

Deuteronomy 12:1-7  
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“These are the statutes and the judgments [i.e., written laws and case laws] which you shall carefully observe in the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess as long as you live on the earth. <sup>2</sup> “You shall utterly destroy [אַבַּד *abad* – piel verb stem – *destroy, annihilate, perish*] all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess serve their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree [the idolatry had permeated every aspect of the land]. <sup>3</sup> “You shall tear down their altars and smash their *sacred* pillars [stone pillars of Baal] and burn their Asherim [wooden idols] with fire, and you shall cut down the engraved images of their gods and obliterate their name from that place [divine form of cancel culture]. <sup>4</sup> “You shall not act like this toward the LORD your God [do not follow the practices of the pagans]. <sup>5</sup> “But you shall seek *the LORD* at the place which the LORD your God will choose from all your tribes, to establish His name there for His dwelling, and there you shall come [to a prescribed future place of worship]. <sup>6</sup> “There you shall bring your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the contribution of your hand, your votive offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock. <sup>7</sup> “There also you and your households shall eat before the LORD your God [enjoy a communal meal], and rejoice in all your undertakings in which the LORD your God has blessed you.

**Observations:**

Deuteronomy chapter twelve begins a new section as Moses commences to provide statutes and judgments to Israelites who are poised to enter the land of Canaan. This new section starts in 12:1 and runs through 26:15. It should be remembered that Deuteronomy is law (תּוֹרָה *torah*) presented as a sermon. Moses’ message is not an exhaustive restating of the law codes which had been given to the previous generation; but rather, a representative restating that emphasized a quality of life the Israelites were to follow. These laws provided the framework for Israel to be blessed if they obeyed them, and cursing if they did not obey (Deut 10:12-13; 11:26-28).

In Deuteronomy chapters 1-5, Moses reviewed the nation’s past to remind them of all God’s work in delivering them. Then, in chapters 6-11, Moses explained how Israel should respond to the Lord’s goodness with an attitude of humility and commitment love to God. Moses was seeking to strengthen their love and faith in God in order to motivate them to walk in obedience. Moses desired their blessing in the new land they were about to enter. Moses’ instructions in the following chapters direct the nation’s vertical relationship with God as well their horizontal relationship with each other.

Anticipating entrance into the land of Canaan, Moses stated, “These are the statutes and the judgments which you shall carefully observe in the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess as long as you live on the earth” (Deut 12:1). *Statutes* likely refers to written laws, and *judgments* to case laws. The *statutes* assume authorial intent as well as the integrity of language in which words and phrases carry specific meaning from the author to the audience down through time. The *judgments*—case laws—are legal precedents in which judges applied the law to specific cases. These judicial rulings serve as samples when analyzing future cases that might have ambiguities. In verses 2-3 Moses calls for the Israelites to purge the land of Canaan of all forms of idolatry, and in verses 4-7 to replace them with worship that is approved by the Lord.

The Israelites were commanded, “You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess serve their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree” (Deut 12:2). To *utterly destroy* translates the Hebrew verb אָבַד *abad*, which, in the Piel stem, means “to cause to perish...to destroy.”<sup>1</sup> Other translations render the verb as “destroy completely” (Deut 12:2 CSB), “surely destroy” (Deut 12:2 ESV), “by all means destroy” (Deut 12:2 NET). Here is a divine mandate to cancel the pagan Canaanite culture by tearing down and removing all vestiges of idolatry. Failure to remove the idols would be comparable to an alcoholic that attempts to deal with her alcoholism by throwing away only ninety percent of the alcohol in the home, or to the heroin addict that discards only eighty percent of the heroin in his possession. The remaining temptation, no matter how small, would always serve as a dangerous enticement to a destructive lifestyle. Concerning the worship of idols on high places and under every green tree, Warren Wiersbe states:

The religions of the Canaanite peoples were both false and filthy. They worshiped a multitude of gods and goddesses, chiefly Baal, the storm god, and Asherah, his consort. The wooden “Asherah poles” were sex symbols, and the people made use of temple prostitutes as they sought to worship their gods. Since the major goal of the Canaanite religion was fertility for themselves and for their crops, they established places of worship on the mountains and hills (“the high places”) so as to get closer to the gods. They also worshiped under the large trees, which were also symbols of fertility. Their immoral religious practices were a form of magic with which they hoped to please the gods and influence the powers of nature to give them bountiful crops.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Equipped*, “Be” Commentary Series (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Pub., 1999), 80.

