

## Sunday, September 5, 2021 | The Shema

Week 1 | Deuteronomy 6:1-9 | "Listen, God is one. Love Him."

### Announcements:

- Don't forget about our church picnic next Sunday, September 12.
  - Sunday, September 26<sup>th</sup>, we'll be having communion and then going over our yearly budget for the 2021-2022 fiscal year.
  - Ladies' simulcast event with Pricilla Shirer on Oct. 2<sup>nd</sup>. Watch this video to find out more. Sign up table is in the back.
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"The Shema" is a four-week sermon series that'll help us understand one of the most well-known Bible passages in all of the Old Testament: Deuteronomy 6:4-5. Throughout this study, we'll learn what it means to truly love God holistically—with our heart, soul, and strength. Moses laid the groundwork for the children of Israel in this one passage, and through it, the Christian can learn what God expects of us when He says, "Love me."

But before we dive into this new study, we need some background on the Book of Deuteronomy itself.

- Written by Moses. It comprises one big long sermon from Moses that is addressed to the Israelites as they were encamped in Moab. Interestingly, Moses is about to pass the mantle of leadership to Joshua, who will then lead the Jews into the promised land.
- The timing is around about 1,400 years before the time of Christ. Meaning, Jesus and his disciples are closer to the timeline of Moses than we are to the events recorded in the N.T.
- It is appropriate that Deuteronomy comes last in the Pentateuch as the book's overall message is about resisting the tendency to return to the "old ways." It effectively looks back on the first few books of the Bible and says, "*Remember* what God did for us and *do not repeat* your ancestor's mistakes." Moses was insistent that the Israelites guard against slipping back into paganism. This was crucial as they were about to enter a land where idolatry was rampant.<sup>1</sup> However, it's not all warnings. Moses also wanted to encourage the Israelites that God would do even *more* for them if they simply remained faithful.

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Raymond, *The Message of Deuteronomy*, The Bible Speaks Today, Editor, J.A. Motyer, (Downers Grove, Ill; InterVarsity Press Academic, 1993), p. 94.

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Ask any Christian what's the most well-known Bible verse, and you'd get John 3:16. And, rightfully so, as it embodies a fundamental principle at the heart of all Scripture: God's love is an action. However, ask a Jew what's the most well-known Bible verse, and you'd undoubtedly get Deuteronomy 6:4-5.<sup>2</sup> It is, without a doubt, the Old Testament equivalent to John 3:16. Why? Because the Shema is "the fundamental truth of Israel's religion."<sup>3</sup> In just a few words, it not only defends against the polytheistic propaganda of their day, but it also answered that all-important question about how, exactly, they were to love God.

Interestingly, even today, all faithful Jews pray through the Shema during their daily prayers. Meaning, for over 3,400 years, Israelite men, women, and children have started and ended their day by reciting this passage.<sup>4</sup> In fact, an entire liturgy arose around the Shema that gave specific guidance on how the Shema should be approached. For instance, to prevent distraction, it was encouraged to cover their eyes when they were reciting it to themselves.<sup>5</sup> And once a child was old enough to speak, they were taught the Shema almost immediately.<sup>6</sup> What's more, it became custom for Jews to recite the Shema before being martyred.<sup>7</sup> Thus, in light of this, it is hard to overemphasize how important this passage is to the nation of Israel. If one wanted to know the heart of the OT, one need only look here.

So, what does "Shema" actually mean? Shema is the Hebrew term translated as "hear" or "listen" in our English bibles. And, like love, when the Bible speaks about hearing something or listening to someone, it implies some action. This is in contrast to how we can passively listen to something without adjusting our behavior. For instance, we've all experienced talking to someone who can hear us but isn't really listening (i.e., parenting; cf. Isa. 6:10; Jer. 5:21; Ez. 12:2; Mat. 13:15; Ac. 28:27; Rom. 11:8). However, in the OT, no such distinction exists. In fact, there is no word in ancient Hebrew that is equivalent to what our concept of obeying is.<sup>8</sup> If they wanted to say "obey," they'd say "listen." Our old English word "harken" is closer to the true

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<sup>2</sup> Christensen, Duane L., *Deuteronomy 1-21:9*, Second Edition, The Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 6-A, (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan, 2001), p. 137.

<sup>3</sup> Craigie, Peter C., *The Book of Deuteronomy*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), p. 168.

<sup>4</sup> General Editors, "Shema," March 24, 2017, *The BibleProject*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6KQLOuIKaRA>, [accessed, September 3, 2021].

