



Deuteronomy - Chapter Twelve

Summary of Chapter Twelve

The people are commanded to completely destroy all the religious shrines, objects and places of worship used by the nations they are to displace in the land. They are also warned not to even worship God in this way but are to do so according to his statutes in a place he shall designate. They are also warned about going their own way once they are in the land.

The people may make occasional voluntary offerings to God and eat them in their home town but the offerings prescribed under the law they must bring to the place that the Lord will determine. They are to slaughter their animals in a way that the blood is poured out onto the ground. Blood must not be eaten in the meat for the life of the animal is in the blood.

The chapter concludes with a further warning against apostasy by following the pagan worship of the other nations.

III Deuteronomy 12:1-26:19 - Moses' Second Speech: Specific Covenant Stipulations

Following the general stipulations of Chapters 5-11, the commands and laws become more specific. The order of the stipulations in these chapters seems to purposely follow the order of categories in the Ten Commandments.

III.a Deuteronomy 12:1-28 - Proper worship

Chapter 12 deals with proper worship, expanding the understanding of the first commandment about having no other gods ahead of the Lord.

III.a.i Deuteronomy 12:1-12 - Pagan Shrines to Be Destroyed

The first part of the chapter is a commandment to completely destroy all the pagan places of worship, the articles used and the practices themselves.

¹ These are the statutes and ordinances that you must diligently observe in the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has given you to occupy all the days that you live on the earth.

Deuteronomy 12:1

These are the statutes and ordinances. This exact expression occurs in Deuteronomy 5:1, 11:32 and 26:16 at the beginning and ending of the two main sections of stipulations. David pleads with God to help him follow God's ways: <<**O that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes!**>> (Psalm 119:5).

² You must demolish completely all the places where the nations whom you are about to dispossess served their gods, on the mountain heights, on the hills, and under every leafy tree. ³ Break down their altars, smash their pillars, burn their sacred poles with fire, and hew down the idols of their gods, and thus blot out their name from their places.

Deuteronomy 12:2-3

You must demolish completely all the places where the nations whom you are about to dispossess served their gods. In the conquest, most cities still stood, except for Jericho, Ai, and Hazor; refer to Joshua 6:24, 8:28, 10:1 and 11:12-14. The places that are to be destroyed are the worship centres.

Before anyone can worship God, there must be some places where they will no longer worship. There must be a destruction of the places where the ungodly worship. The practice in the ancient world, which was always short on buildings, was to take a nice building such as a temple previously used to worship a prior god, and simply make it a place to worship one's own god. The Lord God wanted none of that in his own worship. He commanded that the places of pagan worship be completely destroyed, and that they shall not worship the Lord God with such things. This is where the worship of many is corrupted. It is not that they worship too little; they worship too much. They worship the Lord, and the things of the world. God does not want such worship. It is an abomination to him.

Many could really begin to worship God in Spirit and in truth (John 4:24), if they would only 'destroy' in their hearts their pagan places of worship. Because they give their hearts to so many other things, there is little to give to the Lord.

Canaanite religion, focused on fertility, set up its shrines on mountains and hills and under significant trees. Archaeological excavations at Hazor provide an example of a Late Bronze Age Canaanite temple. Within a central niche or 'holy of holies', a male deity sat on a throne. Next to him was a row of standing stones, or

stelae, one of which had a carving of upraised hands stretched in worship toward the sun god.

Since much of the pagan worship of the Canaanites was a sexualised worship of fertility and nature, their shrines and temples were often in beautiful outdoor settings. God did not want Israel to adopt this approach of worshipping the creature rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25).

Break down their altars, smash their pillars, burn their sacred poles with fire, and hew down the idols of their gods. This is a repeat of an earlier command: *<<But this is how you must deal with them: break down their altars, smash their pillars, hew down their sacred poles, and burn their idols with fire>>* (Deuteronomy 7:5). God did not want these shrines removing; he wanted them obliterating completely.

Their sacred poles or Asherim were wooden poles adorned with female fertility symbols.

Thus blot out their name from their places. The name indicated the presence of the god.

