

Deuteronomy 9

The Shema

We are moving to the postamble or addendum to the Ten Words. This is an equally important section as the preamble is. Our reading is from Deuteronomy 6:1-9 when Moses continued to stress the importance of the Ten Words.

¹ Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the LORD your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, ² so that you and your children and your children’s children may fear the LORD your God 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. ³ Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

We are still with the Ten Words and looking at the postamble or addendum. My theme this morning is what is known as the *shema* to the Jews. This is what is called the *shema*.

⁴ Hear (*shema*), O Israel:
The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.
⁵ You shall love the LORD your God
with all your heart, and
with all your soul, and
with all your might.

Shema is the Hebrew word for ‘hear’. You may ask what the relevance to us is today. Heaps, I might say. There is an attitude today that we can dispense with the Old Testament especially the Mosaic laws. That is not true. We have seen the relevance of the Ten Words and the preamble leading to them. And now we are looking at the postamble or addendum to the Ten Words.

This passage comes straight after the Ten Words in chapter 5 and it is really a commentary on the first two commandments. Its importance needs to be noted as Jesus quoted from this passage and Paul made reference to this with his interpretation. We will look at all these.

The first two commandments	The Shema
Worship the only one God	Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, The LORD alone.
No idols	⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

Jesus referred to the *shema* when He was asked regarding the greatest commandment.

³⁴ When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵ and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

³⁷ 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.” ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matt. 22:34-39)

This is Jesus’ interpretation of the *shema*. He added a second to it – to love your neighbour as yourself. This second part is not really a second commandment, but the corollary from the first. The second cannot exist without the first as we have noted before. We will see later that the second half of Deuteronomy is about this second commandment. (*Show structure of Deuteronomy.*) Jesus has quoted much from Deuteronomy which is the most important book of the Old Testament and indeed the bible. If Jesus (and Paul after Him) quoted so extensively from the Old Testament, then its relevance to us must not be doubted.

Today, I will look at this passage in its rightful place in the Old Testament, in Jewish liturgy, and then look at the New Testament interpretation of it. This passage is commonly termed the *shema*, translating the word ‘hear’ in the passage. The recitation of this verse forms an important place in Jewish worship. It is their declaration of faith in the one God. They were to recite this morning and night. Today we shun such ritual. Well if the heart is not there, then it will be mere ritual and better done without. But if we truly believe and are thankful for who God is and what He has done for us, then it is not ritual. It is heartfelt thanks and worship just like we say grace before our meals thanking God for all that He has bestow on us. I don’t feel that saying grace before meals is a ritual as it is God our Father who gives us our daily bread and that practice says much of how we feel as recipients of God’s grace to us.

The *shema* consists of three parts taken from

1. Deuteronomy 6:5-9, God’s divine rule and His sovereignty over all creation, and our commitment to His commandments,
2. Deuteronomy 11:13-21, acceptance of God’s commandments,
3. Numbers 15:37-41, reminder of God’s redemptive work.

⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:5-9)

¹³ If you will only heed his every commandment that I am commanding you today—loving the LORD your God, and serving him with all your heart and with all your soul— ¹⁴ then he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil; ¹⁵ and he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you will eat your fill. ¹⁶ Take care, or you will be seduced into turning away, serving other gods and worshiping them, ¹⁷ for then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain and the land will yield no fruit; then you will perish quickly off the good land that the LORD is giving you.

¹⁸ You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. ¹⁹ Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ²⁰ Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, ²¹ so that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the LORD swore to your ancestors to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth. (Deut. 11:13-21)

³⁷ The LORD said to Moses: ³⁸ Speak to the Israelites, and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner. ³⁹ You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the LORD and do them, and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes. ⁴⁰ So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and you shall be holy to your God. ⁴¹ I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the LORD your God. (Numbers 15:37-41)

The call to Israel to hear (*shema*) begins this section. However, the verse is a difficult one to translate.

⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. (NRSV)

⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. (NIV)

Other possible translations are,

The Lord our God is one Lord; or
The Lord is our God, the Lord is one; or
The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.

We need not to deliberate over the possible translations, except to note that what it is saying is that our God, Yahweh is the only God, the only one or alone. There is no other beside Him. It is really the sum of the first two commandments.

This is not a verse that our modern society would accept. We live in a pluralistic society and accept multiculturalism. We like to say that all religions are the same, but are they? We are conditioned to be tolerant and even to be accommodating to all faiths because we say that they all lead us to god, but which god? Living with these values in our society, we are asked to maintain not only the oneness of our God, but also as the only One. Do we then live this out as a personal private faith or do we go out to cast out all other faiths?

This is a difficult question for us but we need to go some way to address it. Is this call to love the one and only God a mere dogma or theological assertion or does it have any relevance to our living today? We have already seen Jesus endorsing this as the greatest commandment and as a corollary, emphatically taught that to love another is the expression of this commandment to love God.

We can also get some help from Paul in his interpretation of the *shema*.

