

Worshipping God at the Right Place

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[0 : 0 0] Almighty God, we thank you that you are here, that you are present with us as your people. We pray now that you will write your word on our hearts and bear much fruit for your glory, for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen. You may find it helpful to have open the passage from Deuteronomy 12, page 148 in the Black Pew Bibles.

We're resuming now this sermon series on the book of Deuteronomy, which we began and had a break last week, and we continue now more or less until early December.

The book of Deuteronomy, let me remind you, is the final words of Moses. Before his death, he has led the Israelites through the wilderness to the point of entering the promised land.

He's about to die and Joshua will succeed him when the people cross over the Jordan River and conquer the promised land. And the purpose of the book of Deuteronomy is fundamentally to encourage the people of Israel to enter that land, to explain to them how to conquer it, and how to live in the land once they've entered it and conquered it.

[1 : 2 6] When we get to chapter 12, we begin a new section in the book of Deuteronomy. The first 11 chapters are a general introduction and a general exhortation to the people, the general principles of how to enter and live in the land.

But when we get to chapter 12, we begin the bulk of the middle of the book which deals with some specific laws and commands about how to live in the land. So verse 1 of chapter 12 is a heading, really, for chapters 12 through to 26 or so.

These are the statutes and ordinances that you must diligently observe in the land the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has given you to occupy all the days that you live on the earth. That's the heading.

And the very first of the specific commands for Israel is to do with worship. And it reminds us just how important worship is for us, the people of God.

It's the very first of the things commanded of the people of God to worship Him. If you were paying attention when the reading was read for us by Vern, you may well have wondered, what relevance has this to us?

[2 : 3 6] For here are laws about destroying people, about destroying their places of worship, utterly smashing down all their bits and pieces that they use for worship.

What relevance is that to us in a postmodern tolerant age? It seems to me that this passage is indeed highly relevant in the end of the 20th century.

For we live in an age of multi-faith pluralism where very often all sorts of religions gather together for worship together, where there is a great tolerance and acceptance of other religions in our society, more and more so in a place like Melbourne.

We live in an area, in a society, which has got growing paganism. People who are worshipping pagan gods more and more explicitly. We live in an age of religious immorality.

Not just of secular immorality in the world out there, but more and more there is immorality within the church and within religious institutions. We live in a highly individualistic age where more and more people are saying, what I want.

[3 : 48] Not only out there, but in the church as well. So we come to church thinking, what I want. And we leave from church and the value or the mark of whether it's been acceptable or not is whether it's pleased me and done what I want.

We live in an age of declining church attendance. An age of new age syncretism. Where very often Christian practices are adopting all sorts of new age ideas into their worship practices.

We live in an age of occult and astrological popularity. And in that context, where all of those things are going on, this passage is highly relevant for us today.

Verses 2 to 4 are fairly harsh and severe. You must demolish completely all the places where the nations whom you're about to dispossess serve their gods.

On the mountain heights and on the hills because the Canaanites worshipped on mountains and hills because there they thought they were closer to God. And under every green or spreading tree at the end of verse 2.

[4 : 55] Because Canaanite religion was a fertility religion. And big spreading green trees were obvious signs of fertility. And many thought therefore obvious signs of God's blessing as well.

They were the places the Canaanites worshipped. And Israel is being told to demolish those places. Break down their altars, verse 3, the places where they would sacrifice animals.

Smash down their pillars, sort of like totem poles, usually phallic symbols of male and female sexual organs. Break them down, burn their sacred poles with fire, and hew down the idols of their gods, and thus blot out their name from their places.

Fairly harsh treatment of other religions. That's how Israel was to treat the religions of the nations in the land that they're about to go in and enter.

Why? Why such harsh treatment? It jars with us at the end of the 20th century. It jars with our views of tolerance and pluralism and acceptance of other peoples.

[6 : 09] The command is there for two reasons. One is theological. It breaks, the acceptance of other religions breaks the first two of the Ten Commandments.

