

Made for Worship

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Date: 17 May 2020

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[0 : 0 0] So if you take your Bible and turn to Deuteronomy 12, we're really only going to look at the first 14 verses. It is a passage of tremendous depth and lots of questions, and it has roots that go way back all the way to creation and roots that go all the way through to the last chapter of the Bible and the new creation. You remember that the people of God, Israel, are on the edge of the promised land, and before Moses dies, he preaches the word of God to them, preparing them for life in the promised land. And this section, chapter 12 to 26, is the core of his long second sermon, and it's all about life in the land. It covers how to treat the poor, how to deal with homicide, the shape of the year, what kind of food you should eat, from warfare to marriage.

But the key thing to notice about chapters 12 to 26 is that chapter 12 and chapter 26 are all about worship. In other words, life in the land begins and ends with worship. This is key, because worship is what's most important, because all our ethics and our living come out of who we worship, worship. And our horizontal lives reflect our vertical lives, what we believe. We were made to worship. This is what it is to be human. And you may have heard the old story decades ago about a group of American tourists who visited the Houses of Parliament in London, and they're walking along the hallway, and from a door came the Speaker of the House, dressed in his full regalia, with his baton and his jacket on. And the speaker saw behind the group a friend of his called Neil. So he turned and he called to his friend saying, Neil, and the entire group did, which is just proof that we are all made to worship. You see the same thing in the Ten Commandments.

Before you ever get to murder or adultery or stealing, the first command is, you shall have no other gods before me. It's a specifically spiritual, religious heart command, because it's no good trying to live out God's ethics without loving God. So as we come to chapter 12 on worship, I think we see again how the Bible keeps saying things we wouldn't expect, or even things that we don't even like. This is something of the power of the Word of God. It doesn't just mirror human opinion. It comes to us from the mind and heart of God. So I'm going to ask three simple questions this morning of the passage. Why is there such an interest in place? Secondly, why all these rules from God about worship? And thirdly, what difference does it make for us today? So question number one, why the interest in place? Why does God seem so interested in where his people worship?

There are two things about the passage that are immediately disturbing. The first is we have a series of commands, not on what to do in worship, but about what not to do in worship. Don't do this, don't do this, don't do this. But most strange is God seems to want his people to worship him in only one place when they go into the land. After 40 years of wandering around in the wilderness with the ark and the tabernacle, with the glory of God moving them from place to place. Now God says Israel's worship will be in one place. So look at verses 13 and 14.

Take care, you do not offer your burnt offerings at any place you see, but at the place that the Lord will choose in one of your tribes. There you shall offer your burnt offerings. There you shall do all I am commanding you. Or in verse 5 to 7, you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all the tribes to put his name and his habitation there. There you shall go. There you shall bring your burnt offerings. There you shall eat before the Lord your God and you shall rejoice.

[4 : 30] Now this is a very deep root in the scriptures. This phrase, the place that the Lord chooses to make his name and dwelling there comes more than 20 times in the book of Deuteronomy. In chapter 16, it is the place that God chooses where all Israel has to go out for their three annual festivals together. In chapter 17, the one place that God chooses is the supreme court in Israel for God's decisions. And I remind you, this is hundreds of years before the city of Jerusalem was conquered by King David, or ever the ark came to Jerusalem. In other words, when they entered the land, the ark and the tabernacle was to stop at the place where God said, a series of places which God chose to make his name dwell there. And we know that when they first went in, he went from Jericho to Mount Ebal, and then Gilgal became the place of choosing, and then Bethel, and then Kiriath-Jarim, and then Shiloh, all before the ark arrived in Jerusalem. Now why? Why does God do it this way?

And I think the reason goes back to the first chapter of the Bible. When God created humanity, he created us in a place. We're not just bits floating around like on the internet. He made us embodied and put us in a garden. And that means that creation is not just a stage for human action with God. It is actually part of the story of God with humanity. And when man and woman rejected God, it profoundly affected creation as well. So the alienation that we have caused doesn't just affect our relation with God. But somehow creation is caught up in that alienation of humanity from God as well. That's why Deuteronomy keeps talking about the land as though it's a new Eden, a land flowing with milk and honey, pouring God, pouring rain and blessing on the crops. Because the land is not just real estate, the land itself is part of salvation. It is meant to be a picture of the beginning of the new creation. Because our salvation is not complete until creation itself is renewed. And for that to happen, God has to heal the alienation with creation itself. He needs to make the land holy.

The land, the promised land is contaminated, not by a gigantic Exxon oil spill or chemical pollution.

It has been contaminated by the worship of idols. It's been polluted by the effects of sin. And the way God chooses to make the land holy is by traveling around and making his name dwell and his presence dwell in particular places. Do you remember back before the Exodus, in the book of Exodus, when God appeared to Moses in the burning bush on Mount Sinai?

