

Love the Lord Your God

February 22, 2009

Purpose: To help us grow in our love for God so that God becomes the center of our lives

Key Bible reference: Deuteronomy 6

Key Verse: Deuteronomy 6.4-5

Biblical Background: The Book of Deuteronomy is presented as Moses' farewell sermon to Israel, delivered just before he died and the tribes crossed the Jordan into Canaan. At the heart of the book is an old law code (Deuteronomy 4:44-28:68). The rest of Deuteronomy frequently makes reference to this code as the law (or torah) of Moses (Deuteronomy 1:5; 4:8; 29:29; 31:24). It is likely this code was the document found in the Temple in 622 B.C., during the reign of King Josiah (2 Kings 22:3-23:25). The laws became the basis of Josiah's reforms and the core of our Book of Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy 6:1-3. In contrast to the first four chapters of Deuteronomy, which look back on how the Lord brought Israel out of Egypt and through the wilderness, the opening verses of our Bible Lesson focus on the future. As Israel is "about to cross into and occupy" the land (verse 1), Moses cautions the people again to observe the commandment of the Lord. As in Exodus 18:16, Moses is the teacher of Israel (Deuteronomy 6:1). The goal of his teaching is stated clearly in Deuteronomy 6:2: "so that you and your children and your children's children may fear the LORD all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long." The first stage, notice, is fear of the Lord: an attitude of reverence and awe. This attitude will result in lives of obedience to the Lord, which will in turn lead to blessing.

Notice too that the "Israel" addressed in these words is not just the assembly of tribes preparing to cross the Jordan but all future generations as well: "you and your children and your children's children." Just as all Israel experienced the deliverance of the Lord at the shores of Yam Suph, so all Israel is addressed by the teaching of Moses concerning the torah he received from God on Horeb.

Verses 4-9. This text begins the pre-eminent confession of Judaism, often called the Shema [shuh-MA] after its first word in Hebrew (shemac, meaning "hear"). The NRSV translation of Deuteronomy 6:4 is a bit different from the traditional translation. Instead of "The LORD our God is one LORD," the NRSV reads, "The LORD is our God, the LORD alone." The sentence is difficult to translate, as the Hebrew original has no verb!

Traditionally, the Shema has been understood as a statement of monotheism, the idea that there is only one God. The traditional translation reflects this understanding. However, the rest of Deuteronomy is not so much concerned with the abstract idea that the Lord is the only God as with the concrete commitment of Israel to worship only the Lord. The question assumed by the Shema appears to be, "Who is our God? In whom shall we place all our trust?" The Shema responds, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God." Then, should anyone think that some other loyalty can compare with loyalty to the Lord, the Shema proceeds to affirm that "the Lord alone" is our God. For Israel there is but one absolute allegiance. The NRSV translation captures this idea.¹

What such loyalty means for the daily life of the Israelite is stated succinctly in the following verse: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (verse 5). This love is something more than a feeling. After all, Israel is commanded to love God; and feelings cannot be commanded. S. Dean McBride, Jr. argues that love, in this context, refers to steadfast commitment or covenant loyalty.² Elsewhere in the ancient world, treaties demand that subjects "love" their king—meaning, not that they be fond of him, but that they remain obedient and loyal. So also, Israel has a duty to respond with loyalty to the loyalty the Lord has shown.

To love the Lord, then, is to be loyal to the Lord. But how loyal? Deuteronomy 6:5 says, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." Traditionally, Christians have read this verse as describing three different ways of loving God. But the original Hebrew readers would not have understood it in this way. Hebrew *lebav* [lay-BAWB], translated "heart," is used elsewhere to express entire commitment, just as we speak in English of giving something or someone our "wholehearted" support. Hebrew *nephesh* [NEH-fesh], here translated "soul," usually means simply "life." Loving God with all our life would also mean entire commitment. These two words are used together seventeen times in the Hebrew Bible, always in the context of commitment to a covenant.

The third term in this phrase, translated "might" in the NRSV, is *me'od* [meh-ODE]. The only other place where all three terms are used together is 2 Kings 23:25, where King Josiah is said to have "turned to the LORD with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might," which still does not tell us what this commandment means. To understand this, we must first solve the riddle posed by the word *me'od*.

