

GOD'S WORDS IN OUR HEARTS
Teaching-Learning Resources
BAPTIST LEADER

July 12, 1981

Thomas McDaniel

Background Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:1–15

Key Passage: Deuteronomy 6:4–15

[Page 47]

This is the sixth lesson in the thirteen-week series on Deuteronomy and the second lesson in Unit II, “Laws to Live By.” A look at the outline given in the “Teaching-Learning Resources” of June 7 will help the reader review the material already studied and put this lesson from Moses’ second discourse in its proper context.

Although we are only midway in this study of Deuteronomy, we come to the high point of the book, indeed, the high point of the Torah as a whole. Deuteronomy 6:4–5, ‘Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God . . . ,’ was the credo of ancient Israel and remains the credo in rabbinic Judaism. It is still recited by pious members of the household of Israel every morning and evening. This text has particular significance for the Christian because of the three accounts in the New Testament where Jesus acknowledged this to be the greatest commandment, on which hinged all the Law and the Prophets (see Matthew 22:34–40; Mark 12:28–34; Luke 10:25–28).

Variations in these Synoptic accounts make it difficult to know if the Gospels were recording the same event reported in three different ways, or two or more events when Jesus was faced with a similar question that required the following different answers: (1) to the Pharisaic lawyer in Matthew’s account, Jesus simply gave a lawyer’s response, i.e., an impersonal statement about the relationship and priority of one

GOD’S WORDS IN OUR HEARTS

law to another; (2) to the polite scribe in Mark’s account who had an honest academic question, Jesus concluded a pleasant conversation with the encouraging observation, “You are not far from the kingdom of God”; and (3) to the testy lawyer in Luke’s account who was in search of eternal life, Jesus responded with a counter question. When the lawyer himself quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, Jesus concluded, “You have answered right; do this, and you will live.” Since the issue under discussion was the quest for eternal life, Jesus’ answer implied, “Do this and you will have eternal life.” In Mosaic tradition there was no mention of eternal life, just a prolonged life. In Deuteronomy 5:33 and 6:2, it was stated that obedience to the laws and statutes of Yahweh as given by Moses would result in an extended life (literally, “that your days may be prolonged”). Jesus extended the “prolonged days” to eternal life. But whether it was Moses’ promise of a long life or Jesus’ promise of eternal life, there could be no real life without the “law-and-gospel” of love—God’s love for Israel and all the families on earth and, in turn, their love for God and neighbor.

Interpreting the Biblical Lesson

Deuteronomy 6:3—“... that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly. . . in a land flowing with milk and honey.”

This verse repeats the last words of Moses’ first discourse in 4:40, “You shall keep his statutes and his commandments . . . that it may go well with you. and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land.” Based upon the report of the “committee of twelve” that toured the areas around Hebron and Eshchol forty years earlier, it had

GOD’S WORDS IN OUR HEARTS

long been realized that the Promised Land was a good piece of real estate (Deuteronomy 1:25). In the second discourse a phrase that has become proverbial was used to express just how good the land was, namely, “a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Compared to the arid Sinai desert wilderness, the vegetation in Canaan made the Promised Land look like an oasis. (Rainfall around Gaza is twelve inches a year, and in Jerusalem it increases to twenty-four inches annually.) But as rich and fertile as the land was, things would not automatically “go well” for the Israelites. It just *might* go well with them. There was a condition attached to the promise of peace and prosperity. It would go well only if Israel obeyed the commandments and statutes stipulated in the covenant that Yahweh had made with them. There were religious, moral, and ethical imperatives required for a good life in the Promised Land. Milk and honey were insufficient for survival, for “man does not live by bread alone,” not even honey bread! The good life in the good land required more than honeybees, fertile cows, and rainwater; it required the revelation of the Creator and obedience to God’s revealed word. Even the promise to Abraham, “I will make you a great nation,” carried an implicit condition that Moses made explicit: “Be careful to do the law that you may multiply greatly.”

Deuteronomy 6:4—“Hear, O Israel”

The Hebrew verb *shama*, meaning “to hear, to listen, to obey,” occurs eleven times in Deuteronomy 5 and 6 and occurs as an imperative verb in 4:1; 5:1; 6:4; 9:1; and 20:3. The first word of this verse, the imperative *shema*—“hear!”—stands as the title of ancient Israel’s and Judaism’s credo, the

GOD'S WORDS IN OUR HEARTS

Shema (for *shema Yisrael*, “Hear, O Israel!”). Frequently overlooked is the fact [page 48] that the greatest commandment begins with the imperative “Listen!” and not with the command “You shall love.” The Shema, or greatest commandment, exceeds in meaning the combined message of the first two of the Ten Commandments. The latter contained prohibitions, without specifying what Israel was to do, and evoked a bit more real fear than love for the Creator. The former (6:4) elevated love and captured the essence of all other laws with simple, specific instructions.

