

**Text: Gen 5.1-3**

Our Christmas series begins today.

The topic is, *The Law of the Firstborn*.

Perhaps you recall some of our mentions of this in our studies of the Old Testament. Firstborn sons are a big deal in families through history. They tend to be the chief heir of their father, the one who carries the “title” if there is one.

This custom didn’t occur in all societies, the Roman emperors did not always pass on their position to sons.

But amongst the Semitic peoples and peoples of the Ancient Near East, there was a pattern.

The law mentions this in Dt 21:

Dt 21.15-17 ¶ “If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved, and *both* the loved and the unloved have borne him sons, if the firstborn son belongs to the unloved,<sup>16</sup> then it shall be in the day he wills what he has to his sons, he cannot make the son of the loved the firstborn before the son of the unloved, who is the firstborn.<sup>17</sup> “But he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the unloved, by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the beginning of his strength; to him belongs the right of the firstborn.

Following customs like this, royal crowns in Christendom (Christian Europe) tended to pass on to eldest sons. (Recently England changed the law to “eldest child.”)

Why is a first-born son so important?

- On average, males are stronger and more independent, a son is security against old age
- Males can take up the father’s profession, maintaining family security and stability

Even in our culture, the sun seems to rise and set on the first born son (I am Number One according to my mother, and I don’t let my siblings forget it.)

**Proposition: The first-born son represents Hope, and the Fulfillment of the Father’s Plan.**

That's our proposition, but there is a problem. Here's our title

## *The Failure of the Firstborn*

Read Gen 5.1-3

### I. The custom of *primogeniture*

#### A. The meaning of primogeniture

“Late Latin *primogenitura*, from Latin *primus* + *genitura* birth

**1:** the state of being the firstborn of the children of the same parents

**2:** an exclusive right of inheritance belonging to the eldest son”<sup>1</sup>

“**Primogeniture** The ancient view of the right of the firstborn to inherit the headship of the family. Carries with it titles and rights including high priesthood and kingship.”<sup>2</sup>

#### B. The rights of the first-born

1. Family headship

2. Priesthood and kingship in the clan

3. Double portion of estate (see Dt passage cited)

a. Joseph, the firstborn of Rachel, took Reuben's place in his two sons: Manasseh and Ephraim

<sup>1</sup> Chr 5.1 ¶ Now the sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel (for he was the firstborn, but because he defiled his father's bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph the son of Israel; so that he is not enrolled in the genealogy according to the birthright.

<sup>1</sup> Frederick C. Mish, ed., *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

<sup>2</sup> John D. Barry et al., eds., “Primogeniture,” in *Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

## b. Goal: social stability

“Ronald E. Clements writes, ‘In general, such a firm imposition of the rights of inheritance within a family was concerned to maintain a secure social order’ (Clements, *Deuteronomy*, 446).”<sup>3</sup>

## c. Echoed in Assyrian texts:

“[If brothers divide the estate of their father ... the orchards and wells on] the land, [the oldest son] shall choose (and) take two portions [as his share]”<sup>4</sup>

## II. The genealogy of Adam (Gen 5.1-3)

## A. The surprising genealogy: Seth in the place of Cain

1. Cain was the literal firstborn of Adam
2. Eve set great store by him:

Gn 4.1 ¶ Now the man had relations with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain, and she said, “I have gotten a manchild with *the help of the LORD.*”

3. Of course, we know that Cain killed his brother Abel, and Seth took Abel’s place

Gn 4.25 ¶ Adam had relations with his wife again; and she gave birth to a son, and named him Seth, for, *she said*, “God has appointed me another offspring in place of Abel, for Cain killed him.”

4. As we see, however, in Gen 5, Seth also takes Cain’s place

## B. The unique features of Gen 5

1. תּוֹלְדוֹת – *tōlēdōt*: a key word in Genesis
  - a. In our text, trans. “generations”

<sup>3</sup> Chad Chambers, “Firstborn,” in *Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament, 185, cited in Chambers.

- b. In 2.4, first occurrence of the word, “account”

Gn 2.4 ¶ This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made earth and heaven.

- c. Next use is in Gen 6.9, introducing Noah

It is sort of a “header” word for the sections of Genesis

## 2. אָדָם 'ādām, *i.e.*, Adam

- a. Repeated in 5.1-3 four times

Gn 5.1-3 ¶ This is the book of the generations of **Adam**. In the day when God created **man**, He made him in the likeness of God. <sup>2</sup> He created them male and female, and He blessed them and named them **Man** in the day when they were created. <sup>3</sup> When **Adam** had lived one hundred and thirty years, he became the father of *a son* in his own likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth.

- b. Also is the word used in Gen 1.26-27

Gn 1.26-27 ¶ Then God said, “Let Us make **man** in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” <sup>27</sup> God created **man** in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Called “generic sense” here

- c. The Gen 5 passage alternates between the “personal sense” and the “generic sense”

Adam is an individual but is also the stand-in for the entire human race.

### 3. The image of God

#### a. Gen 5.1 is like a new beginning (echoes of Gen 1)

- 1) After the Fall
- 2) After Cain

#### b. Notice the distinctions though

- 1) Adam: in the image of God
- 2) Seth: in the image of Adam

“he became the father of *a son* in his own likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth”

#### c. Seth is in the image of Adam, in the place of the firstborn, but afflicted with the failure of Adam

- 1) The hope of dominion remains — procreation “replenish the earth”
- 2) The failure of hope is new: “and he died”

## III. The crushed hopes of first-born failure

### A. There are notable instances of first-born failure

1. Son of the handmaiden, Ishmael (Gen 21.-14) [Abraham’s failure]
2. Despising the birthright, Esau (Gen 25.29-34)
3. Disqualification, Reuben (Gen 49.3-4)
4. Disqualification, Cain (Gen 4.8)

Gn 4.8 ¶ Cain told Abel his brother. And it came about when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him.

### B. There are also instances of first-born replacement (prophetic)

1. Prophecy, Ephraim over Manasseh (Gen 48.14)
2. Prophetic insight: Jacob over Esau (Gen 27.37)

Gn 27.37 But Isaac replied to Esau, “Behold, I have made him your master, and all his relatives I have given to him as servants; and with grain and new wine I have sustained him. Now as for you then, what can I do, my son?”

### 3. Human race: Seth for Cain (Gen 5.3)

## C. The ultimate first-born failure

### 1. Adam, the son of God

Lk 3.38 the son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God.

### 2. Adam, recall, made in the image of God

### 3. Adam failed in his mandate, and failing, passed on a flawed image to his sons (including us)

No one can get the full inheritance, unless...

## D. The ultimate first-born replacement

### 1. Adam failed

### 2. Jesus succeeded

Seth, in the hopeful record of Gen 5, is a stand-in, an anticipation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

## Conclusion:

**Proposition:** The first-born son represents Hope, and the Fulfillment of the Father's Plan.

Every first born in humanity represents that hope for something better in the next generation. Every one of us has failed in that, except one:

The firstborn son of Mary:

**Jesus is the only hope for every generation.**

He is the hope for you — if you will have him.