

# AND WHEN THE BATTLE'S OVER

## *JOSHUA-THE ADVENTURE AND VICTORY OF FAITH*

by Doug Goins

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You may remember the *Peanuts* comic strip by Charles Schultz where Charlie Brown plaintively wailed, "How can we be wrong, when we're so sincere?" I have felt that way many times in my adult life. There might be a cause to which I commit myself wholeheartedly only to find out later that I'm on the wrong side. Or there might be a person I champion only to find out that they aren't what they seemed, and I feel personally embarrassed or betrayed. Sometimes I get myself in trouble when my selective memory causes me to misrepresent the facts of my own history, usually to my advantage. That happens when you get older. As they say about middle-aged athletes, the older they get, the better they were.

In Joshua 22 we're going to be confronted with a story like that. It's the story of Israelite soldiers, brothers in arms from all twelve of the tribes. They're going to be sent home to their families by General Joshua after they've done battle together for seven years against all the cities of opposition. And the two-and-a-half tribes that Moses had allowed to settle east of the Jordan River, Reuben and Gad and half of Manasseh, are going to be decommissioned and sent back to their territories in Bashan and Gilead and Moab. But that separation as these tribes head east across the Jordan is going to result in spiritual conflict between the eastern and western tribes. There is going to be confusion over history, behavior, and motives. Both sides are going to make sincere attempts to resolve the conflict. Both sides are going to invoke the name of the Lord and use God's presence and word to buttress their respective positions. But in the end a wholehearted sincerity isn't going to be enough.

We're going to be challenged ourselves in this story to examine our own behavior and motives. The question will come: What are we being controlled by in life? Are we controlled mostly by circumstances and expediency? Or are we controlled by the clear revelation of God's word?

There are three chapters left in this story, and they fit together as a final summary of how life in the land of Canaan is to be lived. It is to be a life in covenant relationship with God, a life of worship and gratitude before him.

Let's briefly review this great adventure story of victory, of how God accomplishes everything he says he'll accomplish through his people Israel. In the opening paragraph of chapter 1 when God called Joshua to lead the nation and commissioned him, God promised Joshua three things: (1) that they would cross the Jordan River and enter the land of Canaan, (2) that all the enemies they faced would be defeated in God's power, and (3) that the land would be divided up and settled. The first five chapters that we looked at together (Discovery Papers 4454-4461) covered the crossing of the Jordan River and the period of preparation for warfare at Gilgal. Chapters 6-12 (Discovery Papers 4462-4467) recorded battle after battle that God fought on behalf of his people. They won the battles at Jericho, at Ai, at Gibeon up in the highlands; all the battles in the southern territories of Canaan; and the final, decisive battles in the north of the land. Those promises were fulfilled. Then finally in chapters 13-21 (Discovery Papers 4468-4472), the land was divided up as an inheritance among all the conquering tribes, and they were settled. There was peace in the land.

Joshua 21:43-45 summarized all that God had done up to that point: "Thus the LORD gave to Israel all the land which he swore to give to their fathers; and having taken possession of it, they settled there. And the LORD gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers; not one of all their enemies had withstood

them, for the LORD had given all their enemies into their hands. Not one of all the good promises which the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass."

### **God's rest or our possession**

The next eight verses in chapter 22 describe how Joshua discharges the soldiers of Reuben and Gad and the eastern half of Manas'seh to their areas. In verses 1-3 Joshua commends these soldiers:

**Then Joshua summoned the Reubenites, and the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manas'seh, 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; you have not forsaken your brethren these many days, down to this day, but have been careful to keep the charge of the LORD your God.**

These two-and-a-half tribes are commended because through the seven years of warfare they have kept their word. They had asked Moses in the trans-Jordan before entering the land if they could stay and settle there, but they promised that they would send soldiers to fight with the other nine-and-a-half tribes. And Joshua said, "You kept your word to the Lord, to Moses, to me, and, perhaps most importantly, to your brothers in arms."

Look at the dismissal in verses 4-8, as he sends these two-and-a-half tribes back to their families:

**And now the LORD your God has given rest to your brethren, as he promised them; therefore turn and go to your home in the land where your possession lies, which Moses the servant of the LORD gave you on the other side of the Jordan. Take good care to observe the commandment and the law which 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 cleave to him, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul." So Joshua blessed them, and sent them away; and they went to their homes.**

**Now to the one half of the tribe of Manas'seh Moses had given a possession in Bashan; but to the other half Joshua had given a possession beside their brethren in the land west of the Jordan. And when Joshua sent them away to their homes and blessed them, he said to them, "Go back to your homes with much wealth, and with very many cattle, with silver, gold, bronze, and iron, and with much clothing; divide the spoil of your enemies with your brethren."**

In our study of Joshua 1:10-18 (Discovery Paper 4456), we saw that not all the soldiers from those two-and-a-half tribes joined the armies of Israel. Some of the soldiers stayed to defend their own lands and families. In wonderful generosity, General Joshua allows the soldiers who did fight to take extra home to share with the soldiers who hadn't joined them in the battles of conquest.