<sup>5</sup> Tigay, Jeffery H., *Deuteronomy*, The JPS Torah Commentary, (Philadelphia, PA; The Jewish Publication Society, 1996), p. 440-441.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Mackie, Tim, & Jon Collins, (Hosts), March 24, 2017, "Episode 1: Shema/Listen," [audio podcast episode], in *The BibleProject Podcast*, <https://bibleproject.com/podcast/word-study-shema-listen/>, (time stamp - 19:51).

meaning of Shema than even "hear" or "listen." In the biblical narrative, the point is that to hear is to listen, and to listen is to obey. Thus, if you failed to obey, then you have also failed to listen properly. So, when Moses tells the children of Israel, "hear, O Israel," he's telling them to "Focus your attention and heed the following teaching."<sup>9</sup>

**EXAMPLE:** Walking in the woods, you hear the sounds of the forest, you might even pay attention to a particular bird chirping, but should you hear a bear rushing at you, you not only notice it and pay attention to it, but you'll also respond by running away. In fact, if you fail to respond to the bear, you not only would end up dead, but you'd also forgotten to *shema* entirely. This is the idea of that biblically listening entails. You mustn't only hear and pay attention to God's instructions; you must also act accordingly (cf. Ps. 27:7).

But before we explain what the Shema is, let's read the passage where it is found. Interestingly, chapters 1-5 have really been more of an introduction. It is here, with chapter 6, that Deuteronomy truly begins.<sup>10</sup>

**READ:** Deuteronomy 6:1-9 (ESV)

<sup>1</sup> "Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the rules—that the Lord your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it, <sup>2</sup> that you may fear the Lord your God, you and your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may belong. <sup>3</sup> **Hear** therefore, O Israel, and be careful **to do** them, that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey.

<sup>4</sup> "**Hear**, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is **one**. <sup>5</sup> You shall **love** the Lord your God with all your **heart** and with all your **soul** and with all your **might**. <sup>6</sup> And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. <sup>7</sup> You shall **teach** them diligently to your children, 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**. <sup>8</sup> You shall **bind them** as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. <sup>9</sup> You shall **write them** on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

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<sup>9</sup> Tigay (1996), p. 76.

<sup>10</sup> McConville, J.G., *Deuteronomy*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary, Volume 5, Editors, David W. Baker and Gordon J. Wenham, (Downers Grove, ILL; InterVarsity Press, 2002), p. 139.

Okay, so Moses wanted the children of Israel to listen, pay attention, and obey whatever he was about to tell them. What, then, is the thing he wanted to say to them?

Moses wanted them to do two things:

**i. Moses wanted the Israelites to know God.**

Interestingly, verse 4 can be rendered in several different ways.<sup>11</sup> From saying, “the Lord our God is one Lord,” to “The Lord our God is Unique” to “The Yahweh is our God, the Yahweh alone” to “Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is One.”<sup>12</sup> And while all of those are grammatically correct, word order in Hebrew is essential. Thus, given that the sentence ends with “one,” this seems to imply an emphasis on God's oneness.<sup>13</sup>

Moses wanted the children of Israel to know not only that God is unique (i.e., that there is no other god like our God; cf. Isa. 45:4; Ex. 20:3; 2 Ki. 19:15) but that He is unable to be divided or separated. In a culture that was inundated with multiple deities, this truth was crucial. The Lord is not a being comprised of multiple distinct divine personalities but **one** indivisible being. This point is echoed throughout the N.T. (cf. Mr. 12:29; Isa. 9:6; Mat. 1:23; Jn. 10:30; Col. 2:9; 1 Tim. 2:5). As Christians, this is why we make a point of saying God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. God has and forever will be the One Triune God in three persons.

And just because we do not have any of the false gods of the OT today does **not** mean this truth is any less relevant. Whether you're bowing before the Egyptian sun god Ra or your love of money is too great, whether you're sacrificing your children to the Canaanite god Baal or you believe it is okay to murder children before they're born, idolatry is alive and well in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We've traded the worship of gods made of stone for the worship of ourselves. God says, “My creation, my claim.” But the world counters with, “My body, my choice.” To this, God's oneness draws us to repent. There is no god worthy of worship, not Ra, not Baal, and not even ourselves. The one and only, Yahweh, is worthy of our worship and allegiance.

**ii. Moses wanted them to love God.**

The Shema underpins all the others that have come before. And this singular command, to love God, is what all the other commandments hang on.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Craigie (1976), p. 168-169.

<sup>12</sup> Tigay (1996), p. 76, 438-49.

<sup>13</sup> McConville (2002), p. 141.

<sup>14</sup> Craigie (1976), p. 167.

The Hebrew word used here for our English word love is the term *ahavah*. In the OT, it is a versatile word referring to all different kinds of love.<sup>15</sup> For instance, Xerxes is said to have “loved” Esther, but, given his character and the context, that kind of love is better understood as lust (Esth. 2:17). *Ahavah* also shows up in the story of Abraham and Isaac, where it clearly refers to parental love (Gen. 22:2). It surfaces again when it is said that Elkanah “loved” his wife Hannah, thus indicating a marital love (1 Sam. 1:5). And, lastly, the word also appears in 1 Sam. 18, where Jonathan, Israel, and Judah all “loved” David, seemingly implying an admiration and/or respect for the man.

