

Worship in One Place
Deuteronomy 12:1-19

Turn to Deuteronomy 12. I will read this. When someone else reads the Bible, I do best if I do not look at my own Bible. I grasp the most if I just watch the person, or close my eyes. But if you prefer to read along, that's fine. The basic ideas of this Scripture are not hard to grasp.

These are the decrees and laws you must be careful to follow in the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has given you to possess—as long as you live in the land. 2 Destroy completely all the places on the high mountains, on the hills and under every spreading tree, where the nations you are dispossessing worship their gods. 3 Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and burn their Asherah poles in the fire; cut down the idols of their gods and wipe out their names from those places.

4 You must not worship the Lord your God in their way. 5 But you are to seek the place the Lord your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name there for his dwelling. To that place you must go; 6 there bring your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, what you have vowed to give and your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. 7 There, in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the Lord your God has blessed you.

8 You are not to do as we do here today, everyone doing as they see fit, 9 since you have not yet reached the resting place and the inheritance the Lord your God is giving you. 10 But you will cross the Jordan and settle in the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, and he will give you rest from all your enemies around you so that you will live in safety. 11 Then to the place the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name—there you are to bring everything I command you: your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, and all the choice possessions you have vowed to the Lord. 12 And there rejoice before the Lord your God—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites from your towns who have no allotment or inheritance of their own. 13 Be careful not to sacrifice your burnt offerings anywhere you please. 14 Offer them only at the place the Lord will choose in one of your tribes, and there observe everything I command you.

15 Nevertheless, you may slaughter your animals in any of your towns and eat as much of the meat as you want, as if it were gazelle or deer, according to the blessing the Lord your God gives you. Both the ceremonially unclean and the clean may eat it. 16 But you must not eat the blood; pour it out on the ground like water. 17 You must not eat in your own towns the tithe of your grain and new wine and olive oil, or the firstborn of your herds and flocks, or whatever you have vowed to give, or your freewill offerings or special gifts. 18 Instead, you are to eat them in the presence of the Lord your God at the place the Lord your God will choose—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites from your towns—and you are to rejoice before the Lord your God in everything you put your hand to. 19 Be careful not to neglect the Levites as long as you live in your land.

There are Right and Wrong Ways to Worship our God

You must not worship the Lord your God in their way. You are not to do as we do here today, everyone doing as they see fit. Be careful not to sacrifice your offerings anywhere you please.

We assume that when we worship God, it will be meaningful and satisfying and rich. We assume we will usually experience it that way. That's good, just fine. But the purpose of worship is to bring something to God, not to have a meaningful experience of God. If the goal is to serve ourselves, we will end up with everyone doing as we see fit, doing for God whatever we please.

Our Scripture assumes that people will naturally want to worship God in ways that he wants no part of. So let's keep in mind, when we come together, that we do this to give God what is meaningful and satisfying *to him*. We call it a worship *service*. Let's gather *to serve God*.

Those of us at the front often lead the group toward God when we're having a hard day, we are not having fun, we would rather not be doing this. But it is our turn, so we show up to serve God and serve you. And you also show up to worship for those reasons. That's all good.

If we understand that we come together to give to God, then it makes more sense that we'd pay attention to *his* preferences. We worship him in the ways he wants to receive worship, of course.

God gives us a lot of freedom in how we worship him. I don't want to make anyone paranoid. But we talk enough about our own "worship preferences" that we must remember that the only preferences that actually matter are God's. And his preferences are *not* just everyone doing what pleases them, his preferences are *not* everyone doing as they see fit. So let's keep an eye on God!

God's Great Concern in Deuteronomy 12 – One Central Place

If we were going to imagine what would be important to God about how we worship him, we would probably not have landed on this. I certainly would not have thought of this.

We make much of *our* personal faith and choices before God. But *God* wants all of Israel's worship to happen in one central place, and *God* chooses the place, not Israel. No complaining about place. But which place is not the emphasis. *One central place* is God's message.

In this chapter, God's biggest complaint about how Canaanites worshiped their gods was that they worshipped anywhere they pleased, on many different hills and mountains, and under every spreading tree. God is clear: you will not worship me like that.

In the OT, people of course met with God anywhere. The Psalms speak of praying to God while lying in bed, and God was with them wherever they went. That was all in place in the OT.

But here's the thing: God wants his people together. That is not always our worship preference, but that is God's great worship preference, that all his people be together, in the same place.

This was inconvenient for his people, make no mistake. Lots of traveling back and forth. Not even one worship place for each tribe, but one for all Israel. Deuteronomy 16 tells us they would come together three times a year to this central place.

In John 10, Jesus explained that he was the good shepherd, and his goal was one flock with one shepherd. Just before Jesus was arrested, in Gethsemane, he prayed that all his followers would be one, and then he asked again that we'd all be one, and then he prayed that we'd be brought to complete unity. That is, Jesus wants all his followers *together*.

Revelation 7 gives a preview of what happens after God makes everything new. John sees a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the Throne and before the Lamb, praising God with a loud voice. On that day, God will be in his glory! For our God, that's as good as it gets, all of us together, in one place, praising him.

When Christians all separate into little groups so each group can do as they see fit, well, that is not very high on God's priority list. That's kind of Canaanite, isn't it. Yes, we are all in some trouble here, that's true. And when we work so everyone can be together, so accept one another and gather when there are differences, that is true and pure worship before our God.

