"For the land, whither thou goest in to possess it, is not as the land of Egypt, from whence ye came out, where thou sowedst thy seed, and wateredst it with thy foot, as a garden of herbs:

"But the land, whither ye go to possess it, is a land of hills and valleys, and drinketh water of the rain of heaven."

Deuteronomy xi,10,11

Deuteronomy xi,1-12

Psalm 135

New Book of Worship, Psalm 111, p.77

"We want a decent country to live in" would express the desires and ideals of a great many people; but perhaps we should not be very far wrong if we affirmed that most of these people have little idea of how they are going to get it or even of what they mean by it. They may have in mind economic security, a good job with good pay, or they may want a world in which they will be free from troubles and from interference with their own lives, and free from war.

In our text two countries are contrasted. They are strikingly different. Egypt is a flat country, fertile, with an even climate. It has no precious metals and little variety in fruits and animals. It receives no rain from heaven, its fruitfulness depending upon the inundations of its great river, the Nile. In Bible times its people worshiped the calf. Palestine, on the other hand, is a land of hills and valleys, with a complex climate ranging from intense heat at Jericho 1300 feet below sea level to the wintry snows of Mount Hermon 10,000 feet above the sea level. It produces a variety of summer and winter fruits and vegetables, of the precious metals and stones, and is made fertile by rain, by brooks and rivers and the melting snows: "a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills...a land where thou shalt eat bread without scarceness, thou shalt not lack anything in it."

The Egyptian ideal was that of external comfort and wealth. Israel prospered there under Joseph and did not wish to return to the Holy Land. But their long-continued life there resulted in bondage, and Moses was raised up to lead them out. The words "Out of Egypt have I called my son" express a great blessing. Abraham went down into Egypt and became rich in flocks. Our Lord was carried down into Egypt and there found protection from Herod. Egypt could both shelter and enslave. She could nourish, she could teach, and yet her wealth and knowledge could never wholly satisfy. And this is the reason given in the Word itself: "Now the Egyptians are men, and not God; and their horses flesh, and not spirit." Therein is its limitation. Man has higher possibilities than the merely natural.
When the two and a half tribes settled in the East Jordan country, they had first to help their brethren overcome the enemies within the Holy Land. So it is with us. There can be no security in the external life if selfish desires rule within. Everyone sees that there must be outward morality—men must not be allowed to rob or steal or kill—and some think that if the commandments are kept outwardly, peace and security will come naturally. But morality does not exist of itself. It exists through what is Divine. It will cease to be unless the Lord is recognized and acknowledged. Morals break down wherever the Lord is not worshiped. Without this the Ten Commandments for many people do not have Divine authority. The fact is that a "decent country to live in" cannot be attained without the Lord's church. Unless it is understood that it is because the Lord commands it that evils in oneself must be put away, moral and civil or social good will be nothing but surface things, beneath which there will be corruption. Then the "decent country to live in" will fade away, and something sinister will take its place, perhaps gradually, so gradually that no one will be able to see how it has come about. People will bewail their lot, being sure that they themselves are not responsible for the conditions which they see about them. They will be unaware that such things have spiritual causes of long standing, and that by apathy and indifference to religion, by regarding morality as a thing of expediency which men can change to suit themselves, they will have lowered the values of the society in which they live, so that even with well-meaning people there is vagueness and uncertainty. Indeed such vagueness seems to be regarded by many as a virtue, so that their children grow up without any clear idea of the Lord or of what life really is.

The Ten Commandments were given from Mount Sinai not because such precepts had been unknown—in fact, in various forms they had existed in the laws of many peoples long before—but because it was necessary that men should know and acknowledge from the heart that such commandments have Divine authority.

The world is abundantly able to provide for all the present and future external needs of men. It is the individual and national struggle for first place that causes scarcity and want. In the writings we find this searching statement: "Heaven consists in willing from the heart better to others than to ourselves, and in serving others for the sake of their happiness."

The Bible does not condemn Egypt if its life is made introductory to a more spiritual life. The development of our natural powers is not condemned if it is followed by the "exodus," the development of our spiritual nature through reformation and regeneration. Some become enamoured of natural learning and the wonders of the natural world. Egypt is fascinating, they say. But we are born to become children of God. We are to look upon our natural knowledges and gifts not as an Egyptian who ends by merely embalming the body, but as children...
of God going forth from the land of bondage. For there is "a land of hills and valleys" that "drinketh water of the rain of heaven." That land is in the region of the soul and is the most precious and important part of us. Remember the Lord's words, "My doctrine shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distil as the dew, as the small rain upon the tender herb, and as showers upon the grass." The Lord said to the woman at Jacob's well, "Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again; but whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life," And in Revelation we are told of a "pure river of water of life, clear as crystal." That is not the Nile, a natural river, for it proceedeth "out of the throne of God and of the Lamb." It is that river "the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God."

We want this world to be a happy, rewarding world, but it cannot become such if we are concerned only with outward things. For a "decent world to live in" we need the truths of the Word which lead us to the Lord. Then our daily tasks will be carried out better because we know that they are a means of serving others. Then, too, our influence in the world will be on the side of what is good and true. Our attitude will imperceptibly influence others in many ways. For the conscious presence of the Lord in the world is through those who look to Him and seek to live from Him. So there will be something of the Divine among the people; their house will be built upon a rock. In the long run it is these unseen and unrecognized Divine forces that affect the history and fate of nations and peoples. The world is not so big that it is impossible for any one of us to affect it in this way.

There are many more interior matters which we might consider, but foremost we should note that if the Lord's presence and sanction are required for the good life, then it is clear that we must learn of Him. People turn from theology today because it is both abstract and incomprehensible. This, however, is not true of the new theology, which is the means by which our hands are strengthened and directed in doing good. If we know who the Lord is, we shall be able to do His will more effectively.

We should wish every natural good for all people, but we should not spoil it by shutting ourselves up in Egypt and singing hymns to the god of the Nile. Let us remember our spiritual nature, and go forth to set foot in that land of hills and valleys, to drink water of the rain of heaven, from the Word of God, whose clouds will pour out water for the spiritually thirsty if we keep our minds open to heaven and to the Lord.

Amen