

**Forward Together**  
**Pastor Joe Oakley**  
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We are in a series called "Forward." As usual - I prayed about what to preach this week. I felt led to preach on Forward Together. I felt extra pressure because we've preached on relationships and community many times and I didn't feel I had anything new to say. But as I prayed I felt led to look for biblical examples of people not moving forward together.

I thought about Pastor Anthony's message last week on crossing the Jordan River and I remembered some people in the Bible who chose not to cross over. They chose not to go forward together. God delivered the 12 tribes of Israel from Egypt and took them to the Promised Land. But did you know that only 9 and ½ tribes actually took possession of the Promised Land? 2 and ½ tribes stopped short of the Jordan River.

That's why I'm subtitling this sermon: Don't Stop Short of the Jordan. We find that story in Numbers 32.

*The Reubenites and Gadites, who had very large herds and flocks, saw that the lands of Jazer and Gilead were suitable for livestock. So they came to Moses and Eleazar the priest and to the leaders of the community, and said, "The land the Lord subdued before the people of Israel is suitable for livestock, and your servants have livestock. If we have found favor in your eyes, let this land be given to your servants as our possession. Do not make us cross the Jordan."*

*Moses said to the Gadites and Reubenites, "Shall your countrymen go to war while you sit here? Why do you discourage the Israelites from going over into the land the Lord has given them? This is what your fathers did when I sent them from Kadesh Barnea to look over the land. The Lord's anger burned against Israel and He made them wander in the desert forty years, until the whole generation of those who had done evil in His sight was gone.*

*And here you are, a brood of sinners, standing in the place of your fathers and making the Lord even more angry with Israel. If you turn away from following Him, He will again leave all this people in the desert, and you will be the cause of their destruction."*

So the 2 ½ tribes said they would move forward together into the Promised Land and help defeat the enemies in the land. Then they would go back across the Jordan to live. Moses agreed to this and then said:

*But if you fail to do this, you will be sinning against the Lord; and you may be sure that your sin will find you out. Build cities for your women and children, and pens for your flocks, but do what you have promised."*

*The Gadites and Reubenites said to Moses, "We your servants will do as our lord commands. Our children and wives, our flocks and herds will remain here in the*

*cities of Gilead. But your servants, every man armed for battle, will cross over to fight before the Lord, just as our lord says."*

And that's what happened. The 2 ½ tribes helped the other tribes take the land and then they went back over the Jordan and settled there.

Now think about it – God had promised this land to Abraham over 400 years earlier. God had delivered Abraham's descendants from slavery in Egypt. Now they were moving forward together into the Promised Land.

God's original plan was for all of the Israelites...all 12 tribes...to inhabit the land together. He wanted all twelve tribes living close to each other so that they could worship at the Tabernacle together... protect each other...and they would be insulated from pagan influence.

Now – here they were standing on the threshold of the Promised Land. They were ready to go in and receive what God has promised them. But 2 ½ tribes had other plans... to not move forward, but to stop short of the Jordan River. The land on the east side of the Jordan River was never part of God's plan for His people to occupy. It was just... On the way...

But...two and a half tribes became captivated with the land of the east side of the Jordan. These tribes had large herds of cattle and saw this territory had the very best grazing land. Their decision to stop short of the Jordan was based on their lust to have what looked good to them.

They chose that over what God had planned for them. Was there no suitable pastureland on the west of the Jordan? They didn't even know, but they grabbed what looked good to them rather than choosing the perfect will of God.

But they should have known better because when God called Moses to deliver them from Egypt, He said this in Exodus 3:8

*I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead them out of Egypt into their own fertile and spacious land. It is a land flowing with milk and honey.*

But the allure of the fertile land on the other side of the Jordan was too intoxicating for them... so they separated from the 9 ½ tribes and lived with the Jordan River as a dividing line between them.

The leaders of the tribes of Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh believed that their plan...to isolate themselves on the east side of the Jordan was better than God's plan of keeping all twelve tribes together.

Listen – when we start believing that our plans are better than God's plans... consequences are just around the corner due to our choices.

Like many of us, the 2 ½ tribes saw the immediate benefit of the land they were not promised. They saw that it was ideally suited for them, from a practical perspective... despite what God wanted for them. They chose immediate blessing rather than delayed blessing.

So - were there consequences to this regrettable choice? Yes there were.

### **1- Not moving forward together caused conflict between tribes**

The 2 ½ tribes did what they agreed on and they helped the other tribes inherit the land. Joshua blessed them and sent them back with a warning to obey God's commands.

