

Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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MEETING GOD ON THE MOUNTAIN

Exodus 19:1-8

Football can break your heart. How is that for an out-of-the-blue opening sentence? If you're a fan of the hometown Washington Redskins, you know what I'm talking about. The Redskins break your heart routinely. If you're a fan of the Atlanta Falcons or Pittsburgh Steelers or New Orleans Saints, all of whom lost playoff games last weekend that they could have won, you know what I mean. Football can break your heart, if you let it.

I generally try to make this a "football-free zone," unless there is some spiritual lesson to be learned or life-application to be made from it. You know of my lifelong allegiance to the Pittsburgh Steelers, so you can understand my disappointment when the Steelers lost to the Jacksonville Jaguars last Sunday. My disappointment, though, was tempered by this principle I think I have shared with you before: "The key to happiness in life is low expectations." Now, this principle does not apply to everything in life, but it sure does come in handy in situations like this. The Lord has taught me – is still teaching me – to have low expectations when it comes to things like football, so I don't get too low when my team loses, and it makes victory all the sweeter when my team wins.

Low expectations of God or His promises? Never. Low expectations of His power to save, His power to heal, or His power to change us to become more and more like Him? No way! Low expectations of His grace or the power of His Word? *Me genoito*, as the apostle Paul would say. May it never be so! But with respect to football and other things in life that have no eternal significance, low expectations can save you a lot of grief.

I want to say one other thing related to football this morning: The last-second touchdown on a 61-yard pass play that enabled the Minnesota Vikings to snatch victory from the jaws of almost-certain defeat was one of the most dramatic game-winning plays you will ever see. They're calling it "the Minnesota Miracle." It almost rivals Franco Harris' "immaculate reception" in the Pittsburgh Steelers' first-ever playoff win back in 1972. Almost. 😊

One thing that happened after the Vikings' win last Sunday brought joy to my heart and, I think, to the heart of our Heavenly Father. In a post-game interview on national television, Minnesota QB Case Keenum, who threw the game-winning touchdown pass to WR Stefon Diggs, said: "This will probably go down as the third best moment in my life, after giving my life to Jesus Christ and marrying my wife." The *best* and most important moment in his life, he said, was entering into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord of his life, receiving salvation from sin and guilt and hell by the gift of grace through faith in Christ. The *second* best moment was when he married the love of his life. These are both of far greater value and significance than anything he has accomplished or may ever accomplish on the football field.

Whatever team you're rooting for, whether you give a hoot or not about who wins or loses, I hope you will rejoice in the spontaneous testimony of this professional athlete regarding what really matters in life.

The Bible is one thing that always matters in life, one thing that is always relevant, for, as Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3, the Scriptures "are able to make (us) wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture," he continues, "is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the (people) of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:15-17). To say it another way, "every part of Scripture is ... useful one way or another – showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us" (*MSG*).

(Read Exodus 19:1-8.)

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Through the leadership of Moses, appointed by God to be the deliverer of His people Israel, the Lord has rescued His people from their oppression and slavery in Egypt. He has brought them out of Egypt, miraculously making a way for them across the Red Sea, destroying the army of Pharaoh that pursued them, and has begun to lead them as a nation to the land He has promised to give them.

It has taken two full months for the entire Israelite community, a million strong, to travel the 150 miles from Egypt to the foot of Mount Sinai in the southern Sinai Peninsula. If you have a Bible with maps, you may want to check out the geography of that area. Or you can probably find a map using your Google machine 😊. Moses and the Israelites will spend the next 11 months there. Sinai is where the events, law-giving, and instructions of the remainder of Exodus (chapters 19-40) will take place, as well as all of Leviticus and up to chapter 10 in the Book of Numbers.

Exodus 19 serves essentially as the introduction of the covenant between God and Israel, as expressed in the giving of the law to Moses (beginning in Exodus 20). The explicit giving of the law is new, but God's covenant with His people is not. The covenant God makes with Israel here in Exodus is really a continuation of the covenant He earlier made with their ancestors – with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – with the promise to bless them to be a blessing, as the Lord said to Abraham, so that through them – through Abraham and his descendants through Isaac and Jacob – all of the world will be blessed (Genesis 12:2-3).

For Moses, his journey with God has come full circle at Mount Sinai. Sinai (also known as Mount Horeb) is where Moses met God in the burning bush in Exodus 3. On that occasion, the Lord promised to bring Moses and the people of Israel, when they had come out of Egypt, back to this mountain to meet with God (Exodus 3:12).

