

Around 1830 an elderly man and his sister sat down with a lawyer to draw up their will.

Neither had ever married,

and they wanted to do something useful with their life’s savings,
so they determined to endow a scholarship at Princeton Seminary.

They had been born and reared in Scotland,

under the ministry of John Brown of Haddington,
one of the finest preachers in 18th century Scotland.

They had settled in Orange County, New York,

where they had taught school for many years.

This is what they said in their bequest:

“Whereas, after a life of nearly fourscore years, much of which has been spent in examining the Word of God, we are fully satisfied of the correctness of the doctrines of religion as laid down in the Confession of Faith, the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, drawn up by the Westminster Assembly of Divines, and as held by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of the United States, we desire that the scholarship which is endowed by this our bequest of two thousand five hundred dollars, be called the ED Scholarship, as a witness between us and the Theological Seminary, that the Lord he is God, agreeable to the said Confession of Faith and Catechisms.

Farther, it is our will, that the Professors in said Seminary be careful, that no person holding sentiments inconsistent with the Confession of Faith, the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, be ever admitted to the benefit of said Scholarship.”

The lawyer who was drawing up the will was puzzled as to the meaning of the name “ED.”

Marian Hall replied, “And dinna ye ken, young mon? E'en go and read your Bible.”

“Well, I have read it, and still I do not recollect the meaning or use of ED.”

“Ed” is the Hebrew word translated “witness.”

And so after explaining its significance as the name of the monument,
the elderly lady summarized the heart of the issue—as far as she was concerned:

“I dinna like your Hopkinsian. I believe in the doctrines of the Bible,
as expressed in the Confession of Faith.”

“The ED Scholarship at Princeton Seminary,” Presbyterian Magazine 7.8 (August, 1857) 369-70.

Robert and Marian Hall understood well that the doctrinal quarrels of the 1820s

might result in division (the Presbyterian church did divide in 1837),

just as the erection of an altar nearly led in the division of the east and the west
in Joshua’s day.

And they hoped that donating money for a scholarship could do its part as a witness—

a testimony of the unity of the church, united around the “doctrines of the Bible,
as expressed in the Confession of Faith.”

The Halls would not live to see the division of 1837 or the reunion of 1869,
but they understood that they lived in a time that paralleled the situation of Joshua 22:
a time when the church was in danger of being split apart,
and only faithfulness to God's Word could preserve the church.

This is a very useful example of how we, as Christians,
should think of ourselves and our own lives in terms of the history of God's people.

Robert and Marian Hall looked at their situation and said –
“Aha! We fit into the story of what God is doing *here*.”

We often try to figure out “what does the Bible say to *me*?”
But that means that the central narrative is *me* – and my story.
When we ask “how does the Bible apply to me”
we tend to make our story the important story.

But when we ask “how does my life fit into God's big story of salvation?”
two things happen:

- 1) It makes us look outside ourselves.
We take ourselves off the throne – I am not the center of the universe.
- 2) But secondly, it forces us to get really serious about understanding the word of God!
Who does *God* say that I am?
And where do I fit into what God is doing?

So let's look at the story of Ed!

The story of Ed begins with the tribes of Israel returning the land of their possession –
particularly the warriors from the eastern tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh.

After dividing the land (in Joshua 13-19)
Joshua sends the eastern tribes home.

1. The Eastern Tribes Return Home (22:1-9)

22 At that time Joshua summoned the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh, ² and said to them, “You have kept all that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you and have obeyed my voice in all that I have commanded you. ³ You have not forsaken your brothers these many days, down to this day, but have been careful to keep the charge of the LORD your God. 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, which Moses the servant of the LORD gave you on the other side of the Jordan. ⁵ Only be very careful to observe the commandment 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.” ⁶ So Joshua blessed them and sent

them away, and they went to their tents.

⁷ Now to the one half of the tribe of Manasseh Moses had given a possession in Bashan, 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, ⁸ 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.” ⁹ 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 of which they had possessed themselves by command of the LORD through Moses.

For several years, the two and half tribes have continued to go to war with their brothers.

We are told in verse 8 that they return with “much wealth” –
and that they are told to “divide the spoil of your enemies with your brothers.”

In other words, not *all* of the men of these two and a half tribes came.

From what we know of other ancient near eastern cultures,
there was probably some sort of rotation.

Maybe a fifth or a quarter of the men would have rotated through military service
in order to make sure that the crops were still being harvested
and the eastern border defended against nomadic raids.

But now Reuben, Gad, and east Manasseh return home
to the inheritance that Moses had given them on the east side of the Jordan.

The two and a half tribes are “laboring out of bounds.”

They are technically outside of the Promised Land!

We saw that when Israel crossed the Jordan River!

That was when they entered the Promised Land!

Reuben, Gad, and eastern Manasseh are called to live outside the land
as those who are fellow-heirs of the promises!

Do you remember what God promised Abraham?