⁴ You shall not worship the Lord your God in such ways.

Deuteronomy 12:4

You shall not worship the Lord your God in such ways. It was not only Canaanite worship practices that were prohibited but also the syncretism of using such places and paraphernalia to worship the Lord. Later generations failed to obey God: *<<They despised his statutes, and his covenant that he made with their ancestors, and the warnings that he gave them. They went after false idols and became false; they followed the nations that were around them, concerning whom the Lord had commanded them that they should not do as they did>>* (2 Kings 17:15), despite the continued warnings: *<<Thus says the Lord: Do not learn the way of the nations, or be dismayed at the signs of the heavens; for the nations are dismayed at them>>* (Jeremiah 10:2).

⁵ 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, ⁶ bringing there your burnt-offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and your donations, your votive gifts, your freewill-offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and flocks.

Deuteronomy 12:5-6

But you shall seek the place. It may not be easy to find the place where God wants a person to worship, but it is out there. There is a place where he wants

each person to worship. He has not called those he wants to follow him in isolation: *<<And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching>>* (Hebrews 10:24-25).

But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose. It is a single place, in contrast to ‘places’ in v.2, also indicated in vv.13-14. This place is unnamed, although centuries later it was clearly identified with Jerusalem. Until then, the place was where the tabernacle resided, which for much of that time was Shiloh: *<<Then the whole congregation of the Israelites assembled at Shiloh, and set up the tent of meeting there. The land lay subdued before them>>* (Joshua 18:1), *<<So they maintained as their own Micah’s idol that he had made, as long as the house of God was at Shiloh>>* (Judges 18:31), *<<When the troops came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, ‘Why has the Lord put us to rout today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord here from Shiloh, so that he may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies’>>* (1 Samuel 4:3), and: *<<Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel. And now, because you have done all these things, says the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently, you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer, therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh>>* (Jeremiah 7:12-14). In Deuteronomy, the Lord chooses Israel (Deuteronomy 7:6), the king (Deuteronomy 17:15), and the priests (Deuteronomy 18:5). Worship was not left to the opinion or whim of the individual Israelite. They had to worship God at his prescribed place, and among other worshippers of God.

As his habitation to put his name there anticipates the realised presence of God, although God is not limited to such a place: for example: *<<But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built! Have regard to your servant’s prayer and his plea, O Lord my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today; that your eyes may be open night and day towards this house, the place of which you said, “My name shall be there”, that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays towards this place. Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray towards this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling-place; heed and forgive>>* (1 Kings 8:27-30). You shall go there rather than to the Canaanite places.

You shall go there, bringing there your burnt-offerings and your sacrifices. The place of worship was to be a place of atonement, confession (which was made when hands were laid on the head of the sacrificial victim), and cleansing. Israel’s

worship of **bringing** is in response to God's bringing Israel into the land. The offerings and sacrifices are described in Leviticus Chapters 1-7.

Your tithes and your donations. The place of worship was to be a place of giving. Of course, there were other places where an Israelite could give and be generous, but giving had to begin at the place of worship God has appointed. Some have thought that because v.6 mentions **your tithes**, that this is an additional tithe which was commanded of Israel, on top of the tithe commanded in Numbers Chapter 18. Some even call this the 'festival tithe.' But in context, this passage is only speaking of where to bring the tithe, not commanding an additional one to be brought.

⁷ And 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.

Deuteronomy 12:7

And you shall eat there. The 'peace-offering' sacrifices were not totally burned up on the altar. Part of the animal was to be eaten by the offerer, the offerer's household, and the priests.

In the presence of the Lord your God. The place of worship is to be a place of joyful fellowship with God and others. That is, in his presence, where his name dwells: <<*and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ*>> (1 John 1:3b).

Rejoicing in all the undertakings. Unlike other ancient religions, which attempted to win the gods' favour or to appease them, Israelite worship was marked by rejoicing in response to grace and blessing.

⁸ You shall not act as we are acting here today, all of us according to our own desires, ⁹ for you have not yet come into the rest and the possession that the Lord your God is giving you.

