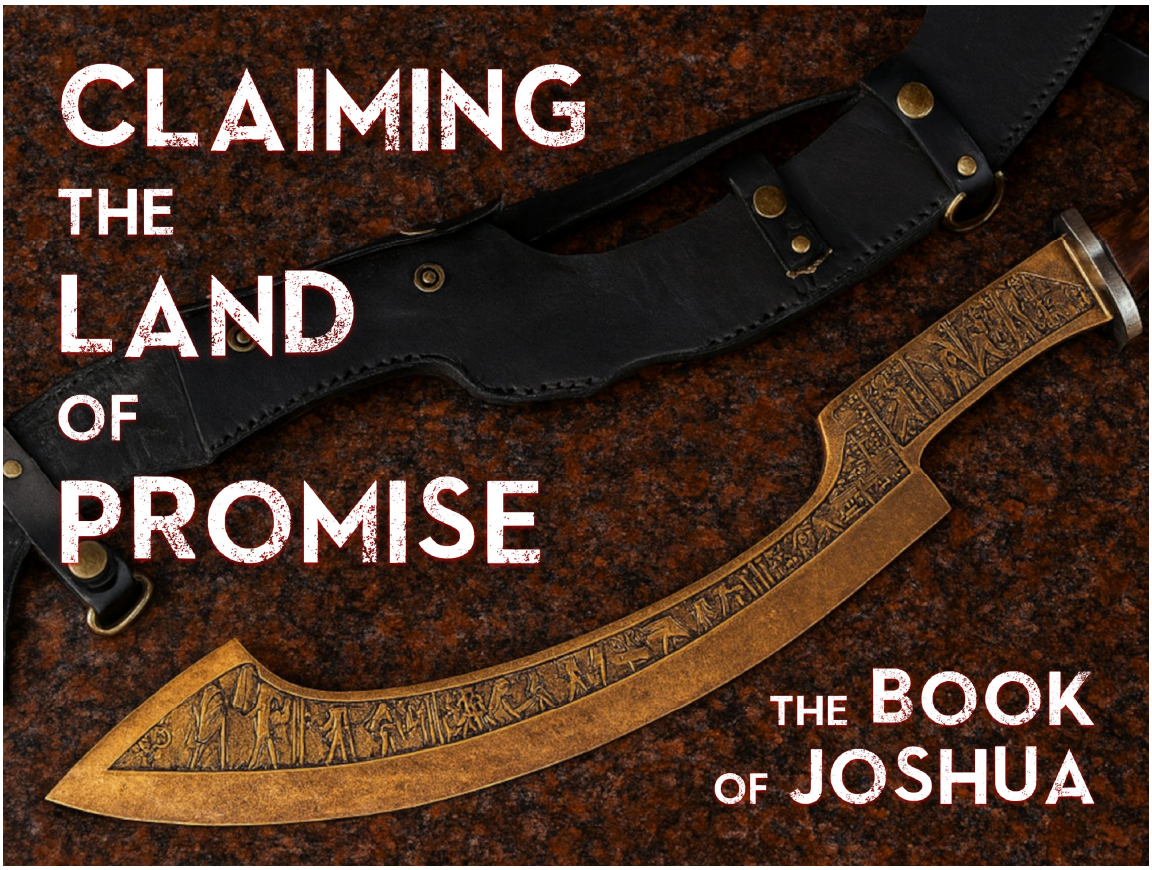


STICK TOGETHER!

We're all different, right? We see the world differently, respond to life differently, come from different backgrounds, prefer different things. Just think of tastes in …

Music.

Movies.

Hobbies.

Fashion.

Food.

And differences are important (what a boring world it would be if we were all the same). But they can also bring their fair share of challenges, as we'll see. Because just when you think things are going well for Israel …

BAM! They hit a *monumental* misunderstanding.

Quite literally!

Joshua 22

Some background to this story: before Joshua led the Israelites into the Promised Land, the tribes of Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh had approached Moses and asked if they might be able to settle in the land east of the Jordan. So, Moses asks God and God says "yes", but on one condition:

that the men of those tribes cross the river with their brothers and help them take the Promised Land. Which is exactly what they do.

