

Deuteronomy 6:1-15

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[0 : 00] And please turn with me in your Bibles back to the passage we read earlier in Deuteronomy chapter 6. It's on page 151 in the Bible I have. We're going to look at just at verse 4 this morning.

But we'll be looking at the context more broadly, so do keep the passage open. And we just thank you as you're turning to the passage for your welcome again. And for your support for us. We're very aware of your ongoing prayer and encouragement.

As well as your financial support, it's very precious to us. And we're very thankful for your partnership in the Gospel. So Deuteronomy 6 verse 4 says this.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we do thank you for speaking to us here.

And we pray that our hearing of it now may become effectual to save us and for our ongoing growth in grace and walk with you. And so to that end, we pray that by the power of your Spirit, you would help us to attend to your words diligently, readily and prayerfully.

[1 : 12] Help us to receive it with faith and love, to lay it up in our hearts and to practice it in our lives.

This we ask in the strong name of Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever blessed. Amen. Amen. Well, what do you say when you don't know what to say? Probably quite a few generations now who have been taught that what you say when you don't know what to say is, of course, supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.

Because, as the song goes, even though the sound of it is something quite atrocious, if you say it loud enough, you'll always sound precocious. But I'm not sure that sounding precocious is always what we're going to need in the ins and outs and the ups and downs of life.

So I think it's pretty safe to say that the usefulness of saying supercalifragilisticexpialidocious is pretty limited as something to help us.

[2 : 23] But in this text before us, we have something, we have a set of words that actually do mean something. And it truly is what we should think about and say when we're not sure what to say.

We're at the very beginning of the book of Deuteronomy, where Israel's time of wandering in the wilderness is almost over. And Moses wanted to prepare God's people to enter the promised land. And wanted to prepare them for those ups and downs of daily life in the land. Each family would be facing different circumstances, different successes and failures, different diseases and joys.

In addition, of course, to everything that they would be experiencing together as a nation, as a church. And here in Deuteronomy 6, we find Moses telling the people the refrain, the ongoing chorus that should be echoing about all the time in the land.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. This is the track that should be always playing on the radio. This is the soundtrack for their daily life.

[3 : 34] Have a look at verses 6 and 7. These words should be etched on everyone's hearts, from the toddlers to the pensioners. These are the words that should be what you talk about when you're hanging out at home and when you're on the school run, at bedtime and at breakfast.

These are the words that should be inescapable. Verses 8 and 9. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand. They should be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

You might know that even today in Judaism, there's a practice of men especially, literally putting these words in a box called the tefillin and binding it to their hands, to their arms and to their foreheads.

And putting this text in a box that they call a mezuzah and attaching it to their doorpost. Whatever we think of that as an interpretation of these instructions, it's clear here, isn't it, that we're dealing with a really important set of words.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. In fact, if you looked at a printed edition of the Old Testament in Hebrew, even without being able to read Hebrew with all the funny letters, you would be able to tell that the people down the ages have understood that the words in verse 4 are really, really important.

[4 : 50] Because they print the first and last letters in the verse much, much bigger than the rest of the verse and the rest of any text in the book. So that first letter of the word hear and the last letter of the word one are written in a way bigger font just to really emphasize this verse.

So here's a set of words that is to serve as the constant echo as well as the abiding anchor for God's people day in, day out. So let's take some time to study these words together.

And very simply, we're just going to take it through three steps. We'll examine the text to see what it means. We'll see what lesson we should be learning from it. And then think about what difference it makes to our lives.

So let's start by just thinking about what this verse means. And of course, we start with that very first word, hear. Hear, O Israel, listen. Listen. You might know that this verse is often referred to as the Shema.

That's just the first word of the verse in Hebrew, the word for listen or hear, Shema. And it's important to note that even though these are words that people were called to say and repeat and confess and proclaim, these are first of all words to be heard and received and submitted to.

[6 : 09] The church father, Ambrose of Milan, points out on this point. The law says, hear, O Israel. It did not say, speak, but hear.

The first word from God says to you, hear. We should note as well that it's not just hear as opposed to speak, but also as opposed to discern or work out.

