**Joyful, careful, holy worship**

Text: Deuteronomy 12-13

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Romans 12:1-2; Deuteronomy 12-13

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] Songs Chosen: 326, 1, 282, 359, 183

**Series:** Deuteronomy (#8)

**Theme:** Moses instructs Israel about the vital importance of removing false worship and apostasy from the land of Canaan so that the people could be set apart from the nations by worshipping the Lord joyfully in a single place where the blood of sacrificed animals was to be poured out on the altar.

**Proposition:** Joyfully and carefully worship the Lord in holiness according to His Word

**Introduction**

The ‘worship wars’ is a phrase which describes the conflict and disagreement which has occurred within churches over the style, structure and substance of corporate worship services. One way to start such a war could be to hold a special congregational meeting and invite open discussion with old and young alike invited to speak and to debate questions like these: Should we have drums as part of the worship service? How about an organ or a saxophone? How about more contemporary songs? Does ‘contemporary’ mean ‘belonging in the present’ as in the dictionary, or a much broader range of anything written in the last 20-30 years? Do video clips and recorded music have a place today within congregational worship? Should we change our worship services with the aim of not losing the younger generation to other churches?

The ‘worship wars’ are nothing new in the life of the church. Many objected to the introduction of Gregorian Chant when it became the official music of the church in the 8th century under King Charlemagne of France. In 1540 John Calvin stated that only the Old Testament Psalms sung in metrical rhythm (the style of the Genevan Psalter) were appropriate for worship – not everyone agreed with him! In 1723 Isaac Watts, author of hymns like ‘When I survey the Wondrous Cross’ was verbally attacked in a public article because of the new ‘worldly trends’ in church music. This ‘new music’ was said to ‘create disturbances making people act indecently and disorderly’. It was also noted that ‘the preceding generations got along without it’. As King Solomon once wisely observed ‘*there is nothing new under the sun*’ (Eccl 1:9).

When Old Testament Israel gathered in the land of Moab to listen to the last sermon that Moses would preach to prepare them for their upcoming occupation of the Promised Land they were about to engage in military warfare. God’s law, which Moses undertook to explain to all Israel (Deut 1:5) contained many ‘statues and rules’ including details as to how they were to physically fight when they invaded the land of Canaan (Deut 20).

However, the law firstly laid out how Israel was to fight the ‘worship wars’ which would be an inevitable consequence of their occupation of a land in which the nations did not fear the Living God. We’re going to look at the Old Testament law from Deuteronomy chapters 12 and 13 under two headings today:

1. The blessings of worship in the Promised Land
2. The dangers for worship then and now

This will be of some benefit in understanding what the Lord’s will for His people Israel was as they entered the land of Canaan. More challenging than this, and more directly applicable for us, is to know what the Lord’s will is for us as we worship Him **now**. This is the subject of our third point:

1. The blessings of worship today as pilgrims in Christ
2. **The blessings of worship in the Promised Land**

I am so very thankful that I was able to come to New Zealand from England almost 35 years ago as an immigrant. This country is a good land with plenty of space and an agreeable climate. We produce very good food here, have ready access to clean water. We are currently able to live at peace with our neighbours across the sea. There is nowhere else in the world that I would rather be!

For Israel, being rescued by the Lord out of slavery in Egypt, they had been promised a country of their own (Gen 17:8); a land ‘*flowing with milk and honey*’ (Ex 3:8; Deut 11:9). When the spies returned to the Israelites camped at Kadesh-barnea, they reported ‘*It is a good land that the Lord our God is giving us*’ (Deut 1:25).

In order for Israel to enjoy the blessings of living in a land where the Lord would give rain so that there would be plenty of food for the people and their livestock, it was absolutely vital that they carefully obeyed His good commandments. First and foremost to ‘*love the Lord your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul*’ (Deut 11:13). Not to be stubborn and uncooperative under the Lord’s rule, but to willingly yield to His good and gracious will. To have a ‘circumcised heart’ – an inner attitude which was fundamentally different from the ‘uncircumcised’ hearts of the pagan nations who did not worship the Living God.

In Deuteronomy chapters 12 and 13, we find specific practical instructions for Old Testament Israel which flow out from the 1st and 2nd of the Ten Commandments: “*You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth*” (Deut 5:7-8).

These laws for Israel’s worship as a covenant community reflected the blessings of their Lord who was the source of their joy, peaceful stability and prosperity – both physically and spiritually. Let’s look at these blessings in a little more detail.

Firstly, you can see the command to ‘*rejoice before the Lord your God*’ in chapter 12 verses 12 and 18. Their joy was to be found in the **presence of their God** who was with them. He had been with His people in the pillar of fire by night and of cloud by day as He led them out of slavery in Egypt (Ex 13:21). He had been with His people at Mount Sinai (Ex 19:18). His presence dwelt in the Holy Place within the moveable tabernacle – the ‘tent of meeting’ (Ex 29:30) for most of the time that He led them through the wilderness.

