

13.13 Two and One-Half Tribes Go Home (Joshua 22:1–34)

✓ “*Check*” it out; opinion, inference, supposed conversation, or fact one can verify follows.

[. . .] indicates a remark to the teacher that should not be read aloud. It also indicates answers to questions.

Visuals and Tools:

- Pictures and other visuals found at the end of this lesson. Please give credit to the sources of pictures.
- Check “Activities” and “Handwork” found below for additional needed materials.

Bible Time Tips and Terms to Teach: Tips and terms are enlarged for flashcards at the end of this lesson. Print, cut out, and glue to card stock, or just print on colorful cardstock.

- *spoil*: the rewards of war taken from the enemy
- *witness*: someone or something that gives evidence or proof

Scripture: (ESV)

Joshua 22:1 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.

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. 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.” 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.

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. 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.”

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. 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? 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. 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!”

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.”

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 [*Ed*] Witness, “For,” they said, “it is a witness between us that the Lord is God.”

Introduction/Review:

Not all the people formerly living in Canaan had been destroyed, and not every section of land had been conquered. Subduing the people of the land was now in the hands of the individual tribes. Each tribe gave cities to the Levites out of their inheritances, including six cities of refuge where a manslayer could be safe.

Last week we read Joshua’s summary of the results God had given. This is what he said: “The Lord gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers. They settled there, and the Lord gave them rest on every side. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the Lord had given all their enemies into their hands. Not one word of all the good promises that the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass” (Joshua 21:43–45).

Story:

Returning home

Remember the two and one-half tribes from the other side of the Jordan—Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh? They had helped their brothers fight for these past ✓five to fourteen years.¹ Now Joshua called them to him to say, “You have obeyed all that Moses and I commanded you. You stayed here to fight for your brothers. Now that the Lord has given rest from our enemies, go back to your land that Moses promised you on the other side of Jordan. But be careful to observe God’s law and commandment—to love

the Lord, walk in His ways, keep His commandments, hold to Him, and serve Him with all your heart.”

Joshua blessed them by saying, “Go back to your homes with much wealth—lots of livestock, silver, gold, bronze, iron, and much clothing. Divide all this spoil with your brothers back home. Now you may go.”

These two and one-half tribes with their many riches traveled to the Jordan River, which they had to cross in order to get to their inheritances. There at the river they stopped to build a giant stone altar ✓in the vicinity where Israel had earlier crossed the Jordan.² Then they got themselves across the river and returned home.

The big question

The question that became a big deal was, why did they build an altar?

That question troubled people west of Jordan when they heard about the massive altar. They felt sure that the two and one-half tribes were already departing from the ways of the Lord God. If that were true, then they, too, were in trouble, for God would punish them all.

Western Israel gathered at Shiloh [locate] to prepare for war against those renegade two and one-half tribes. Why war? God had said not to offer sacrifices on just any ol’ altar but to offer only on the bronze altar at the tabernacle, which was now at Shiloh. But those tribes had built another altar! That was idolatry!

Westerners’ challenge

But before they actually marched forth to war, Phinehas, who was the son of Eleazar the high priest, and ten princes—one from each tribe—went to the land of Gilead [locate] to speak to Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh and possibly dissuade them from their suspected idolatry. They made these points [show enlarged copy found below]:

- “We speak for the whole congregation.
- “What kind of high-handed sin is this that you are turning away from following the Lord by building an altar? You are rebelling.
- “Aren’t we still feeling the consequences for our grievous offense against God caused by Balaam and for which a plague came upon the congregation?”

Students, let’s stop here a moment and remind ourselves of who Balaam was. You might think of the donkey that talked when you think of Balaam. Remember that he was a prophet hired by the king of Moab [locate] to curse Israel. However, God made Balaam prophesy only blessings on Israel. Nevertheless, Balaam recommended a way to cause God’s curse on His people. That device was to encourage Israel’s men to hook up with Moab’s and Ammon’s women so that those women would turn the hearts of the Israelites away from God. Many thousands died in a plague from God because of this sin. The western Israelites stated, “Still from [this sin] even yet we have not cleansed ourselves.” Certainly neither the Easterners nor the Westerners wanted more such judgment and punishment.

