

On Eagles' Wings

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Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you unto myself. (Exodus 19:4)

“On eagles’ wings” tells of the way Israel achieved freedom – all the way from slavery in Egypt to security in the land of promise, from death to life, from helplessness to the heart of God. It was not by fearless fighting and brilliant military maneuvering that they startled the nations of the world. Actually it was not by their own efforts at all. It was by what God did for them – God carried them “on eagles’ wings.”

Borne by wings is an apt symbol of God’s gracious deliverance. But why eagles’ wings? The eagle is one of the birds specifically labeled in Scripture as “unclean,” that is, not to be used for food (see Leviticus 11:13). Also it is referred to as a bird of prey in the Word of God. Our Lord gave a verse that is in many ways the most difficult statement He ever uttered, “For wherever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together” (Matthew 24:28). For this reason, and I think for this reason alone, the eagle is not used in Scripture as a symbol of God.

Yet the eagle is admired and applauded for its exploits. It is the jet plane of the bird family. It soars the highest, goes the fastest, and is superior to all other birds in this respect. These features are noted on the pages of the Word of God. David, in giving a eulogy of Saul and Jonathan after they were slain, likens them to the eagle in his panegyric of praise: “Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant in their lives...they were swifter than eagles” (2 Samuel 1:23). The eagle, though in and of itself rejected as a symbol of God, is admired for its ability to fly. Therefore its wings are given as a symbol of our God. By the strength of its great wings it is able to soar to the heights and perform unusual feats.

Another remarkable characteristic of the eagle is its tenderness toward its young. No member of the bird family is more gentle and attentive in watching over its young. It builds its nest high up on a mountain crag. Both parents bring food to the little eaglets, and when they teach them to fly, both parents are involved in the training program. As the little one takes off from that dizzy height and attempts to follow its parent in flight, the eagle swoops beneath it and bears the little fellow on its wings when he seems exhausted.

Thus the eagle is set before us as being a symbol of God’s dealing with His people, as He bore them “on eagles’ wings.”

Eagle Wings of Deliverance

They are set before us as the salvation which God, by grace, wrought for us. This is given in the nineteenth chapter of Exodus, verse four. You will recall that at this point God had brought Israel out of Egyptian bondage to Mount Sinai. Now He is giving them an opportunity to make a choice. As He does, He says this to them:

Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you unto myself. (Exodus 19:4)

In this verse God reviews their deliverance out of Egypt. He goes back over their passage through the Red Sea and that which brought them up to Mount Sinai. In doing this He says, “I have brought you this far; and the way I brought you – I bore you on eagles’ wings.”

It might be well to look at that statement for just a moment, my beloved. This was a nation that was born in slavery and reared in the brickyards of Egypt. No people, I suppose, were as helpless and hopeless as were these people.

They had gone down to Egypt as one family of seventy souls under their father Jacob. There they had become a great nation. But in the course of time there arose a Pharaoh who “knew not Joseph.” Since it was so evident that God was blessing them, Pharaoh felt it was necessary for the welfare of Egypt to hold them down, and as a result he put them in hard slavery!

The Hebrews did slave labor in the brickyards of Egypt, but in spite of that they prospered. There they became a great nation – great in size and great in ability – yet they had no power to extricate themselves from that awful slavery. There was no way for them to throw off the shackles that were about them and go out free. There was no human possibility that they could get deliverance until the Pharaoh upon the throne was destroyed. Then the chances were that whoever came to that throne would not change their slave status but continue their awful plight. Such was the condition of these folk, and it was in that condition that God looked down upon them.

When God Remembers

The Book of Exodus opens with God looking down upon these people. As He looked down, He did not see their wonderful ability, because any ability they had was God-given. God never saw any goodness in them, because they had no goodness. And it is of no use to say that they were the only people on the top side of the earth at that time that had a knowledge of God, for they did not – they were in idolatry. They were just about as bad off as any people could be. God did not see anything in them that called forth any movement on His part because of meritorious acts or works or any character within them. The thing that He said when He called Moses to be their deliverer was this, in effect: “I heard their cry; I have seen their awful condition; I have seen their plight down there. This has appealed to Me. And I remember that I made a covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I am prepared to do what I promised to do. *I will deliver them.*”

Moses becomes the human agent. God chose this man from the back side of the Midian desert where God had trained him and schooled him. God gave him the only B.D. degree that I think is worthwhile – it is known as the Backside of the Desert degree. After forty years – it takes a long time to get a degree like that – God brings him back upon the scene in Egypt. God says, “Now I am ready to deliver My people,” and Moses and Aaron go into the presence of Pharaoh.

