

Living Word Small Group Study Guide

May 3-9, 2020

Sermon Series: U R The Church

Week Two: "Safe at Home"

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week's Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday's sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

Suggested Opening Prayer:

Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.

Lord God, in whom we find life, health, and strength, through whose gifts we are clothed and fed, through whose mercy we have been forgiven and cleansed, be for us our guide, our strength, our Savior, and our Lord, all the days of our lives. We offer our prayers through Jesus Christ, Amen.

Sermon Series Theme:

Where is God leading us as a church? In light of what we've gone through as a community/country/world, what are the ways God is moving us to be a new or renewed church?

This Week's Sermon Theme:

Family is Christianity's Faith Forming Unit. "Shelter at home" caused us to focus more on those we are with at home. Home is still where faith is formed. Becoming our children's primary faith instructors has been God's plan from the beginning. The church's job is to provide the tools.

Sunday Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 6:1-9 (A group member should read the passage aloud)

For Group Discussion:

What does the text actually SAY?

The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.

What words are used to describe the content of what God directed Moses to teach the people? (6:1)

For whose benefit has God given Moses this direction? (6:2)

Two reasons are listed for the giving of these instructions. What are they (look for the words "so that")? (6:2)

What additional two reasons to "Hear, O Israel" are given in verse 3? (6:3)

Look up the content of verse 4 in several Biblical translations and try to memorize at least one of these versions. (6:4)

With what three aspects of our lives are we told to love God? (6:5)

Where are we meant to hold onto these commandments? (6:6)

Who are we to impress them upon? (6:7a)

Name the four specific times verse 8 suggests we talk about them. (6:7b)

What additional ways of remembering them does the passage suggest we do? (6:8-9)

What questions does the text raise for us?

The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Questions are suggestions, but open discussion is encouraged. These are “I wonder” questions that the group might want to pursue together.

We might wonder how or why these laws and the Israelites’ possession of the land across the Jordan were connected?

We could ask, why is adherence to these laws specifically connected to long life?

We might wonder, more explicitly, what is the relationship between “fearing the Lord” and “enjoying long life”?

We might wonder if this is why there is such an emphasis on “oneness” – were people dividing into separate factions?

We could also ask why the land is called a land of “milk and honey” when we often picture it being arid and desert-like.

If we read the footnotes to verse 4, we might wonder why this verse could be translated in several different ways.

We might wonder if there is supposed to be a difference between what loving God with our hearts, souls, and strengths looks like. Why are three different “ways” to love God spelled out here?

We might also ask, why is the emphasis placed on impressing them on our children?

Finally, are the directions to tie the commands and laws on our hands and foreheads, doorframes and gates, to be taken literally? Or is that just exaggerated language, like talking about them everywhere and every when? Or, are we literally supposed to never talk about anything else?

Commentary on the text:

The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.

See also: Matthew 22:40; Deuteronomy 5:6-7; Mark 12:32; Proverbs 6:20-22; Deuteronomy 6:20-25

It has been said that chapter six of Deuteronomy is the center around which all the rest of the book revolves. Verses 4 and 5 are known in Hebrew as “the Shema,” and have come to be known as the “Great Commandment” in English (although “Shema” means “Hear!” in English). The text is vitally important – Jesus even says, in Matthew 22:40, that “all the law and the prophets hang on this

commandment.” Coming just after the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy, it could be said that these words are, in a way, a summary of them. The gist of the Shema is twofold – to hear the words of God, and to love God fully. These words, in many ways, became the measure by which Israel’s relationship to God was measured by the later prophets. It is no coincidence that in later Judaism, it was these words that were recited every morning and evening, without fail – not as a ritualistic, pious gesture, but as a daily reminder for each of them to shape their daily conduct by these words.

We should note that these guiding words begin with a very specific claim – “the LORD is our God.” When we see “LORD” in all capital letters in the Bible, it is a translation of the Hebrew name for God, YHWH (“Yahweh”). So, in Hebrew, the claim of the Shema was that “YHWH is our God.” This is in some respects an emphatic restatement, or communal owning, of the first of the Ten Commandments – “I am the LORD your God, and you shall have no other gods before me” (Deuteronomy 5:6-7). In reciting the Shema, every Jew reiterated the claim for themselves, day and night – YHWH is our God. Because of the deeply communal self-understanding of the Jewish people, this was identical to the claim “YHWY is MY God.”