The settled camping ground for Israel was to be carefully laid out according to the Lord’s instructions (Num 2:1-3:39) with three tribes to each of the four points of the compass and the tabernacle in the centre. However, during periods of more rapid movement of the people, (as when they were about to enter the Promised Land) it appears that the regular worship practices which the Lord had prescribed (e.g. Lev 1-7) could not be, or were not, followed. This seems to be the background to the Lord’s words in chapter 12:8-9 - "*You shall not do according to all that we are doing here today, everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes, for you have not as yet come to the rest and to the inheritance that the LORD your God is giving you*”.

One of the blessings of worship in the Promised Land would be a **single fixed location** where the Lord would be worshipped. As the people progressively conquered the land of Canaan this place was at Shiloh (Josh 18:1; Jer 7:12), then Gibeon (1 Chron 16:39), and finally at Jerusalem, where the temple was subsequently built by King Solomon (1 Kings 6). Zion, Jerusalem, was the final place associated with the Lord’s name. It was there that His holy presence dwelt (2 Kings 21:4). The worship of the Lord in the Promised Land reflected the joy of His holy presence amongst His people, the peace which He had won for them resulting in the stability with a fixed place of worship and also the abundant physical and spiritual blessings which He generously gave.

It was within the central place of the Tabernacle and then the Temple that Israel worshipped their Lord. There are six different types of offerings described in chapter 12 verse 6 which the Lord called His people to bring to the single place where He would ‘*put his name and make his habitation*’ (12:5). (There are detailed descriptions of Israel’s sacrificial system in Leviticus 1-7).

* **‘Burnt offerings’** – this was the sacrifice offered most frequently. The whole animal, except for the skin, was burned on the altar. The shedding of the blood of slain animal symbolised the payment of the penalty for the sin of the worshipper through the substitution of one life for another.
* **‘Sacrifices’** – refers to the fat portion of an animal, the remaining parts going to the priests and the person offering the sacrifice.
* **‘Tithes’** – literally ‘a tenth part’ – of any produce or earnings. The tithe was to be taken to the sanctuary where, if edible, it was to be joyfully eaten with the priests, the Levites and the poor.
* ‘**Vow offerings**’ were spontaneously brought to celebrate an answer to prayer after a person vowed to praise the Lord if He answered the worshipper’s prayer.
* **‘Freewill offerings’** – were additional donations given in response to God’s unexpected or unsought generosity.
* The male ‘**firstborn of the herd and flock**’ – were to be dedicated to the Lord (Deut 15:19).

The meat from animals sacrificed and tithes of grain, wine, oil (12:17) or other produce was to be eaten ‘before the Lord’ at the single place the Lord had chosen. Other meat, not sacrificed to the Lord, could be eaten in any town (12:15), but the blood was not to be consumed, but ‘poured out on the earth like water (12:24) because ‘*the blood is in the life*’ (12:23). In Scripture, blood is a metaphor or symbol for life and ultimately points to the work of Christ (more about this later!). The ability to make these offerings in worship was a direct result of the Lord’s gift of a highly productive land of plenty.

The blessings of worship in the Promised Land were then: joy in the presence of the Lord with His people; peaceful stability with a single central location for gathered worship; abundant provision in the form of agricultural produce - a portion of which could be generously and willingly given back to the Lord; promised spiritual payment of the penalty for sin as represented by the substitution of an animal, whose blood was poured out on the altar of the Lord (12:27), in the place of the guilty person. Worship would be a rich blessing for God’s people in the Promised Land, but there would also be dangers, which brings us to our second point:

1. **The dangers for worship then and now**

New Zealand is a great land to live in, but it cannot accurately be described as a ‘Christian country’. Almost half our population (48.2%) identified themselves on the last national census form as having ‘no religion’ – this figure has doubled in the past 20 years. Recently added ‘religious affiliations’ include the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster (4,248 people) and Jedi (20,409 people). Hinduism is the second largest religion in New Zealand and is also the fastest growing). 37% of those who completed the last census form identified themselves as being ‘Christian’ – still the largest group in NZ. However, only 16% attend church and only 9% describe themselves as ‘active practicing their faith’. All this to say that Bible-believing Christians who regularly attend church worship services and actively live according to their professed faith are a small minority in this country. Christians are prone to be led astray by the lifestyles and worship practices of those in this land for whom it is true that there is ‘no fear of (the Living) God before their eyes (Rom 3:18).

