

The Shema

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] Today is a very happy day for me and my household. Today is my wedding anniversary. Forty years ago today, Bromham and I made a very important choice that literally changed my life in all sorts of ways that I'm still trying to understand.

Now today as we come to the book of Deuteronomy chapter 6, we find the most powerful and life-changing choice put in front of the new generation of Israelites. As they stand on the edge of the promised land, the world is there for the taking and Moses puts before them a choice, a choice about love and he knows it's the one profoundest choice that every generation must make.

Chapter 6 verse 4, Hear O Israel, the Lord 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.

This is called the Shema. Shema is the first word here in Hebrew and it's said twice a day by Jewish believers even until today. And all the rest of Deuteronomy is basically explaining these two verses. There's so much here, we only have time to look at verses 4 to 9 and I'm going to ask three questions. Firstly, what does it tell us about God? Secondly, what does it mean for us? And thirdly, what difference should it make to us today? So firstly then, what do these verses tell us about God? What does it say about God? This Shema, chapter 6, verse 4 and 5 is the heartbeat of Deuteronomy, but it's not completely straightforward to translate. Our version says, Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Perhaps more accurately, the Lord our God is one Lord, or as it says in the original, Yahweh our God is one Yahweh. It's not talking about how many is God, it's talking about who God is. And whenever in the Bible text you see the word Lord in all capitals, capital L, capital O, capital R, capital D, it's the personal name for God. It's not a general word to describe a divine being, Lord, but it is his own particular name that he has revealed to his people by bringing them out of Egypt. Because in the Bible, names work differently than they do in our day today. Today, names are largely tags and labels. You know, your parents may have a favourite grandparent and they named you after that grandparent, or they might have seen a great movie or have a favourite book character, or they might have tried to find a name that was strong and meant you wouldn't be teased at school. But that's not how it works in the Bible, and especially with God.

[3 : 23] The name reveals the inner character and the capacity of the person. And often when God calls someone to follow him and gives them a special job, he makes that person into a new person, and he marks that by giving them a new name. Back in the book of Exodus, when God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, God told Moses that he was going to bring his people out of slavery in Egypt, and that God would be with him, and God would make it happen. And Moses asks God a really important question. He says to God, what is your name? Not, what is your label? What do I call you?

But what does your name mean? I can't name you God because you are infinitely superior, way higher than I am. And unless you reveal to me who you are, unless you reveal to me what is your story, I can't say anything. One of my favourite characters in the Lord of the Rings novel is Treebeard.

Treebeard is an Ent. He is a huge walking tree. Actually, he's a shepherd of trees. He's very ancient and very wise. And he thinks that humans and hobbits are far too hasty. He says things slowly. And when the hobbits ask him his name in the Ent's original language, in old Entish, this is what Treebeard says. I'm not going to tell you my name, not yet at any rate. For one thing, it would take a long while. My name is growing all the time, and I've lived a very long, long time.

So my name is like a story, says Treebeard. Real names tell you the story of things they belong to in my language. In old Entish, as you might say. It is a lovely language, and it takes a long time to say anything in it, because we do not say anything in it unless it is worth taking a long time to say and to listen to. But God does give Moses his name, and it is the name Yahweh. And God says,

Yahweh is my name forever. And the way you're going to come to know this, the way I am revealing this to you is through my rescue of you from slavery. I will show myself as I bring you out of bondage.

[6 : 06] This is the God who I am. I'm going to bring you to myself, and I'm going to reveal more of myself and bind myself to you in love and take you into the land I promised to give Abraham. I am Yahweh.

And Israel only comes to know the name of God as he reveals himself to them in their lived experience of saving them. God reveals his name as we are drawn up into his story. That's what the first part of the Shema means. To say, hear, O Israel, Yahweh is our God, means we are his people. He's brought us into his story. He's bound himself to us, and he's rescued us, and he's saved us, and he holds those whom he loves forever and ever. And by giving us his name, not only has he revealed himself to us, but he is present with us. But it's the second part of the Shema where things get really interesting.

Our God is one Yahweh. This is not a Sesame Street question, how many is God? It says, it's literally, there is only one Yahweh. And this has a whole raft of implications. Let me mention a couple.

The fact that there is only one Yahweh means there is only one Yahweh for us, and there is only one Yahweh for the universe. It means God has not revealed himself in other names. God has not revealed himself as Krishna or Allah or Mother Earth. We can't worship this God by mixing or blending different faiths together. And the idea that God is like a great elephant and we can only see one leg sounds humble, but actually it's a great arrogant assumption. It says that God is wrong. To say that he is only one Allah, one Yahweh. Secondly, the oneness of God means that he is constant, reliable, unchanging. He's not two-faced. He doesn't speak with a forked tongue. Our God is one Yahweh.

