

ABSOLUTE DEVOTION

EXODUS 19:1-8

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After three months of traversing a desert wilderness, the people of Israel arrived at the Mountain of God. It had been a difficult journey involving hunger, thirst, and enemy marauders. But the Lord had led them, and He had protected them and cared for them over and over again. Now the time had come to fulfill the reason for their journey. They had been called forth from slavery in the land of Egypt to meet with the Lord at the Mountain of God.

In order to prepare the way for this meeting, Moses climbed the mountain and received a message that he was to deliver to the Israelites. This is what the Lord told him to say, "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." Yes, the Israelites had been rescued from slavery, almost as if giant eagles swooped down and lifted them up upon their wings, carrying them far away to the place where they would meet with God. But that wasn't all that the Lord wanted to say. He had a proposition to propose. You might call it an "if then" agreement. If the Israelites would be willing to fully obey the Lord and be bound by a covenantal relationship with Him, then He would do something very special for them.

They would become His treasured possession, possessing a place of honor above everything else that He had created. And not only that, the Lord would transform them into a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. But what does that mean? A priest is a person who can draw near to God. That individual serves as a bridge between the Lord and the rest of humanity, speaking to God on their behalf. In other words, the Lord was saying that He wanted Israel to become the means by which He could re-establish a relationship with all of mankind. They would become the bridge by which people from every nation could have access to the Lord. This would be the fulfillment of what God had declared to Abraham, their forefather, when He said in Genesis 12:3, "and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

God also promised the Israelites that they would become a holy nation. The word "holy" means distinct or uniquely special. They would be different from any other nation upon the face of the earth, and that unmistakable difference would clearly identify them as belonging to the Lord. They would possess His nature and character. They would live and speak and act in ways that would enable people to catch a glimpse of what God is really like. This was, indeed, a unique opportunity to be blessed and to become a blessing for the entire human race.

So how did Israel respond to what the Lord had said to Moses? When they heard terms of this potential relationship with God, the "if you will I will" contractual agreement that He was offering to them, they responded immediately. With one voice, they all together declared, "We will do everything that the Lord has said." And when Moses took their response back to Lord, He in so many words replied, "Ok, I'm going to come down upon the mountain in the glorious raiment of a cloud, and the people of Israel will hear me

speaking personally with you, Moses. Then they will know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I have chosen you to lead them and they will put their trust in you.”

Wow! The Lord and the people of Israel had reached a tentative agreement. It was sort of like what takes place when a family decides to purchase a home. They sign a contract. The closing hasn't taken place yet. That will happen in the future at a special ceremony, but the basic terms have been agreed upon. In like fashion, God had made an offer to the Israelites and they had accepted it. They had declared their absolute devotion to the Lord and to the terms of the agreement. They would be willing to fully obey the Lord and to abide by the covenant or agreement into which they were preparing to enter. And in return God had promised to make them a unique and special people whom He would bless and protect above all others.

But how, you might ask, does all of this apply to you and me? We are not the people of Israel. Few if any of us can trace our heritage back to that group of people who gathered before the Mountain of God. However, because of Christ Jesus we too have become God's people. We have been redeemed by His sacrificial death, and we have become members of His family. We are the fulfillment of what God promised to Abraham. Through Christ who was most definitely an Israelite of the tribe of Judah, we have been grafted into the people of Israel. That's what Paul is talking about in eleventh chapter of his letter to the Romans. Like a wild olive branch, we have been grafted into the cultivated olive tree of God's redemption, the Jewish people, and particularly the most important limb of that tree, the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. So, through our faith commitment to Christ, we too are God's special people, with the same blessings and the same obligations that the people of Israel embraced in the days of Moses.

That's precisely what Peter is talking about in his first letter that he wrote to fellow believers. In 1 Peter 2:9 he declares, "But 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." These words are almost identical to what God told Moses to tell the people of Israel, and they, therefore, apply to you and me. We too are God's people and like the ancient Israelites, our special relationship with Him requires obedience, or in other words, absolute devotion.

However, as you well remember, Israel had a hard time keeping their end of the bargain. Almost as soon as the new relationship with the Lord had been signed, sealed, and delivered, they turned away from the Lord and did the very things they were told not to do. Remember the golden calf? While Moses was away on the mountain, procuring the stone copies of the Ten Commandments, the people fell into sin. They made a golden idol of a cow and worshipped it instead of the Lord, along with riotous sensual behavior that was immoral and degrading. I've often wondered why they wanted to worship a cow, but that's what they did. In both actions and attitude, they were anything but obedient and their devotion was something less than absolute.

