

June 2021

Covenant and the true nature of marriage

Part II: Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Joshua

God gave his people a whole way of life. He explained how to resolve disputes, what to do when their ox gores their neighbor, and where to dig their latrines. He established festivals and Sabbaths and types of sacrifice. But their top priority would be their sacred relationship with him! He commanded them to have no other gods. No idols. No graven images. No human sacrifice. In short, no living like the pagan culture around them! This would be the deepest meaning of honor. This was to be their act of love.

Several central beliefs defined Israel's identity. First, they had been rescued from slavery. Second, two commandments summarized the whole of the law: love God with all your heart, soul, and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself (see Luke 10:27). Third, obedience was an act of love and the key to receiving the promises God had made to their ancestors. Finally, God was uniquely present to them, first in the tabernacle and then in the temple.

Their possession of the land that had been promised to Abraham and their life in that land depended totally on their fidelity to the covenant. Unfortunately, despite all of God's goodness and actions on their behalf, they regularly fell into sin and idolatry. They struggled with their faith. In a moment of great weakness, they even made a golden calf, an image that resembled the chief god of the Canaanites, who was often depicted as a bull. The painful story can be found in Exodus 32.

Their lack of faith led to their wandering in the wilderness for a whole generation. Loss of faith and idolatry are depicted as a longing to return to Egypt, a longing to return to slavery. But finally, they entered the land that God had promised to Abraham. They defeated their enemies and were settling into the land when Joshua, now an old man nearing the end of his life, summoned Israel to Shechem. It was time to renew the covenant.

Joshua knew that the danger of forgetting what God had done for them and turning to other gods was as grave as the danger from the enemies they had defeated (see Joshua 24:15-25). As Moses had said, it is precisely in forgetting that we become vulnerable to being led astray, and this will not go well (see Deuteronomy 30). Like Israel, we are challenged at every turn to remember Moses' words and to respond to Joshua's question, "Whom shall we serve?". Whom shall our families serve—God or Pharaoh, the God of Abraham or the gods of Egypt, of the Canaanites, of other neighbors?

Love in our marriages, love in our relationship with God, is a choice that we can make. Choose life, and live. We are called to renew our covenant with the Lord and our spouse on a regular basis. Can we say with Joshua, "As for me and my family, we will serve the Lord"?



Deuteronomy 5:1–15

Pray

God, come to our assistance.

-Lord, make haste to help us.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit

-As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Reading: Deuteronomy 5:1–15 (excerpt)

Moses convened all Israel, and said to them: Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; you shall learn them and observe them diligently. ² The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. ³ Not with our ancestors did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today. And he said: ⁶ I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ⁷ you shall have no other gods before me. ⁸ You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ¹² Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. ¹³ Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁴ But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. ¹⁵ Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

Meditation

We were slaves! We were rescued! Once each week we should pause and reflect on how the Lord rescued us from our own slavery to the world, the flesh, and the devil. God's covenant is with those of us who are alive today! Our marriages, our family life should revolve around the central reality that we have been saved, rescued, delivered. Our love for each other should reflect that for the world. Our families can become places of refuge for the poor and needy, for family and friends. Once each week we should celebrate our rescue and the redeeming love of our God.

Quiet reflection: *Reflect on one or two ideas that came to mind in the reading or the meditation. Share one idea with your spouse.*

Prayers and Intentions: *As if you were talking to a friend, tell the Lord what and who are on your mind.*

Lord's Prayer: *Conclude your intentions by praying the Lord's Prayer together.*

Blessing: *May the Lord bless us, protect us from all evil, and bring us to everlasting life. Amen.*

Unity Prayer: *God, make our hearts one. Amen.*



Deuteronomy 6:1–9

Pray

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Reading: Deuteronomy 6:1–9

Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the LORD your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, ² so that you and your children and your children's children may fear the LORD your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. ³ Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you. ⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Meditation

In printed editions of the Hebrew Bible, the last letters of the first and last words of the Shema, which is the central prayer of Israel, are larger than all the other letters: “Hea**R** O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD is on**E**!” In Hebrew, the last letter of the word for “one” is a D, which could look like the Hebrew letter R. That would change the word completely and you could misread this text as “the Lord is another.” But that would never do. There simply are no others. We are to love the one God with our whole heart, soul, might. We are to love him with everything that defines us. Moreover, we have an obligation to teach our children and grandchildren the truth about reality. We are never to forget this most central of all commandments. God is one. There are no other gods. All that exists, other than the creator, is created reality. One day the Shema will mean that the one God is actually a community of three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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Leviticus 18:1–5; 19:18

Pray

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Reading: Leviticus 18:1–5; 19:18

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ² Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: I am the LORD your God. ³ You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not follow their statutes. ⁴ My ordinances you shall observe and my statutes you shall keep, following them: I am the LORD your God. ⁵ You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live: I am the LORD. 19:18 “You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

Meditation

Listen to the Lord's words: Do not live as the world around you lives. Live according to the pattern of life that I have given you. Live according to LOVE! Jesus will answer the question of who our neighbor is in a most startling way in his parable of the Good Samaritan. Until that time, God orients his people outward. If obedience to God is a form of love, then to love our neighbor is to love God as well. It is not that our neighbor is God, but rather that our neighbor is the object of God's infinite love. As God's friends we love the same things that he loves, and reject the same things that he does.

