



DEUTERONOMY

HPUMC BIBLE READING PLAN

GROUP GUIDE: WEEK 3

CONVERSATION STARTER

If you suddenly found yourself alone in the desert, what one thing would you want to have with you?

THE SHEMA PRAYER

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Dt 6:4–5).

These words make up one of the most famous prayers in the Jewish faith, The Shema. This was the closest thing the Israelites had to an official creed. They recited it each day as they woke up and before they went to bed. Jesus would’ve been intimately familiar with this prayer, and it’s easy to see how it shaped his worldview and teachings. But what does the Shema mean when it calls us to love God with all our heart, soul, and strength?

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.”

The people are about to enter a land where different people groups worshipped all kinds of different gods. Moses wants them to be clear who the object of their worship is supposed to be. There is no other God like Yahweh, and He is *ours*.

Love the Lord your God

The Hebrew word for “love” is *ahavah*, and this kind of love is about much more than feelings, it’s about action. God reveals his *ahavah* for us by acting to protect and rescue us. And God calls us not just to love Him, but to love others. Meaning we’re called to

practice self-sacrificial love for our neighbor. Love that wills the good of the other, even when it costs us something.

with all your heart

There was no concept for the brain in Hebrew. Everything we know about the brain, they attributed to the heart—positive and negative emotions, our will and desires, how we make decisions, our motivations, and perceptions about the world. This is why Proverbs 4:23 says, “Guard your heart because from it flows your whole life.” Loving God with all our heart means devoting all of our intellectual and emotional being to God, including our decisions, desires, thought patterns, and emotions.

and with all your soul

This may surprise you, but in Hebrew thought, there was no concept for the soul as some invisible, intangible thing distinct from our bodies that went to heaven when we die. The Hebrew word for soul, *nephesh*, referred to a whole human being. For example, Genesis 46:15 says there were 33 *nephesh* in Jacob’s family, and Numbers 31 refers to a murderer as a *nephesh* slayer. Loving God with our *nephesh*, therefore, means giving God all of our physical being—including all of our limitations, abilities, disabilities, skills, talents, and any other way we use our bodies in service of God or others.

and with all your strength

This might just be the coolest word in the Shema, because it doesn’t mean strength as in physical strength. The Hebrew word is *me’od* is an adverb, which means it amplifies or intensifies whatever word it’s next to (think “very” or “much”). It’s like saying, love God “with all your *muchness*.” This makes it the most expansive word in the Shema, because it can be used to refer to almost anything (it has an unlimited capacity). It means devoting to God anything and everything! We’re called to give God every possibility, opportunity, or capacity we have. As Christopher Wright explains, it means “Love the Lord your God with total commitment (heart), with your total self (soul), to total excess!”

Putting it all together

Do you see how beautiful this prayer is? There’s a reason the Israelites made this the first and last thing they said each day. They were reminding themselves to love God and

others with every facet of their lives—physical, mental, social, and emotional. In short, God wants all of us.

Take a moment to talk about this with your group. Which of these words are you drawn to in the Shema? Which do you have the hardest time imagining devoting to God—your heart, your physical being, or your “muchness?”

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What stuck out to you about the reading from last week? Was there a verse or idea that was particularly meaningful or challenging for you?
2. Often, we can forget to revere God and lose sight of His majesty. When was the last time you found yourself awestruck because of who God is and what He has done? How did that impact you? Do you need more of that in your life?
3. Our life is supposed to be centered around loving our neighbors. What does it look like practically for us to embrace loving people who may be challenging to love?
4. Looking back, how have you seen God show up in the “wilderness” moments of your life?
5. Throughout Deuteronomy, Moses warns the people against the practice of idolatry—believing that anything other than God can sustain us or satisfy our deepest needs or longings. What are some things or ideas our culture tends to prop up as idols in this way? What happens when we put those things in place of God—chasing after them with our time, energy, and resources?

WEEKLY PRACTICE

In September, we are focusing on cultivating a life with God where love can grow within us, and we believe this happens in the context of **community**. But community doesn't happen by accident! It takes intentionality. This week, we want to challenge you to invite someone you'd like to get to know out to lunch or to grab a coffee. Ask them, “How are you doing, *really*?” Remember, every friendship has to start somewhere.