

A Priceless Gift

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Last month's *Personal*, "An Unpayable Debt and Obligation," had as its theme a subject that helps us to recognize that, even now, we stand indebted. We are obligated to the Father and Son for Their payment of a debt we could not possibly pay.

That debt was the penalty for our sins. Whether the debt accrued was small—because before our calling we had tried, perhaps very diligently, to keep from sinning by living a life of self-disciplined respectability and religiosity—or whether it was huge—because we had given ourselves over to outright, filthy hedonism as a drug-taking, street-walking harlot, or raped people of their incomes as a cheating, lying, power-hungry businessman—our debt was nonetheless too large to pay if we wanted life to continue with any hope of a far better quality of life.

The previous article centered on Jesus' parable in Luke 7:36-50, given as instruction to the respectable Pharisee, Simon. In it, a sinful woman, while weeping, anoints Jesus' feet, kisses them with her lips, and dries them with her hair in Simon's disapproving presence. Since most of us are not blatant sinners, we would identify more with the respectable Simon.

However, that article's overall purpose was for us to avoid falling under the judgment of I Corinthians 11:29: "For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body." None of us needs to fall short because we misunderstand and thus neglect the importance of what Jesus did in our behalf.

The Contemporary English Version (CEV) renders this verse, "If you fail to understand that you are the body of the Lord, you will condemn yourselves by the way you eat and drink." *The Amplified Bible* translates it, "For anyone who eats and drinks without discriminating and recognizing with due appreciation that [it is Christ's] body, eats and drinks a sentence (a verdict of judgment) upon himself."

These translations show two possible understandings of what Paul meant. The CEV contemplates our overall response in how we, knowing we are Christ's body, conduct our daily lives, whereas *The Amplified Bible* focuses on appreciation of Christ's literal sacrifice while actually taking the bread and wine. Both approaches are correct. In either case, Passover must affect our life in a positive way, or it brings judgment against us.

Along with appreciation and respect, God desires an understanding so deep, strong, and consistent that it motivates us to glorify Him by conforming to His will in daily life. This sense of obligation is not a maudlin sentimentality, but is of such sincere and intense gratitude that it gives us insight into the standard of selflessness Christ exemplified. We must strive to put it into practice in our lives if we are to be like Them and be in our Father's Kingdom.

Put another way, our obligation is to love Them as They loved us—not a resigned attitude of "Okay, I'll do it because I have to" that issues in low-level, letter-of-the-law obedience, but a love that

expresses itself in fervent, sacrificial affection, as the woman in Luke 7 exemplified. This level of love is reasonable to pursue because it drives us far beyond mere superficial conformity. Notice how Romans 12:1-2 draws our attention to this:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Paul proclaims that this sacrificial love will serve to transform us and provide the proof we need to bolster us in following God's will.

A Second Powerful Motivator

The sense of obligation does not stand alone as a motivation for transformation. So that this way of life to which we have been called will make better sense, we must understand and appreciate another reality, one that will provide helpful motivation toward overcoming. There is nothing complicated about it. It is not only quite simple but also true—however, it is not always easily believed. Yet, if we believe it, it can provide significant purpose, impetus, and direction to the activities of our lives.

As children, every one of us had an intense desire to do something that mom or dad would not give us permission to do, despite all our emotional pleadings. Perhaps some of the women in their younger days sought permission to buy and wear a certain item of clothing that was suggestive but considered "in"—if one had it, she would be more acceptable to the group she wanted to impress. But Mama said, "No, good girls don't do that." Maybe for the men it was to be involved in an activity with a group of guys who were considered dangerous to a boy's character because concerned parents did not approve of what they did or of their attitudes. In either case, when we asked why we could not do this, our parents would say, "Because."

That would make us even more emotional because we really wanted to do whatever it was, and we could see nothing but good coming from it! Then, they might say, "Because I am your father [or mother]." They might even go so far as to say, "Because we are the such-and-such family, and we don't do things like that." Such responses left us quite frustrated because we could not get our way, nor could we see that our parents' explanation was adequate. After all, we could not see any harm in it!

