

Several couples at my former church had been unable to have a regular church wedding because of World War II and sudden orders to go overseas. So one Saturday a number of those couples reaffirmed their wedding vows in a beautiful marriage commitment celebration. After their many decades of married life together, with all that history of the normal ups and downs of married life, it was an honor, it was wonderful and inspiring as they reaffirmed their commitments to each other, professing and promising their love and hope, their loyalty and faithfulness for all time. In the scene described by the Joshua passage we read earlier, something like that was going on when they gathered at Shechem. From time to time everyone residing in Israel would gather, descendants of the slaves freed from Egyptian bondage, and everyone who have moved into the land since then. The great stories of God's mighty acts of redeeming the people, along with the stories about God's providing for them all during their long wilderness journey were retold. Those stories about their ancestors & their experiences with God, gave them their identity as the people the Lord, which served to reshape them and form them into a community of those who were in a covenant relationship with God. Even for those who were not blood-descendants of the Israelites, by claiming those stories and experiences as their history, they too became a part of that covenant community... much like an immigrant learning about American history to become a citizen. This gathering, this remembering and retelling their history was to rekindle everyone's sense of being God's people, by virtue of recommitting themselves before God with their covenant-vows. In a similar way, when we say the Apostles Creed together, sing a favorite hymn, prayer together or read Scripture, and respond to God with our worship, offerings and service, we are defined, by those things that we believe and do, as a response that expresses our relational commitment to God.

Just as the people of Israel were defined as the community that was gathered by God, through the stories of the Exodus, so too we are the Church, defined as the community gathered by God through the gospel story of Jesus Christ. And by the power of that gospel story, as Christ's followers, whatever else is going on in this world, whatever anyone else may say or believe, we are a community of faith, defined by our commitment to Jesus. As those who by faith share in the truth of the gospel stories and in holding firm to the values taught in Scripture, that separates us from those who do not believe, from those who do not hold to those values and truths, and who do not walk in faithfulness with the Lord. Which means that as the Church, as the community of faith, we who have been shaped and formed by the gospel of Jesus Christ, we're called to grow deeper, and to more and more reflect God's gracious love in how we behave and how we live... which is our faithful response, much as described in vs.

Joshua 24:14-15.

Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

These verses are about commitment. You'll make your own decision, but this how we going to do things in my home, we will serve the LORD. Joshua was saying, you're not being coerced, but by choice, these are the truths, values and stories of God by which my household and I will live our lives. The phrase, the gods your ancestors served, might also refer to things of our past, our accomplishments, maybe the successes or resources we have accumulated, any of which can dominate our focus, in place of God. We can be so proud of what we have done, of what we have earned, that we restrain God's will and work in our lives, in what God could be intending and helping us to become, or what new thing God might be up to in us or in our world.

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So consider, where specifically, have you seen God at work lately?, or have I let my faith grow a bit stagnant, complacent or stale?, ... is my focus, on the past or on God's living presence today? The phrase, the gods of the Amorites, could also be false gods of our world and culture. We can turn even worthy and good things into idols... if they so dominate & rule our days and the work of our lives, that we leave too little room or too little time for God. It is a question of priority -- who or what will be the God I serve? Idolatry is not just bowing down to a graven image or to a statue. It is whenever we place anything before God in our lives, and can be anything that matters more to us than the Lord. Israel was called and challenged to live out the stories of their shared experiences with God, by committing their lives to being that community focused and faithful to God, and not seduced by the other and lesser gods of this world, or by wanting to be more like everyone else around them... which is to compromise our relationship with God, who demands our absolute and constant loyalty as our highest priority... which may seem too extreme or an uncompromising-excessive faith, compared to our culture's pursuit of comfort, ease and pleasure, or those who live life indifferently, just passing through. We are always under pressure from our world & busy demanding lives to compromise on integrity, commitment & loyalty to God alone, as all this other stuff can crowd out God from our lives. So we must be aware of the trash that blows in from the world, and of accepting seemingly harmless compromises for our own comfort and ease or longing to be popular. Really, the question is, who or what will we choose to serve?, and that choice is the point of what Jesus had to say in Luke 12. When the gospel of Luke was finally written down decades later, it was during a very difficult time of persecution and struggle. Becoming a Christian often meant rejection by family members, and exclusion from community for following the way of Jesus. As Jesus warns,