On their way back, they were confronted with the thought that perhaps, in future generations they will not be recognized as part of the nation of Israel; so they decided to build an altar on the banks of the Jordan. They wanted to be separate and live on the other side of the river, but they also want to be recognized as part of Israel.

That's like people today who want to be recognized as part of the church but they keep themselves isolated from others in the church. Here's what happened in Joshua 22:10-34

*When they came to Geliloth near the Jordan in the land of Canaan, the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh built an imposing altar there by the Jordan. And when the Israelites heard that they had built the altar on the border of Canaan near the Jordan on the Israelite side, the whole assembly of Israel gathered at Shiloh to go to war against them.*

Building this altar almost caused a civil war in the nation, because the only God-ordained place of worship for Israel was in Shiloh. You cannot have another altar. You cannot have another place where burnt offerings and worshipping the Lord takes place; so all of the other tribes are going to there to wipe them out because the two and a half tribes are now looking out for themselves and not for the nation as a whole. So the Israelites sent some leaders to confront the 2 ½ tribes.

*They said to them: "The whole assembly of the Lord says: 'How could you break faith with the God of Israel like this? How could you turn away from the Lord and build yourselves an altar in rebellion against Him now? Are you now turning away from the Lord? If you rebel against the Lord today, tomorrow He will be angry with the whole community of Israel.*

*If the land you possess is defiled, come over to the Lord's land, where the Lord's tabernacle stands, and share the land with us. But do not rebel against the Lord or against us by building an altar for yourselves, other than the altar of the Lord our God. Then Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh replied to the heads of the clans of Israel: "The Mighty One, God, the Lord! He knows! And let Israel know! If this has been in rebellion or disobedience to the Lord, do not spare us this day.*

*If we have built our own altar to turn away from the Lord and to offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, or to sacrifice fellowship offerings on it, may the Lord Himself call us to account.*

*"No! We did it for fear that some day your descendants might say to ours, 'What do you have to do with the Lord, the God of Israel? The Lord has made the Jordan a boundary between us and you — you Reubenites and Gadites! You have no share in the Lord.' So your descendants might cause ours to stop fearing the Lord.*

*"That is why we said, 'Let us get ready and build an altar — but not for burnt offerings or sacrifices.' On the contrary, it is to be a witness between us and you and the generations that follow, that we will worship the Lord at His sanctuary with our burnt offerings, sacrifices and fellowship offerings. Then in the future your descendants will not be able to say to ours, 'You have no share in the Lord.'*

*"Far be it from us to rebel against the Lord and turn away from Him today by building an altar for burnt offerings, grain offerings and sacrifices, other than the altar of the Lord our God that stands before His tabernacle."*

*When Phinehas the priest and the leaders of the community — the heads of the clans of the Israelites — heard what Reuben, Gad and Manasseh had to say, they were pleased.*

So – civil war was averted. But I want you to see the consequences of not moving forward together. When there is separation – communication is hard and misunderstanding is easy. And when misunderstanding happens it's easy to misjudge.

Fortunately, the leaders of Israel had the wisdom to communicate before attacking. Communication enabled them to see that the altar was not built out of rebellion. It was built to remind future generations that they were still part of Israel. However, when you think about it, if they hadn't wanted to be separate in the first place, none of this would have happened.

If they had moved forward together rather than stopping short of the Jordan, they would have been no conflict. But their heart was back on the other side of the Jordan and it caused a separation in the body. And separation caused conflict, misunderstanding and misjudging.

The same is true for us when we distance ourselves from others. They can begin to wonder about us and misjudge our intentions. Be careful in your life to stay connected, stay close and keep moving forward together.

## **2- Not moving forward together weakened the other tribes**

Because the tribe of Manasseh was split in half – those who went into the Promised Land were not strong enough to overcome the enemies in the land. Joshua 17:12 says:

*The sons of Manasseh could not drive out the inhabitants of those cities, but the Canaanites persisted in dwelling in that land.*

God wants us to move forward together.  
 God wants us to take possession of His promises together.  
 God wants us to defeat the enemy together.

We usually think of possessing the Promised Land as possessing our personal destiny in life. But Israel traveled to the Promised Land as a people group – a family – a community.

God's plan was for all of them to move forward together - cross the Jordan and possess the land together. But when 2 ½ tribes stopped short of the Jordan – it weakened those who crossed over.

Your decision to stop short of God's plan for your life does not just impact you! It also impacts your family, your tribe, your church.

