmed the altar to be a witness between them — not a rival sanctuary.

This Text — Intent

God intends through this passage to demonstrate what genuine covenant faithfulness looks like — both in its exercise and in its misreading — and to show that the unity of God's people depends on two things: (1) zeal for covenant loyalty that takes the threat of apostasy seriously enough to confront it, and (2) the willingness to hear before acting, to pursue understanding before unleashing judgment. The passage presses the reader toward a covenant identity that is serious enough about God's honor to be scandalized by false worship, and humble enough to be corrected when the scandal is based on misreading. The ultimate intent is to anchor the reader's identity not in geography or proximity but in shared confession and covenant loyalty — the real border of God's people is not the Jordan River but allegiance to the LORD alone.

Subject Sentence: Covenant identity transcends geography — belonging to the LORD unites His people across every boundary.

Primary Claim: God is pressing His people to anchor their unity in covenant loyalty to Him alone, and to pursue understanding before judgment when that loyalty appears threatened — because the real border of His covenant community is not a river but a shared name.

Interpretive Evaluation

The nature of the altar: rival sanctuary or legitimate witness?

The central interpretive question is what the eastern tribes' altar actually *is* — and the text answers this unambiguously. The eastern tribes explicitly deny that it was built for burnt offerings or sacrifices (vv. 23, 26-27, 28-29). They invoke the self-maledictory formula (“let the LORD himself be the avenger,” v. 23) to reinforce that they are not claiming a second place of worship. The altar is a *witness* — a physical monument to shared identity and covenant standing. Some readers, particularly from traditions emphasizing New Testament freedom from ritual regulation, have read the altar as simply a legitimate act of worship that the western tribes wrongly tried to suppress. This misreads the passage: the eastern tribes themselves did not claim the altar was a place of worship, and the text presents its non-sacrificial, testimony-only function as the resolution of the crisis, not as a secondary issue. The text's narrative arc is precisely that the altar was *not* what the western tribes feared it was — and the crisis is resolved when that is established, not by establishing that a second altar would have been permissible.

The western tribes' response: zeal or overreaction?

Some readers, particularly in traditions that emphasize grace and reconciliation, are uncomfortable with the western tribes' immediate mobilization for war. Is this zeal presented approvingly or critically? The text is carefully nuanced. The western tribes' concern is explicitly grounded in the precedent of Achan (v. 20) and Baal-Peor (v. 17) — both historical moments where unfaithfulness by part of Israel brought consequences on the whole. Their logic is covenant-federal: corporate solidarity means corporate accountability. The text does not criticize their *concern* — Phinehas's speech in vv. 16-20 is presented as principled and correct. What the text *does* present approvingly is the decision to send representatives *before* going to war (vv. 13-14) — they confront with words first. The Reformed reading, which tracks the text most carefully here, sees the western tribes' zeal as genuinely godly and the decision to confront before attacking as the appropriate exercise of that zeal. Traditions that flatten this into either “the west was wrong to be alarmed” or “the east was nearly justly destroyed” both miss the passage's careful balance.

Typological reading: the altar as a type of Christ?

Some Reformed and redemptive-historical interpreters, working from Clowney's canonical-typological method, have pressed the *witness* altar as a type of Christ — the one who is the permanent testimony and the meeting point of God's separated peoples. This reading has canonical attractiveness given Ephesians 2:14 (Christ as the dividing wall broken down) and John 17 (Christ as the ground of unity). While this typological connection is illuminating and can be appropriately invoked in the Theological Importance section, it should not control the primary exposition. The text's own claim is corporate and

covenantal, not directly Christological in its immediate literary frame. The typological resonance is real but secondary. **Acknowledge** the Christological trajectory without allowing it to eclipse the passage's explicit claim about covenant identity and zeal-with-understanding.

The Reformed verdict: The passage functions as a test case in covenant ecclesiology. The unity of God's people is not automatic, not geographical, and not preserved by silence — it is preserved by shared confession of the LORD, by zeal for His honor that takes apostasy seriously, and by the discipline of hearing before judging. The eastern tribes' altar and the western tribes' confrontation together model the shape of covenant community rightly ordered.

