

# Vital Decision

IN HIS FAREWELL ADDRESS, JOSHUA CHALLENGED THE PEOPLE TO CHOOSE THE LORD OVER THE GODS OF THE CANAANITES.

**Scripture Passage: Joshua 24:14-24    Memory Verse: Joshua 24:23-24**

We face decisions every day. Some are major, and some are minor. And some we try to ignore—often with devastating results. What’s more, our decisions can affect others in life-changing ways.

For example, Johann Rall, a German colonel during the American Revolution, made a historic decision in December of 1776. By some accounts, Rall was so wrapped up in a card game that he ignored the warnings of a British spy that the Americans were planning a surprise attack on his Hessian troops in Trenton, New Jersey. Yet, on Christmas night, George Washington led his troops across the Delaware River and did just what the spy had reported. In the battle, Rall was mortally wounded and died. Had Rall acted on the spy’s message, the American Revolution might have taken a very different turn.

As you prepare to lead this session, reflect first on your decision to follow God and what prompted you to make that choice. Then, think about how best to challenge the adults in your Bible study to make the most vital decision they will ever face—the decision to follow the Lord.



## **Weekly Podcast: Group Leader Training**

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Crash landings of commercial jets are extremely rare. Nevertheless, one of the normal routines before a commercial jet takes off is flight attendants giving passengers instructions on what to do in case of an emergency landing on land or water. Most passengers seem to ignore the flight attendants. People might get away with that on a plane, but it is always costly when people ignore warnings in the Word of God. (PSG, p. 64)

**Why are people tempted to ignore warnings of potential danger?**



## Understand the Context (Joshua 22:1–24:33)

Joshua 1–12 deals with the conquest of Canaan, while chapters 13–24 detail the division of the land. After subduing the land west of the Jordan River, Joshua released the tribes of Gad, Reuben, and half of Manasseh to return to their inheritance east of the river. Later, those tribes built an altar as a sign of unity with the other Israelites. The western tribes, though, mistakenly thought their eastern relatives had fallen into idolatry and prepared for war. Once the eastern tribes explained the altar's purpose, each side recognized the altar as a witness to God's work on both sides of the Jordan (see Josh. 22:34).

Chapter 23 preserves Joshua's farewell address. He warned Israel against allying with other nations in the promised land. If they violated their covenant with God, they would experience curses instead of blessings. Echoing the Lord's directive to him after Moses's death, Joshua challenged God's people to be strong (1:6,7,9; 23:6) and to keep following Him (23:8).

In chapter 24, Joshua gathered the tribes in Shechem, near Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim to renew their commitment to the Lord. The preamble to this covenant identified the Lord and Israel as the parties who had entered a special relationship (24:1-2a). Next, Joshua recalled God's gracious actions on Israel's behalf. As a result of His undeserved blessing, the Israelites had received a land they did not labor for and cities they did not build (24:2b-13).

The covenant spelled out what God expected from His people. They were to worship Him alone and abandon the idols their ancestors had worshiped (24:14-24). Joshua challenged them to choose whom they would worship carefully. For Him, the choice was clear. He would worship the Lord.

Israel agreed to the covenant (vv. 16,24), and Joshua included it "in the book of the law of God" (v. 26). He also set up a monument as a witness against the Israelites if they strayed from their commitment to God (vv. 26-27).

The book of Joshua ends with notations about three heroes of faith who were buried in the promised land. The writer first mentioned Joshua, who died at the age of 110 and had positive influence that resonated across Israel long after his death. The second was Joseph. The Israelites had carried his bones from Egypt to the promised land, and those bones were buried at Shechem (see Gen. 50:22-26; Ex. 13:19). Finally, Eleazar the priest was buried at Gibeah (Josh. 24:33).

These three burials witnessed to the Lord's faithfulness in fulfilling His promises to the Israelites and to their ancestors. That faithfulness should have sparked loyalty to Him from Israel for generations to come.

**Read Joshua 24:14-24. Highlight all the ways Joshua encouraged the Israelites to be faithful to the Lord. (PSG, p. 65)**

# ENGAGE



**PREPARE:** Prior to the group time, move the colored circles to Shechem on **Pack Item 1** (Map: *The Conquest of Canaan*) and to “Worship of God in the Land” on **Pack Item 2** (Poster: *Outlines of Joshua, Judges, Ruth*). Make copies of **Pack Item 10** (Handout: *The Life of Joshua*).

