

## Home And Away

### **Deuteronomy 11:13-21**

If you will only heed his every commandment that I am commanding you today—loving the Lord your God, and serving him with all your heart and with all your soul—then he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil; and he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you will eat your fill. Take care, or you will be seduced into turning away, serving other gods and worshiping them, for then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain and the land will yield no fruit; then you will perish quickly off the good land that the Lord is giving you. You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the Lord.

Our Scripture reading this morning is one that is important to both us as Christians and to our Jewish brothers and sisters. But in the Jewish faith, this is considered by many to be one of the most important Scriptures. It holds a very special place in their traditions, and many are aware of this reading on a daily basis.

I'd like to share with you this morning a little bit about how this Scripture is used in the Jewish tradition. How many of you know what a *mezuzah* is? On the doorposts of many Jewish homes, you will find a small case. Inside the case is a scroll containing two Scripture passages. Some people mistakenly think that the case is the *mezuzah*, but that Hebrew word actually refers to the scroll contained inside. And it's the scroll that is important. The case is just a decorative way to protect the scroll from damage.

So what's written on the *mezuzah*? As you may have guessed, one of the two Scriptures is the one we read this morning. The second comes from Deuteronomy 6:4-9:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

So the content of the two readings is quite similar. Both mention loving the Lord fully, with all your heart and soul. They also mention keeping the words in your heart, binding them on your hand and forehead, and writing them on the doorposts of your homes. They also mention teaching them to your children.

The *mezuzah* is what has developed from a tradition of reading these texts literally. The *mezuzah* is a way to write the commandments of the Lord on the doorposts of a house. But there are very specific rules and laws around the *mezuzah*. The scroll cannot be printed using your computer or handwritten with a Bic ballpoint. In order to fulfill the commandment of the *mezuzah*, a specially-trained Jewish scribe must painstakingly write the letters on kosher parchment using a kosher quill dipped in specially prepared ink. The text must then be written perfectly and in the correct order, and of course, in the original Hebrew. There are actually over 4,600 laws governing just the writing of the *mezuzah*.

Then there are the rules for hanging the *mezuzah*. Many Jewish people will hang one *mezuzah* on the doorpost of their front door – and it suffices for the whole household. Others understand that the command from God is to include a *mezuzah* on every doorpost in the house. So there are rules declaring which doors qualify. For example, you don't put them on bathrooms or closets. There are rules to help you place the *mezuzah* at the right height and on the right side of the door. And the rectangular case is hung neither vertically nor horizontally. At a certain point in history, rabbis couldn't agree on which was the correct position, so they compromised. People now hang their *mezuzot* at an angle.

It is a general Jewish custom to kiss holy objects as a gesture of reverence, and this extends to the *mezuzah*. Commonly, as they enter their home or synagogue, Jewish people will touch the *mezuzah* with their fingertips and then kiss the fingertips that touched it. This is often

accompanied by the prayer, “May God protect my going out and coming in, now and forever.” It’s a pretty powerful thing to be reminded of God and God’s presence in your life every single time you pass a doorway.

A man once asked Jesus, “Teacher, what is the greatest commandment?” And Jesus replied, “Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The two sentence answer he gave is the first two sentences of the *mezuzah*. And though many Christians couldn’t point to the place this appears in the Old Testament, many of them do know that Jesus also said it in the New Testament. So this is an important commandment to us as well.

But Christians don’t take the rest of this passage literally. So how do we interpret it? Let me read part of the passage again:

You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates...

Did you catch all the places we’re supposed to put God’s word? Bound to our hands, fixed to our foreheads (those are other Jewish traditions I don’t have time to go into this morning), written on our doorposts and gates, and put in our hearts and souls. Which one do we as Christians focus on? Putting God’s word in our hearts and souls. And this reading even gives us instructions for how we can do that. God’s word moves from the pages of the Bible into our hearts when we teach them to our children, talk about them when we are at home and away, and when we lie down and rise.

My favorite part of that is that we are to talk about God’s commandments when we are at home and when we are away from home. Because, well, those are pretty much our options. You

are either at home, or you are not. But it's a way of saying that we should be talking about and thinking about God's word all the time. That's how it goes from being printed in a book to being imprinted in our hearts.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, had the same idea around communion. When he was asked how often someone should take communion, his answer was, "constantly." Okay, John was a bit of an overachiever, and he set his expectations really high. Does he really mean I need a Big Gulp of communion juice to carry with me everywhere? Probably not. What he meant was that we should participate in communion at every possible chance we get. But he didn't want to use the word 'frequently,' because that's a vague term. What is 'frequently?' Once a month? Once a week? Once a year? And so Wesley said we should constantly be receiving the Lord's Supper.

And I think that's a helpful way to think about talking about God's words when we are at home and away. If that's all we ever talked about, it would be hard to conduct a lot of the business of everyday living. So maybe talking about God everywhere and all the time doesn't really mean constantly. Maybe it means every chance we get.

Does that still set the bar really high? You bet. But I think there's a really important principle at stake here. And that idea is being aware of God's presence in our lives. Our Jewish brothers and sisters have made it a visual thing by placing *mezuzot* on their doorposts. Every time they go out and come in, they are reminded of God, and of God's command to be aware of all the commandments. Particularly to love the Lord with all your heart and soul and mind. How often are you reminded of that? When you wake up and when you go to bed? When you go out and when you come home? How often do you teach your children and remind them of God's presence and commandments?

So am I suggesting that *mezuzot* are the answer? Nope. I think they're a wonderful tradition, but I would never suggest that we should take a religious practice from another religion and reappropriate it as our own. But we can learn from other traditions. In this case, what we learn is that most of us could stand to be more aware of God in our daily lives. And there are some simple ways to do this.

Some people do it by making time for a devotional reading or prayer every day. It doesn't have to be long, but doing it every day makes you more aware of God. And the two most common times people choose for this are when they rise and when they lie down. Some people remind themselves of God daily by being sure to say grace before meals. I had a band director in high school who said we only had to practice on the days we ate. The same principle applies here. We eat every day; we should be thankful for the blessing of food every day; we should take time to be aware of God every day. Saying grace helps us to do that. And for those of you with kids, it also provides that opportunity to teach your children about God.

I went to seminary in Denver, and could see the mountains from school. My friends and I didn't want to get so used to the mountains that we forgot how beautiful they were. So every time we looked west, one of us would say, "Mountains? Good idea God." How many things in your life are one of God's good ideas? What if you took time to be thankful for just one of them every day?

God is present in our lives, everywhere and everywhen. If we practice looking for God on the ordinary days, that makes it easier for us to still see God when life gets difficult. So that's your homework this week. And every week for that matter. Be constantly aware of God's word and commandments. Amen and amen.