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Deuteronomy 11:8-9, 16-21

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### **Bind It to Your Forehead**

Several years ago, a good friend of mine, Leah, gave me this *mezuzah*. It is a little box that contains some verses of Scripture in Hebrew. Leah is a Messianic Jew, a Jew that believes Jesus is the Messiah. And she still observes much of the cultural and biblical heritage of the Jewish faith. If any of you have been in the homes of observant Jews, you might have seen how they hang these *mezuzot* on the main door frame of their home. Often they contain verses from Deuteronomy, especially the *Shema*: "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord, is one, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul."

Some observant Jews place these on the door frame of every room in the house, others just on the outside door into the house. The Jewish law is specific: the *mezuzah* is to be on the right side of the door, on the upper third of the door frame, 3 inches from the opening. And they recite a blessing when they hang it up. As you can see, I haven't put our up yet, but I intend to.

I won't be hanging it up just to be nice, or because I have suddenly decided to follow Jewish law. But because this tradition is based in Scripture, in a Scripture that holds an important lesson for all of us.

The tradition of *mezuzot* comes from the book of Deuteronomy. It's mentioned several times. It was part of the great speech Moses gave to the Israelites, right before they crossed the Jordan into the land of Israel, to take possession of the promised land. Deuteronomy is "devarim" in Hebrew, meaning, "these are the words." These are the words that the Lord gave to Moses to say to the Israelites, to prepare them for crossing the Jordan River and what lay beyond.

Moses instructs the Israelites to fix the words of the Lord onto their hands, bind it to their foreheads, teach their children, talk about it constantly, "write them on the door frames of your houses and on your gates." Why on earth would the Lord instruct them to do something like that?

Look back at verse 16... The Lord was warning the Israelites: "when you go into this land that I am giving you, you will be tempted to follow other gods. You will be tempted to turn away from me, to disobey my commands." He *knew* what they would face as they went into the land. That even if they were to eliminate all the inhabitants of the land, they would still be surrounded by other nations that did not follow the Lord. They would be living in the midst of a society that followed other gods and held to different morals, so they would constantly be tempted to go with the flow: to be like the other nations.

Our situation today is not so different. We, too, live in the midst of a society that follows other gods and other values. We are surrounded by people who worship wealth, sex, health, success, security. We regularly come in contact with people who do not follow Jesus, but follow their own desires. We are bombarded with messages every day that are contrary to what we are called to believe as Christians. Think of all the ads you see just as you drive to work, flip through a magazine, or watch TV. Many of these ads tell us what the culture believes, not necessarily what God wants for us. Institutional Christianity is being pushed to the fringe of society, and so our culture pays less and less attention to Christ and his priorities.

If we are surrounded by such influences, how are we to know the right path? How do we

live in God's will and avoid turning aside? The Lord tells us to fix, bind, speak, write the Scriptures. The great theologian John Wesley wrote about this passage that we should fix the Word to our hand, so it is always in view. To bind it to our foreheads, "which you cannot avoid the sight of."

I don't know if God intended them to follow this command literally. Whether he intended for the Jews to literally wear the Scripture on their arms and foreheads--which they did, these were called phylacteries--or make all kinds of laws about where to nail up the *mezuzot*. But if you think about it, it does make sense: it was a constant reminder, a very practical, this world reminder: something that you could see and touch in the coming and going of life. It was something the children would ask about, or visitors to your home would ask about, and you could tell them: "I don't ever want to forget the words of God. So I wear it. I write it everywhere."

What God wanted was for the Israelites *not to forget*. If they forgot, they would easily turn aside and become just like the cultures around them. They were meant to be a blessing to the nations, drawing them to God. Some of the more literal translations of verse 16 say, "take heed lest your heart be deceived and you turn away." The Israelites were urged to have the words of God always before them, so that they would remember to keep the commands of the Lord.

We are under the same command not to forget. Our witness and our relationship to God are also at stake.

In John 8, Jesus says, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples." In John 14, Jesus says, "If you love me, keep my commands." As followers of Jesus, we are to hold to his teaching and keep his commands. Well, it should be obvious that to know Jesus' teaching and commands, we have to study Scripture. Yes, we need to hear it taught and preached. We need to hear it explained. But we also need to study it ourselves, so it becomes a part of who we are.

The psalmist writes in Psalm 119, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." The psalmist also says, "How can those who are young keep their way pure? By living according to your word."

When we are surrounded by many voices that tell us how to live: to live according to our desires, tell us any spirituality or moral system is as good as the next. It is easy, in such a climate, to forget the commands of God.

The apostle Paul instructs us in Romans 12, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

Pastor Dan told me you have been in the midst of a sermon series on the spiritual disciplines. These are practices that make space for the Holy Spirit in our lives. They put us in a place where God can transform our inner selves. Studying Scripture is one of these crucial practices, where we make room for the Spirit to work in us. Richard Foster, perhaps has been mentioned already... has written one of the classic books on spiritual disciplines, has written: "Many Christians remain in bondage to fears and anxieties simply because they do not avail themselves of the discipline of study. They may be faithful in church attendance and earnest in fulfilling their religious duties, and still they are not changed." Hmm.

By spending time in Scripture on a regular basis, our minds will be transformed by the

Holy Spirit. The more we let the words of God sink into us, the more they become part of who we are, and change us from within.

The commands in Deuteronomy are a lesson for us: to constantly have Scripture before us. When I was kid, our family always listened to the radio show, "The Prairie Home Companion." I got so I knew the voice of the show host, Garrison Keillor. And even now, if I want to hear the program, all I have to do is turn the dial on the radio, and I know I have found the right station when I hear the voice of Garrison Keillor. I recognize that voice instantly.

So many of us desire to hear from God, but first we need to be able to recognize his voice. We need to learn to attune our hearts to his voice, to know God and his voice so well, that we recognize it when we hear it. One of the main ways to learn to hear his voice is to be constantly in the Scriptures. For there we will get to know God and how he works, and learn what he sounds like.

And often he *will* speak to us *through Scripture*. That is often where we hear God's voice. I have found in my life, and I've heard the same from other Christians, that God often speaks through Scripture. So many times I've been praying about something, and one day while I am spending time in Scripture and prayer, some phrase or verse will just jump out. And I will know that is God's answer, that God is speaking.

We want God to speak to us in an audible voice or write things in the sky. And sometimes--rarely--he does do that. But most often, he seems to speak through the things he has put in place: the church, the sacraments, the spoken word, and, often, through the words of Scripture. When the Holy Spirit is involved, the written words on the page become *living words* spoken to us just where we are.

We need to stay in Scripture constantly so that we can face temptation and not sin, so that we will not be conformed to this world, and so that we can learn to hear the voice of God.

Moses gave them another reason for remembering God's words. Look at verses 8-9... We need to spend time in the Scriptures every day, so that we will have the strength to do the work that God has given us to do. The Lord knew that the Israelites would get scared when they saw the city of Jericho and when they began to think about the immensity of the task. "God, how on earth do you expect us to go into this land, take it over, and kick out all of its inhabitants? To take over fortified cities, kings, whole nations?!" God had promised that he would go with them and fight the battle for them. But they had to stick close to him. Verse 22...

I think it would be easy for us to lose heart too when we look at the tasks that God has given us to do--both individually, as as a church--in loving others, reaching out in Jesus' name, and making disciples. We think, "God, the task is too big!" God says, stick close to me, and I will go before you.

And he says that he will give us strength and skills to do what he asks us to do. When we spend time in Scripture, we will be equipped to do the work that God has given us. In 2 Timothy 3, Paul tells Timothy, the young pastor whom he is mentoring, that "all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that all God's people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." In the Scriptures we will find examples to follow, wisdom for decisions, and so forth. The words will shape us, become

part of who we are, make us into his servants. And as we read, we will be reminded of how it is God who fights the battle, and so we will find the strength and courage to carry on. Spending time in the Scriptures enables us to go forward into work, life, ministry with the right perspective, with a God's eye view.

