“. . . But you shall seek the Lord at the place which the Lord your God shall choose from all your tribes, to establish His name there for His dwelling, and there you shall come. . . .” (12:1–32).

God wanted man to have a need for Him and a capacity for fellowship with Him. Created with an eternal soul, man could yearn for fellowship with that God, reaching out for the Eternal One. Indeed, as Augustine said, “Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.”

Having rehearsed the Decalogue and its leading principles, Moses began to apply those principles to the ecclesiastical, civil, and social life of the nation of Israel as found in chapter 12. The invasion of Canaan marked the beginning of a new period in the history of Israel.

Since it was to be a period of true fellowship with Jehovah, He prohibited certain things to help mold Israel’s attitude toward the sanctuaries of other gods. Second, He spoke of the place He would choose for the people to worship Him. A true understanding and practice of worship would ensure Israel’s relationship with God, whereas a corruption of worship would bring ill effects throughout the land.

The chapter begins and ends with a strong warning not to follow the other nations’ style and manner of worship.

“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. And 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 you shall obliterate their name from that place” (12:2, 3; see 12:29–31).

The Canaanites worshiped a vast assortment of gods: gods of the hills, gods of the valleys, gods of the groves. The heathen people erected altars and shrines across the land. Since they had many gods, they needed and built many altars. The pollution of heathen worship filled the air and threatened to weaken the fiber of God’s people. It is an acknowledged fact from Israel’s history that heathen worship appealed to them. God wanted the remnants of idolatry blotted out because He understood the temptations these would bring to His people.

Israel was, therefore, to destroy all the places where the foreign gods were worshiped, that God might come down and dwell among them. The custom of placing shrines on “mountains and on the hills and under every green tree” was not to be in the future worship in Canaan.

God warned that even after Israel had destroyed the nations of Canaan, Israel was not to even inquire after these gods. “Beware that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How do these nations serve their gods, that I also may do likewise?’” (12:30).

James Orr wrote of this characteristic curiosity of Israel to study and know about other gods. The itching desire to hear about the gods of the place, and how the nations served them, was symptomatic of a prurient disposition. There was, unfortunately, too much in the way in which these nations had “served their gods” to excite and interest the passions of the dissolute. It is a dangerous token when those who ought to know better begin to manifest a
prurient curiosity about what is evil. It leads to prying into matters which had better remain hidden, to inquiries at persons whose very society is dangerous, to the reading of obscene books, the visiting of bad places, the keeping of immoral company, etc. At the bottom of such inquiries there is invariably a secret sympathy, which is bound as time advances to yield fruit in evil practices. 2

Later, while Israel invented no gods of their own, they were content to imitate the gods of the nations surrounding them. They had a burning desire to be like those nations around them. We have the same problem today, for it is much easier to follow the crowd. Many would rather die than be out of fashion with the world. This weakness becomes a dangerous snare to the children of God. Paul warned, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, . . .” (Romans 12:2).

THE ONE PLACE TO WORSHIP THEN

To destroy the pagan places of worship was not enough. If Israel did not find fellowship with the true God, they would seek to fill this void with false gods. The negative command was to be succeeded by a positive plan of action:

“You shall not act like this toward the Lord your God. But you shall seek the Lord at the place which the Lord your God shall choose for His dwelling, and there you shall come” (12:4, 5).

Israel was to worship God in a different style from the way the nations of Canaan worshiped their gods. The Canaanites themselves had selected the place their gods would be worshiped. When Israel could live in safety and could all gather at one place before the Lord, they would then worship God at a place of His choosing rather than their own.

One of the major themes of Deuteronomy, the centralization of worship, is portrayed in this chapter. The phrase “the place . . . the Lord your God chooses” appears six times in chapter 12 (12:5, 11, 14, 18, 21, 26), three times in chapter 14, one time in chapter 15, six times in chapter 16, three times in chapter 17, and one time each in chapters 18 and 26, for a total of twenty-one times in Deuteronomy.

The place where God would choose to put His name is not mentioned by Moses at this time.