God said to Moses, take off your sandals for the place where you are standing is holy ground. Now, why is that little patch of ground holy? It's not that God looked down from heaven and looked at Mount Sinai and thought, well, that's a very special place. It looks pretty holy to me.

[8 : 08] I'll meet Moses there. No, no, it's holy because the presence of the Lord is there making it holy. God came in fire to meet Moses. The bush burned but was not consumed. It was the presence of God that made that place holy. Now, in pagan Canaanite religion, it works in the opposite direction.

In Canaan, the people of Canaan chose the places to worship their gods by finding places that had mystical divine feelings to them. You see verse 2, the top of high mountains where gods live or deep shade of tall trees where there's darkness and breeze. And these places they felt had a spooky and mysterious feeling and made the place special. Okay, so we'll worship gods there.

But with God, the God of the Bible, with our Yahweh, it is in reverse. He is the Lord of heaven and earth. Creation stands alienated from him. But in saving his people, God is going to make the land progressively holy by making his name dwell in a series of places. There's nothing particularly special about Shiloh or Gilgal or even Jerusalem, except God chose those places to make his name dwell there.

Because the goal of salvation is not just God and human beings. It's God with his people in the place and in the new creation of blessing and rest. And it's always been God's plan to fill the earth with his glory and to fill his people with the knowledge of his glory as the waters cover the sea.

So that's the first point. My second question is, why all these rules then about worship? And the simple answer is, because he's God and we're not. You and I don't decide how God is to be worshipped.

[10 : 08] In fact, worship of the true God is not based on your personal preferences or your choice of worship style. That actually is Canaanite worship. We so easily fall into this do-it-yourself worship, where we put ourselves at the centre and we decide what's important. And Israel had begun to do that as well.

So if you look at verse 8 in the passage, God says, You shall not do according to all that we are doing here today, everyone doing what is right in his own eyes.

But when they enter the land, the command of God is very specific. Verse 2, You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess served their gods.

On the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. You shall tear down their altars, dash in pieces their pillars, burn their ashram with fire, as we had in the children's reading.

You shall chop down the carved images of their gods and destroy their name out of that place. You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way.

[11 : 17] That's a bit of a challenge to our modern religious pluralistic sensibilities, isn't it? But the problem with Canaanite worship was not just that it was misguided but well-intentioned, but that it stole away the glory of the only true God.

The problem with Canaanite worship was not just its disgusting and disturbing practices, like sex with children, or in verse 31 of this passage, burning the children to Baal.

It's do-it-yourself worship. Baal and Asherah were the main god and goddess of Canaan. They were fertility gods. So a great deal of the worship took place around sex.

The pillars and the ashram were male and female phallic symbols. So you want rain and good crops? You go to the magic places and you engage sexually. And if that doesn't work, you then offer your children.

God, the Lord of heaven and earth, cannot be manipulated. He cannot be managed by anything that we do. He's revealed his grace and his mercy from heaven. And he's revealed that his name is the only name which is worthy.

[12 : 32] So every form of Canaanite worship defies his holiness. It's an offense, not just to the victims, the poor victims of that worship, but to God himself. So God commands his people to chop down the idols, to burn them, because God cares about how he is worshipped.

You cannot worship God in any way you like. The way God is to be worshipped is not up to you to decide. I mean, it's like you go to a function and a friend comes to you and says, Would you like some coffee?

And you say, well, actually, I don't drink coffee, but I'd love a cup of tea if you have one. And they say, well, how do you take it? With cream and sugar? No, no, no cream, no sugar, just a clear cup of tea. And they come back with a big steaming mug of coffee with two creams and three sugars.

You're not going to drink it. It's just the same with worship. This is a series of children's books about a cat called Mog.

They're very clever. They're just the size that a toddler can grab a hold of. We have a toddler in our family right now. It's just one. And she picks it up and she is able to open the pages.

[13 : 46] And she's able to look at the pictures and she's entranced. This one is called Mog Loves. And the cat loves the garden. The cat loves sleeping.

And the cat loves hugs. They're terrific. And the lovely thing in Deuteronomy 12 is that God gives his people a number of pictures of true worship.

And there is something entrancing about them. Because the shape of worship is determined by who God is. God's worship is going to be truly glorious. Let me mention two things that God says about true worship.

The first is true worship is response. You can see this in the wording of the original. Everything is spoken from God's point of view.

So in verse 5, he says, The place that I'm going to choose, there you shall come, not there you shall go. And in verse 6, there you shall bring your offerings, not there you shall take.

[14 : 46] The initiative is all God's. It's God who made us. It's God who revealed himself to us. It's God who set his love on us. It's God who rescued his people from slavery in Egypt.

It's God who made covenant with his people to be their God and they his people. It's God who provided and protected and pardoned them through the wilderness. It's God who set up a way for him to come and dwell with them.

It's God who promised them the land. It's God who took them into the land. It's God who blessed the land. It's God who makes his presence to dwell. And now God invites his people to worship.

Worship is response. Worship is communion with God in response to his revealing and saving and inviting and his calling. That's why every time we gather, we hear the word of God in our gatherings so that we would worship him.

Worship is response first. And second, God says that worship is joy in my presence. So when God's people bring all their sacrifices and their first fruits and their offerings to this place that God chooses, verse 7, God says, And there you shall eat before the Lord your God, i.e. in his presence, and you shall rejoice, you and your household, in all that you undertake, in which the Lord your God has blessed you.

[16 : 11] Or verse 12, you shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you and your sons and your daughters, your male servants and your female servants, and the Levite, etc.

Eating with someone, eating in someone's presence is an act of fellowship and friendship and communion. And God designs worship so that we might be in his presence.

And God gives the blessing of the land and the crop and the rain and the flock. All blessings come from him. And they're meant to bring it together and eat together.

The invitation is not to a dreary, gloomy routine. I mean, if worship was like Deuteronomy 12, it's closer to party time, isn't it? A celebration.

Because God wants us to enjoy his blessings in his presence. To celebrate the goodness of God with each other in corporate worship. To come into his presence with thanksgiving.

[17 : 08] Yes, there are times of grief and of mourning. There are times in worship of lament and repentance. And even though that's true and very true in the Psalms, the Psalms keep saying, let us come into his presence with thanksgiving.

Let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise. The real test of worship is not our correctness. It's not the dignity or the musicality.

It's not the style or spontaneity. It's whether it's God-centered. And the mark, the true mark, I think, of being God-centered is not just that it honors God, but there's joy because we're responding to the true God.

And I know it's a long time since we've met together as a church, but I wonder if you think that's characteristic of worship at St. John's. God doesn't expect our worship to be perfect.

But what would it mean for us to respond more joyfully to God? It's a question for you. And now thirdly, the final question. What difference does this make for us today?

[18 : 16] Because whenever we read the Old Testament, we need to have in the back of our minds the question, what difference did the coming of Jesus Christ mean for us to understand the passage in front of us?

Of course, God has not changed. But the coming of Jesus lifts worship to a new level and gives it a new basis.

Jesus was asked about the right place to worship. And he said in John chapter 4 that the place is no longer important. But the hour is coming, he says, and now is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.

For the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is seeking people to worship him in two ways. Firstly, in truth.

What does that mean? Well, Jesus is the perfect image of God. He has revealed God perfectly because in Jesus Christ all the fullness of God dwelt among us.

[19 : 20] We can see God more fully displayed in Jesus Christ than anywhere else. Jesus is the presence of God, the glory of God. He is by far greater than the tabernacle and the temple.

He's God in the flesh. And in his death, we have seen more of God's love and his grace than could possibly be contained. We see that God is completely faithful to his covenant.

That God himself stepped in and took responsibility for our sin dying in our place. So worship, since Jesus has come, is no longer tied to any particular place.

It's tied to the person of God's Son. It's no longer about priests or altars or sacrifices. It's about drawing near to Christ as Christ has drawn near to us.

To worship God in truth is to worship God having access through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, his son, so that we can now call him our heavenly father and call Jesus Lord.

[20 : 24] And God is seeking worshippers in truth. Second, Jesus says he's seeking worshippers who worship him in spirit. Not just a matter of the head or the heart or right doctrine, but a matter of the heart and fire and spirit.

And that means for true worship, we need to be made new, born of the Holy Spirit. Because when the spirit comes to us, he sets our hearts on fire for God.

And he makes us, he gives us that new life with God. This comes through the gift of the Holy Spirit. He opens our eyes to see Jesus as Lord. He makes us sensitive to God as a heavenly father.

And in the last book of the Bible, we are allowed to look into heaven. The veil is pulled aside. And when we look into heaven, we also get to hear heaven's worship, which is truly God-centered.

And the verse I read at the beginning of the service is a verse from the chorus in heaven. It's praise to God, Revelation 4. They bow, they throw their crowns before the throne saying, Worthy are you, Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power.

[21 : 38] For you created all things and by your will they existed and were created. But worship in heaven is also Jesus-centered. And in the very next chapter, as part of the same scene, we read that everyone together sings, Worthy is the lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.

So it doesn't matter where you are. It doesn't matter how difficult or how easy your circumstances. Worship is simply joyfully acknowledging that God is God, is our God.

That he is beyond worthy of all we have and all we are. And in true worship, we're lifted out of ourselves to the one who is worth all honor and glory and power and praise.

And since he's loved us and saved us and in Christ is carrying us to be with him, where he's going to make all things new in the new creation, it's part of the reason we sing.

The words of the song that we learned last week, that Jesus Christ is our only hope in life and death, is a great way to worship God, even at home.