**READ:**

Call for a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 64 of the PSG. Encourage adults to use a scale of 1-5, with one being “completely tuned out” and five being “completely tuned in” to describe how they respond to the safety information before a flight. Affirm that it is easy to get distracted.

**ASK:**

**Why are people tempted to ignore warnings of potential danger?** (PSG, p. 64)

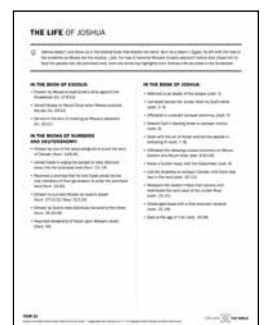
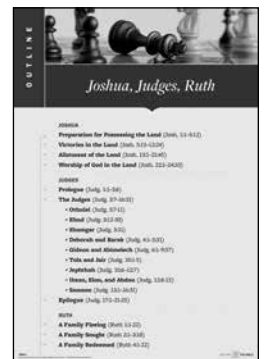
**BACKGROUND:**

Refer to **Pack Item 2** (Poster: *Outlines of Joshua, Judges, Ruth*). Note that this week’s session wraps up the study of Joshua. Summarize this from “Understand the Context” (PSG, p. 65) to provide more background:

“Chapters 23–24 contain Joshua’s last words to Israel. He challenged the people to remain faithful to the Lord and stay away from the false gods of the peoples still remaining in the land. Joshua warned them that if they worshiped these idols, then the Lord would destroy them. The people insisted they would remain faithful. Consequently, Joshua made a covenant for the people and set up a memorial stone as a witness to the oath they made to the Lord. Israel worshiped God as long as Joshua and their elders who served beside Joshua lived.”

**TRANSITION:**

*Joshua had led the people to do some incredible things as they moved into the promised land. His final words represent one last challenge for the people of God.*



## Group Activity Option

### Music

Play the song “Goodness of God” as recorded by CeCe Winans (2021). Provide the lyrics or, if possible, show the lyric video from the internet. After listening to the song, lead the group to discuss its primary message. Ask: **Why would this be a good song for the Israelites to sing after all they had seen God do for them? What are some other songs that would have been appropriate for these people to sing?**

## Challenge (Josh. 24:14-18)

**14** “Therefore, fear the LORD and worship him in sincerity and truth. Get rid of the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and worship the LORD. **15** But if it doesn’t please you to worship the LORD, choose for yourselves today: Which will you worship—the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living? As for me and my family, we will worship the LORD.” **16** The people replied, “We will certainly not abandon the LORD to worship other gods! **17** For the LORD our God brought us and our ancestors out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery, and performed these great signs before our eyes. He also protected us all along the way we went and among all the peoples whose lands we traveled through. **18** The LORD drove out before us all the peoples, including the Amorites who lived in the land. We too will worship the LORD, because he is our God.”

(vv. 14-15) Joshua challenged the Israelites both to **fear** and to **worship** the Lord. The Hebrew verb translated *fear* can denote a distressing emotion triggered by impending danger, pain, or evil. It also can convey a positive respect for God that moves people toward holy living. For the Israelites, such reverence came from learning the law and obeying it (Deut. 31:11-12).

The Hebrew verb rendered *worship* can also mean “to serve.” The verb is closely related to a noun meaning “servant” or “slave.” Offering service or worship to God, however, is not bondage. To the contrary, it frees people.

The Lord desires that we worship Him **in sincerity and truth**. The wording suggests worship that is “firm” or “complete.” The terms are used of animals without blemish and signify wholeness. God expects our commitment to Him to be absolute, holding nothing back.

Joshua commanded his listeners to demonstrate total devotion to God. This required removing the idols their ancestors had worshiped **beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt**. The Israelites had worshiped other gods in Mesopotamia across the *Euphrates River* (Josh. 24:2). Later, the prophet Ezekiel affirmed that they also worshiped Egyptian idols (Ezek. 20:7-8). Joshua emphasized that the time had come to commit themselves fully to the Lord.

Joshua identified contrasting choices. The Israelites could **worship the LORD or the gods your ancestors worshiped**. The people could **choose** freely, but he urged them to make that choice **today**.

