

Joshua 20; 21:1-3, 43-45; 22 (NIV)



Cities of Refuge

20 Then the LORD said to Joshua: ²“Tell the Israelites to designate the cities of refuge, as I instructed you through Moses, ³so that anyone who kills a person accidentally and unintentionally may flee there and find protection from the avenger of blood. ⁴When they flee to one of these cities, they are to stand in the entrance of the city gate and state their case before the elders of that city. Then the elders are to admit the fugitive into their city and provide a place to live among them. ⁵If the avenger of blood comes in pursuit, the elders must not surrender the fugitive, because the fugitive killed their neighbor unintentionally and without malice aforethought. ⁶They are to stay in that city until they have stood trial before the assembly and until the death of the high priest who is serving at that time. Then they may go back to their own home in the town from which they fled.”

⁷So they set apart Kedesh in Galilee in the hill country of Naphtali, Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and Kiriath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the hill country of Judah. ⁸East of the Jordan (on the other side from Jericho) they designated Bezer in the wilderness on the plateau in the tribe of Reuben, Ramoth in Gilead in the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan in the tribe of Manasseh. ⁹Any of the Israelites or any foreigner residing among them who killed someone accidentally could flee to these designated cities and not be killed by the avenger of blood prior to standing trial before the assembly.

Towns for the Levites

21 Now the family heads of the Levites approached Eleazar the priest, Joshua son of Nun, and the heads of the other tribal families of Israel ²at Shiloh in Canaan and said to them, “The Lord commanded through Moses that you give us towns to live in, with pasturelands for our livestock.” ³So, as the Lord had commanded, the Israelites gave the Levites the following towns and pasturelands out of their own inheritance:

⁴³So the Lord gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their ancestors, and they took possession of it and settled there. ⁴⁴The Lord gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their ancestors. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the Lord gave all their enemies into their hands. ⁴⁵Not one of all the Lord’s good promises to Israel failed; everyone was fulfilled.

Eastern Tribes Return Home

22 Then Joshua summoned the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh ² and said to them, “You have done all that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded, and you have obeyed me in everything I commanded. ³ For a long time now—to this very day—you have not deserted your fellow Israelites but have carried out the mission the Lord your God gave you. ⁴ Now that the Lord your God has given them rest as he promised, return to your homes in the land that Moses the servant of the Lord gave you on the other side of the Jordan. ⁵ But be very careful to keep the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the Lord gave you: to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to keep his commands, to hold fast to him and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul.”

⁶ Then Joshua blessed them and sent them away, and they went to their homes. ⁷ (To the half-tribe of Manasseh Moses had given land in Bashan, and to the other half of the tribe Joshua gave land on the west side of the Jordan along with their fellow Israelites.) When Joshua sent them home, he blessed them, ⁸ saying, “Return to your homes with your great wealth—with large herds of livestock, with silver, gold, bronze and iron, and a great quantity of clothing—and divide the plunder from your enemies with your fellow Israelites.”

⁹ So the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh left the Israelites at Shiloh in Canaan to return to Gilead, their own land, which they had acquired in accordance with the command of the Lord through Moses.

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ And when the Israelites heard that they had built the altar on the border of Canaan at Geliloth near the Jordan on the Israelite side, ¹² the whole assembly of Israel gathered at Shiloh to go to war against them.

¹³ So the Israelites sent Phinehas son of Eleazar, the priest, to the land of Gilead—to Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh. ¹⁴ With him they sent ten of the chief men, one from each of the tribes of Israel, each the head of a family division among the Israelite clans.

¹⁵ When they went to Gilead—to Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh—they said to them: ¹⁶ “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? ¹⁷ Was not the sin of Peor enough for us? Up to this very day we have not cleansed ourselves from that sin, even though a plague fell on the community of the Lord!’ ¹⁸ And 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. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ When Achan son of Zerah was unfaithful in regard to the devoted things, ^[a] did not wrath come on the whole community of Israel? He was not the only one who died for his sin.”

²¹ Then Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh replied to the heads of the clans of Israel: ²² “The Mighty One, God, the Lord! 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. ²³ 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.

