

# Undivided Worship

BELIEVERS ARE TO AVOID IDOLS AND WORSHIP GOD ALONE.

As Christians, we understand the senselessness of idolatry in the ancient world (Isa. 44:6-20). The very words of the second command make it clear, “Do not make an idol for yourself” (Ex. 20:4; Deut. 5:8). Idolatry is literally making a god. It’s when humans, who are made in God’s image, make a god with their own hands in an attempt to fulfill their own needs. In ancient times, idols were made by carving wood, chiseling stone, or casting metal. People, who were given dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:28), took earthen materials and fashioned images that exercised dominion over them. Senseless, isn’t it? Well, it sounds silly until you realize that modern people make idols too—not with tools, but through our thoughts and actions. It’s still senseless for (at least) two reasons.

First, consider a statement like *“this is how I like to think about God”* that is not directly tied to God’s revelation of Himself in Scripture. Someone who makes a statement like that is well down the road of making God in our own image. But, the one true God can’t be condensed, domesticated, or controlled. Too often we think of God apart from how He has revealed Himself, and thus respond to Him according to our perceptions and not according to His revelation. This is why we need to continually measure our perceptions of God against His revelation of Himself. Thus, the problem of idolatry gets to the very heart of the authority of Scripture. Scripture is to be what reigns in our disordered and warped imaginations of who God is, and teaches us to reverently accept God as He is. We need God’s revelation to guard our thoughts about God, because it will also guide our worship of the one true God. In short, God reveals who He truly is and prescribes how He must be worshiped; therefore, we must be careful to be attentive to His Word.

Second, we were made for God, and our hearts are restless until we are brought into relationship with Him. You might be thinking, *what does this have to do with worship?* Well, the word *worship* is related to the idea of ascribing worth. We will sacrifice to whatever we believe is most worthy. People sacrifice their families for their careers. People sacrifice going to church to pursue their children’s sports dreams. People sacrifice



their dignity to get what they want and have their desires met. The problem is, if what we value or believe has the most worth is something or someone other than God, it is idolatry. Furthermore, if we look to some created thing to give us the meaning, hope, and happiness that only God Himself can give, it will eventually fail to deliver and break our hearts. All idols ultimately disappoint us. No earthly idols can give us the comfort, security, and fulfillment that can only be found in God. We all have a God-sized hole in our hearts which only He can fill. We may not worship statues, but just like the ancient Israelites all of us struggle from time to time with the temptation to fill this hole with something other than God.



## Deuteronomy 12:1-26:19

If you remember the structure of Deuteronomy 1-11, Deuteronomy 1:1-5 serves as the preamble, Deuteronomy 1:6-4:49 offers a historical prologue (“Remember”), and in Deuteronomy 5:1-11:32 Moses emphasized the importance of Israel living in relationship with God that was to be characterized by obedience to His commands. Now, in Deuteronomy 12:1-26:19, Moses drilled down on specific covenant stipulations. Moreover, chapter 12 is focused on the proper worship of the one, true God of Israel. This chapter on worship is an expansion of the first two commandments found in Deuteronomy 5:7-9, namely, “Do not have other gods besides me” and “Do not make an idol for yourself” to bow down to and serve. In many ways the first two commandments are two sides of the same coin. The first commands us to worship only the one true God. The second commands us to worship the one, true God in the correct way.

Deuteronomy 12 focuses on worship and makes the distinctiveness of the covenant God its primary concern, namely that there is no other besides Him (see Deut. 4:35,39). We would be mistaken to view God’s command for unadulterated worship as coming from a tyrannical dictator who “needs praise.” God lacks no attributes or qualities in Himself that could be nurtured by the praise of others. Even in the New Testament, the apostle Paul was emphatic: God is not worshiped by us “as though he needed anything” because He is perfect in Himself (Acts 17:24-29). Apart from God alone being worthy of worship, the sovereign God’s command that humanity worship Him alone is issued



out of His generous love. In this sense, God desires worship not because it meets His need (He has no such need) but because it meets our need. Remember what we have learned thus far in Deuteronomy: God's laws (including the ones concerning proper worship) were aimed at bringing about Israel's good (Deut. 4:40; 5:16,29,33; 6:1-3,18,24; 10:12-16; 12:25,28; 30:16-20).

As we noted earlier, God is the only one in whom we can have our deepest desires met. Indeed, He created us to find our ultimate joy and satisfaction in Him alone. Thus, if we turn to anyone or anything else in idolatry, ultimately we will be disappointed. And unless we turn to God from everything else (in repentance and faith in Christ), we will be eternally condemned. So the words of our passage are important—our souls literally hang in the balance on these principles. Thus, like Israel, we must be diligent to hear and obey God's Word.



