

Diversity, Individualism, & Covenant Community

SCOTT HOEZEE

Someone once observed that if the United States has one quintessential proverb that sums up its core philosophy of life, it is the proverb: Different strokes for different folks. Probably if there were a song North Americans might adopt as a kind of pop national anthem, it would be that Frank Sinatra song that concludes by belting out the line: I did it my way. We like to be radical individualists these days. Don't tell me how to live my life, we say. Don't get in my hair. Live and let live. The Bible has a very different vision for the Covenant people of God, and that vision comes through in the book of Deuteronomy, too. Today on Groundwork, we dig into Deuteronomy Chapter 12 to see what God thinks about people only doing things their own way. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we are now just past the midpoint of a six-part series on the book of Deuteronomy. This is our fourth program on Deuteronomy, which is the Bible's fifth book, and as we have been saying, what we need to picture in our mind when we read Deuteronomy are the people of Israel, the new generation that has been 40 years now on the other side of the exodus. They are gathered on the plains of Moab, on the shores practically, the banks of the Jordan River, and just on the other side of that river is the Promised Land, Canaan.

DAVE BAST

It is, so this is Moses' farewell address to the people. It is his swan song. It is his last hurrah. So far as we have been working through the early chapters in Deuteronomy, we have reminded ourselves of the basic story of the Exodus, how the children of Israel, really, it could have been a fairly short journey had they simply listened to God and obeyed Him when He told them: Now, go up into the Promised Land; but instead they got spooked by the giants there and all the trouble, and so as a result, they wandered around in circles – basically a holding pattern – in the wilderness for the next 38 years.

Now, though, they are given a second chance and they are about to cross the river into the land, and God has some other things He wants to hammer home to them, and He does it through Moses.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, Moses is holding this giant review session for this new generation that does not actively remember the exodus or the giving of the Ten Commandments. So we get a lot about the Law: Remember that God saved you. Remember God's Law. And also warnings about what is going to happen when you get into the Promised Land. The manna is going to stop. God has been feeding you this wonder bread – this miracle bread – every morning. So your dependency on God has been clear, but now you are going to start baking your own bread and taking it out of your own cupboards; and you won't get miracle water out of a rock, you will have a well. You just pull up the bucket. So, there are warnings not to forget God. Those are God's gifts, too. Now in a similar vein, but turning it in a slightly different direction, we get some similar warnings and encouragement in this 12th chapter – Deuteronomy 12.

DAVE BAST

Right; and Moses has been instructing the people. Telling them now, teach your children these things. Help them to remember, too. God is one, the great Shema passage; and Deuteronomy Chapter 8, when you are blessed and experiencing all these good things; but here is a little bit of a reminder with a twist, as you said, Scott, as we come to Chapter 12. Moses says:

¹These are the decrees and laws you must be careful to follow in the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has given you to possess as long as you live in the land. ²Destroy completely all the places on the high mountains, on the hills, and under every spreading tree, where the nations you are dispossessing worship their gods. ³Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, and burn their Asherah poles in the fire. Cut down the idols of their gods and wipe out their names from those places. ⁴You must not worship the Lord your God in their way, ⁵but you are to seek the place the Lord your God will choose from among all your tribes to put His name there for His dwelling; to that place you must go. ⁶There bring your burnt offerings and sacrifices; your tithes and special gifts; what you have vowed to give and your free-will offerings; and the firstborn of your herds and flocks.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁷There in the presence of the Lord your God you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hands to because the Lord your God has blessed you. ⁸You are not to do as you do here today – everyone doing as they see fit – ⁹since you have not yet reached the resting place and the inheritance the Lord your God is giving you.

So here, Dave, we have a reminder that the land they are going to enter... it is a land flowing with milk and honey. It is the Promised Land of Canaan, but it is not religiously neutral. There is already religion there. There are already religious practices there; and these are things the Israelites absolutely have to, not only just avoid, they have to get rid of it.

