

The Lord's treasure chest

by Scott Grant

A special treasure

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field" (Matthew 13:44). The kingdom is like a treasure that is worth infinitely more than anything one can imagine. It's worth giving up everything for. The scriptures speak of something else as being like a treasure - God's people. We are God's treasure, worth infinitely more than anything he can imagine. He considers us worth giving up everything for. And what is his Son Jesus Christ to the Father but "everything." In Exodus 19, we will see that we, as followers of Jesus Christ, are the Lord's special treasure. Our understanding of our identity as his special treasure helps us to fulfill our calling as people who offer our lives up to him.

In Exodus 19:1-3, the Israelites arrive at Mount Sinai (19:1-2), in fulfillment of the Lord's promise to Moses (Exodus 3:12). Moses then goes up the mountain and receives instructions from the Lord as to what he is to tell the people (19:3). The words of the Lord in verse 3, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel," and his words in verse 6, "These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel," combine to form a frame around the Lord's words in verses 4 through 6. As a picture frame highlights the importance of the artwork, this literary frame highlights the importance of the written material. These three verses are bursting with life. Contained within is crucial, life-giving information for the Israelites and us. The Apostle Peter viewed these words as crucial, for he quotes from them in 1 Peter 2:9, making it clear that these words were not only for Israel but for us as well. Paul also makes reference to Exodus 19:5 in Titus 2:14.

The words of the Lord to Moses here pertain to what the Lord has done for us, what he offers us, who we are and what we are to do.

What the Lord has done (Exodus 19:4)

The Lord tells Moses to tell the people about three things he has done for them. In doing so, he appeals to their perception of what he has done. The Lord says that "you yourselves have seen" what he has done. If two people were at the same event and have different versions about what happened, one might appeal to the other with words to this effect, "Wait a minute; you saw what happened!" In appealing to their eyesight, the Lord is asking them to recognize and appreciate what he has done.

How easy it is for us not to recognize and appreciate what the Lord has done. Although we have seen things, they didn't register; they pass right by us because we are self-absorbed, worrying about protecting or advancing ourselves. These words from the Lord, then, offer strong encouragement to us to recognize and appreciate what he has done, particularly what he has done for us. And we have seen these things. First of all, then, we must recognize that we have seen them. What, exactly, are these things? The Lord tells the people that he defeated the Egyptians, that he bore them on eagle's wings and that he brought them to himself.

What, exactly, did the Lord do to the Egyptians? He unleashed the 10 plagues on them, the last of which finally convinced Pharaoh to release the Israelites. Then, when Pharaoh pursued them into the wilderness, the Lord caused the Red Sea to collapse upon the Egyptian army. The Lord utterly defeated Egypt, thereby winning Israel's freedom.

Then the Lord bore the people on eagle's wings. This is a reference to the people's three-month journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai. The Lord led them away from a battle they were not ready for, he crushed Pharaoh's

army, he provided them with food and water, he gave them victory over the Amalekites and he brought Jethro to give them important instructions. It's been an incredible trip, one they never could have navigated on their own.

Thus, the picture of an eagle carrying her chick is apt - and beautiful. An eaglet is helpless. It has no ability to provide for itself or get from one place to another. Like an eaglet, Israel was helpless. It would have perished in the wilderness without the Lord. But the Lord, like a strong eagle caring for its helpless chick, led and provided for his people for three months. Like the eagle who tenaciously clings to her chick as she soars through the air, the Lord tenaciously clung to his people. He did not drop them; he could not drop them. In so many words, the Lord is telling the people, "I poured out my heart for you."

If this were all he did, it would be enough to send their spirits soaring. But the journey had a purpose. It was so that he might bring them to himself. The image here shifts from the Lord as an eagle to the Lord as a king, as we will see in verses 5 and 6. The Lord, like an eagle, carries them through the wilderness and deposits them at the foot of Mount Sinai, which is serving as his throne. Then at the mountain, he meets them.

What is the purpose of this meeting between the King and these people? Why has he gone to such incredible lengths to bring them to this spot for this meeting? The King wants to tell them something. In fact, he has a proposal for them - a marriage proposal. In inviting the people into this covenant relationship with him, the Lord is offering himself as Husband.

This covenant relationship has not yet begun. The Lord now is in the process of proposing it. Moses, in Exodus 19, acts as kind of a matchmaker, going between the Lord and the people. Look at what the Lord has done for the people, and the covenant relationship hasn't even begun yet! The Lord went to war against Egypt and bore the people on eagle's wings - he poured out his heart for them - just to get them to the place where he could pop the question! He's telling them, "Here's my heart; I love you. Will you marry me?"