You shall have no other gods but me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image of any likeness in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.

Acceptance of other religions infringes those first two of the Ten Commandments. Remember also those words from Deuteronomy 6 I preached on some weeks ago.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. There is no room to worship God and something else whether it's an idol or some other figment of our imagination.

We are to worship God totally and exclusively without sharing him with any other allegiance that we may offer. It is right to be theologically correct, not politically correct sometimes.

[7 : 13] and worship of God is to be total and absolute, undivided allegiance to God. And that's what Israel was commanded to do and that is also what we as Christians are commanded as well.

We cannot worship God alongside other gods. And yet, very often, we seem to hear about and read about multi-faith worship going on and Christians being involved with it.

Multi-faith worship is an abomination to God and Christians ought not to be part of it at all. There is no place for Christians worshipping God as though it's the God of Buddhist religions or Islam or any other religion at all.

We are to worship our God and our God alone. Now that's not to say that multi-faith dialogue is wrong. That is where Christians engage with those of other religions and discuss it and find out about it.

That's all okay. That's good. And it's right to be informed and to understand and to share knowledge and understanding. That's a very different thing from multi-faith worship which is something that God would not tolerate at all.

[8 : 29] The second reason for such strong statements here in Deuteronomy is moral. Canaanite religion was immoral at its core.

In order to invoke or entice your gods to provide rain and crops and produce the Canaanites would go up to their shrines and engage in sexual practices with the temple prostitutes.

Heterosexual or homosexual it didn't really matter. It involved transvestitism. It involved sexual promiscuity. All in order to try and get the gods to do what you wanted them to do.

To give you children or rain or crops or healthy animals. Their religion's symbols were all phallic and sexual. But even worse than all of that perhaps is the fact that Canaanite religion offered child sacrifice to appease their gods and try and win the favour of their gods.

At its heart Canaanite religion was immoral. And so for the grounds of morality Israel was not to have anything to do with it at all.

[9 : 37] It was to be totally cut off from that religion and indeed to destroy it and to destroy their places. For Canaanite religion was somewhat enticing and alluring. There's something enticing about sexual promiscuity and freedom and sexual immorality.

But Israel was to not have a bar of it and to absolutely destroy it for theological reasons and for moral reasons as well.

There's an important warning here I guess to us. That is that immorality kills Christian faith.

If we keep on practicing immorality it will lead to us losing our Christian faith. No doubt some of you have known people who are fine Christians who left their wives or husbands and engaged in adultery and in the end could not reconcile that of course with their Christian faith and end up losing their Christian faith.

I've known of people like that. I remember a person who was in a Bible study I once led who gave up the Christian faith in the end because he wanted to pursue homosexual practices.

[10 : 54] Immorality kills Christian faith and one of the messages of this passage and the warning of Canaanite religion is that you cannot keep on being immoral and worship the one true living God.

It is no wonder that the church today has problems of immorality in the church when it is so liberal theologically in so many places.

Theological liberalism goes hand in hand with immorality. Theology you see undergirds ethics that is what we do.

What we believe and what we do go hand in hand and if we do immoral things then it will lead to our theology becoming liberal and wrong and false and faith that is lost.

The two go hand in hand together and the book of Deuteronomy shows that for the first eleven chapters underline time and time again who God is what he's like what his character is like what his purposes are like and it exhorts the Israelites to know God and know him well because it's only when we know God and know him well that our behaviour will be moral and right and we kid ourselves if we think we can please God without actually understanding and knowing who God is and what he's on about.

[12:18] So Christians who never read their Bibles or pay attention to sermons or go to Bible studies kid themselves if they think they'll know and do what God wants them to do. How will we know God if we don't engage in those activities?

Theology and ethics go hand in hand we will never live upright Christian lives if we don't pursue the knowledge of God himself and Deuteronomy makes that clear in its very structure of the book and that's why it's so important for Christians to know God and know him well.