The land of Canaan 3500 years ago was obviously very different from 21st century New Zealand. However just as there are dangers for us as we worship the Lord now, so there were threats for Old Testament Israel back then. I doubt if any of the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, or the Jebusites would have ticked the ‘no religion’ box on a census form – had they been asked to fill one in. The ‘infrastructure’ of pagan worship was present throughout the land which was ‘littered’ with altars, pillars, carved images including Asherim – objects which depicted Asherah, a fertility goddess, the mother of the god Baal.

The Lord instructed Israel to destroy the places where the nations in Canaan served their gods (12:2); tearing down altars, dashing into pieces the pillars, burning the Asherim with fire chopping down the carved images (12:3). The purpose of this complete purging of any remnants of false worship in the land was to remove the temptation to offer sacrifices in places associated with false gods or to combine true worship with false. At the time of the Protestant Reformation religious paintings, statues of saints and crucifixes were destroyed and/or removed from many church buildings for similar reasons.

There was also the danger of the people being led away from true worship of the Lord their God as a result of: false prophets (13:1-5), persuasive close relatives or friends (13:6-11), and ‘worthless fellows’ who would entice whole towns to serve other gods.

For the sake of the continued well-being and life of the covenant community it was essential that those who threatened the blessed worship of the Lord be removed so that evil could be purged from their midst (13:5). The penalties were drastic indeed: death by stoning for any who ‘*sought to draw you away from the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery*’ (Deut 13:10); the complete destruction of entire communities (and their livestock) who went after other gods. This purging was only to take place after careful investigation to confirm their turning away from the Lord. They were also to burn the entire city with all its goods so that they did not personally profit and so that the place could not be inhabited again.

Locking down the citizens of a country and greatly restricting their personal freedom seemed very harsh when China first did so in early 2020. Yet we have seen how drastic measures can be necessary to contain the spread of a physical sickness; how much more a ‘pandemic’ of going after false gods? These severe measures can be difficult for us to understand and accept today. What can we say?

* The temptation for Israel to turn away from true worship of their Lord was acute. Later in their history, idolatry was the core corporate sin which led to the exile of many from the land and to the destruction of Jerusalem.
* Allowing false worship to flourish alongside true worship leads to a loss of the blessings of the Lord and to the enslavement of people. 500 or so years ago, the Protestant Reformers understood that this is what had occurred within the Roman Catholic church.
* God’s worship laws for Old Testament Israel as they occupied the Promised Land are specific to their situation, but there are important principles which carry forward to today.

There is no need to remove every form of artistic expression and beauty from the places where we worship, but we do need to be careful not to have any objects or images here which could distract us or lead us astray from worshipping the Lord in ‘spirit and in truth’ (John 4:24).

We most certainly do not have physical punishments for those who turn away from following the Lord according to His Word. The state, as the secular governing authority, judges civil matters according to the laws of New Zealand (ref. Rom 13). However in our Reformed Churches, we do practice formal church discipline of those who have publicly confessed Christ but who have not repented of unfaithfulness either in doctrine or in lifestyle.

It is very helpful to notice that the same language is used in the New Testament with regard to excommunication from the church as is used in our text from Deuteronomy for the removal from the land of those who could lead others astray: "*Purge the evil person from among you*." (1 Cor 5:13). Church discipline is sad, painful and distressing for us all within the church when we are called to treat a former brother or sister in Christ who remains unrepentant as ‘*a gentile and a tax collector*’ (Matt 18:17) – someone who is outside the kingdom of God and in desperate need of saving grace.

How hard must it have been for families to stone to death a brother, a sister, a son or a daughter who had secretly enticed others to ‘*go and serve other gods*’ (13:6)? Jesus said “*Whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven. Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household*” (10:33-36).

The ‘hard sayings’ of the Bible are there to warn us and remind us of the dangers which surround us in a land in which we, brothers and sisters in Christ, are a minority who live in the world, but are not of the world (John 15:19; John 17:14-16). Having looked at the blessings of worship in the Promised Land and the dangers for worship then and now, let’s now focus on the blessings of worship today as pilgrims in Christ

1. **The blessings of worship today as pilgrims in Christ**

New Zealand is my home. I still remember with thankfulness the day I was granted permanent residency and then later when I obtained citizenship. It is a privilege to be a Kiwi. However, the passing of government legislation which is directly opposed to God’s good law for the protection of life, for marriage and for family life is deeply distressing and reminds me that this is not my permanent home. This is not a land won over for Christ. Brothers and sisters, we ‘*desire a better country, that is a heavenly one*’ (Heb 11:16) – the place that the Old Testament land of Canaan points to.

We are ‘*sojourners and exiles*’ (1 Pet 2:11) here. Pilgrims passing through a land which is not our place of settled belonging, and yet we are blessed **now** to be able to worship the Lord God together. From our text in Deuteronomy 12-13, what are some of the blessings we have now as we worship?

