

The Shema: Listen and Remember

SCOTT HOEZEE

In Christian circles, there are prayers and sayings that many people know well because they grew up with them. If someone says: The Lord be with you. Most people know to respond: And also with you. Or there are table prayers like: God is great, God is good. Let us thank Him for this food. Or the bedtime prayer: Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep. But in Jewish circles, few such prayers and sayings are more well known than some verses from Deuteronomy 6. The words there are called the *Shema*, and today on Groundwork, as we continue to dig into the Bible's fifth book of Deuteronomy, we will think about the *Shema*, what it meant to Israel way back when and what it continues to mean for all of us yet today. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we are now in program two of a planned six-part series on the Bible's fifth book, the last book of the Pentateuch – the first five books of the Bible – Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy is the Greek title from the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew original Old Testament; and *deuteros nomos* – Deuteronomy – means the second law, or as we said in the first program, it is really the law the second time around. The book of Deuteronomy is...

DAVE BAST

The Law 2.0.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; a giant review session. Moses' farewell sermon, farewell address to the Israelites – to the new generation that was not alive, does not have active memories of the Red Sea and Mount Sinai and the original giving of the Ten Commandments; so this is a giant review session for them, as they now are ready, finally after forty years of wandering in the desert, to take possession of the Promised Land.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely, and one of the most important things that Moses tells the people – one of the classic passages of Deuteronomy – comes in Chapter 6; but first I think we should point out that in Deuteronomy 5 the Ten Commandments are repeated. It is literally the second time around for the law because the Law of God is a term that means different things in the Old Testament. It can mean all of the ceremonial laws, all the sacrificial regulations, the whole of the first five books of Moses – the Pentateuch. It can mean the whole word of God: O, how I love your Law. It is a synonym for God's word; but more narrowly, the Law is the Ten Commandments or the Ten Words, as the Hebrews call them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we get them first in Exodus Chapter 20, when the people first... They just came through the Red Sea, just got out of Egypt. God brings them to Mount Horeb, or Mount Sinai, and speaks the Ten Words, the Ten Commandments, and you can find those in Exodus 20; but of course, that was a long time ago, right? That

was forty years ago, so just think about how long ago forty years was as you are listening to this program. If it is 2016, forty years ago was 1976, and Gerald Ford was president. That was a long time ago. There a lot of people we know today who were not even alive then – they were not born yet; but the people who are listening to Moses now... and they are right on the east side of the Jordan River, and on the west side is the Promised Land – they don't remember that so much; any more than maybe some of our own children don't remember 1976 because they were not alive. So, now we are going to get the Ten Commandments a second time in Deuteronomy 5; so we are focusing on the Shema in Deuteronomy 6, but Deuteronomy 5 repeats the Ten Commandments word for word, except for one interesting exception.

DAVE BAST

And it is the Fourth Commandment, so I will give you a minute to go through the first three and remind yourself what Commandment Four is; well the Fourth Commandment is: Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. The Lord's day. In the original iteration of that commandment in Exodus 20, a reason is attached, and the reason is:

¹¹For in six days the Lord created the heavens and the earth and everything in them, but rested on the seventh day – clearly figurative language – does God rest? Well, He rested from His work of creating, and that is given as the reason why we ought to rest. It is grounded – it is rooted in creation, which means as a creation ordinance, it is good for everybody, not just Christians, not just Jews, not just believers, but everyone needs that kind of Sabbath rhythm built into their life. It is for human flourishing again.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that version of the Fourth Commandment on the Sabbath is the one I think we are most familiar with. When I was growing up in church we used to have the Ten Commandments read every Sunday, and it was always the Exodus 20 version: For in six days the Lord God created... Deuteronomy 5 changes it. Now the reason to observe the Sabbath goes this way:

¹⁵For remember that you were slaves in Egypt, and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore, the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day. So, whereas in Exodus the Sabbath has something to do with creation, in Deuteronomy, it has something to do with redemption.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exodus says: Remember that God wove rest into the fabric of creation, so take a day off – take a Sabbath every week. Deuteronomy says: Hey, when you were slaves in Egypt, you never got a day off; but God redeemed you from that, so now take a Sabbath to remember your salvation, which is an interesting little change.

DAVE BAST

A very interesting change, and packed with, I think, theological meaning because it is a reminder, as our tradition says when it explains the Commandments in the Catechism, that it is a reminder that we don't save ourselves; that it is not our work that achieves our salvation. Salvation is a gratuitous act of God. It is a free gift of God...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, full of grace.

