

It's Written All Over Your Face

Complete this sentence: “The last thing I would like to see before I die *is . . .*”

What was it? What is last thing you would want to see before leaving this world?

For Moses, it was the Promised Land. But he only gets to see it from afar. Never sees it up close. Never get the chance to enter. Seems little unfair, don't you think? After all those years leading the people toward it, and after getting *so close*, he never crosses the Jordan River. Never sets foot in the the Promised Land. But I don't think Moses saw it as a bad thing. He's already very old. Every *day*, for him, is a gift of life above and beyond what most of his generation had been allowed to see. It's no surprise to him anymore that he will never enter the land. He'd given up on that idea long ago. For him, it's enough just to *see* the land.

But what Moses really wants to see is not more landscape but *people* living in the goodness and mercy of the LORD. People with the blessing of God on their lives. However to have that blessing, to fully know the generosity of God in a land “flowing with milk and honey,” they would need to obey the commandments that marked them as the people of a good and generous god. They must *behave* like the people of God. So just before he dies, Moses leaves them as the *first and primary commandment*, “Hear, O Israel.” The first command was not to *do* anything at all but HEAR the Word. It is the same “first commandment” reiterated by Jesus when asked, what is the greatest commandment. (Mk 12:29-30). In every age, there is nothing more important than . . .

An ongoing experience of God.

The Book of Deuteronomy is written from the perspective of a people on the brink of tremendous spiritual and social transformation - a relationship with a god that only a generation before, *they didn't even know the name of*. Yahweh. I AM . Just a generation ago they lived under the curse of slavery; now they are about to enter a new life in which there was at least the *potential* of unlimited blessing: fruit of the land. Fruit of the womb. Good times, because God is good. But whereas, for Moses, it was enough to *see* the land from afar, these people and the generations to come, needed to actually *live* in that land in a way that agreed with the goodness of God. Because if they didn't, life could, in one generation, lose it's goodness, and even the promised land would become a curse. So the Book of Deuteronomy is, essentially, a handbook for the people laying out rules and patterns for the society and its worship, all with the purpose of continuing the *blessings*. They must continually *hear* the commandments so fully and so thoroughly, the commands of God must become so ingrained in their hearts, so much a part of them, that they don't even have to read them because *love of God would be written all over their faces*.

For us understand this Book properly, we must take a trip back in time to the moment when these people made their confession of faith: “**Shema** Israel. . .HEAR O Israel. This ancient confession of faith became known as simply “*The Shema*”

And if Jesus said that *the Shema*, “Hear O Israel,” is still the greatest commandment in the whole Book, we must then ask ourselves what does the Shema mean to me? Today?

Read Duet 11:18-21,26-28

Before we look at this passage, let me make a brief. . .

A Social comparison

Last August Wal Mart began stocking a full line of “faith based toys: action figures of Goliath and Samson took their place beside Spiderman and the Transformers. And we *could* say this is *positive* thing for people on the spiritual journey: toys which reflect Christian values and teachings taking over some share of the self-space in Wal Mart from toys and dolls that promote and glorify evil, destruction, lying, cheating seduction. Here’s something not only fun to play with but also useful to parents and teachers in teaching bible stories.

But would Moses be pleased with his Moses action figure? Did Moses say to the Israelites, “ Give your kids some toys and games and send them off to play? Can an action figure tell child the story of God? Or is there not a far more profound commitment required of the people of God?

But let’s reserve judgement on this, and come back to it later when we consider what this passage might mean to us in the contemporary church. But as we read Deuteronomy must envision the spiritual formation of the Israelite family. And just an offhand observation: by comparison, it’s pretty “hands-on”. Someone in Israel was telling the children the story of God. If we are to have the love of God “written all over our faces, the first thing we each must do is. . .

Make a personal identification with the Book

So it says. . .

“Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.”

By the time of Jesus, the Jews had come to take these words *literally*. *Devote Jews would* tie strips of leather inscribed with scripture on their arms and carry tiny scrolls of scriptures in boxes on their foreheads. These items, called “phylacteries, ” became standard equipment for the Pharisees based on these words of Moses: Had he not commanded us to do this? Ostensibly, these elaborate fashion statements were *supposed* to show the depth of one’s devotion to the study of the Torah. (Cf Dt 6:11 Ex 13:9,16 Prov 6:21)

But Jesus saw a problem with phylacteries: for one thing, in much of the ancient world people wore amulets and charms to ward off evil. Could not phylacteries become nothing more than lucky charms. But more to the point, he said of the Pharisees, “ They do all their deeds *to be seen by others*; for they make their phylacteries broad. . . “

In other words, the Pharisees, in taking these words of Moses literally, tying words of Scripture onto their bodies, were actually missing primary *intention* of the command: to get the Word of God into their hearts and minds.

To be spiritually formed, the Word of God must not simply adorn our walls and wrists and necks and foreheads, but govern our every relationship. What truly writes the words of God on our foreheads” are acts of obedience. And when our lives are lived in a spirit of worship, it’s written all over our faces. And Moses says in order for that to happen homes and daily lives, we must . . .

Seize upon each and every teachable moment

“Teach [these words] to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of

your houses and on your gates . . .”

What specific words are in mind here? Well, here Moses is reminding them of *the Shema* what Jesus called “the Greatest commandment.” Deut 6: 4,5 **AND YOU SHALL LOVE**. So what the people of God must do in every emerging situation is teach the next generation what it means to fully love God. But again Moses gives an instruction that is not *necessarily* to be taken literally: “Write them on the doorframes. . .” ‘Nothing wrong with writing Scripture around the door of your house if you want to; but not necessarily to be taken *literally* but more as a . . .

