

The Book of Joshua, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 12: The Altar of Witness by the Jordan

Joshua 22:1-34

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

The doctrinal center of this lesson is the unity of God's people held together with the purity of true worship, and the deadly danger of rash judgment that threatens both. These belong together and must be taught together. On one hand, the western tribes were entirely right to care, with everything in them, that the Lord be worshiped only at His one appointed altar; a rival altar really would have torn the covenant apart, and their memory of Peor and Achan shows that sin in one part of the body endangers the whole. Help the class feel that holy jealousy for pure worship and never apologize for it. On the other hand, that very zeal nearly drove faithful men to slaughter their own brothers over a conclusion they had never bothered to check. The aim is to send students home loving both truths at once: fiercely loyal to the Lord and His appointed worship, and fiercely careful not to condemn a brother before they have gone, asked, and understood.

Be ready to handle the question of the one altar with care and honesty. Under the Law, God had appointed a single altar at the tabernacle, and the eastern tribes' insistence on this point is the engine of the whole resolution; they built a witness, not a rival. The timeless principle, which Scripture itself draws out, is that God will be worshiped in the way He has appointed, not in ways we invent for ourselves (Deuteronomy 12:13-14; John 4:24). Draw that principle for the church today without binding the Old Covenant's particular ceremonies on Christians; we worship not at a tent in Shiloh but in spirit and in truth, through Christ. Keep the lesson on the enduring point: a shared, exclusive loyalty to the Lord, and worship offered His way, not ours.

This lesson is aimed straight at the way your students treat one another. Almost every congregation has its near-wars over a misunderstood action, a rumor taken as fact, a motive assumed and never verified. Press the formation gently and specifically. Teach them the discipline of going directly to a brother, of asking before concluding, of judging righteous judgment rather than judging by appearance (Matthew 18:15; John 7:24). And teach the other half too, the grace of patiently explaining yourself when you have been misjudged, as the eastern tribes did, until the truth pleases your accusers and the family is whole again. The aim is not merely that they admire Phinehas, but that they become the kind of people who guard both the truth and the unity of the Lord's church.

Question 1

Student Question:

When the eastern tribes build their altar, the rest of Israel does not shrug it off; they gather the whole congregation at Shiloh to go to war (Joshua 22:11–12), and Phinehas reminds them of the sin of Peor and the trespass of Achan (Joshua 22:17–20). Why did a second altar provoke such a fierce response, and what does this reveal about how seriously God's people are to guard true and exclusive worship of the Lord?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The response of the western tribes seems extreme until we feel what an altar meant. There was one altar, at the one tabernacle, where God had commanded His people to bring their offerings (Deuteronomy 12:13–14). A second altar did not look like an addition; it looked like a defection, a second center of worship that would split Israel's loyalty to the Lord.

Phinehas anchors the alarm in memory. He recalls 'the iniquity of Peor' (Joshua 22:17), where Israel joined themselves to false worship and a plague swept the camp, and he alludes to Achan, who 'committed a trespass in the accursed thing, and wrath fell on all the congregation' (Joshua 22:20). The lesson Israel had learned in blood was that sin in one part of the body endangers the whole.

Behind the fear lies a settled conviction: God is to be worshiped only in the way He has appointed, and a rival altar threatens that exclusivity. Their jealousy for pure worship is not narrow bigotry; it is covenant loyalty. They would rather go to war than watch the worship of the Lord be corrupted.

For the class, this establishes the first half of the lesson's tension. The instinct to guard true and exclusive worship of the Lord is holy and right. We should feel the rightness of it before we ever come to the error of how they nearly acted on it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God appointed one altar at one tabernacle; true worship was not a matter of preference but of His command (Deuteronomy 12:13–14).
- A rival altar threatened to split Israel's exclusive loyalty to the Lord, which is why the alarm was so fierce.
- Israel's memory of Peor and Achan taught that sin in one part of the body endangers the whole congregation.
- Jealousy for pure and exclusive worship of the Lord is a holy instinct, not mere narrowness.
- The principle that God is worshiped His way, not ours, endures for the church (John 4:24).

Discussion Prompts

- Why would a second altar provoke such a strong reaction from the rest of Israel?
- How do the memories of Peor and Achan explain the fear of the western tribes?
- What does this account teach us about how seriously God's people are to guard true worship?