Fast-forward a few years: stage 1 of the conquest is over, the Israelites are at rest, and Joshua commends the 2.5 tribes and allows them to return to their lands to the east. But he also adds something: "You're going to be physically separated from us, now. Make sure you stay connected, spiritually." (Important, that.)

So off they go, and just as they reach the banks of the Jordan, they do something which is potentially divisive: they build an altar, a replica of the one in the tabernacle. Now you might be thinking, "So what? What's the big deal?" The problem is that God had made it very clear, in Deuteronomy 12:11-14, that on entering Canaan the Israelites were to offer sacrifices in one place only, and that was on the altar in the tabernacle. In fact, one of the things that Israel had been commanded to do was tear down all the other altars / high places in the land.

So, when the rest of the tribes hear about this, they see it as? Sin. Disobedience. Rebellion. Idolatry. Potentially robbing God of glory. And what do they do? What any sensible, level-headed bunch of people would do at that moment:

They gather at Shiloh. And prepare for war.

In 12 verses they go from a place of rejoicing and victory to upset and strife. All of which might seem a little OTT. But human history is riddled with this kind of behaviour, and sadly, the church has been no exception to that (maybe you could add yourself to the list, too).

So, what do we learn from this passage about dealing with misunderstanding, particularly between believers?

1) Catch it early. It has to be said, this situation might have been made a whole lot easier had the 2.5 tribes simply communicated what they were planning in the first place. And that's a lesson in itself, right? A reminder to ask ourselves, "How might this come across? Do I need to let them know?" It might take a bit of forward-thinking – and some effort too. But it'll be worth it in the long run. Especially if it avoids a major blow up like this.

2) Think the best. Israel knew what rebellion looked like: their parents had been experts at it. So, the western tribes assume the same is happening again. Problem is: unless you're a mind-reader, you won't know what lies behind the actions of another. So, before you start making assumptions about people's motives, do what Joshua does here: endeavour to find out. How many conflicts could have been avoided by doing that?

3) Respond calmly. A delegation goes out, led by Phineas the priest. Now this was the guy who, in his younger years, had shish-kebabbed an Israelite man and Moabite woman who were getting up to mischief in the name of a pagan god (so, a 'shoot-from-the-hip' kind of guy). And yet, credit to him, here he opts for a different strategy: he heads off for a chat. How many of us would be reaching for that spear? Or gearing up for a rant?

4) Talk it through. When they get the chance, everyone in this scenario acknowledges the importance of dialogue. Joshua; Phineas and company; the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh. The point being: it's good to talk. And listen (the 2 go hand-in-hand). But it can also be challenging, especially if, like me, you're not fond of confrontation. But no matter how difficult it might be to broach that subject, you've got to do it. So, talk.

5) Then move on. The 2.5 tribes appeal to God – twice – and explain their motives for setting up the altar. That's it not an altar as such but an *ed,* a witness, to their relationship with the rest of Israel. Then everyone present makes a decision: they speak no more of making war. They never bring it up again – at least, not in their lifetime. The only reason it's recorded is as a reminder of what almost happened, and a lesson to future generations.

Then everyone hugs, they head for their homes, and the altar remains, as *ed hu benotenu ki yahveh ha-elohim.*

"A witness between us that *Yahveh* is God."

There The Blessing Is

Misunderstandings can affect our relationships with each other, and as a consequence, our mission. If you read the stories of Israel's history, you realise that the bloodiest wars were fought, not between Israel and her neighbours, but between Israel and Israel – while the Gentiles were looking on. And the same has happened over the course of Church history. Yes, there are reasons for creating distance between you and another – theological absolutes being one of them. But too often church splits have been dressed up as a battle for truth, when it was really all about power. And so-called followers of Jesus have ended up behaving as Jesus commanded us not to.

We need to remember these words, from Psalm 133:

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is
when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity …
for there the blessing is.

Like the rest of scripture, this story was written to build us up, not condemn us. To strengthen us for the future, not depress us with the past. So where are you, today? If you need to tell God, "I've messed up", do it, then talk to that other person. And if you need to listen – listen.

Whatever your 'monumental misunderstanding' is, treat one another with grace and truth.

Just as Jesus does.