Along with Mesopotamian and Egyptian gods, Joshua added a third option: **the gods**

**of the Amorites**. The term *Amorites* often appears as a broad designation for all Canaanites. Their worship involved a fertility cult that appealed to the Israelites, who were learning more about agriculture. For forty years, God had provided their food as they wandered in the wilderness. Over time, they shifted their reliance to the false gods of their enemies.

Joshua made his personal stance clear. He and his family would **worship the LORD**. The Israelite leader did not attempt to manipulate the people or force them to choose God. He simply set a positive example they could follow.

(v. 16) The people rose to Joshua’s challenge. **We will certainly not abandon** conveys both will and emotions. *Abandon* also means “to leave” or “to forsake” and is used of the backsliding Israelites (Deut. 29:24-25). As a consequence of abandoning the Lord, God’s people would experience the covenant curses (Deut. 28:20).

(vv. 17-18) Israel affirmed Joshua’s recital of God’s mighty acts. They knew who had rescued them **out of the land of Egypt**, and they acknowledged the Lord’s **great signs**. The term likely designates the plagues on the Egyptians (Ex. 4:28-31), along with miracles like the parting of the Red Sea, providing manna, and bringing water from a rock.

Joshua’s audience recognized that God had **protected** them during their journey to the promised land and in the conquest of it. Thus they declared their loyalty to the Lord. They would follow Joshua’s example of faithfulness and **worship the LORD** exclusively.

# EXPLORE Joshua 24:14-18



**APPLICATION POINT:** Each person must consider how he or she will respond to the Lord.

**ASK:**

**When you look back over your life, where can you see the hand of God at work?**

**READ:**

**Invite a volunteer to read aloud Joshua 24:14-18** as the group listens for the response of the people to Joshua's challenge.

**RECAP:**

Point out the location of Shechem on **Pack Item 1** (*Map: The Conquest of Canaan*). Distribute copies of **Pack Item 10** (*Handout: The Life of Joshua*) and recount the significant moments from Joshua's life. Highlight "Challenged Israel with a final covenant renewal."

**SHARE:**

Explain the nature of Joshua's final message to the people:

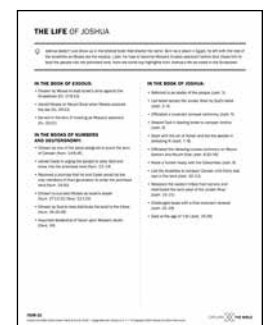
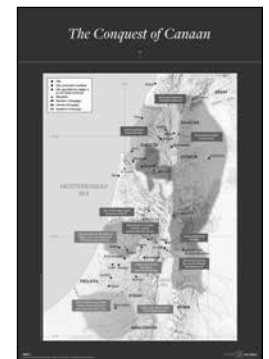
*Joshua challenged the people to choose whom they would worship. . . . Their forefathers worshiped other gods in Mesopotamia and Egypt, and now the Israelites were in a land where its populace, the Amorites (Canaanites), worshiped more false gods. The gods of the Canaanites' seductive fertility cult would tempt the Israelites with materialism and immorality. Either the Israelites would worship the Lord alone and reject all other gods, or they would worship other gods and in so doing reject the Lord. They could not do both. (PSG, p. 67)*

**ASK:**

**Why is it important to consciously choose whom you will serve?** (PSG, p. 69)

**HIGHLIGHT:**

Affirm Joshua's positive example and the people's commitment to follow that example by serving God wholeheartedly.



## Group Activity Option

### Bible Skill

Joshua 24 highlights a renewal of the covenant between the Lord and His people. Use a Bible atlas to locate Shechem on a map of ancient Israel. Look up the word "covenant" in a Bible dictionary. Read and reflect on the following Scripture passages to learn more about ancient covenants: Genesis 9:8-17; 12:1-3; 15:1-21; 17:1-27; Exodus 19:1-8; 2 Samuel 7:1-17. Consider how the Israelites responded to God's covenants through the years. **Why was a new covenant sealed by Jesus's death and resurrection necessary for God's people?**

## Warnings (Josh. 24:19-24)

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**19** But Joshua told the people, “You will not be able to worship the LORD, because he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions and sins. **20** If you abandon the LORD and worship foreign gods, he will turn against you, harm you, and completely destroy you, after he has been good to you.” **21** “No!” the people answered Joshua. “We will worship the LORD.” **22** Joshua then told the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you yourselves have chosen to worship the LORD.” “We are witnesses,” they said. **23** “Then get rid of the foreign gods that are among you and turn your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.” **24** So the people said to Joshua, “We will worship the LORD our God and obey him.”