The land, and the seed, and the blessing to the nations!

Well, already in the inheritance of the 12 tribes,
we are seeing the land begin to expand!

We have certainly seen how the “seed” is including all sorts of people
who are not biologically descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob!

But notice the warning that is given:

you must remember who you are.

You are about to go across the Jordan again,
out of the heart of the land.

But even as you leave the land physically,

do not go out of the land spiritually.

As Joshua says (v5):

Only be very careful to observe the commandment 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.

At the heart of the Law of Moses is the law of *love*.

Love the LORD your God!

Cling to him!

Serve him with all your heart and with all your soul.

We often think of the *law* as a burdensome weight!

But that's not the way that Moses and Joshua thought of it!

Yes, you are to be *very careful* to observe the commandment.

But what was *the* commandment?

“Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one –

And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart
and all your soul and all your strength.” (Dt 6:4)

Love is at the heart of the Law.

So watch what the eastern tribes do:

2. The Eastern Altar (22:10-12)

¹⁰ *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.*

As they are on their way home, they build an altar of imposing size.

Pretty quickly, the word gets out!

¹¹ *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.”*

Notice that the altar is built on the frontier –

right near the Jordan –

but on the *western side* – the side that belongs to the people of Israel!

¹² *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.*

Why do they gather at Shiloh to make war?
Because God had been *really clear!*
Only sacrifice at the Tabernacle.
And the Tabernacle is at Shiloh!

So an imposing altar at the Jordan
strongly suggests that the eastern tribes are setting up their own altar!

It sounds bad – really bad!

But they are willing to *hear first!*
Remember that!
Sometimes you hear something that *sounds* really bad.
But if you took action based on that,
you might be wrong!

So...

3. The Western Objection to the Altar (22:13-20)

¹³ 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, ¹⁴ and with him ten chiefs, one from each of the tribal families of Israel, every one of them the head of a family among the clans of Israel.

They send Phinehas.

Eleazar was still the high priest –
but Phinehas was his eldest son –
the one who would become high priest after the death of his father.

And Phinehas must learn how to mediate between God and his people.

Notice that Joshua is not mentioned

His work here is done.
He is no longer the one that leads Israel into battle.
He will summon Israel one last time,
but he is not the ruler in the land!
There is not talk of making Joshua King!
He is merely the one that brought them into their inheritance.

And he understands his role.
He will diminish and allow others to take on their roles.

This is equally true in the church!
Right now we have middle-aged elders.

But we need to train up the younger folks as the leaders of tomorrow.
While Eleazar is high priest, they send Phinehas to do the negotiations.

The first we heard of Phinehas was in Numbers 25 when Phinehas
speared an idolatrous adulterer at Baal of Peor –
thereby turning back God’s wrath!

And a few chapters later – in Numbers 31 –
Phinehas was sent off to war against the Midianites.

So you might be tempted to think that Phinehas was sent to the eastern tribes
because they needed a hotheaded warrior to launch the invasion!

Except that’s not what Phinehas does.

Listen to what Phinehas says!

He reminds them of what happened at Baal of Peor –
back when he speared Zimri the son of Salu
and Cozbi the Midianite chieftain’s daughter!

¹⁵ 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, ¹⁶ “Thus says the whole congregation of the LORD, ‘What is this breach of faith that you have 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 the LORD? ¹⁷ Have we not had enough of the sin at Peor from which even yet we have not cleansed ourselves, and for which there came a plague upon the congregation of the LORD, ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ Did not Achan the son of Zerah break faith in the matter of the devoted things, and wrath fell upon all the congregation of Israel? And he did not perish alone for his iniquity.’”

Phinehas gives two examples for why this is a bad idea:

First, the sin at Peor (Num 25:3)

when Israel yoked itself to idolaters.

The idea that “even yet we have not cleansed ourselves” suggests that

there were still mixed marriages (even the best generation was not sinless)

But at Peor, Phineas had taken the lead in purging Israel

by obeying the LORD and slaying the wicked.

And second, Phinehas says,

remember Achan:

Achan broke faith by taking the devoted things!

And one man's sin brought judgment upon all Israel.
Achan had stolen from God – he took gold, silver, and a pagan priestly garment –
and because of that, his sin led to the slaughter of the Israelites at Ai.
“He did not perish alone for his iniquity”

Phinehas comes to the two and a half tribes and brings the accusation of apostasy!
You have broken faith – you have turned away from the LORD!

In this way, Phinehas is doing precisely what the Levites were supposed to do in Israel!
The Levites receive no allotment of land.
Their inheritance is the LORD's food offerings.
Their inheritance is the LORD himself!
And so they are scattered throughout all the tribes of Israel
as a way of maintaining the unity of the people of God.

