

God spoke these words: Exodus 20:1-17

## **Exodus speaks to those for whom freedom is a dream, and to those who sense that freedom is becoming a curse.**

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [March 15, 2000](#) issue

It was Boxing Day 1989. Romania was in turmoil. The previous day, President Nicolae Ceausescu, unable to quell the tide of dissent in Bucharest, had been tried and executed. Now no one was in charge. Western reporters flooded into the country from the south, searching for someone who could speak English. Finally they found someone, and in one sentence she summed up not only Romania's predicament, but the human condition: "We have freedom," she said, "but we don't know what to do with it."

The world is divided into the poor and the rich—those who long for freedom, and those who have freedom but don't know what to do with it; those who long for God to come and bring justice, and those who fear that he just might. The Book of Exodus is a testament to both these conditions. It speaks to those for whom freedom is a dream, and to those who sense that freedom is becoming a curse.

The Ten Commandments are a gift to those who have been set free, showing them how they can keep their freedom. They are not an assault course, a barrier to be overcome in order to *gain* freedom. Freedom is a gift from God, not something that can be earned by years of striving. The commandments are not a prison in which God places his people, a straitjacket to prevent them from getting above themselves. God has done what Israel could not do for itself—he has given it freedom in the crossing of the Red Sea. He now gives his people a second gift—the means of keeping that freedom. In the process he shows them who he is and what freedom is.

The sequence of events is as follows. God speaks and states a fact: his people are in slavery. This is not the freedom for which he has created them, the freedom to

which he has called them. He asks a question: Do you want to be free? He then acts, and delivers his people. The map searchings and heart searchings in the wilderness are all exploring what it means to be free and what it means to worship God. The conclusion is that to be free means to be a people who worship God. The goal of freedom is holiness, belonging to God. At Sinai God reveals the destiny of his people: "You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." In other words, just as a priest mediates God to the people, Israel will have the role of mediating God to the world.

Thus, to be holy, to belong to God and to mediate his being to the world, is to be free. It is not the esoteric longing of a few; it is what everyone wants. There is only one way to be free, and that is to be a people who belong to God. In the language of the Reformation, justification—the liberation by God of his people so they may be free in his sight—belongs with sanctification—the way God makes his people holy. Liberation and law are the way God claims his people as his own. At this point God commands. How shall we be holy? How shall we belong to God? How can we keep our freedom? This is how. Worship God, resisting the alternatives, and be a people at peace with one another.

What are the alternatives to worshipping God? There are four, according to the commandments. One is to worship a different God. This is given no elaboration, because it needs none: God has brought Israel out of slavery. What use would Israel have for any other god? A second is to make an idol. This is to worship something smaller than God, something God has made. It is to confuse the creation with the creator, to serve that which cannot liberate—in other words, to return to slavery. A third is to trivialize God by forgetting that his name is holy, by using his name to advance our own purposes rather than his. If we frequently call on him when we don't want him, we must accept that he won't be there to answer when we really do.

The fourth is to make gods of ourselves. This is the underlying warning of the commandments concerning the sabbath and parents. Temptations to break the sabbath are understandable: we are needed, we are vital, we have made commitments and need this extra time to fulfill them, we don't want to let people down, there is so much good that can be done. The temptation to break the sabbath is the temptation to do extra good. Why is extra good necessary? Because salvation is just out of reach and we are striving for it? Because we are surrounded by suffering and evil, and God can't or won't intervene, so we must? The sabbath is a great test of our faith in God. If we look to him, he will look after what he has given

to us.

Honoring one's parents is about acknowledging contingency. The decisive choices in our lives—that we should exist and should be children of God—were made before we were born. Whatever our feelings about our parents, our practice toward them must be one of gratitude, reflecting the fact that without them there would be no us. Our respect for them is a practical demonstration of our thankfulness to God.

The commands to respect life, marriage, property and truth underline that freedom means being a people before God. We cannot be holy on our own; we need others. Unless they respect these boundaries, no people can live in peace.

The commands end where they began. God has brought Israel out of slavery; who could ask for anything more? God has given us life, purpose, heritage, destiny, gifts, truth. Yet we still compare ourselves with our neighbors and want what they have—Israel's perennial mistake. Without God, they could have goods and gratification; but they could never be holy, and they could never be free.