Here, at the foot of the mountain, God's promise to Moses has been fulfilled. God has kept His promise. Just as He always does. In His time. In His way. If God has made a promise in His Word that applies to you, He will keep it. In fact, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:20: "No matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ." Not a single promise that God has made to us will go unfulfilled. In some cases, we may have to wait awhile. And we need to be careful not to put promises in God's mouth – in other words, make sure you don't expect God to keep a promise He has not made, or to claim a promise that is not meant for you. Not every promise in the Bible applies to you or me directly. Don't mistake wishful thinking on your part for a promise from God. That is a sure path to disappointment and disillusionment.

The return to Sinai, though, was a promise from God to Moses. The first time, when God spoke to him from the burning bush, it was just Moses and some sheep. This time, it was Moses and a fledgling nation of a million men, women, and children. Moses could not help but be overwhelmed at what God had wrought. He knew he could never have done it on his own. It was a God-thing from start to finish.

The giving of the law, including the Ten Commandments, seems to be the main reason for the pilgrimage of the Israelites to Mount Sinai. But there are a few things in the interactions between God and Moses and between Moses and the people here in Exodus 19 that I think it wise and instructive for us to notice and take to heart.

ON EAGLES' WINGS

Notice first what the Lord says to Moses in verses 3 and 4. Moses goes up the mountain to meet with God, and God says to him: "This is what you are to tell the people: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.'" (This is not to be construed as some kind of symbolic indication that God favors the *Philadelphia Eagles*! I don't know whether God wants the Eagles or the Vikings to win today, or if He even cares.) The imagery of eagles' wings is a picture of God's grace in the rescue and salvation of His people from their slavery in Egypt. God is reminding Israel of what He has done for them, not because they deserved it, but simply because of His sovereign love and favor.

I'm told that mamma eagles are caring and loving creatures, as well as fierce protectors of their young. At some point the mamma eagle decides it is time for her little eagle to learn to fly. So she takes the little eagle out of the nest and flies up as high as she can go. Then she drops the fledgling, and it falls fast. It has never flown in its life. It is getting closer and closer to the ground, its heart is ready to burst, and it is sure its short life is about to end.

But the mamma eagle is watching, and at the last minute she swoops down and catches the baby eagle. Relieved, the baby eagle thinks: I'm saved. I'm fine. I'm gonna make it. The mamma eagle then flies up as high as she can go and drops the baby eagle again. She continues to do this until her offspring learns to fly.

The Lord carried the Israelites on eagles' wings, protecting and providing for His children at every turn. When they left Egypt, He made a way for them through the Red Sea. When they didn't have any water, He swooped down and provided them with water. When they didn't have any food, He gave them manna and quail. When they were attacked, He gave them victory over the Amalekites. The Lord did for them what they could not do for themselves. Over and over, time and again, He carried them on eagles' wings. It was all an expression of His grace, which comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. Like the people of Israel. And like you and me.

Here is something we must never, ever forget: God's grace precedes His law. Grace precedes obedience. Salvation precedes godly living. You don't achieve salvation by living a righteous life. You don't earn grace by being obedient to God's commands. God *chose* Israel and *saved* Israel from their slavery in Egypt *before* giving His law to them.

This doesn't mean the law is meaningless or the obedience to God is not important. It just means that obedience to God is not the *means* of salvation; it is not the *way* to be saved. It is the *response* of a trusting, grateful heart to what God has already done for us and for our salvation; for the people of Israel, in their rescue and deliverance from Egypt; and for us, in our rescue and deliverance from sin and guilt and separation from God through the saving work of Jesus on the cross for us.

Just as He carried the people of Israel on eagles' wings in the exodus and in their journey to the Promised Land, so the Lord, in His mercy and grace, has carried and continues to carry us on eagles' wings, protecting, providing, and teaching us how to live as His children and followers in this world.

It isn't easy. This world is a mess, just as it has always been since the day Adam and Eve sinned. The condition of the church in the world leaves a lot to be desired, too. There is too much of the world in the church, and too much of the world in our witness to the world. But God has not given up on the world. God has not given up on His church. He has not given up on you or me. Nor will He ever. As with His people Israel, He lovingly carries us on eagles' wings, and He will never desert us to our foes. So, may we never desert Him. May we never doubt Him. May we never

give up on Him. He remains faithful and true. And He is able. More than able. May we remain faithful and true to Him.

THE CALL TO OBEY

This is, in effect, the Lord's message to the people of Israel as He challenges them in verse 3 to "obey (Him) fully and keep (His) covenant." It is the second thing I want you to notice in this passage. The full blessings of the covenant God makes with His people are for those who will, as we sang last Sunday, "trust and obey." Obedience to God is not a pre-requisite for inclusion in the covenant. It is the proper response to being included in the blessings of the covenant.