DAVE BAST

It is something He did for us, and in response, by stopping once in a while from our feverish activity of trying to make a life for ourselves, we are reminded that our life is really made by God for us, and we are invited to step into it and to receive it as a gift and to enjoy it. So, this wonderful double sense of creation – yes, it is good for everybody – but redemption – those who know God as savior, as redeemer – have an extra reason

for keeping a day, a day for worship, really. So now we don't keep the Sabbath day in the sense of the seventh, and we don't have to keep it literalistically with respect to work, but we keep it for worship; it becomes the Lord's Day.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, but this is also... that switch in the grounding of the Fourth Commandment is also significant for us to flag as part of this series, Dave, because this is a refrain or a motif all through the book of Deuteronomy to remember that you were slaves in Egypt and God saved you, because again, this young generation was not alive then. They don't remember crossing the Red Sea and the drowning of the Egyptian army; but they have to remember: You have been saved; and the Law came after that, so the Law is a way to say thank you to God. So you have been saved, don't forget that. You didn't create the world, but you didn't redeem the world either. You are not a self-made people, but you are not a self-saved people, and that was so important for the new generation to keep in front of them: Yes, God saved us; God redeemed us; we owe God our lives; we owe God gratitude; we owe Him faithful living. It is not insignificant that the only difference between the Exodus 20 Ten Commandments and the Deuteronomy 5 ones is that the Sabbath is rooted in remembering you were saved from slavery because remembering salvation every day is going to be key to Israelite identity.

DAVE BAST

And understanding of the purpose of the Law. It is the means by which we live into the life God intends for us. It is intended for our flourishing; and as we saw in our last program, it is really for the sake of mission; it is to make us the kind of people who will attract others to the God whom we love and we serve. These are all the reasons why Deuteronomy is such a great and important book as it reiterates again and again the significance of God's Law for us; and specifically in the Shema – the great passage – Israel's great confession of faith in Chapter 6 – and we will turn to that in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork and our second program of digging into the fifth book of the Bible, the book of Deuteronomy, and we are in Chapter 6, which is known as the Shema, and let's get right to it, Dave. These words, beginning at verse 4:

Here, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ⁵Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. ⁶These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. ⁷Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home, when you walk along the road, when you lie down, when you get up. ⁸Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ⁹Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. And that is the Shema, and in case our listeners wonder why it is called Shema, it is from the Hebrew; and the Hebrew of verse 4 sounds like this: Sh'ma Yisra'eil, Yahweh Eloheinu, Yahweh echad. And so, those first words: Sh'ma Yisra'eil means: Listen Israel... so the Shema is the word for to hear; in fact, the name of Samuel will eventually be derived from this because God heard Hannah's prayer for a child. Sh'ma Yisra'eil – listen – hear – this is what you have to hear again and again and again, Moses is saying.

DAVE BAST

Right; yes, that is a great illustration, the name of Samuel: Shemu-el – God hears. Another great illustration, we at Words of Hope partner with a ministry in the Turkish language, and the primary partner for broadcasting those Christian programs in Turkey is in the city of Ankara, the capital, and it is called: Radio Shema; so they have taken their name from this: Hear, O Turkey – hear the good news about the Lord Jesus Christ; so it is still relevant today – the Shema.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as we said at the outset, Dave, this for Jewish people is as familiar... and Jewish children, too... This is as familiar as now I lay me down to sleep is to a lot of Christian kids because if they do what they are supposed to do with the Shema, it is repeated morning, noon, and night. It is what you say at breakfast, it is

what you say at lunch, it is what you say at dinner, it is what you say when you go to bed; you repeat these verses because there is something in these verses – in Deuteronomy 6 here – that go to the core of Israelite theology and who God is; and so we can sort of look at what is in there.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is not exactly a prayer, it is more of a confession or a declaration of belief. It is almost as if you were to ask one of us: What do you believe, and we might respond: I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth; or in our particular tradition we might say: My only comfort in life and in death is that I am not my own, but belong to my faithful savior. So it is these familiar words that have been drilled down from childhood into every Jewish child, really. What do you believe? *Sh'ma Yisra'eil* – I believe that the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There are really three main parts of the Shema, and that is the first one: We worship one God. That is called *monotheism*; you believe there is only one God. Most of the nations surrounding Israel at the time were polytheistic. They worshipped many gods, many goddesses; but for Israel, there is just one true God. There is only one God and that is the God who has revealed Himself to Moses and gave His name as Yahweh; at the burning bush God told him that, and that is the true God. There is just one of them.

DAVE BAST

He is the only God in town. He is the only God that is. The other gods – so-called gods, sometimes the Old Testament calls them, or idols – they are manufactured, they are human constructs; still very relevant for us today. What are you worshipping? Are you worshipping the work of your own hands? Are you worshipping money or pleasure or sex or stuff or goods and prosperity? Or are you worshipping the God who is real? One of the interesting things that the Old Testament does – Isaiah does this – is to make a pun. The word for God is *Elohim*; it occurs here in the Shema.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, yes.

