

# THE ANCHOR OF THE FAMILY

GOD IN MY EVERYTHING. JADE HOLOWNIA. 2013 NOVEMBER 03.

DEUTERONOMY 6:4-9



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Thank you, Jeremy and Worship Team, for leading us.

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The clock on the dashboard said 6:14 p.m. and Sarah was stuck in traffic yet again. She turns her eyes away from the red brake lights in front of her over to the passenger seat beside her and sees a stack of work – reports that she's got to go through before tomorrow, although Sarah has no idea when she's going to be able to get to this.

She glances at her phone and sees a couple dozen email messages that she hasn't had time to respond to. There's a call from her mom, whom she had been meaning to call, especially given dad's medical condition.

"I really need to do a better a job of staying in touch," Sarah says to herself.

And then there's that text message from her husband, Nick, which ties her stomach up in knots because she remembers the argument they got into last night, which was left unresolved.

Sarah's attention returns to more pressing things: "What are we going to eat for dinner? There's barely 30 minutes from the time I get home until Timmy's soccer practice, and he can't miss another practice. And Lauren has tried out for this dance team – who knows when the practices for that are going to be. If she makes it, she's been told it that it requires a total commitment and that she'll need to be there every time."

There's a mountain of laundry waiting for Sarah at home, and the sink is still plugged because the plumber can only come during the daytime – and nobody's there during the daytime.

Sarah feels like she is drowning.

Just then, the phone rings. It's Sarah's long-time friend. "How are you doing?" she says. Sarah begins to unload some of her many stressors. Her friend empathizes, and then says, "Oh, Sarah, things are going to slow down. In the meantime, you just need to hold on. Just hold on."

"Hold on?" Sarah thinks, feeling more exasperated. "What in the world am I supposed to hold on to?"

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Well, maybe some of you here tonight – maybe most of you – can understand and can relate a little bit to what Sarah's going through. Yeah, maybe the details are a bit different, but we know what it's like to feel like we're a little lifeboat in the middle of a powerful storm. The waves and the wind are crashing against our boat – the expectations, the responsibilities, the deadlines, the pressures. We wonder if our little boat's going to make it. We wonder. In the midst of all these forces pushing at us and pulling at us, we wonder, "*What* can we hold on to?"

Well, thousands of years ago, Moses was leading God's people through the wilderness, and as they approach the brink of the Promised Land, Moses knew that, in this new land, the people of God were going to face a thousand new options, new gods, new influences.

You know, freedom is a great thing; it's a gift. But unless your life is tethered to something, all that freedom won't be very freeing; it will just pull you apart in a thousand directions.

So Moses gives God's people, back then and today, a commandment – the Great Commandment. *This* is what you can hold on to in the midst of all kinds of options and choices before you; hold on to this one thing. What is that one thing?

If you have your Bibles, I invite you to turn to the Book of Deuteronomy, chapter six; it's also going to be up on the screen. Hear God's Word:

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. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

(Deuteronomy 6:4-9<sup>†</sup>)

Let's pray together.

Spirit of God,

We live in a time like your people of years ago, where there are so many options, so many things to give our hearts to, so much freedom. Yet, Lord, sometimes we feel fragmented; we feel pulled into a thousand different directions.

Would you open our eyes to the one thing – the one essential thing, the anchor – that we can hold on to and that can hold us?

Open our eyes and our ears and our hearts to receive from you tonight, we pray.

In Christ's name.

Amen.

We're continuing here in a series at Tenth called *God in My Everything*, and tonight we're looking at the topic of family. How do we experience God in the midst of our families? What do families look like? I recognize that, as I talk about families, many of you wonder, "Why are you bringing this to us?" There's a lot of younger people here. "What does family look like *for us*?" We're going to get in to that in just a moment and see how the Bible defines family.