DAVE BAST

It sounds a little bit like what ISIS is doing now in the Middle East when they blow up some of these ancient sites and we are all horrified because they don't mean anything to us anymore. They are just cultural relics and artifacts; but in Israel's case, these were ongoing, regularly used sites of pagan worship, and the pagan worship that went on there was particularly immoral. It involved, worst of all, child sacrifice in many cases, because the essence of paganism is the attempt to manipulate the gods or the powers that be to bend them to your will so that they do what you want them to. On a slightly less horrifying but still unsavory level, they involve sacred prostitution, because the Baals and the Asherah that are mentioned here were fertility deities; they were thought to ensure that you could have children; your crops would grow well, your animals would reproduce and build up the size of your herds and so on; so one of the things that you did was you sort of acted out in their temple what you wanted them to do for you by having sex.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and increasing the fertility of the land; particularly listeners who are familiar with what will later be the criticisms of the prophets like Amos and Micah and Zechariah; one of the things that often comes up in the Old Testament are the "high places," because apparently in the hills surrounding Canaan, and eventually the hills surrounding Israel, that is a key place where the Baal altars and the Asherah poles were built; and in fact, there is even a reference to it in Psalm 121: I lift up mine eyes to the hills, but where does my help come from? In that psalm, when he lifts up his eyes to the hills he sees the Baal altars that they have not taken down, so he says: My help does not come from there; my help comes from Yahweh, the God who made the hills and who made the heavens and the earth; but the fact of the matter is...

DAVE BAST

Just to give a personal illustration, this is still an impulse today. I remember traveling through the Himalayas in Buddhist regions, and you can look up from the valleys and on all of the mountain ridges and hills there are prayer flags flapping. That is where the shrines are built because it is closer to the gods that way. So the same thing is going on here in Canaan, and the people of Israel are warned against it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And not only warned against just adopting that religion; that was maybe a little less of a danger than something else; something that is called syncretism – we still use that word today – syncretism – which means a blending. It was not so much that Moses thought: Oh, the people are going to go there and they are just going to worship Baal and Asherah only; no, he was also worried – and God through Moses was worried – that they would adopt some practices of the Canaanites and weave it into their worship of Yahweh – of God; as though they were saying: Well, we can just do what we want as long as we've got the right God in mind, it doesn't matter what we do to worship Him, right? He won't care, so we will just adopt some of these practices. We will blend them in with our worship of Yahweh. Something very similar happened when Aaron built the golden calf, right?

DAVE BAST

Sure, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Aaron said: Here, you can worship Yahweh – you can worship the God of Israel through this calf. That didn't work, and it is not going to work in the new land, God is saying: Don't blend together Canaanite practices with other practices. God says: Look, there is going to be a place... we know ultimately it will be Jerusalem and the Temple; but God says here there will be a place where I will put my name. My name will be on this one place, and that is where you will go to worship Me, and you will worship Me as I tell you to worship when you get there; so don't start adopting and building together and cobbling together your own religion with a little Asherah here, a little Baal here, a little Yahweh there. No, no, no, no.

DAVE BAST

It is interesting because there is such a strong temptation to blend in, isn't there? We don't want to stick out. We don't want to be different. We would like to be like everybody else, and it is sort of embarrassing to have to be distinctively religious or distinctively Christian. So this is a strong temptation that still exists and it goes way back to the book of Deuteronomy; and God is saying... God has a strange sort of intolerance of blending in. He wants to be worshipped distinctively in His own way, and not just in the way of our neighbors or those who surround us. So, what this means is, we have to come together as a community and not just be individuals; and that is the idea we want to pursue in just a moment.

Segment 2:

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork, and the fourth program in a six-part series we are doing on the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy; and Dave, we have been in Deuteronomy Chapter 12, and we are being reminded here that Israel is a covenant community. They are not to be a bunch of radicalized individualists, right? They are not each person doing his or her own thing, beginning with the call of Abram already, they are a covenant community. They are to do things together; they are to do things communally; and they are to do things together and communally the way God dictates from His revelation to them.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and I think there is a strong connection, Scott, between those two ideas; the idea that you cannot just be like everybody else – you cannot just blend in; but in order to stand against the temptation to blend in, you cannot stand alone, and that is the connection, I think, between these two ideas of being a distinctive people but being a people as well. You cannot go it alone, and you need the congregation of God's people. Beautiful word, incidentally, that we still use: A congregation. I think it was John Wesley who said the New Testament knows nothing of solitary Christians, while the Old Testament knows nothing of solitary Israelites...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

It is a communal effort.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And when we opened this program we talked about how in North American culture today we are so individualized, and before this program is finished we will think about that very specifically in our current context within the Church today; but interestingly, we read in the first segment Deuteronomy 12:8-9; and lets just review that a minute because it hints at something that was happening during the wilderness wandering years:

⁸You are not to do as we do here today – everyone doing as they see fit – ⁹since you have not yet reached the resting place and the inheritance the Lord your God is giving you. So that sort of hints that there was some individualized stuff going on, either worship wise or in other ways, during the wilderness wandering. There was some individualism going on, and God says: All right; I have put up with that for now, but once you get into the land and get settled, that is going to stop.