Question 2

Student Question:

The western tribes were ready to fight for pure worship before they had checked whether their fear was even true. Where in your own life does a right concern, a real conviction about what honors God, tempt you to act harshly or hastily before you have actually understood the situation?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The western tribes were ready to fight for pure worship before they had verified whether their fear was even true. Their cause was right; their method was about to be a catastrophe. This is the danger this question presses into our own hearts.

This is a self-examination question. Ask the class to find the place where a real, godly conviction, a concern for what honors the Lord, tempts them to act harshly or hastily toward another person before they have actually understood the situation.

Help students see how subtle this is. The problem was not that the western tribes cared too much about God; it was that their zeal outran their knowledge. A right concern, carried out wrongly, can do terrible damage.

Press them toward a specific habit: when conviction rises and indignation flares, the godly first move is not to strike but to ask. Zeal must be wedded to understanding, or it wounds the very people it means to protect.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A right concern for God's honor can still drive us to wrong and hasty action against others.
- Zeal that outruns understanding wounds the very people and truth it means to defend.
- The godly first move when indignation rises is to ask and understand, not to strike.
- We are accountable not only for what we care about but for how we act on it (James 1:19–20).

Discussion Prompts

- Where does a real conviction about what honors God tempt you to act harshly before you understand?
- How can you tell the difference between holy zeal and mere impatience or assumption?
- What would it look like to pause and ask the next time your indignation flares?

Question 3

Student Question:

Notice the great mercy hidden in this story: before they marched, the western tribes 'sent unto the children of Reuben' a delegation led by Phinehas to ask what the altar meant (Joshua 22:13–16). What does this decision to send and ask, rather than simply attack, teach us about how God would have His people deal with one another when sin is suspected (compare Matthew 18:15; Deuteronomy 13:14)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The great mercy of this chapter is easy to miss: before they marched, the congregation 'sent unto the children of Reuben, and to the children of Gad, and to the half tribe of Manasseh' a delegation led by Phinehas (Joshua 22:13–16). They armed for war, but first they sent to ask.

This restraint is not weakness; it is wisdom. It reflects the very pattern the Lord later commands: 'go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone' (Matthew 18:15), and the older command to 'inquire, and make search, and ask diligently' before condemning (Deuteronomy 13:14). God's people are to investigate before they accuse.

Phinehas himself is a striking choice. This is the man who once drove a spear through open sin at Peor, a man of unquestioned zeal. Yet here that same zeal expresses itself first as a question, not a sword. Zeal and patience are not opposites in a godly heart.

For the class, this is the hinge of the chapter. The willingness to go and ask, rather than to assume and attack, is what saves Israel from disaster. It is the practical shape of love that 'thinketh no evil' and 'believeth all things' until it knows otherwise.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's people are to investigate before they accuse; sending Phinehas to ask was an act of wisdom, not weakness.
- This anticipates the Lord's command to go directly to a brother before condemning him (Matthew 18:15; Deuteronomy 13:14).
- Even the zealous Phinehas first asks a question rather than striking; godly zeal and patience can live together.
- Going to a brother directly is the practical shape of a love that does not assume the worst (1 Corinthians 13:5–7).

Discussion Prompts

- What does the decision to send and ask, rather than attack, teach us about handling suspected sin?
- How does this connect to the Lord's command in Matthew 18:15 to go directly to a brother?
- Why is it significant that the zealous Phinehas leads with a question instead of a spear?

Question 4

Student Question:

The eastern tribes had been faithful for seven years, yet a single misunderstood action nearly erased all of it in the eyes of their brothers. When has your reputation, or someone else's, been threatened by an action that looked wrong but was not, and how does this story shape the way you want to respond when you are the one misunderstood?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The eastern tribes had been faithful for seven years, leaving their own families to fight for their brothers (Joshua 22:2-3), yet a single misunderstood action nearly erased all of that in the eyes of those same brothers. Years of faithfulness can be eclipsed in a moment by an appearance.

This is a self-examination question with two angles. Ask students when an action that looked wrong, theirs or someone else's, threatened a reputation that did not deserve it.

Help them sit with the experience of being misjudged. The eastern tribes did not lash back when accused; they explained, patiently and reverently, until the truth was plain. That is a model for how to respond when we are the ones misunderstood.