Verse 4 summarizes what Moses is saying to the Israelites you shall not worship the Lord your God in such ways you shall not worship God in the ways of other religions you shall not worship the Lord your God in the ways of Canaanite religions but nor are we to worship God in our own ways either we're not to worship them according to the ways of other religions but nor are we to worship God according to the ways of ourselves we shall not worship God in our own way either verse 8 makes that clear as well you shall not act as we are acting here today all of us according to our own desires well if ever that was a statement of 20th century individualism this is it acting according to our own desires for so often Christians today are highly individualistic we have high views of what I want in church what I want to see what I want to sing what I want to hear and so on very often we talk about what I like in church what I enjoy what I get out of church we go when we want and where we want and very often that's very selfish and individualistic it is basically doing what that verse says doing according to our own desires for God doesn't want us to worship him according to our own desires he wants us to worship him in his way and so when we come to church and when we're part of

Christian fellowship and when we worship God we should think along the terms of what does God want what pleases God that's fundamental not what pleases me but what pleases God and sometimes God is pleased by things beyond what please us I think God is pleased by great variety rather than straight jackets of thought our desires are often really secondary issues which book we use whether it's ancient or modern whether it's in a book or on the overhead projection screen whether we sit here or sit there whether there are children here or not all those sorts of things are in a sense peripheral issues what pleases God that ought to be our governing criteria when we think of worship and worshipping God so what then is worship in God's way well this passage addresses that issue we're not to worship God in the ways of other religions we're not to worship

God according to our own desires but we are to worship God and do what is right in his eyes what is that then verse 5 I think is the key to that in response to all the Canaanite religions but you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes as his habitation to put his name there you shall go there the emphasis is on the place that God will choose not what Israel chooses and not what the Canaanites choose but the place that God will choose to make his name dwell there and there are actually two things there that are important the place and the name the place and the name we could even say the name and address for what this passage is about really is the name and address of acceptable worship of God and it's emphasized in this chapter the name that God will make to dwell there comes in verses 5 and 11 and the place is mentioned in verses 5, 11 and 14 and then in later chapters as well this is not something insignificant but something rather important for Christian worship and worship of God the name and the place well firstly what is the place what is the place that's mentioned in verse 5 you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose where is it what was it well for 400 years it wasn't clear there was no real central place of worship in the land basically the prime place of

[17:13] Israelite worship was where the Ark of the Covenant was the Ark was a box made famous by Harrison Ford but really more famous before him the Ark was a box in which were placed the Ten Commandments and it was portable and where it stayed was a temporary place and that became a central place of worship for the Israelites places like Shiloh and Gilgal but after 400 years of being in the land King David decided that this portability was not really suitable for God and he decided that he would build a permanent place in Jerusalem which was his city God told him hang on a minute not you but your son Solomon will build this place and Solomon the son did and that became the temple in Jerusalem and it's clear in the Old Testament that in the end Jerusalem and the temple in Jerusalem is the place that God chose to make his name dwell there that was to be the central place of their worship three times a year the men were supposed to go there for the main feasts of Passover

Pentecost and Tabernacles when we read the Gospels in Gospel of John Jesus time and again goes to Jerusalem precisely for those feasts to celebrate the feasts in Jerusalem Jerusalem was the place where the sacrifices were made Jerusalem was the place where the tithes and offerings would be taken Jerusalem was the central place of worship for the Israelites in the Old Testament that's why it's so important in the Old Testament and indeed that's why it's so important in the current Middle Eastern dispute as well today Jerusalem was God's choice and God's place and there was to be the focus of Israelite worship that's the place what about the name what does it mean for God to say this will be the place where I make my name dwell really what that's on about is the symbol of the presence of God symbolically

God dwelt in the temple in Jerusalem oh he really still lived in heaven and that's made clear in the Old Testament as well but symbolically the temple in Jerusalem was where God met humanity it's where Israel and God encountered each other the name of God in the Old Testament is Yahweh or Jehovah literally it means something like I am who I am or I will be who I will be it expresses the sovereign freedom of God to do what he wants to do to be who he wants to be and so on but it's a personal name as well Israel called their God Yahweh or Jehovah that was their personal name for God it denoted their relationship with God even though of course they were very careful about using the name for fear of blasphemy but the name of