Deuteronomy 12:8-9

You shall not act as we are acting here today. Once the land is entered, the laws of worship, especially regarding its place, are to be stricter.

All of us according to our own desires or **everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes.** Before Israel crossed over the Jordan, during the wilderness wanderings, each Israelite pretty much conducted their own worship as they pleased. However, God was not really pleased with this; worship was not a matter left up to whatever pleased the individual. Real worship is concerned with what pleases God. This attitude of self-justification re-emerged not long after the

people were settled in the land: <<*In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes*>> (Judges 17:6 and 21:25).

Much of what is called worship in today's church really is not worship. It is self-focused, man-focused, and personal experience focused instead of being God focused. Much of today's worship is measured by how the worshipper feels instead of being measured by how God was honoured and worshipped. Charles Spurgeon wrote: "Singing should be congregational, but it should never be performed for the credit of the congregation. 'Such remarkable singing! The place is quite renowned for its musical performances!' This is a poor achievement. Our singing should be such that God hears it with pleasure, singing in which there is not so much art as heart, not so much of musical sound as of spiritual emotion."

For you have not yet come into the rest and the possession. In a sense, this anticipated place of worship will reflect the abiding rest of Israel in the land, which finally occurs only under David: <<*Now when the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, 'See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent'*>> (2 Samuel 7:1).

¹⁰ When you cross over the Jordan and live in the land that the Lord your God is allotting to you, and when he gives you rest from your enemies all around so that you live in safety, ¹¹ then you shall bring everything that I command you to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name: your burnt-offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and your donations, and all your choice votive gifts that you vow to the Lord.

Deuteronomy 12:10-11

The place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. A particular place is important to worship. The man who tells himself, "I can worship God just as well out on the golf course" is a man doing whatever is right in his own eyes. It is fine for him to worship God out on the golf course; but there must also be a specific place where he comes to worship with God's people.

¹² And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you together with your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, and the Levites who reside in your towns (since they have no allotment or inheritance with you).

Deuteronomy 12:12

And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God. Verse 7 included households in general. Now specific members of the households are mentioned, notably slaves and the Levites, both landless categories of people. Levites were scattered in various towns to serve each of the other tribes. They owned no land (no allotment or inheritance) and relied on the offerings and sacrifices for their survival: <<*The number of those enrolled was twenty-three thousand, every male one month old and upwards; for they were not enrolled among the Israelites because there was no allotment given to them among the Israelites*>> (Numbers 26:62). In this way worship was to be corporate and caring. When Christians truly believe that what they have has been given to them by God then they are far more willing to share with others.

The emphasis on shall shows that rejoicing is commanded. It is also commanded in the NT: <<*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice*>> (Philippians 4:4), and: <<*Rejoice always*>> (1 Thessalonians 5:16). If a Christian cannot rejoice because they do not feel like it, then they can always rejoice out of being commanded.

III.a.ii Deuteronomy 12:13-28 - A Prescribed Place of Worship

The people may kill and eat animals in their home towns and do so as an offering to God. However, the tithes and offerings prescribed in the law must be undertaken at the place where God will designate.

¹³ Take care that you do not offer your burnt-offerings at any place you happen to see. ¹⁴ But only at the place that the Lord will choose in one of your tribes – there you shall offer your burnt-offerings and there you shall do everything I command you.

Deuteronomy 12:13-14

Take care implies the ease with which Israel will disobey this command, as their subsequent history shows.

The repetition of the command to offer sacrifices only at the place that the Lord will choose (v.5) underscores its seriousness.

In one of your tribes. While this phrase could mean one place per tribal territory, v.5 has already specified one place of God's choosing for the entire nation.

¹⁵ Yet whenever you desire you may slaughter and eat meat within any of your towns, according to the blessing that the Lord your God has given you; the unclean and the clean may eat of it, as they would of gazelle or deer.