Draw out compassion as well. If a season of faithfulness can be misread, then perhaps the brother we are quick to condemn also has more to his story than the appearance suggests. Being misjudged ourselves should make us slower to misjudge others.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A lifetime of faithfulness can be eclipsed in a moment by an action that merely looks wrong.
- When misjudged, the godly response is to explain patiently, as the eastern tribes did, not to retaliate.
- Having been misunderstood ourselves should make us slower to misjudge others.
- Appearances are an unreliable basis for condemning a brother (John 7:24).

Discussion Prompts

- When has a reputation, yours or another's, been threatened by something that looked wrong but was not?
- How do the eastern tribes model the right way to respond when we are misunderstood?
- How might being misjudged yourself change the way you treat others you are tempted to judge?

Question 5**Student Question:**

When the question is finally asked, the eastern tribes answer with a flood of reverence: 'The Lord God of gods, the Lord God of gods, he knoweth, and Israel he shall know; if it be in rebellion, or if

in transgression against the Lord, save us not this day' (Joshua 22:22). What does the intensity of their oath reveal about how seriously they themselves took the danger of false worship, and what does it mean that both sides cared so deeply about honoring the Lord rightly?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

When finally asked, the eastern tribes do not answer with offense but with overwhelming reverence: 'The Lord God of gods, the Lord God of gods, he knoweth, and Israel he shall know; if it be in rebellion, or if in transgression against the Lord, save us not this day' (Joshua 22:22). They invoke God's own name as witness and invite His judgment if they are guilty.

The sheer intensity of the oath reveals that they took the danger of false worship every bit as seriously as their accusers did. They were not casual about the altar; they were terrified of being thought rebels against the Lord.

This is the beautiful surprise of the chapter: both sides loved the Lord and feared false worship deeply. The conflict was never between the faithful and the faithless. It was between two groups of faithful people separated only by a misunderstanding.

For the class, this reframes how we picture conflict among God's people. Often those we are quick to suspect share our deepest loyalties. The eastern tribes' oath shows a heart as jealous for God's honor as Phinehas himself.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The eastern tribes' solemn oath shows they feared false worship as deeply as their accusers did.
- Both sides in this conflict loved the Lord; the division was over a misunderstanding, not over loyalty to God.
- Many we are quick to suspect actually share our deepest convictions and loyalties.
- Invoking God as witness to one's heart is a sober act, not to be done lightly (compare 2 Corinthians 1:23).

Discussion Prompts

- What does the intensity of their oath reveal about how seriously they took false worship?
- What does it mean that both sides in this conflict cared so deeply about honoring the Lord?
- How should it change us to realize that those we suspect often share our deepest loyalties?

Question 6

Student Question:

The eastern tribes were afraid that one day the western tribes would say to their children, 'What have ye to do with the Lord God of Israel? ... so shall your children make our children cease from fearing the Lord' (Joshua 22:24-25). When have you worried that you, or those you love, might

be treated as if you had no real part among God's people, and how does that fear deepen your compassion for others who feel like outsiders?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The real fear that drove the eastern tribes to build was this: that one day the western tribes would say to their children, 'What have ye to do with the Lord God of Israel?' (Joshua 22:24–25). Separated by the Jordan, they dreaded being treated as if they had no part among God's people.

This is a self-examination question about the ache of feeling like an outsider. Ask students when they have feared, for themselves or for those they love, being treated as if they did not truly belong among God's people.

Help them name that fear honestly. It is a real and painful thing to wonder whether you have a genuine part in the family of faith, or whether some line, geography, background, history, marks you as not fully one of them.

Then turn that ache into compassion. The eastern tribes built an altar so their children would not be cut off. We are called to make sure no one who belongs to the Lord is made to feel they have no part. Our own fear of exclusion should make us tender toward others who feel it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The deep fear here is exclusion: being treated as if one has no real part among God's people.
- The longing to belong to the Lord's people, and to keep our children in it, is a holy and tender thing.
- Our own experience of feeling like an outsider should make us gentle toward others who feel it.
- God's people must take care that no true believer is made to feel cut off from the family of faith.

Discussion Prompts

- When have you feared that you, or those you love, might be treated as having no part among God's people?
- Why does the longing to belong, and to keep our children near the Lord, run so deep?
- How can that fear, once felt, deepen your compassion for others who feel like outsiders?