This formal discharge gives these men the freedom to go home to their families in trans-Jordan. But look carefully at verse 4: Joshua uses the language of contrast in describing the possessions west and east of the Jordan. To the nine-and-a-half tribes west of the Jordan, he says God gave rest. That's the sixth time that this gift of rest is mentioned in the book of Joshua. It's very important, and it's always defined for the tribes west of the Jordan. To the two-and-a-half tribes east of the Jordan, he says Moses gave a possession. And it says, "Go to your homes" four different times in those verses, but literally in the Hebrew it reads, "Go to your tents."

The heart of our study is an attempt to understand the important difference between what it means to live at rest in Canaan west of the Jordan and what it means to live in tents east of the Jordan. We've already looked at this contrast a couple of times before in Joshua 1:10-18 and in Joshua 13. Rest is an important concept throughout the book of Joshua, and it means much more than simply the cessation of conflict. The word carries connotations of both victory and safety. God had promised Israel a resting place in the land of Canaan, and the book of Joshua is the record of how he kept that promise.

More than once we've seen the importance of the spiritual application of this for us as God's people today. We

probably find it most clearly stated in Hebrews 3 and 4. Canaan is a picture of the rest that we experience as Christians. In this rest we learn how to surrender more and more completely to the lordship of Jesus Christ in our lives. We learn to let go of confidence in ourselves and the old ways of living life that we've developed over the years. We learn how to trust God, as unnatural as that feels to us. Imagine what it was like for the soldiers of the nine-and-a-half tribes west of the Jordan to go home to their families after seven years of warfare-the love they experienced, the joy they found, the treasures they shared with their families. That's just a small picture of what God wants to give us as we enter into his rest and learn how to trust him and submit to him. Rest is ultimately the experience of living free of fear, of knowing that we're safe and secure in the Lord Jesus no matter what the circumstances are. It's victorious adventure as a lifestyle.

But the contrasting picture of living in tents in the possession east of the Jordan portrays a different lifestyle. Tents in the Old Testament are always associated with people on the move. That's not necessarily a bad thing; moving can be responding quickly to follow the leading of the Lord. But here it speaks of transitoriness, of restlessness. We're going to see that restlessness lived out in the history of these two-and-a-half tribes east of the Jordan.

The word "possession" in verse 4 is a different Hebrew word from the one used to refer to God's possession for his people west of the river. This word refers to something that the two-and-a-half tribe possess properly, but not naturally; something that has been acquired through special concession. Remember, we saw that Moses' agreement with the two-and-a-half tribes' request to stay east of the Jordan was a concession. It was not God's idea, and it was not the best of ideas. But Moses was mostly concerned that the two-and-a-half tribes be willing to send soldiers to fight in the battles of conquest.

From the very beginning of the book it was clear that God wanted all the people to live together in the land. Joshua 1:1-2: "After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' minister, 'Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise, go [cross] over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land which I am giving to them, to the people of Israel.'" God wanted all twelve tribes to cross over together in unity. Remember the importance of the term "crossing over," leaving behind the old life and entering into the new life of fullness and completeness and abundance that God had prepared for them.

Joshua chooses his words carefully in 22:4, and they make it clear that these people who want to live in the trans-Jordan are returning to second-best, to a possession that God had conceded to them only by his permissive will.

Over and over again in our lives as believers we are confronted with the same choices. Are we going to move by faith into areas of risk, being stretched, living outside of our comfort zones? Are we going to cross over, as we're called to do? Or are we going to retreat back into familiar, comfortable patterns and habitual ways of believing that don't even honor Christ, that are merely self-serving?

I was part of a team that just came back from ministering in some prisons in Mexico. We were confronted by that choice while we were there. We all confessed at times to insecurity. It was an intense trip, and we went into unbelievable hellholes. There were times of physical danger. There were times of feeling totally incapable of effectively communicating the love of Jesus Christ. There were times when we tried to manipulate our dear Mexican hosts to get them to change their agenda to fit us so that we would feel more secure.