Unfortunately, those who stop short of the Jordan usually don't care about what happens to others as long as they get what they want where they want when they want. But that didn't last long for those who did not move forward together!

### **3- Not moving forward together caused them to be defeated & enslaved**

Having remained on the east side of the Jordan...away from the other 9 ½ tribes of Israel...away from God's Tabernacle...they were vulnerable to attack by marauding bands.

Some church people today are choosing to stay of the east side of the Jordan...where it's nice and comfortable...where they call their own shots and make their own decisions.

But God's plans for your life do not involve the east side of the Jordan. God has better plans for us. Those plans involve each one of us staying connected to God's covenant community...to worship together...to encourage one another...to pray for each other...to serve side by side...to learn together...to share life together... to keep moving forward together!

None of this can happen if we choose to isolate ourselves on the wrong side of the Jordan... away from God's people. That's what the 2 ½ tribes did and they paid a price for their choice! 1 Chronicles 5:23-26 says:

*The people of the half-tribe of Manasseh were numerous; they settled in the land from Bashan to Mount Hermon. They were brave warriors, famous men, and heads of their families. But they were unfaithful to the God of their fathers and worshipped the gods of the peoples of the land, whom God had destroyed before them. So the God of Israel stirred up the spirit of King Pul of Assyria, who invaded the land and took the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh captive.*

Out of all the nation of Israel - the first ones to go astray were these two and a half tribes. They were the first ones to go after other gods and commit idolatry and they were the first ones that were actually taken captive away into Assyria.

So, yes, they wanted to be separate. But that decision had consequences. God had delivered them from slavery and now they were slaves again! Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh chose worldly blessing over spiritual blessing...and they lost everything. They reaped trouble and captivity instead of the blessing that God had intended for them.

They chose the good rather than the best. They settled. They stopped short of the Jordan and it cost them greatly.

It's amazing to think that after hearing about the land flowing with milk and honey for 40 years, that they would settle for something less. Yet, because the land on the wrong side of Jordan looked good in their eyes, they gave away what God had in store for them.

I believe these two and a half tribes in scripture are a warning to us. You can separate yourself from the will of God and the family of God, but there will be consequences.

So many people settle for a “good” life instead of God’s “best” life. They want to do what’s right in their eyes rather than God’s eyes.

- They go to church...but do not get involved.
- They have a Bible...but just can’t find time to read it.
- They have opportunities to be part of a small group for fellowship and discipleship, but they choose other activities instead.
- They are interested in missions but they never give or go!
- They know they should serve – but they stop short of the Jordan and they never volunteer for anything.
- They pray for their own needs...but have little inclination to worship God, thank God, and pray for others.

So what do these two and a half tribes say to us? I believe that they are in the Bible for a warning. To me, it illustrates two different types of believers.

One set of believers is really interested in all that God has for them. They have come through the Red Sea. They have come through the wilderness, with its hard experiences, but they want to inherit all that God has for them. They want to go into the land, they want to press into God and obtain everything that God has for them. That is one type of believer.

The other type, I believe, are a picture of what the New Testament would call

carnal believers or worldly believers. They are border dwellers - they are not in the land but they are not out, they are just on the border. Not back in the wilderness, but they are not yet in the land. Like the 2 ½ tribes they say, "Do not take us over the Jordan.'

Border dwellers stop short of the Jordan. They're not totally in the land, but they want to be close to it.

These are the type of people who want to be saved but they want to keep their sin. The question they ask is, "How much can I sin and still be right with God?"

They want the blessings of the Promised Land, but they do not want to live in the Promised Land.

Some people are like King Agrippa who told Paul in Acts 26:28 *"You almost persuade me to become a Christian."*

They've almost been persuaded to become believers in Christ but they keep stopping short – but it's time to move forward, cross the Jordan and accept Jesus as Lord.

Some people are like the people in the Bible who followed Jesus only because of the miracles He performed and the food He provided. But when He began to teach some hard truths that they did not understand, John 6:66 says:

*From this time, many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed Him.*

If you stopped following Christ when things got difficult - it's time to move forward, take up your cross and follow Him!

Some people are like the rich young ruler – wanting to follow Christ but unwilling to give up anything to do so. It's time to move forward and count everything loss for Christ!

Some people are like Demas – formerly totally sold out to Jesus – but the love of the world pulled you back across the Jordan.

It's time to move forward, cross the Jordan and return to your first love!

Some people want to go it alone – but it's time to move forward together!