This is a declaration for us to receive. Our faith is always receptive. Our call as creatures and redeemed believers is always first and foremost to listen, to receive and submit.

Our Lord always works by a principle of grace, not of our own works, but we're always receiving from God's goodness. And so a high point of a church service is where people sit under the word of God and receive and listen, as we're doing now.

And so a Christian who doesn't have humility in his blood is not just missing out on a finer nuance of Christian life, but he or she is totally missing the point. We live in a world, don't we, and a culture where we're often encouraged to form or express our own opinions, figure out our own way, speak our own truth even.

[7 : 33] But here is a call to listen. A call to have teachable and listening spirits. Come with open hands to receive the truth from our God.

And it's not just listen as a one-off, but always be listening. Let this truth penetrate to the depths of your hearts and your soul and your mind.

Morning and night, day after day, wherever you go, hear this word. And then secondly, we see who should be listening. Hear, O Israel. It's God's people.

God's church are the ones called to hear this word. It's not just hear, O Israelites. Not just hear members of the church. Hear individuals in the church.

It's a call to hear this corporately. It's a collective, corporate hearing. It's a family hearing together. We're called to be aware that we're hearing and receiving these words together as a family.

[8 : 35] And then, of course, what is it that we are to hear? Well, the rest of the verse is very simple, actually, in the original language. Hebrew very often is a very simple, concise language.

It's just four words, actually. And it can be quite ambiguous. It could be read a couple of different ways. But they're all ways that complement or help each other and then work together.

And so we could read it as we have in the translation here. The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Or you could actually translate it as the Lord is our God, the Lord alone.

That's another way, a legitimate way of reading it. But let's just look at this. Let's look at the phrase. Let's look at the first part. The Lord our God. Or the Lord is our God.

This is not just any God. It's the Lord. It's Yahweh. It's the way you see the capital letters, you'll know. That means referring to that covenant name of God, Yahweh.

[9 : 36] It's this particular God. And we have his name here. That's worth noting. He's using his covenant name, Yahweh, the name that he used to reveal himself to Moses.

He is our God. He's the God who's made himself known to his people. And more than that, he is our God. He's bound himself to his people by covenant.

It's not just the Lord God, but the Lord our God. And of course, the mention here of his name should cast our minds forward through the Bible to that time when the Lord Jesus brought us to the culmination of the revelation in the Bible, where we hear God's name in an even fuller way than we see here.

And not just Yahweh, but his ultimate revelation of his name, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And so we witnessed baptism earlier, didn't we?

And little Rosa was baptized in the name, the one name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Here, O Israel, Yahweh, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, is our God.

[10 : 52] He is for us. He has bound himself to us as our God. He's committed himself to us. And we have a mark of that on us, don't we, in baptism.

And the second part of the phrase, the Lord is one. Yahweh, Father, Son, and Spirit, is one. And we can speak of his being one in two different ways.

There's an exclusive sense or a negative sense and an affirmative or positive sense. So the exclusive sense, namely that he is the only God.

As the Apostle Paul, as well as our Westminster Confession refer to him, he is the living and true God. So, boys and girls, you'll know this from a very young age, won't you?

Is there more than one true God? No, there is only one true God. Or if you've been learning the shorter catechism, are there more gods than one? There is but one only, the living and true God.

[12 : 02] But also here in the Shema, not only is he the only God, but also he alone is our God. We have no other God beside him.

He alone is for us. We owe our lives and our love to none other. So that's the exclusive sense. Then we have an affirmative or a positive sense for speaking of God as one.

So the French La Rochelle Confession of Faith, that was written in 1559. So that's the church I've been in, in Paris, that's when they use. It puts it this way. We believe and confess that there is but one God who is one soul and simple essence.

Spiritual, eternal, invisible, immutable, infinite, incomprehensible, ineffable, omnipotent, who is all wise, all good, all just, and all merciful.

Now there's lots of big long words there, isn't there? But the key thing is he is one soul and simple essence. For all the wonderful and varied things we may say of him, truly and very helpfully, we are ultimately describing one being, one simple essence.

