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CHAPTER ONE

FROM EDEN TO THE EAST

At dawn of an August morning, 1978, Prince Michael Bates of the principality of Sealand personally led a daring mission to recapture his nation from invading German and Dutch mercenaries. The operation was successful, and no one lost their life. Following negotiations with German and Dutch government officials, Prince Michael released the invaders he had held as hostages, and he was free to rule his homeland. Yet another example of the habit of humans throughout history to risk our lives to defend, and fight for, our homes, nations, and kingdoms.

Sealand, however, was no ordinary country. And Prince Michael was no ordinary royal. Sealand is what is termed a *micronation*. A former World War II anti-aircraft platform, located several miles off the English coast in the North Sea, the dilapidated concrete and metal platform is slightly smaller than a basketball court. Lying abandoned, it was claimed in the 1960s by entrepreneur and pirate radio operator Roy Bates,

who declared it his own kingdom. He even printed his own money and passports and created his own flag. Media footage from the early days of Sealand shows Bates commanding himself with all the self-importance of a monarch, while his wife, Joan, looking regal and full of adoration, leans in to his side. Their self-confidence as rulers contrasting with the ramshackle surrounds of the rotting platform in which they hold court.

Sealand could appear as a joke, or an excuse for a tax dodge, but for a half-century the Bates family has defended Sealand, most notably when rival businessmen hired goons to seize the platform while Roy was away on business. Armed with firearms, and with the aid of their friend, a former James Bond stuntman and helicopter pilot, the Bates family willingly risked their lives to recapture their micronation. Illustrating the way in which humans are seemingly wired to create places, to erect borders around them, and to be willing to defend them with our lives. This impulse of humans to create "places" is vital to understand if we are to grasp our current cultural moment. The Scriptures are a wonderful place to begin to discover why we seek a place called home.

THE FIRST PURE SPACE

Whether we are believers or not, the boundaries and structures of secularism shape and form the way we think about religion. The devout can buy into the myth of the sacred-secular divide, unconsciously relegating faith into the private realm. Thus we struggle to see that the whole of culture operates in the grammar of religion. Yet if we are to be biblical people, we must learn again to view the world through the lens of Scripture. To

again turn to Scripture's wisdom, which divides soul and spirit, laying bare the motivations of the human heart. Such motivations, the origins of human possibility, tragedy, and failing are found in the book of Genesis—a book that shows that all human history is colored with a religious hue.

Genesis presents all of creation as a temple, and humans as divinely ordained priests. Whereas we are used to thinking of temples as buildings, God originally established the whole world as a temple. The divine, the sacred, was not confined to brick and mortar.

The early scenes of the Bible show us a God who is gloriously powerful and omnipotent, who can speak universes into being, a cosmic God, above and beyond the parochial gods who guarded small areas of earth and served tribes and nations of humans. He is the God of the world. He is both radically present yet separate from His handiwork. Present in the good creation He inhabits, He walks in the garden in the cool of the day. He's a relational Deity, capable of conversation and communion. Humans are created to be His partners in conversation, to bask and worship in His presence. He tasks them as His functionaries, stewards or priests. Their identity is rooted in their Creator and the vocation He has given them, to flourish as they ensure that creation flourishes.

Adam and Eve's place is with God and in the world, because everything is in its right place. The world operates as God intended it to. Creation praises Him as it performs the roles He has given it. God is not restricted to a temple, confined to a building, because the whole world operates in the tenor of worship; everything points toward Him. Heaven is where

God's will is obeyed, thus there is no delineation between heaven and earth. Reflecting God's good order, a series of borders exists to ensure the flourishing of creation. The border between Creator and creation. Between humans and animals. The border that prevents humans from eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, preventing the priests from futility and disastrously attempting to cross the border between humanity and divinity.

Yet these priests stage a coup. Those who worship wish to become objects of worship themselves. The serpent promises the potential to become like gods. When Adam sinks his teeth into the fruit, a sacred boundary is transgressed. Humans trade eternal life with God for the weakness of mortality.

Humanity is expelled from the garden, separated from easy access to God's presence. A new order is established, one with cherubim as border guards. Peter Leithart writes, "After Adam's expulsion from the garden, holy space became taboo, inaccessible space."[1] Thus humanity finds itself wandering east of Eden, aware at a deep level that it is expelled, yet also aware that Eden exists. The space of true freedom, of true communion with the divine, where humans are truly recognized as His children, able to approach God without fear, to commune with Him freely, to see each other minus the lens of sin, is no longer accessible. Instead, their fate: God's judgment has them exposed, vulnerable to the forces of chaos that they themselves have participated in unleashing.

