



▶ *Undivided Worship* ◀

BELIEVERS ARE TO AVOID IDOLS AND WORSHIP GOD ALONE.

DEUTERONOMY 12:1-11,29-32

We've all heard the statements. "I don't need to go to church to worship. I can worship just as well while walking on the beach, working in my garden, or hiking in the mountains." Well, those statements may contain a kernel of truth, but the experiences aren't the same, are they? To worship with God's people in a place set aside for that distinct purpose centers our focus. Corporate worship draws our hearts to Him like nothing else can.

 **Do you think God cares about where and how people worship Him? If so, why?**

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT


DEUTERONOMY 12:1–26:19

Deuteronomy contains a series of messages God delivered to His people through Moses. Moses’s first message (1:1–4:49) reviewed the history of the Israelites, beginning with their leaving Mount Sinai (also called Horeb). It concluded with a challenge for the Israelites to follow the Lord’s commands.

This week’s study comes from Moses’s second message (5:1–26:19). Some biblical scholars have called these chapters the “Code of Deuteronomy.” They compare it to Exodus 20:22–23:19. Although the two share similarities, the Deuteronomy passage contains details not in Exodus. Deuteronomy offers specific applications for God’s people as they entered and inhabited the land of Canaan. The Exodus passage was given to the Israelites at Mount Sinai; Moses delivered the Deuteronomy message to a later generation, as the previous had died out during their forty years of wilderness wandering.

The earlier part of Moses’s second message (5:1–11:32) reviewed the Ten Commandments and emphasized obeying the first of the ten (5:7). Last week’s study came from this earlier part of Moses’s second message. This week’s study comes from the latter part of Moses’s second message (12:1–26:19). This section explains how to apply the remaining nine commandments. These applications addressed specific matters the Israelites would face in the years ahead. Moses’s words would teach the Israelites how to live as God’s people in the land He was giving them.

Thoughts that connect the two parts of Moses’s second message include God’s giving the land to His people (6:1-3; 26:9-19) and His delivering them from Egyptian captivity (7:8,17-19; 26:5-8). Both emphasize the importance of remaining faithful to God (6:4-19; 26:16-19). Both also warn God’s people not to become entangled in the religious practices of the Canaanites (7:16-19; 12:29-32).

 **As you read through Deuteronomy 12:1–26:19, highlight the imperatives. Why do you think God considered these specific actions so corruptible that they called for the death penalty for fellow Israelites?**

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

REMOVE IDOLATRY (DEUT. 12:1-7)

¹ “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. ² 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. ³ 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. ⁴ Don’t worship the LORD your God this way. ⁵ Instead, turn to the place the LORD your God chooses from all your tribes to put his name for his dwelling and go there. ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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.”

VERSE 1

Four times Moses spoke of God’s people obeying His *statutes and ordinances* (Deut. 5:1; 11:32; 12:1; 26:16). These mark the beginning and ending of both parts of Moses’s second message. Like parentheses, the terms indicate the framework for this message. *Statutes and ordinances*, taken together, refer to the whole law. What will follow are details about following and applying that law.

Moses’s words connected obeying God’s law with living in the promised land. For the Israelites, the two were inextricably linked.

God had already *given* His people the land. Although they did not yet *possess* it, in the eyes of God, it was already theirs.

VERSES 2-3

Worship was the initial focus of these statutes and ordinances. The Lord was calling His people to worship Him in a radically different way. This was because God, the Creator of the universe, was radically different from the so-called gods other nations worshiped.

God called His people to *destroy completely* all the pagan worship sites. These were easily identified. Canaanites put them atop *high mountains* and *hills*, believing this allowed the worshipers

to be closer to their gods. The Old Testament commonly refers to these as “high places” (Num. 33:52; 1 Kings 3:3; Isa. 15:2).

Canaanites also set up places of worship under specific trees. The word **green** can also mean fertile. Their primary gods were supposedly concerned with producing fertile fields and wombs. Thus, ●**Asherah**, the Canaanites’ main fertility goddess, was depicted as a tree.