You know that in this series, Pastor Ken Shigematsu has used an image of the trellis to talk about how it supports our friendship in Christ. Tonight, as I read through this text, there's another image that comes to mind, and it is that of an anchor: In the midst of so many options, so many things to give our hearts to, what is the one thing that is going to anchor us, the one thing that we can hold on to?

At a certain section in the Niagara Falls, boaters are greeted with two signs as they approach. The first sign says, "Do you have an anchor?" The second sign says, "Do you know how to use it?"

In the midst of turbulent waters, do we have an anchor? What is that anchor? How do we use it?

Tonight, I think there are really four things that emerge from this passage of Scripture that I want to explore with you. First, who is this anchor for? What do we mean when we say family? Second, what is the anchor? Third, the Scripture gives us an indication of when can we turn to this anchor. And finally, how? How do we do it? What

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<sup>†</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, *New International Version*®, NIV®.

does it look for us to hold on to this anchor? So: who, what, when and how.

Let's start with the *who*: *Who* is this anchor *for*? What does family mean?

Family means a lot of different things to us. Think of your family. Think of the families around where you live. First of all, we have the iconic Western nuclear family. We have single-parent families. We have blended families. We have extended families. We have cross-generational families. We have families without children. We have adoptive and foster families.

We also know that families look different over time. Here's a picture of a family from the 1950s. Next, my personal favourite: a family from the '80s. (You know, Jay, you and Milissa haven't changed a bit!) Then we've got the 21st century family – the caption on this one was “Twenty-first-century family bonding.”

Families look different. What is a picture of family from the Scriptures? What is the Bible's definition of family?

Well, we read it in our text; it actually says, in verse 4, “**Hear, O Israel!**” Who is this addressed to? It is addressed to the family of God – the family of faith. This is addressed not to one or two parents with their children but actually the entire community of faith, from young to old and everything in between. Our picture of family from the Scriptures is, first and foremost, the family of faith. It's been said that blood runs thicker than water, but according to the Bible, something runs even thicker than blood: faith.

Jesus once looked at his followers and said, “**Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? ... [W]hoever does the will of my Father**” (Matthew 12:48-50). We have been connected to a family – a family of faith. Because of Jesus and because of the Holy Spirit, we are brothers and sisters. Because of Jesus, you have children – perhaps not biological children, but there are kids or youth upon whom you have influence. You have aunts and uncles.

We have been connected together, so as we talk about family tonight, let me remind you to expand your definition of family. If you're here tonight and, as I talk about families, a big question mark comes to mind and you say, “Well, my family doesn't live here,” then let me invite you to think about who is around you with whom you can let your guard down, with whom you can be yourself, with whom you can talk about Jesus, with whom you can share your prayer requests. Maybe they're your roommates or small group. Who are your spiritual friends – the people whom God has brought around you? Let's think about them as our family.

If you're here tonight and your family looks a little bit like mine – perhaps a very typical Western nuclear family – we, too, are invited to expand our definition. For the past four or five years, my wife, Brandy, and our kids and I have had the privilege of expanding our family: We've had a number of students who live with us, including many from the Third Service, one of whom is here tonight. We've had the privilege of sharing Life Together over meals, cooking together, sharing bathrooms and refrigerator space, celebrating good things together, weeping together – and our lives have been enriched. Some of these people have helped to raise our kids.

So, who is the family that we are talking about? It's the family of God.

Next, *what* is this anchor exactly anyway? Now that we know who it's for, *what* is this anchor?

We see it in verses 4-5: “**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.**” What the Scripture is saying is: “What is to be the very centre – the heart – of your life? of your community? of your small group? of your family? of your church? What is to be right at the very centre? What is to be your anchor that you can hold on to? It is this: love. Love the Lord your God with your heart, with your soul and with your strength.”

You see, God's people, as I mentioned before, were heading into a time of a thousand options and a thousand

gods, and Moses knew that they would be pulled in all different directions; that in the midst of such freedom, without something that their lives were attached to, they would get pulled apart; that they would be tempted to give their hearts to so many different things. They would have wanted to have it all, and in the end they would have been left with nothing. So Moses says, "I want you to come back to this one thing. Don't forget this one thing. This is the most important."