Like our English words much, very, or greatly, *me'od* is an adverb that intensifies the meaning of the adjective or adverb with which it is used. Since Deuteronomy 6:5 and 2 Kings 23:25 are the only places in the Hebrew Bible where *me'od* is used as a noun, its meaning is unclear. How are we to love God with all our "muchness"? One solution is to understand the word to mean "power" or "might." But Professor McBride argues that instead *me'od* "evokes the fullest 'capacity' of loving obedience to [the LORD] which the whole person can muster."³ He therefore suggests that the phrase should be read, "with all your heart, with all your life, indeed with all your capacity!"⁴ The point of Deuteronomy 6:5 is that we are to love God as much as we are capable of loving—with all that we are!

The entire commitment of the person to the Lord is spelled out in Deuteronomy 6:6-9. These words are to be kept in the heart, that is, memorized and studied. We are to teach them to our children and are to call them to mind wherever we are, at home or away. They are to be recited "when you lie down and when you rise" (verse 7), which means that from the time we wake up to the time we drop off to sleep, we are to remember our total commitment to God. Jewish tradition takes these words literally by making the Shema part of morning and evening prayers.

The text further commands us to "bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates" (verses 8-9). Our commitment to the Lord is to inspire us in everything we think, direct us in everything we do, and guide us to everywhere we go. Here again, Jewish tradition takes this command literally. When pious Jews pray (except on the sabbath and on other holy days when no special reminder is needed apart from the day itself), they may wear small leather

boxes strapped to their forehead and to their upper left arm. These boxes, called tefillin or phylacteries [fi-LAK-tuh-rees], contain a small scroll upon which is written texts concerning love for God, including the Shema.

Pious Jewish households will have a small container called a mezuzah [muh-ZOOZ-uh] tacked to the doorpost. Rolled up in the mezuzah is a tiny scroll, inscribed on one side with the divine name Shaddai [SHAD-eye] and on the other with some of the selections found in the phylactery—including the Shema. Leo Trepp writes, "Thus the Shema is the last greeting and admonition to those who leave the house; may their lives be guided by its ideals. The Shema is man's first welcome home; may he place his home, and his thoughts and actions within it, under the instruction of God's Torah."⁵

Verses 10-15. The people of Israel have come through slavery, persecution, thirst, hunger, and warfare. Now at last, they stand ready to enter and claim the Promised Land, "the land that [God] swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you" (verse 10). In contrast to the stark, unsettled wilderness that is all most of the Israelites have ever known, Canaan is a settled, cultivated land. But comfort and prosperity will bring new dangers. "When you have eaten your fill," Moses warns the Israelites, "take care that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (verses 11-12). When the people of Israel no longer have to depend upon the Lord daily for sustenance, they may begin to trust in themselves or in the richness of the land. Indeed, they may begin to take credit for their blessings and forget that all they have is a gift from God. For this reason Moses reminds them of where they are from and urges them never to forget their days of struggle and the Lord's deliverance.

Another, more subtle, threat to Israel's faith came from the religion of Canaan. The farmers of the Canaan valleys did not know the Lord. They attributed the fertility of their farmland to their own gods, especially to Baal [BAY-uhl], god of the storm and the rains. The Israelites in turn may well have thought that while the Lord had been God in the mountains and waste places, this new land called for new ways—and new gods.

The people did accommodate to the religion of Canaan, offering sacrifices to both the Lord and Baal and perhaps swearing oaths by the gods of Canaan. But our text tells us that Moses had warned the Israelites before they entered the land that there could be no compromise. "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone" (Deuteronomy 6:4). The Lord has no rivals! Deuteronomy 6:13-14 rules out any form of honor, reverence, sacrificial service, and worship to any god but the Lord.

Indeed, although the Ten Commandments warn against the misuse of the divine name, only the name can be used in oath taking. The people of Israel are forbidden to swear by the name of any other god. In no way is Israel to follow the gods of Canaan "because the LORD your God, who is present with you, is a jealous God" (verse 15).

Remember what we have observed before about the Lord's "jealousy." God's zealous passion, covenant faithfulness, and loyalty are all devoted to Israel. Notice too that the Lord is the God "who is present with you" (verse 15). Those long years ago on Horeb, God had promised Moses, "I will be with you" (Exodus 3:12). Now Moses assures the Israelites of the Lord's continuing presence. However, the Lord's presence and zeal are also a warning. If Israel should prove unfaithful, "the anger of the LORD your God would be kindled against you and he would destroy you from the face of the earth" (Deuteronomy 6:15).

Prayer: O God, help us to grow in our ability to love you faithfully and to love and care for one another. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Credits

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