



[Ezekiel 20:15-16](#)

(15) Also with uplifted hand I swore to them in the desert that I would not bring them into the land I had given them—aland flowing with milk and honey, most beautiful of all lands- (16) because they rejected my laws and did not follow my decrees and desecrated my Sabbaths. For their hearts were devoted to their idols.

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Ezekiel 20:15-16 refers to a historical situation that shows idolatry's deceptive nature. These verses summarize that Israel went into captivity and were scattered primarily as the result of [idolatry](#) and Sabbath-breaking. As they were breaking those commands, did they believe that doing so would take them into captivity? Probably not, but we can believe it because [God](#) records it for our admonition! It is interesting that idolatry and Sabbath-breaking are linked, because the breaking of either leads directly to the breaking of the other.

We can see Ezekiel's general accusation against Israel's idolatry in the specific example of Judah in the writings of his contemporary, Jeremiah. This occurred just before Judah completely collapsed and the Jews were led into Babylonian captivity. At that time, God flooded the nation with godly [prophets](#) to give the people a final warning:

From the thirteenth year of [Josiah](#) the son of Amon, king of Judah, even to this day, this is the twenty-third year in which the word of the LORD has come to me; and I have spoken to you, rising early and speaking, but you have not listened. And the LORD has sent to you all His servants the prophets, rising early and sending them, but you have not listened nor inclined your ear to hear. They said, "Repent now everyone of his evil way and his evil doing, and dwell in the land that the LORD has given to you and your fathers forever and ever. Do not go after other gods to serve them and worship them, and do not provoke Me to anger with the works of your hand; and I will not harm you." "Yet you have not listened to Me," says the LORD, "that you might provoke Me to anger with the works of your hands to your own hurt." (

[Jeremiah 25:3-7](#)

Many prophets witnessed against the Jews, but no lasting [repentance](#) occurred. A key to understanding why nothing changed is found in verses 6-7 in the phrase, "provoke Me to anger with the works of your hands." "Works of your hands" indicates concepts, ideas, and notions developed from their own minds, not from the Creator's. He refers, of course, to their idolatry. The deceptive nature of idolatry and Sabbath-breaking is such that their damaging effects are more subtle than other sins' effects. The pains of the penalties usually come so much later that most are unable to connect the true spiritual cause with the individual's or culture's moral and spiritual degeneracy.

If one lies, steals, or commits [murder](#), the effects are almost always immediately evident, but this is not so with idolatry and Sabbath-breaking. With those who do not know God, breaking the [first commandment](#) leads to breaking the fourth. However, with the converted—those who know the truth—breaking the fourth can just as easily lead to breaking the first.

The Bible reveals that the effect of breaking the first commandment is to break the second, and eventually all the other commandments ([James 2:10](#)). In practical experience, this happens because, once a person is no longer responding to the Creator God's values, someone or something else has to be put in His place. Man will worship—that is, give his devotion to—something, and that something is more often than not himself and his own creations!

— John W. Ritenbaugh

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