[8 : 27] You can trust him. And thirdly, it also means how good and how special this Yahweh is. When you want to say that something is absolutely the best, you say there's only one. Some years ago, there was an advertising campaign for Jeep. There was only one Jeep. There's one and only Queen Elizabeth II.

There's nothing as good as this Yahweh. Our God is one Yahweh. This is what the text says about God. Secondly, then, what does this mean for us? And here is the choice. And the fundamental choice is this.

It means loving God with everything we have. It's very interesting. If God is one Yahweh, why doesn't he call us to bow down and grovel before him or give him 50% of our finances or 100% of our children or five nights a week or whatever, the fact that Yahweh is our God and the fact that Yahweh is one God is the basis for our loving him shows us something about ourselves and shows us something about Yahweh. It means that we were made for this. We were made for love. And it means that Yahweh is love, that to know him is to know love. And not to love him means we don't know him.

Because biblical faith is an affair of the heart. And notice in verse 5, the three alls, you shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

And heart and soul and might are not three different parts of us. They're every area of our life from the inside out. The heart, your heart is what makes you who you are. We call it mind, will and heart decision making. Love God with all your inner life. The soul is your outward person, how you express yourself outwardly in your body. Love the Lord your God with all your soul. And might literally means greatness or muchness or many. It's what you've got lots of. It could be physical strength or economic strength or relational strength. But the command here is to love God without reserve, not holding back.

[10 : 43] To love him with our inner person, with our outer life and with our muchness. Why? Because Yahweh, our God, is one Yahweh. He deserves all we have because he is our Yahweh. It's wonderful really.

It means that in all we do, our focus is not on the things we're doing, but on loving Yahweh through those things. This makes a massive difference. I cannot tell you this week how many Zoom calls I've been to. And you come to the Zoom call and you think, here are the goals for the meeting. And this week I've been thinking, no, no, no, I ought to come to these meetings and try and figure out, how can I love God in these meetings with all my heart, with all my soul and with all my might?

It's made them very different experience for me. But every form of serving, it doesn't matter how small or how big, whether public or private, is ultimately a matter of loving God. Take financial generosity. You can give financially for all sorts of reasons. You can do it grudgingly, you can do it guiltily. But God loves a cheerful giver. You can only give cheerfully out of love.

Now in verses 6 to 9, Moses takes these three same areas of life, inward, outward and public, and he applies them and what it means to love God. Let's look at them quickly. Firstly, with our hearts, verse 6, all these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.

[12:16] These words are the Shema and the Ten Commandments that come in chapter 5. We ought to have them on our hearts. They ought to be on our hearts as we drive, as we meditate, as we think about them, as we walk.

If you're someone who can't put your cell phone down, text yourself Deuteronomy 6, 4 to 10, and read them just before you go to bed and when you wake up in the morning. Have them on your hearts.

Secondly, in our families. Verse 7, you shall teach them diligently to your children. You shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise.

Now what a culture teaches its children is the true measure of what we think is important, of what we truly value. If you belong to Yahweh, you'll impress on your children that he has revealed his very nature to us, that he loves us and holds us forever, that he has saved us and he wants us to love him in very practical ways. And we're meant to do this in structured ways and casually when it comes up, when we're walking or eating or on the swing. Because you see, passing the faith on to the next generation is one of the central concerns of Deuteronomy. And later on in this very chapter, in chapter 6, Moses gives parents a little catechism to teach the children. When your child or junior teen comes to you and says, ah, but dad, dad, why do we have to obey these 10 commandments? Why can't I do what all the other kids do? I mean, Simon next door, his parents don't let him do all that stuff.

Why are you so strict? Well, what Moses does is completely wonderful. He doesn't say, tell your kids, these are the laws that God will get you if you don't do them, or this is the way we've always done it in our family. Moses gives a little five-point catechism to the parents. And the first four points are about God and his grace and kindness. And only in the fifth point then does he get to the rules. So let's have a look at these verses, verses 20 to 24. When your son or daughter asks you in time to come, what is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules?

[14:34] that Yahweh, our God, has commanded you. Then you shall say to your son, point one, we were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt. We were in great need. We couldn't rescue ourselves. We are utterly beyond ourselves. Point two, and Yahweh the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.

He rescued us. He digged the big saving thing. Thirdly, it was very costly. Yahweh the Lord showed signs and wonders, great and grievous against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household before our eyes. We saw it. This is our history. Point four, and he brought us out from there that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give to our fathers. He brought us out to bring us in.

