

Text: Ex 13.1-16

We will sweep swiftly now from the beginning of the race and the *Failure of the Firstborn* to the beginning of the Jewish nation and the first Passover.

Our passage announces Passover, and there we will pick up the next thread of the concept of the firstborn in the Scriptures.

Read Ex 13.1-16

A couple of things to notice before we get the message started.

Notice how verse 1 stands apart from verses 2-10. God gives Moses a command about the firstborn, then Moses starts telling the people about the Passover.

It is not until v. 11 that Moses turns to the subject of the firstborn.

Why is that?

Another thing to notice is this word, “sanctify” — this is a big word in the passage. We will talk about what it means.

All right, so let’s get started with the concept.

We saw last week the importance eastern cultures placed on the firstborn (and many still do). Of course, one’s first baby is important, whether boy or girl. [Cause of my first mid-life crisis!]

The firstborn represents continuity, stability, the future. The firstborn represents hope.

Since Adam, mankind needs hope. Adam sinned, death passed to all men, and man was kept out of the garden by an angel with a flaming sword. Where is the hope?

The hope is in the firstborn.

Even when the firstborn is a failure, like Cain, men then look to a replacement, a substitute.

Yet now, we see God saying, “the firstborn is mine.” What does that mean for this story?

Proposition: The Lord demands a part that represents the whole. All men, everywhere, belong to God.

I. The meaning of sanctify (1-2)

A. A Semitic word

1. Found in Akkadian, various Canaanite languages
2. Always means “sacred, holy, to make sacred or holy”
3. Sometimes found in place names: Kadesh Barnea (“Holy” Barnea) – Canaanite name

B. Clearest incident illustrating the meaning

1. Rebellion of Korah, Num 16
2. Moses set up “dueling priests” with those following Korah
3. Ground opened up and swallowed Korah, Dathan, and Abiram up
4. Those following Korah, assembled with “censors” in their hands (firepans) were slain by fire that flashed out on them from the Lord

Num 16.38 “As for the censers of these men who have sinned at the cost of their lives, let them be made into hammered sheets for a plating of the altar, since they did present them before the LORD and they are holy; and they shall be for a sign to the sons of Israel.”

5. The censers of these false priests were devoted to the Lord, set apart, sanctified, no longer available for common use

C. The firstborn son is to be sanctified to the Lord

1. A note on “son”
 - a. The “gender” notation of the words in v. 2 are masculine, but the word “son” or “male” not given (so a bit ambiguous)
 - b. But v.12 and v. 15 make it clear that God means “males”
2. The meaning is set apart, devoted to the Lord’s service, belonging to the Lord

II. The call to remember this day (3-15)

A. Through Passover (3-10)

1. The day of the Passover was to remember their escape from Egypt (3-4)

2. They were to memorialize the rite when they entered the land (5-7)
 - a. They were to keep the feast of unleavened bread seven days (6)
 - b. The seventh day was Passover (6)
 - c. No leaven in the house for the seven days (7)
3. They were to “tell your son” on that day (8)
4. The ritual was to become a sign on the hand, a reminder on the forehead (9)
5. Therefore: keep this ritual every year (10)

Now the passage begins with sanctifying the firstborn, but proceeds with a sanctifying of a day

B. Through the firstborn (11-15)

1. The memorial of the firstborn was also for their arrival in the land (11)

One commentator mentioned that their expectation when Moses gave this instruction was, “Next year...”

2. The first *male* offspring of every womb (12-13)
 - a. The firstborn males of every beast belong to the Lord
 - 1) Both clean and unclean
 - 2) Disposition differed
 - b. The males of sheep, goats, and oxen were given to God
 - 1) The kind of sacrifice isn't specified here
 - 2) Numbers 18 gives disposition, but we will see that later
 - c. The males of unclean animals (donkeys) were not sacrificed
 - 1) Either redeemed (with a non-firstborn lamb)
 - 2) Or simply killed: “break its neck”

We need to emphasize that it is the *unclean* animals that are redeemed: they belong to the Lord, but not legit sacrificial animals, so must die or be redeemed.