SCRATCHING OUT EDEN IN THE DUST

Because humans are spiritually homeless, we dream of holy spaces, utopias, motherlands, golden ages, and soulmates. We yearn for reconnection to the divine, re-admittance to the sacred and pure space. "The seed of all of man's questing is to be found in Cain's life in the land of wandering, always searching for a place where his need for security might be satisfied,"[2] observes Jacques Ellul. This wandering, this lostness, is the essence of humanity's essential weakness: *detachment from their true home in God, and with that, the curse of mortality.*

With this detachment—this sense that we have a true home but are not living in it—we see in a myriad of ways that something is awry in the world, that it is tainted, impure, and corrupted. Death, disease, and disorder lurk, bursting out at points. Cain's response to this situation of danger, fear, and dislocation is outlined in Genesis 4:16–17: "Then Cain went out from the LORD's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden. Cain was intimate with his wife, and she conceived and gave birth to Enoch. Then Cain became the builder of a city, and he named the city Enoch after his son."

Cain, just as all humans will do, fights back against his weakness and mortality with an attempt to carve out meaning and legacy apart from God. First, he and his wife conceive a son. While God had commanded Adam and Eve to procreate and fill the earth, the tone of Cain's act of procreation carries a different tenor. It is the attempt to strike back at mortality by creating a line of descendants, to reach beyond the impending grave with a glorious lineage. As Ellul writes, "It is man's desire to find life, eternity, again. He transmits his life to his children . . . He will

satisfy his desire for eternity by producing children."[3]

After his wife gives birth to a son, Cain attempts to create a legacy by creating a city named after his son. God had named Adam—a display of authority over the man. Yet Cain wished to exercise his own name-giving power, attaching it not just to his own son, but to a city. Cain, like his parents, attempts to be like God. Not just in exercising the power of name-giving, but in exercising power over life in the murder of his brother Abel. Erasing the brotherhood of humanity, by erasing his brother from the world. This act of domination, of the taking of life and the making of life, makes possible the establishment of the first city.

Building the city, too, is an act of subtle rebellion against God. It is an attempt to mirror the security and peace of Eden, but without God. It was a projection of human power, an attempt to counter the weakness of mortal human flesh with the solidity of stones and walls. "The city is almost certainly founded on the fear of death and with a view to safety," Leon Kass notes.[4]

Cain reaches for a kind of substitute for eternity by fathering a son and attempting to create a lineage. He initiates a city in his son's name, but without the protection of God. Fear grips him; his lineage, his memory, must be protected, so he creates a city, a location protected by walls and a watchtower—a memorial to himself and his family and protection against chaos in the world.

Like Cain, our selfish rebellion, thrusting us into the fleshly condition of fear and mortality, seeks to find security and stability in the spaces, places, and social structures that we create.

Lost, wandering east of Eden, we, like Cain, scratch out imitations of home in the dust of where we find ourselves. Unable to return to Eden, we create a place for ourselves.

CHAPTER TWO

THE NATIONS RAGE

At 9:36 pm on July 13, 1977, New York City experienced a citywide blackout. Those who were there for the 1965 blackout remembered how civilly everyone responded then. Neighbor helped neighbor, and a community spirit defined the event. This time it was different. The social fabric was fraying. The city was straining from the nation's economic woes. Poverty was rampant, and cost-cutting measures slashed essential community services. When the lights went out, havoc erupted. Looting and arson spread across the city. When even ordinary citizens joined in, the power of mob mentality was revealed. Soon looters were looting other looters. By sunrise thousands had been arrested, over a thousand buildings had been torched, and hundreds of police officers were injured. Total damages ran into the hundreds of millions. Some retail strips didn't recover for over a decade, as store owners boarded up their businesses, unable to face the prospect of selling to the neighbors and friends who had looted their stores.

The darkness threw a blanket over law, order, and social convention. Within minutes the social fabric unraveled. What was

formerly strength in numbers became danger in numbers. The darkness, paradoxically, cast a light upon the motivations of the human heart. We see the tensions between our human social systems, created to protect us, and their propensity to tear at us. This is something at play in our world today, something the Scriptures are deeply interested in.

COALITIONS OF THE FLESH

Psalm 2 gives a realistic view of world affairs, pondering the struggle between earthly authorities and the heavenly King. "Why do the nations rebel and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers conspire together against the LORD and His Anointed One: 'Let us tear off their chains and free ourselves from their restraints'" (Ps. 2:1–3).

Even now, the Hebrew word for the nations, *goyim*, is often uttered with a desultory sting, because the nations were Israel's enemies. They would surround, oppress, and enslave God's people. Whereas Israel would fail its priestly vocation by falling into idol worship, the nations are another matter. Like a wild bull, they buck at the restraints that God has placed upon them for their and the world's safety. (A sobering thought to reflect upon as we stand for our national anthems.)