Key Canonical Support

- **Deuteronomy 12:1-14** — The law of the single sanctuary, the violation of which the western tribes feared. Grounds the western tribes' alarm as principled covenant concern, not tribal territorialism.
- **Numbers 25:1-13** — The Baal-Peor episode explicitly invoked in Joshua 22:17. Phinehas's prior zeal is directly referenced, establishing his credibility as the representative sent to confront the east. The corporate consequences of one clan's sin establish the federal logic driving the western tribes' alarm.
- **Joshua 7:1-26** — The Achan narrative, explicitly cited in Joshua 22:20. "Did not Achan the son of Zerah act unfaithfully... and wrath fell upon all the congregation of Israel?" Establishes the precedent of federal solidarity in guilt that makes the western tribes' alarm coherent.
- **Ephesians 2:11-22** — Paul's declaration that Christ has broken down the dividing wall and made one new humanity from those once separated. The Jordan's power to divide the covenant community is the precise problem Joshua 22 addresses; Ephesians 2 shows its ultimate resolution in Christ, the true meeting point of God's people.
- **Matthew 18:15-17** — Christ's instruction to confront, then escalate, rather than act on suspicion without confrontation. The western tribes' decision to send Phinehas before mobilizing the army prefigures the principle Christ later codifies: go first, hear first, judge later.

Aim: To demonstrate that covenant unity is neither automatic nor passive — it demands both zeal for God's honor sufficient to confront apparent unfaithfulness, and the humility to hear before acting on that zeal.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1-3	Joshua commends Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh for their faithfulness to Moses' command throughout the conquest	The commendation is comprehensive: they kept the charge, obeyed Joshua, did not forsake their brothers. This sets up the bitter irony that they are nearly destroyed for faithfulness
4	Joshua announces that the LORD has given rest to the western tribes; the eastern tribes are released to return to their possession across the Jordan	"Rest" (נוח) echoes the Deuteronomic promise — its bestowal signals the conquest's completion
5	Joshua's departing charge: love the LORD, walk in His ways, keep His commandments, hold fast to Him, serve Him with all your heart and soul	This is the Shema-shaped summary of covenant obligation — the last word Joshua speaks to them frames everything that follows
6-8	Joshua blesses them and sends them away; they depart with great wealth — livestock, silver, gold, bronze, iron, and clothing — to share with their brothers	The shared wealth signals solidarity: the eastern tribes return enriched, connected, not estranged
9	The eastern tribes depart from Shiloh to go to Gilead, their own land	Shiloh is the location of the tabernacle — they are departing from the center of worship
10	At the region of the Jordan in Canaan, the eastern tribes build a large, imposing altar	The altar's size and prominence is noted — it will be seen; it is <i>meant</i> to be seen
11	The western tribes receive word of the altar	The alarm is immediate and total
12	The whole congregation of Israel assembles at Shiloh to go to war against the eastern	The war-mobilization is corporate and serious — this is not individual alarm but

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	tribes	national response
13-14	Phinehas son of Eleazar the priest is sent with ten chiefs, one from each tribe	The delegation is weighty: the priest's son and the leaders of each tribe. War is withheld while investigation proceeds
15-20	Phinehas delivers the western tribes' accusation: Have you broken faith with the God of Israel? Have you turned from following the LORD? The altar looks like a rival sanctuary — and they invoke Baal-Peor and Achan as warnings of federal guilt	The accusation is formal, specific, grounded in precedent. Phinehas offers a genuine alternative: come over to the western side if your land is unclean
21-23	The eastern tribes swear by the Mighty One, God, the LORD (three divine names — emphatic oath) that the altar is not for burnt offering or sacrifice	The triple divine name underscores the gravity of the oath
24-25	The eastern tribes explain their fear: future generations of western tribes might say the Jordan is the border and the eastern tribes have no portion in the LORD — so the altar was built as a preemptive witness against that exclusion	The pastoral logic is striking: the altar was built <i>against</i> apostasy, not <i>for</i> rival worship
26-29	They restate: the altar is a <i>witness</i> — not for holocausts, not for sacrifice, but to testify that we serve the LORD. To build a rival altar would be rebellion — God forbid	The word “witness” (Τῦ) is the passage's key term
30-31	Phinehas and the chiefs receive the explanation as satisfying. Phinehas declares that God is among	The priest pronounces the community clean