Jesus would later say that all of the law and the prophets can be summarized with this: love.

Love God with everything you are – make that your one goal; make that the defining characteristic of your life. And when you do that, when this is your one thing, all those other good things will find their proper place.

This sounds kind of simple, and yet it's very difficult to live out, isn't it? It seems to me that there are lots of other good things that want to become ultimate things.

Let me give you an example from the Holownia family.

I'm a hockey dad: I have two boys who play hockey. Every Saturday morning, I am up way, way, way too early, driving and watching my kids, in a very cold arena, skate around – and I love it. They love it. There's so much that is great that comes out of this: The opportunity to be in team sports; my getting to stay connected with people outside of the church community, which I value.

There's so much that is great about this, but there's also another side to being a hockey dad – let me call it "hockey culture." There are some unwritten rules about having your son or daughter in hockey, and they go like this (and this applies to many other activities and sports): If you really want your kid to succeed, you need to make sure that they're there at every practice because they need to develop. And, of course, they absolutely have to be at the games – *every* game – because you can't let your team down. So you need to be willing to drop other things on your schedule to make that happen. And if you really want your kid to be successful, then, well, you should probably sign them up for a power-skating clinic, which runs on Monday nights for two hours, at the cost of \$300. And don't forget the spring break camp and the summer camp and the Christmas tournament and the spring break tournament. And all these things just start adding up. You sign for this and suddenly it just starts growing and expanding – and there seems to be plenty of other parents who quite happily are spending that money and that time. It's as if hockey is not content to be on the periphery but wants to take the centre spot.

There's something in our hearts that finds it easy to put something else at the very centre and make it our anchor and our master. Tim Keller puts his finger on this when he says that "Money" – and, I should add, time – "flows effortlessly to that which is its god."

Where are we willing to spend our money and our time, which seem to effortlessly flow to what we value most? What is that thing for you? Could it be that it is starting to edge its way to the very centre of your heart? Could it be that your love for God is being crowded out by these good things that want to become ultimate things?

For some, it's the right career, the right grades, academic achievement, getting their kids into the right school. For others, maybe it's the pursuit of a life partner. There are all sorts of things that we can make our anchor – our number one thing that trumps everything else. It seems to me that if we want to say yes to loving God as being our anchor, we probably are going to have to say no to other things – other good things.

There's a mom in this community whose kids are now grown up, but she told me that when her kids were teenagers – I think they were teenagers at the time – they skied together as a family, and they loved it. In fact, they had a place that they had access to up at Whistler. Most weekends, they would go up there on Saturdays. But this family also wanted to hold on to this anchor of loving God and making that the most central thing in their lives,

and they valued worshipping in community – that was important to them. What this mom told me was that, over time, the skiing and the place at Whistler began to occupy a more central place in their hearts. Every weekend, it became a very difficult decision: Were they going to come home and be at church or not?

Recognizing that skiing seemed to be over taking over, they did something really gutsy: They gave up access to their place in Whistler. This mom said to me, "Jade, you know when our kids were young, I thought it was so important to give them all of these opportunities. Now I realize that that isn't what's most important; what's most important is to let them see God's love and let them experience it as a part of the community – for that to be our defining number one and for that to trump everything else. *That* is what's most important. That's the one thing."

Once in a while, I will chat with somebody who will say something like this: "Yeah, we haven't been in church for a while because..." – and they will go on to name a sport or an activity that sometimes they're involved in or sometimes their kids are involved in. Then they'll throw up this line: "You know, we don't want to get legalistic about church attendance."

I thought about that for a little bit, and I think I understand at some level what they mean. But I also thought about how many things there are in our lives that we become totally committed to, whether that be exercise or work or activities. Most of the things that my kids are involved in require a pretty strict – dare I say a "legalistic"? – commitment. So is it that we are willing to accept a legalistic commitment to one thing, but when it comes to worshipping in community, we're saying, "Yeah, I don't want to get legalistic about that"? Doesn't it in the end come back to what's at the centre?

What matters most? At the end of the day, what really matters to us? Is it our love for God which is central? which is our anchor? which holds us and our families and our small groups and our friendships and our communities?

Will you come back to this Great Commandment to love God and let that be the defining characteristic of your life? When you do that, everything else will take its proper place: The good things will stay good things; they won't become ultimate things.

Well, this text also describes to us *when* we can hold on to this anchor.

In verses 6-7, we read that we are to "[i]mpress [these commandments] on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up."

Notice that the call to hold this anchor is something that we do throughout our day. It is something that we talk about and that we spontaneously bring up while we're eating dinner or at breakfast or while we're chatting with our roommate or our friends. It is something that can be a topic of conversation at all times.

Did you know that we talk, naturally, about the things that we love? They just kind of naturally overflow from us. But it's also true that we come to love the things that are always talked about.

I have this friend who attends Third Service. Let's just call him Josh Ruberg. *[The congregation laughs.]* Josh has been over to our place many times for dinner – it's not really about my cooking; it's more about his fiancé, Liz, who lives with us at our home. But we love having Josh over.

Josh loves Jesus; he loves Liz – but I found out that he's got another love. Anybody want to guess what that love is? *[Several voices from the congregation call out, "Tea!"]* Tea. Well, that was incredible! That was about 15 people who said, "Tea!" Is there anybody who loves tea more than Josh? I don't know, but Josh just loves tea and is always talking about tea: He talks about the different kinds of tea and which teashops he went to— He went to Victoria recently and had tea at the Empress, and he was rating how good it was on a scale of 1 to 10. He just loves tea.

Meanwhile, I'm more of a coffee guy – I've got to be honest with you! But the more that Josh comes over and talks about tea and brings samples— He talks about where he got it and makes some for us, and I try it out and— I think he's trying to convert me! He really is. He's not there yet; I'm not there yet.

But isn't it true that the things that are talked about, we then come to love? There's something that's contagious. When somebody loves something and talks about it, we take an interest and we start to feel an attachment to that very thing.

The Great Commandment here to love God – the Scripture calls us to talk about this. Talk about this all the time and with whomever you want to talk to about it because it's contagious. The more you talk about it— It has a cumulative effect. When you're out with friends and you naturally and spontaneously talk about God and his love, it spreads: God's love fans into flames. And so we can encourage each other as we do this. Let this be a topic of your conversation, and the more you do that, the more it gets inside you: It becomes internalized; it becomes impressed upon you. Advertisers get this; they know that if they keep repeating a jingle or a phrase over and over and over and over again, it starts to get *in* us.

Can we let God's love be the topic of our conversation so that, over and over and over again, as we talk about it, naturally and spontaneously, it gets in us and permeates every aspect of our lives?

In preparation for this message, I asked a number of families here at Tenth, "What does this look like for you? How do you live out of a rhythm of life?" Most of them talked about the importance of table time: as a family, gathering around meals and talking about their day together. One family said, "We talk about the highlights and the lowlights," and then, a little bit later on in the evening, when they're putting their kids to bed, they pray through those things. They pray through the highlights, remembering that God is there in those great moments and that God is also there in our hurts, our frustrations and our disappointments.

Let prayer spontaneously break into your day.

I remember coming home one time after a particularly stressful day. Our friend Daniel, a student who was living with us, was cooking his dinner; our kids were at the table, doing their homework, I think. Daniel said, "How are you doing?" I told him, "Ugh, I have a monster headache." He said, "Let me pray for you" – and right there and then, in the middle of cooking up his pasta, he just reached over and said a simple prayer that God would heal me. I've got to be honest with you: My response to a headache – my first thought – was not prayer; my first thought was, "Two Tylenols and a glass of water."

Daniel reminded me in that moment that it is always okay to interrupt whatever you're doing, however big or small, so as to turn to your anchor – to turn to Jesus – knowing that Jesus is there for us in the big and in the small. And in small ways, we can turn to him and say, "God, I need your help. I need your help now."

Finally, *how* do we hold on to this anchor?

The Scripture talks about tying reminders on our gates and on our wrists and on our door posts – having some physical, visual cues around us that can actually draw our attention to God.

A little piece of information, free tonight, just for the Third Service! If you are here and you struggle with exercise, the experts say there's a fool-proof way to get started exercising. Here it is: Go down to Sport Chek. Get yourself a really nice pair of running shoes. Then get a workout outfit or a tracksuit or something that looks good on you and is comfortable and feels good. That's what you do on day one, okay? Day two: Put it on. All you have to do on day two is to just put it on. You don't have to start exercising; you just put it on. And you know what will happen? Throughout your day, as you look down at your feet, you will think, "I'd like to kinda try these things out. I

wonder how they feel like on a walk or maybe a run.” There's something about these physical, visual reminders that, as you look at them, will be highly suggestive to you; they will prompt action.

We can set things up in our lives that serve as reminders and as cues that actually prompt us to act. In the same way, we can put reminders for ourselves – physical, visual cues – to draw our attention to God.

In our home, we have this painting above our fireplace; it's a reprint of Rembrandt's *The Prodigal Son*. It's been there so long that sometimes we don't even notice it anymore except when we have guests over. They point it out, and we get a chance to look at it again and talk about it and remind ourselves that we are the sons who are so warmly received by the Father. It's a visual cue to remind us.

Recently, over the Thanksgiving weekend, my wife, Brandy, and our kids put together this Gratitude Tree. They took construction paper and cut out leaves and put it up on the wall. (I don't know if we have a picture of that. There it is.) And so, I and our kids and our guests took time to each write one thing for which we were grateful on a leaf, and we put the leaves up there on the Gratitude Tree on our wall. It's been up there for two or three weeks now, and today we had some people over and they added to it. Every time we walk by it, it's a reminder of how God has been good to us and how we can be grateful to him.

Another visual cue in our house is our calendar, which hangs in our kitchen. On it we schedule things that are important to us – things that will keep us connected to our anchor. We schedule worship – corporate worship – on Sundays. We schedule time with our small group, which is an important thing for us.

As a family, we have a couple of budding musicians, Josh and Alicia, one on the guitar and one on the piano. They know one or two worship songs, and so on Monday evenings, we get them to play those songs and we sing together as a family – and, in worship, we name what matters most. Sometimes we read a Bible story together and the kids act it out. We pray for each other.

And you know what? Sometimes it doesn't work. Sometimes the kids are too tired; sometimes the parents are too tired or are distracted. But, little by little, we're reinforcing: “What is our anchor? What do we desire to be at the very centre?”

This past summer, my eldest son, Josh, turned 13, and I asked him what he wanted to do to celebrate this milestone, this coming of age. He told me that he wanted to go on a backpacking trip. I'd never gone on a backpacking trip; I was scared to death! I thought I was going to get eaten by bears, all right? But I couldn't really admit that, so I said, “Sure, I'd love to.” We called it “The Man Trip” – it was mostly about *me* becoming a man! (I think we have a picture from the trip as well.)

So, Josh and I hiked up Black Tusk, and we had a lot of time together to talk. That was intentional: mile after mile of hiking together. When it started pouring rain at 3 p.m. and we had nowhere else to go except our tent, we had *more* time to talk: We talked about God and we talked about life and we talked about entering high school and we talked about choices. We talked about a whole bunch of other things that I swore to him I would never publicly bring up in front of so many people. But that was intentional. It was a part of our routine that keeps us – him and me – connected to our anchor.