(vv. 19-20) Joshua had just passionately urged the Israelites to serve God alone. Yet when the people responded positively, he said that they would **not be able to worship the LORD**. Further, he noted that the Lord would refuse to forgive their **transgressions and sins**. Their leader seemed to be warning the Israelites against making a hasty promise that they had not considered thoroughly. He was urging Israel to take God’s holiness seriously. It is similar to Jesus challenging followers to “calculate the cost” of discipleship (Luke 14:28-30).

Joshua did not mean that the Lord is not a God of forgiveness (see Ex. 20:5-6), but He would judge rebellion severely. Rejecting God and turning to idols would not go without serious consequences (Num. 15:30-31).

The Lord is a **holy God**, as well as a **jealous God**. The Hebrew term for *jealous* expresses strong emotion and can be translated “zealous.” Positively, it denotes a consuming passion for one who is loved. God loved His people and desired the best for them. Consequently, He would not tolerate that which destroyed their fellowship with Him or condone divided loyalties.

(vv. 21-22) The Israelites protested with a forceful **No!** They insisted that they would **worship the LORD** faithfully. Most likely, the people’s response was genuine. They really believed they would serve God well—and may have for a spell. But the book of Judges reveals that after Joshua’s death, the Israelites fell into the spiral of spiritual depravity that he had predicted (Judg. 2:7-13).

Joshua made the Israelites **witnesses** against themselves. Ancient treaties often called on the gods to witness the agreement. Because Yahweh alone is God (and He alone is worthy of worship), other gods held no authority in the matter. So, Joshua held the people accountable to be their own

witnesses. He also set up a large, stone memorial as an additional reminder of their commitment (v. 27). The Israelites would be condemned by their own words if they refused to follow God alone.

(vv. 23-24) Joshua again urged the people to **get rid of the foreign gods** among them. After all, words mean very little if they are not supported by action. The most prominent Canaanite god was Baal, and he proved to be a stumbling block to God’s people for centuries. For now, Joshua urged them to surrender their **hearts to the LORD**.

The Israelites again affirmed their commitment to **worship** God (see v. 21). The people also added that they would **obey him**. The Hebrew word for *obey* literally means “listen.” When parents say, “Now listen to me,” they are expecting far more than mental comprehension of spoken words. They want obedience.

Genuine worship involves absolute obedience to God. He calls His people to put away any idols that might distract us from the devotion that rightfully belongs to Him. And, like the Israelites, He will hold us accountable for obeying His words.

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### Key Doctrine

#### God’s Purpose of Grace

Believers may fall into sin through neglect and temptation, whereby they grieve the Spirit, impair their graces and comforts, and bring reproach on the cause of Christ and temporal judgments on themselves; yet they shall be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation. (See John 5:24; 10:27-29.)

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**APPLICATION POINT:** We're to put away any idols that might demand our devotion that rightfully belongs to the Lord.

**READ:**

Call for a volunteer to read **Joshua 24:19-24**, directing the group to listen for how many times the people affirmed their desire for the Lord.

**DISCUSS:**

Lead the group to discuss why Joshua said the people would not be able to keep this commitment. Highlight that following God can be challenging at times.

**EXPLAIN:**

Summarize what Joshua meant regarding God's refusal to forgive the Israelites' sins:

“The statement, ‘he will not forgive your transgressions and sins,’ was not an absolute, eternal statement for the Lord’s covenant people. The remainder of the Scriptures demonstrates this (see Rom. 11:11-24; Eph. 2:11-22). Nevertheless, it did mean that God would not overlook their unfaithfulness and there would be consequences for their sin. The law warned that if the Israelites were unfaithful to the Lord, then they would experience drought, famine, disease, defeat, and ultimately exile from the promised land (Deut. 28:15-68). Joshua knew this.” (PSG, pp. 69-70)

**ASK:**

**What kinds of idols or false ideas compete for your time and attention?** (PSG, p. 71)

**EXAMINE:**

On the board, write *WORSHIP* vertically as an acrostic. Lead the group to suggest words or phrases that are related to worshiping the Lord. Encourage them to use these words to evaluate their own lives and to determine if idols are hindering their absolute commitment to God.