Metaphor of a marriage.

In a wedding, we come before our family and friends and we say, “This is the one I love.” And so, in the same way, we begin with God by saying, “Hear O Israel, the LORD, he’s the ONE. He’s my God. I take him to be my wedded God, I have no other God.

When two people fall in love they enter into these deep conversations, whether their sitting in a café or walking down the street hand in hand. And even though they’ve talked to each other all day long, later on, in the middle of the night as they lie on their beds, all they can think about is more things they want to talk about with their beloved tomorrow. And when they get up in the morning, the first thing do is phone their beloved to continue the conversation.

And then on their wedding day, these two take rings and they put it on each other’s finger to remind them of the bond even when their outside the physical presence of each other. And everyone will know by the rings that these two belong to each other.

And so the Jews, to this very day, nail a little metal box called a *mezuzah* to the doorframes of their houses. And inside this box is a little piece of paper inscribed with the words of the Shema “Hear O Israel” And when you arrive at the door, you touch it or kiss it and bless the house.

But like a wedding ring, that little box nailed to the doorframe must be backed up by the actual *lives* of the people in the house.

So Moses says if they are to be a people “married” to the god of Israel, they must always.

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Read the Book keeping the End in mind

“so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land that the LORD swore to give your ancestors, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth”.

Unlike human marriage which last for only one generation – “until death do us part,” God intends for each new generation to fall in love and live in covenant with him.

When one first discovers a relationship with God and authentic spirituality develops, it’s awesome. Just like when one first falls falls in love.

But after the wedding after the honeymoon is over, love must get down to the serious work of learning about and really listening to each other. And inevitably this involves creating rules for the relationship, such as: “You catch ‘em, you clean ‘em”. Or “Don’t talk about my nose”. And as long as the rules are observed, the relationship flourishes. When the rules are not observed, especially the major ones, the marriage seem less fruitful and life-giving. In fact, as we all known a marriage can completely wither and fall apart.

And so can a relationship with God.

So we need to pay attention in order to understand the "rules" of the human-divine

relationship. For Israel this meant : If you observe the commandments, of God, he will send the rain at the right time, and the fields will produce grain, the vines plenty of wine, the olive trees oil; the bees, plenty of honey and you will eat and drink and be satisfied generation after generation. But if you *don't*, the rain will stop, the land will dry up, and you will starve.

These words were addressed to people who understood the cycle of rain. Rain was what *literally* connected heaven and earth. So it was easy for them to draw a direct relationship between obedience to the Word of God and their survival.

But we don't live in that world. We have the technology. We may have vague worries about the rising price of oil, global warming. . . But it seems harder for us today to make the connection between obedience to God's commands and our continued survival in the world. But still, if we believe the Bible to be the Word of God, we must travel today towards the horizon between this ancient text in the Bible and modern life on planet Earth.

God said "[do these things] so that your days upon the land be multiplied."
So in what sense is the *Shema* still related to our survival?
What might help is . . .

An Analogy

On July 10, 2007, in Meadville Pa., 1,500-pound wrecking ball was being used to demolish part of a library when the cable snapped. The humongous iron ball crashed to the street and began racing downhill. The crane operator tried to stop it, but it rolled nearly three-quarters of a mile down the street, weaving from one side of the street to the other, injuring three people and damaging more than a dozen vehicles as it bounced from curb to curb. Finally the ball slammed into the rear end of Alex Habay's Ford Taurus stopped at an intersection, causing a chain reaction accident with two other cars at the traffic light.

"All of a sudden, the back windshield exploded and I hit the car in front of me," said Habay, 20, a junior at Allegheny College.

"I got out of my car and couldn't believe it when I walked back and saw this giant wrecking ball sitting in the trunk of the last car," said Meadville police Officer Brian Joseph.

(2008 ABC News Internet Ventures)

Here's the analogy: what happens when a really bad idea get's loose in a society? The run-away wrecking ball could be racism, domination of women, economic or political oppression. Who can stop such ideas from gaining more and more momentum? How can we control their impact?

Could the answer lie in one, ancient confession of faith. . .

Hear, O Israel. . .?

Let's come back to the action figures on the shelf at Wal Mart. The contemporary church tends to experience the Bible piecemeal – a little bit at a time: a memory verse, a favorite story, a thought for the day. The story of God gets broken down into tiny, convenient pieces.

But perhaps this approach to the Bible is like little kids in a ball pit. It's fun it's easy. If we see the Bible like this, we can pick and choose between ideas we find there. We can move through individual ideas without ever grasping the one overarching theme that binds them all together. But the problem is, without one overarching theme, what's to stop a really bad idea from running amok in our lives?

The Shema, this ancient confession of faith has such power against even the most disastrous of wrecking balls because it reminds us the **GOD IS ONE**. He has the power to hold

all reality together, Nothing is beyond his control. And this God calls us again and again to love him and each other within the rules of a covenant relationship. And when a people buy into this their collective strength is enough to halt the rampages of the various wrecking balls that intrude into our lives.

But the Shema also prevents the Bible from becoming just a bunch of rules or a text book from which we can construct dogmatic beliefs. It commits us to an ongoing discussion and *re-situating* of the commands of God in each new generation. If we really put these words into our hearts and souls we will realize that there is much in the Bible that is hard to understand even for adults, let alone children. Yet we are invited to continue this journey started so long ago by Moses and the people.

So if you ask me what the last thing I would like to see before I die, it would be the faces of those who love me and who I have loved.

When we HEAR the God of Israel, when the Bible becomes the lens through which we can SEE the God who is most fully revealed through Jesus Christ, we will love him more and more each day and it will be written all over our faces.