Then a battle ensued, a battle literally of the gods. For God pitted Himself against the idolatry of Egypt and struck against that awful satanic system that shackled the minds and spirits of the people and was holding them (all of them, including the Egyptians) in spiritual darkness. Each plague was directed against a particular god of Egypt. The sacred Nile was turned to blood; frogs, lice, then flies swarmed over the land; the livestock sickened and died; boils broke out on both man and beast; hail and locusts devastated their crops; then darkness enveloped them for three days. When God finally came to the tenth plague, it was awesome in its severity, but it took this to release the trap that was holding His people in slavery. It turned the key in the lock and let them go free. The last plague was the death of the firstborn.

Now God is ready to show His people that He is redeeming them, not because of any merit within them, but by the sovereign grace of God.

An Unforgettable Night

God said it would be a night that they would never forget. Today if you go into the home of any orthodox Jew, you will find that on his calendar there is a Passover. After all these years it is still being remembered. It is the oldest holy day on any man's calendar on this earth. This is the day they remember; this is the day they shall not forget. This is the day that God wrought His deliverance for His own. These people were to select a lamb and slay it. The blood of that lamb was to be put outside on the doorposts and on the lintel that went across the top of the door. Someone has called attention to the fact that it was in the form of a cross. There the blood was sprinkled. And that night the death angel went over. He did not stop to enquire if the people on the inside of the house were saying their prayers. He did not stop to ask them if they had joined a church. He did not stop to ask what kind of lives they were living. He did not even stop to ask if they were Israelites. The only thing for which he looked was blood on the doorposts. When he saw the blood he passed over. When it was not there, then followed the death of the firstborn – both man and beast.

It was judgment from Almighty God upon a sinful nation and a sinful people. The firstborn who lived through that night knew that they were redeemed by blood. The only thing that wrought redemption was blood. That night these people ate the Passover, with loins girded and lights ablaze, then marched out a redeemed people, redeemed by blood.

That is what it means to travel on eagles' wings! "Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you unto myself" (Exodus 19:4).

Trapped

But this was only the beginning of their experience with the grace of God. These people came down to the Red Sea, and there they were trapped. I cannot imagine any people being more totally trapped in a military way than were they. They were down in a pocket; around them were the waters of the Red Sea, behind them were the advancing hosts of the Egyptians. These people had no weapons with which to protect themselves; they were easy prey for the Egyptians. They would have been slaughtered to a man at that time, but again God intervened.

Realizing their plight, these people were perfectly willing to go back to the brickyards of Egypt. In fact they begged to return.

And they said unto Moses, Because there were no graves in Egypt, hast thou taken us away to die in the wilderness? Wherefore hast thou dealt thus with us, to carry us forth out of Egypt? Is not this the word that we did tell thee in Egypt, saying, Let us alone, that we may serve the Egyptians? For it had been better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness. (Exodus 14:11, 12)

However, it was not God's intention to let them go back to Egyptian bondage. You see, when God redeems, He does a complete job of it. He never starts a work of redemption but that He finishes the work. And so God is prepared to deliver them again, but this time in an altogether different manner.

Moses goes down to the Red Sea and takes with him that rod that had been so potent when it was dedicated to God, the rod that had brought the plagues, the rod that had been used back in

Egypt for the deliverance of Israel out of slavery. He takes that rod, he smites that water, and all night long those waters roll back. And the children of Israel go over on dry land.

The writer to the Hebrews said, “By faith they passed through the Red Sea as by dry land, which the Egyptians, attempting to do, were drowned” (Hebrews 11:29). The same route that brought deliverance for them brought death to the Egyptians. Why? Because the Israelites happened to be people who were redeemed by blood, and redemption by blood leads to resurrection. Therefore they passed through those waters of death and came through on the other side.

Now do not tell me that they had great faith. I do not think they had any at all. When you read that passage in Hebrews, notice that it does not say, “By *their* faith they passed through the Red Sea.” It just says, “By faith.” Whose faith was it? It was Moses’ faith. Who stretched out his hand over the Red Sea? Moses. Who said to go back to Egypt? *They* said to go back to Egypt. They had no faith, but because Moses did, that sea opened up and the people passed through it. They came through on the other side. And when they got on the opposite bank, they looked back and saw the Egyptians coming. They saw something else. The walls of water were breaking, and the Egyptians were being engulfed and destroyed.

Song of the Redeemed

Safely on the other side, they sang the song of Moses. They were now prepared to sing a song of redemption. They had been redeemed by blood, they had been redeemed by power, they had been redeemed by death, and they had been redeemed by resurrection.

