

Exodus 19 and Leviticus 26  
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### **Built With Whispers**

Bless their hearts. I love the Israelites' enthusiasm. I can almost hear them shout:

*Everything that the Lord has said we will do!* They have three whole months of freedom under their belts and now find themselves camped at the foot of Mount Sinai. At this moment, they are all in, completely ready to do all that God asks. God has reminded them of the way they were whisked away on eagles' wings from Egypt, how even the sea could not stand in the way of their march to a new life. God calls them "a kingdom of priests" and "a holy nation." It is easy for me to overlook just what a mind-blowing transformation they have undergone. This is a complete 180 from where they were and who they were in just months before, at least in the eyes of the larger world. They were enslaved. They were disposable nobodies in Pharaoh's eyes, and possibly in their own eyes, too. God has reminded them and the Egyptians who and whose they are. God has called them out, placed them on a new path, and now God is set to make a new covenant with them here in the wilderness, a covenant that lays out the ways they are to live with him and with one another in the midst of the larger world. This covenant takes the form of the Law, the Ten Commandments, a gift that spells out what it means to be God's holy nation.

It can be a challenge to understand God's Law as a gift. Mention of the Ten Commandments often conjures up images of exceedingly heavy stone tablets inscribed with an abundance of thou-shalt-nots (to be read in a gruff, deep voice of course). Even in recent years, these laws have been weaponized in the public square. And yet, they were never intended to be weapons, nor were they written as a way of reining in a world gone mad. No, these ten rules were understood from the outset as a promise, a covenant between God and the people of God,

an internal memo of sorts, intended to shape a people whose primary king and highest allegiance is the creator of the universe, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In the Law God is setting up fenceposts for people moving in and among other cultures and nations, distinctive ways of living in obedience to God and concern for one another in a diverse world.

Our own Reformed protestant tradition has embraced the Law in particular ways from the days of John Calvin. The Law has three roles, three jobs, even. The first role or use is that it functions as a mirror, showing us clearly where we fall short. For example, the Law reminds me that I am often quick to place other things—including my opinions—above God on any given day without even thinking. So, reading the Ten Commandments is a wake-up call. I am not as faithful as I think I am. The Law also restrains us when we might not automatically restrain ourselves. God does not want me to swipe my neighbor's cow, nor does God approve of my trying to claim that my neighbor's brilliant and insightful sermon is mine. So the Law—which for Calvin includes not only the Ten Commandments but also the promise of grace and salvation—is a way of reminding me how I do not measure up to God's expectations on my own and a way of giving me clear guardrails for living a faithful life in the world. Those are the first two uses. For Calvin the Law is also a blessed guide, instruction for how I can honor God as I live and move in the world. The Law is not a dismal burden but a gracious help. As scholar Mary Lane Potter reminds me, Calvin understands God as the “Guardian of our welfare” and our “chief teacher.”<sup>1</sup> God offers the Law not as a way to punish us or weigh us down, but rather for our benefit, an aid to faith and faithful living. Potter lifts up Calvin's insistence that:

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<sup>1</sup> Potter, M. L. (1985). The “Whole Office of the Law” in the Theology of John Calvin. *Journal of Law and Religion*, 3(1), 117–139. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1051350>

The Law is ‘a peculiar manner of teaching,’ which ‘shows us the road in order that we might not be errant pilgrims who ramble about from pillar to post, led by our appetites, but that we might be led as if by [God’s] hand.’<sup>2</sup>

In other words, Calvin wants us to understand that God wants good things for us, a good, full, and joyful life as God’s people in God’s world. The Law is one way God reminds us of this.

You may have noticed something different in the order of worship this morning, the Summary of the Law. On the heels of being reminded that we are saved by grace, that God indeed forgives us, we are then given a chance to hear Jesus’ summary of the Law—love God, love neighbor. It is that simple—*not* easy—simple. It is good to rehearse this as often as possible because I for one need all the reminders I can get.