Deuteronomy 6:4—“. . .Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone” (alternate rendition).

The traditional translation for this text is “the LORD our God is one LORD,” but the Hebrew text has “Yahweh,” not the noun “LORD.” Literally, the four words in Hebrew are, “Yahweh our-God Yahweh one.” Christian as well as Jewish translators, have struggled with the meaning of the word “one” in this verse. Once the common noun “LORD” was substituted for the name “Yahweh,” the problem disappeared. But Hebrew, like English, does not use the cardinal numbers to modify proper names. Therefore, recent translations of this verse vary. The translation used here follows that of the great medieval rabbi, Ibn Ezra (died A.D. 1167). It is preferred by the writer in light of recent evidence from Ugaritic texts, which date from 1500–1200 B.C. and are in a language that had a dialectal relationship to Hebrew, that the cardinal number “one” also functioned as a noun for the idea of singularity or uniqueness. It was interchangeable with other synonyms for the idea of “alone, only, unique.” In light of such evidence, it seems most likely that the verse should be translated

GOD'S WORDS IN OUR HEARTS

as cited in the heading above or as follows: "Yahweh is our God; Yahweh is unique."

Additional evidence can be drawn from similar uses of the cardinal "one" in the Old Testament. In Zechariah 14:9, the prophet addressed himself to that day when Yahweh would become king over the whole earth, for, "on that day *Yahweh will be one* [i.e., the one and only God] and *his name one* [i.e., the one and only name at which every knee will bow]" (italics added). The prophet was not concerned with the unity of God's essence or attributes, as though they had at some time been fragmented; but he was thinking of Yahweh's universal reign when all the families of earth would go up to Jerusalem "to worship the King, Yahweh of Hosts" (14:17).

A similar use of the cardinal "one" is found in the Song of Solomon 6:9, where the lover, when speaking of his beloved, states, "My perfect one is *unique!*" or "My perfect one is the *one and only!*" (paraphrased). He continues by stating that she is her mother's *one* (i.e., her mother's *one and only*). Thus, in the language of ardent lovers who avow the exquisite uniqueness of their one and only beloved, the greatest commandment required recognition of Yahweh as the one and only God for Israel.

As discussed in the "Teaching-Learning Resources" for July 5, the uniqueness of Yahweh is affirmed in the meaning of the name, which is best paraphrased by the English noun "Creator." The uniqueness of the Creator can be better appreciated when it is recognized that Old Testament writers divided all reality into two categories: the created order and the Creator. Creation included everything but the Creator, who, standing outside of creation and over creation, was unique.

GOD'S WORDS IN OUR HEARTS

Deuteronomy 6:5—“And you shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

The study by William L. Moran, S.J., entitled “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy,”¹ has proved to be the most helpful study available for interpreting this text. We are too inclined to associate “love” with emotional feelings, often to the extreme of irrational emotionalism. But the love for Yahweh commanded here has little to do with an emotional attraction or emotionalism in worship.

In the words of Moran, “Love in Deuteronomy is a love that can be commanded. It is a love intimately related to fear and reverence. Above all, it is a love which must be expressed in loyalty, in service and in unqualified obedience to the demands of the Law.”² This type of love is obviously different from God’s love for Israel, which, as depicted in Hosea, draws upon the marriage model and the parent-child relationship. Israel’s love for God was expressed in terms drawn from the language of international treaties and covenants, the language used between the king and his vassal subjects. Love was the duty of a vassal to his liege lord. An Assyrian command read, “You will love Assurbanipal as you love yourselves,” and in an oath the vassals declared, “The king of Assyria, our Lord, we will love.”³ The commandment for

1. *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vol. 25 (1963), pp. 77–87.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

GOD'S WORDS IN OUR HEARTS

Israel to love Yahweh was cast in the same covenant language.

It is significant to note that in Hebrew the verb “love” is an “active” verb as over against some verbs which are “stative” verbs. Active verbs require action; they do not express ideas that can be accomplished by a mood, a feeling, or by inactivity. The imperative “love God!” requires action. By contrast, in Hebrew the verb “to hate” is a stative verb; it indicates a state of being, a mood, a set of feelings that expresses a reality even when the person doing the hating does nothing. This grammatical observation carries a spiritual lesson: Love without action is impossible and unreal, but hate is real even when it is only felt and unexpressed.

