

WINTER QUARTER, 2018-19

OUR LOVE FOR GOD

Unit 1 God Commands Our Love, Respect, and Obedience			Dec. 2
December 2	Love and Devotion	2	Dec. 9
	Deuteronomy 6:1-9		Dec. 16
December 9	Choose to Love and Serve God	8	Dec. 23
	Joshua 24:1-3, 13-15, 21-24		Dec. 30
December 16	Love and Worship God	14	Jan. 6
	Psalms 103:1-17, 21-22		Jan. 13
December 23	Jesus: God's Loving Promise	21	Jan. 20
	Luke 1:26-31; 2:22, 25-35		Jan. 27
December 30	Modeling God's Love	27	Feb. 3
	Matthew 25:31-46		Feb. 10
Unit 2 Loving God by Trusting Christ			Feb. 17
January 6	Hold Fast to God's Love	34	Feb. 24
	2 Thessalonians 3:1-5; 2 John 4-11		
January 13	Submit to God's Love	40	
	James 4:1-10		
January 20	Submit to God in Christ	46	
	Philippians 1:12-21		
January 27	Devote All to Christ	52	
	Philippians 2:1-11		
February 3	Renounce Everything for Christ	58	
	Philippians 3:7-14		
Unit 3 Love Songs That Glorify God			
February 10	Pondering God's Steadfast Love	64	
	Psalms 48:1-3, 9-14		
February 17	Praising God's Mighty Works	70	
	Psalms 66:1-9, 16-20		
February 24	Living With God's Loving Assurance	76	
	Psalms 91:1-8, 11-16		

Love and Devotion

Purpose

To show the role of a moral and a spiritual education in living a life that is pleasing to God.

Hearing the Word

The Scripture for this lesson is printed below.

Deuteronomy 6:1-9 (NIV)

1 These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess,

2 so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life.

3 Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you.

4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

5 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

6 These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts.

7 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.

8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.

9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Deuteronomy 6:1-9 (KJV)

1 Now these are the commandments, the statutes, and the judgments, which the Lord your God commanded to teach you, that ye might do them in the land whither ye go to possess it:

2 That thou mightest fear the Lord thy God, to keep all his statutes and his commandments, which I command thee, thou, and thy son, and thy son's son, all the days of thy life; and that thy days may be prolonged.

3 Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe to do it; that it may be well with thee, and that ye may increase mightily, as the Lord God of thy fathers hath promised thee, in the land that floweth with milk and honey.

4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord:

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

6 And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart:

7 And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.

8 And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes.

9 And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.

Seeing the Need

A fellow pastor once told me about encountering a woman from his congregation at the grocery store. He hadn't seen her family for a while, and she explained, "We haven't been in worship or Sunday school because Jimmy has had soccer practice, and it's the only day he gets to sleep in. And, well, he's 11 now and can make his own decisions."

She seemed surprised when the pastor asked her if she cut Jimmy the same slack on weekday mornings for school. She was even more surprised when he asked, "When Jimmy grows up and is faced with moral issues, a failing marriage, an addiction, or a whole host of results of sin, won't both you and he be glad that he spent all that time at soccer practice?"

Sarcastic as the pastor's question was, it did confront this mother about the importance of her son's God-centered education. Faith is not a hobby; it's an essential component of a decent life, and we should begin to learn that when we are young.

Such education alone is not enough for living a life pleasing to God. Many are the young adults who have gotten into serious trouble with the law whose parents say, "They weren't raised that way. We took them to church and taught them right from wrong." But a moral and spiritual education is an important foundation for righteous living nonetheless.

In this lesson, we will examine direct instructions from God to the people of ancient Israel through Moses about not only what they should base their lives on but also what they should teach their

children. The critical heart of that teaching, declared Moses, was this: "Our God is the Lord! Only the Lord! Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). It is still the critical starting point today.

Living the Faith

The Book of Deuteronomy is set in Moses' last days, when the people of Israel were camped on the plains of Moab, immediately prior to crossing the Jordan River into the Promised Land. The book includes Moses' final messages to the Israelites. While most of the words in the book are presented as spoken by Moses—excluding, of course, the report of his death in the final chapter—Moses often conveyed words he'd received from the Lord.