My friend, that is what it means to travel on eagles’ wings. “Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you unto myself.” There is no travel quite like it. It speaks of our deliverance and our salvation.

“On eagles’ wings” tells of what God did for the children of Israel all the way from slavery to freedom, from the brickyards to the Promised Land, from Egypt to Sinai, from death to life, from Egyptian darkness to heaven’s light, from helplessness to the heart of God, all the way from defeat to victory – they made the trip on eagles’ wings. They did not come by their own effort, they did not come out by their own ability. They came out because God, by the mighty wings of deliverance and victory, brought them out of that awful place in which they were. And that became a symbol to them.

Under His Wings

One day a little girl named Ruth left the land of Moab and came over into the land of Israel. She came there because she trusted God. This we find in the lovely words spoken to her by Boaz when he said,

The LORD recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee by the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust. (Ruth 2:12)

Those eagle wings of salvation.

Then again, when the psalmist wanted to speak of our pilgrim journey through this earth and the salvation that God brings to pass, he speaks of being “under His feathers” and “under His wings we can trust.” What a picture of God’s method of salvation!

You see, God's method of transportation, as He leads lost sinners out of Egyptian darkness into heaven, is done by air. It is an airlift, it is by eagles' wings, it is by grace! But the tragedy of it is that when these people came to Mount Sinai, God reviewed their past and said in effect, "Now that you see what I have done, would you like to continue on eagles' wings, or are you prepared to receive My commandments and go in your own strength now?" And they replied in a very bold, audacious, and proud manner, "All that the LORD hath spoken we will do" (Exodus 19:8).

Yet they did not even receive the Ten Commandments until they had broken them. At the time the commandments were being written by the finger of God, they were making a golden calf.

The same tragedy is being reenacted today. We are constantly in danger of making the same wrong decision. There is danger of our getting off or forsaking the eagle wings of the grace of God in salvation, and getting in the ox cart of law or good works or religion. Oh, it is so dangerous today! John opened his gospel by writing, "For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).

There are two utterly separate modes of travel through this life. They are just as different as an ox cart is from a jet plane. You cannot travel with one foot in an ox cart and the other foot in a jet plane – it is absolutely impossible. Yet today in the matter of religion, a great many folk are trying to go by law and grace. If you are trying to live by law, may I say to you that today it is all the way by grace. It is all the way "on eagles' wings."

Law demands; grace gives.

Law extracts; grace bestows.

Law says, "Do"; grace says, "Believe."

Law say, "Work"; grace says, "Rest."

Law threatens, pronouncing a curse; grace entreats, announcing a blessing.

Law says, "Do and thou shalt live"; grace says, "Live and thou shalt do."

Law condemns the best man; grace will save the worst man.

Law reveals the character of God and also reveals the weakness of man. "Now we know that whatever things the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law, that every mouth might be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God" (Romans 3:19).

By the Law is the Knowledge of Sin

The Law was given that you might know your sin. It was given that you might know that you have not attained to His standard. It was given that you might know that you will never get to heaven by that route. My friend, it will never take you there.

The Law will not get you to heaven any more than taking blood pressure will cure a heart condition or making an X-ray will cure cancer. Taking the temperature is not the way to deal with leprosy today.

To change the figure of speech, sewing a patch on a pair of old trousers really never solved the problem. Of course so little is known about patches in this day of prosperity, but I know what it is to wear patched pants. I hope you do. There is something humbling in wearing patched pants. I remember as a boy that my mother used to sew a patch on a *patch*. Then one day my dad brought home for me a new pair of pants. What a joy it was to get rid of the old patched ones and

wear new ones! May I say to you that the Lord Jesus Christ came, not to sew up the old pair of pants, but with a new pair! He came to put aside the Law – not to sew grace on it. At this moment the Savior by His grace can give you a garment that will enable you to stand before Almighty God.

There are only two kinds of religion in the world (southern California to the contrary). You can list every “ism,” every cult, every religion in southern California under one category. They all say, “Do, do, do.” Only Christianity says, “Done” Christ has done it all. Paul said to a young preacher, “For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men” (Titus 2:11).

It is by His grace, it is by eagles’ wings, that He delivers us. That is His method today.

During a series on the Ten Commandments, several folk talked with me about the nature of the Law. One man said, “I’ll be honest with you. I have always felt that somehow I would be able to work it out, and if I did the best I could, God would have to accept that. But I see now that when you put my best down by the white light of His standard, I cannot measure up even to that standard. I have no ability at all.”