God meant that God was personal that he related personally to his people he wasn't a remote deity he wasn't an impersonal heavenly being but was personal and present in his place what marks then the worship that is to be carried out in this place according to this chapter firstly it was personal it was meeting God where he was so when Israel came to Jerusalem and to the temple and prayed and offered sacrifices and worshipped they did so before the presence of the Lord so in verse 7 and you shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God not remote from him but in his presence worship is meeting God where God is and it is personal and that's important then to understand who God is if we are in his presence to know him and what he's like secondly the worship is also to be corporate it's not individualistic so again in verse 7 you shall eat there in the presence of the

Lord your God you and your households together and then later on also in verses 12 and 18 the underprivileged and the landless are singled out for attention not only you and your households but also your servants and the widows and the orphans and the people from other countries who live in your midst and also the priests who don't own land all of you are together to worship it's a corporate event when we come together as God's people to worship him we do so together we belong together it's not me in my little box worshipping God doing what I want but us together as the body of Christ worshipping God as a body corporately together and the principle comes from the Old Testament not not only is worship to be personal and corporate it's also to be sacrificial the ancient Israelites came and they would sacrifice animals and they would give tithes and first fruits and all sorts of other offerings many of those we don't give today we don't come with a cow and slash its head or throat here on the slate steps or something like that that's a bit of nonsense today for us for various reasons but nonetheless the worship of ancient

[22 : 46] Israel was sacrificial it cost them to worship God they would offer the best of their crops the best of their animals to God in worship of him now we of course don't make such animal sacrifices to God we don't do that because Jesus is the one perfect sacrifice for us but this idea of sacrificial worship has two things for us one is that we worship God on the basis that Jesus died for us that's what makes it acceptable and if we put aside the fact that Jesus died for us whatever worship we do is unacceptable to God acceptable worship is worship that worships God on the basis of Jesus atoning sacrificial death for us but secondly our worship of God is also sacrificial not because we bring animals and first fruits and things but because we bring our whole lives our worship of God is not 945 till 11 a.m.

or a bit longer if the sermon gets carried away but rather it's worship of God all week all of our lives is a sacrifice to God and that's costly and that's sacrificial and the principle that's there in the Old Testament applies in that way for us as well our worship of God costs us it is sacrificial and if it's not it is not acceptable to God so worship is personal corporate sacrificial and joyful verse 7 again you shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God you and your households together rejoicing in all the undertakings in which the Lord your God has blessed you that's not insignificant twice more in this chapter and a number of times in subsequent chapters the emphasis is on rejoicing you and your households your servants your manservants your maidservants the Levites that is the priests without land the widows the orphans the sojourners from other countries all of you together rejoicing in all the things that

God has done for you mark of worship of God that is acceptable is that it is joyful that doesn't mean that we go around with smiles and our faces beaming oh what a happy day and it's pouring with rain and somebody's just died or whatever but Christian worship is fundamentally from the heart joyful because of what God has done for us Canaanite worship and other religions worship is not joyful because it's worship that is trying to invoke God to do something for you but when we come to worship God fundamentally we come to worship him to rejoice and with gratitude in our hearts for what God has already done for us which is far more important than anything God might do for us in the future or we want him to do what God has done for us far exceeds anything else he could do for us for his son died for us accepting us forgiving us and giving us the gift of eternal life and there is nothing greater that God can already do for us and that is to be a mark of our worship we don't come solemn and sad and somber but with hearts that rejoice in the great blessings of