Deuteronomy is the fifth and last book of what Christians call the Pentateuch, which is the central reference of the Judaic religious tradition. "Deuteronomy" is the Greek translation of the Hebrew used in Deuteronomy 17:18 for "second law" or "copy of this Instruction." The title was probably chosen because Deuteronomy summarizes God's instructions (also called "commandments"; "laws"; and, collectively, "the Law") originally given to the Israelites through Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 20-23).

But more than merely repeating or summarizing, Moses' description in Deuteronomy of the laws includes revisions of those instructions and a refreshing of them through new emphases. In that sense, Deuteronomy is the second giving of the divine instructions.

In addition to that, Moses also nar-

rated for the people the highlights of their history since leaving Mount Sinai (usually called Mount Horeb in Deuteronomy). This narration was important because with just a couple of exceptions, all the people in his audience belonged to generations born en route from Egypt. Their parents who had witnessed Moses' original delivery of the Law had since died (Numbers 26:65).

Back in my college days, I had a classmate who'd grown up nominally Christian but had seldom attended church. In college, however, he decided to embrace the Jewish faith. He contacted a rabbi who told him that the first thing he needed to do was to read Deuteronomy all the way through. In fact, the rabbi urged reading it several times. He explained that much of what Jews believe is encapsulated in that book.

Such is the importance of this biblical book for Jews; but it also contains significant teachings for Christians, as it is part of our Bible, too. And the unwavering message of the book is that we need a steadfast commitment to God and God alone.

What does the term steadfast mean to you when it's coupled with commitment?

The Shema

It's important to understanding Deuteronomy 6 to notice that in Chapter 5, Moses had just restated the heart of God's instructions: the Ten Commandments (5:6-21), which were first given in Exodus 20:1-17. Due to his advanced age, Moses must have known he wasn't going to be able to lead his people much longer, but he wanted them to understand the importance to their lives of the

Law he'd just reviewed for them.

At that time, the Israelites were camped on the east side of the Jordan River on land they'd had to wrest from other peoples, peoples who still viewed them with hostility. And they were about to cross the Jordan and battle other peoples for possession of the land west of the river. Yet in his remarks, Moses said little about the threat from those conflicts. He was more concerned about threats posed by the possibility of his people disregarding God's instructions.

Thus, in our passage for today, he directed the adults in his audience not only to keep all God's laws themselves but also to teach them to their children. Moses said, "Listen to [God's instructions], Israel! Follow them carefully so that things will go well for you and so that you will continue to multiply exactly as the Lord, your ancestors' God, promised you, in a land full of milk and honey" (Deuteronomy 6:3).

And then, so that there would be no confusion about what they were to remember themselves and teach their children, Moses gave them what can be considered a summary statement: "Israel, listen! Our God is the Lord! Only the Lord!" (verse 4). At minimum, this affirmation reminded the Israelites, who were surrounded by cultures that believed in many gods, that Israel's God was the only God for them and the only one whose instructions they should follow.

Although the Common English Bible version of this verse puts "Israel" first, followed by "listen," the original Hebrew has the order reversed as Shema Yisrael ("Listen, Israel"). Over the centuries, this

statement that Moses gave has come to be referred to by the first Hebrew word, and thus called “the Shema.” And the verse became and continues to be the centerpiece of the morning and evening Jewish prayer services. So important is it that Jews aim to say the Shema as their last words, and Jewish parents teach their children to say it before they go to sleep at night.

In time, Shema also came to be used by extension to refer to the entire section of the daily prayers that begins with Shema Yisrael and includes Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21 and Numbers 15:37-41.

What verses, prayers, or liturgy serve—or could serve—as a kind of Shema for you as a Christian?

Love the Lord Your God

Moses’ next statement after the Shema verse is equally important and is included in the larger statement of the Shema in the Jewish daily prayers: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength” (verse 5). It, too, was part of what the Israelites were to do themselves and teach their children.

One measure of how important this statement became for Jews and later for Christians is that when a legal expert asked Jesus which was the greatest commandment, Jesus answered by quoting this verse from Deuteronomy (Mark 12:28-30). In that encounter, Jesus went on to state the second most important command: “You will love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31). Hearing Jesus’ answer, the scribe quickly agreed that Jesus was right on both commands. At

that, Jesus said to the scribe, “You aren’t far from God’s kingdom” (Mark 12:34).

Note that the legal expert had not signed onto a doctrinal declaration. He had not declared himself as a fan of Jesus or asked to be a disciple. He simply agreed that to love God with his heart, soul, and mind and to love his neighbor as himself is the centrality of religion. And at that, Jesus said he was not far from the kingdom of God. This command to love God is the central aspect of the Bible, the primary building block of spiritual education and of a life that pleases God.