It may not be fair for me to speak for all nine men who went, but I think that on Saturday morning we basically settled for second-best instead of honoring our hosts by doing what they wanted us to do. They had a wonderful celebration that morning with three thousand children of prisoners. They were celebrating the Day of the Three Kings. The children all came to a huge building where our hosts put on a wonderful evangelistic program for them, fed them, and then gave every child a toy. We had the privilege of working with our hosts organizing and packing three thousand toys into this room and helping lay them out. But about 10:00 a.m. we made a choice to go back to the security of our hotel, because we had been going very intensely for three-and-a-half days, and we felt we had earned the right to watch the Forty-Niners football game. The rest of the day, a number of us admitted to a nagging sense that we had done the wrong thing because we wanted to go back to "gringo" food and safe surroundings and to enjoy football together. We ended up having to apologize to our hosts.

## A shaky identity

When we get to 22:9-10, the import of what Joshua has said to these two-and-a-half tribes begins to sink in:

**So the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manas'seh 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.**

**And when they came to the region about the Jordan, that lies in the land of Canaan, the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manas'seh built there an altar by the Jordan, an altar of great size.**

Again, Moses made the decision that they could stay there, and God supported it. It's true in our lives that if we demand something strongly enough, God will give in and let us have what we want. We may suffer consequences later on, as we're going to see in the lives of the two-and-a-half tribes. As they begin to travel east and leave their brothers, it's as if they have a growing sense of isolation. They remember the great things they shared together for seven years as they pass landmarks on their way east. They're leaving behind their brothers, the tabernacle, the priesthood, the sacrifices for sin. They're leaving behind the land in which God promised to bless them, and returning to the land they chose for themselves.

Back in Numbers 32, when the two-and-a-half tribes first asked Moses if they could stay east of the Jordan, there is no record that Moses ever consulted the Lord on the decision, because he was mostly concerned about having enough fighting men. But the text does say that at first Moses was angry with them because their request was selfish. He was concerned about unity, but then he conceded to their desires. His first instinct of anger, of concern about the good of the whole nation, was probably the right instinct, because there is no question that Canaan was God's appointed land for his people. Any place short of Canaan wasn't what he wanted for them.

Remember, too, on what basis the two-and-a-half tribes made the decision to stay east of the Jordan: self-interest. They said it was lush grazing land for their cattle. They were already settled, and it was much more comfortable to stay there. The decision they made was very similar to the one Lot made when he chose to leave his uncle Abraham in Genesis 13 and pitch his tents toward Sodom, because it was fertile ground and a more beautiful place to live. In this decision, the people of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manas'seh divided the nation. They separated themselves from the blessing of the land of Canaan. As we've seen before, they were farther from the tabernacle and much closer to the influence of the pagan nations that surrounded them. They became borderline believers.

Remember that Egypt represents our old life in sin before we were baptized into Christ, as Israel was baptized into Moses in the passage through the Red Sea. As I've said already, Canaan is a beautiful picture of all the richness, fullness, and adventure that God has for us. The wilderness represents the experience of believers who do not enter by faith into the rest that God has for them. Hebrews 3 warns us of that possibility. These two-and-a-half tribes portray believers who have experienced the blessings and even some of the great victories. They've experienced some warfare, they've seen God conquer, they've tasted some of the inheritance in Christ. But they prefer to live across the border, outside God's appointed place of blessing, and they end up in the history that follows with a restless, distancing faith.

Do you know people who live a distancing Christianity, who have a foot in both worlds, playing both ends against the middle in terms of following Christ and playing by the world's rules? The British Bible commentator C.H. Macintosh wrote this at the turn of the century: "Faith can never be satisfied with anything short of the true possession and portion of God's people. An undecided, half-and-half Christian is more inconsistent than an open out-and-out worldling or infidel."

So how do the two-and-a-half tribes deal with this ambivalence as they head east? They build a huge altar that can be seen from a long distance. They build it on the Canaan side of the river. They want it to be a reminder

that they really do belong to the nation of Israel. If they lived in the land on the west side of the river where they belonged, no one would ever question their nationality. But living outside the land, they give the impression that they're not Israelites. This is a very artificial, external statement that they make to reinforce an identity that is pretty shaky on their part. If these people understood the call of lifestyle in God that Moses gave them (verse 5), they wouldn't have to worry about their identity. We're going to see in the verses that follow that they're very concerned about how their decision is going to affect their children. They're hoping the altar will somehow guarantee success for the generations that follow. But history will prove that the altar doesn't really accomplish anything.

## Creating confusion

Verses 11-14 tell us that word gets out very quickly about this altar that has been set up. We see confusion between the two halves of the nation over the history, behavior, and motivation of the two-and-a-half tribes.