1. **Joy** in the presence of the Lord for all those who have been born again by the Spirt (John 3:3) who is God dwelling within His people (John 14:23). When Jesus lived on this earth He was literally ‘*God with us*’, Immanuel (Matt 1:23). He and God the Father sent the Spirit so that God would be with us always. We can gather together at any physical location (Matt 18:30) in the joy and security the His holy presence of the One who said, ‘*I will never leave you nor forsake you*’ (Josh 1:5; Heb 13:5). The Temple now is Christ Himself. All for whom He died are inseparably joined to Him. This is our comfort and joy in life and in death.
2. **Freedom** from the elaborate system of sacrifices in the Old Testament.It is not possible for the blood of animals to take away sin (Heb 10:4-6). These all pointed forward to Christ, the truly innocent One, who substituted Himself in the place of the guilty; people like you and me. In our worship we present our entire selves as ‘living sacrifices’ (Rom 12:1), willing workers in God’s kingdom who belong to Christ and who live for Him (Gal 2:20). We have liberty to bring our freewill tithes and offerings reflecting both the bounty of the Lord’s material provision for us and our thankfulness for all that He has done.

We also have much liberty in how we worship the Lord together as a gathered congregation. The Bible does not prescribe a fixed order of worship – a liturgy. However we do know that the New Testament church met and worshipped in these ways: they sang the Bible (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16); they heard the Bible preached (2 Tim 4:2); they prayed the Bible (Matt 6:9); they heard and/or read the Bible (1 Tim 4:13); they saw the Bible in the sacraments of baptism and Lord’s Supper (Matt 28:19; Acts 2:38-39; 1 Cor 11:23-26; Col 2:11-12).

We have no indication that they enacted the stories and messages of Scripture with dramas, plays or dances even though these were commonplace in the 1st century Greco-Roman world. However, we can decide whether or not to sing Genevan tunes, new songs or old ones, or to have a range of musical genres which helps us all, young and old, from many different cultures to worship the Lord together. We can select an instrument or multiple instruments which accompany us well as we praise the Lord together in song.

When our congregational worship is regulated by God’s Word, applied to our worshipping hearts by the Holy Spirit, then we are enabled to worship our God in spirit and in truth. This is careful, holy worship which pleasing to our Lord.

1. **Protection** from those who could lead us astray either to serve false gods or to seek to include what is not true in our worship. Ministers of the gospel in our churches are carefully and extensively trained to explain the Bible in preaching and teaching. Ministers are closely watched throughout the period of training and continue to be monitored and checked as they serve. The elders in our local churches regularly review the Minister’s sermons and their handshake with him before and after the service indicates that he preaches under their authority as Christ’s appointed leaders in His church.

Formal church discipline is another form of protection for us as the Lord’s good will for His church. An aim of church discipline is that an unrepentant sinner, who once confessed faith in Christ, be restored to relationship with Him (or perhaps, if they never truly savingly believed that they come to faith). Another aim is to protect the church from the damaging influence of those who could lead others astray either by their active influence or just by the knowledge of their example. There is a warning for us all as we learn about others coming under discipline. The third aim of church discipline is to honour Christ whose Body the church is to be a holy people. This does not mean that we are all perfect, far from it, but that when sin comes to light and there is no repentance then not dealing with this Biblically as a church brings dishonour to Christ.

It’s clear from our text in Deuteronomy, that Old Testament Israel was not to just ‘turn a blind eye’ to false prophets, persuasive family members or those who would draw whole communities away from the Lord. Decisive action was required then. Different decisive action is required now, painful and distressing though it is.

In summary, we should seek to avoid ‘worship wars’ about the style, structure and substance of corporate worship services as a congregation (e.g. 1 Cor 12:25; Tit 3:10). I’m not about to suggest that we have a special congregational meeting to debate music, instruments, or the use of technology! However, it’s vital that we see that we are engaged in a ‘worship war’ with the culture around us, just as Old Testament Israel was when they entered the Promised Land, populated by people groups who followed various different religions. None of these belief systems worshipped the True and Living God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It’s not popular today to say that there is only One true faith. Should we not be tolerant of others and affirm that their beliefs are at least equally as valid and true? No. Jesus is the only human being who is full of grace and truth. The only human being who is also God. He said: "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*” (John 14:6).

Do you believe this? Have you come to God through Jesus His Son? Do you know the joy, freedom and protection of worshipping God as He has revealed in His good and perfect will for you, for us?

Moses was seeking to equip God’s people to worship their Lord in the Promised Land, explaining both blessings and dangers to them. I have sought to do the same today so that we too can joyfully and carefully worship God as pilgrims in Christ today who long for the promised land of Paradise in the New Heavens and New Earth.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, here’s the main point, **joyfully and carefully worship the Lord in holiness according to His Word**.

AMEN