

God's Chosen Place

When we talk about the United States we cannot avoid the Declaration of Independence and Constitution, our



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documents of origin and vision. But for all the high ideals and safeguards of freedom, we modern Americans sometimes twist those high-sounding words and violate their principles. Truth involves both heart and head. Ignore either one and the other becomes compromised.

On June 24 we studied 2 Kings 22-23 about King Josiah's reign when the neglected Temple in Jerusalem was being repaired and the book of Deuteronomy was rediscovered, resulting in a spiritual renewal among God's people. Today's study focuses on Deuteronomy 12, part of what was read publicly to the children of Israel who had wandered from God and compromised with an unbelieving world.

People need reminders or tangible evidence supporting truth, morality and the meaning of life. Being the people of God is not easy in this challenging world, so the God who delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt granted them a place to become his people and offer his love to the world. God inspired this book about worship and living as a teaching guide. Deuteronomy is explicit about building a temple in Jerusalem, meaningful rituals and sacrifices that must be offered in this singular space that will represent God's presence in the midst of his people. This is a new way of seeing God and serving him. Israel becomes a nation for the first time, totally different from Egypt with its multiple gods and desire to dominate other nations.

There is a radical difference between gods who are selfish, immoral, unpredictable and violent and the true God who is loving, gracious, concerned about individual lives – the God who does not play games with people. The God of Israel neither looks like nor acts like us. Sometimes words cannot adequately describe God, so we struggle to see God in terms of his love, forgiveness, compassion, perfection, and absolute knowledge. We formulate God's character more than his physical appearance. Then we hear Jesus call

God "Father," using the most tender word – Abba – which is a child's term of endearment, "Daddy" (Mark 14:36). As we read these remarkable books about God and the uneven experiences of Israel we begin to understand believing in God must be more than legal codes, priestly rituals and complex sacrifices. Faith in God can only be real when it becomes a relationship initiated by God, made possible by his love, and ruled by his grace. This is the flow of the Old Testament writings and the saga of Israel's journey of faith, from which we learn what it means to be God's people.

On claiming the land of promise Israel was commanded to demolish all the pagan altars, "smash their pillars, burn their sacred poles with fire, and hew down the idols of their gods, and thus blot out their names from their places" (v. 3). Pagan gods varied among the different nations and were often connected to immorality and human sacrifice. Jehovah is totally different, so his teachings and character should fashion a people who are different. Instead of scattered places of worship, God declares there will be one temple in Jerusalem as their focus for worship and sacrifice. To establish the difference, there are special seasons and feast days when all Israel will gather to celebrate God's blessings and remember his uniqueness in a pagan world.

Israel is to live by more than the sacrifices and feast days, but by God's commands. Thus, "it may go well with you and your children after you forever, because you will be doing what is good and right in the sight of the Lord your God" (v. 28).

Was this promise a guarantee of life without sadness or pain? Was this a religious rewards system in which faith results in prosperity and success? Nowhere does the Bible make such a promise. Life is marked by joy, sadness, disaster, success, seasons, change, events beyond rational explanation, and yet God's companionship through it all. As a young Christian I wondered why Job was included in the Old Testament because it was so harsh and seemed to portray God as disconnected from our world. But as I grew in faith, met other Christians who knew suffering, and studied the Bible, I learned God is with us through the entirety of life and his grace can sustain

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us in all things. God makes incredible promises to Israel even though he knows their weaknesses and the future tragedies of their own making. But God loves them!

If you have been paying attention to news and social media, you know the world can be an ugly, unjust and cruel place. People are often glaring proof of how evil we can be. The most significant truth, the possibilities of living daily with God as your strength and guide, does not make the headlines.

Like Israel on the day God welcomed them to the land of his promise, we have the choice to love God, accept his gift of spiritual life and live in a much different way. Unlike the people in today's text, we do not need a temple as our single place of worship because we understand God is with us wherever we go. Our sacrifices are not burned on an altar; instead, we live out God's love in our words and actions. Worship occurs when we gather for church, but worship continues as we leave the building and serve God every day. Romans 12:1 reminds us: "by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship."

Life always presents challenges and questions that have no easy answer. Israel's history shows them facing enemies and experiencing loss, sometimes as victims and sometimes by their own bad choices. I have faced some harsh challenges and losses in my 76 years, but in each situation I found God's love, forgiveness and strength the key to overcoming. Romans 8:28 does not say all things are good, but that "God causes all things to work together for good to them who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose." The secret to living beyond circumstances and self-pity is to trust the loving God who will be with you no matter what.

Commitment is a big word and can be a tough go, but remember God in Christ has committed himself to you. Jerusalem was to be God's chosen place for Israel to lean their identity and purpose as God's special people. The cross of Christ is God's chosen place for each of us to begin truly living as God's grace people!

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques. Formations is a curriculum series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. through NextSunday Resources.