So what has the Lord been doing, in his war against Egypt and in his care for them in the wilderness? He's been courting them! He's been showing them his heart. As anyone who has ever extended his or her heart to someone knows, this is a tremendously vulnerable thing to do. The risk is enormous.

Has the Lord courted us? You bet he has! Let's revisit the three things he did for Israel and see how the Lord similarly acted on our behalf.

He defeated Egypt. A vast array of wicked spiritual beings has taken aim against the kingdom of God, and against each person's entry into it. If today you are a follower of Jesus, that means the Lord turned back those wicked forces. Whatever demonic forces that were aimed at keeping you in the darkness were turned back by the Lord so that you had the ability to move toward the light. He carried us on eagle's wings and brought us to himself. We never would have found our way to the Lord without his leading. Before we even came to Christ, he poured out his heart for us - just to get us to the love seat on the porch so that he could pop the question!

If you are not a follower of Jesus and are hearing these words and understanding them as the Lord's extending to you the offer of relationship, he has silenced the evil spiritual voices that have been shouting in your ear, and he has allowed you to move toward the voice of truth. Perhaps his grace this day has brought you to the point where you are ready to hear and accept the Lord's proposal.

The theological term for what we've been describing is "prevenient grace." This is the grace of God that gets us to the place where we are ready and able to enter into relationship with him.

Several years ago I visited Boston on a business trip with three others. Because of circumstances beyond our control we ended up leaving for the return trip later than planned. Seeing the Boston rush-hour traffic, I thought we'd never make it to the airport in time. But that was before I became familiar with Boston cab drivers. If there are any traffic laws in Boston, our cabby ignored them. He dodged trash cans, dashed in and out of traffic, screamed through side streets. It was more thrilling than a ride at an amusement park. And he got us to the airport on time. I never could have done it. I wouldn't have known how to get there. I'd have gotten stuck in traffic. If I got to the airport at all, I would have been hours late. In that situation, I was helpless. And

the cabby did something for me I couldn't have done for myself, like God, who has done infinitely more than get us to the airport on time - he has brought us to the foot of his throne where we can hear his marriage proposal.

After the Lord gets them to the mountain, he explains what he offers.

What the Lord offers (Exodus 19:5a)

The Lord invites the people to "obey" his voice. The base meaning for the verb is "hear," or "listen to." It is the same verb that begins the famous "Shema" in Deuteronomy 6:4: "*Hear*, O Israel, the Lord your God is one." So the Lord is asking the people to listen to his voice. And he is asking them to listen to his voice "now," not later. What is the Lord saying to them now? He's proposing! All through Exodus 19, he's proposing. So when he invites them to hear his voice, he's asking them to listen to his covenant proposal. The Lord is offering relationship.

The offer, of course calls for a response. Therefore, the Lord invites them to "keep my covenant." What is this covenant? The simplest explanation for a covenant is an agreement between two parties, be they nations, kings or individuals. Even today, we speak of "the covenant of marriage" in which two individuals agree to enter into relationship. This particular covenant is known as the Sinatic Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant and the Old Covenant. The Lord, though, is the superior party. He is the ruling King, and he is offering relationship.

What does it mean for the Israelites to "keep" this covenant relationship? First, it means they must enter into it. Second, it means they must remain in it. It does not mean, "Do not sin," although it certainly doesn't encourage sin. Part of the covenant arrangement was the sacrificial system, which was the Lord's provision for sin. So it can't mean, "Don't sin," or even, "Don't sin too much." It means, "Don't break off the relationship." So keeping the covenant means entering into relationship with God and persevering in it.

It means the same for us. We are under a different covenant, what Jeremiah, Jesus and Paul referred to as a new covenant. But the New Covenant is simply an expansion of the Old Covenant. The New Testament, too, speaks of perseverance. It calls us to persevere in our relationship with God, but for those who have truly entered into that relationship, it guarantees perseverance. God, as part of his end of the covenant, guarantees that he will enable us to persevere (John 10:28, Ephesians 4:30, Romans 8:38-39).

That leads us to consider the conditional clause in this verse. The Lord says, "Now then, *if* you will indeed hear my voice and keep my covenant, then you shall be my own possession among all the peoples ..." The conditions are "hearing" and "keeping," which we have defined as hearing the Lord's proposal of relationship, accepting it and remaining in it. If these conditions are met, they will be the Lord's possession. In other words, if they enter into the relationship, they will be his possession, and if they remain in the relationship, they will continue to be his possession.