[13 : 18] The 12th century theologian Bernard of Clairvaux had to use a made-up Latin word, because he obviously had to write in Latin, but he had to make up a word to describe his understanding of the truth here.

Those of you with any experience of learning music will have had to learn some Italian, won't you? Learn some Italian words for the speed and the dynamics of when you're reading the music.

So kids, you might have had this in piano lessons or trumpet lessons or whatever you've had. So if the music, if the composer of the music wants you to play loudly, we call that forte, don't we?

But if you want to be really loud, that's fortissimo. And if you want to play softly, you've got to play piano. And if you need to play really softly, you have to play pianissimo.

And the other languages have that pattern too, of adding letters into the word to strengthen the meaning of it. So you get it in French as well, and you get it in Latin.

[14 : 20] And so Bernard of Clairvaux, this French theologian about 900 years ago, said that God is not just unus, which is the Latin word for one, he is unissimus.

He wrote this, he is, if you will allow me this word, unissimus. Not just unissimus. He's not just one, but he is very one.

He is the onest. There's no division in him. There's no internal conflict in him. Sometimes it can be necessary to present some truths about God as though there's some kind of tension.

Now we might say something like, God is holy and just, but he is also loving. We even get that in the Heidelberg Catechism.

There's a question, is not God then also merciful? And the answer is, God is indeed merciful, but also just. And that can be a helpful way of explaining some aspects of what we see in the Bible.

[15 : 27] But we should acknowledge that there is no real but, or however, or nevertheless in God. He's not a sum of parts or a mixture of attributes.

He is one. He's God. He's not composed or complex. He's not made up of parts. He is what we call simple. So we might need to distinguish between different attributes like his love and his holiness and his knowledge and his power in our own way of describing him and our thinking of him.

But that's just because we're limited as creatures and we need those distinctions to help us to understand him. You know, if you get a prism, you know, like a glass, a triangular thing, and you shine a pure white light through it, it gets refracted and you get a rainbow of colors at the other end. But God is more, is like that pure white light. And our limited creaturely minds are like that prism. And so when we talk about all these attributes and characteristics of God, that's what we get when we get God's revelation of himself refracted through our own limited creaturely minds.

But as for God, our God, he is one. He's most one. He is simple. And so his love is actually the same thing as his power, even though we might need to think of them differently.

[16 : 57] But it's the same thing. And his power is the same thing as his knowledge, and his knowledge is the same thing as his goodness.

And all of those are actually the same thing as his being. Well, those are the various things that we hear when we listen to these words. That's what all of that means.

So let's consider for some time what we should be learning from the text. What's the lesson we get from this verse? And in a sense, it's quite clear, isn't it? We are to learn here that our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, our covenant God, is one.

That much is pretty obvious from the text, isn't it? And the surrounding context does a lot to underline that this is a really important lesson. We also get it hammered home in the rest of the scriptures as well, especially in the prophets.

In Isaiah, in chapters 45 and 46 especially, you get this refrain coming all the time. I am the Lord. There is no other. Zechariah, for example, when he looks ahead to the final day, to the time of the new covenant, in Zechariah 14.9, he proclaimed, And the Lord will be king over all the earth.

[18 : 15] On that day, the Lord will be one and his name one. And, of course, the truth and importance of this lesson is underlined all the more by the Lord Jesus.

So, in Mark chapter 12, when the scribe asked him to identify the greatest commandment, he quoted Deuteronomy 6, 4, and 5. Not just verse 5, but he starts with verse 4.

The Lord is one. And it's a lesson that features quite a lot in the Apostle Paul's writings. So, in Romans 3, in Galatians 3, he appeals to God's oneness as a foundation for various arguments that he makes.

Our God is one. Which means that we should remember that we live our lives before only one God. There's a Latin phrase that's often used, that we live coram Deo, we live before the face of God. We live only before the face of God, his face alone. It means that we're not living before a multitude or a pantheon of gods, as Hindus and other pagans and polytheists would believe.