One of my favorite writers is Kate Bowler, who teaches at Duke Divinity School. Dr. Bowler is an expert in American Protestantism, particularly the Prosperity gospel. She is also a wife and mother who was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer before her child could walk. She wrote earlier in the week about struggling with chronic pain. She spoke about how her friends had helped her by listening to her, encouraging her, helping her celebrate her latest book being released in paperback, and giving her room to rage and cry. Near the end of her post she wrote, “I am built from the outside in.”<sup>3</sup> *I am built from the outside in.*

So are the Israelites. So are we. We are not built to do this on our own, nor do we build ourselves into faithful followers all *on* our own. We are not self-made by any stretch of the imagination. God creates us for a good, full, faithful, joyful life in community, and God knows such a life ain’t easy. We meet the Israelites this morning only 90 days or so since they have left Egypt behind, at least geographically. They are fearful and ornery, easily tempted to fall back on

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<sup>2</sup> Potter (quoting John Calvin), 121.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/CjUJpcFOWjG/>

what seems easy or safe. They need help remembering, they need reminders, guidelines on how to orient themselves and their community to honor God in who they are and what they do.

Scholars date the writing of Exodus to a long stretch of time dating from the years of David or Solomon on through to the time of the exile. The temptations of Israel's glory days under David's rule differ from the temptations in exile, and yet there are powerful temptations in each historical moment, nonetheless. When all seems grand and glorious on the top of the mountain, one may begin to believe that she got there all on her own and that nothing can knock her down. And when every remnant of home lies in smithereens and multiple voices offer seductive options for quick happiness, one can begin to think the best life is the one that embraces what is close by, what is popular, what is—at least on the surface—easy. So the people of God need reminders, repeated reminders—in good times and bad—of who and whose we are called to be.

We don't often read Leviticus in worship, let alone preach from it. Leviticus is filled with the Law in all its minutest detail. And, it must be said, it contains texts—such as the proper cost of a person who is enslaved—that are not in keeping with the just and faithful life we believe God intends for us and for all. And yet there is also a moment when God reminds Godself of what is at stake, when God remembers that God has made a promise, too. In the 26th chapter of Leviticus, God rehearses all the ways the people suffer for straying from the covenant, noting that they will find themselves in enemy territory. And God says:

But despite all that...I will not reject them or despise them to the point of totally destroying them, breaking my covenant with them by doing so, because I am the Lord their God. But for their sake I will remember the covenant with the first

generation, the ones I brought out of Egypt's land in the sight of all the nations, in order to be their God; I am the Lord.<sup>4</sup>

We are built from the outside in. God is ever present, stubbornly faithful, calling us back, leading us forward in faith and faithfulness. God has promised to be our God, always. That is who God is. And God does not and will not forget this, even if we do. God does not forget us, even though that may be a tempting option at times.

My friend and colleague Bob Fuller told a story in a seminary preaching class years ago. Some friends of Bob's had a son named Ben who was four or five years old when they brought their newborn daughter Sarah home from the hospital. Ben was completely smitten with his sister and could not wait to hold her. They propped him up in the middle of their bed with pillows all around him and placed Sarah in his arms. Then Ben abruptly told them they needed to leave because he wanted to talk to Sarah by himself. His parents had no clue what Ben had in mind, but they wanted to encourage a close bond between siblings, so they piled more pillows around the two children and scooped to the edge of the room. Ben proceeded to give them a strong side eye. They then stepped to the other side of the door, cracked just enough to hear what he would say and to rush in if anyone started to take a tumble. Ben leaned forward and whispered, "Sarah, I need you to tell me all about God, because I am starting to forget."

We are built from the outside in. There are voices shouting at us from every direction every moment of the day taunting us to take the easy way, to trounce our neighbors in order to get ahead, to sell our souls to the flashiest power offering a quick fix. **And** there is a steady, powerful, whispered hum telling us something different, telling us something true: "Remember: You are loved; you are treasured." God created us for a good life, a joy-filled life in community

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<sup>4</sup> Leviticus 26:44-45, Common English Bible

with others who are also created for a good and joy-filled life. And even when we forget, even when we go astray, God still claims us, still works to build us into the people God longs for us to be. The loud voices who feed on fear and hatred and demand our attention make us no promises, not in any lasting or good or holy way. They do not build us up, but rather revel in tearing us down, filling us with fear, and ripping our communities apart. The shouting will not save us. Maybe we would do well to listen for God's whisper again, to tune our ears to that hum, to turn our hearts back to the one who promises to be our God always and forever, to remember whose we are, who and what we are built to be and do. We are children of the promise. God is our God, and we are his. Always.

*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.  
And a second is like it:  
You shall love your neighbor as yourself.  
On these two commandments  
hang all the law and the prophets.*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.