So many people have told me that as a community or as a small group or as a family, the practice of Sabbath has been centring; it has helped them to be anchored. They turn off the phones and the computers and the TVs and the videogames, and they get outside into God's creation and play together. It draws them back to God, to their anchor.

Others have talked about the importance of serving together, of volunteering together, of doing missions trips.

Let me invite you, in closing, to think through these three questions with your small group, with your friendship circle, with your community house, with your family. They're questions that Pastor Ken gave to us at the beginning of our series.

1. What nourishes you? As a family of faith, what nourishes you?
2. What helps you to feel connected to God?
3. What helps you to look outward to others?

Can I suggest that you dialogue around these questions and that you put some things in place in your routine – in your rhythm of life – that regularly nourish you, connect you with God and cause you to look outward?

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I want to finish tonight where we started. Why don't we go back and take a look at a day in the life of Sarah? Let's fast-forward a few weeks from when we last caught up with her.

You know, in some ways, if you are to look at Sarah now, at least externally, not much has changed: Sarah is still a hard-working mom. There's still a pile of laundry at home. Unfinished, unresponded-to emails.

Does Sarah still feel overwhelmed at times? Of course.

But something has changed for Sarah. Little by little, she has returned to what matters most. Sarah has come to the place of recognizing that, at the end of the day, what she wants most for herself, for her marriage and for her family is this one thing: to be anchored in a love for God. She has come to recognize that that matters more than what school her kids get into or whether she gets a promotion; that, more than anything else, this – the love for God – is what matters most.

Each morning, Sarah is able to hold on to this anchor. She takes two or three minutes – it can't be more than that – and, with a cup of coffee in hand, she sits by her window, she takes a few deep breaths, and she invites Jesus to be with her every step of the way. She thinks through her day, her meetings, her work, her schedule – and she imagines that Jesus is right there with her at every step. And then – get this! – she thanks God that the imagined will become real: Jesus will be with her every step of the way.

Lately, her youngest child, Timmy, has stumbled out of his bedroom, half asleep, seeing his mom sitting by the window and wondering what's up. And so she's shared with him what she's doing. Tim snuggles up onto her lap, and she takes a moment to pray for him and to bless him.

Her husband, Nick, has gotten in on the action as well. He walks the kids to school, and he has realized, "What better thing to do than to say a brief prayer for my kids as we walk together?" So he blesses them and he prays for them. He's never done that kind of thing before, but it just feels right to entrust them to God.

Last Saturday, the family did something they'd never done before: They blocked off the whole afternoon – no soccer practice, no Costco run, no errands. Instead, they went to Lynn Canyon and they walked and they explored God's creation together. On that walk, Lauren started a conversation about "How many trees could be in this park after all?" and "How could God create all of them?" – and they talked about that as they walked.

It's not much, but little by little, Sarah and Nick and their kids are beginning to return to the one thing that matters most, and they've found that there is good news. They've found that, as they begin to hold this anchor – guess what? – this anchor has begun to hold them. They've found that it's not all about how well they do this but that Jesus is there, holding them, sustaining them and enabling them not just to survive but to begin to *thrive* together as a family.



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People of God here at Third Service, family of God, as you begin to hold this anchor, hear the good news: The anchor will hold you.

Let's pray.

Jesus, we thank you that you have given us the one essential thing – the one commandment – that can save us, that can hold us.

Lord, we confess that many times we have let other things crowd this one thing out; that we have gone after other loves; that we, sometimes, have tried to do it all – and we've been left feeling fragmented and pulled apart.

Jesus, we need your help.

As we return, little by little, to this anchor, I pray for this community and for the families and the small groups and the community houses – for this family of faith. I pray that as, little by little, we begin to hold this anchor, you, Jesus, would hold us.

May it be so, we pray, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

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## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What is the anchor? (v. 4)
2. When do we turn to this anchor? (v. 6)
3. How do we hold on to the anchor? (v. 8)

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