

## Hear, O Israel, October 10, 2004

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Deuteronomy 6

(1 John 3:1-3; Luke 10:25-28)

Introduction:

I recently acquired a complete Hebrew Talmud with English translation, thirty volumes containing the entire body of Jewish tradition, biblical exposition, story, the accumulated wisdom and culture from the time of the Babylonian captivity through the middle ages, a period of over a millennium and a half. The first volume, *Tractate Berekoth*, opens with these words: "From what time may one recite the *Shema* in the evening?" I also purchased this past week a book by Rabbi Neil Gillman entitled, *The Jewish Approach to God*. It opens with the words, "By any measure, the one passage that every Jew, no matter what his or her identification with Judaism, will recognize is Deuteronomy 6:4, commonly known as 'the *Shema*.'"

We come this morning to the very heart of the Hebrew Bible, what we know as the Old Testament. Here we find the

answer that an Israelite was to give to his child when asked, "Why are we different from other people?" In answer, he was to tell his child of God's salvation of his people from bondage, of the perfect and lovely pattern of life set forth in God's law, and of God's promises to those who seek to walk in his ways.

But, why should we who are here this morning, mostly gentile Christians, care particularly for this passage, except out of historical interest? What does it have to do with people living under the New Covenant, whose trust is in the righteousness of God's Son, Messiah Jesus? I believe that it has everything to do with us, and that we are impoverished in our lives, our worship, our approach to the ordering of our day and the raising of our children, if we do not realize its continuing relevance.

This morning, consider with me four bedrock, foundational teachings with continuing relevance that are found in this passage.

## **Body:**

### **1. The foundation of our knowledge of God: The Lord is one.**

*Our God is the only true God.* In this sense, the Shema reflects the first commandment: No gods but God. It is always fruitful to ask what might be the gods we trust, perhaps without even realizing it. We have spoken already of the usual suspects — success, pleasure, position, and power. But far subtler are those things that may masquerade as true religion, but in fact be idolatry. I am thinking of love of Bible study more than love of God, love of worship more than love of God, or love of ministry and service more than love of God. We can altogether too easily mistake the things we do related to knowing and serving God with the worship of God himself.

*However, there is another aspect to this statement that God is one: Namely, our relationship with God is unique among the nations of the earth.* In the original context of Deuteronomy, in view is the unique relationship between God and his covenant people Israel. This becomes clear

when we look at Zechariah 14:9, which speaks of God one day being the one God of all the nations, even as he was at the time of Deuteronomy uniquely recognized as God by his covenant people, Israel.

What does this second emphasis have to do with us? Just as Israel was granted a unique relationship with God, not merely for herself, but for the sake of the nations, so too, we who are in New Covenant relationship with God are to long for the day of the Lord, when all nations acknowledge that the Lord alone is God. Our election is for mission; we are God's people for the sake of the nations, and that passion for the salvation of the nations should possess us, lest we presume, as Israel presumed, upon the loving-kindness of the Lord, and forget that he has saved us for the sake and the salvation of the nations.

## **2. The foundation of our obligation to God: Love the Lord completely.**

*"Heart and soul" speak to our entire being.* In view here is our intellect, emotion and imagination: in other words, the entire person. We are not to compartmentalize ourselves,

giving some part of ourselves that we consider our religious self, who comes alive on Sunday, to the Lord, but reserving other parts for other loves. No, the Lord is to be our great love.

*But what does this mean? Are we to harbor feeling more tender toward God than we do toward spouse or child? How can we command our feelings?*

*"Strength" speaks to our passion and energy: It addresses the works of love.* Moses is giving the Israelites laws and commandments. They are pictures of what it looks like to love God and to love our neighbor. We are to keep God's commands, not grudgingly, but with all our strength. The apostle John echoes this at the end of his first letter, when he writes, "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3).

**3. The foundation of our obligation to one another: Help one another love the Lord completely.**

*Protecting our families.* We love our families well when we place the teaching of God — who he is, what he has done to save us, and what we ought to do in return — at the center of our family's life. When our children are small, we have the opportunity to hide God's Word in their hearts, to pray with them, and to seek to show them in everything that trusting and obeying God is the only pattern of life worth living. If we do this, no matter how long and far they run, they will always carry in their hearts the teaching. It will haunt them, and convict them, and speak to them in the watches of the night.

*Protecting our time.* So, too, we are to sanctify time. Our day should be divided into our times of prayer. The Jews and the early Christians shared the daily pattern of prayer, the least expression consisting of morning, mid day and evening prayers. The Shema was prayed daily. The Jews followed the calendar of the Old Testament, the rhythm of the great three feasts, as well as the minor festivals. So, too, the church very early began to sanctify time by following a calendar that commemorated the three great feasts of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, as well as various minor

festivals. Its aim is to remind us that we live in the light of eternity, as those who have been redeemed from bondage to sin and death, and made citizens of God's kingdom, even members of his royal family.

*Protecting our body.* The placing of the Word of God on the forehead and on the arm was taken literally by Israel in the fashioning of teffilim (or phylacteries), little boxes carrying this commandment, and worn during prayer. But the heart of the commandment is to have God's Word directing our thoughts and actions, just as in the book of Revelation, those having the "mark of the Beast" are directed in thought and deed by human thinking in rebellion against God.

*Protecting our space.* The placing of the Scriptures even on the doorposts, as observant Jews do even today, in the placing of mezuzahs on their door frames, was to remind themselves that their homes belonged to the Lord, and that all that went on in their homes was to be pleasing to him, the one and only true God. So, too, we should consecrate our homes, as well as our places of worship, to the one true God, who deigns to meet us buildings made by human hands.

#### **4. The foundation of God's promise to us: He will preserve us and bless us, if we love and obey him.**

At the end of the day, it matters ultimately what we believe and how we live. In fact, how we live is the only real indicator of what we believe. God promises to bless those who do his will. This, of course, sounds like salvation by works. But it is, in fact, simply the acknowledgment that God gives his law to those whom he has already redeemed, those whom he has already shown his grace. To those he has saved, he says, "If you would remain in my love, and not fall back into bondage, live like this: it is your life." Jesus' brother, James, makes the same point in the New Testament. Those who truly believe and receive God's grace will begin to obey out of gratitude and a deep sense that God's ways are right, good and altogether lovely. Although we may begin keeping the law out of fear, we end up keeping it out of love and desire: How I love your law, how sweet it is to my mouth. *Here is the final mark of the life that is blessed by God: In God's law I delight, and on that law I meditate day and night.*