

Abiding Fruit

Informing the Mind & Inflaming the Heart

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The Law of Worship Deuteronomy 12:1 - 32

The book of Deuteronomy written by Moses is one of those books that are often neglected by Christians for a number of reasons. There is constant repetition of important truths and there is the length of the book – it requires hard work to read, understand and digest, but the benefits are worth it. In our English Bibles we refer to this book as “Deuteronomy” because of a mistranslation of Deut. 17:18 where that verse speaks of the future king of Israel sitting on this throne over his kingdom, writing for himself in a book “*a copy of this law*”. This is often referred to as “*second law*”, hence the name Deuteronomy. The Hebrew title begins with the opening words of the book in Deut. 1:1 – “*these are the words.*”

The book of Deuteronomy generally follows the structural pattern of an ancient vassal treaty, but this should not be pushed too far. It is preferable to see the book as the last words of Moses to the nation prior to their preparations to enter the land under Joshua. Ancient kings often entered into treaties or pacts with vassal countries, and those treaties contained a certain structure. There was an introduction, a historical overview (the king’s dealings with the vassal), a general call to allegiance, a specific call to allegiance, the witnessing of the treaty by divine gods, blessings and cursings for obedience or disobedience

These elements are evident in Deuteronomy, except that God (Yahweh) does not call upon other gods (these are false and not real, therefore they do not exist – see 1 Cor. 8:4 – 6), to witness the so-called treaty. What Moses is concerned with, is to call Israel back to the Law and faithful allegiance to God’s revelation contained within that Law (indeed the Law is a revelation). Success in the Promised Land is expressly connected with obedience (Deut. 28:1 – 14), and failure is connected with disobedience (28:15 – 68). Moses’ words are not just for the leadership of Israel, but for every single individual within the nation. Corporate success is dependent upon individual faithfulness to the covenant. Faithlessness will bring judgment from God as all sin does.

There are various laws given for various situations. There are laws specific to idolatry (4:15 – 40; 12:29 – 32; 16:21, 22). The Moral Law is reiterated (5:1 – 21). There is the famous “Shema” in Deut. 6:4, 5. There are specific laws concerning food (14:1 – 21), tithing (14:22 – 29), Sabbatical Years (15:1 – 23), the Passover and the Feasts (16:1 – 17), judges and law courts (16:18 – 20), laws for the future kings of Israel (17:14 - 20). The Cities of Refuge had stipulations attached to them (19:1 – 13), there were laws about property lines (19:14), about witnesses and the *lex talionis* (19:15 – 21). There were laws about warfare (20:1 – 20), unsolved murders (21:1 – 9), marriage to female captives (20:10 – 14), the inheritance that went to the first-born (20:15 – 17), laws about family matters (20:18 – 21), laws about sexual relationships (21:13 - 30), exclusion from life in the camp (23:1 – 8); uncleanness (23:9 – 14), various business laws (23:15 – 25). There were laws concerning divorce (24:1 – 4) and Levitical marriage (25:5 – 10). Why so many laws? Israel required law and God’s laws would ensure exceptional standards in the nation, both in the home and the field, if observed with faithfulness. Deut. 29:29 points out that the secret things belong to God, but the revealed things (laws, etc) belong to man and his descendants forever for the sole purpose of ensuring that Israel would “*do all the words of this law.*”

What is of special interest is the Law of Worship in Deut. 12:1 – 32. Not only were there lessons for Israel to learn, but we can learn many of the same lessons today in view of the ignorance and uncertainty about worship in the Church. Deuteronomy 12 does not give all the laws that were ever given about how to

worship God, but rather, Moses lists certain specifics that would help every Israelite subordinate his or her life to the Lord's revealed will, and at the same time eliminate any bad influence or practice that would hinder true worship of God. Israel is to be very careful to follow the stipulations laid down by God concerning their worship, especially once they get into the land (12:1). Careful observance of what God said would lead to prolonged life and enjoyment in the land (on the earth). The first part of ensuring true worship is to *eliminate any rivals*. Deut 12:2 - 4 is a command to destroy Canaanite idolatry and its associated practices. God will tolerate no rival (Ex. 20:5; 34:14; Deut. 4:24; 5:9; 6:15; Isa. 45:5, 18, 22; 46:9; Nah. 1:2). There can never be true worship of God as long as there is competition with God. We must be very careful that we do not elevate even our practices to the level of worship, and thus eliminate God (see vs. 4). We are to worship God only and God alone. So there must be no rival to God. Sin is a rival to God, so we must fight continually to destroy the enemy just as Israel had to fight to destroy their enemies.

Second, God lays out specific instructions about the location of worship, or the place of worship (*where* to worship – see 12:5 – 7; cf. 12:13, 14). This was not a place of the people's choice, but it was God's choice (vs. 5), and in this place God would dwell among his people. It was in this place only that Israel had to come and bring their sacrifices, their tithes, and all their offerings (vs. 6). It was corporate worship. Today we live in a world that offers individual worship. You don't have to go to church – you can worship God by watching television or even the internet. Who needs the people of God? – I have everything I need in my own home – I don't even have to leave my comfort zones. Such thinking is abominable to God and foreign to biblical worship. As technology improves at its fantastic and unimaginable speeds, beware that you don't worship at its throne. Why is corporate worship in a localized place required? It is required because there we are all before the Lord (vs. 7) as His people, eating and rejoicing together (e.g. Lord's Supper and singing). Thirdly, God tells Israel *when* they are to worship (12:8 – 14, 26 - 28). While Israel was in the wilderness the danger always existed of worshipping when you pleased. You always had to go to the tabernacle with sacrifice (Lev. 17:1 – 4). You could not take your sacrifice and offer it outside your tent door. Pagan sacrifices always involved blood "eating", and Israel was prevented from this by coming to the tabernacle at prescribed times (Deut. 12:26 – 28; Lev. 17: 5 – 13). Moses may be implying in verse 8 that Israel had become slack by doing what was right in their own eyes. All offerings were to be made at the tabernacle when they were in the land. Today, it is important to set aside time to worship God with His people. It is no good to say, "Well, you know how it is, the time doesn't suit me," etc. Taking time to meet with God is very important. Finally, Israel was told *what* to offer to God (12:20 – 28). For daily provisions and sustenance they could eat in their own homes (vs. 20 – 25), providing they observed the prohibitions of Leviticus 17, but as far as holy things were concerned – it had to be at the tabernacle (vs. 26, 27). What do we offer to God today? Is it what God has prescribed or is it like the strange fire of Nadab and Abihu? (Lev. 10:1; Num. 3:4). Nadab and Abihu offered (an act of worship) strange fire (that which was not permitted, indicating their desire to do as they pleased). This implies that there is a right way and a wrong way to worship (e.g. Cain and Abel). One way brings judgment and the other way brings blessing.

Is it not significant that music is not mentioned in Acts 2:42 as a function of the church? Their focus was rather to be on the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and praying. This does not imply elimination of worship. Music is a distinct part of worship, but not the main part. Teaching, fellowship, prayer and the Lord's Supper are essential elements of true worship. Let there be no rivals to God. God has ordained worship as a corporate act in a location, at a particular time and in a particular manner. You can worship God alone, but you must never forget to worship God with His people, and we must worship Him in spirit and truth (John 4:24). He is always seeking true worshippers (John 4:23).