

Faithfulness to God

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Unfaithfulness is something we celebrate as a society. It's looked down upon to stick with the same company, to embrace traditional values, or to be fervent in your beliefs. Instead, we're encouraged to innovate ourselves, experiment with our values, try on new identities. But when a set of beliefs claims to explicate reality, and when the center of the beliefs isn't mere dogma but a holy, loving God, we ought to come to terms with what he's saying—to question our unfaithfulness, interrogate experimentation, and embrace faithfulness. This story shows us how and why *faithfulness* matters to God.

True Faithfulness

Our story opens with Joshua commending three tribes for their faithfulness. The tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh left their pasturelands east of the Jordan river seven years ago to help the rest of Israel conquer Canaan. After a lot of war, and the conquest complete, now they get to go home. But before they leave, Joshua encourages faithfulness in two ways. First, he **commends** them for keeping all Moses said: [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 \(22:3\)](#). He draws public attention to the personal nature of their faithfulness, noting they haven't forsaken their brothers. It's not just civic duty; they weren't mercenaries; it was faithfulness *to a family, God's people, down to the day*. They made great sacrifice to be away from their families. On this note, I'd like to publically thank everyone in this church family that serves. Many of you give up time to serve other's children in Kids Life, sacrifice time with family to set up the Ballet and tear it down to create a warm worship environment for us. Others serve in security, hospitality, finances, music, CG Leaders, deacons, staff, and elders. I commend you for your faithfulness, down to today—God is pleased with you. I know a person who served his church for years while struggling with belief, his mind riddled with doubt. In addition to our lengthy conversations and intense study, he regularly set up/broke down Sundays. When I asked him if he was ready for a break from service, he said Oh no, service is part of what keeps me faithful, helps me deal with my doubt. Now why would he say this? [Because he knew faith isn't merely intellectual; it's behavioral](#). When someone says I Do on wedding day, it's a statement of belief—your're the one—but its also an act—I give you everything. True belief doesn't just learn; it acts, serves even (especially) when it doesn't want to. This is something we admire in Jesus who, not wanting to go to the cross, said to his Father not my will but yours be done. Although part of him desired not to serve, he chose to act on what he believed, to be *faithful*. *And choosing not to serve others shows how impoverished our real beliefs are*. Where do you need to serve? Jesus has served us so well, we are freed to serve and bless others. A second way Joshua encourages faithfulness is to offer **caution**: [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 \(5\)](#). Joshua could have skipped this, banked on the tribes great track record, but he knew better. He knew, returning to the comforts of home, now with great wealth, they would be tempted to coast, to be unfaithful (8). Be careful, he says. Are you careful to obey? One author warns, [“There is a hardness, an insensible lack of spiritual sense, gathered in](#)

prosperity, that, if not watched against, will expose the heart to the deceits of sin and baits of Satan...Many men's negligence in it hath cost them dearly" (Owen). That person who served faithfully *was not careful* and eventually it cost him and his wife dearly. Prosperity can be the devil's playground. A friend called me this week asking me to pray for him. He confessed that he lacked joy in Christ and love for God. I asked him if he had any idea why and he said, "Comfort." I asked, is it a comfort in particular? He said, No one, just the collective comfort of my life. I can do what's required, even serve my church and family, and still lack love for God. Faithfulness isn't just serving; it's *wanting*: "[Alas, it is easy to want things from God and not to want God himself](#)" (St. Augustine). Do you want God or just things from him? Prosperity can make us spiritually insensible, irrational, convincing us we need some new thing, instead of the most ravishing Thing. We must be *careful* not just to obey *but to cling to God*: [cling to him and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul](#). To cling to something you have to be close, so close there's contact, skin, muscle, bone clinching it for dear life. Are you clinging to God? Without that, we become unfaithful. Without love, faithfulness withers into duty. But with love, faithfulness flowers into glory. Who do *you* caution? Who do *you* commend? God grant us grace to be faithful.

Pure Worship

Returning to Gilead, the three tribes build an immense altar, and hearing about it Israel reacts by sending a group to investigate. They send Phineas, known for his zeal, who once skewered an idol-worshipping couple in bed with a spear. His presence signals *spiritual offence*. In tow are ten heads of state, one from each tribe, and an army. *National offence*. Why such a strong show of force? Israel explains by comparing the tribes action to the idol-worshipping couple skewered in Peor, and to Achan, who broke faith with God and stole devoted things. But what was so wrong about building an altar? The answer is tucked away in this statement, "[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](#)" (19). Israel fears they'll be complicit in the *building of another altar*. According to Jewish Law, the only altar allowed for sacrifice was the one in front of the temple. The three tribes built a replica next to the Jordan. Now why a single altar? One altar, one faith, one God. The centralization of worship, particularly in front of the place where God's presence dwells, *promoted purity of devotion to God*. It kept satellite altars from springing up and mixing with Canaanite beliefs, gods, and practices. It promoted pure worship, clinging to God with all your heart. You could say competing altars threatened true love. Do you have competing altars? In the Oscar winning film *Phantom Thread*, Reynolds Woodcock is tailor who is meticulous about his daily rhythms, working environment, and design. People who trifle with these things get the short end of the stick. He falls in love with Alma, who gets closer to him than anyone else. And yet even she is snubbed, ignored, asked to leave the breakfast table because she is cutting her toast too loudly. Woodcock is absorbed with his brand, his rhythms, his work, which is to say he is absorbed *with himself*. Feeling distance in their relationship, Alma makes him tea from a poisonous mushroom, using just enough to set him back for a few days but not kill him. In his agony, he is detached from his work, *but put in touch with his real need*. Only when he is shocked into need, does he realize he's missing something, that there is something *more* worthy of his devotion—love. She insists on it. God calls us to true love, to cling to him with all of our heart and soul. If we refuse, he'll induce weakness to

show us the truth, there's something more worthy of our devotion. What altars do you need to walk away from to return to your true Love? To be faithful.

Jesus as Faithful

The tribes respond to Israel's charge of creating a competing altar by insisting they didn't intend to sacrifice on it. Instead, they erected it as a witness to their posterity that, although separated by a river, they are united with Israel worship of the one, true God: "[The Mighty One, God, the Lord! The Mighty One, God, the Lord! He knows...](#)" (22). In this appeal they deliberately echo the Jewish *shema* from Deuteronomy 6, which affirms the oneness and uniqueness of YHWH, the Lord your God is *one*. Contrary to what it looks like, they are advocating purity of worship to be passed down to their children: [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? So your children might make our children cease to worship the Lord](#) (24-25). More than good schools, positive influences children need a community that worships, parents who put God above their children, and teach them not just to want things from God, but to want God himself. Hundreds of years later, St. Paul addressed a similar concern with the church in Corinth. He writes: [For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist](#)" (8:5-6). And in writing this he does something radical for the Jewish audience. He describes God the Father *and* Jesus as one. He places Jesus in the very identity of God/YHWH, showing they are one in essence, and one in service: *all things exist from the Father and through the Son*. They are faithful to their identity, when we are not. So faithful, that Jesus drinks the 100 proof cup of our weakness to redeem us with his pure love. Faithful to the end. Pure worship includes Jesus. Cling to him.