In telling us to "bind these words on your forehead," these verses urge us to keep Scripture constantly before us, in our line of vision, so to speak. Before we were married, my husband Joel had his own apartment in Chicago. He told me how once he had seen a verse and said to himself, "That's a really good verse, I should write that down." So he wrote it on an index card and taped it up by his front door, so he would see it every time he went in and out. It wasn't until later he happened to notice that right near where he had put his verse up, there was a *mezuzah*. It amazed him how both he and the former residents of his apartment had come to the same conclusion: that posting Scripture is a good thing, a good reminder.

Sure, we can apply the text that way: it can be helpful to put up verses where you will see them in your daily routine. I've done that on occasion and it has been good for me. But these verses have a broader point: we need to have Scripture constantly before us, as a part of our every day life.

It is *crucial* for every follower of Jesus to spend time in the Scriptures regularly. If not every day, then on a regular schedule of some sort. Most of us immediately think, "but I don't have time for that." Well, then, make time. It is *that* important.

You know, if you want to get to know your neighbor, just saying "hello" every day is really not enough, is it? You have to spend time with them, have conversations on a regular basis. By the same token, a marriage will begin to fall apart if husband and wife never spend time together.

When we spend time with the Bible, we are saying to God, "I am taking time out of my schedule for you, because ultimately, this is the most important relationship of my life." If we are honest with ourselves, it's not that it is difficult to find the time. What is difficult to convince ourselves that this is important enough to make time.

How do we bind Scriptures to ourselves? Spending time with it regularly. You could read one verse, one passage, one chapter, or several. Just as an example, I read a psalm or a portion of a psalm and then one or two other selections from the Old and New Testament. There have also been times where I read the same passage each day for several months, so that it would really sink in. Another time, I took a favorite passage and thought about one phrase every day.

Memorizing Scripture is a really good way to bind it to your forehead. One author I read talked about how he had learned memory verses as a child, and how they still come back to him even later in life. He writes, "I never forgot them, and God used them in countless ways through the years."

If you are not the type to sit down and read, there are other ways to spend time in Scripture. My husband has found a system that works well for him: he listens to a recording of the Bible on his MP3 player while he is walking. I have heard that there are ways to have Scripture passages e-mailed to you. Find some way that works for you!

Whatever method you chose, there are some things to keep in mind. It's important to spend time alone with Scriptures and in a quiet place. We need to set aside that time alone, for that purpose--to turn down the noise of the world, so we can hear the voice of God. Sometimes it's good to find a specific spot that is designated for that purpose. Find the right time of day that works for you, and the right conditions that will help you focus. For some people, what works best is to have regularly scheduled retreats, setting aside time to study and reflect.

I also recommend starting your time with prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to make the words clear to you and to work in you through them. Change in our inner selves requires our willingness and our humility, and it requires the work of the Spirit. Sometimes it is just hard to understand, and we need the help of the Spirit.

It will be hard in the beginning, if you are not used to it. Start with small steps. For people who are new to the Bible or new to reading it regularly, I don't recommend starting in Genesis with the plan to read all the way through. Inevitably, you will get bogged down in Leviticus or Ezekiel, and give up. Instead, start with the New Testament or the Psalms.

Whatever you chose to do, remember that it is important to do so regularly and consistently, to be alone and quiet, and to ask for the help of the Spirit.

"Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds, bind them on your foreheads." Through these words of Deuteronomy, the Lord is calling us to spend time with him regularly, to meet him in Scripture. If we keep Scripture constantly before us, we will be able to stand against temptation, and so we will learn to hear the voice of God. We will be given strength and skills to do the tasks God has given us to do. If it is a part of our everyday life, it will gradually find its way to the center of our being, and transform us from the inside out.

When we spend time studying Scripture, we will find truth, life; we will grow, be transformed. It will be like it says in Psalm 1: "Blessed are those who delight in the law of the Lord and meditate on his law day and night. They are like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither." Amen.