## Remove Idolatry (Deut. 12:1-7)

Upon entering Canaan and taking the land, the Israelites were to destroy the local shrines devoted to the worship of Canaanite gods. The Israelites were told to worship God in a separate place. In Canaan, they would establish one central sanctuary that would be recognized as the Lord's dwelling place.

### VERSES 1-3

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**“Be careful to follow these statutes and ordinances in the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has given you to possess all the days you live on the earth. Destroy completely all the places where the nations that you are driving out worship their gods—on the high mountains, on the hills, and under every green tree. Tear down their altars, smash their sacred pillars, burn their Asherah poles, cut down the carved images of their gods, and wipe out their names from every place.”**

Perhaps you have noticed how often Moses instructed the people to be careful in following God's **statutes and ordinances in the land**. Remember, God reveals who He truly is and prescribes how He must



be worshiped. This is why we must be careful to be attentive to His Word. This became difficult for Israel to remember when living in a land filled with false gods and pagan shrines.

In the pagan religions of Canaan, outdoor shrines known as *high places* were usually dedicated to the Canaanite god Baal, but the Ammonite god Molech and the Moabite god Chemosh also were worshiped at some high places. These pagan shrines were constructed **on the high mountains, on the hills, and under every green tree**. For both Israel and the pagan nations, mountains were the place where heaven and earth met. Thus, climbing a mountain was akin to ascending as far as one could go into the heavens. For pagans, groves of trees symbolized fertility. These high places generally consisted of “an altar (2 Kings 21:3; 2 Chron. 14:3), a carved wooden pole that depicted the female goddess of fertility (Asherah), a stone pillar symbolizing the male deity (2 Kings 3:2), other idols (2 Kings 17:29; 2 Chron. 33:19), and some type of building (1 Kings 12:31; 13:32; 16:32-33).”<sup>1</sup> At such high places, people offered animal (and sometimes human) sacrifices, burned incense, prayed to their gods, ate sacrificial meals, and partook in cultic prostitution.

God’s call for the Israelites to **“tear down their altars, smash their sacred pillars, burn their Asherah poles, cut down the carved images of their gods, and wipe out their names from every place”** was comprehensive and complete. Being obedient to this command was a call for the utter destruction of all idols. Once these idols were obliterated, only one God would remain: the one true God of Israel. The removal of all the idols of false gods and their places of worship would remove the influence and temptation for the Israelites to worship and serve these gods.

God’s call for Israel to remove all idols and pagan places of worship reminds us we too have weaknesses. Temptations abound to find fulfillment in persons, places, and things other than the one true God. This is why Scripture commands in the most absolute terms to remove (or remove ourselves from) hindrances and enticements which might draw us away from our singular loyalty to and worship of Him.

## VERSES 4-5

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**“Don’t worship the LORD your God this way. Instead, turn to the place the LORD your God chooses from all your tribes to put his name for his dwelling and go there.”**

The command **“Don’t worship the LORD your God this way,”** that is, as the pagans did, is instructive. Such high places were forbidden. The location of worship would be **“the place the LORD your God chooses from**



**all your tribes to put his name for his dwelling,”** first at the tabernacle and then at the temple in Jerusalem. At this point in Israel’s history, however, the place was not named, which underscores the importance of the one who would choose it, namely, God. In this sense, what matters most here is not just the “where” of worship but “who” Israel was commanded to worship: Yahweh, the one true God.

Moreover, this command, *“Don’t worship the LORD your God this way,”* meaning as the pagans worshiped their gods, concerned not only the location and manner of idol worship but also the intent of idol worship. In the Canaanites’ religion, using idols to manipulate the deities they represented was common. Furthermore, in the ancient Near East people generally believed that gods and goddesses had their own realms of influence in the world (weather, fertility, war, and so forth). They also believed that each of these deities was associated with particular shrines or temples, as well as particular lands or territories. Thus, if a pagan religious adherent wanted to manipulate the god of a particular realm, he would visit that god’s shrine and offer sacrifices, take vows, and formalize contracts with that god. In other words, “I worship you, and you work for me.” Israel’s God, however, is the Creator and Sustainer of all that exists (Gen. 1–2; Ps. 146:6; Isa. 45:18; Acts 17:24; Col. 1:17), the Lord of heaven and earth (1 Chron. 29:11–12; Ps. 103:19). He alone was worthy of Israel’s worship in the place where He designated, and He could not be manipulated by human beings. This remains true in our day.