[19 : 21] It means that we live before this God and not any other gods, not the God of Islam, not even the God of Judaism. Even though our Jewish friends would use this text and say that they worship this God, they have nevertheless rejected God's witness concerning himself in the person of Jesus Christ.

When he revealed the name of God par excellence as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is the one God before whom we live. And neither do we live before a multitude of saints that we would need to pray to or venerate.

And we don't live before the various gods of this world either, whether it's money or power or sex or family or freedom or equality or success or excellence.

Our God, the God before whom we live, is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and he is one God. So there's the lesson that we learn from this.

So what's the use of this teaching for us then? What difference is that going to make in our daily lives? I've got just four things for us to think about here.

[20 : 33] First of all, it allows us to find peace. It brings us peace. Let me quote you the Dutch theologian from the 17th century this time, Petrus van Maastricht.

It's a bit of a long quote, but I find it so helpful. He said this, It's a godly consideration of the divine unity. So thinking about God's being one is extremely effective for tranquility of mind.

It's going to give you peace. If at any time our mind is distracted by the variety of cares, by the clashes of civil wars, by the variety of church quarrels, or by private contentions with our neighbor, our mind wavers.

What then could comfort us more effectively than taking note, first, of that fount of evil, namely the baseness of our sins, and second, of the fact that for all these distractions and quarrels that come from our cares, there is no other remedy than to bind our soul to the one God.

There is no other remedy in all that than to bind our soul to the one God. As the psalmist says in Psalm 73, Whom have I in heaven but you?

[21 : 54] And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. Later on, that same writer, Van Maastricht, says that these words in verse 4 that command us to lead our soul back from multitude, so all the different cares and distractions, to unity, and bind it to the one God, to rest in Him alone, to desire Him alone, to seek Him alone, and to set all that we have ourselves and all that is ours upon Him alone.

Persuaded that He alone, because He is God, is sufficient for us in all things. Some of you might be familiar with a fairly well-known phrase from a fourth century church father, Gregory of Nazianzus, about God and the Trinity.

About how when he thinks of the one, he thinks of the three and vice versa. It's especially worth seeing how John Calvin talks about that quote when he quotes it in his book.

He says this, That passage in Gregory of Nazianzus vastly delights me. And then he quotes it, I cannot think on the one without being quickly encircled by the splendor of the three, nor can I discern the three without being straightaway carried back to the one.

So there's that great mystery, three persons and one God, one being. But note what Calvin said there, that passage vastly delights me.

[23 : 31] Meditating on God, contemplating God in what He is, obeying this call of the Shema to listen, can bring you great joy and peace.

I've personally found that there are a few better ways to prepare for worship and to fuel worship than to meditate on the simplicity and the oneness of God and all the implications of it.

I remember when I was doing my theological training, I had to spend a Saturday afternoon having to wrestle through a pretty dense, pretty technical, but very wonderful chapter of a book that was all about God in His oneness and His simplicity.

And it was really mind-stretching and mind-blowing and really wonderful to read. But when it really came home to me was the next day on the Sunday morning, getting to church, hearing a call to worship.

And in this church, the very next thing after the call to worship was always to get up and sing the doxology. And it really came home. So suddenly we were standing up and saying, praise God from whom all blessings flow.

[24 : 40] And just immediately realizing, which God? Who is this God? It's this God, this amazing one God that I was reading about yesterday, that I was meditating on yesterday.

Praise Him, all creatures here below. Praise Him, that one God above you heavenly hosts. Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Just hit me, that God I was reading about yesterday was stretching my mind about as far as it could go, not all that far.

That's the God I've come to worship here this morning. And it's just so encouraging, so helpful in preparing for worship. So that's the first difference it makes.

It helps us find peace and joy in Him. Secondly, we can find simplicity here. So we found peace, we also find simplicity. Which means I'm not constantly at the mercy of a pantheon of different gods.

I don't have to worry to worry about which god or even which saint I need to pray for for such and such a situation. I don't need to wonder about who's going to be willing to listen to me today.

[25 : 51] Neither do I need to wonder about what kind of mood God is going to be in tomorrow. He is one. He is our God. And you can bind your soul to Him in peace and confidence.