²⁴ “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? ²⁵ 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.

²⁶ “That is why we said, ‘Let us get ready and build an altar—but not for burnt offerings or sacrifices.’ ²⁷ 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.’

²⁸ “And we said, ‘If they ever say this to us, or to our descendants, we will answer: Look at the replica of the Lord’s altar, which our ancestors built, not for burnt offerings and sacrifices, but as a witness between us and you.’

²⁹ “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.”

³⁰ 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. ³¹ And Phinehas son of Eleazar, the priest, said to Reuben, Gad and Manasseh, “Today we know that the Lord is with us, because you have not been unfaithful to the Lord in this matter. Now you have rescued the Israelites from the Lord’s hand.”

³² Then Phinehas son of Eleazar, the priest, and the leaders returned to Canaan from their meeting with the Reubenites and Gadites in Gilead and reported to the Israelites. ³³ They were glad to hear the report and praised God. And they talked no more about going to war against them to devastate the country where the Reubenites and the Gadites lived.

³⁴ And the Reubenites and the Gadites gave the altar this name: A Witness Between Us—that the Lord is God.

Footnotes:

- a. [Joshua 22:20](#) The Hebrew term refers to the irrevocable giving over of things or persons to the Lord, often by totally destroying them.

Holman Christian Standard Bible - *Study Bible*¹

Joshua 20; 21:1-3, 43-45; 22

20:2 In this chapter some of the land or towns given to Israel are set aside for a specific purpose. On the significance of the cities of refuge, see [Ex 21:12-14](#); [Num 35:9-15,22-28](#); [Dt 4:41-43](#); [19:1-10](#). These passages indicate that there were to be six towns—three east and three west of the Jordan River.

20:3 Someone who killed another person unintentionally or accidentally could find refuge in one of these towns from a form of blood vengeance in which the dead person's nearest kin was to seek the death of the killer in order to remove any blood guilt from their family.

20:4 The elders of that city functioned as the judges who heard all important disputes within the community.

20:6 The trial before the assembly was presumably a legal trial in his hometown where the killing occurred ([Num 35:22-28](#)). Even if he was acquitted of premeditated murder, he remained in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest serving at that time. Presumably the avenger was to accept the high priest's death as a substitute for the guilt incurred by the shedding of innocent blood. The killer was free to return home.

20:7 Three cities of refuge were originally envisioned west of the Jordan River ([Num 35:9-15](#)). Perhaps the size of the population led Joshua and the leadership to appoint six cities and name them here. They were located across the land so that a person was never far from such a place of refuge.

20:8 These cities of refuge located east of the Jordan River had been designated and named by Moses ([Dt 4:41-43](#)).

21:1-42 As Israel was given its inheritance in the preceding chapters, so it now gave back to God some of that inheritance for the use of the Levites. Their responsibility for the holy things of God meant they did not have time for the major occupation of the other Israelites—farming their land. See [1Ch 6:54-81](#) for a duplicate of this list of cities.

21:1-2 Eleazar at Shiloh recalls [18:1-10](#) and the distribution of the tribal allotments. This would be the Levites' allotment.

21:2 The Lord's command through Moses about the Levitical cities occurs in [Num 35:1-8](#), where the towns are not named.

1. Jeremy Royal Howard, ed., *HCSB Study Bible*, (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2010), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Joshua 20, 21, 22".

goral

Hebrew Pronunciation	[goh RAHL]
HCSB Translation	lot
Uses in Joshua	26
Uses in the OT	77
Focus Passages	Joshua 21:4-6,8,10,20,40

