

Deuteronomy 6:5

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart,
and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.

Analysis

And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.

This verse commands comprehensive, wholehearted love for God using three Hebrew terms that together encompass the totality of human existence. Levav (לבָּב, 'heart') represents the center of thought, will, and emotion—the inner person. Nephesh (נֶפֶשׁ, 'soul') denotes the living self, one's entire being and vitality. Meod (מְאֹד, 'might/strength') literally means 'muchness' or 'force,' indicating every resource and capacity.

The command to love (ahavta, אהַבְתָּא) God is remarkable in ancient Near Eastern religion, which typically emphasized fear, service, or sacrifice to deities rather than affection. Biblical love is not mere emotion but committed, covenant loyalty expressed in obedience and devotion. This love is commanded—it's a matter of will and choice, not just feeling.

Jesus quoted this as the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:37), adding 'mind' (dianoia, διάνοια) to emphasize intellectual devotion. The threefold or fourfold division isn't meant to compartmentalize human nature but to emphasize totality—God demands every aspect of our being. This love flows from God's prior love (7:7-8) and redemptive acts (v. 12), making it responsive rather than meritorious.

Historical Context

The Shema and its surrounding exhortations were delivered as Israel prepared to enter a land filled with competing religious systems. Canaanite religion was polytheistic, with gods like Baal, Asherah, El, and Mot controlling different aspects of life—fertility, weather, death, etc. The temptation would be to hedge theological bets by worshiping Yahweh for some things while turning to Canaanite deities for others.

Ancient Near Eastern peoples generally practiced henotheism (devotion to one god while acknowledging others' existence) rather than monotheism. Egypt worshiped hundreds of deities, Mesopotamia had complex pantheons, and Canaan's religion was syncretistic. Israel's radical monotheism was unique in the ancient world, claiming that Yahweh alone is God and all other so-called gods are false.

The command to teach children (vv. 6-9) established intergenerational faith transmission as central to Israel's identity. Unlike surrounding nations whose priests controlled religious knowledge, Israel democratized spiritual responsibility—every household became a center for teaching Torah. This domestic religious education would preserve monotheism and covenant identity through subsequent generations.

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. How does the Shema's emphasis on God's oneness challenge modern pluralism and religious syncretism?

2. What does it mean practically to love God with 'all your heart, soul, and strength' in daily life?
3. How should Christians balance grace (God's prior love) and responsibility (commanded love) in their relationship with God?

Interlinear Text

וְבָרְךָ And thou shalt love	אֶת H853 H157	יְהוָה the LORD H3068	אֱלֹהִים thy God H430	בְּכָל with all H3605 H3824	לְבָרְךָ with all thine heart H3605 H3824
and with all thy soul	H3605 H5315	וְבָרְךָ and with all thy might	H3966	מְאֹדֶךָ:	מְאֹדֶךָ:

Additional Cross-References

Mark 12:30 (Love): And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment.

Matthew 22:37 (Love): Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

Luke 10:27 (Love): And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.

Deuteronomy 10:12 (Love): And now, Israel, what doth the LORD thy God require of thee, but to fear the LORD thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul,

Deuteronomy 30:6 (Love): And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.

Deuteronomy 4:29 (References God): But if from thence thou shalt seek the LORD thy God, thou shalt find him, if thou seek him with all thy heart and with all thy soul.

1 John 5:3 (Love): For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous.

Mark 12:33 (Love): And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.

Deuteronomy 11:13 (Love): And it shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently unto my commandments which I command you this day, to love the LORD your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul,

2 Kings 23:25 (References Lord): And like unto him was there no king before him, that turned to the LORD with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; neither after him arose there any like him.

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