## Group Activity Option

### Object Lesson: Water

Before the session, prepare two clear glasses of water. You will also need a small amount of food coloring. Display one glass of water. Explain that God wants our worship of Him to be pure and fully devoted to Him alone. Say: *However, we often find ourselves embracing the idols of the world.* Put some food coloring into the water. Say: *Just a little contamination ruins the whole thing.* Display the second glass of pure water and encourage adults to examine their lives for any idols that might be “coloring” their walk with God.

## CHALLENGE

### SUMMARIZE:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 72 of the *Personal Study Guide*:

- *Each person must consider how he or she will respond to the Lord.*
- *We're to put away any idols that might demand our devotion that rightfully belongs to the Lord.*

### REVIEW:

Call for the group to review the statements and to discuss some practical ideas that help a believer live out their devotion to the Lord. Encourage them to find specific ways they can express worship to the Lord each day.

### DISCUSS:

Divide the group into two teams. (*Note: For smaller groups, an individual can be a team. For larger groups, more than one team can work on the same assignment.*) Direct one team to discuss the first question set on page 72 of the PSG, while the other team does the same for the second question set on page 72 of the PSG. After a few minutes, allow volunteers from each team to share their responses. Challenge adults to read and reflect on these questions throughout the week and identify ways they can apply these truths personally.

### PRAY:

Lead the group in a time of silent prayer, encouraging the adults to ask God to reveal any idols in their lives that are keeping them from a true commitment to Him.

### AFTER THE SESSION

Reinforce the session by texting or emailing the group this message: *Just as Joshua challenged the people to choose the Lord over the gods of the Canaanites, I challenge you to choose the Lord over the idols of this world this week.* Encourage adults to continue reflecting on the questions from page 72 of the PSG. Let them know that the next session begins a study of the book of Judges.

### LEADER EXTRAS



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EXPLORE  THE BIBLE.

# *Idolatry's Persistent Appeal*

Leon Hyatt Jr.

In Joshua's last appeal to the Israelites, he reminded them of God's blessings and urged them to show their appreciation by being loyal to Him (Josh. 24:1-28). However, the Israelites failed to follow through on Joshua's challenge. The allure of false religions overwhelmed them, from worshipping a golden calf at Sinai (Ex. 32:1-6) until their last days as an independent nation when Ezekiel saw a vision of them worshipping their favorite idols in the temple (Ezek. 8:1-16).

In between Moses and Ezekiel, the Hebrews worshiped gods like Molech ("Milcom") of the Ammonites (Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5; 1 Kings 11:5,7; Jer. 32:35) and Chemosh of the Moabites (1 Kings 11:7,33; 2 Kings 23:13). Most commonly, they followed the two primary deities of Canaan, Baal (Judg. 2:11; 6:25; 1 Sam. 12:10; 1 Kings 16:30-33; 2 Kings 17:16; Hos. 2:8) and Ashtoreth (Judg. 10:6; 1 Sam. 7:3; 2 Kings 23:13). One wonders why a people who consistently witnessed the overwhelming goodness and power of the true God would so often be deceived. The reasons were manifold.

The various gods and goddesses that Israel worshiped had differing myths and rituals, but all of them shared elements that pervade virtually every false and deceptive religion. This allows us to consider the appeal of all of them together.

## **MAGIC AND MYSTERY**

The priests and priestesses of the false religions that fascinated the Israelites practiced various forms of magic, divination, fortune telling, and spell casting. Pharaoh's wise men in the days of

Moses practiced magic (Ex. 7:8-8:7). So did the Philistines in the days of Samuel (1 Sam. 6:1-10). The Israelites adopted those practices in the days when Micah preached—during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (Mic. 1:1; 3:5-11; see 2 Kings 17:1,17), as well as in the days of King Manasseh (2 Chron. 33:6).

In Daniel's day, the wise men of Babylon carried out these same practices (Dan. 2:1-28; 4:7). Casting spells, pronouncing curses, and dispensing favors secured fame for the practitioners as early as the time of Balaam (Num. 22:1-7). The mystery of clairvoyance, incantations, sorcery, and fortune telling was enticing to the people of ancient Israel in every generation.