The *lot* was an article cast to decipher God's will, since God revealed His plans to Israel that way ([Pr 16:33](#)). Other nations also employed the practice ([Jnh 1:7](#)). The *lot* was usually used for public decision-making, and various techniques for casting existed. *Lots* could settle disputes ([Pr 18:18](#)) or assign goods and services. The *lot* selected arrangements for priestly duties ([1Ch 24:5](#)), responsibilities for providing altar firewood ([Neh 10:34](#)), and a goat on the Day of Atonement ([Lv 16:8-10](#)). Victors cast the *lot* to divide war spoils ([Ob 11](#)), so it figured prominently when Joshua distributed tribal lands and assigned Levitical cities ([Jos 18-19; 21:4-40](#)). The high priest used special *lots*, the Urim and Thummim, to learn God's will ([Ex 28:30](#)). *Goral* may indicate the *allotment* or object *allotted* ([Jos 15:1; 21:20](#)). It figuratively indicates one's *lot* ([Pr 1:14; Isa 17:14](#)) or *destiny* ([Dan 12:13](#)) in life.

21:5 The descendants of Kohath, second son of Levi ([Gen 46:11](#)), received their inheritance in the hill country, at that time the location of the ark, for which they were responsible in the wilderness ([Num 3:1; 4:15-20; 7:9](#)). These cities are listed in [Jos 21:20-26](#).

21:6 The descendants of Gershon, first son of Levi, had been responsible for the tabernacle's coverings and other textiles ([Num 3:25-26; 4:24-26](#)). They received cities in the northern tribal areas, listed in [Jos 21:27-33](#).

21:7 Merari's descendants, from Levi's third son, guarded the tabernacle and transported its frames ([Num 1:47-53; 3:33-37; 4:29-33](#)). They were given the Transjordanian and Zebulun Levitical cities, listed in [Jos 21:34-40](#).

21:9-42 The 48 Levitical cities are listed and subdivided into four groups, with occasional notes. These are further subdivided by tribes with numerical totals after each grouping. This is characteristic of a longer town list ([15:20-63](#)).

21:43-44 The Lord fulfilled His promises. He gave Israel the land He had promised to them and their ancestors ([1:3](#)). God also gave the Israelites rest on every side just as He had promised ([1:13](#)).

21:45 The conclusion that everything was fulfilled shows how God kept His promises and how all the enemies of Israel that they fought against were defeated. Israel did not drive out all the inhabitants of the land, but this was not God's responsibility. He kept His part of the covenant.

22:1-6 These verses bring to fruition [1:12-18](#) and the promise made by the two and a half tribes from east of the Jordan River to follow Joshua wherever he led. They had been faithful to their oath, so Joshua sent them home with his blessing.

22:5 Joshua dismissed the Transjordanian tribes with one condition: to fully obey God's revealed instruction. To serve God with all your heart and all your soul repeats [Dt 6:5](#).

[22:8](#) The people received material blessings even though this was not the main motivation for assisting their fellow tribes.

[22:10](#) The tribes on the eastern side of the Jordan River built a large, impressive altar by the river. The altar that these tribes constructed is in Hebrew, *mizbeach*, a word that means "slaughter." This is what caused the concern of the other tribes: animal sacrifice would take place on this altar.

[22:12](#) Because the altar was beside the Jordan River and was so large, the ten tribes could probably see it. The rest of Israel assembled against the two and a half tribes to war against them from their base at Shiloh.

[22:13](#) How much later this took place is not clear, but Phinehas son of Eleazar was now the acting priest. He had last appeared in [Num 31:6](#) where he took articles from the sanctuary into battle.

[22:16-19](#) The 10 representatives of the remaining tribes objected because the altar was considered a competitor to the true altar of the LORD our God.

[22:17](#) The sin of Peor refers to the time when Israel joined Midian in worshiping the Baal or god of the region of Peor, east of the Jordan River. In [Num 25:1-13](#) Phinehas executed God's judgment for this sin by killing an Israelite man and a Midianite woman who were engaged in this carnal ritual.

[22:20](#) Mention of Achan son of Zerah ([8:1-29](#)) explains the concern of the 10 tribes. They feared that God's judgment for what the Transjordanian tribes had done would also fall on them all.

[22:24](#) The two and a half tribes explained they had built the altar as a way to maintain the unity of all the tribes in future generations.

[22:26,29](#) Repeatedly the Transjordanian tribes denied any intent to use the altar as a place of sacrifice.