3. Counting the cost

a. The average numbers of animals born to “clean” animals

- 1) Sheep will average 1.65 lambs per birthing, and bear for an average of five years (according to several websites) = Total about 8.25 lambs per ewe
- 2) Cows will average just over one calf per birthing, tend to bear from age 2 to 10, eight years, so total again just over 8 calves per cow

b. The ratio of males to females

- 1) Sheep average about 49.96% males
- 2) Cows average about 52% males

Most ewes or cows will produce a “firstborn male” in their lifetime

c. What does this mean for the Israelite farmer? 1 out of 8 = 12.5% offered to the Lord (plus those offered to redeem sheep)

On average, this is a greater percentage than the OT tithe (10%)

C. The purpose of the offering: to memorialize the Exodus (14-15)

1. Tell your son (14)
2. Points directly to what God required of the Egyptians (15)
 - a. Repeated in two other passages

Num 3.13 “For all the firstborn are Mine; on the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I sanctified to Myself all the firstborn in Israel, from man to beast. They shall be Mine; I am the LORD.”

Num 8.17 “For every firstborn among the sons of Israel is Mine, among the men and among the animals; on the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I sanctified them for Myself.

b. Notice that it is not because God spared the Israelites – he required it of the Egyptians

1) He still required the firstborn of Israel

2) But he made a provision to redeem them (sacrificial system)

III. The constant obligation (16)

A. Just as with Passover, the ritual “served as” a sign on the hand and a phylactery on the forehead

1. In other words, the perpetual ritual of the firstborn is a constant reminder

2. In the course of things, you never run out of firstborns: constant reminder

B. The priests portion: all the firstborn (Num 18.14-18)

1. The animals offered in these sacrifices became the priests portion

2. So all the firstborn of the flock and herd

3. And every redemption animal of the unclean animals also belongs to the priests

4. The redemption of male Israelite babies was 5 shekels (Num 18.16)

Lk 2.22-23 ¶ And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “EVERY *firstborn* MALE THAT OPENS THE WOMB SHALL BE CALLED HOLY TO THE LORD “),

C. The significance of redemption

1. The offering of the sheep and goats to the Lord we understand... they belong to the Lord

2. The donkeys belong to the Lord also

a. But they are unclean

b. So they are killed or redeemed

D. Consider then what happens to men

1. God called Israel his firstborn

Ex 4.22-23 “Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, “Israel is My son, My firstborn.²³ “So I said to you, ‘Let My son go that he may serve Me’; but you have refused to let him go. Behold, I will kill your son, your firstborn.”””

2. Recall that an earlier Pharaoh tried to kill all the male children of Israel

Ex 1.15-16 ¶ Then the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other was named Puah;¹⁶ and he said, “When you are helping the Hebrew women to give birth and see *them* upon the birthstool, if it is a son, then you shall put him to death; but if it is a daughter, then she shall live.”

3. And then remember the night of the first Passover, the night of the Exodus

- a. The death angel came
- b. The death angel passed over Israel (because of blood sprinkled on the door)
- c. The death angel slew every firstborn in Egypt

Ex 12.29-32 ¶ Now it came about at midnight that the LORD struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of cattle.³⁰ Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians, and there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was no home where there was not someone dead.³¹ Then he called for Moses and Aaron at night and said, “Rise up, get out from among my people, both you and the sons of Israel; and go, worship the LORD, as you have said.³² “Take both your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and go, and bless me also.”

- d. Remember this: the unclean must die, or be redeemed

e. Note this: every firstborn of Israel must be redeemed

- 1) Because every firstborn of Israel is unclean like every man from Adam: in Adam, all die
- 2) The firstborn is a stand-in for the whole family: we all belong to the Lord

“Once again, Exodus points us to the cross of Christ, ‘who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness’ (Titus 2:14). To say that Jesus is our Redeemer is to say that he died in our place. But if he is not our Redeemer, then we will perish like the donkeys that were broken at the neck.”¹

Conclusion:

Proposition: The Lord demands a part that represents the whole. All men, everywhere, belong to God.

The question for each of us is this: there is a redemption price paid for you. Jesus paid it.

Do you have it? Has there been a moment when you cried out to God and asked Him to forgive you of your sins?

Redemption isn't automatic

Egypt had no redemption and perished.

Israel had redemption and lived.

What do you have?

¹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory*, ed. R. Kent Hughes, ESV edition (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2015), 373.