

Saved to Serve a Holy God

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[0:00] Well, some pretty amazing stories, true stories of being rescued from potential death for a loving relationship.

I like the story of Ronnie in the US in 2018, 2018. Take a look at this. He was just nine years old when he witnessed the unthinkable.

His father savagely murdered his mother and sister. The horror from that day was captured in a 911 call as mom begged for her life. Then his father, Ronnie O'Neill III, turned on the youngster, stabbing him 20 times and setting him on fire.

He has to be a miracle. The fact that the injuries that he sustained and what he went through, there's absolutely no reason he should be alive. For young Ronnie, the emotional and physical scars from that horrific day are slowly healing.

Dear Lord, thank you for this food. And now this story takes a remarkable turn. Ronnie has been adopted by Detective Blair and his wife, Danielle. He is their sixth child.

[1:04] If you were to ask him, what's the mantra that you live by as it goes to the family? And it's, I am safe, I am loved, and I'm part of this family. I did know that I would love to be his mom.

He's a joy to have around the house. Today, Ronnie is thriving. Pretty amazing, huh? He's rescued from potential death and then adopted for a loving relationship by the very detective that investigated his case.

But as amazing and emotional as that story is, what we come to today is actually even more so, even though it's hard to feel it.

Because today we come back to an amazing true story of rescue for a nation from potential death for a loving relationship.

That is, Israel from Egypt for relationship with God. In fact, the first half of the book of Exodus is all about Israel's rescue from Egypt.

[2:08] You know, the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea. And today marks the turning point in the book as it begins to focus on their relationship with God. And this is a really significant passage for the whole history of Israel.

You see, God had already promised Abraham that he would be Israel's God and they would be his people. But here God builds on that first covenant with Abraham and offers Israel even more.

He offers them a relationship where they would be his precious people and serve him with purpose in life. In fact, throughout the early chapters, God has repeatedly said to Pharaoh, let my people go that they may serve me time and time again, all through the early chapters.

Serving though, not as slaves, but as precious people with a privileged purpose in life. And the first reference there from chapter 3 says that God planned to begin all this on this mountain where he first appeared to Moses in the burning bush.

And well, three months later, Israel has arrived from Egypt to that mountain. Have a look at verse 1. On the first day of the third month, so three months later, after Israelites left Egypt, on that very day, they came to the desert of Sinai.

[3:39] After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the desert of Sinai and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain. Interestingly, we're told three times that Israel camped in the desert away from the mountain.

There's some distance there, which as we see is important because God is a holy God, which we'll come back to later. But the mountain is called Mount Sinai because it's in the desert of Sinai.

And that's a picture of Mount Sinai today on the title slide there. But for now, they've arrived at this mountain and God begins by firstly recapping their rescue.

That's a point one, verse three. Verse four is the recap of the rescue.

Very quick one. Not that God literally carried Israel on a flock of eagles' wings. The word eagles is plural there, by the way. They still walked on their feet to Sinai.

[5:01] Rather, the eagle is a symbol of strength and protection, much like it is today. It's why America has it as its emblem. And a flock of eagles then symbolize great strength, great protection, which is what we see in the first part of Exodus, where God brought them to himself, rescued them.

But God says he carried them on eagles' wings because he did all the work. Do you notice in verse four how it says, you saw what I did and how I carried you.

You see, God saved them from Egypt. God provided manna in the desert. God led them to Sinai. It's all from God. They did nothing to earn their rescue.

Their rescue, in other words, is by grace. And God still operates the same way today, doesn't he? We don't need rescuing from Egypt, of course, but we do need rescuing from sin's judgment, don't we?

Because we've all sinned in life, whether it's by ignoring God from time to time or not loving others from time to time. And yet we just remembered on Good Friday how God graciously gave his only son and how Jesus willingly went to the cross to pay for our sin's judgment in our place so that we can be forgiven and rescued from it.

[6:25] But it's all God's work through Christ. And so even our rescue is still by grace. We did nothing to earn it, did we?

It's all God's work. We simply accept it by faith, by believing in Jesus. And so I guess the first application for us this morning is do you believe in Jesus?

Because if you don't, then I'm afraid you won't be rescued yet. It's only Jesus who pays for our sin's judgment.

And so it's only by believing in Jesus that we can be rescued from it. And it's worth it because we're not just rescued from sin's judgment, but also for a privileged relationship.

So point to verse 5. God continues. He says, Now, if you obey me fully and keep my covenant or agreement, then out of all nations, you will be my treasured possession.

[7:28] Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites. Now, there's a fair bit in these titles, these phrases that's worth unpacking.