[22:27-28](#) The altar bore witness that those on both sides of it worshiped the same God at the same tabernacle. When Abram first came into the promised land, he built altars from north to south as a testimony that the land belonged to God and was His to give to Abram and his descendants ([Gen 12:6-8; 13:18](#)). Now the Transjordanian tribes had done the same thing. Although their land was not part of the promised land, they wanted to identify with the God of the promised land and to show that their land was a place where God was worshiped.

[22:34](#) With the conflict resolved, the altar was named in recognition of the confession of the Transjordanian tribes.

HCSB Apologetics Study Bible²

Joshua 20; 21:1-3, 43-45; 22

20:1-9 Six cities of refuge were established to provide asylum for people who had committed manslaughter (unintentional killing) (cp. [Ex 21:13](#); [Dt 4:41-43](#)). The Lord issued detailed instructions to Moses about how these cities were to function (see [Nm 35:9-34](#)). The offender could seek refuge in them from the "avenger of blood" (i.e., the near relative who would take the perpetrator's life in reprisal) until his case could be decided by an equitable trial ([Jos 20:6](#)). The system of cities of refuge allowed justice to prevail in the land while preventing blood vengeance of a "vigilante" sort.

20:3, 5, 9 The "avenger of blood" was, typically, a near relative of the murder victim (or some other designated person) who was responsible for exacting legal vengeance against the murderer (see [Gn 9:5-6](#); [Ex 21:23-24](#)). While vengeance was the domain of God alone ([Dt 32:35](#); [Ps 94:23](#); [Pr 20:22](#)), He also recognized it as part of ancient Israel's justice system. Vengeance was never to be a private or personal matter, but was strictly regulated by the Law of Moses. For further discussion of the system of blood vengeance and the cities of refuge, see [Nm 35:9-34](#); [Dt 19:1-13](#).

21:1-3 The leaders of the Levites approached Eleazar, Joshua and the tribal heads about fulfilling the Lord's command to Moses to give towns for them to live in and pasturelands for their flocks from within the other tribal allotments ([Nm 35:1-8](#); [Lv 25:32](#)).

21:3, 8 [Verses 3](#) and [8](#) form a literary bracket around [verses 4-7](#) showing that the Israelites obeyed the will of the Lord.

21:4-7 Joshua and Eleazar distributed the cities among the Levitical clans by the method of casting lots. Three major clans are listed: the Kohathites, the Gershonites, and the Merarites. The Kohathites were further divided into two groups, those who were descendants of Aaron and those who were not ([vv. 4-5](#)).

21:9-42 Although [13:14](#) notes that the Levites received no inheritance, they were allotted 48 towns, with their pasturelands, within the territories of the other tribes ([Nm 35:6-7](#)). This passage catalogs those cities.

21:43-45 With the distribution and settlement of the land of Canaan the Lord's promise to the patriarchs was fulfilled ([Gn 12:7](#); [15:7](#), [18-21](#)). Although Canaanites continued to reside among the Israelites in some places, the land as a whole was firmly under their control. Several passages assert total triumph over the Canaanites (e.g., [Jos 10:40-42](#); [11:16-23](#); [12:7-24](#); [18:1](#); [23:1](#)), while others note that their removal was incomplete ([13:2-6](#); [15:63](#); [16:10](#); [17:12-13](#), [16-18](#); [23:4-5](#), [7](#), [12-13](#)). These statements are not mutually contradictory; rather, the narrative gives a realistic picture of the conditions of the occupation. The conquest of Canaan did not require that every individual Canaanite be removed or annihilated; displacement of the Canaanites was a process that went on over a period of time ([23:4-5](#)). It was still the case that God had faithfully fulfilled His promise to Israel.

2. Ken Fentress, "Notes on Joshua," in *The Apologetics Study Bible: Understanding Why You Believe*, ed. Ted Cabal (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2007), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 352-357.

