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PROMISED LAND—
HERE OR THERE?

In the story of Exodus, something divine happens. Something that is inexplicable apart from the activity of God. This happening becomes the formative story of the Jews. This story shapes the nationalistic desires of their nation even to this day. It shapes their very beliefs. They believe they are the chosen people of their God. They believe that in their weakness, God is strong. They believe that a powerless nation can overcome a stronger political entity. They believe that their existence is somehow tied up in the will of this God. They believe that they are the light to the Gentiles and that their Jerusalem is the hill to which these Gentile nations will one day stream to bow in worship of God. They believe that God can grow weary of their lawlessness and exile them among pagans but cannot forget them and will, sooner or later, bring them home to the land promised—their Middle Eastern turf. These beliefs drive their understanding of land rights, political power, and foreign relations. All this is rooted in Exodus.

The Exodus story is also formative for Christians. God acts and something inexplicable happens. Slaves are set free. The powerless are empowered for a journey thought impossible. The powerful are left in shambles with their firstborns in the mortuary and their army at the bottom of the sea. God rewrites the expected ending. The dying live; the living die. In essence, Christians see the shadow of resurrection in this story. God moves in a way that creates a future where there was none. A dead end becomes a new highway. People without need for a map now browse travel brochures. They are going somewhere. Their future is blessed by God. Tomorrow is a gift.

Out of this come the Ten Commandments. They come on the other side of Egypt, on the other side of liberation. They are not given as an exit plan from Egypt or a road map to the Promised Land. They are given after God has already acted on their behalf. The commandments are given to people who used to be as good as dead and are now vibrantly alive—and free.

Until we get it fixed in our hearts and minds that law is not how we get to God, earn God, gain God's attention, placate or impress God, we will not understand the place of the law in our lives. Law is simply how the redeemed live.

And that law is given for life on earth. Sometimes I think we forget that the Ten Commandments were given to God's people who were en route to an earthly place. We fondly call their destination the Promised Land. God had made promises to Abraham about land. That promise stayed alive and gave them something to hope for, even in the mud pits of Goshen. But their hopes were not that they would one day die and leave filthy old Egypt behind and go to heaven where the streets were gold and the angels played harps and nobody bossed you around anymore. They hoped for earthly turf where they could work the land, raise a family, and worship God. But we Christians have turned the Promised Land into an unearthly place out in the galaxy somewhere. Flip through the hymnal and listen to our wishful longing for a faraway land. In our songs we talk about a promised land, flowing with milk and honey. We say that we are just passing through this world on our way to Glory Land, Sweet Beulah Land.

I do understand the longing behind these lyrics. I've sung these songs with a wistful longing to be freed from the earthly burdens of labor, sickness, trouble, and death. I do not mean to minimize the desire to be away from the effects of a sinful world, beyond the reach of evil and its consequences. Every child of God feels this tug at some point. And those who have more friends and family on the other side of death feel it especially strong. This is not a denial of the blessed reality of heaven. It is, however, an attempt to deliver us from an escapist faith that embraces a future beyond this world rather than embracing the future of a kingdom coming to this world in a glorious act of bodily resurrection, planetary restoration, and global justice.

DANCING WITH THE LAW

If we desire a rest from our labor in the presence of God, the law addresses this in the commandment about Sabbath. But if we think the law is a list of things to do to get to heaven, we have missed its intended function as a way of life on earth. God's primary interest is not to get us to heaven but to get heaven in us on earth. Remember this part of the Lord's Prayer, "thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10, κγν). The Promised Land is the land beneath our feet right now, where the God who liberates the captive and raises the dead seeks to bless us with a way of life that is rich in mercy, justice, and righteousness.

Sadly, many of us have given up on much happening here on earth. Like the Jews tramping straw in Pharaoh's mud pits, like the slaves on the southern cotton plantations, like the elderly woman watching nonstop TV news, we've set our sights on escaping to another world. We no longer believe that our eyes will see God's redemption in the land of the living.

We forget that our own scriptures speak of the earth as the site of God's last great redemptive move. We forget that the heavenly city is coming down to earth. We forget that we are not going to where God is but that God is coming to where we are. We forget that the risen Jesus tells His disciples to meet Him, not just inside the Eastern Gate, but on the road to Galilee. We forget that the ultimate hope of the Christian is not that our soul would ascend to heaven but that our body would be raised from an earthly grave. We forget that Paul's great chapter on the resurrection of Jesus ends, not with "Thank God, we're all going to heaven," but "Be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58).

The Ten Commandments are not a list to observe so we can go to heaven someday. They are the gift of heaven already landed in our hearts by the God who gives life to His redeemed—which means that the Ten Commandments are better understood as a corporate instruction for the formation of a people, rather than

a list of personal morals to be observed. Every commandment is highly relational, reflecting the way we relate to God—worship no other gods, make no images, do not misuse God’s name; and reflecting the way we relate to each other—honor your parents, be faithful to your spouse, do not murder, do not steal. You can’t keep a single commandment by yourself. Obedience requires another; even if he or she is the person you don’t envy or kill.

Maybe we are wrong to insist that the Ten Commandments remain the ethical code for a pluralistic society. Only God followers can keep the first three commandments, and the only way they can keep them is by virtue of the Spirit dwelling in them, writing the law on their hearts and empowering them to obey it. To demand this of pagans is to demand the impossible and the unlikely. Granted, the last six commandments may have principled wisdom to guide lawmaking and life in community, but if these are separated from the narrative of the first four commandments, the very likeness of God that defines behavior toward our fellow humans is lost. The God we worship in the first four commandments is the God who

- creates respecting families (think Trinity as a loving community)
- loves life more than murder (think Jesus’ words to a sword-slashing Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane)
- cherishes marital faithfulness as an example of His treatment of His own covenanted bride (think the prophetic calls for a wayward bride to return to her faithful, suffering covenant partner)
- respects the boundary of bodies not to be used without permission (think Virgin Mary)
- respects property (think instructions to the Ephesians to steal no longer but to work with the hands and supply gifts to the needy)
- calls for truth to be spoken (think Jesus’ words before Pilate)

DANCING WITH THE LAW

- covets nothing (think Jesus emptying himself and becoming a servant who grasped for nothing but the Father's will)

The commandments are a three-chapter narrative that flows
from God
to
deliverance
to
God-worship
to
God-like behavior.

You can't break into the narrative and expect the God-like behavior without the prior saving activity of God. This is not a checklist. It's a story of people being transformed. And it's our story.