DAVE BAST

Yes; things apparently got a little loose during those 40 years as far as the worship of God; and when you stop and think about it, they had the tabernacle; they had built this beautiful thing; it was fitted out with all the proper means of worshipping God – the altar and the ark and all the rest – but somehow some people sort of got away from that. It is a tendency, isn't it? In fact, we know later, after they entered the Promised Land – if you remember your Bible history – the book of Judges describes a situation of almost total chaos and it ends with the ominous phrase: Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. So, this was a constant struggle for the people of Israel, as it is for us today, really.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and even though we are not one hundred percent sure how that manifested itself, it could have manifested itself in morality; it certainly could have manifested itself in terms of piety... how did they worship God? Or maybe some of them didn't worship God all that regularly. Maybe they had fallen away from their prayer life and reviewing things with their children, as we had seen in an earlier program in this series; and in fact, later in the book... So, we have been in Deuteronomy 12 primarily today, but if we go ahead 17 chapters this comes up again in Deuteronomy 29. Let me just read these verses from the 29th chapter, which again warns against this individualized approach to God:

¹⁹When such a person hears the words of this oath and they invoke a blessing on themselves, thinking, "I will be safe even though I persist in going my own way," they will bring disaster on the watered land as well as the dry. ²⁰The Lord will never be willing to forgive them. His wrath and zeal will burn against them. All the curses written in this book will fall on them, and the Lord will blot out their names from under heaven. ²¹The Lord will single them out from all the tribes of Israel for disaster according to all the curses of the covenant written in this book of the Law.

DAVE BAST

I mean, these are strong words, and this is the part of the Bible we like to down-peddle a little bit – the idea of God's curse – God's wrath; and what he says here straight out is if you want to sing Frank Sinatra's song, *I Did It My Way*, disaster will be the result; and disaster not only on you, but it is going to affect the whole community, and even the land you are living in – ecological disaster is forecast. I mean, is there anything more contemporary? We all do our own thing. We all live lives of conspicuous consumption. We all use up stuff at an alarming rate, and what is the result? The earth itself is in danger. I mean, say what you want about climate change and global warming and all the rest, but there is no question that unbridled individualism is wreaking havoc in our communities and in our world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And for Israel, of course, the land – the promise of the land – was all along so key. Land equals salvation for them; so it makes sense that the land would suffer if they are disobedient; and this comes up later in the prophet Amos as well. You can read in Amos that the land did suffer droughts and other disasters, and Amos says: Well, the reason is not purely meteorological or ecological, it is theological. You people are not obeying God because you cannot say when you are a covenant community: Different strokes for different folks. Live and let live. So what if the neighbors next door worship God that way; we will worship God this way; and the people next door to us on the other side can worship another way; I am sure it is all fine with God. Lots of different ways to skin a cat, you know. Lots of different... All roads lead to God... No, God says they don't. I am going to tell you how to worship Me, and that, again, is a very key theme in the Old Testament; and really, it remains a key theme in the New Testament and for the Church today. So before we wrap up this program, we will want to turn toward our contemporary setting and see what some of these words, encouragements, but also warnings from Deuteronomy have to say to us today.

Segment 3:

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. Along with Scott Hoezee I am Dave Bast, and today we are digging into Deuteronomy – primarily Deuteronomy Chapter 12 – and this strong warning that God gives there through Moses against individualism, against going your own way and especially going your own way when it comes to the worship of God. It is not just that we have to worship God alone, but we have to worship God in the way He prescribes, and there is this great danger of what we have called syncretism, that is the basic word for it, a kind of blending in, a kind of a... well, let's just worship God in the same way our culture is worshipping their gods and we can all get along that way; and God gives this strong warning against this and says: If you do that, the results will be nothing short of disastrous.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, that is the word: disaster; but what about today? Obviously when we move from Deuteronomy and the people on the plains of Moab 3,000 years ago to the current day as Christians – and with the Church there are lots of things that are different. We don't believe that there is only one place where God has placed His name. We don't have to go to Jerusalem to worship God. We now believe we are each a temple of the Holy Spirit; every Christian church is a proper place to worship God – so that is different. We also know there is a broad set of principles of worshipping the triune God, preaching the word, observing the sacraments of baptism, the Lord's Supper, all of those things fit within a broad definition of proper Christian worship; but we also know that today within that common language – let's call it the liturgical language – an orthodox, liturgical language – there are different... we could call them different accents of speech.