22:9-34 While returning to their homes in the Transjordan the men of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh provoked a crisis by erecting an altar at Geliloth. Their altar was a replica ([v. 28](#)) of the one at the tabernacle, intended as a witness to future generations of the legitimacy of their share in the inheritance. This was an innocent act on their part, as they did not intend the altar to be used for sacrifices. The Cisjordan tribes, however, viewed such an altar as a threat to the unity of Israel as a whole. The western tribes sent a delegation, headed by Phinehas son of Eleazar, to investigate the matter. The eastern tribes explained their purpose in erecting the altar to the satisfaction of the rest ([vv. 21-31](#)), and the crisis was resolved.

22:10 "A large, impressive altar" indicates that it would be seen by anyone who passed by.

22:12 The assembly of the Cisjordan tribes at Shiloh was preparing to go to war against the Transjordan tribes in order to correct what they thought was a breach of the covenant with the Lord.

22:16-18 The Phinehas delegation expressed its concern in the strongest terms. The word translated "treachery" is used twice in verse 16 and refers to an act of rebellion; the same word was used with reference to Achan's deed at Jericho ([7:1](#)). The delegation recalled the incident at Peor ([Nm 25](#)) as an example of the consequences of idolatry. The Phinehas delegation was concerned that an act of spiritual unfaithfulness on the part of the tribes east of the Jordan would endanger all Israel.

22:33-34 The incident ended peaceably. The Transjordan tribes named the altar in accordance with its purpose: it was to be a witness for future generations to the sovereignty of the Lord and the unity of all the tribes of Israel.

NLT Life Application Study Bible³

Joshua 20; 21:1-3, 43-45; 22

20:6 A new nation in a new land needed a new government. Many years earlier God had told Moses how this government should function. One of the tasks God wanted the Israelites to do when they entered the Promised Land was to designate certain cities as "cities of refuge." These were to be scattered throughout the land. Their purpose was to prevent injustice, especially in cases of revenge. For example, if someone accidentally killed another person, he could flee to a city of refuge where he was safe until he could have a fair trial. The Levites were in charge of these cities. They were to ensure that God's principles of justice and fairness were kept. (For more on cities of refuge, see the notes on [Numbers 35:6, 11-28](#).)

21:2 The Levites were to minister on behalf of all the people, so they were given cities scattered throughout the land. Although Jerusalem was far away from the homes of many Israelites, almost no one lived more than a day's journey from a Levitical city.

21:43-45 God proved faithful in fulfilling every promise he had given to Israel. Fulfillment of some promises took several years, but "not a single one of all the good promises the Lord had given to the family of Israel was left unfulfilled." God's promises will be fulfilled according to his timetable, not ours, but we know that his word is sure. The more we learn of those promises God has fulfilled and continues to fulfill, the easier it is to hope for those yet to come. Sometimes we become impatient, wanting God to act in a certain way *now*. Instead, we should faithfully do what we know he wants us to do and trust him for the future.

22:2-4 Before the conquest had begun, these tribes were given land on the east side of the Jordan River. But before they could settle down, they had to first promise to help the other tribes conquer the land on the west side ([Numbers 32:20-22](#)). They had patiently and diligently carried out their promised duties. Joshua commended them for doing just that. At last they were permitted to return to their families and build their cities. Follow-through is vital in God's work. Beware of the temptation to quit early and leave God's work undone.

22:5 Here Joshua briefly restated the central message Moses gave the people in Deuteronomy: Obedience should be based on love for God. Although the Israelites had completed their military responsibility, Joshua reminded them of their spiritual responsibility. Sometimes we think so much about what we are to do that we neglect thinking about who we are to be. If we know we are God's children, we will love him and joyfully serve him. We must not let daily service take away from our love for God.

3. *Life Application Study Bible*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1988), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Chapter 20", 343-347.

[22:11-34](#) When the tribes of Reuben and Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh built an altar near the Jordan River, the rest of Israel feared that these tribes were starting their own religion and rebelling against God. But before beginning an all-out war, Phinehas led a delegation to learn the truth, following the principle taught in [Deuteronomy 13:12-18](#). He was prepared to negotiate rather than fight if a battle was not necessary. When he learned that the altar was for a memorial rather than for pagan sacrifice, war was averted and unity restored.