Believe it or not, a great deal of this appears in the Bible. It really should not surprise us because God is, after all, a Father with vast experience, and we are children who lack experience, wisdom, and foresight. God often gives commands with little explanation beyond the equivalent of "Because."

By doing so, He is requiring that we live by faith. Do we trust Him? Sometimes He gives a broad and brief explanation, but whether brief or none at all, do we still trust Him in a good attitude until a more complete explanation and understanding are provided? We need to see what is behind God's method, because if we grasp it, we will see the motivational tool that is the subject of this article.

Malachi 3:16-17 says:

Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord

and who meditate on His name. "They shall be Mine," says the Lord of hosts, "on the day that I make them My jewels, and I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him."

This familiar scripture contains a word that has important implications to this subject. The English word translated as "jewels" in verse 17 is not entirely wrong, but it is not a precise translation of what the Hebrew word, *segullâh* (*Strong's* #5459, transliterated in various ways), really means. The simplest usage of *segullâh* is to indicate personal possession. *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* expounds its meaning (remember that *we* are being described):

Cegullah signifies property in the special sense of a private possession one personally acquired and carefully preserves. Six times this word is used of Israel as God's personally acquired (elected, delivered from Egyptian bondage, and formed into what He wanted them to be), carefully preserved, and privately possessed people. . . .

This is not the first time this word appears in the Bible, which distinction belongs to Exodus 19:5, "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine." *Segullâh* is translated as "special treasure."

The *Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* explains:

This manifestation of the love of God to Israel formed only the prelude, however, to that gracious union which Jehovah was now about to establish between the Israelites and Himself. If they would hear His voice, and keep the covenant which was about to be established with them, they should be a costly possession to Him out of all nations. . . . *Cagulaah* does not signify property in general, but valuable property, that which is laid by, or put aside, hence a treasure of silver and gold. . . .

It is helpful to note how God emphasizes *segullâh* to impress its importance on Israel—and now us—by saying, "For all the earth is Mine." This establishes a reference point, indicating that He could have considered any people on earth as His own personal and private treasure, but He did not. Just as a person carefully and discriminately chooses his personal jewelry according to his own criteria, so He chose Israel then and chooses us now.

In I Chronicles 29:3, *segullâh* is again translated as "special treasure," but the context provides a clear use of the term. It involves the preparations David made for the building of the Temple so Solomon could construct it. David explains that from his own *personally obtained and set-aside treasure*, he gave so much gold and silver.

Thus far, we have seen references from the Old Testament. Obviously, because *segullâh* is a Hebrew word, it does not appear in the New Testament. However, the same sense appears in the New Testament concept of being God's special treasure, and through it, His personal ownership of us becomes much more important and personal.

I Peter 2:9 reads, "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." The King James Version (KJV) translators use the word "peculiar" rather than "special." Is

this correct? At first glance, it may not seem so, but this is only because the word's usage has changed through the centuries. However, according to the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, *peculiar* means:

The Latin *peculium* means "private property," so that "peculiar" properly = "pertaining to the individual." In modern English the word has usually degenerated into a half-colloquial form for "extraordinary," but in Biblical English it is a thoroughly dignified term for "esp. one's own" . . .

Why Is the Special Treasure Different?

The apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 1:13-14:

In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.

This chapter extols the uniqueness of the church, which Paul refers to as "the purchased possession." Earlier, we did not search out how Israel became God's personal possession, but it was through the destruction of Egypt, and more importantly, with the killing of Egypt's firstborn as the price for Israel's liberty. God "purchased" Israel and its liberties by this means.

What we see taking form is a separate and unique people. Even though all mankind owes its existence to God as their Creator, Israel and the church are both separate and unique because they belong to God in a way other people and nations do not. Amos 3:2 declares, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth." God purchased these people at awesome cost and thus came into possession of them.

When Israel became His property, it gave them certain liberties. So it is with us, but we receive more besides. Among other things regarding the uniqueness of the church, Paul explains that its members have been set apart (redeemed and freed from the rest of mankind and its ways) and sealed through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The term *sealed* is important because it embraces, not only the sense of ownership, but also security and guarantee. Individual seals were unique, used on documents to identify the sender and to render the content secure from prying eyes and theft, and so they were a guarantee that the contents would reach the intended destination.