God for us which are there whatever the week we've had they are lasting and enduring for eternity so let us make sure that rejoicing is a mark of our worship every week whatever hymns we sing whatever service we have whoever we sit next to however long the sermon goes whoever is leading or not leading whatever we do rejoicing is to be a mark of Christian worship and fifthly it is to be moral we are hypocrites if we come and worship God and then leave to practice and indulge in immoral living this chapter began in verse 1 picks it up again in verse 14 and ends in verses 28 and 32 by stressing four times you must obey all the laws and commandments which the Lord your God is giving you faithful obedience to God goes hand in hand with acceptable worship and it doesn't matter what we do and it doesn't even matter if we rejoice and our worship is sacrificial but if we practice immorality in our lives our worship is unacceptable to God worship and morality go hand in hand and when

Israel fell into immorality the prophets derided them and rebuked them their worship practices carried on very fervently but their lives were immoral and so God despised their feasts and their sacrifices because of their immorality all those principles of worship for ancient Israel apply to us today our worship of God is personal because God is personal and we meet him our worship of God is corporate we belong together we don't worship as individuals doing what is right in each of our own eyes our worship is to be sacrificial it is costly to worship God for we offer him our whole lives on the basis of Jesus sacrificial death our worship is to be joyful because of what God has already done for us and our worship is to be moral if I were to stop here it would leave open the question why aren't we now in Jerusalem because this command in

[28 : 31] Deuteronomy 12 ultimately applied to the place in Israel that God chose the New Testament develops the issue of the name and place in two significant ways the name is no longer Jehovah or Yahweh in the New Testament but Jesus Philippians 2 reminds us that it's at the name of Jesus that every knee shall bow every knee in all of earth and heaven shall bow before the name of Jesus so worship Christian worship is worship of Jesus Christ that's where the Jehovah witnesses go wrong because they misunderstand the name of Jesus Christ and they think it's still Jehovah but they've forgotten to read their New Testaments properly true worship is worship of Jesus but what about the place the temple Jerusalem remember Jesus words when he said destroy this temple

I'll raise it in three days and John puts in brackets he wasn't talking about the temple but he was talking about his body because the place the temple the focus where God and humanity meet is no longer a building in a city in the Middle East but it's a person Jesus Christ he's the temple for us when Jesus said to the woman at the well in John there will be a time when people don't worship in Jerusalem and Mount Gerizim but you must worship in spirit and truth he was talking about himself worship Jesus who is the truth and Jesus who is the giver of the spirit Jesus is the one the focus the not only the name but also the place for Christian worship that's made clear in Matthew 18 again for it's when two or three gather name there am I in your midst when

Christians gather together Jesus is present not because we're in a building that's consecrated by a bishop not because we're in Jerusalem or in a temple not because of any of the furniture in this building Jesus is present with us now because we're Christian people we could be outside or in a tent and Jesus would be present because we're Christian people where Christians are gathered in Jesus name there he is in their midst that's also why Lydia read the second reading from Hebrews 12 for us you might have puzzled about what on earth it was about but it was basically saying that for Christians they no longer come to a place to Jerusalem but you have come to Jesus it said that is where acceptable worship is conducted by Christians with Jesus present false worship is the worship of something other than Jesus Christ Muslims engage in false worship so do

Sikhs and Jews and new age practices so do atheists and pantheists Buddhists and Jehovah's witnesses those who are pagans those who practice occult things the Hare Krishna's those who worship an unknown god all of that is false worship and Christians ought to have none of that because none of it worship Jesus Christ what then is the ultimate mark of Christian worship it is Jesus Jesus who is the name above all names who is the center and focus of our worship the one to whom every knee shall bow Jesus the morally perfect one the one whose death brings us into the very presence of God Jesus who creates in himself a new corporate people of God in his body Jesus is the one to whom we bring tribute and Jesus is the one in whom we rejoice

Jesus is the one in whom we have received every blessing in the heavenly realms Jesus is the one with whom we shall eat and rejoice at his own banquet at the end of time and the name of Jesus is the name high over all and and him the name high over all let us stand let us worship and let us rejoice as his people in hymn number 213 Earl for look sure Amen.

[33 : 50] Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen.