

Decisions (Joshua 24:1-2, 14-18; John 6:56-69)

by [Heidi Husted](#) in the [August 2, 2000](#) issue

Woody Allen once remarked that humanity is at a crossroads: “One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness, the other to total extinction. Let us pray that we have the wisdom to choose correctly.”

These scriptural passages are about real choices. The scene from Joshua 24 is a covenant renewal ceremony at Shechem. In the Bible the word “covenant” is shorthand for “what God has done.” It all starts when God says, “I will be your God; you will be my people.” Israel doesn’t apply for the job; it’s God who takes the initiative. God chooses. But then the chosen are challenged: “Choose this day whom you will serve.”

This is *not* a no-brainer. Faithfulness to God is not easy. Acknowledging Yahweh requires the reordering of everything else in life. It takes dedication, devotion, determination. God’s people are duly warned that life with Yahweh is rigorous and demanding. They must purge themselves of competing loyalties; they must quit dabbling in idolatry. They must reject any and all lesser gods and commit themselves to worship and obey the Lord in all areas of their lives.

We readers are momentarily left hanging: Will God’s people let God be God? Yes or no? They can accept or reject, but there is no middle ground. Is it peer pressure or maybe just good leadership when Joshua says, “As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord”? That’s one vote in. Next comes a quick review of Yahweh’s track record. God intervenes in history on behalf of God’s people—delivering them from bondage in Egypt, protecting them in the wilderness, kicking out the Amorites from the Promised Land to make room for them. It doesn’t take long to grasp what God has done, and it leads to an overwhelming response: “We will serve the Lord.” From now on, every time God’s people say no to temptation and yes to God, their love for God is deepened, their relationship strengthened. Step by step. Temptation by temptation. Choice by choice.

The disciples, too, are faced with a choice. Jesus feeds the 5,000, and the crowd is impressed with his miraculous ability to fill empty stomachs. Hoping for another

handout, many of them decide to stick with Jesus. But Jesus has much more to give. When he says, “You have to eat the bread of my body and drink the cup of my blood,” the notion must have sounded as cannibalistic to their ears as it does to ours. In the end, when Jesus refuses to become some kind of divine vending machine, they walk away.

But Jesus is not surprised. He even knows which one will betray him. What’s more, evidently no one can even respond to Jesus unless God is at work making it happen. The relationship between the divine electing purpose and human responsibility is a mystery the Bible never fully explains. Nevertheless, Jesus issues a call for commitment from the twelve. “Do you also wish to go away?” he asks. The choice is reminiscent of Joshua 24: Will they let God be God in God’s way?

There is no middle ground. They must identify with Jesus completely and intimately on his terms—or not. Peter responds for them all: “Lord, to whom shall we go?” In other words, What in the world would we do? Can’t you see we don’t really have a choice? “For you alone have the words of eternal life. And we have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Walter Wangerin wrote about finding his son reading a big stack of comic books. “Where did those come from?” “I took them out of the library.” “You mean you borrowed them?” “No . . .” So Wangerin marched his son to the library and made him apologize to the librarian, who delivered a stern lecture about stealing. That was the end of that. Until the father found another stack of comic books. “Where did you get these?” There was no use in lying. “When we were on vacation last summer I stole them from the store.” It was too late to return them, so the father ripped up the comic books and threw them into the fireplace.

When the son stole comic books a third time, his father said he was going to have to spank him—not a common occurrence in the Wangerin household. Five spanks later, his head hanging in shame, the boy was holding back tears. The father excused himself, stepped out of the room and sobbed.

Years later the son and his mother were reminiscing about those days. “After that incident with Dad, I never stole anything again,” he said. “I’m sure that spanking cured you,” said his mother. “Oh no,” the young man replied, “it was because when Dad stepped out of the room I could hear him crying.”

If anything can help us decide to live in obedience to God's word, it is knowing God's heart. Our disobedience and our abstinence break God's heart. Perhaps knowing that might help us make better choices today, and tomorrow.

I don't like the idea that life is a perpetual altar call. But faithfulness is still a challenge. What does a life reordered by God's demands look like today? Can I drive an SUV, co-own a modest vacation home, eat beef, invest in a pension fund? (I do.) How do I get the American flag out of the sanctuary without causing WW III? When faced with a choice, I'm not always sure what yes looks like. It's a good thing that God is still a God of covenant—taking the initiative, choosing, guiding and forgiving.