**And the people of Israel heard say, "Behold, the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh have built an 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." 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.**

**Then the people of Israel sent to the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh, in the land of Gilead, Phin'ehas the son of Eleazar the priest, 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.**

The concern they have is that this new altar is being set up in competition with the place for worship and sacrifice that God has ordained, which is at Shiloh (eventually it will end up in Jerusalem). Remember, part of the responsibility of warfare that the Israelites were given as they came into the land was to cleanse the land from pagan worship. All the altars that were built to the Canaanite gods were to be destroyed. There was to be only one true place of worship of the Lord. So the conclusion they jump to is that something has gone really wrong with their brothers in the two-and-a-half tribes. Look at the seriousness of the charges in the appeal they make to the two-and-a-half tribes in verses 15-20:

**And they came to the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh, in the land of Gilead, and they said to them, "Thus says the whole congregation of the LORD, 'What is this treachery which 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? Have we not had enough of the sin at Pe'or from which even yet we have not cleansed ourselves, and for which there came a plague upon the congregation of the LORD, that you must turn away this day from following the LORD? And if you rebel against the LORD today he will be angry with the whole congregation of Israel tomorrow. But now, if your land is unclean, pass over [cross 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 yourselves an altar other than the altar of the LORD our God. 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.'"**

Phin'ehas is probably the spokesman for this delegation that represents all of the other nine-and-a-half tribes. He uses three very strong words in challenging the hearts of these two-and-a-half tribes. The first one is the word treachery, which is sometimes translated trespass or transgression. Joshua has commended them at the beginning of the chapter for their loyalty to the other tribes, but now the concern is that they're faithless not just toward the other tribes but toward the Lord himself. He also accuses them of turning away or backsliding, gradually drifting away from the Lord. The strongest word, which he uses three times in this paragraph, is rebel. He really accuses them of apostasy, deliberately resisting God's will, disobeying his law. The fear is that this is what this unauthorized place of worship represents.

Phin'ehas gives a couple of examples from Israel's recent history. Both are incidents that we have studied

together before. One is the sin at Pe'or, in which the Jewish men got involved in a Moabite sexual orgy. Some kind of sexually transmitted disease came into the nation, and twenty-four thousand people died because of their sin. Phin'ehas says that was the wrath of God on them for disobeying his word. He also reminds them of the sin of Achan (see Discovery Paper 4463). Phin'ehas says, "We all suffered because of Achan. We lost the next battle at Ai, and thirty-six Israelite soldiers died, because of his sin. And he and his whole family were executed. Don't you understand the seriousness of what all of us together can suffer because of what you're doing in building this altar?"

In verse 19 the nine-and-a-half tribes make a gracious, generous offer to the two-and-a-half tribes. There is great spiritual discernment in the offer. They invite the two-and-a-half tribes to cross over and join with them. They even say they're willing to share their land with them. There is more than enough room. Remember, earlier they struggled at times because they didn't feel there was enough room in the tribal allotments for everyone to live together. But they understand the seriousness of the decision that these two-and-a-half tribes are making, that they're not living in the right place. They can't substitute the presence of the Lord anywhere else.

### **Sincere motives are not enough**

Tragically, the two-and-a-half tribes don't respond to the invitation to cross over and join their brothers living west of the Jordan, claiming the inheritance within the land that God had promised to bless. In contrast, look at their response in verses 21-29. Do you think they're protesting this thing a bit too much?

**Then the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh said in answer to the heads of the families of Israel, "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 toward the LORD, spare us not today for building an altar to turn away from following the LORD; or if we did so to offer burnt offerings or cereal offerings or peace offerings on it, may the LORD himself take vengeance. Nay, 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? For the LORD has made the Jordan a boundary between us and you, you Reubenites and Gadites; you have no portion in the LORD.' So your children might make our children cease to worship the LORD. Therefore we said, 'Let us now build an altar, not for burnt offering, nor for sacrifice, but to be a witness between us and you, and between the generations after us, that we do perform the service of the LORD in his presence with our burnt offerings and sacrifices and peace offerings; lest your children say to our children in time to come, "You have no portion in the LORD."' 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.' 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, cereal offering, or sacrifice, other than the altar of the LORD our God that stands before his tabernacle!"**

Don't you hate to be misunderstood? I hate it when people don't understand why I do what I do. And like these folks, I have a tendency to over-explain. If I say it enough times, maybe it will get through and you won't confront me or challenge me or question my motives. They feel they have to cite God's name six times, and then take this firm oath on the name of the Lord. They're basically saying, "God knows our hearts are pure and our motives are sincere."