DAVE BAST

Well, that is true, and I think even before we think about maybe different forms of worship – contemporary, traditional, sacramental, word-centered – all of those kinds of questions which are struggles maybe within the Church – within the body of Christ – we should step back and recognize the basic principle that for Christians as we apply this idea of worshipping God in the right way, it involves a person not a place. So, in John 4 Jesus enunciates this great, basic worship principle when He is having a conversation with the Samaritan woman about where to worship God. Do we have to go to Jerusalem to the Temple or can we worship like we Samaritans do, she asks, on this mountain? And Jesus says: You know what? There is a new day now. It is neither here nor there. It is not about a place anymore, even the Temple in Jerusalem. It is about a person. Those who worship must worship in spirit and in truth, meaning through Him and by the power of the Spirit. So that is the basic principle of Christian worship: Is it Trinitarian? Are you worshipping God through Jesus His Son in the power and with the help of the Holy Spirit?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and that is where, as we were saying earlier, too, I think; different accents of speech – so, the common language of worship to the triune God in spirit and in truth through the person of Jesus Christ; and there are different accents. So, you know, people from the southern United States speak with a little bit of a drawl and people from the East, they've got the New Jersey accent; similarly, you know, Reformed people have a certain accent in their worship and Catholics have a different accent. The Orthodox have a different accent of speech than the Baptists and Pentecostals and others. That is all fine. That is not the individualism that Deuteronomy is warning about.

DAVE BAST

Right, that that is warning against, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But there are some things, I think today that we properly need to be careful about, where worship is getting changed in significant ways to meet people's tastes. We have both, I think, and many of our listeners no doubt have heard sermons on television or on the radio that sound more like pep talks – that sound more like motivational speeches that are hardly even tethered to the Bible, but that is kind of what people want. They want do it yourself religion – DIY religion – they want good advice on childrearing and how to be successful in business, and maybe it is not the Bible, but that is what people want to hear. That is something to worry about.

DAVE BAST

I think the extreme example of that is what is called the prosperity gospel...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Which really is syncretistic, I think, with the American culture and the American dream of success – financial success – material success – well, if you get God on your side, you know, that is a sure ticket to a successful life. He will make you rich, literally; and so then Christian worship gets melded into a kind of a technique for getting ahead in life. It is really not much different from the old Canaanite fertility religion. You use God to get what you want out of life; so that is a great danger.

Another area where I see this in a very contemporary sort of debate that is going on; do we all worship the same God? In the context of the time right now when we are recording this program, there is a bit of a controversy raging because of a Christian college professor who said: Yes, Christians and Muslims worship the same god. We don't have the time to unpack that fully; there is some nuance that is needed there; but the fact is, that as Christians we worship the triune God – we worship God through Jesus His Son; and frankly, other religions don't believe that Jesus is the Son of God who is also divine and is to be worshipped; so we cannot all just coexist, as the bumper sticker says, as if we are all the same. Sure, we should be tolerant toward one another and charitable, but no, we don't actually worship the same God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that ties in also with another movement that a sociologist, Christian Smith, has termed something we have talked about before on Groundwork, which is called moral therapeutic deism, which basically is an approach that God is kind of far away; He is kind of the old man upstairs who is just very, very generous and forgiving. He doesn't really care about your sexual morality. If you live a pretty good life He will reward you when you die. Well, that is also a syncretism to today's culture. These are the high places – the Baal and Asherah places of North American culture of radical individualism – different strokes for different folks. Live and let live. God does not even care how you live your life, so don't worry about it; don't get uptight; hang loose. That, too, would be... when that creeps into our preaching and into our worship, that would be the kind of individualism – I'll do it my way – that God worried about in Deuteronomy 12.

DAVE BAST

God calls us – the Bible calls us to be different, and in order to be different, to worship Him alone and worship Him in the way He has directed in His word, we need each other. We cannot just be on our own, individuals; we need to be part of the congregation – the community of faith – the Covenant people of God. So thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation today. I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what passages or topics you would like to dig into next on Groundwork.

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