#### VERSES 6-7

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**“You are to bring there your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tenths and personal contributions, your vow offerings and freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. You will eat there in the presence of the LORD your God and rejoice with your household in everything you do, because the LORD your God has blessed you.”**

Israel’s God also commanded His people to worship Him in the ways He prescribed. **“You are to bring there your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tenths and personal contributions, your vow offerings and freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks.”** All of these types of offerings and sacrifices are detailed elsewhere in the Torah, particularly in Leviticus 1–7 (see also Lev. 23; Num. 18). In sum, offerings and sacrifices generally involved a costly ritual instituted by God. Thus, worship was not driven by the adherents’ needs or desires but by God’s command. It was also gracious institution from God,



reminding Israel of the seriousness of sin and their need for atonement. This points to the relational nature of God's covenant with Israel. The Israelites were to **"eat [feast] there in the presence of the LORD your God and rejoice with your household in everything you do, because the LORD your God has blessed you."** Some sacrifices and offerings involved a sacrificial meal eaten in God's presence by those making the sacrifice. Even more, their worship was not to be motivated by a desire to manipulate God for some purpose but rather as a response to God's goodness for already providing all they needed—He had *blessed* them. This inclusion of feasting and rejoicing is also notable, as Israel's annual feasts (Day of Atonement, Lev. 23:26-32; Passover, Deut. 16:1-8; Pentecost, 16:9-12) were times of covenant renewal or reaffirmation of their relationship with God.



### **Explore Further**

Read the article "Sacrifice and Offering" on pages 1398–1401 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*, to learn more about the various sacrifices offered to God by the Israelites in the Old Testament. How did the atoning sacrifice of Jesus make such sacrifices unnecessary?

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## **Worship God (Deut. 12:8-11)**

The Israelites were directed to bring all their offerings to the Lord into the sanctuary once they crossed into the promised land. The Lord would choose the place where His Name would dwell.

### **VERSES 8-9**

**"You are not to do as we are doing here today; everyone is doing whatever seems right in his own sight. Indeed, you have not yet come into the resting place and the inheritance the LORD your God is giving you."**

Now that God through Moses had declared that there would be a centralized place of worship, He contrasted it with the Israelites' manner of worship that was being done since Sinai. As evidenced by what they were **"doing here today,"** the Israelites had been **"doing whatever seems**



**right in his own sight.”** The nature of this statement is not elaborated on, but the Israelites had not been without prior instruction as to the worship of Yahweh. Guidelines had been established forty years prior (Ex. 25-31; 34:1-28; 35:1-2).

Here the emphasis is on the coming time when the Israelites would enter into the promised land, **“the resting place and the inheritance the LORD your God is giving you.”** During this period, there would be a centralization of the worship of Yahweh, first at the tabernacle and then at the temple in Jerusalem that would be built by King David’s son Solomon (1 Kings 6).

## **VERSES 10-11**

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**“When you cross the Jordan and live in the land the LORD your God is giving you to inherit, and he gives you rest from all the enemies around you and you live in security, then the LORD your God will choose the place to have his name dwell. Bring there everything I command you: your burnt offerings, sacrifices, offerings of the tenth, personal contributions, and all your choice offerings you vow to the LORD.”**

As Israel had traveled through the wilderness, God had been with them at the tabernacle. It would only be when they crossed **the Jordan** River and settled in the promised land God was giving them that they would finally live in **rest** and security from all their **enemies**. The first established location of the tabernacle in Canaan was at Shiloh (Josh. 18:1), thirty miles north of Jerusalem. But the promise of God was that He would establish a permanent location; **“the LORD your God will choose the place to have his name dwell.”**

One of the points of a centralized place for the worship of *the LORD* (Yahweh) was to protect the Israelites from the dangers of being pulled into the practices of pagan religions and becoming acclimated to the surrounding pagan cultures. It is difficult to fully comprehend the importance of a physical temple of God to the Israelites because no one building is as important and integral to our modern lives as the Jerusalem temple was to the Israelites. All aspects of their lives centered around God and His temple. In the eyes of the people, the temple constituted the divine dwelling-place of the God of Israel. There the worship of God was performed through **“your burnt offerings, sacrifices, offerings of the tenth, personal contributions, and all your choice offerings you vow to the LORD.”** By following God’s commands to offer such sacrifices, the people of Israel showed their allegiance to and faith in Him alone.



*Burnt offerings* were offered every day in the morning and evening, as well as on specific days such as the Sabbath, the beginning of each month, and the annual feasts (Lev. 1; Num. 28–29). They were offered using specified animals such as bulls, sheep, goats, turtledoves, and young pigeons (Lev. 1; Num. 28–29). The nature of *sacrifices* and *choice offerings* are not detailed, but other types of offerings/sacrifices included the grain offering (Lev. 2), the fellowship offering (chap. 3), and the sin offering (chap. 4–5). *Offerings of the tenth* were tithes on livestock and produce offered at the tabernacle/temple that acknowledged the goodness of the Lord in providing the bounty of the land. Their purpose was to instill in the Israelites a fear of the Lord (Deut. 14:22–29).

