

God's Words in Our Hearts

Deuteronomy 6:1–9

by Felton Spraggins

“Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the judgments which the Lord your God has commanded me to teach you, that you might do them in the land where you are going over to possess it, so that you and your son and your grandson might fear the Lord your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be prolonged. O Israel, you should listen and be careful to do it, that it may be well with you and that you may multiply greatly, just as the Lord, the God of your father, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey.

“... Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (6:1–9).

This passage contains some of the most fruitful and impressive religious instructions ever set down. It constitutes the heart of Jewish theology and motivation, for it forms the famous Shema, which is so precious to all of the Hebrew faith.

SHEMA: “HEAR”

The true motive for Israel's devotion and loyalty to God is set forth in the first verse of the Shema: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!” (6:4).

The real incentive for all that follows begins with the understanding that “the Lord is our God.” Jehovah was Israel's God, a fact that was

to serve as a foundational stone for their every action.

In the Hebrew language, the first word in verse 4 is *shema*, with the emphasis being on the last syllable. Eventually, the Jews called this passage in Deuteronomy the Shema. “Hear” is the English translation of the Hebrew word *shema*.

Every Jewish child memorizes the Shema, and the synagogue's service is opened with its recitation. It is a call to worship and a testimony of faith to the Jewish people. In this declaration, the Jewish people affirm their faith in the one God who created and sustains the world. Christians should declare this same kind of faith in the Son of God.

The introductory part of the Shema states that God is “one.” The word stresses God's unity and uniqueness. It validates Israel's conviction that Yahweh, their God, was unique, with an emphasis on the worship of one God as against the universal worship of many gods so prevalent during Moses' day. He was, and is, one God, independent of other so-called gods and consistent in worship and moral requirements. It thus gives support to the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before Me” (5:7). W. L. Alexander writes:

Among the heathen there were many Baals and many Jupiters; and it was believed that the deity might be divided and communicated to many. But the God of Israel, Jehovah, is one, indivisible and incommunicable. He is Absolute and the Infinite One, who alone is to be worshiped, on whom all depend, and to whose command all must yield obedience (cf. Zech. xiv. 9). Not only to polytheism, but to pantheism, and to the conception of a localized or national deity, is this declaration of the unity of Jehovah opposed. With these words the Jews begin their daily liturgy, morning and evening; the sentence expresses the essence of their religious belief.¹

The fundamental truth of Israel's religion focused on the uniqueness and unity of God. Awareness of this fact behooved the Israelites to accept their fundamental duty to dedicate themselves fully to God. All the verses that follow in our text hinge upon God's unity and uniqueness.

A full understanding of the Old Testament concept of God suggests, as the New Testament clearly reveals, that God is triune. This does not mean that the idea of more than one God is supported in either the Old or the New Testament. But it does show that, although God is one being, He is also one God in trinity. The idea is not, as the Orthodox Jew suggests and insists, that there is only one person in the Godhead, but that the Godhead is a unity. No plurality of "gods" is possible. But "the Old Testament pictures the unity of God as marked by differentiation . . . that God is both one and plural."²

"LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD"

The focal point of this great precept is in verse 5: "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."

Jesus Himself made this statement a central requirement for all who would please God. He quoted this passage in what He declared to be the greatest commandment of all. This command, along with Leviticus 19:18 regarding the love of one's neighbor, is the basis, Jesus said, of "the whole Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:36-40).

Verse 5 is also central to the book of Deuteronomy. The exhortation to love God is found ten times in Deuteronomy and nowhere else in the Pentateuch. Because of His uniqueness and His having chosen Israel for His purposes, God had a right to command that His people love Him completely. Heart, soul, and might represent the whole personality. Anything less than wholehearted devotion and allegiance would lead to a shared allegiance, which would have been impossible.

It is not merely keeping the letter of the law, as many have taught, but the attitude of the heart which is pre-eminent. If one loves God, he will long to do His will. This love has to be more than mere affection. The extent of a man's love for God must be total. It includes loyalty and obedi-

ence and, therefore, can be commanded.

To give to any other a higher place in our affections than we give to God is an outrage against His love. The human heart has been fashioned by God Himself. It is designed to enable us to bestow our worthiest love on Him. Love for God is commanded, but it is a privilege as well as a duty.

This proclamation calls for a complete devotion: "With all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." The word "heart" in the Hebrew contains both the idea of thought and of affection. Hence, Jesus really added nothing to what is given here when He specified that love should be expressed with all the "heart," "soul," "mind," and "strength" (Mark 12:30).

