

SECTION 3: CHASING THE WIND

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God says, “Take what you like, and pay for it.” -Spanish proverb

In my last book, I wove stories about my midlife growing pains in and around specific scriptures and lessons associated with the Exodus journey. As one example, by instructing the Israelites to not make, worship, or bow down to idols (Exodus 20:4-6), God reveals that He is jealous for their commitment, loving those who love Him and keep His commandments. It made me consider the kinds of idols I’d clung to in my own life, and how they’d gotten in the way of my relationship with Him. But I admit I wrestled hard with the confounding notion in verse 5 of His punishing the children for the sin of the parents—all the way to the third and fourth generation.

As my research continued, I learned “to the third and fourth” is a Hebrew idiom meaning “whatever number of times it takes” to learn our lessons. As depicted in these verses, God’s jealousy simply means He refuses to be subordinate to any idol. In His wisdom and care, He demands the top position in our lives to ensure our freedom and wholeness of heart and mind. He doesn’t want us enslaved to anyone or anything that will take our eyes and efforts off of Him...and sometimes we have to learn these lessons several times.

We choose to be enslaved to so many things, and it all costs us. Our modern-day idols may include overt desires for wealth, power, physical prowess, or social standing, or more covert desires for comfort, ease, predictability, or safety. Consider here, too, the more socially acceptable idols like innovation and knowledge, when we chase and chase...always seeking, never resting. When we tangle with our god-substitutes, we find ourselves living “to the third and fourth”—learning the hard way, again and again, that our false security is fleeting and our deepest longings can be satisfied only by Him. And when it comes to our parents’ sins, He requires us to learn from their bad choices—for whatever number of times it takes us—so we don’t repeat those mistakes in our lives.

Now, reread the opening proverb while keeping these Exodus principles in mind: God says, “Take what you like, and pay for it.”

If we take ease and comfort, we’ll pay for it in terms of smaller, shallower lives.

If we take wealth and status, we’ll pay for it in terms of burnout, jealousy, anxiety, or broken relationships.

If we take physical perfection, we’ll pay for it in terms of being only as good as we look...plus the emotional devastation that comes when we invariably age or experience limitations.

And if we take Him, instead of our idols...? We’ll get a lot of good out of that decision—His presence, promises, and possibilities. But truth be told, we’ll pay for it, too, in terms of uncertainty, heartbreak, frustration, painful growth, and long seasons of waiting. He’s not the safest or most predictable Guy to hang out with.

This is why it’s risky to ask Him to disturb us when our false comforts have quenched our thirst (for a time). Because we will pay for it, one way or another.

But this is exactly what the Church needs to do.