In the end, the centralized importance of the temple would preserve Israel’s unity and distinctiveness, as they were only to meet in one place and worship the one true God precisely as He had prescribed. Now, within the context of the entire canon of Scripture, God’s presence and direction for proper worship remain central.

In the time of the New Testament, worship moved away from a physical structure in the sense that Jesus is with us wherever believers gather in worship (Matt. 18:20). Jesus Christ came to dwell (tabernacle) among us (John 1:14). Jesus proclaimed that “an hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.” Instead, God’s people would worship Him “in Spirit and in truth” (4:21–24).

After Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection, that promise was fulfilled as the Holy Spirit descended on the first believers (Acts 2). As Christians, when we think about offerings and sacrifices today, it’s important to remember that we do so on the other side of the cross. Today, God’s people’s sins have been atoned for by the shedding of Christ’s blood, and we are indwelt by God’s Holy Spirit (Rom. 8). Because we are forgiven in Christ, we can now offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1). This means sacrificially giving our resources, energies, gifts, and time for His kingdom—using all that we are and all that we have for His purposes rather than our selfish motives. This is our act of true, spiritual worship.



### **Explore Further**

Read the article “Worship” on pages 1670–1672 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. In what ways is Christian worship today similar to and different from the worship of the ancient Israelites?



## Stand Firm (Deut. 12:29-32)

God Himself would aid the Israelites in their military battles to take the land promised. God warned them to be careful and to avoid being ensnared by the worship of the pagan gods of the Canaanites. They were not to adopt any of the Canaanite worship practices or incorporate them into Israelite worship.

### VERSE 29

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**“When the LORD your God annihilates the nations before you, which you are entering to take possession of, and you drive them out and live in their land,”**

One of the prominent biblical motifs is that of God being a Divine Warrior. The central principle of the Divine Warrior theme is that God engages in battle on behalf of His people, defeating their enemies and bringing them victory. It’s important to remember that God’s intervention on behalf of Israel was rooted in their covenantal relationship with Him. In this relationship, God protected the Israelites from their enemies. However, there were times when God gave them over to their enemies in situations where Israel had rebelled against God in violation of their covenant with Him (28:15,49-52,64-68).

In this verse, the first thing we are told is that God **annihilates the nations** when Israel was entering to **take possession of . . . their land**. It was only after the nations of Canaan were defeated that centralized worship of God could be established and undertaken without the threat of Israel being lured into idolatry. Note, however, that even with this divine promise, Israel had to take possession of the land and **drive . . . out** the pagan peoples. But as the following few verses make clear, the destruction of the pagan peoples and the Israelites’ possession of the land would not totally remove Israel’s propensity toward idolatry.

### VERSES 30-32

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**“be careful not to be ensnared by their ways after they have been destroyed before you. Do not inquire about their gods, asking, ‘How did these nations worship their gods? I’ll also do the same.’ You must not do the same to the LORD your God, because they practice every detestable act, which the LORD hates, for their gods. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Be careful to do everything I command you; do not add anything to it or take anything away from it.”**



The warning to **be careful not to be ensnared** by foreign nations' ways reminded Israel of its proclivity to follow false gods, as would be illustrated in its history as a nation. Because of their past inclinations, even inquiring, **"How did these nations worship their gods?"** would be a grave danger to the Israelites. It was possible that Israel would find the sensual religious practices and elaborate rituals of the Canaanites alluring—"I'll also do the same." However, God's warning was intensified by His reference to **every detestable act**, illustrated by the horrific practice of child sacrifice among the Canaanites. Indeed, **"They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods."** Once again, like so many times before, this warning was bolstered by God's command for Israel, **"Be careful to do everything I command you,"** followed by the instruction, **"Do not add anything or take anything away from it [God's commands]."** Ignoring the divine commands against worshipping other gods would violate the covenant relationship between God and Israel. The first two of the Ten Commandments (Deut. 5:6-10) and the Shema (6:4-5) demand a single-minded allegiance to God. Anything else would be a treasonous violation of their covenant.

This section's call for Israel to identify and reject all forms of idolatry is needed for the church as well. Just as Israel often was drawn to idols, so our hearts can be drawn to so many things to find comfort, success, pleasure, and meaning apart from God.



### Explore Further

Read the articles "Baal" on page 156 and "Molech" on pages 1121-1122 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. These were just two of the many gods that the pagan nations worshiped in Old Testament times. To worship these false gods was a constant temptation for the Israelites. The article on "Molech" notes that the Israelites were particularly susceptible to turning to Molech in times of desperation. What are the differences between acting in faith and acting out of fear and desperation?

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1. Gary V. Smith, "High Place," in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Chad Brand, rev. (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2015), 747.