This really has practical implications for us. Neither the fact that God knows my heart nor my taking an oath guarantees that my actions are right. Jeremiah 17:9 makes it clear that I don't even know my own heart. We are by sinful nature intrinsically deceitful, God's word says, and we can shield all sorts of questionable activities by saying, "But the Lord knows my heart, you don't. Who are you to judge me?" I've developed that to an art form. How about you? The apostle Paul shows the right balance in writing to the Corinthians, who have challenged him and his motivation. Paul says, "For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men" (2 Corinthians 8:21).

When a whole nation misinterprets what is supposed to be a good activity and it brings them to the brink of war, then there's got to be something wrong with the activity. We have to be willing to open ourselves up to accountability to and counsel from our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Basically, what these tribes do is to protest that they're not understood-they're not trying to set up a rival religion, it's not going to be for sacrifices. It will be a witness to the unity that exists between the tribes east and west of the Jordan. In verse 24 it's interesting that their concern is driven by fear of what might happen. Are you controlled at all by fear of the what-ifs? "What if terrible things happen-I'd better take action to guard against those possibilities." And the fear is about their children, they say. They sort of shift the blame, saying, "It may be your children who say to our children in generations to come, 'Who are you people? You aren't Israelites. You don't have a place in the Lord.' You have the worldly children, we don't." They bring that issue up three times. They piously talk about their concern for their children, but remember, again, what really motivated them to stay there before was material security and self-interest. So it sounds a bit lame now when they say they're so concerned about the next generation, and how all this might affect them.

They also blame God in verses 24 and 25. They say God is the one who made the river a boundary. Is that true? No, they're the ones who chose to live east of the river. They artificially made the river a boundary, not God, nor the western tribes.

Remember, when the Israelites came up out of the river back in chapter 4, Joshua also built an altar of witness in the same spot, from twelve stones out of the river. It was to remind the people that they had left the old life behind, they had come up out of the river to this new life in the land. So there are two conflicting altars now, built side-by-side. Joshua's altar was to the glory of God, to the life of God expressed through his people. This new altar is to human expediency and human wisdom, to the desire to live where they want to live and say, "God bless the whole thing."

The story closes with everyone-Phin'ehas, the delegation, and the eastern tribes-being pleased. They are pleased because now the altar will probably guarantee that they won't fall under God's wrath, and because there won't be a civil war. The last verse of the chapter says,

**The Reubenites and the Gadites called the altar Witness; "For," they said, "it is a witness between us that the LORD is God."**

But if God was absolutely sovereign over their lives, why did they choose to live where they wanted to live instead of submitting to his gracious, loving desire that they live together in unity in the land?

There is a sad historical footnote in 1 Chronicles 5:25-26. It says of these two-and-a-half tribes, "But they transgressed against the God of their fathers, and played the harlot after the gods of the peoples of the land, whom God had destroyed before them. So the God of Israel stirred up the spirit of Pul king of Assyria, the spirit of Til'gath-pilne'ser king of Assyria, and he carried them away, namely, the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manas'seh...." Thus ends the history of these people who wanted God to bless their self-serving plans.

The next two messages on chapters 23 and 24 are going to focus on the restful joy of living in the land, on what it means to surrender to the lordship of Christ, what it means to trust God more and more for every aspect of life, and how life can be an exciting adventure. But this chapter is a serious challenge to us, and it asks us the hard question, Are there priorities that we've committed ourselves to that make us unwilling to live where God wants us to live, to enter into his rest? Have we been sincerely wrong about priorities? Are we driven more by circumstances or expediency than the clear revelation of God's word? Are we trying to create our own security, to live in self-controlled comfort zones?

Like these two-and-a-half tribes, we tend to minimize the seriousness of living on the borderline. We tend to rationalize our distancing behavior from the Lord and from his people. Like them, I've bristled when my brothers and sisters have challenged me. I've said, "But you don't understand my history. What right do you have to question me? You don't know my heart. How could you question my sincerity toward the Lord?" And then we end up puzzled at our restlessness, our fearful anxiety, our sense of alienation from the Lord and from

the body of Christ.

The good news is that the invitation in Hebrews 3 still stands today. Listen to it again: "Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts...But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin...Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts...." (verses 7-8, 13, 15).

How is God speaking to you today? Has he shown you that there is indeed distancing, that in areas of your life you're living where you please, that you've been unwilling to trust him, to cross over and enter into the fullness of relationship with him? If so, the good news is still that it's never too late, as long as it's today. You can get that straight with the Lord. You can tell him that you want to live with him and you want to know more and more of resting in him, of deeper intimacy with him, of what it means to trust him as your loving Lord.

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Doug Goins  
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