God saved Israel from their slavery in Egypt because He loved them. And He had a plan for them. He had a mission for them. Just as He has a mission for us. Just as He has a mission for His church in the world today. They were blessed to be a blessing. But they would not experience the fullness of the blessing God had (or has) for them unless they were to surrender themselves fully to him and dedicate themselves to obey, serve, and follow Him wholeheartedly.

If you look ahead to verse 8, you see how the people responded when Moses told them what God had said. They said: "We will do everything the Lord has said". They said: "We're all in. What the Lord has said, we will do". They answered with an unqualified yes.

I believe they were sincere. I believe they meant it. I believe they had the best of intentions. Unfortunately, the history of Israel from the exodus on is a history of repeated failures to live up to this vow. It is a history of repeated failures to trust God, to obey God, to follow God, to love God. The rest of the Old Testament tells the story of their failures and the consequences.

So they never – or rarely – experienced the rich blessedness of being God's treasured possession (verse 5). Sometimes they let the idea of being God's chosen people go to their heads. They forgot their chosen-ness was an expression of God's grace. They thought it was because they were pretty hot stuff (which, unfortunately, is the way that way too many newsmakers today – athletes, entertainers, and politicians – view themselves, and some church leaders, too).

A TREASURED POSSESSION

Moses spoke truth to the people of Israel and brought them back to reality in Deuteronomy 7, where he says to the people: "You are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be His people, His treasured possession" (7:6).

Sounds pretty good, right? The words speak of a special, privileged position for the people of Israel. But then Moses says: "The LORD did not set His affection on you and choose you" – "(He) wasn't attracted to you" (*MSG*) – "because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples." It wasn't because of your resume or record of achievements. It wasn't because of your wealth or power or wisdom. It wasn't because of your greatness or giftedness. No. "It was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath He swore to your forefathers that He brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt" (7:7-8).

It was not because they were great that the Lord chose them and saved them and blessed them. It was because of His sovereign, loving choice. God does not raise up people to prominence or power today because they deserve fame, wealth, popularity, or power. That is not how God works. Neither fame nor wealth nor popularity nor power nor Oscars nor Emmys nor Grammys nor championship rings nor titles nor offices nor followers on Twitter is a sign of greatness as God defines it. It was because God chose them that the people of Israel were God's treasured possession. It is because God has chosen us in Christ that we are His treasured possession and precious to Him.

Greatness in God's eyes, I think, is defined or measured by the degree to which we conform to His character in the way we live, the degree to which we display the light and love, the grace and truth of Jesus in the ordinary and not-so-ordinary events of life. This is what the Lord has desired of His people in every generation. It is what He desires of us today.

Peter, in the New Testament, takes what God says to Moses about Israel and applies it to the church. The Lord says to Israel: "You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). In 1 Peter 2:9, Peter says to all of us who are followers of the Lord Jesus: "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light."

“A kingdom of priests” or “a royal priesthood”: A people whose first and highest purpose in life is to serve God and to act as a bridge connecting people with God. That was God’s mission for Israel. It is His mission for His church – for us – today.

“A holy nation”: In one sense, to be holy is to be separate or set apart from other peoples and nations. Set apart *by* God. Set apart *for* God. Set apart *to serve* God and His purposes in the world. In another sense, to be holy is to live differently from the world around us. To be different, not for the sake of being different, but for the sake and honor of God, who calls us to be different by conforming, as I have already said, to His character. We are to be holy, the Bible says, because the Lord our God is holy (Leviticus 11:45).

This different way of living is what Paul has in mind when he urges the Ephesians to “live a life worthy of the calling you have received” in Christ (Ephesians 4:1). He makes the same appeal in Philippians 1:27, where he says: “Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” And again in 1 Thessalonians 2:12, urging the believers in Thessalonica “to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into His kingdom and glory.”

What are we to learn from all this? History shows that all too often, Israel received God’s grace in vain. They took it – and God – for granted. Or, in some cases, they misunderstood the nature of grace and thought it was something they could, or had to, earn. Godly living is not a requirement to receive grace. Godly living is a response to grace freely given.

You are, in Christ, God’s treasured possession. Never doubt it or forget it. And you – we – are to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation as followers of Christ. Receive His grace – the grace He has freely, lovingly, sovereignly given in Christ – and dedicate yourself day by day and moment by moment to live for Him. Starting right now.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.