The first one is treasured possession, which refers elsewhere in the Bible to the king's private collection. Out of everything he owns, it was his most treasured possession.

And so the point is, out of all the nations that God owns, because he is God, that he's offering Israel to be his treasured possession, his most prized treasure, which is an extraordinary privilege, given that there's nothing in them that warrants that.

And it means, what's more, that God will always be with them, never to leave them nor forsake them, but to provide for them and guide them to their promised land, which is where they're heading after the book of Exodus.

In fact, the last 15 chapters of Exodus are all about how a holy God wants to dwell amongst his people because he wants to be with them, have relationship with them. It's kind of like this little guy on the slide.

[8:42] His name is Oscar. Out of all my daughter's teddies, this is her treasured possession. And she's 16. Such that she is always with him, never leaves him nor forsakes him, even to the point of never letting Michelle ever wash him.

He's pretty grotty. And for all those years, and we've moved 14 times, she's always stayed with him and brought him to our next home.

Well, in a greater way, this is God's offer to Israel. And for us who believe in Jesus, this is who we are in Christ.

As we'll see later on from 1 Peter, God says that we who believe are his special possession, his treasured possession. It doesn't mean life will always be easy, but it does mean God will always be with us through the ups and downs to strengthen us, provide, guide, until he brings us to our heavenly promised land and the new creation.

Of course, we may not always seem that special or treasured to the world's eyes. In fact, Christianity is increasingly being ridiculed by the world. And sometimes we may not feel that special in our own eyes.

[10:05] I was interested in that even the kids, when Michelle was asking them, does that make you feel special? They're going, take it or leave it. It's hard to feel it until we don't have it.

Until we're kicked down. Until we feel unworthy or uncertain in our world. And when those things happen, when it feels like it's not worth being a Christian or when it feels like you're a failure in life, the second application is know how treasured you are.

Ronnie's new family from that video gave him a mantra. I don't know if you remember the detective Mike Blair telling him, he says, he told Ronnie to repeat, I am safe, I am loved, I am part of this family whenever he felt insecure given what he'd been through.

And so I suppose for us, whenever we feel insecure or worthless as a Christian, then perhaps our mantra can be, I am treasured. I am loved.

I am part of God's family. Know how treasured you are in Christ. But part of this privileged relationship was also to have a special purpose.

[11:26] It was to serve God as a kingdom of priests or a holy nation, verse 6. A priest is someone who had privileged access to God but also helped people come to God.

And the way Israel was to be a nation of priests to the world was by reflecting God's character and loving rule. to the world.

In fact, that's what God created humanity to do in the first place. Do you remember? He made humanity in his image. That is to rule creation reflecting his loving rule, his character.

But then of course, Adam and Eve had all went pear-shaped or apple-shaped, I can't remember. There's no, actually it's not apple in the garden, it's the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. That's right. They sinned and so here God caused the people of Israel to be a kingdom of priests, to be kingly priests who will now reflect his character and loving rule over the world.

How? Well, by being a holy nation. Holy just means being set apart as distinct or separate. And so Israel was to be set apart as distinct from every other nation, different to every other nation.

[12:40] and they were to be different by the way they lived. Earlier this year, for example, there was a guy who was being holy, you know, distinct and different from every other person by how he lived.

He decided to eat raw meat for 78 days as part of a caveman diet to see if he can survive. I'm not sure I'd recommend that. But it is different, isn't it? It is set apart, holy.

And for Israel, actually, they were to be different by what they ate or didn't eat. So part of their food laws was not to eat bacon so they would be distinct or holy. But the thing that was especially to set them apart as different was how they were to love God and love others.

In other words, they were to be distinctly holy by being morally holy just like God. And in this way, they would reflect God's holy character and loving rule to the world as a kingdom of priests.

like a light. They'd shine like a light in the world so that the nations might see and go, hey, look at how they're living, loving one another. That seems like a good thing.

[13:48] You know, no fights, backstabbing, and in those days it was literal backstabbing. Let's go and see what kind of God they worship and let's go and worship him too. You see, this was part of God's evangelistic plan.

Of course, for all this to happen, you'll notice in verse 5, they had to obey. It says, if you obey, then you will be. But remember, God has already rescued them so their obedience wasn't to earn their rescue, rather it was the means by which they could enjoy that relationship as God's treasured people.

It's kind of like kids, isn't it? So if you're a grandparent or a parent, uncle or auntie, you have a relationship already with this child, don't you? But if they don't obey, then they're getting in trouble.