All of that makes it important to understand what loving God means and to teach that to subsequent generations. At minimum, it means trusting and obeying God and making God’s will, insofar as we can ascertain it, our priority. (That’s at least part of what Moses must have had in mind when he said in Deuteronomy 6:8, “These words that I am commanding you today must always be on your minds.”) And while “love” in this sense doesn’t imply romantic feeling, loving God doesn’t rule out passion; the relationship of command and obedience can generate a passion that motivates us.

In what ways have you taught younger generations what it means to love God?

Verbs of a Moral and Spiritual Education

In Deuteronomy 6:7-9, Moses uses four verbs to give concrete ways adults can instill in children this bedrock of faith about loving God: “recite,” “talk,” “tie,” and “write.”

“Recite,” in this context, means literally to present the content of verses 4-5 (and later,

the whole of God's instructions) to children as something for them to learn by rote, much the way children in Sunday school today learn Bible memory verses. "Talk" means to make the meaning of the Shema and the loving God verse part of family conversations and prayers, so that children begin to understand how the words they've memorized translate into actual living.

"Tie" and "write" as used by Moses refer to practices specific to the Jewish faith that reinforce the importance of the teaching. He told the Israelites to tie the teaching to their hands and forehead. It's not clear whether he meant that literally or metaphorically; but, eventually, observant Jewish men took it literally, using phylacteries (small leather boxes containing slips of paper inscribed with scriptural passages) and wearing them on their left arm and on their head during morning weekday prayers.

The Jewish people also took writing the Shema on their doorposts literally, the verses written on a slip of paper and placed in a small container, called a mezuzah case, which orthodox Jews tack to the doorframes of their homes. Both practices continue today.

In what specific ways can reciting and talking be used to teach faith to our children today? What might be Christian equivalents of phylacteries and mezuzah cases for reinforcing our faith?

Beyond a Moral and Spiritual Education

As we indicated in "Seeing the Need," a moral and spiritual education is a starting point for righteous living, not the whole of what we need. In his letter to the

Galatians, the apostle Paul made that point when he referred to the Law using the Greek word *paidagōgos* (pahee-dag-og-os), which is commonly translated as a "custodian," "schoolmaster," or "disciplinarian."

In Paul's day, a *paidagōgos* was a servant who took children to school or taught them once they got there. Paul was saying that similarly, the Law served to instruct God's people in righteousness until they attained spiritual maturity through faith in Christ (Galatians 3:23-26).

Jesus' encounter with a rich man in Matthew 19:16-22 illustrates this. The man asked Jesus what good thing he needed to do to receive eternal life, and Jesus answered that he should keep the commandments. To which the man responded, "Which ones?"

Jesus then named some of the commandments, perhaps as representative of the whole of the Law, and the man stated that he already kept those. That was no doubt true. As a Jew, he would have had the kind of faith education that God had mandated for God's people through Moses.

But then the man asked, "What am I still missing?" (Matthew 19:20). He apparently recognized that his faith education wasn't enough to satisfy the spiritual hunger he felt within. So Jesus told him that if he wanted to be "complete" (verse 21), he needed to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor. While Jesus likely tailored that answer for that man's specific situation, we can surmise that the lesson for us all is that we need to translate the learnings of our faith education into commitment to follow Jesus.

Certainly, we should make sure our children learn right from wrong and know the command to love God. But we ourselves need that additional thing that moves that knowledge into the fabric of our behavior: commitment. That's the personal decision that regardless of what comes, we are going to live by what we have learned about loving God. It's the personal decision that we are going to follow Jesus not just when it is convenient to do so but also when it is difficult to do so. It is a decision that keeps us going even when the flame of inspiration is low and we are exhausted.

But here's truth: When we commit ourselves to love God, as Moses and Jesus taught, we are standing in a place of strength. We are in a place to receive God's help. A faith education is a place to first learn that.

When have you been aware of your faith education kicking in and helping you decide how to act?

O God, help us to be faithful in educating those coming along after us in the ways of faith. And cause us to translate our own faith education into commitment to follow Jesus; in his name we pray. Amen.