This is what happened for many of them. Later, identical words are applied to the people who had satisfied the condition of entering into the relationship. Deuteronomy 7:6: "For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth." Deuteronomy 26:18: "And the Lord has today declared you to be his people, a treasured possession ..." In each case, the people are declared to be the Lord's possession, apart from any condition. Presumably, the condition had been met.

When Peter refers to Exodus 19:5, he writes, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession ..." Again, no condition is implied. That's because Peter believed that the condition had been met: faith in Christ. If we are followers of Jesus Christ, we are God's possession. Of course, there are those who think they are followers but are not (Matthew 25:44-46), and Paul encourages personal examination to see if we are in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5).

The long and short of all this is that the proof is in the pudding. It's a mystery that we can't completely understand. Although the Lord guarantees perseverance for those who belong to him, we are to do everything we can to persevere nevertheless. Keep turning away from other gods; keep seeking after the Lord; remain

faithful to him.

So, the Lord offers the people relationship. He has offered us the same thing. Many of us have taken him up on this offer. We heard his voice and we have kept, and are keeping, his covenant - we are still in relationship with him, persevering, even drawing closer to him and falling more deeply in love with him.

For those who haven't taken him up on his offer, after seeing how he's restrained the evil forces aimed against you and seeing how he carried you on eagle's wings to get you to the place where you could hear his voice calling you into relationship through faith in Jesus Christ, how can you turn him down?

So the Lord has offered all of us relationship. To do so, he has blown open the doors of his heart and let go of his Son.

If we have accepted the Lord's proposal, we have a completely new identity.

Who we are (Exodus 19:5b)

The Lord tells the people that if they enter into and remain in the relationship that he is offering, they will be his "possession." This will be their status, their identity. It is not yet, but it will be when they enter into the covenant. Their perseverance in the covenant is the evidence of their having truly entered into it. Most of Israel rejected the covenant, but the Lord preserved a remnant - the faithful few who truly entered into relationship with him. For those of us who have entered into relationship with God through Jesus Christ, this too is part of our identity, as Peter makes clear in 1 Peter 2:9.

The word "possession" doesn't seem like any special status. But in Hebrew, it is a highly significant word. It is used of the treasure of kings (1 Chronicles 29:3, Ecclesiastes 2:8). These treasures were the kings' most valued possessions. So the Lord tells Israel that it will become his most valued possession upon accepting his proposal. Israel will be his treasure chest - his special treasure. Israel will be what he values most. That is what happened - at least for the remnant (Deuteronomy 7:6, 26:18).

They were taken by the Lord from "among all the peoples." This speaks of God's choice of them. And his choosing them from among all the nations speaks, once again, of their value to him. The Lord has picked out his jewels - his people - and gathered them together in his treasure chest.

Finally, the Lord says he will do these things, "for all the earth is mine." The NIV begins a new sentence here, and translates the word that is normally translated "for" or "because" with the word "although." But the NASB translation is to be preferred here: "Now then, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, then you shall be my own possession among all the peoples, *for* all the earth is mine." How, then, does all the earth's belonging to the Lord explain Israel's being his possession? It speaks of the Lord's desire to reach the whole world. The Lord chose Israel to influence the world through it.

So, together, we are the Lord's treasure chest and individually his jewels. We are the most valuable, precious thing God has. Nothing is more dear to him than we are. We need look no further than the cross of Christ to understand our value to God. When he looks down at us, he sees sparkling jewels glistening in his radiant glory. And he says, "Wow, look at that one! And look at that one over there! And this one right here!" We are delightful to his eyes. When the Lord wants to think good and beautiful and uplifting thoughts, he thinks about his treasured possession - he thinks about you!

Last Thanksgiving I traveled to Oregon to see an old childhood friend and his family. During the time I struck up a friendship with Ken's 6-year-old son, David. We played basketball and football and baseball together, even in the rain. At Christmas time David traveled with his family to our old Mountain View neighborhood. I parked my car at my parents' house, around the corner, and walked over to visit the family. In the distance, David spotted me coming, and I could hear him utter to his father in the garage, "Cool! Scott!" David's first reaction upon spotting me was, "Cool!" Now, if we are the Lord's jewels, what do you think his reaction is when he spots us? At the very least, it's, "Cool!"