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	them — the explanation has proven the eastern tribes did not commit unfaithfulness	
32-33	The delegation returns with their report; the western tribes are pleased; they bless God and speak no more of war	The crisis is resolved; the assembly is satisfied
34	The eastern tribes name the altar <i>Witness</i> (“for it is a witness between us that the LORD is God”)	The naming is the chapter’s closing word — identity, testimony, shared confession

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1-9	Faithful Service Honored: Joshua commends, charges, and releases the eastern tribes
2	10-12	The Altar and the Alarm: a monument built, a war nearly begun
3	13-20	Zeal Before the Sword: the delegation confronts with words before weapons
4	21-29	The Witness Declared: the eastern tribes explain the altar’s true meaning
5	30-34	Reconciliation and Naming: the community receives the testimony, averts war, and names the witness

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Covenant identity transcends geography — belonging to the LORD unites His people across every boundary.

Primary Claim: God is pressing His people to anchor their unity in covenant loyalty to Him alone, and to pursue understanding before judgment when that loyalty appears threatened — because the real border of His covenant community is not a river but a shared name.

Applications (Five)

1. Your identity in God's covenant is not determined by where you live or how close you are to the center of worship. (*Mind/belief*) The eastern tribes' anxiety was well-founded: rivers become borders, and borders become reasons for exclusion. The altar was built because they feared their children would one day be told, "You're on the wrong side of the Jordan — you have no portion in the LORD." This is a fear worth examining in yourself. Do you believe your standing before God depends on proximity — to a particular church, community, tradition, or spiritual experience? The passage insists that belonging to the LORD is not a matter of geography or institutional access. The confession "the LORD is God" crosses every river. What false borders have you allowed to define your covenant standing?

2. Zeal for God's honor that is unwilling to confront sin is not godly zeal — it is cowardice dressed as peace. (*Will/behavior*) The western tribes did not ignore the altar. They assembled. They sent a delegation. They named the specific precedents — Baal-Peor, Achan — and they stated the stakes plainly: unfaithfulness by one part brings consequences on all. That is what covenant community looks like. If you see something in your church, your family, or your community that looks like spiritual compromise, the faithful response is not silence in the name of "not making waves." It is the careful, principled, loving confrontation that says, "This matters too much to ignore." Where have you been silent about something that deserves to be named?

3. The discipline of hearing before judging is itself an act of covenant faithfulness. (*Will/behavior*) The western tribes had every reason to be alarmed. The altar was large. The precedent of Achan was recent. The law of Deuteronomy 12 was unambiguous. And yet — they sent Phinehas before they sent the army. This is the passage's moral and procedural center: confront with understanding before you act on suspicion. The war that would have destroyed half the covenant community was averted not because the concern was wrong but because the accusers were willing to hear the accused. How quick are you to mobilize against a perceived offense before you have heard the whole explanation? Name one situation where you owe someone a hearing before a verdict.

4. God can be found working in the very thing you were about to destroy. (*Affections/worship*) Phinehas's declaration in verse 31 is striking: "Today we know that the LORD is in the midst of us." He is not saying the LORD was absent before — he is saying that the eastern tribes' faithfulness has been *revealed* by their testimony. What looked, at distance, like apostasy was actually an act of covenant zeal. This should produce in you a deep gratitude for the moments God has stopped you from acting on a conclusion you had drawn too quickly. It should also produce in you a worshipful recognition that God's

working often looks different from the outside than from the inside. Are you willing to let what you find replace what you assumed?

5. Shared confession of the LORD is the only sufficient foundation for the unity of God's people. (*Mind/belief*) The altar was named *Witness* — and what it witnessed to was not tribal alliance, not geographic proximity, not shared ancestry, but this: “the LORD is God.” That is the sentence at the end of the chapter (v. 34). The community's unity was not preserved by pretending the alarm never happened, not by minimizing the stakes, and not by finding common political ground. It was preserved by the eastern tribes' willingness to say, “We confess the LORD — that is our only claim to belong.” Every other basis for Christian unity eventually fractures. This one does not. Where are you tempted to build Christian community on something other than shared confession of the LORD alone?

