

Worship As Directed

HN 08/01/06pm

Reading: Deuteronomy 12, John 4:1-28

Study Text: Deuteronomy 12:1-32

Sing Psalms: 96:1-5, 96:6-9, 122, 115:1-3

SiddhartaGautama was sitting under a Pipal tree when he was enlightened and became the Buddha. The pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa*) is regarded as sacred by Hindus and Buddhists alike. Shrines are set up at their base and sometimes these expand into temples. So if such a tree emerges in your yard it is a good idea to remove it before people start coming to worship under it.

The Canaanites worshipped their different gods in all sorts of places – under every spreading tree and on every hill. They built shrines along with idols and altars all over the place. Such things would be a snare to the people of God when they entered this land. Gods were often associated with different lands in those days. Baal was a fertility god worshipped by the Canaanites in an effort to get increase in their fields, flocks and herds.

The Lord God promised to graciously send his people rain in season so they would have fruitful fields and flocks. He promised they would have plenty and would be satisfied when they obey him. It was not sacrifice but obedience that God required. Yet the people might be tempted to turn to these other gods for better harvests if their places of worship remained, just as many today turn to gambling and corruption because they are not satisfied with what the Lord gives.

This chapter begins a new section in Deuteronomy. Some say it begins a whole new section going through to 26:19 and call it the Deuteronomic Code. Others see this as a continuation of Moses' address which began in 4:44 with the re-statement of the Ten Commandments. After this re-statement Moses goes on to explain and apply each commandment in the contemporary context – or indeed in the immediately future context of life in Canaan.

The law had not changed but the environment in which the people were living had. *You shall not do at all as we are doing here today* said Moses (12:8). Therefore he explained the first commandment, 'you shall have no other gods before me', and now turns to the second commandment. The focus in this chapter and the next is on propriety in worship. Basically he states where the people are to worship and how they are to worship the Lord in this new land. The 'why' has been dealt with in the previous chapters.

Where to Worship

When they crossed the Jordan to possess this land they must worship the Lord in the place where the Lord chooses (12:5, 11, 14, 18, 21). They were not free to worship where they liked, at places determined by superstition, beauty, convenience and any other reason.

The people were commanded to destroy, utterly destroy, every last thing associated with Canaanite worship. All altars, images and idols must be burned in the fire. No doubt they had beautiful and precious things as part of their worship. People might say 'Oh this is so beautiful, look at this precious thing – let us take it put in the house of our God'. It would not have been the first time this happened, nor the last.

Multi-faith worship had no place within this holy nation. Every effort was made to avoid syncretism. Even the names of other gods must be eradicated from that place (12:3). They were not even to be mentioned. They were not to teach their children about Canaanite worship. Canaanite worship was not to be kept alive.

Where then were the people to worship the Lord? They were to worship in one place, the place the *Lord your God chooses* (12:5). Moses does not specify where this place was to be, for the people had not yet entered the land. Later he does tell them to build an altar on Mt Ebal (27:5). In the times of Samuel it was at Shiloh, while from David onwards it was in Jerusalem. Exactly where the place of worship was does not seem to be important, but it was to be the place of God's choosing and it was to be one place.

Why one place? This land was to extend from river to river and the sea to the desert. Some people would have to travel a long way to worship. This issue is addressed to some extent in this chapter (12:20f) and later (14:25). They could exchange their tithe for money instead of carrying produce and livestock to the central place of worship.

Factors to consider in having only one place for worship included:

1. There was only one ark which was placed in one tabernacle. These were constructed according to the pattern the Lord gave Moses on the mountain. All sacrifices and offerings were made at this place. The blood of the sacrifice of atonement was sprinkled on and before the mercy seat (Leviticus 16:14).
2. The tribes were allotted various portions of the land. Already Reuben, Gad and Manasseh had inherited land east of the Jordan. A central place of worship would have helped keep unity within the nation as these tribes went off to their own allotments.
3. Worship could be more easily supervised at a central place. There would be none of this 'everyone doing his own thing' with regards to worship. If each family and each tribe were permitted to worship the Lord in their own place imagine what would have happened. Maybe we don't have to imagine! The next chapter tells about prophets and dreamers and their plans for worship.