We are the Lord's special treasure. That is our identity. That's who we are. And a proper understanding of who we are correctly motivates what we do.

What we do (Exodus 19:6)

As the Lord's special treasure, Israel is to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation "to," or "for," the Lord. As his treasure, the people belong to him. The same is true for us, of course: We belong to the Lord. We serve his purposes, not vice versa. Most assuredly, he will take us, like Peter, to places that we do not wish to go (John 21:18). That can be a somewhat frightening prospect until we understand our status as the Lord's special treasure. The Lord doesn't trash his treasure! He takes us to places we do not wish to go so that he can polish us and make us shine more brightly.

The people are to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." If they are to be a kingdom, they must have a king. This, of course, is the Lord, their royal suitor. The phrase "holy nation," which is in parallel construction, can be seen as an expansion of the phrase "kingdom of priests." "Holy" means to be set apart for a special purpose. When the Lord ordains the priestly structure later in Exodus, that's exactly what the priests were - holy, set apart for the Lord (Exodus 29). So Israel is to be a nation of holy priests - set apart for the Lord's use. The primary function of a priest was to offer sacrifices to the Lord on behalf of the people.

How do we understand this concept of priesthood from a New Testament perspective? First, we turn to Jesus Christ, who is our high priest (Hebrews 2:17, 3:1, 4:14). As our high priest, he offered up not the body of an animal but his own body (Hebrews 10:10), which is pleasing to the Lord and atones for our sin.

As a kingdom of priests, what do we do? The same thing Jesus did: We offer up our bodies to the Lord. We present them for his use. Romans 12:1: "I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship."

The amazing thing in all this is that God wants our bodies and considers them acceptable, well-pleasing, a fragrance in his nostrils. As priests, what do we have to offer up to God? Our bodies! We may think, "God, all I have to give you is this body, this carcass. I've trashed it, abused it, served my own purposes with it, pursued lust and sensuality with it, caused dissension and destruction with it, and run millions of impure thoughts through it. All I have is this stinking, broken-down, rotten carcass." And the Lord says, "I'll take it. It's beautiful. My Son died for that carcass, and he made it beautiful."

So what do we do? We bring ourselves to the Lord and tell him, "Do with me what you will." And the Lord will take us seriously. What does he do with our bodies? He sends them out to love people. And that's how the offering of our bodies has an outward, sanctifying effect. The effect of our offering is not like the offering of Jesus in its scope: Our offering atones for no one's sin. But it does point others to Jesus, whose offering does atone for sin.

Let's consider all of 1 Peter 2:9: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who has called you out of the darkness into his marvelous light." The offering of our bodies to God has the effect, as the Lord takes us seriously and moves us into the lives of people, of proclaiming the greatness of the Lord. A priest always has a mediatorial effect: He goes to God on behalf of others. The Hebrew priests offered sacrifices to God on behalf of the people. The nation as a whole was to be a kingdom of priests, whose lifestyle attracted the rest of the world to the Lord. Jesus our High Priest offered up his body as a sacrifice to save those who would believe in him. And finally, we offer up our bodies to the Lord, who takes them and sends them to be the conduit of his love to people.

This is an absolutely thrilling way to live. If we offer ourselves up to the Lord, life will be more thrilling than we ever dared to dream. And what is it that frees us up to live this way? It is the truth of who we are, and what God did to make us who we are. It is the fact that we are his treasured possession, the jewels for whom his Son died. What we do is based on who we are, or our perception of who we are.

Brennan Manning well illustrates both the offering of our bodies as priests and the effect of that offering: "If

we dared to live beyond our self-concern, if we refused to shrink from being vulnerable, if we took nothing but a compassionate attitude toward the world, if we were a counterculture to our nation's lunatic lust for pride of place, power and possessions, if we preferred to be faithful rather than successful, the walls of indifference to Jesus Christ would crumble. A handful of us could be ignored by society, but hundreds, thousands, millions of servants would overwhelm the world. ... The call of Jesus Christ is revolutionary. If implemented, we would change the world in a few months."

Do it

The Lord went to phenomenal lengths just to get us to the point where we could hear his proposal of relationship. Dwell on it. As people who have accepted the proposal and entered into relationship with him, we are his special treasure, the most beautiful thought he can think. Dwell on it. As his special treasure, let us offer up our bodies to the Lord. Let us allow him to take us to places we do not wish to go that we might be a blessing to others. Do it.

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