*Run, run and do, the Law commands,
But gives me neither feet nor hands.
Better news the Gospel brings,
It bids me fly and gives me wings.*

“You have seen how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you unto Myself.”

Discipline

There is another thing I want you to notice about eagles’ wings. They are set before us as discipline by grace, for God disciplines those whom He saves by grace.

As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings, so the LORD alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with him. (Deuteronomy 32:11, 12)

The eagle is known for its ferocity and cruelty. An eagle, as it is flying aloft, may see a lamb or some other animal down below, plunge out of the sky, leap upon the animal, and destroy it.

In sharp contrast is its tenderness toward its own young. The eagle builds its nest on a high mountain crag. After the eggs are laid and the little ones hatch out, both the male and female watch over the nest and bring food to the eaglets. Then comes the day when those little fellows are big enough to fly. But they do not want to fly, they are having it too easy up there in that nest. They are given breakfast each morning in bed! Why should they want to leave? The mother eagle knows that it is time for them to start flying. There they are on the dizzy heights of a mountain crag, and she tries to lead them out. She attempts to teach them by flying out herself and coming back, but they are reluctant to follow. They don’t want her to know they are ready to fly, so they don’t move.

Then she breaks up the nest and takes a little one to the edge of the cliff. It is a long way down, and she pushes him over! She does not push him over to destroy him. She watches that little fellow as he starts down and clumsily flaps his wings. If he doesn’t take off as he should, she swoops underneath him, and her mighty wings hold up that little eaglet. He will never be

dashed on the crags beneath. She brings him back up and tries again until eventually the little fellow flies as she has shown him. Each time she flies a little farther, and he follows her.

Davy, in one of his books, tells about an experience he had:

I once saw a very interesting sight above one of the crags of Ben Nevis as I was going in pursuit of big game. Two parent eagles were teaching their offspring, two young birds, the maneuvers of flight. They began by rising from the top of the mountain, right into the eye of the sun. They first made small circles, and the young birds imitated them. They paused on their wings, waiting until they made their first flight, holding them on their expanded wings when they seemed exhausted. And then they took a second and larger gyration, always enlarging their circle of flight, so as to make a gradually ascending spiral.

That is the eagle. And God made the eagle that way in order that He might give us a verse. Read it carefully:

As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings, so the LORD alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with him. (Deuteronomy 32:11, 12)

A Higher Plane Than the Law

My friend, if we have been saved by grace, we have been called to a higher plane of living than the Law ever called any man to experience. We are called to live above the valleys of this world, in fact, above the mountain peaks of the world. You see, the Law never raised man very high.

If you will recall, when planes first started flying in a commercially, they never flew above six thousand feet in the air. Now and then they would bump into a mountain. But now with pressurized cabins, they are no longer limited to six thousand feet – they now go up to forty thousand feet. And when you say that a plane does not fly at six thousand feet, you do not mean that it is on the ground, you mean it is higher.

When we say that a Christian is not to be under Law, what we mean is that he is to be on a higher plane. He is to leave the six thousand foot level and go up to where it is forty thousand feet because he is being borne on eagles' wings.

God has a way of training those whom He has saved by His grace. He now wants to teach them to use their wings. God does not want us to live on a low plane. He wants us above the mountain peaks of this world of human effort. He does not want us caged down here by some religious zoo of this world to be on display for spectators. We are to live for Him on a high plane. That is the thing Paul said to Titus: "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men" (Titus 2:11).

The eagle wings of God's grace have taken those who have trusted Christ and lifted them out of sin. But that does not end it. The same grace of God is "teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present age" (Titus 2:12). And Paul wrote this, not in the language of Sinai, but in the language of love, the language of the mother eagle urging her young to come up higher: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by

the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service” (Romans 12:1).

And again to the Ephesians he said, “I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love” (Ephesians 4:1, 2). It is a high calling, but it demands walking in lowliness and meekness down here.

Their Nests Were Broken Up

Do you know the way He accomplishes this in our lives? He breaks up our nests. Oh, how comfortable we are, how comfortable we get in grace. And God has to come along and break up our nest. That has been His method.

Adam and Eve were put into the Garden of Eden – what a nest that was! Then they sinned, and God broke up the nest – it was for their good – and He drove them out of the Garden.

Follow the record of how He dealt with His own. Abraham was living in Ur of the Chaldees, which boasted a great civilization in his day. They had all sorts of comforts, and Abraham was a prosperous businessman. He was doing well, but one day God called him, broke up his nest, and moved him out. It was hard going from then on, but I can assure you that Abraham would never have exchanged that experience for a life of comfort in Ur of the Chaldees.