So the people were to come to one place, the place chosen by the Lord. They were to come together, or at least as extended families (12:12, 18) and at special festivals. Worship was not a solitary activity. In particular they were not to worship at Canaanite shrines.

In India invading Muslims destroyed temples and erected mosques on the same site. Now Hindus want to destroy these mosques and erect temples. Some Christians take the same attitude. They want churches or crosses erected on hills or other strategic places.

Where does the Lord choose for his people to worship today? This was a question the Samaritan woman put to Jesus as he spoke with her at the well (John 4). The Samaritans said it was Mt Gerizim, but the Jews said it was Jerusalem. What did Jesus say? God is Spirit. *True worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth*. He did not nominate any earthly place for there is none.

Worship is now in the person of Jesus through whom we come into the true heavenly sanctuary. *Where two or three are gathered together in my name I am there in the midst of them* said Jesus (Matthew 18:20). Jesus is the true rest spoken of by Moses even in this chapter (12:9).

How to Worship

You shall not worship the Lord your God with such things (12:4). What things was Moses referring to? Things associated with pagan worship! Such things were an abomination to the Lord. *They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods* (12:31). This may seem extreme and indeed it is, but in pagan religions extreme measures were, and are still today, taken in order to appease a god or influence him. If a gift or animal sacrifice does not work then what will – human sacrifice?

Such things and such practices were not to be adopted by the people of God. Whatever the Lord commanded and that alone was to how they were to worship – nothing more and nothing less (12:32). They were to take their burnt offerings, sacrifices, tithes, heave offerings, free will offerings, vowed offerings and the first born of their flock to the place chosen by the Lord. There they were to eat before the Lord and rejoice (12:6-7). All this sounds a bit foreign for us today – except the bit about eating and rejoicing! What does it all mean?

Under the Old Covenant, animal sacrifices were commanded to atone for sin. Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. Ultimately of course only the sacrifice of the perfect man, Jesus Christ, can atone for sin. All these animal sacrifices pointed forward to this great and final sacrifice (Hebrews 10). So we no longer bring blood sacrifices in worship.

Sometimes the animal was completely consumed in a burnt offering. In other sacrifices the fat portion and the blood belonged to God while the meat was eaten by the worshipper. Tithes or a tenth of the produce of the land were brought to the Lord, but again were eaten by the worshipper and the Levite at the place of worship. Additional offerings associated with a vow or simply free will offerings were also brought. So there were tithes and free will or extra offerings.

Moses told the people they could eat at home whatever they liked when they liked (12:15, 21). Animals could be slaughtered for food apart from sacrifice, but they must be ‘clean’ animals and the blood must be poured out on the ground and not eaten (12:16, 23). Why? The blood represented life, life which belonged to God who gave it. Blood was what was sprinkled on the mercy seat for atonement of sin. Pouring the blood on the ground would have prevented it from being eaten or offered on some other altar.

At the place of worship the flesh from their sacrifices and the offerings of grain and oil were to be eaten within the extended family, including servants, and also shared with the Levites who had no land of their own (12:7, 12, 18). New Testament Christians similarly ate together as part of worship. They ate together with *gladness and with sincere hearts, praising God and having favour with all people* (Acts 2:46). Sharing a common meal promotes unity within the body of Christ.

Worship where the Lord chooses and in the manner he chooses. The principles still apply to us today. God is Spirit and he is in heaven. We worship him there through our Lord Jesus Christ. And we worship him according to the Scriptures. We no longer sacrifice animals but we do offer the sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips giving thanks to his name (Hebrews 13:15). We do bring our tithes and offerings – in fact we offer ourselves as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to the Lord (Romans 12:1). We continue to bring our thanks and praise to the Lord. Do we continue to come together in fellowship and eat before the Lord?

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