

Shema Israel - Pursuing God (Deut 6:4-9; Mark 12:29-31; John 17:26)



Shema Israel (Deut 6:4-9) means 'Hear, all Israel' or 'Listen everyone!' This commandment had to be the central reality of every Israelite's life and family, and the defining truth which was to be lived from inside out. This is the core reality of our faith also, which must be passed on from one generation to another. Or all we have is worthless religion. This was the reason behind Jesus' indictment of the Judaism of his day.

There are four ways our heart must experience and process the love of God: (i) God loves me; (ii) I love God; (iii) I love myself; (iii) I love my neighbour. From among this, loving God i.e. (ii) is the first and the greatest commandment. (C.f. Mark 12:29-31; Matt 22:37-40)

1. Mysteries of God behind 'Shema Israel'

- a. 'Mystery of God's desire' – Why did God command us to love Him with all our hearts? Does God lack something? (C.f. Ps 50:10-12) Yet the Father says to the Son, *'Ask of Me, and I will give you the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession.'* (Ps 2:8) What could Jesus possibly want from the Father? The answer to this question is the answer to the 'why' behind creation and redemption. One day all God's creation must give God 'mandatory obedience' as the 'King' of the universe. *'At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is the LORD, to the glory of God the Father.'* (Is 45:23 c.f. Phil 2:10-11)

But God seeks to have a special class of people who will give Him 'voluntary love', obedience out of love not of necessity. God desires an intimate relationship with His redeemed people as the 'Bridegroom God'. This is a shocking revelation of God's heart: *'You shall have no other gods before Me...you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God.'* (Deut. 5:7-8). God is not insecure. But there is hidden in God's heart a deep desire that the passionate love He has for us be returned to Him in the same way. God wants an exclusive relationship with us, analogous to the marriage relationship between husband and wife!

- b. 'Mystery of our worth' – David said, *'What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him? You have made him a little lower than the angels and You have crowned him with glory and honour.'* (Ps 8:4-5) *'I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.'* (Ps 139:14). Out of all His creation, human beings are the only ones with whom God desires to enter into a relationship of this kind. Although angels are far superior to human beings in intelligence and power, they were never invited into this relationship of perfect love within the Triune God. When the revelation that God desires us this way sinks in, it changes the way we view ourselves.
- c. 'Mystery of godliness' – Why does God command us to love Him with 'all of our heart, soul, mind, strength'? Because that is exactly how God loves us. Paul speaks of the mystery of godliness, *'...great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh...'* (1 Tim 3:16) The fire of love that was in the heart of God did not stay hidden or passive, but it was revealed in time and history through God coming into this world in the form of human flesh. God loves us passionately with all His heart, soul, and strength. It cost Him everything to love us and He gladly paid the price. A glimpse into God's heart in Rev 4:3 is a fiery red sardius stone.

2. Loving God as the Highest Call: There is no calling higher than this.

- a. Jesus' High Priestly Prayer (Jn 17:26) – The night before Jesus went to the cross, the whole chapter is Jesus' prayer to the Father for His people – They are Jesus' prize, His inheritance, His bride purchased by His blood. Jesus' prayer crescendos to a volcanic eruption in the last verse: *'That the love with which You love Me may be in them, and I in them.'* (John 17:26) That we would love Jesus with the very love the Father loves His Son! This prayer of Jesus cannot be denied by the Father. There will be a generation prepared by God's Spirit, who will love the Lord Jesus with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength even under great pressure. *'For the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.'* (Rev 19:7)

This is the prophetic imperative of this hour and the greatest work of the Spirit on earth! The Church of Jesus Christ exists first and foremost to love God! And all the activities of the church and the Christian service must flow out of this core reality!

- b. Loving God as the Glorious End in itself – I have discovered that when I know this and I set my life's goal of loving God and pursuing intimacy with Him, my heart is most free, alive, empowered, and exhilarated. When I lose that focus and let other priorities dominate my heart, soon the fire of God goes out and my heart feels old, sluggish, and demotivated. Serving God without burning love for Him is a guarantee to disappointment, wounding, and burnout (Rev. 2:4, 2 Cor 11:3). We need to have the incremental ongoing touch of God in our hearts, and make continuous small course corrections in our hearts!
- c. Your Greatest Attainment in Life is to have the burning heart of love for God. Note Jesus' assessment of the life of John the Baptist (Matt 11:11; Jn 5:35). At the end of your life, your life will not be measured by the size of your achievement, but the size of your heart for God. We may not have great gifts and great achievements externally. On that final day, the greatest people in God's assessment will not be the most famous people, but those who walked with the Lord intimately and lived lives of obedience out of deep love for Him. This is what God is looking for the most and this is what impacts the heart of God.

'Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth I desire besides You.' (Ps. 73:25)

3. What Does it Mean to Love God with All Our Heart, All Our Soul, and All Our Strength?

Note the emphasis falls on 'ALL' or 'Whole', i.e., undivided heart. The fall has shattered our hearts into many conflicting pieces, and this is the root cause of endless unhappiness. *'Our heart is more deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; Who can know it?'* (Jer 17:9). The cure is to focus our love on God.

- a. Heart – is 'the centre of our affection'. Your life today is the product of the affection of your heart over many years. Your affection is what you value as the most precious, and directly impacts your emotion and your decision. If your will and emotion (affection) are in contradiction, which wins out over time? It is your emotion (affection). Amazing truth is that you can set your love and affection on anything you choose to, and deeper affection will develop over time. That's how one becomes a musician for example. *'Set your affection on the things above not on things on the earth'* (Col 3:1-2). *'Because he has set his love (affection) upon Me, therefore I will deliver him; I will set him on high because he has known My name.'* (Ps 91:14)
- b. Soul – Positively expressed, *this is* 'what constitutes our personality'. The three functions and expressions of the soul are 'I will; I think; I feel'. Negatively expressed, it is the 'self-life', e.g., self-preservation, self-esteem, selfish agenda, etc. *How do we love God with all our souls?* Positive expressed - by developing our identity - our sense of security, self-worth, and significance - in the love of God. Negatively expressed - by denying the sinful demands of our soul when it conflicts with the revealed will of God. *'If anyone comes to Me and does not hate ...his own life (soulish life), he cannot be My disciple.'* (Luke 14:26)

We must love God in His terms (John 14:15, 21, 23). Jesus defined loving God as being deeply rooted in obedience. The desire to live in full obedience to God's will is supernatural, born from above. Beware of the nebulous concept of love rooted in humanism. The biblical love for God is rooted in a radical commitment to obey God's word at the cost of self-denial.

- c. Strength – How your soul life relates to the physical world. It is the practical outworking of your time, energy, and resources. To love God with all our strength, takes planning and diligence in the use of our time, energy, and wealth. What do you do with your resources such as time, energy, talents, money, and influence? Did you plan for it in prayer? Are you walking it out? *'Your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.'* (Matt 6:18)
- d. Mind – Jesus adds 'mind or intellect' (Mark 12:29-31). Our mind is the doorway into our soul that inspires our hearts toward loving God. Much of our life occurs in our minds. Our mind is an internal movie screen that continually shows pictures, memories, dialogues, etc. It never switches off. How do we love God with all our mind? By filling our mind with the loving meditation of God's Word. When we agree with God's word, we expose and reject the lies and deceptions in our life. (C.f. 2 Thess 2:10-11)