⁴Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” ⁵Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—⁶yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

⁷It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ⁸“Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. ⁹But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. (1 Cor. 8:4-9)

Paul has re-interpreted the *shema* and included Jesus.

— ⁶yet for us there is one God, the Father,
from whom are all things and
for whom we exist,
and one Lord, Jesus Christ,
through whom are all things and
through whom we exist. (1 Cor. 8:6)

He has separated ‘the Lord and God’ in the *shema* and identified that as two persons, but in reality they are one. That is the oneness of the Triune God as we know it today from scriptures. His re-interpretation is in relation to impasse of the church in coming to terms with the issue of food offered to idols.

Paul made this statement, an extension of the *shema* in relation to food offered to idols. The Corinthian church was debating whether one should eat food that has been offered to idols. The argument is that it does not matter as idols are nothing and it is immaterial whether one eats that food or not. On the other hand, there were people with weaker (uncertain) conscience who felt that it matters. How did Paul deal with this? He appealed to the *shema* and to the cross.

We are not to adopt the values of the world. In Paul's teaching on food offered to idols, that was simply food. Whether you eat that food or not is not the real issue. Our relation with the one God will not be compromised if we do or do not because those idols are not real things. The issue of food and idols is not the primary issue. It is a secondary issue. The primary issue is the welfare of the other who may differ in their conscience. How does Paul deal with that?

As Paul redefined the *shema* with the inclusion of Jesus is the cross, the real issue is this. The cross is not simply a way of dealing sin, but the meaning of the cross must shine through in the life and practices of the community that proclaim this oneness of God, the only God. The *shema* and to love the Lord our God with the totality of our being must now find its interpretation in the cross as Jesus has already come and achieved the redemption of God's people. This new interpretation of what it is to love God is not to be found in personal devotion or in private religion. It is to be found in the oneness and the life of the community. Jesus has achieved the redemption of His creation and broken down all barriers that separated the fallen community. It is not just simply a matter between God and me. Its manifestation has to be found in the otherness of the community of God's people. Its manifestation is to be found in the way we relate to the 'weaker' person in 1 Corinthians 8. It is not so much as the person is weak, but the person has a weaker or uncertain conscience. The person thinks that eating food offered to idols is part of the offering to God, and if that were to be the case then Paul taught that he would not eat it so as not to offend the person. The person who is unable to relate in the community and share the concern for another does not know what the cross really is. So Paul repeated,

¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. (Rom. 14:17)

The kingdom of God is not about ramming the gospel down the throats of others. And the kingdom of God is also not about me and my rights. One may know that there is nothing in eating food offered to idols. That is the way things are, but one does not insist on one's rights if that were to be offensive to someone else. That is the bulk of the laws of Deuteronomy which we will look at in due course. The kingdom of God is about living out the new life in Christ in the community of God's people and His creation.

We can now see that the *shema* as Moses gave to the people of Israel has been more fully explained to us firstly by Jesus and then by Paul. Moses gave us those words and Jesus made that clear by the inclusion of the second commandment. It is not that Moses overlooked that. He did not. He spelt out that second commandment in practical terms in later chapters. Moses pre-empted the second commandment given by Jesus. Paul then re-interpreted the *shema* not only as the oneness of God but also the oneness of the community which is what the regulations in Deuteronomy spell out.

Thus the *shema* is not merely about worshipping the one God in a private manner, but the living out of this truth in the community.

Paul, having come after Jesus, looked backwards to the cross, in the same way as we must do, to re-interpret this second commandment in terms of the cross. He separated the one god, the Father and one Lord, Jesus Christ, as the cross now must figure boldly in the carrying out of the second commandment which of course must flow from the first. Without the first there could be no second. The community of God's people must now be the engaging ground in which we live out what it is to love God with all our heart, soul and mind. It is not a matter of private religion between me and my God. It is not a matter of marshalling troops for a crusade. It is bringing the good news to those in the highways and byways of life and to bring them into the banquet of God. But before we can do that we need to acknowledge the word of God.

The Shema		
Moses	Jesus	Paul
⁴ Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. ⁵ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)	³⁷ 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' (Matthew 22:37-39)	⁴ ... "there is no God but one." ⁶ yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Corinthians 8:6)

The importance of the word

⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:6-9)

Following the *shema*, what Moses said to the Israelites was vital for them in their lives and in their community. They were to keep these words in their hearts. This is the first prerequisite for their lives. It is not merely head knowledge, but something that dwells deep in their being. They were to be immersed in those words. It is meant to be the very words – no other gods - that govern their whole lives and indeed the whole community of Israel.

Passing this on to the children

⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. (Deut. 6:7)

Not only do they need to immerse their whole being in this, they must pass it on to the next generation and the generations that follow, to their children and children's children. As long as the Lord gives us breath, this vital teaching of loving the only one God need to be passed on to our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren, and so on.