Question 7

Student Question:

The eastern tribes explain that the altar was never for burnt offering or sacrifice but was 'a witness between us, and you' (Joshua 22:26–28), a pattern or copy of the true altar of the Lord, built precisely so that no one would ever set up a rival worship. How does their careful insistence

on the one true altar at the tabernacle reflect God's demand that He be worshiped only in the way He has appointed (Deuteronomy 12:13–14), and why does that principle still matter for the church today?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The eastern tribes explain that the altar was never for burnt offering or sacrifice at all, but was built 'a pattern of the altar of the Lord' as 'a witness between us, and you' (Joshua 22:26–28). It was a copy, a memorial, designed precisely so that no rival worship could ever take root.

Notice how careful they are to honor the one true altar. They go out of their way to affirm that 'the Lord he is God' and that real sacrifice belongs only at His tabernacle (Joshua 22:29). Far from breaking the principle of one altar, their whole purpose was to protect it for future generations.

This reflects God's enduring demand that He be worshiped only as He has appointed (Deuteronomy 12:13–14). Worship is not something His people invent for themselves; it is His to define. The eastern tribes understood this so well that they built a monument to guard it.

For the class, draw the timeless principle for the church without binding the Old Covenant's ceremonies. We no longer worship at a tent in Shiloh, but the principle abides: God is worshiped in spirit and in truth, in the way He has appointed through Christ, not in ways we devise (John 4:24). That conviction still matters today.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The altar was a witness and a copy, never a rival; its whole purpose was to protect the one true altar.
- The eastern tribes affirm that real sacrifice belongs only at the Lord's appointed place (Joshua 22:29).
- God is worshiped in the way He has appointed, not in ways His people invent (Deuteronomy 12:13–14).
- Draw this principle for the church today without binding the Old Covenant's particular ceremonies; we worship in spirit and truth through Christ (John 4:24).
- A shared, exclusive loyalty to the Lord and His appointed worship still matters for the church.

Discussion Prompts

- Why were the eastern tribes so careful to insist the altar was only a witness, not for sacrifice?
- How does their concern reflect God's demand to be worshiped only as He appoints?
- Why does the principle of worshiping God His way still matter for the church today?

Question 8

Student Question:

The whole crisis grew out of a failure to communicate; the eastern tribes built without explaining, and the western tribes concluded without asking. Where in your relationships has a lack of plain, honest communication allowed assumptions to grow into walls, and what would it cost you to be the one who finally speaks, or finally asks?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The entire crisis grew from a failure to communicate. The eastern tribes built a great altar without a word of explanation, and the western tribes drew a deadly conclusion without ever asking. Both halves of the failure were needed to bring Israel to the brink of war.

This is a self-examination question about the walls that silence and assumption build. Ask students where a lack of plain, honest communication has allowed assumptions to harden into distance in their own relationships.

Help them see that both speaking and asking are duties of love. The eastern tribes might have spared everyone by explaining first; the western tribes might have spared everyone by asking first. Most relational breaches involve a failure of both.

Press toward a concrete step. Reconciliation usually waits on someone willing to break the silence, either to explain themselves at last, or to ask the question they have been afraid to ask. Invite each student to name that step.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Most breaches among God's people grow from a failure to communicate plainly and honestly.
- Both speaking clearly and asking sincerely are duties of love; this crisis involved a failure of both.
- Silence and assumption build walls that a single honest conversation could have prevented.
- Reconciliation often waits on someone willing to break the silence, to explain or to ask.

Discussion Prompts

- Where has a lack of honest communication allowed assumptions to grow into walls in your relationships?
- Which is harder for you, to explain yourself plainly or to ask the question you fear?
- What would it cost you to be the one who finally speaks, or finally asks, this week?

Question 9**Student Question:**

Hold these two truths together as the heart of this lesson. The western tribes were right to be jealous for the pure, exclusive worship of the Lord; division over false worship would indeed have been a deadly thing (Joshua 22:18–20). Yet they nearly committed the grievous sin of making war on faithful brothers because they judged rashly, on an assumption, without going to ask (Joshua 22:30–31). How does this chapter teach us to be fierce in guarding the unity of God's people and the purity of true worship at the same time, and what does it warn us about the sin of rash judgment that masquerades as zeal (compare John 7:24; Romans 14:13; Ephesians 4:3)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal high point, and it asks us to hold two truths together without letting go of either. First, the western tribes were genuinely right to be jealous for the pure, exclusive worship of the Lord. A real rival altar would have been a deadly thing, and their willingness to confront it, even at the cost of war, was rooted in covenant loyalty (Joshua 22:18–20).