God's children may look no different on the outside, but they have been given something inside; something spiritual, that makes them different from others and special to God. They are different only because of something God has done, which also makes them His personal, treasured possession.

John 1:12-13 declares, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name: who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." That "something" is the right or *power* (KJV) to believe the Word of God, which opens our minds and imparts to us the knowledge of God and His purpose, faith, the fear of God, the love of God, and so much more.

Billions of people have access to the Bible. They read it and may even attend church and call themselves Christian, but they then ignore and disobey huge amounts of it, thus not living by every Word of God. This is actual evidence that those who are part of God's special treasure do indeed possess something that sets them apart and motivates them to obey more completely.

Deuteronomy 7:6 begins a section that reveals one of the major reasons why God has done this. "For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth." *Segullâh* appears again as "special treasure," but along with *segullâh* is another, more familiar term that identifies being a special treasure as an aspect of a larger subject: the blessings and responsibilities of *holiness*.

Holy literally means "set apart." Being a special treasure has set us apart from other people. Others, without this advantage, are not set apart. When this principle from the Old Testament is combined with Ephesians 1:13-14, we can understand that the blessing of having the Spirit of God makes us special, different, and holy (Romans 8:9).

This occurs because, in God's self-revelation, His Spirit imparts faith and the love of God beyond what the natural mind is capable. It is becoming clear that being blessed as a special, holy people imposes responsibilities on us that we are required—indeed commanded—to meet. The standards within this relationship are high, requiring gifts and growth to meet them.

Specialness and Faithfulness

Suppose a man is unmarried but attracted to someone of the opposite sex. They become acquainted and begin spending time together. The more they see of each other, the greater the bond grows. What is happening through this process is that they are becoming special treasures to each other.

During the course of their courting, they become so special to each other that they feel blessed and decide to marry. At this point, the specialness has reached such an intense state that they are completely set apart for each other. However, this intense specialness and setting apart also bring with them responsibilities to each other that did not exist before.

Now the married couple is special to each other above all other people on earth, so much so that God says that for this cause "a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife" (Genesis 2:24). Their specialness to each other overrides responsibilities to all other people. The only one to whom the responsibilities of being "special" and "set apart" are greater is God.

Deuteronomy 7:7-11 continues the theme introduced in verse 6, leading to an overview of why we were chosen and of our responsibilities:

The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the Lord loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Therefore know that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments; and He repays those who hate Him to their

face, to destroy them. He will not be slack with him who hates Him; He will repay him to his face. Therefore you shall keep the commandment, the statutes, and the judgments which I command you today, to observe them.

Being chosen to be God's special treasure and become holy had nothing to do with any of our accomplishments, race, nationality, sex, IQ, or academic training. We are special and thus blessed because God loves us and because He is faithful to His promises to the fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He reinforces these points by emphasizing that He is faithful, as well as by warning us that He is a God of justice.

Therefore, He is clearly stating that the foundation of this relationship is based completely in what He is within Himself, otherwise the relationship would have never gotten past the casual stage of mere acquaintance. The vast majority in the world who call themselves Christian are merely acquainted with God. By God's personal calling (John 6:44), we have been made special—to have an intense and intimate relationship with Him. The very character of God, not any excellence in those He has chosen, is the basis for our being special.

This gives us no room for pride. He was not somehow attracted to us because we had been seeking Him all our lives, were so attractive, or had done so many good things. On the other hand, this blessing gives cause for a great deal of gratitude, and just as in a marriage, this specialness brings responsibilities.

God proclaims Himself to be the faithful God, and in Deuteronomy 7:11, He broadly states the means by which we are expected to prove our faithfulness in return: We are responsible to keep His commandments, statutes, and judgments. As in a marriage, because the parties have become special to each other, they are responsible to be faithful to each other above all others. A covenant made before God binds us to this intense, marital faithfulness.

I Peter 2:9 states this responsibility in a somewhat different manner: "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him, who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." Notice his sentence begins with "but," introducing an explanation of why the chosen are to be different from the disobedient of verses 7-8, and of what they are obligated to do.