Deuteronomy 12:15

You may slaughter and eat meat within any of your towns. Possibly up to this point, any meat eaten was ordinarily sacrificial. Now, partly because of the distances that people would be from the central place for sacrifice (vv.20-21), provision is made for non-sacrificial eating of meat. In the ancient world, almost every time an animal was butchered it was sacrificed to a god. Here, the Lord made it clear that not every slaughtered animal was considered a sacrifice to him.

The unclean and the clean. This is a ceremonial distinction, not a moral one. Leviticus Chapters 12-15 define certain people as unclean and therefore forbidden to eat sacrificial meat, but this would not apply to meat from non-sacrificial animals.

¹⁶ The blood, however, you must not eat; you shall pour it out on the ground like water.

Deuteronomy 12:16

The blood, however, you must not eat. The blood is the life: *<<Only be sure that you do not eat the blood; for the blood is the life, and you shall not eat the life with the meat. Do not eat it; you shall pour it out on the ground like water>>* (Deuteronomy 12:23-24), and is divinely earmarked for atonement for sin: *<<If anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens who reside among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut that person off from the people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel: No person among you shall eat blood, nor shall any alien who resides among you eat blood>>* (Leviticus 17:10-12). Since the blood was the picture of life in any animal or man, God would not allow Israel to eat meat that had not been properly bled. Instead, it was to be given to God by pouring it out on the earth. This has been a stipulation throughout the ages: *<<Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood>>* (Genesis 9:4), *<<It shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations, in all your settlements: you must not eat any fat or any blood>>* (Leviticus 3:17), *<<but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood>>* (Acts 15:20).

¹⁷ Nor may you eat within your towns the tithe of your grain, your wine, or your oil, the firstlings of your herds or your flocks, any of your votive gifts that you vow, your freewill-offerings, or your donations;
¹⁸ these you shall eat in the presence of the Lord your God at the place that the Lord your God will choose, you together with your son and

your daughter, your male and female slaves, and the Levites resident in your towns, rejoicing in the presence of the Lord your God in all your undertakings. ¹⁹ Take care that you do not neglect the Levite as long as you live in your land.

Deuteronomy 12:17-19

Nor may you eat within your towns the tithe of your grain. The command is repeated for emphasis, refer to v.11.

You together with your son and your daughter, your male and female slaves, and the Levites resident in your towns. Again, there is repetition for emphasis that the meal is to be shared with the family, the servants and the servants of God who have no land inheritance of their own (v.12).

Rejoicing in the presence of the Lord your God in all your undertakings. Worship is not a ‘once-a-week’ activity but should be undertaken in and through everything a person does: <<*Then he said to them, ‘Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength’>> (Nehemiah 8:10), and: <<*This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil – this is the gift of God. For they will scarcely brood over the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with the joy of their hearts>> (Ecclesiastes 5:18-20).**

²⁰ When the Lord your God enlarges your territory, as he has promised you, and you say, ‘I am going to eat some meat’, because you wish to eat meat, you may eat meat whenever you have the desire. ²¹ If the place where the Lord your God will choose to put his name is too far from you, and you slaughter as I have commanded you any of your herd or flock that the Lord has given you, then you may eat within your towns whenever you desire. ²² Indeed, just as gazelle or deer is eaten, so you may eat it; the unclean and the clean alike may eat it.

Deuteronomy 12:20-22

When the Lord your God enlarges your territory. This again is an indication that the land will be taken slowly and that the territory will be enlarged over a period of time until it reaches that specified in God’s promises. This was finally fulfilled under King Solomon: <<*For he had dominion over all the region west of the*

Euphrates from Tiphseh to Gaza, over all the kings west of the Euphrates; and he had peace on all sides. During Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beer-sheba, all of them under their vines and fig trees>> (1 Kings 4:24-25).

You may eat meat. There is no restriction on eating the non-sacrificial meat. Even though the animals that are killed may be the same as those offered in sacrifice they can be treated like other sources of meat, such as gazelle or deer.

²³ Only be sure that you do not eat the blood; for the blood is the life, and you shall not eat the life with the meat. ²⁴ Do not eat it; you shall pour it out on the ground like water. ²⁵ Do not eat it, so that all may go well with you and your children after you, because you do what is right in the sight of the Lord.