Point four, now point five, and Yahweh the Lord commanded us to do these statutes, to fear Yahweh the Lord, our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive as we are this day. So even in the fifth point, the focus is the unique relation we have with God. It's not about rules, but it's about knowing this Yahweh is our saviour. It's not even about you. It's about God wanting to preserve us and bless us. And even when Moses does get to the rules, the reason is not just do it, but it's for our good always, because Yahweh is good. So apply it to your heart, apply it to your families. And thirdly, Moses says, do it publicly as well in your public life, verses eight and nine. He says, you shall bind them as a sign on your hand. They shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. Now, some people have taken this literally, and they write the shemar in a little leather box, and they bind it around their wrist, or they wear it on the front of their heads. But as Jesus later points out, the trouble is, our hearts are so sneaky that we can do the outside thing instead of having inward love.

[16:48] But Moses is saying here that what you do with your hands and what you do with your eyes, how you view life, how you view others, how you view your resources, should be through the reality that God has loved you and revealed himself in saving us.

And the doorposts and gates are what other people see. Now, two years ago, my wife Bron and I stayed in a guest house in Northern Ireland. And when we went into the room, all around the room were the most terrifying scripture texts from the Bible. And they were all in King James language. So just beside the bed lamps, beside the bed, there was this text that said, be sure your sins will find you out. And then over the bed, there was a large, it was a poster with flowers around it. And it said, prepare to meet your God.

And then in the bathroom, there was repent or you will likewise perish. And then above the mirror in the main room is behold, I was shapen in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me. It was terrible.

And we were keen to get out. And I don't think Moses is saying to do something like that. But he is saying, if anyone comes into your house, they will quickly see what your deepest commitments are. The last time these people saw door or gates was when they were slaves in Egypt.

[18:17] And it's a reminder to them, God has given them the land and the houses even, because he is one Lord. So that's the second thing. What does it mean for us? And the last point is this, what difference does it make for us today? I mean, these words were written down over 3,000 years ago, more than 1,000 years before the coming of Jesus Christ. And whenever we read the words of the Old Testament, we need to ask the question, what difference does Jesus' coming make? It's a great help to us that Jesus himself made reference to the verses here in Deuteronomy 6. One day, a teacher came up to him and said, tell us, what is the greatest commandment? And Jesus said, the most important is, hear, O Israel, the Lord 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 mind and with all your strength.

And the second is like this. Sorry, the second is this. You shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these. And the power and ability to obey the second command to love our neighbour comes from the first commandment, which connects us to the love of God.

But as we can see, the commandments remain the same because God doesn't change and we don't change. We are the same. However, the New Testament does move the oneness of God into a completely higher key.

Christmas, Easter and Pentecost make a massive difference to how we understand the oneness of God and our salvation. Let me just deal with those three quickly before we finish together.

Christmas makes a terrific difference. Since Jesus has come, we have seen Yahweh in the flesh.

[20:16] The Apostle Paul, when writing to the Corinthians, says, other gods have no existence. They're not real. And then he says in chapter 8, verse 6, for us, there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist. And then he says, and one Lord, which is the New Testament equivalent of Yahweh, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

Since the incarnation, Jesus is Yahweh, the one and only God, to whom we owe complete allegiance and love. So what the Old Testament said about Yahweh, we can say about Jesus Christ. There is still only one God.

That's why Jesus said we are to be baptized in one name, one singular name. But there's now a threefold complexity to the name. The name is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christmas makes a big difference.

Second, Easter also makes a terrific difference. In the death and resurrection of Jesus, we have seen more of God's love and faithfulness than Moses or Israel ever did. We have more reason to love him with all our muchness.

And that great redemption that God worked for Israel by bringing them out of slavery in Egypt with his powerful arm was just a rehearsal for the great redemption that he worked through the cross of Jesus Christ, where we are redeemed not just from a physical slavery, but from slavery to sin and to death and to Satan.

[21:57] As the Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians, in Christ, in him, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses according to the riches of his grace.

Christmas makes a huge difference. Christmas makes a huge difference. Easter makes a huge difference. And thirdly, Pentecost also makes a massive difference. Because Jesus not only came to save, he came to give us the Holy Spirit.

And since the day of Pentecost, 50 days after the resurrection, God now dwells in his people in a new way by the Holy Spirit. 40 years ago today, I was married and I made a commitment to take

Bronwyn as my wife and to give myself to her as her husband.

Actually, it was not a difficult choice, frankly, because love and choice go together. We choose what we love. We love what we choose.

And the Holy Spirit empowers us to love God with all our hearts and all our souls and all our might. He comes into our hearts and he remakes us and reshapes us in the image of Christ.

[23 : 14] He begins to write God's law inwardly in our hearts. So the first fruit of the Holy Spirit is love. And he binds us to himself and to each other in the body of Christ, giving us a new love and a new life and a new freedom.

And he enables us to say, we love because he first loved us. And this is the only choice. This is the one choice that is most important. And we need to make it now and we need to make it today and we need to make it each day.

To love the God who has loved us in everything we can. And now we're going to sing a song about Christ and how we have everything in Christ alone.