Moses, by what the world would call a trick of fate, got into the palace of Pharaoh and would have been the next Pharaoh on the throne. I have a notion that he could have given a very convincing argument for staying in that advantageous position. Certainly he could have said, “I can be of more help to my people here than if I attempted to step out.” But he did not argue that way. In fact, Moses wanted to deliver them before God was ready. God broke up his nest and one day drove him out of that palace to the back side of the desert yonder at Midian. That was God’s method.

Then there was David, a shepherd boy out yonder with his sheep. He described how peaceful it was by the cool, limpid water and the green pastures. It was so comfortable there. One day God broke up his nest, the anointing oil was poured upon him, and he became Israel’s king, the like of which they never saw from that day on. But he went into hiding in the caves of the earth. He had to go underground for many years. Schooled and roughed up – my, how God put the sandpaper on that man! God disciplined him. He was God’s man and, you see, his nest had to be broken up.

James and John were prosperous fishermen living in Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee. They were doing well until one day there came by a Man who called them. And they immediately left the ship and their father and followed Him. Their nest was broken up. They left the fishing business to become two of the twelve disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. One of them died a martyr’s death, and the other spent time yonder on an island in lonely exile. Way back there at Capernaum God had broken up their nest, you see.

What If God Breaks Up Your Nest?

Since this is God’s method, it is possible that He may break up your nest and He may break up my nest. Sometimes He not only breaks up the nest, but He pushes us off the cliff. Now I do not know about you, but I do not like being pushed off a cliff. However, God does this to His own. And generally He pushes them right into a peck of trouble, problems, and difficulties.

Remember that the Lord Jesus sent His disciples across the Sea of Galilee one evening definitely, directly, and deliberately into a storm. He did it purposely. Some time ago I mentioned this incident at a Bible conference, and a lovely couple approached me after the service. They were highly incensed at what I had said.

“Now look here, you have no right to make such a statement about our lovely Savior. He would never send His disciples into a storm!”

I said to them, “Do you think He was God, or wasn’t He God?”

“Oh,” they said, “we believe He is God.”

“Does God know everything?”

“Yes,” they replied.

“Did He know that storm was coming?”

They said, “Yes.”

“Well,” I said, “He sent them into it.”

Their honest comment was, “We hadn’t thought of it like that.”

My friend, He sent His own deliberately into a storm. This couple, who became wonderful friends of mine, now know what it is to be sent into a storm. Their daughter was kidnapped and brutally slain. They knew what it was to sit night after night, waiting to see if the FBI had any word to give to them. They went into a storm.

Some through the fire, some through the flood – that is the way God leads His dear children along. That is His method. He will send His own into a storm.

But always remember that He will not let you fall. There have been many times in my life when I have been pushed to the edge of the cliff and I was sure there would be a crash. But there wasn’t.

In college I knew that God had called me to the ministry, but I had very little faith in Him. I had a notion that He would take me to a certain height and drop me off, let me go. When I graduated from college, I was the unhappiest person there. After having received my degree, I returned to my room in the dormitory, still in cap and gown, and sat dejectedly on the edge of my bed. My roommate came in and asked, “What in the world – did somebody die?” I said, “Just as well to. I thought God called me to the ministry. I’m through college, the Depression has hit, and I do not even have a job this summer. I haven’t a dime to go to seminary next year.” Without going into details, let me just say that when I went to bed that night, I had checks that totaled \$750 which had come from people whom I never dreamed would be interested in seeing me go to seminary. And \$750 the year the Depression hit, brother, was a whole lot of money! I thought He was going to drop me. He did, but He did not let me fall.

Be Confident

This verse was given to me at that time and it is my life verse: “Being confident of this very thing, that he who hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6). You may think you are falling, my friend, but the wings will be there at the right moment. “Underneath are the everlasting arms” (Deuteronomy 33:27).

He will hold you on His wings, He will not let you fall. If, when you are reading this, you are at wit’s end corner and do not know where to turn or what to do, let me give you this verse:

They that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run, and not be weary, and they shall walk, and not faint.
(Isaiah 40:31)

In the eighteenth century this thought was put in a hymn that went like this:

*Rise, my soul, and stretch thy wings,
Thy better portion trace;
Rise from transitory things
T'ward heav'n, thy native place:
Sun and moon and stars decay;
Time shall soon this earth remove:
Rise, my soul, and haste away
To seats prepared above.*

“Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you unto myself.”