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Joshua 22 teaches that the God of Israel is a God who takes His own exclusivity with absolute seriousness — the reason the western tribes nearly went to war was precisely because they knew that the LORD does not share His altar. This is not tribal jealousy; it is covenant theology: God has established the terms of access and the form of worship, and deviation from those terms is not a minor irregularity but a federal crisis. Equally, the passage teaches that God's covenant community is defined by confession and loyalty rather than by geography — the Jordan cannot be the border of His people if His people confess the same LORD on both sides. The passage further reveals that God preserves His people through the instruments of zeal-with-discernment: the crisis is resolved not by divine intervention but by the faithful exercise of confrontation and hearing. God works through His people doing hard things well.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Reformed covenant theology finds in Joshua 22 a striking case study in the federal principle that undergirds the whole of redemptive history. The western tribes' alarm is not an overreaction — it reflects the biblical teaching that God's covenant people bear one another's sin in a way that makes holiness a corporate concern, not merely a private one. The passages cited by Phinehas — Baal-Peor and Achan — are load-bearing precedents in the covenant framework: one man's or one clan's unfaithfulness can bring wrath on the whole. This corporate solidarity is not merely an Old Testament administrative arrangement; it is the same federal logic that grounds Paul's doctrine of imputation (Romans 5:12-21) — what one representative does, the whole body bears. Additionally, the resolution of the crisis through confession — “the LORD is God” — anticipates the Reformation's recovery of *sola fide* and *solus Christus* as the only basis for covenant standing: not proximity to the right institution, not performance of the right ritual, but confession of the right Lord.

Main Takeaway

The boundary of God's people is not geography — it is the confession “the LORD is God.” That means two things at once: no river can cut you off from the covenant community if you confess Him, and no amount of religious activity can substitute for actually confessing Him. When the unity of God's people is threatened, the faithful response is neither silence nor war — it is the hard, loving work of confrontation followed by hearing. Go to your brother. Say what you see. And be willing to be surprised by what you find.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Turning the eastern tribes into heroes and the western tribes into villains.** The western tribes are not presented as paranoid or hostile — they are presented as principled. Their alarm was grounded in the law of Deuteronomy 12 and the precedents of Baal-Peor and Achan. The text commends their zeal. Preaching that frames this passage as “the west was wrong to be upset” misses the point entirely and produces an application that approves indifference to covenant unfaithfulness. The western tribes' zeal is the other half of the passage's teaching.
- **Spiritualizing the altar as simply “a good thing misunderstood.”** The eastern tribes themselves did not claim the altar was a legitimate place of worship. They explicitly denied this (vv. 23, 26-29). Preaching that treats the altar as a straightforwardly good religious act that the west misread collapses the tension the text itself maintains. The resolution is not “the west was wrong about altars” — it is “this altar was not what the west feared it was.”
- **Missing the federal/corporate logic that drives the western tribes' alarm.** Modern individualism makes it almost impossible for contemporary hearers to feel the force of vv. 17-20. “Did not Achan sin, and wrath fell upon all Israel?” This is not a rhetorical flourish — it is the operative logic of the entire chapter. Without establishing this federal principle, the western tribes' mobilization for war looks like overreaction. Establish the corporate covenant principle before the passage can land.
- **Reducing the passage to a conflict-resolution lesson.** The passage does model Matthew 18-style confrontation before escalation, and that is a legitimate application. But if the sermon becomes primarily a seminar on how to handle interpersonal conflict, the passage's theological center — covenant identity, the exclusivity of the LORD, the unity of God's people grounded in shared confession — disappears. The conflict-resolution dimension is real but instrumental; it serves the passage's larger claim.

- **Leaving the passage in the Old Testament without the canonical trajectory.** The problem of God's people separated by a geographic and social barrier, yet united by shared confession of the LORD, is not resolved in Joshua 22 — it is *illustrated* there. Its resolution awaits Ephesians 2:14 and the gospel that makes Jew and Gentile one. Preaching that ends at verse 34 without noting the trajectory toward Christ and the church has given people a useful historical example but not the full claim of the canon.
- **Failing to preach the anxiety of the eastern tribes as a genuine pastoral concern.** The eastern tribes built the altar because they were afraid their children would be excluded from the LORD's covenant community (vv. 24-25). This is a real pastoral concern — the fear of being cut off, of belonging only provisionally, of having one's standing in God's people defined by others' gatekeeping. Preaching that skips over this fear in order to get to the resolution will miss the people in the congregation who share it. Name the fear. Let the testimony of the altar's meaning — “the LORD is God, and we are His” — land as the answer it was meant to be.