Let’s go back to the points the nine and one-half tribes were making.

- “Today you will sin, and tomorrow God will judge the whole congregation.
- “If your land is unclean,³ then come on over to the west side of Jordan. Stay with us, but do not rebel against God or us by building an altar besides God’s altar in Shiloh.
- “Remember Achan’s sin. One man sinned, and wrath fell upon the whole congregation of Israel. He did not perish alone for his iniquity.”

Easterners’ response

Those points were serious ones with serious consequences. How would Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh reply? They did so with sincere protest:

- “The Mighty One, God, the Lord! The Mighty One, God, the Lord!”⁴ (Notice, they said this twice.) “He knows, and let Israel know! If we built the altar in rebellion against the Lord, do not spare us today. Or if we did so to offer burnt offerings or grain offerings or peace offerings on it, may the Lord himself take vengeance.
- “Rather, we built it because we thought your children someday might say to our children, ‘You have no portion with the Lord God of Israel because you are separated from us by the Jordan River.’ By saying that, your children might make our children stop worshipping the Lord.
- “Therefore, we built this altar, not for burnt offering or sacrifice, but that it might be a witness between us and our grandchildren that we will come and offer sacrifices at God’s altar and so that your children won’t say later, ‘You have no part in the Lord.’
- “We said, ‘This altar is built like God’s pattern, not for sacrifices or offering. It is for a witness between us and the generations following so that we might offer at the tabernacle without having your children say that we can’t. God forbid that we should rebel against the Lord to offer sacrifices here instead of at the tabernacle.’”

Satisfaction

Whew! That which they had just heard ✓was likely not what the nine and one-half tribes expected to hear. What a turn of events! What a relief! Reuben, Gad, and half-Manasseh were not departing from the Lord!

Phinehas and the ten rulers responded, “We see the Lord is among us because you did not sin in this. Now you have delivered the people of Israel from the hand of the Lord.”

I want to say, “Praise the Lord!” Let’s do it. Say, “Praise the Lord!” [“Praise the Lord!”]

Then these eleven men returned to their land across the Jordan and told the people what they had learned—that the two and one-half tribes were not rebelling but had set up their altar as a witness.

This report pleased the people, and they blessed God. Maybe they said, “Praise the Lord!” Let’s say it again. [“Praise the Lord!”]

From then on, instead of seeing that altar as a sign of rebellion, the Israelites all called it *Ed*, the Hebrew word for *Witness*. They said, “This altar is a witness between us that the Lord is God.”

¹“For the space of fourteen years, which is the commonly received notion of the Jews; seven years according to them the land was subduing, and seven more spent in dividing it”

(<https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/joshua-22-3.html>).

²Scholars disagree as to whether the altar was built on the western side or the eastern side of the Jordan River. From the mere sound of words, it seems to this author as if it was built on the Canaan (western) side near where Israel had crossed.

³“That is, if it was judged to be [unclean] by them, because not cleansed from the sins of the former inhabitants of it by sacrifice, or because there was no altar in it to offer up sacrifice for the expiation of sin”

(<https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/joshua-22-19.html>).

⁴“[N]ow this is repeated by them for the confirmation of their faith . . . and to express their earnest and vehement affection for this truth, and to clear themselves from any imputation of idolatry, or thought of it”

(<https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/joshua-22-22.html>).

Lessons from this lesson:

- We see Jesus:

“Christ [is] typified both by the altar and the sacrifices on it; and who is but one, one priest, one

sacrifice, one altar, one Mediator and Saviour” (<https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/joshua-22-29.html>).

