

The Spiritual Formation of Jesus: Grounding (Deut. 6:1-9; 7:9)

Today I want to continue our study of the spiritual formation of Jesus. You'll remember the premise from last week that Jesus developed in his earthly life in the same manner common to all Jews in his day. Heb. 5:8 piques our interest where it says, "Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered." He shared in the same experience of life as the Jews of his day, and that through these experiences, he learned obedience—another way to think of this is agreement with God, meaning then that he ordered his life according to his growing knowledge of God.

We saw that the point of the Hebrews passage was to reinforce the idea that Jesus was fully human, just like us in every respect, that the life he lived wasn't based on "insider" information, but rather was gained in the same way available to all. This means, then, that we also have access to the same means which will form our inner life to match his so that the life we live will display the characteristics true of him.

Jesus' self-understanding was progressive, and we'll dive deeply into this next week. For today then, we want to discover the elements that grounded him, that provided the foundation for his life forming him as the person he was.

As we consider these elements, recall that Jesus was born into a particular culture and faith history. Because of this, we're able to piece together elements that defined them and would have been common to his early development. Last week we saw that Jesus was born into a household of faith to godly parents, so these elements would have been woven into his life. A foundational piece of this comes from the first few verses Gabi read for us moments ago from Deut. 6—it was the primary confession of the Jewish faith known as the Shema that reads, "Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one."

This primary confession established for Jews that their life was inextricably wrapped up in the life of YHWH. In our English translations of scripture, wherever the word Lord is written in all caps, it represents the self-disclosed name of God. Whenever this name appeared in the text, instead of reading the name itself, Jews would substitute the word Lord—Adonai—as a preventive against any possible misuse of God's name. But YHWH was the name God gave to Moses when asked, and it identified Israel's God as distinguished from the names for deities used by surrounding nations and cultures.

Inherent in the name is the context in which Israel received it. That history remembers the delivery of Israel from their captivity in Egypt by the power of God exercised through Moses. It recalls God's love redeeming those claimed as God's own by virtue of the covenant made with Abraham centuries before. The opening chapters of Deuteronomy review the history of God's interaction with Israel in the wilderness, all of which bore witness to the idea that Israel's God was a living God, dynamically engaged in relationship with a people belonging to God being shaped to fulfill the promise God gave to Abraham that his descendants would be blessed to be a blessing to the world. This God was Israel's God. This God journeyed with Israel. This God sustained the people of Israel. And this covenanted love is what Israel confessed in the Shema—they belonged to YHWH.

Israel's response to this immediately followed the Shema: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. This idea, that the people of God were to be solely devoted to YHWH was imprinted in the life of the faithful Jew. Their heart—that is, the decisions they made, their soul—that is, the character of their life, and their strength—that is, their actions or behaviors were to be guided by God, their lives were to be aligned with God's life. And in the pages of the New Testament we see this imprinted in the life of Jesus, for when asked about the most important commandment, his answer was to recite the Shema including the response to love God in every aspect of life.

Specifics in how this was done were expressed in what we might call the executive summary of the Law of Moses—the 10 Commandments, identified in the fifth chapter of Deuteronomy, and these, according to vs. 6 of our text were to be internalized—they were to orient one's life to the life of God. Going on in the text we find that parents were to impress them upon their children—we saw the importance of this last week. Parents were to create a

home environment reflecting these commandments so that they would become the normal response for the way life was lived. They formed the backdrop for the household's approach to life. The instruction to tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads meant that the commandments were to define what you do and how you think. Having them on the doorframes of homes and on the gates simply meant that this household would be described as the kind of people whose lives were joined to God. The life of God covered every aspect of life, and living in that stream of consciousness revealed the glory of God. That's the essence of the summary statement in Deut. 7:9—"Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments."

This identity and orientation to life soaked into the life of Jesus as he matured in this faith history and culture. His life of faith was informed by the prayer book of Israel: the Psalms, in which the opening Psalm declared: "Blessed is the one whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night." To mediate is another way of saying considers or contemplates—it describes one whose thoughts are turned towards God to discover God in the life shared with God and learning from God how to live that life. The promise of that opening Psalm is that the one who soaks in that stream will be ever fruitful and live vibrantly. And it closes by affirming that the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, meaning it is perfectly safe to live in that awareness.

Anchored into this foundation, Jesus was assured of his union with God—he belonged to God. His life was aligned with God as the commandments guided him—he was oriented to God. He experienced joy—that sense of being held in the grip and care of God's love, by living under God's direction. These truths, in turn, shaped his worldview, that he not only lived in the immediate reality of his physical life, but also in the larger reality of God's kingdom, of God's life and Spirit over, above, and around all of life. This guided his approach to life—how does this moment fit into God's purpose? how does this moment reveal the character of God? It gave him the settled assurance of his place in the world—that He was never beyond the reach of God's love and care. He knew who he was—a human being created in God's image displaying God's character. He knew who God was—the living sovereign over all of creation. And Jesus understood his relationship to all else—he was blessed to be a blessing.

Now we've covered these foundational elements very briefly—there's much more we could add to this, and we'll explore some of this additional material next week. But I wonder if you've noticed that there hasn't been anything we've said about the foundational elements of Jesus' life that couldn't also apply to your life and mine? Which might then lead you to ask: what are the foundational elements of my life? To what or to whom is my life oriented? Who or what is my God? What frames my approach to life? What is the greatest commandment in my life? Do I have settled assurance of my place in the world? What is my primary identity in life? And how does this govern my sense of relationship to all else? Do I consider myself blessed to be a blessing?

These may not be the kind of questions we're used to answering. We don't always consider things of this nature even in church. But these foundational questions shape who we are. Too often we settle for absorbing beliefs of faith or practices of faith as the substance of faith, but sadly they don't often have a bearing on the way we live our lives. More to the point, when beliefs and practices comprise faith for us, we can find ourselves spiritually impoverished when reality punches us in the gut and we suddenly feel alone.

Foundation is what you stand on when the rug is pulled from underneath you. Foundation tells you that you belong to God through Jesus Christ. That God demonstrated love towards you through the cross, and by that you are united to God by the Spirit of Jesus who dwells within you. That God who sent Jesus, who provided the ability for Jesus to be faithful to his call, who sent the Holy Spirit to dwell within you, this God knows your situation. This God is present to you. This God will provide all that you need in this and every moment. This God watches over you.

You build foundation in your life as you begin your day acknowledging that you belong to God through Jesus Christ. You confess that you are a child of God and you commit yourself

to loving God today in all that you do. Just today. Don't worry about tomorrow. You ground yourself in God's life determined to love God today. You place your life in the hands of the Spirit to guide you this day. You orient this day by agreeing with God about the best way to live with others today. You train yourself to ask: how does this moment serve God's purpose? how is God revealed in this moment, in this decision, in this action? At day's end you reflect on God's care through the day, how you experienced God in the moment. When you wake up tomorrow, you do it all again, for as many tomorrows you have in you.

When you do this, your foundation will grow strong, you will find God faithful, you will discover yourself blessed to be a blessing. And God smiles. AMEN