And He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is one tomorrow with what He is today. Boys and girls, I'm sure you might have had times when you've wanted something and so you've wanted to ask your mum and dad for it, but you need to take some time beforehand to think, well, which one of them do I ask?

Should I ask mum or should I ask dad? Maybe if dad's had a good day at work, then maybe that's the right time. But if it's been a bad day, then maybe I should go and ask mum.

Or maybe I need to try and get them both together or maybe I need to split them off. All those kinds of questions and, or maybe you just go straight above their heads and go and ask grandma or granddad. And I'm not saying I'm encouraging that kind of thinking.

It can be a bit sneaky sometimes, can't it? But that is what we do. But it's simply and wonderfully true that with God, I don't have to ask any of those questions. Where shall I go now?

[27 : 03] To whom shall I turn today? To whom shall I turn today? It's always the one God. And him alone. And he will always be the same. I don't have all those worries. It's simple.

I just go to God. In all my distractions, in all my sufferings, in all the quarrels and difficulties that I face, it is always to this one God that I turn.

It's simple and it's clear. Knowing that God is one just makes everything simple and straightforward even if everything on earth is complex and difficult.

So that's peace and simplicity. Thirdly, we find unity here. Our Lord Jesus himself draws the connection, doesn't he, in his high priestly prayer in John 17.

He prays for the disciples and all that will believe through them that they may be one even as we are one. Paul also builds his argument for church unity on this teaching of God's oneness.

[28 : 06] In his case, it's especially unity between Christians from a Jewish background and Christians from a Gentile background. So in Romans 3.29, for example, we read, is God the God of the Jews only?

Is he not the God of the Gentiles also? And his answer, yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised by faith.

So the one God justifies us all by the one means of faith in Jesus Christ. We all have the one God. We come to the same God and we are one in him.

And then just fourthly, as a final point of application, a key way that this changes our lives is what we see in the following verse, in verse five. So our translations don't always help us.

They often miss that there's a conjunction between the two verses. But verses four and five read really, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one, and, or you could even translate, therefore, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

[29 : 17] The reason you love him with all your heart, soul, and might is because he is our one God. Our Lord's oneness and simplicity, his being all that he is as our one God, as our one simple creator, as our one simple redeemer, is a call for us to give all that we are to him and only to him.

To give him the whole of our lives and the whole of our love. As we think of his oneness, as we meditate on all that he is and on the simplicity of all that he is, our hearts should be drawn towards him in love.

But just in closing here, let's not forget the starting point in all this. This lesson, this great truth that's so essential for all of life is a truth to be heard and listened and received.

It is this God who has spoken, who has taken the step down to condescend to us, to reveal himself to us, to tell us his name, to be our God, the one who especially came down to us in the sun who became flesh, to bridge that gap between us, not just the difference in what we are, but especially the relational gulf that we had created through our sin and rebellion, that loss of communion.

He is the one who came to save us by his death and resurrection. He's the one God to whom we owe everything. And now united to Christ, reconciled with our one God, we can know him.

[30 : 59] We can see him and contemplate him. We can love him with all that we are by the Spirit's help. The privilege that we have of being able to hear these words was hard won and paid for at great cost.

It's in our suffering and glorified Saviour that this God could, again, be our one God. And so Israel, Church of Jesus Christ, this God, he is our God and he alone is our God and he is one.

Maybe that we've neglected this glorious teaching of the oneness and the uniqueness and the simplicity of God. Maybe we've been slow to hear it. But he is patient to keep speaking these words to us.

It's a constant call to hear, which means the words are still coming to us. He is still speaking them to us and calling us to hear them again. So whether we have been hearing with cold hearts or mature faith, whether it's really getting through to us for the first time this morning, hear this.

Our covenant God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is our God, our only God and he is one. And he has made himself our God through Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection.

[32 : 40] So come to our one glorious God and find this peace. Find this simplicity. Find this clarity. Find unity with your brothers and sisters in Christ here and come to love him with all your heart and all your soul and all your might.

Amen. Let's pray. Let's pray. Thank you.