Activities:

- Play dough: a stone altar or stones to make an altar
- Snack: Crusty Soft Rolls to resemble stones. A ten-minute video gives a recipe and instructions at <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=Crusty+No+Knead+Artisan+Bread+Recipe%2bbig+family&docid=608008845993380129&mid=EE3E3C1B2E94DD3E8323EE3E3C1B2E94DD3E8323&view=detail&FORM=VIRE>. This recipe could be cut in half and made into rolls instead of loaves. Hints for crusty soft rolls include letting the dough “work” overnight or longer in the refrigerator and having steam in the oven. Serve with butter and jelly if you wish.
- Ask students if they know anyone with the word *Ed* in their name. Encourage them to inform these people of the Hebrew meaning of their name, “witness.”
- Review questions: (Game: Cut roughly rounded circles out of felt to represent stones. For each correct answer, a student may place a stone to form an altar.)
 1. Why did Joshua call the two and one-half tribes to him? [To say they could now go home.]
 2. What were the names of these two and one-half tribes? [Reuben, Gad, one-half Manasseh.]
 3. Name one thing Joshua said the two and one-half tribes should be careful to do. [“Be careful to observe God’s law and commandment—to love the Lord, walk in His ways, keep His commandments, hold to Him, and serve Him with all your heart.”]
 4. What did the two and one-half tribes do on their way back home? [Built a large stone altar.]
 5. What did the other tribes do to show their displeasure about this altar? [Gathered at Shiloh to prepare for war.]
 6. Who went to Gilead to negotiate with Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh? [Phineas the priest and one chief from each of the western tribes, eleven men in all.]
 7. What was one argument the western tribes presented? [The example of Balaam’s sin and its continuing consequences; rebellion against the Lord today would bring His wrath tomorrow; if their land was unclean, they should live west of the Jordan; the example of Achan, whose sin brought wrath upon all the congregation of Israel.]
 8. What was the first thing Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh said in their answer? [They repeated twice the words, “The Mighty One, God, the Lord!”]
 9. Why had the two and one-half tribes built the altar? [As a witness that they still would worship at the tabernacle even if Israel’s children accused them of not being part of Israel.]
 10. How did the western Israelites respond to the report of Phineas and the chiefs? [“Today we know that the Lord is in our midst, because you have not committed this breach of faith against the Lord.”]

Memory Verse[s]:

- Joshua 24:14–17 (or any portion thereof): [Joshua said,] “Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. 15 And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” 16 Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods, 17 for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our fathers up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight and preserved us in all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed.”

