

To God Alone Be The Glory

Imagine what it must have been like for the Israelites. They and their parents and their grandparents had been slaves for many years in Egypt. It's all they knew. They groaned to the Lord in their misery, and he sent Moses to rescue them. Just think how happy they were when Moses told them the Lord would soon free them. But visualize their faces when they realized Pharaoh was going to need some convincing before he would agree with the Lord. Then came the ten plagues. Remember how the Lord allowed the Israelites to suffer along with the Egyptians during the first three plagues? During the last seven plagues Israel was spared from suffering with the Egyptians. Finally Pharaoh relented, and Israel marched out of Egypt. Were they smiling and cheering and singing? Oh, yes. But then they found themselves on that peninsula surrounded by the Red Sea on three sides and Pharaoh's army on the fourth. Now they were crying. Then a way opened up through the Sea—dry land with walls of water on each side, a miracle! Now they were cheering again. Welcome to the desert—land of freedom and opportunity ...except that there is no water. “We're so thirsty, Moses. Did you lead us out here to dehydrate us? Waaaaah.” Then the Lord provided water. Now they were happy again. Welcome to the desert ...except that there is no food. “We're so hungry,

Moses. Did you lead us out here to starve us? Waaaaah.” Then the Lord provided manna. “Yea!”

And now for the important part of the journey. *2After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.* WELCOME TO THE DESERT. Here the Lord will meet with you. You keep thinking that what you need is food and water for your bodies. But what you really need is nourishment for your souls. WELCOME TO THE DESERT. Here the Lord will meet with you. You keep thinking that what you need is an end to this social isolation and safe places you can go without these uncomfortable masks. But what you really need is nourishment for your souls. WELCOME TO THE DESERT. Here the Lord will feed your soul.

3Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, “This is what you are to say to [my people]: 4‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.’” Imagine what it would be like to ride on the back of a giant eagle. You could cover large distances in less time than walking. I suppose if the Lord were writing this today he might say, “*I carried you in a jumbo jet and brought you to myself,*” right here at Mt Sinai. WELCOME TO THE DESERT.

Do you see what the Lord is doing with this eagle sentence? He is using the gospel on his people. He is standing at the door of heaven, unlocking the door with the key, holding the door open and saying, “See what I have planned for you someday? I’m going to help you get here. That’s why I carried you on eagles wings and brought you to myself.”
WELCOME TO THE DESERT.

This is not like when parents or grandparents trot out the things they do for their children or grandchildren like so many ponies. “I cook for you. I clean for you. I give you a roof over your head. All I ask in return is that you take out the trash and clean your room.” The Lord isn’t trying to guilt his people into living for him. He’s trying to rejoice them into it with proper gospel motivation. The people of Israel have access to a good perspective. They can remember back just three months to the harsh slavery they endured. They soon say, “O Lord, we are grateful that you rescued us. *8We will do everything the LORD has said.*”

Grateful. That’s where the Lord wants them. Now they were in the right frame of mind for his message. *5If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.* Treasured possession? What a great thing to be—God’s treasured possession! Think of a

woman who has collected several pretty things. “Ding dong.” “Oh, that’s the Fed-Ex guy with the next piece in my collection.” She opens the package and holds up her new piece in the light. She glides over to the display case and makes some space. Then she steps back and looks at her treasured possessions with a big smile. Or you can picture a man behaving similarly with his car or his boat or his tools. Treasured possession.

That’s what we are: treasured possession. Like the Israelites we were born into slavery, but our Egypt is ‘inherited sin.’ And then we made things worse by adding our own sins. Talk about groaning under a burden! Who can carry the load of their own sins? It’s so heavy that people try to ignore some of their sins, or convince themselves that some sins aren’t really sins, or they lie about what they did in an attempt to lessen the weight on their shoulders. But the lies are just more burden to bear. Under such a heavy load we could not possibly get up and walk toward the Lord (see Ephesians 2:1). Worse yet, we didn’t even want to (see Romans 8:7). We were stuck.

The Lord could not stand our plight. He loves us. He wanted us out of slavery. He sent Jesus to rescue us. Even before we were born, Jesus reached into our future, picked up our load of sin, carried it to the cross, and paid the penalty in full. He carried us on eagles’

wings and brought us to himself.