But before we start pointing a finger at them, perhaps we need to take a look at the three other fingers on our hands that are pointing back at us. What about our obedience and our devotion to the Lord. I can still remember sitting in Sunday school and singing this song. "When we walk with the Lord in the light of His Word what a glory he sheds on our way! While we do His good will, He abides with us still and with all who will trust and obey. Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey." Let me be honest with you. I didn't like that song. Not only did it seem like we sang it almost every Sunday, but I also didn't particularly care for its message. The only way to be happy was to trust and obey. I didn't always want to trust and obey. I wanted to do things my

way, even if they went against what the Bible was saying. There were times when I wanted to be selfish. There were times when I wanted to be mean to others. There were times when I wanted to do and say the wrong things, even though I was a Christian who had been baptized and professed faith in Jesus Christ.

And how about you? A number of years ago, a study was conducted comparing the life styles of Christians and non-Christians. Here is what they discovered. There was no discernable difference between the way Christians and non-Christians live. They were both capable of doing and saying the kinds of things that are reprehensible. And whatever margin of difference there might have been is rather rapidly fading away. All of the sins and shortcomings of the world have not only invaded the lives of God's people, and they are now being embraced as normative. There are any number of things which would have been branded as sinful a few years ago, such as gambling and drug use, which are now becoming a part of our everyday lives, embraced by Christians and non-Christians alike. I'll never forget what Mahatma Gandhi, a national leader in India and the great champion of non-violent protest, once said, "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." He admired the teachings of Christ, but he wholeheartedly rejected the hypocrisy of His followers.

Yes, the Lord Jesus Christ expects His people to be obedient, to exemplify His teachings in their daily lives. But it is much more than blind obedience, much more than just keeping a bunch of rules and regulations, much more than a rigid dress code or a certain style of life. It's a way of life that draws people to the Lord, a way of life that resembles the way Jesus lived when He walked upon the face of this earth. And it's a way of life that He describes for us in the Gospel of John. In John 14:21, Jesus says, "Whoever has My commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be beloved by my Father, and I too will love him and show Myself to him." That's a powerful statement. And like the one that God gave to Moses it's an "if then" declaration. If we are willing to take what Jesus had to say seriously and if we're willing to really begin living out those words in our own lives, then something rather wonderful is going to take place. Jesus will make himself known to us and through us to others. We will experience His life giving presence at work within our lives.

I discovered that truth many years ago when I read a story about Albert Schweitzer. He was an incredibly intelligent and gifted individual. Born in the Alsace-Lorraine region between France and Germany, he was an accomplished musician who not only played many of the magnificent organs in the churches of Europe but who also repaired them as well. He was also a gifted theologian and writer. However, he came to the realization that his obedience to Christ demanded more than his passion for music and theology. He felt that he was being called to medical missionary service. His colleagues couldn't believe him. They thought he was crazy. Why would any sane individual give up everything he knew and enjoyed to go to the jungles of Africa? But that's what he felt the Lord had told him to do, and he was absolutely devoted to being obedient to his master's wishes. So at the age of 30 he enrolled in medical school, became a doctor and in 1913 went to serve as a medical missionary in French Equatorial Africa. His obedience became the hallmark of an abiding faith that inspired the world, and I had the privilege of actually seeing him on television. He was being interviewed, late in his life at his hospital in Africa, by Jack Parr, one of those early hosts of the Tonight Show. At one point during the interview, Jack brushed some ants off of Dr. Schweitzer's shirt sleeve. In response he said, "Don't hurt them. They're my ants."

That my friends, is what it means to be absolutely devoted to the Lord, and it reminds me of one concluding story that I would like to share with you. It's about a dog named

Hachiko. As a pup he was adopted by a professor in the agriculture department at the University of Tokyo. Each day Hachiko would meet his master at precisely the same time when he disembarked from the train at Shibuya Station each afternoon. But one day something happened. Hichiko arrived at the station at the prescribed time, but his master did not get off the train. The professor had died that very day of a cerebral hemorrhage while delivering a lecture at the university. That, however, did not deter Hichiko from his long standing obligation to greet the one whom he loved. For the next nine years, nine months, and fifteen days, Hichiko arrived at the station at precisely the same time each day to greet the one to whom in obedience he was absolutely devoted. Today the memory of Hichiko is honored throughout the country of Japan and a statue marks the spot where this beloved dog waited for his master.

There will probably not be any statues to commemorate our devotion to the Lord. But I do hope that our obedient devotion will inspire others to embrace what Jesus said when he told His disciples, "He who has My commandments and keeps them, he is who loves Me, and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself unto Him."