There is a teaching in our day to allow children decide what they want to believe. This presumes that we are all born innocent and capable of knowing the truth. Not so. This is the popular understanding of freedom and this understanding does not come from the biblical teaching. Let the children decide for themselves. No, no, no. As parents we are firstly called to keep the words of God ourselves. This is our first priority. If we don't, then there is nothing that we can

give to the next generation. Having kept the word of God ourselves, we need to instruct our children (or grandchildren) in the word. The way of the world has gone right against all that is taught here. We need to come back to the word to see the way God wants us to go. Our children need the word and the transformation by the cross.

There is a practice amongst parents to send their children to the Sunday school so that they can learn something about being good. Having done that, the parents then go round the corner for their cup of coffee and pick up the children afterwards. That is not what Moses was teaching. The word is to reside within our hearts first and foremost. It is like what the airline says on take-off. When the oxygen mask comes down put it on yourself first and then only put it on the children afterwards.

Take every opportunity to hear the word

This section closes with an exhortation to take every opportunity to hear the word.

⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:8)

Judaism has taken this literally and encourages people to tie headbands with biblical text on them. Some do it as if that very action does something to them. They got it wrong. It is a figurative expression. However, there are practical ways of expressing this. Well, in my younger days when I was taking a bus to school, I have used cards with biblical texts and kept them in my pocket so that when I was in the bus, I can just take them out and memorise them on the way. Nowadays, I have CD and a MP3 player in my car so that I can listen to the biblical texts on long trips such as going to Bordertown. Whatever way we can, we need to take every opportunity to be reminded of the grace of God in our lives. It is not just memorising but in the process of hearing, the word becomes a part of me.

Sometimes, there seems to be a struggle in services where the pastor wants to teach the word, but another sector wants more time for singing and other acts before doing that. Both are valid, but one needs to judge the situation and decide on the priority.

Is this a matter of merely knowing the word or does the word do something in us? The psalmist points to the latter.

⁹ How can young people keep their way pure?
By guarding it according to your word.
¹⁰ With my whole heart I seek you;
do not let me stray from your commandments.
¹¹ I treasure your word in my heart,
so that I may not sin against you.
¹² Blessed are you, O Lord;
teach me your statutes.
¹³ With my lips I declare
all the ordinances of your mouth.
¹⁴ I delight in the way of your decrees
as much as in all riches.
¹⁵ I will meditate on your precepts,
and fix my eyes on your ways.
¹⁶ I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word. (Psalm 119:9-16)

We can look at this passage with the sole idea that the study of the word is what we do and keeping the word as our achievement. That is not exactly right. Yes, we ought to study the word, but that is only the first step. It is not the end as if the knowledge is the achievement. Last week I refer to the greatest delusion in history – let us know the command and we will listen and do it. That never happened in the history of Israel, maybe for a little while. The key is in verse 10 which says ‘do not let me stray from your commandments’. There is a trust and a dependence needed in keeping the word. It is symbiotic process like these plants that grow on the trunk of the tree. We call them saprophytes. They would not survive apart from deriving its nutrition from the trunk of the tree. We need to have the word and as the word dwells in us, the word keeps us in the Lord. We keep the word and the Lord keeps us.

Do not forget the Lord

¹⁰When the LORD your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, ¹¹houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, ¹²take care that you **do not forget the LORD**, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ¹³The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear. ¹⁴Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are all around you, ¹⁵because the LORD your God, who is present with you, is a jealous God. The anger of the LORD your God would be kindled against you and he would destroy you from the face of the earth. (Deut. 6:10-15)

We need to be reminded of what God has done for us because it is so easily forgotten especially in our comfortable society to rest and enjoy the comfort of life. It is also easy to think that what we have got is what we have achieved in life. I earned it so we say, but in so saying we forgot the way the Lord has showered His blessing upon us.

Why did Moses link this to the emphasis on not forgetting the Lord to the word? Because to know the Lord is to know His word. Because not to forget the Lord is not to forget His word.

The grace of the Lord

¹⁶Do not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah. ¹⁷You must diligently keep the commandments of the LORD your God, and his decrees, and his statutes that he has commanded you. ¹⁸Do what is right and good in the sight of the LORD, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may go in and occupy the good land that the LORD swore to your ancestors to give you, ¹⁹thrusting out all your enemies from before you, as the LORD has promised.

²⁰When your children ask you in time to come, “What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the LORD our God has commanded you?” ²¹then you shall say to your children, “We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. ²²The LORD displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. ²³He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. ²⁴Then the LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case. ²⁵If we diligently observe this entire commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in the right.” (Deut. 6:16-25)

This is the grace of God to us. The grace of the Lord involves living in conformity to Him and to His word. Why do we need to live this way? It is because our God is creator and redeemer. We are not only to teach the word to our children but also to teach them the grace of God in our deliverance from sin and evil. Again there is a tendency to teach our children a sense of independence and too often too early. Godly parents are parents who know the Lord and His word. Godly parents are parents who teach this word to their children. Godly parents are parents who teach their children to trust and to depend on the Lord, but first of all they need to

live that way. We teach more effectively by our way of life and our attitude. Our children pick up our values and attitude more so than the words we say.