Daily Bible Study

December 3	Rules on People Relating to God	Exodus 20:1-11
December 4	Rules on People Relating to People	Exodus 20:12-17
December 5	Keep the Faith and Live	Joshua 23:2-6, 14-16
December 6	Rescued From Egypt; Settled in Canaan	Joshua 24:4-12
December 7	We Promise to Serve God	Joshua 24:16-21
December 8	Covenant With God Confirmed	Joshua 24:25-28
December 9	Choose to Love and Serve God	Joshua 24:1-3, 13-15, 21-24

Choose to Love and Serve God

Purpose

To affirm that while we may rethink or rescind many decisions, we should hold fast to our decision to serve God

Hearing the Word

The Scripture for this lesson is printed below. The background text is Exodus 20:1-11; Joshua 24..

Joshua 24:1-3 (ending with “descendants”), 13-15, 21-24 (NIV)

Joshua 24:1-3 (ending with “descendants”)

1 Then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. He summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel, and they presented themselves before God.

2 Joshua said to all the people, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Long ago your ancestors, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshiped other gods.

3 But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the Euphrates and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants.’”

13-15

13 “So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.

14 Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord.

15 But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

21-24

21 But the people said to Joshua, “No! We will serve the Lord.”

22 Then Joshua said, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the Lord.” “Yes, we are witnesses,” they replied.

23 “Now then,” said Joshua, “throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield

your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.”

24 And the people said to Joshua, “We will serve the Lord our God and obey him.”

Joshua 24:1-3 (ending with “Multiplied his seed”), 13-15, 21-24 (KJV)

Joshua 24:1-3 (ending with “Multiplied his seed”)

1 And Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and called for the elders of Israel, and for their heads, and for their judges, and for their officers; and they presented themselves before God.

2 And Joshua said unto all the people, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Your fathers dwelt on the other side of the flood in old time, even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nachor: and they served other gods.

3 And I took your father Abraham from the other side of the flood, and led him throughout all the land of Canaan, and multiplied his seed.

13-15

13 And I have given you a land for which ye did not labour, and cities which ye built not, and ye dwell in them; of the vineyards and oliveyards which ye planted not do ye eat.

14 Now therefore fear the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the Lord.

15 And if it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

21-24

21 And the people said unto Joshua, Nay; but we will serve the Lord.

22 And Joshua said unto the people, Ye are witnesses against yourselves that ye have chosen you the Lord, to serve him. And they said, We are witnesses.

23 Now therefore put away, said he, the

strange gods which are among you, and incline your heart unto the Lord God of Israel.

24 And the people said unto Joshua, The Lord our God will we serve, and his voice will we obey.

Seeing the Need

If there is one thing that marks our era, it is the sense of wanting to keep our options open. We see it in the young woman who announces to her husband that she's leaving because she just doesn't want to be tied down in marriage. We see it in the young man who turns down a full-ride scholarship to a university that would prepare him for a career in which he has obvious talent but that he thinks might lock him into a way of life he is not sure he wants.

Lest we think this is primarily a problem for the young, let's remember that the term middle-age crazy refers to people in that stage of life who are trying to go back to something they left behind. And we sometimes hear of older people—well beyond middle-age—who go hunting for the lost loves of their youth or give up their way of life to embark on another.

We are indeed a people who want to have it all, or at least as much as we can cram into our lifetimes. Thus anything that asks for a long-term commitment doesn't fit the mood of our age very well.

In many areas, keeping our options open or rethinking prior decisions isn't necessarily a bad thing. But, as Joshua reminded his people in the Scripture reading for today, we are best served by holding fast to our decision to serve God.

Living the Faith

After successfully leading the people of Israel from Egypt to the edge of the Promised Land (Canaan), Moses died. His chief assistant, Joshua, son of Nun, took his place and led the people in their conquest and settlement of the land. Joshua was not only the Israelites' military leader, he was also their spiritual leader.

Today's Scripture reading finds Joshua near the end of his long life (he died at age 110; Joshua 24:29), doing what he could to equip his people to carry on and prosper after he was no longer with them. He gathered the people and urged them to make a once-and-for-all choice about whom they would serve: (1) the gods their ancestors served in Egypt, (2) the gods of the indigenous peoples around them, or (3) the Lord God who brought them out of Egypt and who made them strong as they fought to take the land.

Joshua uttered not one word about keeping their options open. He said nothing about trying God's way now with the possibility of backtracking later if they found it too hard. He called for a lifetime decision right there on the spot: "Choose today whom you will serve," he said (verse 15).