Second, and just as real, they nearly committed a grievous sin. They were an hour from making war on faithful brothers because they judged rashly, acting on an assumption without going to ask. When the truth came out, 'it pleased them' and the war dissolved (Joshua 22:30–31), but it had been a near thing. Zeal had almost become bloodshed.

The chapter refuses to let us choose between these. We are called to be fierce in guarding the unity of God's people and fierce in guarding the purity of His worship at the same time. The two are not rivals; a rash judgment that splits faithful brothers harms unity, and a tolerance of false worship harms purity. Both must be held.

Scripture itself gives us the guardrails. 'Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment' (John 7:24). 'Let us not therefore judge one another any more' (Romans 14:13). 'Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Ephesians 4:3). The sin to fear here is rash judgment that wears the mask of zeal, condemning a brother before it has gone and asked.

For the class, keep the doctrinal lines clean. This is a call to love both truth and unity, not to soften either. We do not buy peace by going quiet about false worship, and we do not defend the truth by slandering and attacking faithful brothers on an assumption. The cross of Christ makes us one body, and that one body is to worship the one Lord in the way He has appointed (Ephesians 4:3–6).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Guarding the unity of God's people and guarding the purity of true worship are both commanded, and must be held together, not traded against each other.
- The western tribes' jealousy for exclusive worship of the Lord was right and rooted in covenant loyalty (Joshua 22:18–20).

- Yet they nearly sinned grievously by rash judgment, marching against faithful brothers on an assumption without asking (Joshua 22:30–31).
- Rash judgment that masquerades as zeal is a real sin; we are to judge righteous judgment, not by appearance (John 7:24; Romans 14:13).
- We keep peace not by going silent about false worship, and we defend truth not by slandering faithful brothers; both errors must be refused (Ephesians 4:3).
- In Christ the one body worships the one Lord in His appointed way; unity and pure worship belong together (Ephesians 4:3–6).

Discussion Prompts

- How does this chapter call us to guard both the unity of God’s people and the purity of worship at once?
- Where were the western tribes right, and where were they nearly grievously wrong?
- What does this warn us about a rash judgment that disguises itself as zeal for God?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole of Joshua 22, from the homeward blessing, to the great altar by the river, to the war that nearly was, to the worship that finally came. Name one specific way the Lord is calling you to labor for the unity of His people this week, whether by guarding true worship, by going directly to a brother instead of assuming the worst, or by patiently explaining yourself to someone who has misjudged you. What is the one step He is asking you to take?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the capstone. Invite the class to look back across the whole of Joshua 22, the homeward blessing on faithful men, the great altar rising by the Jordan, the congregation arming for war, Phinehas crossing to ask, and the worship that finally came when the truth was heard.

The chapter holds together a cluster of graces: a holy jealousy for true worship, a willingness to go and ask before condemning, a patient readiness to explain when misjudged, and a love that labors to keep the family of God whole. Help students name where the Spirit is pressing this story into their own lives.

For some the call will be to guard true worship more carefully, to care that the Lord be honored His way. For others it will be to stop assuming and to go directly to a brother. For still others it will be the patient grace of explaining themselves to someone who has misjudged them, until the truth pleases and the breach heals.

Close by lifting their eyes to Christ, who broke down the middle wall of partition and made the two one, who is our peace (Ephesians 2:14–16). The God who turned a near-war into worship by

the Jordan still binds His people together in one body. Ask each student to name the one specific step He is asking them to take this week for the unity of His people.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- This chapter unites a jealousy for true worship with a refusal to judge a brother rashly; mature faith holds both.
- Christ is the goal of the story; He broke down the wall of partition and is our peace (Ephesians 2:14–16).
- Spiritual formation moves from admiring Phinehas to becoming people who guard both truth and unity.
- Each student should name one specific step toward the unity of God's people this week.

Discussion Prompts

- As you look back over Joshua 22, what is the Lord asking you to guard, the purity of worship or the unity of His people, or both?
- Is He calling you to go directly to a brother, to guard true worship, or to patiently explain yourself to someone who has misjudged you?
- What is the one specific step He is asking you to take this week for the unity of the Lord's people?