Deuteronomy 6:6–7—“These words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children. . . .”

The word “heart” occurs over eight hundred times in the Old Testament, and its semantic range includes the physical organ, the inner person, the human will, and the mind and intellect. In our English idiom the heart, when used in a religious context, is viewed as the seat of emotion, and many have assumed that the combination of “love” and “heart” in this commandment was a double call for a heavy dose of emotionalism to express piety and the devout life. But the term “heart” in this text stands for “mind” or “human reason and intellect.” The quotations of the greatest commandment in the New Testament provide the evidence for arriving at this conclusion. The three quotations in the New Testament all differ from the text of Deuteronomy 6:4–5, which has three nouns in this order: heart, soul, and might (or strength). In

GOD'S WORDS IN OUR HEARTS

Matthew 22:37, the three nouns are quoted as heart, soul, and mind. The word “strength” has been replaced with “mind” in Jesus’ quotation. In Mark 12:30, Jesus is quoted as having added the word “mind” to the three nouns of Deuteronomy, for Mark has four nouns: heart, soul, mind, and strength. In Luke Jesus’ quotation to the testy lawyer (10:27) also has four nouns, but they are in a different order: heart, soul, strength, and mind. Since the word “mind” does not occur in the Old Testament *Shema*, it must have been added after the rise of Greek ideas modified traditional Semitic thought that included the idea that people thought with their heart (compare the English expression “learn by heart”). In Greek thought, as in our own, the mind, not the heart, was known to be the seat of human intellect and reason. Consequently, the word “mind” was added or substituted as an interpretive gloss on the meaning of the word “heart” in the original Hebrew. One has only to read through the Targums (the Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible) to see how common and acceptable—indeed, necessary—such additions were for correct understanding. This variation in the quotation of the *Shema* is all the commentary needed to assert that the greatest commandment required the intellectual and rational expression of love for God, not a simple emotional attachment. The use of the mind entailed teaching the Law to one’s children, and the children learned the Law “by heart,” memorizing it with great mental effort.

Deuteronomy 6:10–11—“ . . . great and goodly cities, which you did not build, and houses full of all good things, which you did not fill. . . .”

GOD'S WORDS IN OUR HEARTS

God's gift to Israel was to be a land of good cities, full houses, hewn cisterns, manicured vineyards, and fruitful trees. Such a landscape, as painted here with words, does not suggest the conquest that was to follow with its battered walls, burned fields, chopped trees, and clogged cisterns. The Promised Land, as God intended to give it, stands in marked contrast to the landscape painted for the Israelite conquest of Moab, recorded in 2 Kings 3:19–25 (contrast Deuteronomy 2:9), “you shall conquer every fortified city, and every choice city, and shall fell every good tree, and stop up all springs of water, and ruin every good piece of land with stones.” This is the equivalent of our “scorched earth” strategy. But it seems that God had intended something other than scorched earth for the Promised Land.

Applying the Lesson to Life

The Letter of First John, especially 4:20–21, provides the guidelines for applying this lesson to the Christian life, “If any one says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from *him*, that he who loves God should love his brother also” (italics added). The pronoun “him” in this verse refers to Jesus who combined the greatest commandment in 6:4–5 with the second greatest, which was “like it,” namely, Leviticus 19:18, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The fact that John used the word “brother” instead of the word “neighbor” should not obscure his appeal to the two greatest commandments as combined by Jesus. A full reading of Leviticus 19:17–18 will make it obvious that “neighbor” refers to kinfolk and family members: “You shall not hate your *brother*

GOD'S WORDS IN OUR HEARTS

in your heart, but you shall reason with your *neighbor*. . . . You shall not take vengeance [on] the *sons of your own people*, but you shall love your *neighbor* as yourself” (italics added). In these laws “brother” and “neighbor” are interchangeable synonyms. There was no intent to exclude outsiders, for they were covered in Leviticus 19:34, “You shall love him [the stranger who sojourns in your midst] as yourself.”

This teaching, articulated in 1 John 4, became so prevalent in the Christian church that Leviticus 19:18 gradually replaced the *Shema* as the greatest commandment. This is evidenced by (1) James 2:8, “If you really fulfil the royal law, according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you do well”; (2) Galatians 5:14, “For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’”; and (3) Romans 13:8, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law.” On good authority we can conclude that any attempt to love God with heart, soul, strength, and mind must result in and be expressed by loving ourselves, our families, our neighbors, and the aliens in our midst with as much strength and as much reason as we possess.