How do (or did) you feel when confronted by a call to make a commitment to God that you won't rescind?

The Lesson of Their History

Before calling the Israelites to make

this firm decision about serving God, Joshua set the stage by reviewing their history as a people. In Joshua 24:2-13, he summarized how God had directed their ancestors and the generations since. Among the events Joshua enumerated were God's leading of Abraham from "the other side of the Euphrates [River]" to Canaan (verse 2), God's rescue of the people from Egypt (verses 4-7), God's aid to the people in the wilderness en route to the Promised Land (verses 8-10), and God's enabling the people to occupy the land God had promised them (verses 9-12).

That recitation brought Israel's history right down to their present day. Joshua finished this history review saying, "[God] gave you land on which you hadn't toiled and cities that you hadn't built. You settled in them and are enjoying produce from vineyards and olive groves that you didn't plant" (verse 13).

Joshua did not take the people through this review of their past simply so they would remember the events. Rather, he wanted them to take a single lesson from their historical record: that God had been unfailingly faithful to them.

This then became the context from which Joshua issued his challenge to them: "So now, revere the Lord. Serve him honestly and faithfully" (verse 14). In other words, "Be as faithful to God as God has been to you."

What was more, Joshua didn't want them to rely on the gods of their ancestors among whom Abraham had grown to adulthood, gods that Abraham himself likely worshiped before the Lord God called him to leave those behind and trust instead God's direction. Joshua said, "Put

aside the gods that your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt and serve the Lord" (verse 14).

What personal or family history, if any, helped you decide to follow Jesus?

The Personal Choice

Joshua concluded his call for decision by stating the options and announcing his own choice: "But if it seems wrong in your opinion to serve the Lord, then choose today whom you will serve. Choose the gods whom your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you live. But my family and I will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15).

This was a way of saying that not making the commitment to serve God was, in fact, a choice of its own. Joshua assumed that his people would worship some god or gods. So if they didn't commit to the Lord, they would serve the old gods that Abraham left behind when he listened to the Lord and headed for Canaan or they would embrace the gods of their Amorite neighbors.

That Joshua would make this statement suggests that both sets of these gods already held some allure for the Israelites. It's unlikely that Joshua was pointing to these as new options.

Notice, however, that he didn't say that choosing no god was an alternative. In one sense, atheism has always been a choice; and at least a few people in the ancient world must have pondered the possibility of a world with no gods, which would explain why Psalm 14:1 and 53:1 declare, "Fools say in their hearts, There is no God." But in the Old Testament, "unbelief" usually meant denying the truth of certain

divine claims, not denying the existence of deity itself. But if Joshua were speaking to us today, he'd likely include agnosticism and atheism among the options, since both positions now have advocates and adherents.

There's no question that Joshua considered serving the Lord as the only path leading to a life of peace and well-being. Thus he declared that regardless of what others decided, he and his family were going to serve the Lord.

Joshua reminds me of a man I know who is a deeply committed Christian. He works at following Jesus so straightforwardly that you can't help but respect him. When you suggest an activity to him or request his participation in some event, you can almost hear the wheels turning in his head. I think what he is doing is measuring what you've suggested against his primary life choice to follow Jesus. If after making that check, the request seems right to him, he accepts it willingly. But if it doesn't, he declines, and you can't change his mind. You might not always agree with his conclusions, but you are impressed by his single-mindedness and his sincerity.

That's the kind of commitment Joshua was talking about.

At what points does your decision to serve the Lord impact your family?

Not So Fast

Having heard Joshua's call for decision, the Israelites quickly agreed to serve the Lord. Their collective response was, "God forbid that we ever leave the Lord to serve other gods! The Lord is our God. . . . We too will serve the Lord, because he is our God" (Joshua 24:16-18).

Because of that positive reply, including what could be a liturgical confession, "The Lord is our God," we might expect Joshua to be delighted and perhaps to utter, "Great!" or "Wonderful!" Joshua, however, seemed concerned that their response was in fact too quick, too quick for them to have fully considered the ramifications of their decision. And Joshua knew that a promise made during a burst of enthusiasm was unlikely to stand the test of time. So with a "not so fast" implication, he answered, "You can't serve the Lord, because he is a holy God. He is a jealous God. He won't forgive your rebellion and your sins" (verse 19).

