

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost  
June 16, 2002

*Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke*

### **We are the LORD's Treasured Possession**

1. Carried on eagle's wings
2. Consecrated as priests

#### *Exodus 19:2-8a*

**NIV Exodus 19:2** After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain. **3** Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: **4** 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. **5** Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, **6** you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites." **7** So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the LORD had commanded him to speak. **8** The people all responded together, "We will do everything the LORD has said."

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

If you had two minutes to retrieve something from your house before it went up in smoke, what treasured possession would you try to save? (Assuming that all the people who were in the house are safe!) Some of us might try to retrieve the strongbox where our important documents are stored. Others might dash in to scoop up a pet or some jewelry or a photo album. Still others might use that time to back the car out of the garage and bring it to safety. I think that whatever we risked our lives to retrieve could safely be called our "treasured possession."

In today's Old Testament lesson, the LORD tells us that his people—believers—are his treasured possession. He says, "*Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.*" The term he uses to call us his treasured possession is the same term that King David once used to describe his personal fortune of gold and silver. There's no mistaking from God's words that we believers are precious in his sight. But our status as the LORD's treasured possession isn't just a matter of words. These verses draw our attention to two acts of God that show how highly he values us. **We are the LORD's Treasured Possession.** The proof is 1] that he carried us on eagle's wings, and 2] that he consecrated us as priests.

#### **1. Carried on eagle's wings**

The opening verse of this section provides the setting. *“After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.”* Less than three months have passed since the Israelites left Egypt. They’ve come to Mt. Sinai, where the LORD is preparing to expand the covenant he made with Abraham some 600 years before. But before he states the terms of the covenant, he reminds the Israelites of that very recent act of deliverance by which he had retrieved his treasured possession from what was threatening to become a Holocaust in Egypt. Through Moses he said to the Israelites, *“You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagle’s wings and brought you to myself.”*

Ben Franklin was a bright fellow, but it would have been a serious mistake if our fathers had followed his suggestion and made the wild turkey our national symbol. The image of the eagle, fierce-looking, soaring on the thermals, is far more stirring. Here the Lord compares his use of his strength to deliver the Israelites to an eagle’s care for its young. Moses wrote more about this in the book of Deuteronomy: **“In the desert he found him (Israel), in a barren and howling waste. He shielded him and cared for him; he guarded him as the apple of his eye, like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them on its pinions.”** (Deut. 32:10-11)

The Israelites started their 430-year stay in Egypt as the honored guests of Pharaoh. Jacob’s son, Joseph, had exercised such obvious wisdom in dealing with the seven years of famine that Pharaoh invited Jacob’s whole family—about 70 people—to live in Egypt. But the book of Exodus reports ominously that later a new king came to power in Egypt and this king didn’t know Joseph. What he knew is that the descendants of Jacob had become numerous. He worried that they were a threat to national security. So the Egyptians made the Israelites their slaves and instituted a brutal form of population control, ordering that baby boys born to Israelite women be thrown into the Nile River.

The LORD saw what was happening. He called Moses and sent him to Egypt to say to Pharaoh, “Let my people go.” Pharaoh, though, proved to be remarkably stubborn. The miracles Moses performed didn’t persuade him to loosen his grip on the Israelites. The plagues softened his resolve, but as soon as a plague ended, Pharaoh would harden his heart. Ultimately it took a tenth and final plague—the death of all firstborn men and animals in Egypt—to break his resistance. Even then Pharaoh changed his mind about releasing the Israelites and sent his cavalry after them. But the LORD exerted his omnipotence and cut a passageway through the Red Sea, so that the Israelites with their women and children and flocks could cross to safety. The LORD vanquished the Egyptians and brought Israel to himself on eagle’s wings. Those Old Testament people of his were undeniably his treasured possession.

Just as much as he could say to the Israelites, “I carried you on eagle’s wings,” so he can say it to us. We were enslaved, too—by sin—and bound in the chains of God’s condemnation, with eternal condemnation as our only prospect. Satan had marked us as his own and he is far more cruel and crafty than any Egyptian slave driver. We were helpless to change the course of events or the outcome. But St. Paul in our epistle lesson

today records how God swooped down to carry us on eagle's wings. **“You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.”** And a little later, Paul says, **“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”** (Rom. 5:6,8) As with Israel, so with us: God regards us as his treasured possession not because of our great worth or goodness. We were powerless, ungodly, sinners when God fastened on us his intention to save us. It's his mercy alone that caused him to value us in this way.