The Israelites were to demolish any structures the Canaanites had erected on these sites. Further, they were to destroy all objects that represented the Canaanite gods or that the people used as a part of their worship. God did not want His people tempted to go to these sites and participate in their worship. Canaanite worship included “detestable acts” that the people did “for their gods” (Deut. 20:18).

By destroying the locations and objects of worship, the Lord intended to erase the false gods’ names from the land and thus, the people’s minds. God had given similar instructions earlier because He was concerned about His people’s holiness (7:1-6). Here, He was focusing on His name being revered in the land.

VERSES 4-7

Verse 4 raises two significant questions. First, why was God determined to be worshiped differently? Simply put, He was unlike the false gods and deities the Canaanites worshiped. The Creator and Sustainer of the universe and all that exists, He alone is God. All other supposed gods and deities were the products of people’s imaginations and fanciful ideas.

Second, what did this prohibition include? It was a complete and all-encompassing ban. The Israelites could not involve themselves in the Canaanites’ pagan worship practices. They could not try to mix Canaanite and Hebrew worship practices. God allowed no compromise.


The word **instead** in verse 5 denotes a profound contrast. Instead of *don’t*, what follows is what God expected His people to *do*. Verses 2 and 3 mentioned “all the places” and “every place.” The Canaanites worshiped their numerous gods, deities, and idols in multiple places. Verse 5, though, talks about **the place**—singular. The Israelites were to worship at a singular place, the tabernacle. God had given Moses instructions about its construction and how the Israelites were to worship Him there (Ex. 25:1-31:17). After construction was complete, God’s glory filled the tabernacle (Ex. 40). God’s **name**, His essence and glory, dwelt there. The Israelites were to **turn to** it and **go there**.

The people were to bring their offerings and gifts to the designated place. The **burnt offerings** were whole animals that worshipers offered to God. The burnt offering was a particular category or subset of the **sacrifices** worshipers gave (see Lev. 7).

God also spoke about the **tenths** or “tithes.” The Hebrews paid these out of gratitude for what their Sovereign Lord had done and would continue to do. The tithe was a tenth of the produce from the peoples’ fields and herds. The Hebrews typically gave these during the Feast or Festival of Weeks (Deut. 26:1-11). The **freewill offerings** were given spontaneously; **vow offerings** were planned.

Bringing offerings and contributions was a celebration. Families would eat together and express their thanks for God’s blessings. The different foods were to be shared by the worshipers and the worship leaders, except for the burnt offerings; they were completely burned atop the altar’s fire.

 **Why was it important for the Israelites to focus first on ridding the land of the pagan worship sites and related objects?**

 **BIBLE SKILL:** Use a Bible dictionary to learn more about a biblical concept.

Read the article “Sacrifice and Offering” in a Bible dictionary. Note the various kinds of offerings and their distinct purposes. How does bringing our offerings of time, talent, and treasure to our house of worship bring praise to God and bless others?

WORSHIP GOD (DEUT. 12:8-11)

⁸ “You are not to do as we are doing here today; everyone is doing whatever seems right in his own sight. ⁹ Indeed, you have not yet come into the resting place and the inheritance the LORD your God is giving you. ¹⁰ 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,¹¹ 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.”

VERSES 8-11

We find a similar accusation elsewhere in Judges 21:25. Judges described a time of sinful depravity when the Israelites failed to honor God as their King. The current description of *everyone . . . doing whatever seems right in his own sight*, though, is referring to worship. The Israelites were sacrificing whatever and however they wished. Rather than having multiple or even a portable worship hub, they needed a centralized site where they could celebrate, worship, and participate in their God-directed rituals and services. Having a set place would give the Hebrews a sense of permanence.

