

Directions for the Journey

Imagine with me if you would that you were going on a long trip to somewhere you'd never been before and imagine *not just* that you were going on a trip, but that you were leaving everything behind to find a new life in a new land. And say this was before the age of the internet and photography, before Expedia and Tripadvisor, and so you were going somewhere you'd never even seen before, somewhere you've heard about, but not somewhere you've seen. Admittedly this would be a tremendous task, not for the faint of heart. And if this was our situation, then wouldn't we want to do everything we could to find out what was needed to successfully reach our destination? What were the landmarks along the way? What were the dangers to avoid? What was the quickest route? How long will it take? Well, in Deuteronomy 6 Moses addresses the children of Israel with sound guidance for their trip that it might go well with them. You see, they were on their way to the Promised Land, to that land that God had promised to their fathers before them that they would possess, a land flowing with milk and honey. And before we think that this OT passage is too far removed from our experience to apply to us, let's remember that we too are on a pilgrimage to another land, but in our case we are on our way to the heavenly country, which means we would also do well to listen in to what Moses is telling Israel. Moses helps us with three directives for our faith.

Point 1: A pilgrim faith looks upward to God.

Our text this morning begins with the foundational statement of faith for the people of Israel in the Old Testament. What the Pledge of Allegiance is to the United States, this confession of faith was to the nation of Israel. And Jews today still recite this morning and evening each day and during their synagogue services. You'll oftentimes hear it referred to as the Shema, Shema simply being the first word of the verse in Hebrew. And that first word is "hear," "Hear, O Israel." This was a call to Israel, *to all of those in the assembly, the very youngest to the very oldest*, to hear the word about just who their God was.

"The Lord is one." He is One. He is not many. This was counter cultural. The people of Israel were always surrounded by foreign nations that were polytheistic, meaning they worshipped many gods, rather than monotheistic, which means belief in just one God. As a small sampling: there was Asherah, a Canaanite goddess; Baal, the god of fertility and rain; Bel, the Babylonian sun god; and there was Molech, the god of the Ammonites. *There was no shortage of deities you could look to for fruitful seasons, fruitful wombs, and a fruitful life.* But the LORD declares that He alone is God. He is numerically One. But He is also one of a kind. Whereas the false gods of the peoples were thought to

exercise dominion over one or two spheres of life, say the weather and crops, the LORD unconditionally exercises sovereign authority over every sphere: He is the lord over life and death, He is the lord over the governments of the world; He makes poor and makes rich; He brings low and He exalts; He closes and opens the womb; He hardens the hearts of some and softens the hearts of others. The gods of the peoples we're much too small; they could never compare with the infinite power, exalted majesty, and blinding glory of the LORD.

And this statement in our text this morning is no cold, lifeless academic statement about God. No, but this confession has a beating heart! It's not as if he merely says, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is God, the Lord is one." While that would've been true, that's not what he says, is it? He says something much much more. He says, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord *our* God, the Lord is one." And with that little pronoun 'us', a whole new world of meaning is opened up to us. God was not just a God, not just some God, no, He was their God. What sweeter words could they possibly hear in the midst of their journeyings? With this pronoun, the people would have been reminded that they had encountered God, that they had experienced God firsthand in their being delivered out of Egypt. When the LORD was talking to Moses before he judged Egypt with the 10 plagues, He said this, and notice all the relationship-language here, "I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians." *They had a practical, real-life knowledge of God, because of what He had personally done for them in history.* And is not the Lord our God as well? He has delivered us, not from harsh slavery to Pharaoh, but instead from slavery to sin and Satan. Left to ourselves we were in spiritual bondage, without hope and without God in the world. But God, being rich in mercy, sent His Son into this world to bear our sin and the punishment for our sin, for all of our sins, past, present, and future, that we might be set free to live unto God, for if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

Well, what does all of this say to us today? As we journey to the heavenly country, like Israel we too can plan on being constantly bombarded with and tempted by the gods of this age, lust, pleasure, success in the eyes of others, acceptance by our peers at any cost, earthly security, self-creation, accumulation of possessions, prideful self-sufficiency, and the list goes on. But God has thundered into this world by His revelation and has shown us that He is above all of these gods that can neither profit nor deliver, and He has shown us that the perfection of His own being and His covenant of grace prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that He is the One we should look to in our earthly pilgrimage.

Point 2: A pilgrim faith looks inward at the heart.

If we continue reading, we see that Israel was also to hear these words, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.” I believe there are three things here we need to observe for our spiritual health and growth in grace. First, we must distinguish the law from the gospel. In the Bible, commandment and promise are fundamentally different principles altogether. The law says, “Do this,” while the gospel says, “only believe.” Notice how verse 5, the commandment to love God with all of our faculties, only comes after the statement about the Lord being *our* God. *God graciously makes us His people, then He gives us a moral law to live according to out of gratitude for His gift of grace.* And this is the pattern throughout the whole Bible. Friends in Christ, this isn’t just a theological nicety irrelevant to life. This is a life-and-death matter. If we ultimately and finally look to our own obedience to God’s law as the reason why we are accepted by God, rather than to the perfect work of Jesus Christ, we will be lost. Now, this isn’t to say we’ll never be tempted to look at our works as the source of our salvation, I think we’ll battle that constantly, but we must turn from such thinking and instead cast ourselves upon the mercy of Christ as He is revealed in the gospel. The law is a rule of right living, not an entryway into eternal life.