### Luke 12:51-53

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

These words of Jesus were drawn from the prophet Micah's writing, and served as reminder that he had warned them about the high cost and difficulty of following him... that their families and former friends might well reject them, & that faithful discipleship was not an easy comfortable road- - for the peace Jesus brings is not the absence of struggle, but the presence of God's grace, Holy Spirit and hope. In this passage, Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem, to suffer & die, and to fulfill the purpose for which he was sent... which he compared to the Old Testament image of divine fire. In the Bible, fire is a metaphor frequently used to describe the powerful judgment and presence of God: that burns away the chaff of pollution and corruption, making the way for new life and redeemed faithfulness. Jesus was interpreting his own death through the Old Testament, drawing upon that same prophetic image in

### Luke 12:49-50

"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!"

The phrase: 'and what stress I am under until it is completed!', more literally means, "to be dominated by a single thought." The actual sense is more like, 'anticipation', not stress, and aware of the cost, he's eager to get his mission accomplished. For Jesus, for his disciples and for the early Christian Church, being faithful and obedient to God's call and purpose clearly came at a high cost and demand for commitment. There is also a sense of disappointment that so many didn't get it and some frustration at the bitter opposition of the religious leaders who oppose and refuse to believe. The religious leaders were truly blind because they wouldn't see. They refused to recognize the signs of God's power and presence and by choice, rejected seeing God at work in their midst. Three years of parables, his teachings and amazing miracles, had not yet broken through the hard crust covering their hearts, they rejected Jesus, refusing to see the clear signs of God. They didn't deny seeing the mighty acts – these signs of God, yet rejected the Messiah, refusing to recognize what

they saw. They claimed to be the chosen people of God, yet they attacked – plotting to kill the one sent by God.

Luke 12:54-56

Jesus said, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

In Israel the winds from the west are off the Mediterranean Sea, they are moist winds that often bring rain, and a South wind off the desert is of course, very dry. Ancient farmers in Israel knew to plant their crops by the wind, knowing that from the west the winds brought rain, and to plant during a South wind was to waste their seed. If they could so read the wind and plant crops accordingly, then why couldn't they also read the clear signs of God, why weren't they 'planting' by what they could see? Their rejection of Jesus and his ministry was in clear contradiction of the signs set before them. The offer of God's grace is freely given and available to all. Jesus never abandons us or stops calling us to come home, but at some point, we do make a real choice to respond, and our response is the decision we've made... and an authentic relationship with God through Jesus Christ, which is to take up our cross and follow him, will necessarily put us at odds with the ways & values of this world & culture. In our world and in our lives, there are many other voices that seek our attention and loyalty, but we cannot serve the Lord our God and compromise with them... for we are challenged to live distinctly into God's grace... ..and there are real consequences in what we choose and decide, for either God is the priority of our lives, or God is not. The gospel of Jesus is not about being nice and getting along, but it is about being converted, being transformed, and becoming a useful instrument of God's grace, one whom God can use to heal and transform our world. If we faithfully follow Jesus, sometimes it will be divisive, because it requires commitment and demands a decision, because it disallows comfortable indifference & cynicism, calling for a passion that is willing to paying the price. Our God loves us with a fierce and fiery fury, far too compassionate to leave us broken, wounded and damaged as we are. Jesus demands a decision, which brings the flames of crisis to burn off this world's chaff that strangles and smothers, in order to enable the green shoots of new life to sprout. ... so what is the evidence of that flame and green shoots in my life?

In her book of meditations, Dr. Channey wrote this:

Jesus said, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment.

How much do I have to give to the church to be a good Christian?

There was one I loved, and it came time to buy a gift. What I wanted to give cost too much and was out of the question. But I saved, and went without, and bought the gift, and I was deeply happy.

How much time do I have to give to the church to be a good Christian?

There was one I loved, and I dreaded our separations. And we planned and devised ways to find time to be together; to talk together; to work together; to laugh together. And when we were together, I lost track of time, and I was deeply happy.

How much of my behavior do I have to have regulated by God in order to be a good Christian?

There was one I loved, and I wanted his respect. I was careful with my language; careful in my work. I lived as truly as I could, so he would nod his head in approval. With him or away from him, I acted in a way I thought he would admire. And as I strove thus to be more than myself, I was deeply happy.

Somehow, somehow God is inviting all of us to live the adventure, and is calling each of us to respond to God's love and grace. As the Apostle Paul wrote in

Romans 12, (The Message)

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out, for God brings the best out of you.