DAVE BAST

And technically it is a plural. Isaiah constantly refers to the gods of the nations as *elilim*, which means *no gods*; so it is Elohim or elilim – are you worshipping *the* God or are you worshipping something that isn't a god?

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, there is one God; and then the first thing we are told about that God is that we have to love Him with everything we've got: Heart, soul, strength: Your head, your emotions, your body – everything. Worship the Lord your God and love Him with your heart, your soul, your strength – everything you've got; that is the second thing that comes out; and thirdly, what does that mean? You obey His Law and you talk about that Law morning, noon, and night to your children, in the house, outside – it doesn't matter where you are; the Shema says: Listen, there is one God. You have to love Him with everything you've got, and what that means is you respect His Law and you talk about it and you memorize it, and above all, you live it.

DAVE BAST

And interestingly, there are words here to parents about how to instruct their children in this Law. It is something you do consistently, day in and day out, and you do it when you are sitting and when you are standing and when you are walking and when you are home. It is just a way of life. The Law as a way of life – the Law of God as a way of life; and the importance of instruction in the family comes out here, too. It is such a beautiful truth; one maybe that we are in danger of losing. We don't farm out our kids' instruction in God's word to some other institution or some other agency. It is something that parents do for their children.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we want to talk about that a little more in the third segment, too; but before we close out this segment we could note just one curiosity: Because this passage says to bind that Law around your hands and your heads, and to put them on the doorposts of your house, in the Jewish tradition they have had this interesting tradition where they had these little boxes on leather straps and they will insert just Hebrew letters in there standing for the Commandments of God – they are called phylacteries – and during certain festivals they literally tie them around their foreheads and on their wrists, and they have also developed things called *mezuzahs*. Mezuzah is the Hebrew word for doorpost. So if you go to a Jewish home, if they are observant, Orthodox Jewish people, you will see these little metal boxes containing pieces of God’s Law on the front door, on doors leading into the kitchen and into the bedroom. You are supposed to touch the mezuzah each time you enter a room as a reminder of God’s Law; so that is a very literal way...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

To take these words about binding them around your forehead and writing them on the doorposts of your house, but it is a holy effort to saturate your life with an awareness of God.

DAVE BAST

Well, I think it could be, you know, or it could devolve into a superstition like so many...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Like anything, right.

DAVE BAST

Like anything; but certainly they are intended first by Deuteronomy as metaphorical, meaning bind them on your heads: Fill your mind with the truth of God’s word. Bind them on your hands: Let your hands be active. Let your hands and feet be doing God’s word – God’s Law – God’s will.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Let your home be filled with the word of God...

DAVE BAST

Absolutely, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The front gate and the doorpost...

DAVE BAST

You know, I just thought of something interesting. ReFrame Media publishes a devotional called *Today*, but the original name of that devotional was *The Family Altar*...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Correct.

DAVE BAST

You remember that, Scott; but that was the idea. Let your home be filled with God’s word, and parents instruct your children around the dinner table; teach them and share with them so that they grow up learning and loving Him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So the Shema was highly important in the life of Israel. It was supposed to be daily repeated over and over once this new generation settled into the Promised Land, but it has a lot of implications for the Church yet today, and we are going to want to think about that in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we have been looking at Deuteronomy 6, the Shema, that which Israel must hear, which they must listen to over and over again; and many of us who are Christian people, we probably know the Shema best, not because of Deuteronomy 6:5, but because of something in Matthew 22.

DAVE BAST

I am sure that a lot of folks picked up on this when we read Deuteronomy 6:5, where immediately after proclaiming the oneness of God – the Lord our God is one – Moses goes on to say: And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind; and that, of course, was picked up by Jesus very famously in Matthew 22 when He was challenged one day by someone who said to Him:

³⁶“Teacher, which is the greatest Commandment in the Law?” ³⁷Jesus replied, (and He quotes Deuteronomy 6:5) “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸This is the first and greatest Commandment,” and then He adds another, ³⁹“Love your neighbor as yourself.” That is from the book of Leviticus. Jesus summarizes by saying: “All the Law and the Prophets...” in other words, the whole Old Testament – the whole Bible – hangs on those two Commandments.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So here, interestingly, just to remember the context, in Matthew 22 the Pharisees and the scribes are asking Jesus a series of gotcha questions. This is after His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He is in the final week of His life. They are trying to trap Him into saying something wrong so they can pin something on Him. In this case, they were trying to make Jesus pick one of the Commandments as a favorite, which they would probably accuse Him of heresy – Oh, you cannot play favorites with God’s Laws. They are all important...