Now, carried on the wings of God's mercy, we soar to great heights of confidence and peace. We see God's gracious plan laid out below us, a plan that began in his grace and never ends. Rather than remaining earthbound because of the weight of sin's guilt, we've been set free to fix our hearts and minds on things above, where Christ is seated at God's right hand. We live not in dread of death or in fear of Christ's return, but in the joyful certainty of those who know that they are God's treasured possession through faith in Jesus. We know that when Christ, who is our life, appears, then we also will appear with him in glory. What a glorious position we occupy as the treasured possession of the true God!

Does the word “if” bother you in this passage? *“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession.”* The covenant God made with Israel at Mt. Sinai had all kinds of terms and conditions. It had all manner of “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not.” The fact is, the “if” was far too big for the Israelites. They shattered every one of those commandments. They grievously violated the first and most basic commandment—“You shall have no other gods”—before they'd ever broken camp at Sinai. Yet, amazingly, God continued to esteem Israel as his treasured possession. For them and for us he made a new covenant of grace that contains no “ifs.” This covenant of grace is based on Jesus and his death for us on the cross. Now, through faith in Jesus, we are purified from sin and set free to serve as priests of God. This, too, is a privilege, and evidence that we truly are the LORD's treasured possession.

## **2. Consecrated as priests**

As God's declaration of love for his people continues, he says, *“Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”* The LORD could have chosen any people. They're all his. But moved by his grace alone, he chose Israel to be a kingdom of priests.

This passage is a bit surprising in view of what comes later in the law of Moses. God will specifically state that he has selected Aaron, the brother of Moses, and Aaron's descendants to be the priests of Israel. He ordained what Aaron and the other priests were to wear. He described their priestly duties. And in great detail he described how the priests were to be consecrated, that is, how they were to be “set aside” for their work as priests. It was a matter of sacrifices and ceremonial washings and anointing with oil. But if we remember that the work of a priest is essentially three things—teaching God's Word, offering sacrifices, and praying for God's people—then I think we can see that even in Old Testament times, each Israelite was a priest. Cleansed for service through

their faith in God's promise, they offered intercessory prayers and taught God's word within the circle of their family and friends. They also offered God the sacrifices that he was really interested in: the sacrifice of obedience to his will and thanksgiving for his blessings.

The New Testament makes it clear that we Christians are priests, too. We were consecrated—set aside—for this priestly work when we were baptized. As a result of our new birth, the apostle Peter can say to us, **“You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”** (1 Pet. 2:5) We are, Peter declares, **“a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that (we) may declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light.”** (1 Pet. 2:9) In a beautiful passage of praise at the beginning of his book of Revelation, the apostle John writes, **“To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever.”** (Rev. 1:5)

Bible passages like these remind us that as God's holy people we occupy a privileged position. We are able to enter the very presence of God with our prayers and offerings, since Jesus by his death opened the way for us. These verses remind us that our lives now aren't simply a matter of making a living or of hunting for good times. We're priests of God. “Holy to the LORD” was inscribed on us in the instant we came to faith in Jesus. We have priestly responsibilities to carry out, no matter what our occupation or situation in life. By the way we approach our work, by our priorities in family life, by our witness to God's mercy, by our prayers and offerings, we are doing the priestly work for which we were consecrated.

In the early years of homesteading on the prairies of the Canadian province of Alberta, settlers faced numerous perils. One year the peril came in the form of a prairie fire that spread quickly near the village of Metiskow. A mother found herself alone with her infant child as the fire raced toward the family farm. Clutching the child, she tried to outrun the blaze, but the flames overtook her. Just then she spotted a badger hole. She wrapped her baby tightly in the blanket and stuffed him into the hole. Then she spread her body out over the hole to wait for the worst. And the fire did its worst. After it was over, her husband and friends discovered the woman's charred body. But as they removed her charred remains, they heard a muffled cry. The mother's treasured possession had survived with no ill effects. God says that is what we are to him, so precious in his sight that the Son of God offered his life for us. It is an indication of how dearly God loves us that he has not only carried us on eagle's wings, but also consecrated us to be his priests. Amen.