The words that come next are just as significant as this initial claim, but take some explanation. The words in Hebrew are “YHWH ‘ehad.” To be honest, this Hebrew phrase is ambiguous. Because “‘ehad” could legitimately be translated either “one,” or “lone,” or “only,” you could find the phrase translated either “the LORD alone,” or “the LORD is one.” Depending on the Christian tradition you grew up in, you may have been asked to memorize a particular form of the Shema as a child. Maybe you were surprised to see different words in your Bible today! Translators who choose “the Lord is one” believe the Shema was meant to emphasize the oneness of God – that God’s mind is faithful, consistent, not divided, and not subject to capricious whims. The reality of God’s presence and activity in one time and place is consistent with the reality of God’s presence and activity in all times and places – it is a statement of God’s consistent/persistent nature to say, “the LORD is one.” Translators who choose “the Lord alone” believe the Shema was meant to emphasize that YHWH, and YHWH alone, was to be the God of the Israelites. Given the fact that the later prophets make clear that this was a constant struggle for the Israelites, that the Israelites often found other local gods more attractive than YHWH, it is easy to see why this translation is often chosen. What is perhaps most fascinating is that in Mark 12:32, Jesus seems to indicate that BOTH understandings of the Shema were held to be legitimate even in his day! There, he tells a teacher of the law, “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but Him.” Perhaps, speakers of ancient Hebrew were much more comfortable with the idea of a single phrase carrying two different meanings than we are today!

There are also several different interpretations of the command to love God with “all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength.” It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word typically translated “strength” is, in perhaps awkward English, better translated “muchness.” In the early Christian movement, these three words were simply understood as a way to describe the human personality – “heart” referred to our passions, “soul” referred to our logic and reason, and “strength” referred to the limits of human potential. Thus, we are to worship God with all that we “are” and all that we possibly “could be.” For Jews, though, the common understanding was that to love God with your “heart” meant to give God undivided loyalty, “soul” meant to commit to God even to the point of death or martyrdom, and “strength” meant to yield to God whatever wealth or property God might call upon one to surrender. Ultimately, it is a demand to love God wholeheartedly, to the limit of our capacity to love. We could say that the “oneness” of God is to be matched by the “oneness” of our total devotion to God.

The imagery that follows, of talking about the commandments night and day, whether we are at home or traveling, binding them to our foreheads and our hands, and posting them on our gates and on our door frames, could be taken literally or figuratively. To be sure, orthodox Jews throughout the ages have taken them literally. But throughout that same history, those who have taken the words figuratively take them to mean that these words are to be a constant companion in life. Proverbs 6:20-22 suggests that to do so, to truly have them “on our hearts,” will, in some sense, actually protect us in a dangerous world.

This proverb also points towards the final, perhaps one of the most important points of the entire passage in Deuteronomy, and that is the command to “impress them upon your children.” Deuteronomy contains many references to children, because the book itself is aimed at the next generation. Deuteronomy is the record of Moses’ teaching for the generation of Israelites that would enter the Promised Land, just before his death, and after the death of the entire generation that had wandered the wilderness for forty years. The book pictures families in constant, lively conversation about their experience of God, and of God’s expectations of them, as the primary way to keep their faith alive. It asks, continually, “What will it take for each succeeding generation to learn to love the YHWH wholeheartedly?” The answer it provides is that these words need to be discussed, studied, and learned. Deuteronomy 6:20-25 makes clear that the way to accomplish this is through frequently telling their story. The key to a child’s “why” questions – “why” should we obey these laws? – lies in the fact that it is God who took them from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the promised land, making God their new “master to be obeyed” rather than the Egyptians. For Christians, the same answer holds true. Through Jesus, God has taken us from slavery to sin to the freedom of the Kingdom of God. That is why we are obedient, and why we bring God our praise and worship.

Final Thoughts for Discussion:

The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.

What do the words “the LORD is our God” mean in your daily life? Is it something you remind yourself of every day?

What do you think it looks like today to love God with all your heart, soul, and strength? Do you think your life reflects this kind of wholehearted love?

Whether you think the words about gates and doorframes, hands and foreheads, are figurative or literal, are there visible reminders of the words of the Shema around you in your world? If not, what value do you think there might be in having visible reminders of God around you?

Regardless of your present stage of life, are you impressing these words upon “your children”? Who do you think Moses meant when he said “your children” – only the family unit, or all of Israel’s children? Do you feel any sense of duty to God with regard to the religious education of all children?

How do you feel about the fact that the words in today’s reading are all imperatives (commands)? Do you view them that way?

Suggested Closing Prayer:

Loving God, we seek to be obedient to Your words, and we seek to love You with all our heart, soul, and strength. We thank you for Your grace, by which we are able to grow in our love for You. Remind us, always, of who YOU are, of whose WE are, and of our responsibility to propagate our faith to future generations. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.