In the NT, believers met in churches. That how the apostles taught believers to serve God. And that's why we have our covenant of membership, because our life together is not always easy for us, but it is true worship in the eyes of God.

God does not want each person worshipping alone in their own way. That's part of loving God, but not the whole. The worship that pleases him the most is when his people do this *together*. Some of us will say, that does not please me much, that's not when I feel close to God.

Fair enough, we're allowed to feel like that, God is not upset. But we must also ask, when does God feel most like he is being worshipped? What kind of worship pleases him? Biblically there is no doubt – it's when his people gather together to worship him together. That may not feel like pure worship to us, but it feels like pure worship to him.

The Bible tells us in Luke 4 that Jesus attended Jewish synagogue every Sabbath. Was that the spiritual high point of his week? Probably not. But Moses called God's people to weekly sacred gathering, so Jesus was there.

High Point of Worship – Eating and Rejoicing Together

The high point of worshipping God, in our Scripture, was all Israel having thanksgiving meals together in one place. Listen to this. V7 *There, in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the Lord your God has blessed you.* V12 *And there rejoice before the Lord your God—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites from your towns who have no allotment or inheritance of their own.* V18 *Instead, you are to eat them in the presence of the Lord your God at the place the Lord your God will choose—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites from your towns—and you are to rejoice before the Lord your God in everything you put your hand to.*

We read more about this in Leviticus 23, and Deuteronomy 16. All Israel was to go to this central place 3 times a year, and they were all thanksgiving celebrations.

In the middle of the first month was Passover and Unleavened Bread. This was also the end of the barley harvest. Seven weeks later was the Festival of Weeks, Pentecost, at the beginning of the third month. That was also the end of the wheat harvest.

In the seventh month, they would all come together for the Festival of Tabernacles. And that was when they had just harvested their figs, grapes, and olives. At that harvest they got their sugar, wine, and cooking oil. Three thanksgiving festivals a year. Biblically, thanksgiving is much more important than Christmas.

What kind of central worship place does Moses picture here? He says, “you and your whole household will go to the one place, and there will you all eat and rejoice at all you have turned your hand to, because God has been good to you.”

Moses pictures a central altar, for burnt offerings and sacrifices, and around it he pictures a huge picnic area, 150 acres of picnic sites (I’m guessing), 150 acres of picnic tables, fire pits & BBQs.

Three times a year all Israel would go there to have happy thanksgiving meals together, thousands of households cooking and eating and rejoicing, because God had blessed them. That’s thanksgiving, and that’s God’s picture of excellent worship.

These meals included many people. “You, your sons and your daughters, your male servants and your female servants, and the Levites from your towns.” Many of the servants will have been foreigners, Canaanites who survived and stayed around.

In Israel, every male inherited land. That’s how they grew crops and fed their herds and flocks. But foreigners did not own land, so they needed to work for someone else. Most of these worshipped God, there was no other worship allowed, but they were still generally poor.

And widows were in trouble, and orphans as well, if some kind of extended family did not take them in. And Levites did not inherit land, either. So when Israel gathered for these thanksgiving celebrations, all these other people came along, to eat and rejoice together, because God blessed.

And Moses said, “You Israelites will do all this in one central place, three times a year. In this way, you will show that you are not Canaanites, you are the people of God Almighty, because this is how we worship him.”

So, how will we apply this? 1, Everyone worshipping as they see fit, in the way that pleases them, and being careless about regular sacred gathering, is a pagan way to worship God.

The OT is full of important private meetings with God. This happened to Moses. He was no enemy of that. But Moses was adamant that regular sacred gathering together was essential. Jesus' own life demonstrated this.

Many years later, the writer to Chronicles said that God's people continued to worship at the high places, but only to the Lord their God. Still not proper worship because it was not at the central place, but it was certainly better than worshipping idols. (2 Chron 33:17)

For God, people together is the true worship. For God, that is the best worship, the pure worship.

2, All kinds of people eating and rejoicing together in what God has provided is wonderful to God. It is not the only kind of worship, but it is surely a worship that is special to God. In the OT and the NT, the Scripture often pictures the coming kingdom of God as a banquet. We remind ourselves of this every time we have the Lord's Supper.

3, The meal will also collect those who themselves don't have much harvest. God giving enough means he purposely gives us enough to share, so that those with little or no income can also eat and celebrate God's goodness.

Imagine a huge, noisy, happy picnic ground. That's how to worship the Lord our God. Amen.

PRAYER: Oh God, God of Moses, God of Israel, the God who chose one central place, the God of Israel who wanted everyone together to eat and rejoice before you, oh God, save us from selfish worship. Make us hungry to worship you in your ways, to make your joy our purpose. We can be self-centered in worship, as we can in everything else. Lead us with your Spirit to serve you in the ways you want to be served.

Thank you for clear guidance about this. You have not left us guessing. And God, you want all these households coming together to eat and rejoice together in the one place you choose. I would not have guessed that this set your people apart from Canaanites who worship other gods. So God, help us in our time live out this unity. And thank you that this huge, happy, busy, noisy picture is so close to your own heart! We love you for this! Amen.

(response time)

BENEDICTION: May the God who gives us endurance and encouragement give us the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice we may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.