As nations and as individuals, we would benefit from a similar approach to resolving conflicts. Assuming the worst about the intentions of others only brings trouble. Israel averted the threat of civil war by asking before assaulting. Beware of reacting before you hear the whole story.

[22:17](#) For the story of how Israel turned away from God and began to worship Baal at Peor, see [Numbers 25:1-18](#).

[22:20](#) For the story of Achan, a man who allowed greed to get the best of him, see [chapter 7](#).

[22:26-28](#) The tribes were concerned that, without some visible sign of unity between the people on the two sides of the Jordan, future generations might see conflict between them. The altar, patterned after the altar of the Lord, was to remind these people that they all worshiped the same God. Often we need to be reminded of the faith of our fathers. What actions demonstrate to your children your reliance on God and remind them of what he has done? Take the time to establish family traditions that will help your children remember.

Life Essentials Study Bible

*God's Promises*⁴
from Joshua 21:43-45

We are always to trust God to fulfill His unconditional promises

When God called Abraham, He made an unconditional promise that a great nation would come from his seed and that they had a title deed to a large parcel of land ([Gn 12:1-3](#); [15:18-21](#)). That nation is Israel. Though they have often been removed from the land because of their unbelief and disobedience, the promise is still unconditional and will be fulfilled someday

All true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ—both Jews and Gentiles—also have an unconditional, eternal promise. Someday we will occupy a new heaven and a new earth. The apostle John saw this in a vision:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea no longer existed. I also saw the Holy City, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband. ([Rv 21:1-2](#))

It appears that this is what Jesus was ultimately referring to when He tried to comfort the troubled hearts of His disciples:

Your heart must not be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if not, I would have told you. I am going away to prepare a place for you. If I go away and prepare a place for you, I will come back and receive you to Myself, so that where I am you may be also. You know the way to where I am going. ([Jn 14:1-4](#))

Reflection and Response

How should God's eternal and unconditional promise of eternal life to all true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ impact the way we live? (See [Tit 2:11-14](#).)

4. Gene Getz, *Life Essentials Study Bible*, (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2011), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 294.

Life Essentials Study Bible

*Avoiding Divisions*⁵

from Joshua 22:1-34

As members of Christ's body, we are to do everything we can to avoid misunderstandings that lead to divisions and disunity.

In this event, we have a classic illustration of the way in which communication can break down leading to serious repercussions. For seven years, the Reubenites, Gadites, and half the tribe of Manasseh had sent their fighting men across Jordan to help conquer the land, fulfilling their commitment to Moses. Before they crossed back over the Jordan River, they “built a large, impressive altar” ([v. 10](#))—not to offer sacrifices, but as a reminder to all Israel that although they lived on the eastern side of the river, they were included in the Abrahamic covenant ([vv. 27-28](#)).

Unfortunately, the other tribes totally misinterpreted their motives. They concluded that they had set up another place for worship other than in the tabernacle at Gilgal—a direct violation of God's command ([Lv 17:8-9](#)). To avoid God's judgment, those who settled in Canaan were ready to go to war. Before acting on what they believed were facts, the Israelites wisely sent representatives to confront the situation. They discovered unexpected truth, reported the facts, and restored peace among all the tribes of Israel.

There's a great lesson in this story. On countless occasions throughout church history, misunderstandings and lack of communication have destroyed unity among believers. This often happens when Christians act on what they believe are facts without face-to-face interaction and careful investigation.

In the New Testament, Barnabas stands out as a wonderful example. When the disciples in Jerusalem—including some of the apostles—believed that Paul was still the murderer that he once was, Barnabas took Paul to the apostles and explained his conversion and how he had begun to preach the gospel boldly in Damascus ([Ac 9:27](#)). Barnabas had apparently taken time to discover the truth, which in turn led to unity among believers rather than confusion and division.

Reflection and Response

How does avoiding divisions apply not only to the church, but to our marriages and our families, as well as to other social and vocational relationships?

5. Gene Getz, *Life Essentials Study Bible*, (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2011), *WORDsearch CROSS e-book*, 295.