

“What Was the First Scripture You Memorized?”

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

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What was the first verse of scripture you memorized? For most of us it was John 3:16. Upon these words of assurance and hope, we laid the foundation of our faith.

Our Jewish friends would answer the same question by citing Deuteronomy 6:4-5. These words formed the basis of their faith in the same way John 3:16 did for us. *“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”*

Even Jesus quoted this passage when asked by the Pharisee what the greatest commandment was. There was no doubt his own faith had been built on it.

These verses begin the passage known as the Shema, Deuteronomy 6:4-9. In ancient times, the Shema, whose title was taken from the first Hebrew word in this passage, was recited by faithful Jews once each morning and evening as well as being the call to worship in every service.

I want to examine it today mindful of its rich heritage and overwhelmed at how God has used it to turn the heads and hearts of many people toward Him. I can only hope that happens again today.

I read this passage several times last week. I wanted to feel it as well as understand it. What made it strong enough on which to build a faith? Why has it stood the test of time and scrutiny? Why did Jesus call it the greatest commandment? I’m still pondering these questions even as I raise some more for us to consider.

Why did Moses issue this command to his people? I think it was in response to the first commandment that he received on Mount Sinai. “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me” Exodus 20:1-2.

Moses was preaching a sermon, perhaps the first sermon on the first commandment. There is no way to overlook his redundancy of the word, all. “Love the Lord your God with **all** of your heart and with **all** of your soul and with **all** of your strength.” He insisted that they love God with all that was within them.

Was it even possible to love God this much? Yes, because they did not have to divide their loyalty and affection with other deities.

How did the Shema begin? “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” In contrast to the Egyptians that believed in many gods, the Israelites had but one God. There was no need to cut up their love like slices of a pie. All their affection could be directed to one God.

Why was Moses so adamant about their loving God wholeheartedly? What was he afraid would happen if they did not?

I think he was afraid they would become distracted. Their world provided no shortage of gods and I think he feared that anything less than their complete and undivided allegiance would enable them to wander. To combat unfaithfulness, idolatry and apostasy, Moses instructed them to love God with all their heart, soul and strength.

He even told them how to keep from becoming unfocused and distracted. *“These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them upon your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates”* Deuteronomy 6:6-9.

The thought of God and reminder of their covenant with Him was to be ever on their minds. At no time were they given permission to forget Him or their unique relationship with Him.

I believe Moses was afraid they might become disgusted. Without loving God, religion would become a burden for them. Making and following rules would take precedent over building relationships and following Him. Moses knew that love must precede responsibilities or the responsibilities will turn into dreaded obligations.

Recently, I talked on the phone to my son that has the three-month-old daughter. In the course of the conversation, I asked him how his golf game was. He told me that he hasn't had time to play since Ellie arrived. I asked him if he had been to any football games, knowing how much he and his wife, Emily, enjoy going to games. Again, he said that they had not had time to go to any games yet. When I asked what he and Emily had time to do, he replied, "Change diapers, feed Ellie, rock Ellie, go to work, change diapers, feed Ellie, rock Ellie, go to work..." However, not once in our conversation did he sound upset, angry or bitter over his new responsibilities and lack of time to relax and enjoy life's simple pleasures. As a matter of fact, the opposite was true. He was happy to have these new responsibilities and considered them privileges. Why? When love precedes responsibilities, sacrifices become privileges. Moses understood this.

I think Moses was afraid of one other thing if the people did not love God with all their heart, soul and strength. He was afraid they would become discouraged. He knew they would face problems and challenges that were bigger than they were. At times, they would have to trust God with tears in their eyes, pain in their hearts and doubts in their minds. That kind of faith and confidence would wear thin for a God that was merely an acquaintance. Only if they loved God with all their heart would they be faithful to Him when their heart was broken.

Did you ever have to say to a confused child, "I need you to do this out of love for me and confidence in me? You may not understand what I am asking so I need your heart to guide you." Moses knew that request would be coming their way and wanted them to be prepared to respond.

How were the ancient Israelites going to do it? How were they going to honor Moses' request? I think there was only one way they could take their love for God to this level and that was by realizing how much He loved them. It is the only way any of us can reach this level of rock-solid devotion.

Do you recall the story in the Gospels where a woman approached Jesus while he was dining and poured an expensive bottle of perfume on his head? Matthew told us that she poured all of it, not just a portion, on him. It was perhaps the greatest expression of love that anyone at that dinner had ever witnessed and was even misunderstood by his own disciples.

Why did she do it? It was in response to what he had already done for her. Evidently, Jesus changed her life in ways that no one else had or could and she had to express her gratitude.

Do you know anyone that loves God this much? What would it take for you to love Him like this? How would it change your life and influence those around you? Think about it this week as you dwell upon His love for you and your response to Him.