



underthefigtree

HIGH PLACES

A Discussion Guide for Groups

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What do you live for? There's a nice, Sunday-school answer to that question, of course: We live to serve and love God. But words that easily roll off the tongue are not always backed up with actions. All too often, our lives reflect a different reality than the one we project during Sunday morning worship.

Some live for their work, rushing off to the office early each morning and working well into the night. Others live for their kids, carefully mapping out the family schedule to accommodate soccer practices, dance lessons, and any other opportunity that might advance their children. Still others live for the weekend, only enduring their job until they can cut loose on Friday night with their friends.

Volunteer work. Basketball. A romantic relationship. There's an endless list of things that can capture our

hearts and govern our lives. Sometimes, we are not even aware of who or what we are serving. But we all give our best to something. We set our alarm clocks for it. We work overtime to earn the money for it. We rearrange our schedules and sacrifice time for it. When it comes to discovering what a person truly lives for, the everyday choices they make reveal far more than any platitude spoken in Sunday school hour.

In today's lesson, we'll study the high places where ancient nations sacrificed their best to pagan gods. As you discuss the everyday concerns that swayed Israel toward idolatry, I think you'll see a mirror of our own spiritual struggles: Though they may not be as obvious, we are still surrounded by idols today. But amidst the barrage of people and activities that vie for our attention, it's my hope that you'll find a renewed passion to place God in the high place of your heart.



The Text

Before you watch this session's video together, read the following passages:

Deuteronomy 12:1-7

Jeremiah 32:30-35

Psalms 106:36-39

Psalms 115:1-11

The Teaching

Watch the video, "High Places." If time allows, we recommend that your group review the vocabulary words and background details below before continuing with the talking points.

Vocabulary

Valley of Ben Hinnom

valley outside Jerusalem, where Israelites had built "high places" in order to make sacrifices to pagan deities

necropolis

a place of entombment, cemetery. (Greek: "city of the dead")





Background Information

Petra is made famous for the beautifully sculptured façade called “The Treasury”. But for this lesson our focus is not “The Treasury” but the archeological site high atop the cliffs of Petra known simply as: “The High Place”. Petra was the capital of the ancient Nabateans, who were at the zenith of their power from 100 BC until 100 AD. The city’s famous dusky-rose buildings were carved into the towering rock faces near Mount Seir. Its builders created a sophisticated water conduit system to capture and control the water supply, and the artificial oasis of Petra became the Nabatean capitol. Petra was a powerful center of caravan trade, controlling one of the main commercial routes that connected the kingdoms of the East and the West.

The Nabateans understood who was responsible for such wealth and success, and constructed one of the most remarkably preserved worship sites the Bible describes as: “high place” to their gods. The impressive size of Petra’s high place speaks to the prominent place worship held in Nabatean culture. Located at the top of one of the mountains that guards Petra, the high place is a difficult and arduous hike from the city. It required both significant effort and cost to create this high place, and great energy and dedication to visit and worship there.

In a land of scarce water supplies fertility was a real and tangible concern. The seasonal rains barely filled the community’s cisterns with enough water for another year. They carefully watered their crops and put food on the table for one more growing season. Without the rain, starvation and thirst were close and threatening dangers. Though different people groups had a different name for their “chief god” they all understood that the rains came at his pleasure. The Canaanites rain & thunder deity was Baal; to the Moabites, he was Chemosh. The Ammonites worshipped him as Molech. But no matter his name he was seen as the god of thunder, with the power to give—or withhold—desperately needed rain.

In order to please their fertility gods and bring the needed rains, ancient communities built high places such as the one we saw in today’s video. What made them “high” was not only the altitude or geography of the site, but the important role these worship centers played in people demonstrating devotion to their gods. Altars would be built there. Religious rituals would take place and sacrifices, even child sacrifices, would be made.

Heart wrenching though it must have been, ancient families offered the lives of their firstborn, as well as the sexual purity of their daughters in prostitution at pagan shrines. In the distorted equation of ancient pagan worship, the sacrifice of a few could guarantee the survival of the rest. The fertility gods demanded a steep price for the rain. But many families—including some of Israelite heritage—were willing to pay.

THE TALKING POINTS



- 1 What is the equivalent of “the rains” in our culture today? What are the things we rely on heavily to maintain our way of life? When have we—as a society—been willing to sacrifice in order to protect our way of life?
- 2 Psalm 115:2-8. How do you see these truths in our world today? In what ways has our culture become blind and deaf because of the gods we serve? In what ways has our culture become an image of the idols it praises?
- 3 When God brought Israel to the Promised Land, he commanded them not only to worship the true God, but also to break down the pagan high places of those in the land: Why is it not enough to simply worship God? Why must the high places of others also be destroyed? Are we still expected to destroy the high places of non-believers in our own cultural context? And if so, what does that look like?
- 4 Israel failed their mission on multiple levels: They failed to destroy the high places of the pagans. And then they went on to create high places of their own to worship pagan gods. Do you think the second failing is an inevitable conclusion of the first? In other words, if we fail to tear down the high places in our culture, are we bound to end up following our culture’s gods?
- 5 The Israelites continued to acknowledge God even as they attempted to weave idol worship into their religious views. How do you think this dynamic developed and what kind of tensions do you think this created in their religious life? Do you see a similar dynamic anywhere in Christianity today?
- 6 What is the relationship between fear and idol worship? What does a person’s choice in idols reveal about their trust in God?
- 7 What does it look like to make God your high place? Read Deuteronomy 11:13-15. What kinds of actions and choices characterize a person who has built their high place for Jesus?

“SEE WITH YOUR EYES, HEAR WITH YOUR EARS, AND SET YOUR HEARTS ON EVERYTHING I AM GOING TO SHOW YOU, FOR THAT IS WHY YOU HAVE BEEN BROUGHT HERE. THEN TELL THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL EVERYTHING YOU SEE.” EZEKIEL 40:4



The Task

It's been said: "Satan works more through erosion than explosion." Reflect on your choices of the past week? What things were a priority and you protected in your schedule? And what got easily pushed aside? What did you burn the midnight oil to complete? And what did you decide to put off for another time? What got the best of your energy, resources, and time and what received "the left-overs?"

Think about it for a minute; reflect on the momentum of your life. The way you lived last week and month is an indicator about where you're building your high places and what you value most. Now, do you like what you see? Are your high places being built for the things you really want to value and consistent with Deuteronomy 11:13-15?

This is where it gets difficult, friends; choices must be made. Our lesson began with the essential question: What do you live for? So for this week's task, REFLECT and take stock of the direction of your life. As with our ancestors in the faith God has given us a host of good things in which we may choose to invest ourselves—good causes we can champion, good skills we can develop, and good times we can plan. But if they become our high places, these good things simply distract us from the greater plans of God. They become demanding, yet powerless idols, and we slowly become like them. I'd like to encourage you to take Moses' words to heart and memorize Deuteronomy 11:13-15.