God stated the reason for the current state of Hebrew worship. The people had not yet come *into the resting place*, meaning where they would settle on the other side of the Jordan. They had not yet received *the inheritance* God had promised. Thus, worship felt temporary and transitory, rather than firmly established in the land.

Life on the other side of the Jordan would differ from what the people had experienced while enslaved in Egypt and traveling in the wilderness. God described Canaan as *the resting place* (v. 9). In doing so, He was not describing a life of leisure where the people would do no work or have no responsibilities. God promised to give His people *rest from all* their *enemies*.

Verse 11 echoes verses 5-6. The *then* comes as part of a sequence introduced in verse 10. When you cross, when you live in the land, when He gives you rest, and when you live in security—*then*—the Lord would reveal where His *name* was to dwell. God’s *name* was more than a title. It indicated His essence, glory, and power.

The Lord would dictate the details about the *place* He would *choose*. God had chosen Israel to be His people (Deut. 7:6-7), had chosen to deliver them from Egypt (4:37), and had chosen the Levites to serve as the Hebrew priests (18:1-7). Where His name would dwell would also be the Lord’s decision.



Why did God want to designate a certain place for His people to worship Him? Why was that important to Him—and to them?

STAND FIRM (DEUT. 12:29-32)

²⁹ “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, ³⁰ 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.’ ³¹ 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. ³² Be careful to do everything I command you; do not add anything to it or take anything away from it.”

VERSES 29-32

Verses 29-32 state the three-fold essential emphasis of Deuteronomy: God would lead His people successfully into the promised land, they were to worship Him alone, and they were to remain faithful to His full law.

The Hebrew word translated *annihilates* carries the idea of something being cut down and destroyed. God earlier promised Moses, “For my angel will go before you and bring you to the land of the Amorites, Hethites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites, and Jebusites, and I will wipe them out” (Ex. 23:23). These were the *nations* God would annihilate. However, the destruction would come at the hands of God’s people. Thus, God said the Hebrews would *drive them out*.

Having promised His people military victory, God knew the Israelites faced another threat—spiritual defeat. He did not want His people to go after foreign gods. A concern was that the Hebrews would attempt to incorporate some of the Canaanites’ religious practices and beliefs into Judaism. The word for this type of mixing is “syncretism.”

God was telling His people not to become curious about the Canaanite gods. He knew that if they began to *inquire*, they might become enamored by those religions and become *ensnared* in

their beliefs and practices. The root for the Hebrew word translated *ensnared* means to be entrapped, as with a noose.

As does verse 30, verse 31 twice mentions ***their gods***. The Egyptians and Canaanites worshiped multiple gods. Temples and altars dotted the landscape. Verse 31, though, speaks twice of ***the LORD***, singular. Worshiping one God differentiated the Israelites from all other people groups.

Moses declared that ***the LORD hates*** Canaanite worship. God said the Canaanites ***practice every detestable act . . . for their gods***. The one practice God mentioned here is that they burned ***their sons and daughters in the fire***. They sacrificed their children as burnt offerings. This was not uncommon in that day. We find a description of other detestable practices a few chapters later (18:9-11; 23:17). Concerning the possibility of adopting any Canaanite beliefs and practices, God said emphatically, ***you must not***.

Verse 32 repeats two thoughts Moses stated earlier: follow God's commands and do not add to or take anything from them (Deut. 4:2,4). God's Word is altogether sufficient.

God made amazing promises to those who would obey His commands. He would affirm them as his own possession. Further, God said He "will elevate you to praise, fame, and glory above all the nations he has made, and that you will be a holy people to the LORD your God as he promised" (26:19).

Just a generation earlier, these same people were Pharaoh's slaves. God promised to bless them with a land and life they could have never imagined. What a promotion!



In what ways are we tempted to draw the world's practices and beliefs into our worship experiences today? How do we draw the line so we practice only what God finds acceptable in worship?

KEY DOCTRINE: *The Scriptures*

Scripture reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. (See Psalm 119:89; Matthew 24:35.)

