HEART, SOUL, STRENGTH

The Shema (Deut. 6:4) is the heart of Jewish faith today, inscribed on every doorpost and recited daily. Indeed, it was also the heart of the faith that Jesus sought to inculcate in His followers, noting that it is the foundation of salvation (Matt. 22:34–40). It is fitting that this faith statement is all about the heart itself.

Loving the Lord with all your heart, soul, and strength is not just a random collection of three elements of the body, but actually encompasses all of life! Moses explains the meaning of each element in the successive verses. In Hebrew, the word for heart is *lebab*, which refers to the will, the mind, the emotions, and the inner person. This is the center of relationship and choice. Loving the Lord with all your heart means, at the very least, memorizing God’s word and always having it in your thoughts (v. 6). It means teaching God’s word and a love relationship with Him to your children, and talking about it all day long!

The Hebrew word for soul, *nephesh*, is often translated “life,” and refers to the whole person, everything you do and say and see and experience. To love the Lord with all your soul means that you live differently because you follow God (vv. 7, 8). You talk about God all day long, and you do and see everything through the lens of God’s word. Loving the Lord with all your strength uses the word *khayil*, which is often translated as “army,” but here probably refers to wealth and possessions. In all you buy, and all you own, you are to live as through the focus of loving God. This is why you think of your doorposts and your gates as being emblazoned with God’s word (v. 9).
Write out Deuteronomy 6:4–25 from the Bible translation of your choice. If you are pressed for time, write out Deuteronomy 6:4–9. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
DON’T FORGET GOD

The Jews today take Deuteronomy 6:8, 9 very literally, and inscribe Deuteronomy 6:4 in a box on all their doorposts and gates, as well as often wearing a small box on their foreheads and hands. While this is not a wrong way to read the text, and certainly would remind you very visibly of your relationship with God, it is also not all that the text entails, as explained above in verses 6–9. By thinking and talking of God’s word and your love relationship with Him all day long, and acting in accordance with it in all you do and with all you own, you are truly living out this life of love for God. This is necessary because we are prone to forget all that God has done for us and ascribe it to our own talents and work. Moses warns Israel of this in verses 10–15. God is the one who gives blessings and delivers them, but the temptation is to forget Him and to tempt Him, rather than following in His ways out of gratitude and love.

As we have seen in previous passages in Deuteronomy, God is a jealous lover and longs to keep growing in intimacy with His people. It is important to realize that God would not act vindictively to end His relationship with the people, but rather act in the passion and anguish of unrequited love (v. 14). He had saved them miraculously so many times, and yet they have continued to turn from Him over and over. And as we see with many other nations, if people repent, God is always willing to save those people, even if the nation as a whole is totally given over to evil and utterly refuses to repent (Gen. 6–9; Josh. 2; Amos 9).

In addition, this is not a prosperity gospel, which teaches that if you obey, God will bless you, but if you do not obey, you will experience bad things. However, there is some truth to the idea of a prosperity gospel simply because following God’s laws is actually what is good for us, bringing health and freedom and joy. So when we don’t follow His laws, there are natural and logical consequences that come our way, including disease, addiction, and sadness. But it is not that God is delighting to destroy us; it is that we are destroying ourselves, while God is trying to save us and bring us back to the way that will bring us most joy and eternal fulfillment. Of course, there are times when punishments come, by God allowing other nations to intervene, but these are always meant to be redemptive as well, until the final punishment when everyone not following God is totally given over to evil and there is no way God can reach them anymore (Gen. 6; Revelation).
THE LORD ALONE

Translating Deuteronomy 6:4 is challenging, as there is only one verb in Hebrew. The people are to hear/listen/obey, but there are many possibilities for the translating last half of the verse. Here are a few:

The Lord is our God, the Lord is one
The Lord is our God, the Lord alone
The Lord our God is one Lord
The Lord our God is the unique Lord
The Lord our God is the only Lord

When considering the immediate context, where loving God is to infiltrate every aspect of life and to eliminate the possibility of worshipping other gods, the second translation above seems most likely. While God is certainly one and unique and the only one, the point here is not His oneness or uniqueness, but the fact that He alone is God, and that He alone is our God. As His followers, we owe our allegiance to Him alone, and to no other.

When we love the Lord with all our heart and soul and strength, we are living life differently than we would otherwise, and this is also described as fearing the Lord. Fear in the Old Testament refers to a faith relationship with God. While this can involve terror sometimes (when we sin and realize we deserve the sentence of death), that terror is dissolved by God’s grace and provision for our sin, by bearing it on Himself! Loving comes first, and it leads to obedience.