Moses specifically states, “You shall tear down their altars and smash their *sacred* pillars and burn their Asherim with fire, and you shall cut down the engraved images of their gods and obliterate their name from that place” (Deut 12:3). This command was a reiteration of previous commands to destroy the altars, sacred pillars, Asherim and engraved images (Deut 7:5, 25). To *obliterate their name* means to remove their memory from the land. Of course, the written record would serve as an historical reminder about these places and events, and this would allow the Israelites to remember their history from a proper theological perspective. Daniel Block writes:

Moses assumes that obliterating the physical symbols of paganism will reduce the temptation of idolatry. Thus, he commands the Israelites to obliterate the name of their gods from every place where they are worshiped. This action will remove all reminders of their existence, delegitimize the sites as centers of worship, neutralize the respective divinities’ claim to the sites and the surrounding regions, and set the stage for Yahweh’s election of a place for himself, and with this his exclusive claim to the land.<sup>3</sup>

The Israelites were told, “You shall not act like this toward the LORD your God” (Deut 12:4). The Israelites were not to act toward Yahweh the way Canaanites acted toward their pagan idols. Israel was to be holy, distinct, separate from the values and practices of the pagan nations around them. Warren Wiersbe states:

Israel worshiped the true and living God, while the pagans in the land worshiped dead idols that represented false gods. The Canaanites had many shrines, but Israel would have one central place of worship. There is a definite contrast in the text between “all the places” in Deuteronomy 12:2 and “the place” in verses 5, 11, 14, 18, 21 and 26:2. The Canaanites built many altars, but Israel was to have but one altar. The Canaanites sacrificed whatever they pleased to their gods and goddesses, including their own children, but the Lord would instruct the Jews what sacrifices to bring, and He made it clear that they were never to sacrifice their children.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to the Canaanite practices, Moses tells God’s people, “But you shall seek *the LORD* at the place which the LORD your God will choose from all your tribes, to establish His name there for His dwelling, and there you shall come” (Deut 12:5). The central place of worship was the tabernacle at the time when Moses wrote, and this moved about as the Lord chose. *The place* of God’s choosing is mentioned twenty times from this point

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy*, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 305.

<sup>4</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Equipped*, “Be” Commentary Series, 81.

onward and refers to the location where God's people would meet the Lord for worship (Deut 12:5, 11, 14, 18, 21, 26, 14:23-25; 15:20; 16:2, 6-7, 11, 15-16; 17:8; 18:6, 26:2; 31:11). Later, this place of worship became fixed in Jerusalem (2 Sam 24:18-25; 1 Ch 21:18).

Moses describes the practice of worship, saying, "There you shall bring your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the contribution of your hand, your votive offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock" (Deut 12:6). In this verse Moses provides a basic theology of worship and lists seven expressions of worship for the Israelite.

1. Burnt offerings – an animal sacrifice in which the whole carcass was consumed by fire (Lev 1:1-17). This pictured total dedication to God.
2. Sacrifices – animal sacrifices in which the blood and fat were to be burned on the altar, and the meat was to be eaten by the presenter and the priest together in the presence of the Lord (Lev 7:11-15).
3. Tithes – the tenth portion of crops and animals (Deut 14:23).
4. The contribution of your hand (special gifts) – these were contributions made at any time and were set apart specifically for the Lord (Lev 22:21).
5. Votive offerings – a vowed offering (Lev 7:16-17; 22:21).
6. Freewill offerings – these were spontaneous offerings of happiness (Lev 22:21).
7. The firstborn of herds and flocks – the firstborn animal from the herd or flock (Deut 15:19-21).

And this was to involve the whole family, as Moses states, "There also you and your households shall eat before the LORD your God, and rejoice in all your undertakings in which the LORD your God has blessed you" (Deut 12:7). These worship events were to be characterized by joy with the whole family. To eat the meal "before the LORD your God" implied the Lord was present at each meal as a personal participant (Deut 12:18; 14:23, 26; 15:20; 27:7). Rejoicing in connection with worship is mentioned several times in Deuteronomy (Deut 12:7, 12, 18; 14:26; 16:11).

Unfortunately, we know from Scripture that Israel failed to obey this command and the remnant of evil in the land became a corrupting influence (Psa 106:34-39). Over time Israel did not obey the Lord, and the place of God's choosing had been forgotten, and idolatry became prevalent. It was during the reign of Josiah (2 Ki 22:1), that a copy of Deuteronomy was found in the temple (2 Ki 22:8-20), and the land was largely purged of idolatry and the temple restored to its proper place of function (2 Ki 23:1-25). However, after Josiah died in 609 BC, the four subsequent kings all did evil in the sight of the Lord until eventually Judah and Jerusalem were destroyed in 586 BC by the Babylonians and many taken into captivity for seventy years.

As a reminder to us as Christians, we do not live in a theocracy and there is no land that God requires us to take by force. Rather, we find ourselves, for the most part, living in pagan societies that promote values contrary to Scripture. Though most of the people we encounter are indifferent to God, we are to love them, pray for them, and share God's truth when we have opportunity. Jesus said, "love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men" (Luke 6:35). Though we are to love others, we must also guard ourselves from being polluted by worldly values that can injure our walk with the Lord. David's instruction is valuable when he states, "How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night. He will be like a tree *firmly* planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers" (Psa 1:1-3).