But then notice the response of the eastern tribes:
v22-23

4. The Eastern Response – An Altar of Witness (22:21-29)

²¹ Then the people of Reuben, the people of Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh said in answer to the heads of the families of Israel, ²² “The Mighty One, God, the LORD! The Mighty One, God, the LORD! He knows; and let Israel itself know! If it was in rebellion or in breach of faith against the LORD, do not spare us today ²³ 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.

They insist this is not an altar for sacrifice, but only for witness.
It is to be a monument—a visible sign of the unity of the people of God:

Notice that the altar was built out of fear:

²⁴ 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?’

I think that nowadays we have the idea that you should never do anything out of fear!

David Powlison has rehabilitated anger.
Anger is not always a bad thing!!

I think we need to rehabilitate fear!
The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom –
so fear is *not* a bad thing!

Fear can boost your adrenaline so that you can deal with that situation appropriately!

Our problem is that we very often *misuse* fear –
because we are more concerned with what *others* think –
rather than with what *God* thinks!

But notice that Gad and Reuben's *fear* is based on what the LORD has done!
They fear that the children of Israel will say:

²⁵ 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.

In other words, Reuben and Gad have been paying attention to what God is teaching his people!
(Remember, this is why God scatters the Levites among them!)

This gets really practical for us!
What are you concerned about?
What are you afraid of?

The fears of Reuben and Gad were appropriate.
Your children might make our children cease to worship the LORD.

Your children might treat our children like second class citizens!

I think that every parent has had that fear!
The difference is that they were concerned for decades or centuries in the future –
whereas we are fixated on the next few months or years.

We need to do better at developing that long-term way of thinking!

Reuben and Gad handle it by building an altar.
They build a massive stone altar as a witness:

²⁶ Therefore we said, 'Let us now build an altar, not for burnt offering, nor for sacrifice, ²⁷ 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 your children will not say to our children in time to come, "You have no portion in the LORD."'' ²⁸ 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."'' ²⁹ 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 altar of the LORD our God that stands before his tabernacle!"

It was to be a copy of the heavenly altar at the Tabernacle of the LORD.

Of course, the greatest memorial was built by our Lord Jesus Christ himself!

I used to think that the church should have a *table* for the Lord's Supper –
but the Story of Ed helped me see that the language of altar is not inappropriate!

Not every altar is an altar for offering sacrifices!

And particularly, an altar made of *wood* is rather useless for *burnt* offerings!

There is a way in which the “wooden altar” is a fitting blend of the biblical images.

It is the Lord's *table* – which is also a picture of the heavenly altar!

It's also fitting that the wood for the pulpit, the table, and the baptismal fount
came from the same pews that you are sitting on!

Well, when Phinehas hears all this...

5. Resolution – A Witness Between Us that the LORD Is God (22:30-34)

³⁰ When Phinehas the priest and the chiefs of the congregation, the heads of the families of Israel who were with him, heard the words that the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the people of Manasseh spoke, it was good in their eyes. ³¹ And Phinehas 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.”

And this satisfies Phineas.

Intent is a significant part of the question of sin.

Building an altar is not inherently sinful.

Sacrificing on an altar other than the one the LORD has appointed is sinful!

Indeed, Phineas declares that the answer of the eastern tribes has

“delivered the people of Israel from the hand of the LORD.”

Israel will not be ripped apart by civil war

because the eastern tribes have spoken and acted faithfully.

“Today we know that the LORD is in our midst.”

God with us – Immanuel!

Phineas recognizes the presence of God for what it is!

When God is present – when God is with us –

we turn away from sin.

We only sin when *we* turn away from God!

³² Then Phinehas 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. ³³ 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. ³⁴ 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."

And so Israel blesses God for his provision of deliverance.

It's worth noting that the book of Judges will end with a similar situation:
Israel will gather together again, under Phinehas, to go to war,
but that delegation will get a very different response,
and judgment will fall against one of the tribes of Israel.

So in the end, what do we have?

We have an altar that speaks.
An altar that witnesses that Yahweh is God
An altar that witnesses to the unity of the people of God.

The story of Ed reminds us that us ordinary folk can still do our small part
in bearing witness to the mighty deeds of God.

Ordinary folk who have lived ordinary lives of ordinary faithfulness
bear witness to God's mighty deeds.

We need memorials – not just for the next few months or years,
but for the next few centuries!
But we have to start somewhere!

And in keeping with the theme of future generations following the LORD,
I had a thought.

We are still looking for the last \$750 for the Counseling Internship.
For some of you, \$750 is a lot of money.

But what if 15 of our young people each gave \$50.

There are easily 15 of our teens and young adults who have jobs.
If you each pledged \$50 above and beyond your regular giving,
that would be a way in which you would be saying,
we want to see the kingdom of Christ advance –
and we want to *build* a monument of that
by our gifts.

If one of you thinks that this is a good idea –
talk to your friends – make something happen!

Hopefully, by the grace of God – the counseling center that results from this small beginning
will be a testimony to the gospel of Jesus in this area for decades and centuries to come!