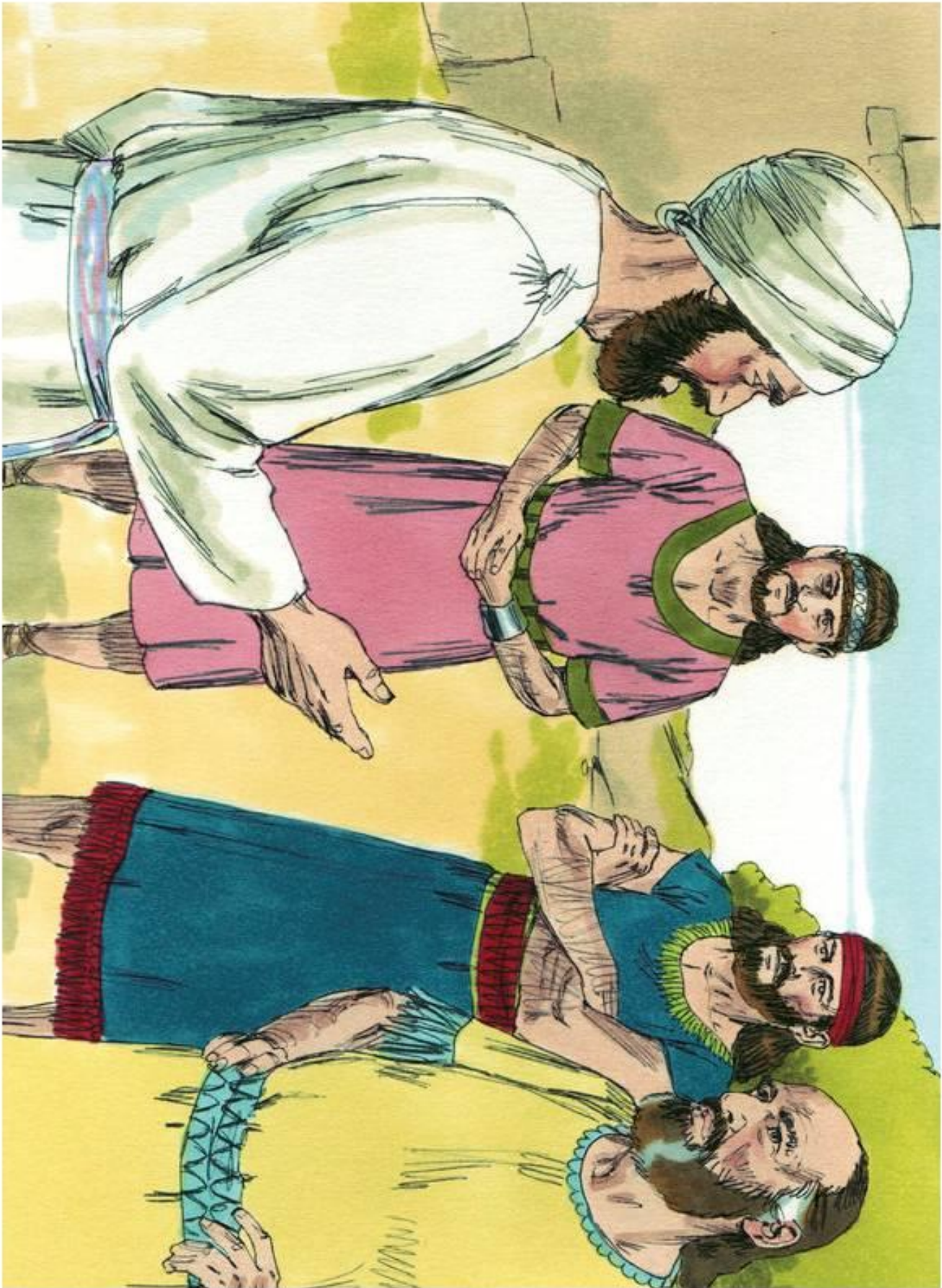
Handwork:

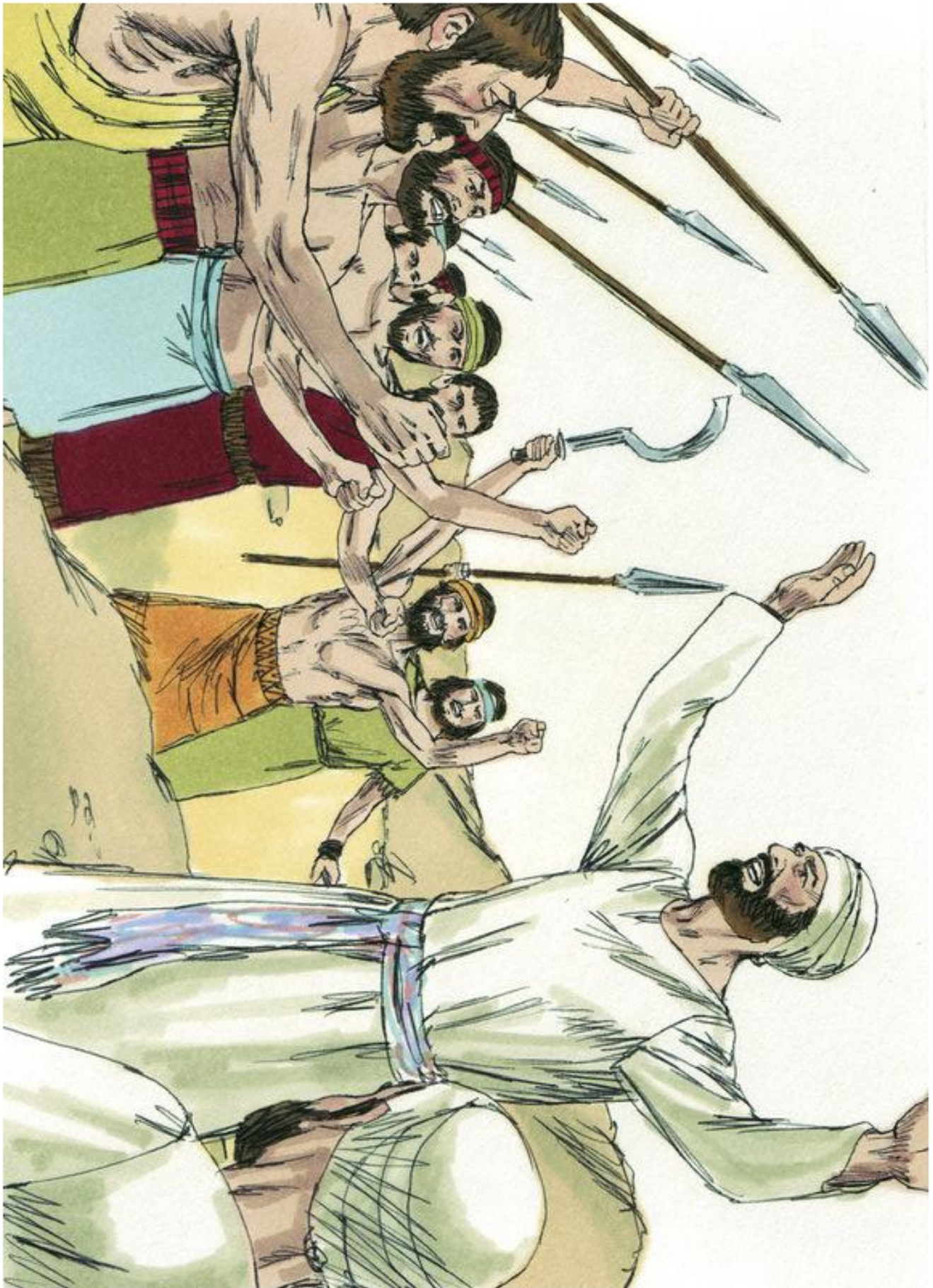
- Draw a large altar of stones next to a river with a sign, *Ed/Witness*, next to the altar.

spoil

witness







The Case Against the Easterners

- “We speak for the whole congregation.
- “What kind of trespass (high-handed sin) is this that you are turning away from following the Lord by already building an altar? You are rebelling.
- “We are still being punished by God for the time we sinned against God when Baalam caused us to sin.
- “Today you will sin, and tomorrow God will judge the whole congregation.
- “If your land is unclean, come on over to the west side of Jordan. Stay with us, but do not rebel against God or us by building an altar besides God's altar.
- “Remember Achan's sin: one man sinned, and several men died because of it.”

The Easterners' Case

- “The Lord knows whether we have built this altar in rebellion or to offer sacrifices and offerings.
- “Rather, we built it because we fear doing this sin.
- “We thought your children someday might say to our children, 'What have you to do with the Lord God of Israel because you are separated from us by the Jordan River?' This might discourage our children from following the Lord.
- “Therefore, we built this altar, not for burnt offering or sacrifice, but that it might be a witness between us and our grandchildren so that we can come and offer sacrifices at God's altar and so that your children won't say later, 'You have no part in the Lord.'
- “We said, 'This altar, built as God's pattern, not for sacrifices or offering, is for a witness between us and the generations following so that we might offer at the tabernacle without having your children saying that we can't.'
- “God forbid that we should rebel against the Lord to offer sacrifices here instead of at the tabernacle.”