In a word, Moses wanted the Israelites to be obsessed with God. They were to engage their entire being (i.e., heart, soul, might – we’ll explain precisely what those different parts mean in the coming weeks) in their pursuit of God. They were to love God ***holistically***. As He is one and His love for them is undivided, so too ought their love be unified.

Biblically, love ***does not*** occur naturally; it is something that must be cultivated. What we typically mean when we say that we’ve “fallen in love” with someone is that we’ve fallen in like with someone (i.e., “Hooked on a Feeling” by Blue Swede). Admittedly, this is not as catchy of a phrase as the more well-known saying, but I think you get the point. Ironically, speak with a couple that’s been together for a long time, and they’ll tell you that there is a vast difference between base attraction and genuine affection. One happens spontaneously but will fade over time if not supported by the other. Attraction is as common as any feeling, whereas true love is unique.

**EXAMPLE:** How many of us have struggled to speak the language of those we love? Some may feel loved when their partner buys them things. Others may feel loved when they’re doing the dishes, cleaning the floors, or taking out the trash. Still, others may feel loved when their significant other compliments them. There are as many ways to love someone as there are people on the planet. The trick is, finding that one or two or three unique things that make the one you love feel loved. With God, the way we show our affection is really quite simple: keep His commandment and commit yourself entirely to Him.

Now, for us to read that God expects us to love Him may sound totalitarian, authoritarian, and oppressive. We think, “Shouldn’t love come naturally and not be required?” In fact, requiring that we love God sounds flat out wrong to our ears. But allow me to point out that the very first explicit command for the Israelites to love God only comes after God has proven His own love

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<sup>15</sup> Mackie, Tim, “Bible Studies: Love,” July 20, 2017, *The Bible Project*, <https://bibleproject.com/church-at-home/week18-love/>, [accessed, August 18, 2021].

to the family of Abraham in Genesis and all of Israel in Exodus. Generations passed where men and women lived and died under the protection and guidance of God without Him expecting that they love Him in return. True, He had expected that they obey Him and revere Him. But not love. Only after God raised a nation from one family in Genesis and delivered them from bondage in Exodus did He expect them to truly love Him.

God's love has never been a mere sentiment; it has always been an action. Long before He ever demanded love, He demonstrated it. Likewise, our love for Him must be expressed in loving acts of obedience and not in words alone. A love that is without action is like a melody with no instrument to play it. It may look good on paper, but it will never be conveyed to the heart.

### **So, what's the takeaway?**

**With everything we have, we ought to love the Lord.**

**READ:** Matthew 22:34-40 (ESV)

<sup>34</sup> But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. <sup>35</sup> And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. <sup>36</sup> "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" <sup>37</sup> And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. <sup>38</sup> This is the great and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. <sup>40</sup> On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

Now, much has been written on Christ's second command there about loving our neighbor as ourselves. In fact, we did a whole sermon series about this very point at the height of the pandemic called "Neighborhood Watch." As Christians, we mustn't forget that we cannot love God if we do not also love our neighbors. There is no lack of passages that illustrate what it means to love our fellow human beings. But the point in drawing a connection between Matt. 22:34-40 and Deut. 6:4-5 is to highlight that the same principle given to the Israelites before they went into the Promise Land is the same principle that Jesus gives to us before He went to the cross: *Love God*. Jesus brought this O.T. principle into a N.T. context. And while yes, loving your neighbor is second only to loving your God. Only when we love God like we ought to will we love others as we should.

How exactly we are to love God will be explained in the coming weeks. So, let me encourage you, don't miss even one message in this series.

## Video Description

The Shema | Week 1 | “Listen, God is one. Love Him.”

TEXT: Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Ask any Christian what's the most well-known Bible verse, and you'd get John 3:16. And, rightfully so, as it embodies a fundamental principle at the heart of all Scripture: God's love is an action. However, ask a Jew what's the most well-known Bible verse, and you'd undoubtedly get Deuteronomy 6:4-5. It is, without a doubt, the Old Testament equivalent to John 3:16. Why? Because the Shema is the basis of Israel's religion. In just a few words, it not only defends against the polytheistic propaganda of their day, but it also answered that all-important question about how, exactly, they were to love God.

Interestingly, this verse is just as foundational to the Christian as it is to the Jew. Jesus Himself brought this O.T. principle into a N.T. context (cf. Matt. 22:34-40). And while yes, He did add that we ought to love our neighbor too, the point Jesus was making is that it is only when we love God as we ought to that we will be able to love others as God intended. First, we must learn how to love God. Only then will we discover how to love your neighbor as yourself.

Pastor's manuscript can be found here: <https://docdro.id/66gZrTu>