DAVE BAST

They had 615 commandments, I think, the Pharisees did.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so Jesus cuts through all of that and gets out of their trap by saying: Look, if you don’t love God you are not going to keep any of the Commandments anyway, because love for God is what motivates you to keep the Commandments; so, what is the greatest Commandment? It is the one that you have been saying morning, noon, and night since you were a little kid: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. Jesus changes that a little bit, by the way... Deuteronomy has *strength*... He adds *mind*, but we don’t have time to go into what that might mean...

DAVE BAST

That is an interesting one in itself.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The point is, Jesus is saying that this is as relevant now as it ever was; and so as followers of Jesus, the Shema is very relevant for us because it reminds us that we are to love God; and how do we love God? Well, Jesus said it to His own disciples: If you love Me, you will keep My Commandments. Not as a way to become saved, but as a result of being saved. Not as a way to make God love you, but as a way to say thank

you to God because He already loved you and already saved you in Christ. The same for the Israelites. They did not get the Law before the exodus from Egypt. They got it after; and we didn't get the Law before Jesus died and rose again, we get it after as a way to say thank you.

DAVE BAST

Jesus Himself reminds us of the ongoing relevance of Deuteronomy 6. What He really does, I think, is invite us to reflect on what it means to love God with all those elements of our being. So, what does it mean to love God with our emotions; as we would say, with our heart? Heart did not exactly mean that in the Bible, but with our whole person?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; our core, yes.

DAVE BAST

What does it mean to love God with our mind? How do we, in the Apostle's words, take every thought and make them subject to Christ? What does it mean to love God with our being – with our strength? And as you just said, Scott, surely it means something for us emotionally, but it means something even more for us ethically if we really do love God, which is why Jesus links the two Commandments together, too. Because it is easy to say: Oh, in my heart I love God; or to sing a song or something; but as John will point out in his first epistle, how can you say you love God, whom you cannot see, if you don't love your neighbor or your brother, whom you can see – your brother or sister?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And James... We did a series on James recently, and that is James' big point, too. Love for God has to translate into love for people. So Jesus quotes the first part of the Shema here, and then He stops, but of course, He implies the rest of it, which as we saw in the previous segment, Dave, implies talking to our children and educating our children and making sure that the new generation... even as Moses was standing before the new generation of Israelites who were going to take possession of the land, finally, after forty years of desert wanderings... so we are always facing the new generation. We have our children, our nieces and nephews, our grandchildren, grand nieces and nephews; and it is our obligation to do what the Shema said: Saturate your homes – saturate your words – saturate your own behavior as followers of Jesus now, we would say, such that the children cannot miss it. It is an interesting question how well we do that within our homes, or are we just too busy these days? Are we... maybe we don't do those mezuzahs that we talked about, literally putting little metal plates on our doorposts, but is there enough reminders of God in our daily lives, within our homes, that our children cannot miss it?

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; you know, we are going to look ahead in the next program into Chapter 8, where Moses looks ahead. He spends most of his time there talking about what is going to happen to them when they settle into the Promised Land. The great thing that he will be concerned with there, as we will see, is that they forget God – the danger of forgetting God. Why does it have to be repeated? Why does it have to become a daily business? Why do you need daily devotions yourself? Why do you need to, if you do have children or grandchildren, be reminding them constantly? Because life kind of runs along, and for most of us most of the time we are not in the wilderness, we are in the Promised Land and life gets comfortable; and when life is comfortable God can kind of recede into the background; and when that happens, we find ourselves slipping...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; we take grace, of all things, we take grace for granted, and we don't remember to lead lives of gratitude; and so there is a sense in which the Church still needs the Shema today. Maybe we would say: Hear, O Church... Hear, O new Israel, because the New Testament describes the Church as the new Israel; so hear, O new Israel... Hear, O Church, the Lord our God is one; and we have to love Him with everything we've got because of the great salvation we have in Christ Jesus our Lord; and that following of God's ways is, as the

Westminster Catechism says, that is how we glorify God and enjoy Him forever; and as with the Israelites, it is also how we witness to our neighbors.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you know, for me I think the bottom line in the Shema is this daily – day in and day out – when you are out, when you are in, when you are with your children, when you are alone, when it is just you as an empty nester, and your spouse – remember God; remember to thank Him; remember to glorify Him; remember to obey Him; and in that way, you will indeed, enjoy Him forever.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we always want to know how we can help you to continue digging deeper into scripture. So you can go to our website: groundworkonline.com, and suggest some topics and passages to dig into next on Groundwork.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/the-shema-listen-and-remember>

Printed on June 3, 2026