Deuteronomy 12:23-25

Do not eat the blood. This is an important point and worthy of repetition. The prophet challenges the people in the time of exile to abstain from blood if they wish to live in the land again: <<*Therefore say to them, Thus says the Lord God: You eat flesh with the blood, and lift up your eyes to your idols, and shed blood; shall you then possess the land?>> (Ezekiel 33:25). Refer again to v.16 and the comments made there.*

²⁶ But the sacred donations that are due from you, and your votive gifts, you shall bring to the place that the Lord will choose. ²⁷ You shall present your burnt-offerings, both the meat and the blood, on the altar of the Lord your God; the blood of your other sacrifices shall be poured out beside the altar of the Lord your God, but the meat you may eat.

Deuteronomy 12:26-27

The sacred donations are Holy things, those things set apart for God: sacrifices, offerings, tithes, and objects of vows. Refer to vv.17-18.

The blood of your other sacrifices shall be poured out beside the altar. This was part of the procedure for many of the sacrificial offerings, for example: <<*The bull shall be slaughtered before the Lord; and Aaron's sons the priests shall offer the blood, dashing the blood against all sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting>> (Leviticus 1:5).*

²⁸ Be careful to obey all these words that I command you today, so that it may go well with you and with your children after you for ever,

because you will be doing what is good and right in the sight of the Lord your God.

Deuteronomy 12:28

Be careful to obey all these words that I command you today. Again, there is a warning about obedience but also there is a promise to those who do obey: so that it may go well with you and with your children after you for ever: <<*Keep his statutes and his commandments, which I am commanding you today for your own well-being and that of your descendants after you, so that you may long remain in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for all time*>> (Deuteronomy 4:40), and: <<*Though sinners do evil a hundred times and prolong their lives, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they stand in fear before him*>> (Ecclesiastes 8:12).

III.b Deuteronomy 12:29-13:18 - Warning against Idolatry

This section warns the people not to become ensnared by the worship practices of the pagan nation they will be replacing when they take the land. They are warned that false prophets may appear among them as a test from God to see whether they can be enticed away to other gods or will remain true to the Lord. Such false prophets are to be put to death. Indeed, this even applies to a close relative or friend who attempts to entice them away from God. No compassion or mercy is to be shown to such a person.

If the Israelites hear of one of their towns claiming to follow ways other than those of the Lord they are to investigate the issue and if the town is found guilty of such a crime the people are to be killed and the whole town totally destroyed by fire, never to be rebuilt.

²⁹ When the Lord your God has cut off before you the nations whom you are about to enter to dispossess them, when you have dispossessed them and live in their land, ³⁰ take care that you are not ensnared into imitating them, after they have been destroyed before you: do not inquire concerning their gods, saying, 'How did these nations worship their gods? I also want to do the same.'

Deuteronomy 12:29-30

Take care that you are not ensnared into imitating them. Many of the pagan practices were to do with material value or fertility rites. God knew that his people may well be enticed to follow such ways, which would lead them away from God and thus cause his wrath to fall upon them. Far from bring them wealth and prosperity, such practices would lead them to total destruction.

³¹ You must not do the same for the Lord your God, because every abhorrent thing that the Lord hates they have done for their gods. They would even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods.

Deuteronomy 12:31

You must not do the same for the Lord your God. Canaanite worship is not only wrong, it is accompanied by abhorrent moral practices, not the least of which is child sacrifice: <<*Then he took his firstborn son who was to succeed him, and offered him as a burnt-offering on the wall. And great wrath came upon Israel, so they withdrew from him and returned to their own land*>> (2 Kings 3:27), and: <<*They built the high places of Baal in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to offer up their sons and daughters to Molech, though I did not command them, nor did it enter my mind that they should do this abomination, causing Judah to sin*>> (Jeremiah 32:35).

³² You must diligently observe everything that I command you; do not add to it or take anything from it.

Deuteronomy 12:32

Do not add to it or take anything from it. God's Word is not to be altered in any way: <<*I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book*>> (Revelation 22:18-19).