The nations and their rulers plot rebellion against God's ordered plan. "These are not just kings but 'earth's kings'—kings from all over the world," reflects John Goldingay. "This is not just an ordinary, small-scale rebellion but the whole world asserting itself."[1] Nations are a melding of people, place, and culture. Biblically, they emerge organically from the rebellion

of Babel, the great human project to ascend to the heavenly heights of divinity by human effort, to continue the rebellion of Adam and Eve "to become like gods" via great and heroic human endeavors. They are a response to our mortal, weak, and fleshly existence, an effort at having strength and protection in numbers, solace and comfort in community, meaning in language and culture. To insulate the human heart against the cosmic loneliness and insecurity that humanity experiences after the fall.

But at the heart of these coalitions is a contradiction: we attempt to escape the flesh by gathering it together. The structures, communities, and institutions we create in order to protect ourselves from the chaotic ravages of the flesh do not free us from the effects of the flesh. For the flesh is within us. Augustine reminds us:

> Indeed, it may happen that a man refrains from sensual indulgence because of devotion to an idol, or because of the erroneous teaching of some sect; and yet even then, though such a man seems to restrain and suppress his carnal desires, he is convicted, on the authority of the apostle of living by the rule of the flesh; and it is the very fact of his abstention from fleshly indulgence that proves that he is engaged in the "works of the flesh."[2]

In other words, what we create to protect ourselves from the flesh can also end up serving the flesh.

Law and order, our traditions and social conventions, our governance, are created to protect us from being overrun by the

flesh. We build militaries and borders to protect us from the evil outside us. We create police forces, legal systems, and punishments to protect us from the evil within. We intuitively grasp that if we are to flourish, love, create, and build, we must be protected from the flesh that always lurks both within and without. Thus our cultures contain the chains of which Psalm 2 speaks—the restraints that we create to protect us from the flesh. They are on one hand God-given, yet they also have the potential, when disconnected from their divine source, to become overrun by the flesh themselves.

Ancient civilizations, nations themselves, seemed to have a fairly perceptive view of the danger of the flesh. The Greeks and Romans feared the decay and corruption that luxury and comfort brought. The Greek historians Herodotus and Xenophon both worried that cultures that enjoyed soft living eventually were overrun by more militant peoples toughened by deprivation. Aristotle attempted to protect Greek civilization by discouraging young men from political service, because wealth and comfort would disconnect them from the common experience and cause them to view life through the prism of pleasant feelings.[3] The Roman writers Cato and Juvenal acted as watchdogs over the moral state of the Empire, fearing that the comfort and indulgence engendered by its success would sap its strength. Tacitus looked favorably upon the "barbarian" Germanic tribes, lauding them for their sexual ethics in comparison to what he called the "modern" sexual culture of promiscuity in Rome.[4] Polybius, one of the great observers of Roman culture, fretted that the decadent sexual and materialistic mores of his Greek culture were corrupting the strength and vitality of the Roman Republic.

Thus the wisdom of the ancient world tended to side with the view that social and political progress would eventually be sabotaged by the frailties of human nature. History was a perpetual cycle, a fight of civilization against flesh, a struggle that would ultimately be undone from within. The ancients worried that their culture, weakened and degraded, would eventually be overrun by the barbarians who always seemed to be amassing at the border, threatening to sack civilization in a kind of deserving failure. A protecting force was needed. The borders could not be breached.

The strategies of Rome for protecting against the flesh were trade, commerce, stability, freedom of religion, liberty, and the flourishing of classical culture and philosophy. Yet, this was enforced with the *gladius*, the sword of the legionaries, designed to smash skulls and disembowel those who resisted the reign of peace. When the North Africans of Carthage dared to take the fight to Rome, crossing the impenetrable Alps to the empire's borders, the armies of Rome fought them all the way back to North Africa. Defeat was not enough; they crushed Carthage. They sold its citizens into slavery, burned their city, and salted their fields so none would yield crops ever again. The Roman military machine wiped Carthage from the face of the earth—an entire culture obliterated by the legions of flesh.

And so, a cycle emerges, a self-defeating vortex. Our nations, our cultures, our places, and indeed our religions—buffers against the flesh—soon turn into barriers distancing us from God, which is an essential component *of* the flesh. These systems take on a life of their own and go rogue, becoming destructive rather than protective forces.

LONGING TO BE HUMAN

"The sin of man consists in that he does not want to be flesh," writes Herman Ridderbos, reminding us that we are defined by our rebellion against God. We hate our mortality, our weakness, so even as we battle against flesh, we wish to transcend it. Our desire to be as gods continues beyond Eden. The human "does not want so to be flesh as it has been given to him to be, as the foundation of a life after the will of God."[5] In God's plan, the limitations of our flesh turn us to Him. Sensing our weakness, we long for strength. Fearing our mortality, we desire to live forever. God is the answer to both these needs—and more—so that, in His wisdom, our flesh creates a longing only He can fulfill.