As stated here, the responsibility of God's own special people is to proclaim—to show forth (KJV)—the praises of Him who has called us. The proclaiming is accomplished through speech and conduct. We show forth His praises in our witness through faithful obedience, just as is commanded in Deuteronomy 7:11.

I Peter 1:13-16 shows that being a special treasure and holiness are inextricably linked:

Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy."

God emphasizes "special treasure" to impress us with the magnitude of His blessing in making us special and the critical importance of our difference from others expressed through holy conduct.

It is important to consider our calling as God's peculiar treasure a tremendous blessing that we never allow to slip from our minds. It opens the door to the knowledge of God, faith, forgiveness, His Holy Spirit, access to Him, transformation to be like Him, and an endless supply of other things He provides, besides everlasting life. However, there are specific things we must do and cannot do because we are special.

Responsibility goes both ways. In return, He loves us to a degree that others are not loved. Is that surprising? It is often said that God loves the sinner but hates the sin. We cannot take that broad, blanket statement to be always true. God does not love everybody equally, as Romans 9:13-16 plainly states:

As it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated." What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion." So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.

Psalms 5:5-6 can be a startling statement to those who do not understand this: "The boastful shall not stand in Your sight; You hate all workers of iniquity. You shall destroy those who speak falsehood; the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man." Notice David specifically says God hates the *workers* of iniquity, not merely their works. Such people are most definitely not special.

Notice also Hosea 9:15: "All [Israel's] wickedness is in Gilgal, for there I hated them. Because of the evil of their deeds I will drive them from My house; I will love them no more. All their princes are rebellious." God's hatred of individuals is not something frequently stated, but it is part of the Bible's record. We who are called to be special must remember that God warns in Deuteronomy 7:10-11 that He is a just God, therefore He punishes as He sees fit. However, it does not have to be this way with us if we believe His calling is a blessing, and we use it to drive us to further growth.

John 14:23 shows the positive side of this coin: "Jesus answered and said to [Judas (not Iscariot)], 'If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him.'" The Bible clearly teaches God's reciprocity. God loves us while we were yet sinners and makes the first step toward reconciling us to Him (Romans 5:8-10). He expects love in return for His love so freely given. What we must understand is that, whether God loves or hates, He never loses His sense of righteous judgment, as we would.

Other Specific Responsibilities

Deuteronomy was written in the final month prior to Israel's entering into the Promised Land. Following God's review to the Israelites of the basis of their relationship in Deuteronomy 7 comes a warning to be faithful to the covenant, along with a brief overview of their responsibilities. In chapter 8, He proceeds to remind them of how well He provided for them in the wilderness and how He tested them through a variety of means.

In the next two chapters, He reviews their rebellions, reminds them that He had to provide a second table of laws, and appeals to them to understand that what He desires of them is their love. In chapter 11, He encourages them to obey Him, showing that their love and obedience will be greatly rewarded.

In Deuteronomy 12, He provides specific instructions regarding worshipping Him, emphasizing that He is to be worshipped only where and how He signifies. Deuteronomy 13 contains a powerful and sobering exhortation against idolatry in the form of a command describing the responsibility of one who has witnessed it being practiced within his own family.

If your brother, the son of your mother, your son or your daughter, the wife of your bosom, or your friend who is as your own soul, secretly entices you, saying, "Let us go and serve other gods," which you have not known, neither you nor your fathers, of the gods of the people which are all around you, near to you or far off from you, from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth, you shall not consent to him or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him or conceal him; but you shall surely kill him; your hand shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. And you shall stone him with stones until he dies, because he sought to entice you away from the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. So all Israel shall hear and fear, and not again do such wickedness as this among you. (verses 6-11)

Is there such a zealous fervency like this in the church today? Is it burning in us individually? Is there such a hatred of evil and a love for God and His Family within us that we will not permit even one iota of idolatry within ourselves? Or, are we tolerant of its existence within ourselves and within the church, convincing ourselves that it really does not matter? These verses show that it matters very much to God!