Robert Jamieson gave the following explanation for Moses’ silence:

This studied silence was maintained partly lest the Canaanites, within whose territory it lay, might have concentrated their forces to frustrate all hopes of obtaining it; partly lest the desire of possessing a place of such importance might have become a cause of strife or rivalry amongst the Hebrew tribes, as about the appointment to the priesthood. 3

Since all the earth belongs to God, He has a perfect right to select any spot He chooses. Later the psalmist declared the place God had chosen: “For the Lord has chosen Zion; He has desired it for His habitation” (Psalm 132:13).

Verses 5 and 21 state “the place where the Lord your God chooses to put His name.” Verse 11 reads, “Then it shall come about that the place in which the Lord your God shall choose for His name to dwell.”

The phrase “to put His name” is not unique to the Bible. Gordon J. Wenham notes that the expression has at least three implications in cuneiform literature: (1) It is an affirmation of ownership, the equivalent of taking a possession. (2) It describes the conquest and is associated with the erection of victory monuments. (3) It is used at times in inscribing a name on the foundational stones of sanctuaries. 4 All three of these definitions are in harmony with its use in Deuteronomy. God not only possesses the place, but the people who would worship there following their victories over the Canaanites.

One national center of religion was essential in the eternal purposes of God for mankind. The central sanctuary emphasized the unity of God, the purity of Israel’s worship of God, and the political and spiritual unity of the people.

At this point in Israel’s history, it was crucial to establish the sanctuary for the preservation of national unity and the memory of God’s mighty acts. The unity of Jehovah needed to be publicly signified by a central altar.

A central place of worship would raise a psychological and spiritual bulwark against the hundreds of temples, altars, and shrines spawned by the polytheism of the times. The prohibition to choose altars at random (12:13) was timely, since the Israelites might be tempted to use the altars of the Canaanites.

A central place of worship was also a giant
factor in the cultivation of fellowship between God and man. It was a source of strength for a deeper understanding of God’s plan of the ages. They needed a central place of worship to protect the unity of the faith, to preserve the unity of the faith, and to preserve the concept of the oneness of God.

THE ONE PLACE OF WORSHIP NOW

There has been divine order and a gradual revelation in the worship of God. Now under the gospel of Christ, we have no temple that sanctifies the gold, no altar that sanctifies the gift, but Christ only who is seated at the right hand of God. As to our place of worship, the prophets foretold that in every place spiritual incense would be offered.

“For from the rising of the sun, even to its setting, My name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense is going to be offered to My name, and a grain offering that is pure; for My name will be great among the nations,” says the Lord of hosts (Malachi 1:11).

Jesus our Lord declared regarding the place of worship:

. . . An hour is coming when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall you worship the Father. . . . But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:21, 23, 24).

Those who are acceptable as true worshipers worship God in spirit and truth without regard to any physical mountain or city. Jesus said: “I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father, but through Me” (John 14:6). Our only avenue to the Father is through Jesus Christ. Peter described the Christians’ spiritual relationship in these words: “You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices accept-

able to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5).

Four characteristics of a place to worship God are brought over from the Old to the New Testament. Our place of worship should be a place where God is present (1 Corinthians 1:2; Matthew 18:20); a place where God’s people gather (Acts 2:46, 47; Hebrews 10:25); a place that is different from the world (John 17:14–16); and a place of ministry (Ephesians 4:11, 12; Hebrews 10:24).

CONCLUSION

Surrounded as we are by many gods and lords, we, too, need a place of worship. Here, as God’s children, we can gather at God’s throne to find a unifying loyalty in a kindred devotion which will draw us, hold us, and give us a unity of hope and promise in Jesus Christ.

The danger is always that we may become polytheists (worshipers of many gods). Theologically and theoretically, we remain monotheists (worshipers of one God). But even as we proclaim God as our Lord, smoke rises from diverse altars within our lives. While we profess Him in theory, we adore other gods of success, prestige, and material things.

Isn’t the contemporary emptiness and restlessness of man indicative of the fact that while God designed man for fellowship with Himself, man chooses rather to fill his life with the gods of his own choosing? May our prayer be: “Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.”

Endnotes

5Confessions, 3.