Second, faith and obedience are a matter of the heart. “You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart.” “And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.” It wouldn’t be wrong to say that Christianity is the heart-religion. And this is important to pick up early on in life; I’m thinking of the youth here especially. Like King Solomon tells us, “Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth.” Obeying your parents by coming to church and coming to Sunday school is commendable and healthy and should be done. But be on guard against all of this becoming a mere formality, just another box to check off, like math homework on a Tuesday night. Instead, know that the matters of God, sin, salvation, the church, the law, the Second Coming of Christ at the end of the world, that all of these things have to do with you just as much as they do anyone else here. So, I want to challenge you, if you haven’t already, to take a personal interest in your faith. Ask yourself, do I personally believe in God? If so, what do I believe? Does my life, my thoughts, words, and actions, do they in some way reflect my belief? And, just a word of encouragement: no one has God completely figured out—He’s God after all; so, don’t be discouraged if you don’t know everything there is to know about our faith. Believe me, you’re in good company. Not only that, know that the rest of us here don’t always think, speak, and act in a way that reflects our faith. But glory to God, we are in a covenant of grace, not a

covenant of works. So, make the faith your own, however little you may think you know, however messy you think your life may be. And if you want to talk to someone about all of this, ask your parents, talk to your elder, feel free to reach out to me. I'd love to connect with you, we can always go to Katz or Coconut Kenny's.

Third, the law displays the shape of love. We might ask: What does God's law have to do with love anyways? Aren't these two very different things, love being warm and affectionate, while the law is cold and impersonal? Absolutely not! It was our Lord Himself who said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." *Law and love are essentially linked together for the Christian, they coalesce into a beautiful unity, perhaps, to put it crudely, like peanut butter and jelly—they belong together!* We know the apostle's words in 1 Corinthians 13 that "love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast," but it would also be true to say that love is having no other gods besides the Lord and making no graven images; love is not taking the name of the LORD your God in vain; love is keeping the Sabbath day holy; love is honoring your father and mother; and so on. And may we be a people sensitive to the Spirit's leading in seeing how the law applies to our daily life situations. Perhaps having no other gods looks like putting our phones down and picking our Bible's up; perhaps keeping Sunday as a day of rest looks like finishing your homework on Saturday or early Monday; perhaps honoring our father and mother will look like picking up our room when they ask. All of these works of love are ultimately for God's glory and for our good, that it may go well with us on our journey to the heavenly country.

Point 3: A pilgrim faith looks forward to the next generation.

The rest of our text this morning, verses 7-9, now shifts its focus to the transmission of this faith: "*You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*" We should know that the LORD our God has left in Scripture an undeniably clear testimony that the faith once for all delivered to the saints should be passed down from one generation to the next. I just want to share three passages with you that speak to this. Psalm 78:5-7 says, "He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments." Proverbs 22:6: "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will

not depart from it.” And finally, Ephesians 6:14, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”

We can ask: Why do we do this? We teach and strive to communicate the faith to our children because we love them and we want them to live a life in communion with the living God. To be without God is to be without hope, to be without direction. We in no way desire for our children to be without a foundation for life, constantly tossed to and fro by the waves and winds of this present evil age. *Instead, we wish for them to be grounded in the true Christian religion, for no higher honor or excellence exists for mankind, whose chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.* What better way to love our neighbor, our children, than to share the life-giving hope of the gospel with them?

But then we can ask: How do we do this? The picture that Moses gives us is one of comprehensiveness. The instruction of children, of youth, is a full-orbed task. It’s something done in at least four different ways. First, it’s done explicitly, with words, words reminding children of God’s great works and great love, and words of moral instruction. Second, it’s also something done implicitly, through one’s own life-example. Do we practice what we teach? And when we don’t, do our children see repentance and forgiveness modeled? Third, instruction is done communally. *We are a community bonded together by God’s covenant of grace; we belong to one another, as different members all belong to one body. So, we should be supportive of parents, and we should be supportive of the children in this church.* One example: Brant Hilverda came and spoke to the high schoolers this week, sharing with them some of his journey of faith, which was a real encouragement for the kids and the leaders to hear. And, by the way, we’re always eager to have new people come and share with them. But this can also take place through befriending a youth, a word of encouragement to them, supporting the volunteers and leaders in the different children and youth ministries here. Bringing snacks every once in a while is a bigger help than you might think. Finally, instruction is done prayerfully. All of these efforts must be bathed in prayer, for in this way we show our dependence on the LORD and the work of His Spirit to change lives. Pray with the children; pray for the children. So, friends in Christ we have a few different directions to look as we make our pilgrimage to the heavenly country: our faith looks upward to God, inward at the heart, and forward to the next generation. Thanks be to God for His instructions and thanks be to God for His promise to bring us all safely into His heavenly kingdom. Amen.