## **ILLICIT SEX**

Many who worshiped false gods tied the change of seasons and their land's productivity to fertility cults. As part of the fertility rites, the king, representing the major deity of the people, would engage in relations with a temple prostitute or slave, who represented the goddess. The people believed that these illicit acts caused crops to be fruitful and livestock to be productive. In time, priests and priestesses (or temple prostitutes) emulated these actions at sacred sites, believing they too were ensuring the land's fertility.

Adopting these practices, the Israelites built shrines on hills and under trees (1 Kings 14:23; 2 Kings 16:4; 2 Chron. 28:4; Jer. 3:6). Some consisted of a pillar with sexual significance or a female image with exaggerated sexual features

(Ex. 34:13; Deut. 12:3; Judg. 3:7; 1 Kings 14:23; 2 Kings 17:10; Isa. 27:9; Jer. 17:2). Some such shrines contained small rooms where people could practice sexual perversions.<sup>1</sup> The Israelites used such shrines during their wilderness wanderings (Num. 25:1-9). They still were using them a thousand years later, just before the Babylonians carried the nation into exile (Ezek. 16:15-34).

Some shrines made cult prostitutes available for “worshippers” (Hos. 4:14). As hideous as those practices sound to us, their explanation was as plausible as the modern justification of the same evils: “If it feels good, do it.”

### RIGHTEOUSNESS THROUGH SUFFERING

Man-made religions often revealed a morbid side. In this, the gods seemed more likely to grant a person’s wishes if he punished or harmed his body. The best-known example of this can be seen when Elijah challenged the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel. Baal’s priests cut themselves as they raved and danced around their sacrificial bull. Despite this self-mutilation, they received no response from Baal (1 Kings 18:26-29). Meanwhile, Elijah showed the folly of their passion by pouring water over his offering and offering a simple prayer to the Lord. In response, the Lord sent fire to consume the offering, the altar, and the water around it (1 Kings 18:30-38).

The most extreme example was the practice of human sacrifice, especially child sacrifice. Practitioners called it “passing through the fire” (Lev. 18:21; 2 Kings 16:3; Jer. 32:35; Ezek. 16:21). The sacrifice was made to appease a god’s anger or disappointment (2 Kings 3:26-27) or to obtain favor from a god (Jer. 32:35; Ezek. 16:20-21). In all likelihood, some did it for the added “benefit” of ridding themselves of unwanted children.<sup>2</sup>

In Hinnom, near Jerusalem, the people of Judah built an idol called “Topheth” to use for worshiping Molech (2 Kings 23:10; 2 Chron. 33:6; Jer. 32:35). Rabbinic writers stated that Topheth consisted of a hollow statue of a man with a bull’s head. Worshipers heated the statue from below and then threw their children inside while drums drowned out their cries.<sup>3</sup>

Few practices reveal a more distorted and depraved understanding of the true God, who is by nature a God of grace, love, and blessing. That fact did nothing to lessen the appeal of false gods who specialized in suffering and death.

### A DEMONIC PRESENCE

The Scriptures plainly state that the worship of idols is the worship of demons (Lev. 17:7; Deut. 32:17; 2 Chron. 11:15; Ps. 106:37; 1 Cor. 10:20-21). Those statements should not be reduced in significance by explaining them as symbols. Demons are real, and they want to be worshiped. They involve themselves in idol worship because they receive the worship they crave. The demon gains power over the worshiper and holds the worshiper ever more closely in captivity to the forces of darkness.

Even a brief survey of scriptural teachings about idolatry should make people aware that the same deceptions that captivated the Israelites of old are alert and alive in the world today. Idolatry is not dead. It may call itself by different names, but its power is just as prevalent, just as enticing, and just as deadly today as it was centuries ago.

1. Peter C. Craigie, and Gerald H. Wilson, “Religions, Canaanite” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, gen. ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 100.

2. Ample evidence demonstrates that ancient and modern idolatrous lands place little value on children. In the ruins of ancient idolatrous Carthage (in modern Northern Africa), archaeologists discovered many remains of children and animal skeletons mixed or buried together, likely offered as sacrifices. Various methods of abortion have been amply documented among ancient idolatrous peoples. The cities of India, where idolatry still abounds, are filled with outcast children living by begging on the streets. Some in China today still continue a practice that began in idolatry of abandoning unwanted babies in fields, which exposes them to the elements and results in death.

3. Roland K. Harrison “Molech” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 3 (1986), 401.

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