Admittedly, this statement seems at odds with God's character as described elsewhere in the Bible, but it helps explain the concept of God as "jealous." As used in relation to God, that word indicates "God's passionate desire for Israel's love and devotion," says a sidebar in The CEB Study Bible. "Israel's neighbors typically worshipped multiple deities, and a single God who expected them to worship no other god would have been a foreign concept. The notion that God is jealous, however, indicates that the Israelites can't divide their commitment between God and another deity."¹

In light of that, the meaning of Joshua's statement, "You can't serve the Lord, because he is a holy God," becomes clearer. Though Joshua's words seem to declare an impossibility, he probably was deliberately overstating the difficulty of living out one's commitment to God to make a point. The Contemporary English Version of the Bible conveys that sense by its rendering of verse 19: "The Lord is fearsome; he is the one true God, and I don't think you are able to worship and obey him in

the ways he demands. You would have to be completely faithful, and if you sin or rebel, he won't let you get away with it."

But the people were adamant. "No! The Lord is the one we will serve," they said (verse 21).

Still wanting to make sure they'd fully considered the implications of their choice, Joshua then told them they were "witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the Lord." And they responded, "We are witnesses!" (verse 22). That is, just as third parties normally witness legal covenants, in this covenant with God, the people collectively were one of the two principals (God being the other) and the witnesses. While that concept may not have much meaning to us today, it did convey to the Israelites how serious was the promise they were making.

If your first impulse to follow Jesus was made during a burst of enthusiasm or emotion, how have you since bolstered that decision?

The Tension in the Story

This biblical account holds a certain amount of tension. Joshua, as spokesperson for God, knew that for the Israelites' well-being, they needed to choose the Lord. But he also knew that his people preferred not to make choices that committed them to one path forever. Thus, if they were going to declare for the Lord, Joshua did not want them to make that choice lightly.

Yet making a lifetime choice is what God asked of them. So, too, several centuries later, the prophet Elijah stood before a later generation of Israelites and demanded, "How long will you hobble

back and forth between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow God. If Baal is God, follow Baal" (1 Kings 18:21). Several centuries later, Jesus challenged some who said they wanted to follow him with these words: "No one who puts a hand on the plow and looks back is fit for God's kingdom" (Luke 9:62).

And still today, God asks us for a lifetime commitment. That is not to say God does not welcome back people who made that commitment and then turned away, but it does mean that, ultimately, we must make a choice to serve the Lord that we do not withdraw.

The fact that God calls us to make a forever choice about serving him does not necessarily mean that rethinking other choices is wrong. In fact, in life, there are many circumstances where that can be exactly the right thing to do. We could even say that to live means not only to make choices but also to reevaluate some of them because of new learnings or new opportunities.

You might think that statement is too broad. It is one thing to be a free agent when it comes to our career or our political party or our level of involvement in community leadership or regarding our financial goals, but what about in our marriages? Am I suggesting that because of the opportunity for a new relationship that it is okay to backtrack on our marriage vows? And what about our promises to our parents or children? Am I saying those don't have to be considered binding?

No. What I am saying is that when we make the choice to follow Jesus for the rest of our lives, then that commitment becomes the backstop for any other decision or changes of mind we make. That

primary, once-for-all decision to be God's person will serve us when other commitments come up for a second look. It helps us to know which choices to reaffirm and which ones to circle back on.

As Christians, we can indeed be people who keep our options open in many aspects of life, but we can do so safely and morally when behind all of that is one choice that we don't bring up for reconsideration: the choice to serve God and follow Jesus.

When has your commitment to follow Jesus helped you decide how to handle other choices that came up for reconsideration?

O God, strengthen our commitment with your energy, that when life is pulling us to rethink other promises, our covenant with you will be a starting point and a grounding in that which is essential. Let our promise to you, Lord, give us the perspective we need to make good decisions, even when rethinking is necessary; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

1 From *The CEB Study Bible, Old Testament (Common English Bible, 2013)*; page 364.

Daily Bible Study		
December 10	Nothing Separates Us From God's Love	Romans 8:31-39
December 11	An Answer in Time of Trouble	Psalm 86:1-7
December 12	Let Me Walk in Your Truth	Psalm 86:8-13
December 13	Acts of God's Steadfast Love	Nehemiah 9:16-21
December 14	God Abounds in Steadfast Love	Exodus 34:1-7
December 15	God Forgives and Loves People	Numbers 14:13-20
December 16	The People Bless the Lord	Psalm 103:1-17, 21-22