It's not really enjoyable for you or for them, is it? Obedience helps you and them enjoy the relationship, doesn't it? Well, so too with Israel.

And what's more, it helps them to fulfill their purpose as a kingdom of priests and holy nation. After all, it's a bit hard to reflect God's holy or loving rule if you're not actually living out God's loving rule.

[15:02] It's hard to be a holy nation if you're not actually living a holy life, isn't it? And it's similar for us. In 1 Peter chapter 2, Peter picks up some of this language from our chapter today and he says to the Christians, he says, you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special or treasured possession that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

It's here we see that we are already in Christ, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. And so we are to live lives that reflect that, that might attract people to us.

But it's not just attracting people to God through us, which it was for Israel. Notice there's that plus declaring his praises or greatness. His rescue for us through Christ that caught us out of darkness into his wonderful life.

And as I said, while Israel had to obey to become this in Christ, notice what it says in verse 9, you are already this. Because Christ obeyed for us.

And being united to Jesus means we are already chosen and treasured. It doesn't depend on our obedience. And we are already royal priests, already holy in God's sight, which is an extraordinary privilege, isn't it?

[16:32] And yet, we're still to live that out, aren't we? To enjoy that relationship and fulfill our purpose. after all, we may be holy in God's sight, but we won't be in the worlds if we don't act like it.

And they'll be less likely to listen to us declare God's greatness when we have the opportunity, won't they? Which is why Peter actually goes on to say to live distinctly good lives and to be like foreigners in exiles.

In verse 12, to live such good lives among the world that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds, come to trust in Jesus and glorify God. And so the third application for us this morning then is live distinctively good lives as God's royal priests and holy nation.

That people might see, might be provoked to ask why, and we can declare to them God's greatness in Christ. I was chatting with someone a couple of weeks ago who was acting in a higher role at work and he applied to make that promotion permanent but he didn't get the job.

And just to rub salt in the wound, well it feels like this to me, the boss asked him to keep acting in that role until the person who did get the job came and replaced him, which I thought was a bit harsh.

[17:59] And yet his prayer point was that he would still respond in a gracious way that would make him stand out at work. How good is that?

Here is someone who wants to live a distinctively good life as God's royal priest and holy nation that people might notice, ask why, and have an opportunity to declare God's greatness to them.

Well in verse 7, if you look in your Bibles, verse 7, Moses heads back down the mountain and tells Israel about this offer of a privileged relationship. And they all say in verse 8, yes, we'll do everything that the Lord has asked us to do.

We'll keep his covenant or agreement. But they haven't actually heard all the details or laws of that covenant agreement yet. And so it kind of sounds like they're doing what we sometimes do.

You know when you get an online form and it comes with pages of details and then it says click I agree at the bottom. What do you normally do? Agree, move on with life.

[19:05] Or is that just me? It just feels like what they're doing here. But just so you know, it's not. They're actually going to have another chance to agree later on in chapter 24 after they've heard all the terms and conditions.

But for the moment, verse 8, they've got every intention of obeying, haven't they? And yet sadly we know having every intention doesn't equal ongoing submission.

It's kind of like when I went to see the physio for my knee. I had every intention of doing the exercises. Didn't equal ongoing submission. I think I lasted about a week.

And so to help Israel, God makes a personal appearance. And as he does, we see just how holy he is. Point three. We don't have time to look through all the rest of the verses.

Though feel free to ask me about them later if you want to. I like why in verse 15 they had to abstain from sleeping with their spouse even though God's all for that in marriage. But we see through these verses and it's on the outline that you can follow up later if you like, that they have a need for a mediator, Moses.

[20:15] They have a need to be consecrated and they also have a need to keep their distance. And that all highlights just how holy God is. Perhaps the one thing worth explaining is what we probably find most confronting.

That in verses 12 to 13, that if they don't keep their distance, they die. In fact, later on in verses 21 to 24, God warns them two more times that his holiness will break out against them and they will die if they don't keep their distance.

And to us, that sounds a bit harsh, doesn't it? But we've got to remember that firstly, God does warn them three times. But more than that, it's not because God hates them.

It's simply because of his sheer holiness. It's kind of like the sun. The sun gives us warmth and light and life to all on earth.

But if you get too close to the sun, you're toast. Aren't you? Literally. Not because the sun hates us, but because it's sheer heat and awesome splendor is just too much for us frail humans.

[21 : 28] Well, in a similar way, God doesn't hate us, but his sheer holiness and awesome splendor is simply too much for us sinful humans.

Though interestingly, later on, after blood from an animal has atoned for their sins, some of them will be able to see God. The point though, is their need for distance highlights just how holy God is.