In chapter 6, two strong emotions are mentioned that would keep Israel from departing from God's commandments. The fear of Jehovah is mentioned in 6:2, 13, 24; love of the Lord, the greatest of all commandments, is mentioned in 6:5. To the casual reader, they at first seem contradictory. These two emotions, however, are closely related. Fear must stem from respect and reverence for the Creator, God. It must produce within us a total awe of His sovereign Lordship. It requires the knowledge that God first loved us and has our interest at heart. God has a right to command our love, and He does.

Christians have sometimes ignored the necessity of complete devotion. All that genuine Christian education implies, in the church, the home, and the Christian school, university, and college, finds sufficient authorization in this passage.

"YOU SHALL TEACH THEM DILIGENTLY"

Chapter 6 finds its foundation in the danger of Israel's forgetting and departing from Jehovah God, for the commandment of verse 5 is not automatically transferred from one generation to another. The precepts of God could never really be made a vital part of life or be perpetuated in future generations unless there was an adequate plan for doing so. A four-part plan is given by Moses in the remaining verses of the Shema:

And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them

when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (6:6-9).

They were to learn them (6:6), teach their children (6:7), talk about them (6:7), visualize them (6:8, 9), and, most importantly, model them in their lives. The plan in these verses is practical and conforms to the rules of good teaching. Only by such a method can the present generation be properly informed about God and the faith of future generations preserved.

First, Israel was *to learn* the commandments: "These words, . . . shall be on your heart" (6:6). Unless one has learned the truth, his mind can never be fixed upon and his thoughts absorbed by what God expects of him. He may let it pass not only from memory but also from practice. Learning God's will is the first step in living by faith, which will lead to a transformed life that hopes to transform others.

The second part of the plan called for Israel *to teach* the law to their children: "You shall teach them diligently to your sons. . . ." (6:7). Deuteronomy attaches the importance and responsibility of teaching to the family (4:9; 6:7, 20-25; 11:19).

This educating of the children must be done in a diligent manner. The home is to be the center for conserving and propagating the truth. Home is where life makes up its mind. Religious truth and understanding must begin in the home. That is where God told ancient Israel to begin.

The young people of Israel were to have, by the example of their parents, an assured knowledge of their faith and a commitment to its practice. Jewish parents were to feel comfortable in discussing the truth in the home and were to guide their children in and toward the faith every day as they grew. The instruction from parent to child was not to be a lesson, but a continuing way of life.

The responsibility of the child was to listen and obey. The responsibility of the parent was to model God's truth by example and instruction. Spiritual parents were to be obeyed, not because of their depth of wisdom and knowledge, but because they represented God, who is all wisdom and knowledge.

Third, Israel was *to talk* of the law: ". . . and

shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up" (6:7). This was to be done at home, in public contacts, and at work ("when you walk by the way"). Through discussion could come an opening of the meaning of the law. This would lead to mutual understanding.

Truth was to be communicated when they sat, as they walked, after they lay down at night, and when they arose in the morning.

Fourth, Israel was *to visualize* the laws: "And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates" (6:8, 9). The old adage, "Seeing is believing," was to be a part of the continuation process for Israel. Upon one's person and in his house were to be evidences of God's instructions. No one was to have a reason to forget the meaning and significance of God's directions.

The binding of fragments of the law on their arms and writings on the doorpost did not prove that the ancient Hebrews had real religion. They were only to be surface reminders. The important thing was their commitment to their Lord as the delivering God.

Literally interpreting verse 8, the custom of the Orthodox Jewish man has been to copy four sections of the law (6:4-9; 11:13-21; Exodus 13:1-10, 11-16) and put these passages in leather cases on straps and bind them to their left arms and on their foreheads during morning prayers. They also put 6:4, 5; 11:13-21 in a metal or glass case and attached it to the right-hand doorpost of every entrance to their homes. When Jesus censured the Pharisees, He did not do so because they wore phylacteries, but because they ostentatiously displayed them. They had exalted the trappings of religion over the condition of the heart.

CONCLUSION

How can we love God in such a way that we will follow this plan? We can fix our thoughts on Him as the worthiest object of our love. We can contemplate His moral and essential goodness. Every attribute and quality that calls for our love is found in Him. He is the source of life; all we have, are, and hope to be is derived from

Him.

In Christ, God comes into a relationship with us. We can appreciate what He has done for us in Christ, for in Christ we have redemption and the forgiveness of our sins. The love of God produces a love for His Word. As a loving child esteems every known wish of his father, so we highly esteem God's every known wish for us. When we love God, we will obey His every desire and command. "For this is the love of

God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3).

Endnotes

¹H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell, eds., *The Pulpit Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), vol. 3, *Deuteronomy*, by W. L. Alexander, 118–19.

²Clyde T. Francisco, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, Shield Bible Study Series (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1964), 34–35.

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