Yahweh also calls us to pass on the legacy of our relationship with God to our children or anyone we mentor. Younger people will ask us, why do you serve God? Why do you follow the Torah? This gives us the opportunity to share about our former slavery to sin, and how God is the one who saved and rescued us, and has worked many miracles on our behalf. Our testimony is the most powerful way to bring people to a saving relationship with God. Then it is clear that this is not dry doctrine or legalism, but gratitude and joy for all of God’s blessing and deliverance! In addition, obedience to God is good for us too, and leads us in paths of righteousness and life (vv. 24, 25). We are also to consider that we were the ones God brought out of Egypt, even though Moses is speaking to those who were born in the wilderness. Salvation is not because of what happened to our parents or ancestors, but it is living right now in our own hearts as well, and that is what makes it powerful and inviting and contagious.
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Matthew 22:34–40
Deuteronomy 11:13–25
1 Samuel 16:1–13
Jeremiah 31:31–34
Psalm 40:6–8
1 John 4:7–21

What other verses come to mind in connection with Deuteronomy 6?
GOD IS LOVE

The picture of Yahweh in Deuteronomy 6 shapes the understanding of God’s love and character in the Old Testament in more ways than almost any other passage, except perhaps Exodus 34:6, 7. Here, Yahweh is our God, not some impersonal force far away. He is the God who is close to us, who wants a loving relationship with us. Yahweh longs for our hearts, and this is the main focus of the passage, because true heart change leads naturally to obedience.

When we truly understand the love of God, we will want to think and talk of Him all day long (vv. 5–6). We will not be able to help but involve Him in our every word and action, as well as in our possessions and work. Rather than being a chore, it will be the great desire of our life to bring others into a similar love relationship with God (vv. 7–9).

Yahweh blesses us with so many things we do not deserve (vv. 10, 11). Even when we have the tendency to forget all that He has done for us, He continues to give us material and physical blessings. He also longs to give us spiritual blessings, but so often we are not willing. All these good things are not what we deserve, but God gives to us out of the abundance of His love and grace.

Yahweh loves us so much that He does not want to give us up to anyone else, and He will do whatever it takes to get us back, even if that means allowing difficult and painful circumstances to wake us up and turn us around (vv. 12–15). He has our best in mind, even when we are blinded by sin and cannot see it. And His love is true and deep, not giving up no matter what we do, constantly wooing us back.

Redemption is the basis of our response of gratitude to what Yahweh has done. Our hearts will overflow with thanksgiving when people ask us why we live the way we do (vv. 20–25). Unfortunately, today we too often respond to that question with a legalistic answer, telling people the right things to do, but without the heart relationship that is what God actually wants. Our outward behavior is simply a reflection of what is inside and does not save us in any way. If only Yahweh’s salvation and deliverance could be the focus of our every moment, our witness would be infinitely more powerful and winsome and contagious.
THE LAW AND THE COVENANTS

“The same law that was engraved upon the tables of stone is written by the Holy Spirit upon the tables of the heart. Instead of going about to establish our own righteousness we accept the righteousness of Christ. His blood atones for our sins. His obedience is accepted for us. Then the heart renewed by the Holy Spirit will bring forth ‘the fruits of the Spirit.’ Through the grace of Christ we shall live in obedience to the law of God written upon our hearts. Having the Spirit of Christ, we shall walk even as He walked. Through the prophet He declared of Himself, ‘I delight to do Thy will, O My God: yea, Thy law is within My heart.’ Psalm 40:8. And when among men He said, ‘The Father hath not left Me alone; for I do always those things that please Him.’ John 8:29.

“God’s work is the same in all time, although there are different degrees of development and different manifestations of His power, to meet the wants of men in the different ages. Beginning with the first gospel promise, and coming down through the patriarchal and Jewish ages, and even to the present time, there has been a gradual unfolding of the purposes of God in the plan of redemption. The Saviour typified in the rites and ceremonies of the Jewish law is the very same that is revealed in the gospel. The clouds that enveloped His divine form have rolled back; the mists and shades have disappeared; and Jesus, the world’s Redeemer, stands revealed. He who proclaimed the law from Sinai, and delivered to Moses the precepts of the ritual law, is the same that spoke the Sermon on the Mount. The great principles of love to God, which He set forth as the foundation of the law and the prophets, are only a reiteration of what He had spoken through Moses to the Hebrew people: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.’ Deuteronomy 6:4, 5. ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’ Leviticus 19:18. The teacher is the same in both dispensations. God’s claims are the same. The principles of His government are the same. For all proceed from Him ‘with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.’ James 1:17.” (White, Patriarchs and Prophets, 372, 373.)

The Blessings and the Curses

“Greater attention should be given by religious teachers to instructing the people in the facts and lessons of Bible history and the warnings and requirements of the Lord. These should be presented in simple language, adapted to the comprehension of children. It should be a part of the work both of ministers and parents to see that the young are instructed in the Scriptures.

“Parents can and should interest their children in the varied knowledge found in the sacred pages. But if they would interest their sons and daughters in the word of God, they must be interested in it themselves. They must be familiar with its teachings, and, as God commanded Israel, speak of it, ‘when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.’ Deuteronomy 11:19. Those who desire their children to love and reverence God must talk of His goodness, His majesty, and His power, as revealed in His word and in the works of creation.

“Every chapter and every verse of the Bible is a communication from God to men. We should bind its precepts as signs upon our hands and as frontlets between our eyes. If studied and obeyed, it would lead God’s people, as the Israelites were led, by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night.” (White, 504.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

What are the blessings that God has given you, both material and spiritual?

How can we manifest in our lives that we serve God alone?

What are some practical ways to love God with heart, soul, and strength?

What are some ways that we can make sure we see and do everything through the lens of our love for God?

In what ways might you pass on this love relationship you have with God to your children/future children, or friends and family?

How have you seen love leading to changes in your behaviors?

How can we combat legalism in our own lives and in our church?