WELCOME TO THE DESERT,
TREASURED POSSESSION. *Now
if you obey me fully and keep my
covenant, then out of all nations you
will be my treasured possession.*

Do you know what would be really great right now? It would be great if you were all thinking, “Oh, now that’s quite different from how the Lord treats us today.” This would be great because that’s correct. God does not approach you and me today with the “if” like he did Israel—“*if you obey me fully and keep my covenant.*” There’s no condition when Jesus comes to us with forgiveness. He does not say, “If you will just ask me into your heart, then I will come in. He does not say, “If you accept me, I will accept you.” He does not say, “If you pray this prayer, I will give you faith.” We don’t have to do anything in order to get rescued that first time. In fact we can’t. Before the Holy Spirit takes hold of our hearts, we are very much like stone (compare Ezekiel 36:25-29). But the Holy Spirit enters our hearts through God’s message of love and rescue—for most of us that happened through baptism when we were babies. He warms our stone-cold hearts. He puts faith into us as a gift. Faith latches onto God’s offer of forgiveness in Jesus. Faith says, “Now *I* have a

treasured possession. I have hold of God himself.” Faith acknowledges that God has done great things for us. It says, “I am now the Lord’s treasured possession. How can I thank God for all his goodness to me?” (Psalm 116).

To put it another way, when God met with Israel in the desert, he offered them a two-sided covenant. He had a part to play, and Israel had a part to play. But he would keep up his end of the bargain only if they would keep up theirs. Israel could not keep up their end of the bargain.

So when God welcomes us out to the desert today, he comes to us with a one-sided covenant. We have no end of the bargain to keep up. Only God plays a part. He just forgives us for Jesus’ sake.

Our sinful flesh usually rears its ugly head at this point and says, “So then I’m free to do whatever I want, right?” But faith regains control of our lips: “No,” it says. “I’m free to serve God. My sinful flesh couldn’t before, but now I am a new creation in Christ, so I can. With the Holy Spirit’s help and strength, I’m free to stand up in a public place like the church and say, ‘I know what you people teach here, and I agree with it. You believe Jesus is the Savior from sin. So do I. You believe the Ten Commandments are God’s will for

our lives. So do I. You draw your thinking about life from the Bible. So do I. And I promise to be faithful to God for the rest of my life.”

It's similar to what happened in our text. *7Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the LORD had commanded him to speak. 8The people all responded together, "We will do everything the LORD has said."*

That sure sounds like what people say when they become communicant members of our church. Our six confirmands are soon to make this promise: "I will be faithful in hearing God's Word every week unless prevented by reasons acceptable to my Lord." If you search the Bible from cover to cover, you will find many places where people are urged to follow the Lord, or where people pledge themselves to serve the one true God. They recognize that God has led them out of slavery and into the desert where the only water is the living water of God's Word, where the only food is the manna of law and gospel.

WELCOME TO THE DESERT where the Lord meets with us, not in a scary cloud with thunder and lightning, but at the rail where simple bread and wine are joined by the Word of God to be the very body and blood with which Jesus purchased our rescue from slavery. And by this God forgives us once

again and strengthens us so we can work at living for him.

And he says, *Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.* A kingdom of priests. Kings and priests. How do you like that? We have gone from slavery to royalty. We are now all priests. You are priests. You have the right to approach God and offer him the sacrifice of thankful prayer anytime. Priests are go-betweens. So you have the awesome privilege to intercede with God for others, especially those who are straying away from God. And then you get to go from God to people and share with them the wonderful things God has done for them through Jesus.

My friends, we are no longer slaves to sin. We are free, free to honor God with our attitudes and behaviors, free to serve our fellow human beings, conducting ourselves in ways that benefit them, sometimes even at our own discomfort, treating them as if they are better than we (see Philippians 2:3). We no longer live in Egypt.

WELCOME TO THE DESERT, TREASURED POSSESSIONS. This is where we get to live for God. And when we fail, he will forgive us so we can try again to live for God as his treasured possessions. **WELCOME TO THE DESERT.**