Beginning in Deuteronomy 7, He is systematically defining their relationship to Him and the terms of faithfulness. God is to be our God—exclusively. Please understand that we cannot literally conform to some of these details today because we have no civil authority. Nevertheless, His stern commands illustrate how serious God is about idolatry—faithlessness to Him and the covenant. He charged them with this because He loved them, because faithfulness would be good for them and would bless them within the relationship, whereas faithlessness would bring curses on them, just as it does in human marriages.

The relationship is further defined in Deuteronomy 14:1-2:

You are the children of the Lord your God; you shall not cut yourselves nor shave the front of your head for the dead. For you are a holy people to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

Segullâh appears again in verse 2, as He is more specifically defining their—and our—responsibilities. He is saying to do or not to do these things because we are a special people and because He is our God and Father.

What comprises the rest of chapter 14? We are not to eat things God has declared unclean for the same reason: because we are His special, holy people and because He is our Father. He gives no other reason. He is still defining faithfulness. He does not say we are not to eat them because they will destroy our health—a point that must be assumed because we know everything God does is in love. Thus, if He says not to eat them, we do not.

Deuteronomy 14:22-29 contains the tithing laws. We are to follow His tithing laws and keep His festivals for the same reason: because we are a special, holy people to Him personally. Faithfulness to Him and the covenant is primarily tied to our personal and intimate relationship with Him—and only secondarily to membership in the Israelite nation or the church of God. Trusting Him is the issue.

Deuteronomy 7:2-3 commands:

. . . and when the Lord your God delivers [the Canaanites] over to you, you shall conquer them and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them. Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son.

This particular point of obedience is especially interesting because it is the first thing mentioned about our faithfulness to Him. This passage bans Israel from making covenants with the people of the land. Among covenants are marriage unions. A marriage is a covenant to be special treasures to each other and therefore faithful to each other. As we continue in the chapter, verses 4 and 6 begin with the conjunction "for," which tells us why something is to be done or is forbidden.

Here, unlike some other situations, He provides a brief reason or two why this is forbidden. In short, in verse 4, covenants—including marriages with the heathen—are banned because it is too spiritually dangerous. It is similar to playing with fire—the Lake of Fire. Interreligious marriages *will* work to destroy the special faithfulness to each other.

In verse 6, God's reason is that they—and we—are a special, set apart people for God's uses only. Entering covenants with the heathen, including marriage and honoring their gods, *will* work to destroy the special relationship. In other words, it will work to destroy our faithfulness to God and therefore our ability to proclaim God's praises.

Do we love God enough that we are willing to heed His commands, or do we love ourselves more than Him, making us willing to risk what He says not to do? Marrying outside the faith is a matter of idolatry.

Half-Full or Half-Empty

The perspective through which we look at these things in the course of daily life makes all the difference in the world. A common way of illustrating this is to ask whether we consider the glass half-full or half-empty. Do we think of God's calling as a blessing that has opened a door to a fabulous eternity? Or, do we feel it bars us from areas of fulfillment, excitement, adventure, and fun in life, excluding us from those who have access to all the pleasure and glory this world can produce?

As mentioned earlier, becoming God's special people gives us liberty. But liberty to do what? Exodus 3:18 provides us with a major clue:

Then they will heed your voice; and you shall come, you and the elders of Israel, to the king of Egypt; and you shall say to him, "The Lord God of the Hebrews has met with us; and now, please, let us go three days journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God."

This is the original request Moses made to Pharaoh for Israel to be set free. The reason was that they might be free to sacrifice to their God. The same principle applies to us; this is why God has freed us. Recall that Romans 12:1 charges us with the responsibility, once we are free of our slavery to Satan and sin, to be living sacrifices.

The blessing of our God-given calling makes available to us the opportunity to dedicate our lives in service to Him. Its magnificent potential opens the door to positive motivation to counterbalance the somewhat negative sense that obligation to Christ seems to impose. Because He first gives us evidence of His love for us, it enables us to believe Him, to live by faith, and to live a life of self-sacrifice to glorify Him. It has provided entrance to the Kingdom of God.

The just shall live by faith because they know Him in His loving character. This causes any lingering negative sense that human nature has toward being *required* to keep God's commands to fade gradually into the background, freeing us to obey from the heart in sincere gratitude and joy.