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Deuteronomy 6:17–23

Pray

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Reading: Deuteronomy 6:17–23

You must diligently keep the commandments of the LORD your God, and his decrees, and his statutes that he has commanded you. ¹⁸ Do what is right and good in the sight of the LORD, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may go in and occupy the good land that the LORD swore to your ancestors to give you, ¹⁹ thrusting out all your enemies from before you, as the LORD has promised. ²⁰ When your children ask you in time to come, "What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the LORD our God has commanded you?" ²¹ then you shall say to your children, "We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. ²² The LORD displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. ²³ He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors."

Meditation

At the heart of God's plan to rescue the human race is family. The family is the first place in which new human beings come to realize what it means to be human. It is here that we learn how to live out the pattern of life that is love. We learn how to forgive, to preserve, to seek the good of the other. Children learn about generosity from their parents' generosity and openness to life. They learn about faithfulness and fidelity by watching how their parents love each other. They learn that the truth of human life is that we were once all slaves to sin and that genuine freedom is found only in the Lord.

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Exodus 32:1–7

Pray

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Reading: Exodus 32:1–7

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." ² Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." ³ So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" ⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD." ⁶ They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel. ⁷ The LORD said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely.

Meditation

The lure of idolatry is ever present. The prophets will condemn idolatry as adultery: the breaking of our vow to be faithful to our spouse, who in this case is God. However, sometimes it is awfully hard to see what God is up to in our lives. He seems slow to answer our prayers. Our world is often turned upside down or filled with chaos and we are afraid. It is tempting to turn to something tangible, solid, apparently real. It is in these moments that we need to return, as individuals and as couples, to God's word. We need to allow the Scripture to shape how we think, to challenge the assumptions that we make or that are on offer from "experts." No object made by human hands, no idea that comes solely from the human mind, can ever take the place of God. The golden calf is not just an old story; it's an ever-modern human story. If we are not careful, it can become our story too.

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Share one idea with your spouse.

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Deuteronomy 30:15–20

Pray

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Reading: Deuteronomy 30:15–20

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. ¹⁶ If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. ¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸ I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰ loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Meditation

Love is a choice that we can make. But it is so easy to be deceived, to be tricked, to be lied to. Why is it so hard to choose life, to choose love? Perhaps it is because the counterfeits on offer look good on the outside. The counterfeits offer simple, often immediate, solutions to intractable problems, but precisely because they are counterfeits, they cannot deliver on their promises. Tragically, we often don't discover our mistake until it is too late. In our marriages, the angry word, the cold shoulder, the self-righteous indignation can feel so good in the moment—but is so destructive. A negative joke, with its little barb of poison, gets us the laugh we are looking for, but wounds the love of our life. The Lord says to us, "Today I set before you life and death. Choose life!"

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Exodus 40:32–38

Pray

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Reading: Exodus 40:32–38

When they went into the tent of meeting, and when they approached the altar, they washed, as the LORD had commanded Moses. ³³ He set up the court around the tabernacle and the altar, and put up the screen at the gate of the court. So Moses finished the work. ³⁴ Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. ³⁵ Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. ³⁶ Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on each stage of their journey; ³⁷ but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day that it was taken up. ³⁸ For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, before the eyes of all the house of Israel at each stage of their journey.

Meditation

The glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. The cloud, the pillar of fire, now was present in the tent, or tabernacle. God was uniquely present in the tabernacle. Later, when Solomon built the First Temple, the glory of God filled the temple, and it became one of the central symbols of Israel. It was the unique dwelling place of God on earth. Just before the temple was destroyed by the Babylonians, the prophet Ezekiel had a vision of the glory of God leaving the temple. There is no comparable story to mark the return of the glory of God to the temple when, 600 years later, their great longing was fulfilled. Because this occurred in a most unexpected way. The new temple was not a building; it was the human person of Jesus, in whom we beheld the glory of God (see John 1:14). Jesus then in turn poured out his Holy Spirit on his church; now, each believer is God's holy temple and God's own spirit resides in us (1 Cor 3:16). Our marriage now participates in that great mystery of God's presence in the world. We make him visible when we let him shine forth from our relationship. We married couples have the unique privilege of reflecting for the world the mystery of two distinct persons being one new being. Our bond brings together the human and the divine, and God is present.

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Joshua 24:15–18, 23–25

Pray

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Reading: Joshua 24:15–18, 23–25

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." ¹⁶ Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; ¹⁷ for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; ¹⁸ and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God." ²³ He said, "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel." ²⁴ The people said to Joshua, "The LORD our God we will serve, and him we will obey." ²⁵ So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

Meditation

At the end of our reflections on Exodus and covenant, we have come full circle. The question remains to this day: Whom will we serve, whom will we worship? We have seen that to serve and to worship are the same thing. The challenge is not only to put away the foreign gods that are in our lives, but to first recognize what they are. It is easy to recognize a statue of a foreign god or goddess. But what if the foreign gods in the modern world are disguised? We must ask ourselves with great honesty: In whom or what do we put our trust? Is it in politics or secular solutions to intractable human problems? In our job? In our savings account? In our gifts and talents? Our spouse? Our friends? Our material possessions? What or whom **do** we serve? Can we make Joshua's prayer our own? Can we say wholeheartedly, "As for me, with my spouse and my family together, we will serve the Lord"?

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