

The Shema-The Greatest Commandment

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who promised to be with us always, Jesus Christ our Savior, amen.

We all need to be constantly reminded of who we are, whose we are, and what we should be about... Two men were talking one day over lunch. The first man said: "My wife has a terrible memory. She has the worst memory you could ever imagine." The second man said: "She forgets everything, huh?" The first man said: "No! She remembers everything!" Most of us are the other way around. We are so forgetful. The other day I walked all the way from our kitchen to the other end of our very long ranch house to PJ's study. I knocked on the door and had to admit I had no idea why I made the trip... It wasn't until I was back at the other end of the house and saw the package of cookies on the kitchen counter that I remembered what I wanted to ask her. I knew those cookies were for the WELCA meeting the next day, but I thought she might let me have just one... I suspect I'm not alone when it comes to memory troubles... We just have a lot of trouble remembering things... and consequently, we have to come up with all kinds of creative ways to remind ourselves of what we need to be doing. Some people tie a string around their finger as a reminder, but when I've tried that I can't seem to remember what that silly string is supposed to be reminding me to do! We have all kinds of ways to remind us of what we're supposed to be doing. We use calendars to write down our important events for the day. Some people have secretaries that

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keep their schedules and keep them on track. We have to do lists, sticky notes on the bathroom mirror and many others.

Our forgetfulness isn't a new problem brought on by our modern lifestyles. Our short memories date back as far as recorded history. That's precisely what this famous passage in the second part of our scripture reading for today in Deuteronomy 6 is really all about. Moses reminds the people that the main thing, is to keep the main thing, the main thing! He does this by giving them the what our Jewish brothers and sisters call The Shema. This is one of the mountain peak moments in all of the Bible, the Greatest Commandment of all time. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone (no other gods). (So) You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

Now, let me tell you why Moses is giving the people this great commandment at this particular time. A lot has happened since last Sunday when we left Moses at the Burning Bush. Let's get up to speed... It took 10 plagues before Pharaoh would release the Israelites from his iron fist. They had been a nomadic people traveling in the wilderness for a long time, forty years long... During the entire adventure they had to depend on God for everything. By everything I mean they picked manna from the ground in the morning, Quale for meat in the evening, and water from the rock when they were thirsty. They were given a law and the promise of a land flowing with milk and honey. God had

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personally led them with a pillar of clouds by day and fire by night. All the while, they had rebelled against God. First, with a golden calf and then constantly complaining against God every time they forgot just how awesome and powerful, forgiving, and loving their God truly was.

Now two very dramatic things are about to happen to them. First, they are about to cross over into the Promised Land. Second, Moses can't go with them. He has grown old and weak, and God had already told him he will not be allowed to lead the people into the promised land. As they establish themselves there, Moses will not be with them to constantly remind them they are God's covenant people, God's servant people and to put their trust in God and God Alone. So, to help them to remember, he "ties a string around their finger" so to speak, by giving them this Great Commandment. He tells them to always remember to put God first and to serve God alone, and to put their faith and trust in God alone. "Love God alone with all your heart, soul and might." Put these words on the doorposts of your homes. Put these words on the gates of your city. Wear them on your arm-bands and head-bands. Speak them in every worship service. Teach them to your children. Don't give in to the temptation to worship the gods of the Canaanites. Don't water down or contaminate your faith. Don't chase after every new fad that comes along. Just put your trust in Yahweh. Serve God and God alone.

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For all those years, the Hebrew people had struggled to survive in the wilderness. Now, they have come to the Promised Land. They had dreamed of this. They had longed for this. They had prayed for this, but Moses knew, as they went into the land, they would face an even more dangerous problem. Other people already lived there... They had their own set of gods they worshipped. They had a god of wine, a god of war, a god of fertility and a god of this, that, and a god on every hill and high point. Moses knew as they settled in, some of these gods would look attractive to the Hebrews... So much so, they might begin to worship them instead of Yahweh. So, Moses gave them this great commandment to be a constant and daily reminder... to worship, serve and trust God alone, to love God (and no other) with all your heart, soul and might. That great commandment is as relevant today as it was thousands of years ago when Moses first spoke it because it's all about choices, decisions, commitments, loyalties, priorities. It's about deciding – to whom will we give our allegiance; - in whom will we put our trust.

Let's bring this closer to home. All of us have at one time or another faced an uncertain future. You may be staring into that void right now. If you are, this Shema serves as your reminder to put God first; to worship Him alone; to not be taken in by false prophets or gimmicky religion; and to remember God's promise to always be with you. This is God's greatest promise, isn't it? We find it recorded

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over and over again in the Bible... on page after page of the Scriptures... God's promise to always be with us, God's promise to never forsake us, God's promise to give us the strength we need in every situation... Someone said God always gives us the strength we need, but He doesn't give it to us in advance or else we would take the credit. So, if you are going off to college, or to a new school, or a new job, or a new marriage, or a new home, or a new location, or a new challenge, or a new opportunity, or a different health situation... then, remember God. Remember His love, His strength, His great promise to always be with you, no matter what it is you're facing. Moses knew the Hebrew people would face great temptations in their new land. He knew they would be tempted to do things not worthy of their sacred heritage. He knew they would be tempted to short-cut their best selves... and contaminate their covenant faith. So, he gave them this great commandment to love God alone with all your heart, soul and might. They would be sure to always remember God, even when Moses was no longer leading them.

Isn't it something to realize that Moses never made it to the Promised Land? He died just before they got there. When they came to a mountain where they could look over and see the land... Moses realized his body was old and weak and he didn't have the strength to go on. So, he passed the torch to Joshua to lead the people while Moses stayed behind... on the mountain... alone to die. Can you imagine how it must have felt for Moses to be so close to the land he had dreamed

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of for all those years... He was so close and yet too old and too sick and too tired to go on. I mean, just imagine the conversation between Moses and God. “Lord, I know Your plan is best, but I can’t help but feel disappointed. I wanted so much to lead the people into the land. I had dreamed of it for well, forty years now. I wanted it so badly... and now this. I’m so weak, so frail, so tired. If only I could have had a little more time.” And God answers... “Moses, Moses... you have served me well. You have done your best. Soon you will come and live with me.” Moses looks down from the mountain and He sees the people moving forward toward the land (without him) and suddenly, he feels so alone. Moses looks up into heaven and quietly, he says: “Are you with me, Lord? Are you with me?” And the answer comes back: “Of course I am, Moses. Of course I am.” “Now take my hand and let me lead you home...”

This is the good news of our faith. When you’re facing an uncertain future, when you’re battling temptation and especially when you face your own death or the death of a loved one, may you find hope and remember to trust in God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. Amen.