His sheer awesomeness, which is bigger than we realize. And so two days later, on the third day, pick it up in verse 16. On the morning of the third day, there was thunder and lightning with a thick cloud over the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast.

Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because the Lord descended on it in fire.

The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace and the whole mountain trembled violently. As the trumpet, the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.

[22 : 38] Now, it's hard for us to grasp the gravity of this situation. It's hard for us to feel the sheer awesomeness of God here.

And so I was trying to think about what might be an equivalent and I think for me it's perhaps going on one of these rollercoaster rides if you're crazy enough to do one of these and as you get to the top of the rollercoaster and start to look down, you feel that in the pit of your stomach?

Well, magnify that a hundredfold and perhaps that's a little what Israel felt. but the purpose of all this was to help the people, help them to firstly listen to Moses as their mediator, verse 9, but secondly help them to have a right fear of God that might keep them from sinning and help them serve.

So turn over the page, we have the Ten Commandments that God speaks directly to Israel and then have a look at it towards the end of the Ten Commandments. verse 18 where we pick up this scene again.

Verse 18, When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, Speak to us yourself and we will listen, but do not have God speak to us again or we will die.

[24 : 05] Moses said to the people, Do not be afraid. God has come to test you so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.

God's holiness is again highlighted where the people think they're going to die just from hearing God's voice. That's how overwhelming and awesome it is. And so they asked Moses to be their mediator.

But do you notice what Moses says? He says, Don't fear. That is, Don't fear death. After all, God has chosen you. He wants you to be his treasured possession.

He is for you. But do fear him. That is, revere him that you might serve him without sinning.

You see, God revealed his awesome holiness at Sinai to help Israel have a right fear of him for their own good so that they might serve him and enjoy their relationship and live out their privileged purpose.

[25:05] for us, God has given us something even better in Christ. And so we come to our second reading, which we'll finish on. You might remember that the writer of Hebrews contrasts this scene here today with what we have as Christians.

He says, You have not come to a mountain that can be touched that's burning with fire to darkness, gloom and storm to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them because they could not bear what was commanded.

If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death. The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, I am trembling. No, no, you, Christian, have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.

You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

You see, in Christ, we have better. For example, we have better assurance. We've not come to darkness, gloom, and storm that made Israel uncertain.

[26:23] They thought they were going to die. No, no, no. We have come spiritually to the joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn. We have our names written in heaven. And in fact, the language in verse 22 there is past tense.

You have come spiritually already. It's as though we've got one foot in heaven. That's how certain we can be of going there. That's our assurance.

Or because we have a better mediator whose blood speaks a better word, a word of ongoing forgiveness. That means we can be certain of life eternal in an unshakable kingdom.

This doesn't mean, though, we fear God less, by the way. It actually means we fear God more, but with thankfulness and love. And so the writer of Hebrews continues as we heard.

He says, see to you, do not refuse the one who speaks. If they didn't escape when he spoke from Sinai, then how much more so won't we if he warns from heaven? At that time, his voice shook the earth.

[27:27] The tremble, the mountain shook here in chapter 19, and he has promised in scripture that once more he will shake not only the earth, but the heavens as well. In other words, everything created will be gone, and only his eternal kingdom that cannot be shaken will remain.

And therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful and so serve, worship, or literally serve God acceptably with reverence and fear.

fear of God. You see, we're still to have fear of God. He remains holy, a consuming fire, which we often forget, I think.

But he has given us something even better in Christ, like assurance of life eternal in an unshakable kingdom. And so our fear is not a fear of dread, it's a thankful or loving fear of God.

God. And so our final application for us this morning is, have a loving fear of God that helps you to serve him. A famous preacher, Charles Spurgeon, wrote, there is also the loving fear which every true right-hearted child has towards its father, a fear of grieving so tender a parent, but also a proper feeling of dread which makes it watch its every footstep.

[28:50] May God graciously grant to us much of this kind of loving fear. God offers us rescue from judgment for a privileged relationship in Christ, and so do you believe in Jesus?

And for us who do, know how treasured you are, live distinctively good lives as his royal priests and holy nation, and have a loving fear of God.

Let's pray. O gracious father, we thank you so much that you are our loving father, but like most fathers, we know where to draw the line, and so help us to have this loving fear of you, we pray.

Thank you so much for rescuing us from sin's judgment, for a privileged relationship with you. Help us to know how treasured we are. Help us to live distinctively good lives, that people may notice, and we may declare your greatness to us in Christ.

Help us in these things, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.