But when we seek fulfillment elsewhere, we use the flesh to try and fulfill desires of the spirit—we take up attitudes and actions that oppose the reign of God in our lives, further adding to our chaos. Our flesh blinds us. Our minds are driven into a kind of madness, warped by the terror of our fleshly limitations. We begin our rebellion against God, conspiring between each other, but our conference of fleshly rebellion is futile. *Flesh next to divinity is revealed for what it truly is.* For "The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord ridicules them" (Ps. 2:4). We are deservedly mocked, for our great programs to rid the world of flesh too often create more flesh.

The good news, however, is that God is no cynic who delights in human misery and mayhem. Instead, He has a plan. Psalm 2 speaks of a Davidic earthly king whom God chooses and promises, "I will make the nations Your inheritance and the ends of the earth Your possession" (Ps. 2:8). This is no king

of the world who rebels against God and sows discord. Instead, this King is God's Son, ruling from God's holy mountain. Facing this King, the fleshly kings of the world are counseled, "Be wise; receive instruction, you judges of the earth. Serve the LORD with reverential awe and rejoice with trembling" (Ps. 2:10–11). The earthly kings, should they rebel against Him, will perish in their rebellion.

That King came, but not as most kings do. Born in poverty to parents on the run, and raised in obscurity ("Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" [John 1:46]), He defied earthly notions of kingship and power, confounding humanity with His humility. The role of kingship is a dramaturgy, using the symbols of power—thrones, palaces, scepters, harems, crowns, ostentatious displays of wealth and might. Jesus' saving act upon the cross, the confirmation of His kingship, the axial point of salvation history, is filled with royal imagery, but all of it is turned on its head.

There is no grand procession to a palace, only a painful march outside the city. No royal fragrances or incense, only the stink and waste of rotting garbage. No resplendent throne inlaid with the plunders of an empire, only a common cross made for anyone. No golden crown of shining jewels, only thorns digging into flesh. No royal wine flowing in celebration, only blood and water spilling from His side. No torches or parades, only a cosmic darkness. No cheers, only the sobs of the women standing at a distance, faithful to the gory end.

The Hebrew prophets had predicted His appearing, and the people of God had prayed, waiting in painful anticipation for the coming of the Messiah. For the glory of God to return

to the temple, for God's favor to again come. The court crier, the announcer of Jesus' divine kingship, was not a Hebrew prophet, nor a respected rabbi. Shockingly, he was a Roman centurion. "Surely this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39 NIV). Something deeper was at play. The great centrifugal force of God's purpose was breaking into history. Of all the people to announce the King, it was a cog in the Roman military machine. The war against flesh had been turned on its head.

Jesus put flesh to death in sweeping measure. Our individual sin and rebellion; our fleshly structures and systems, corporately erected to protect us from the flesh yet enslaving us to that very flesh; our attempts at reentering the holy space on our own strength—He took all of it upon Himself. He made a royal mockery of it and left it dead outside the Holy City. Jesus' answer to the flesh wasn't to restrain it, but to slaughter it.

Having defeated sin upon the cross, Jesus emerged from the grave. Human flesh, body, and bone, but transformed. The future of humanity for those who bend their knee to Christ, on display in a human being. The miracle of the resurrection was not just a once-off, individual miracle reserved for the risen Christ. It was and is an invitation to join God's salvation project, to be resurrected, to live fully human lives through the work of Jesus, minus the corruption of the flesh.

IN-BETWEEN DAYS

As the implications of Jesus' atoning death and resurrection swirled in the social firmament, strange gatherings happened across the Roman world. Jews, Gentiles, slaves, free people, men, and women met together, laying down their statuses and

identities and bowing knees—not before the emperor, but a Galilean Jew they claimed had risen from the grave. Off the radar, something radical, something momentous, had occurred. The church had been born. Gentiles no longer plotting with their brothers in vain, nor Jews living out of the Torah, which protected against the flesh but could not save from it. Instead a new kind of life, a life in the Spirit, had begun—a following of Jesus' example of living in the flesh but not being controlled by the flesh, instead abiding in the Father, living by the power and direction of the Spirit.

The nations had rebelled and conspired against God and harassed the people of God. Now, however, following the atoning death of Christ, the church, those living out this new life in the Spirit, was sent out to the nations. Jesus charged His disciples to go into the nations, baptizing them, making them disciples of Christ. Redemption would come to the nations. They would, as the prophets had promised, recognize God as king, and this redemption would come through a transformed people, a church of disciples, fighting the flesh and living through the Spirit. The world had entered a new epoch.