

Text: Num 3.1-51

Before we get into introducing today's message, let me remind you of what we know about the firstborn from our previous messages:

1. *The Failure of the Firstborn* teaches us of the need for substitution, the first man failed, and we are all in the first man. We need a substitute.
2. *The Consecration of the Firstborn* teaches us that man needs a *clean* substitute — his consecration is like that of a donkey.

Today we our message is *The Ransom of the Firstborn*.

The words connected with *ransom* don't show up in our text until v. 46, so we are going to work our way towards that concept.

To start with, let's read the first ten verses:

Num 3.1-10

Before we look closely at our text, let's lay out some preliminary ideas about what the word *ransom* means.

- "The basic meaning of the Hebrew root is to achieve the transfer of ownership from one to another through payment of a price or an equivalent substitute."¹

Key concept: paying a price

- "The word was given special religious significance by the Exodus. When God delivered Israel from servitude to Egypt, he did so at the price of the slaughter of all the firstborn in Egypt, man and beast (Ex 4:23; 12:29)."²

Is God ransoming Israel? To whom is God paying the price?

There is a related concept, redemption. When you redeem something, you pay a ransom, or a price.

- Pawn shops loan money on the value of an item you pawn, you leave in their care as a security for the loan.

¹ William B. Coker, "1734 רָחַץ," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 716.

² Coker, 716.

- When you redeem the item, you pay more than the loan amount to get it back — the price of redemption, or, literally, a ransom.

(Pawn shops aren't the fairest places to get a loan in case you were wondering!)

We think about our salvation with that term, redemption.

- To whom is the price paid?

This is a question that troubles men when they think about redemption, but I think the law of the firstborn helps us answer it.

Proposition: There is a price for redemption, it is the ransom of the firstborn.

I. The consecration of Levi for the firstborn of Israel (1-13)

A. The consecration of the priests (1-4)

1. This is one of those standard “*toledoth*” passages we mentioned in Gen 5.1
2. The priests are a subset of the tribe of Levi: marked out especially for their role
3. Nadab and Abihu are marked out as rejected

B. The consecration of Levi (5-10)

1. Levi is set out from the rest of the congregation for special service
2. Levi's role is to “*serve Aaron*” (6)
 - a. The duties of the tent of meeting (7)
 - b. Keeping the furnishings of tent of meeting (8)
3. Repeat: Levi given to Aaron (9)
4. Warning: the layman (other Israelites) who come near shall be put to death (10)

The consecration of Levi allows the Levites to handle the tabernacle objects in their appropriate service with no penalty.

Key idea: setting apart (“*make holy*” — “*sanctify*”)

C. The consecration *for* the firstborn of Israel (11-13)

1. The Levites a substitution for the firstborn (12)

- a. In the Law of the Firstborn, as we have seen, *substitution* is a BIG concept
- b. Last week, in Ex 13, we saw God designate all the firstborn of Israel as his
- c. Now, the Lord adds new information: He takes Levi as a substitution for the firstborn of Israel

2. The basis of God's demand: the firstborn are mine (13)

- a. Established in the Exodus, when the Lord slew the firstborn of Egypt
- b. Sparing the firstborn of Israel sanctified them to the Lord, they belonged to him
- c. The ground of the doctrine: "I am the Lord" – absolute sovereignty

As the firstborn is a token, the whole concept means all men belong to God.

- As we saw last week, all men will either day or be redeemed.
- Here, we see the firstborn of Israel being redeemed by the tribe of Levi, with more information to follow.

II. The numbering of Levi (14-39)

We won't read this lengthy section, but note some key details

A. The sons of Levi to be numbered before the Lord (14-16)

1. Gershon and his sons (17-18)
2. Kohath and his sons (19)

Note: Amram is the father of Aaron and Moses

3. Merari and his sons (20)

B. The numbering of the Levites (21-37)

1. Gershon: 7,500 males from a month old and upwards (21-26, note 22)
2. Kohath: 8,600* males from a month old and upwards (27-32, note 28)
3. Merari: 6,200 males from a month old and upwards (33-37, note 34)

C. The order of the encampment

1. Gershon to the west of the tabernacle (23)
2. Kohath to the south of the tabernacle (29)
3. Merari to the north of the tabernacle (35)
4. Priests to camp to the east of the tabernacle (36a)
5. Layman coming near the tabernacle to be put to death (36b)

All of this is to *sanctify* the tabernacle, to set it apart, to protect its *holiness*.

D. The total of the sons of Levi (39)

1. Number: 22,000*
2. You may notice my asterisks: 8,600* and 22,000*
3. If you total the individual numbers in our text, you get 22,300!
 - a. Rabbis solved this by saying something like, 300 Levites were themselves firstborn, so not counted (no textual basis)
 - b. There are copies of the LXX where the number for Kohath is 8,300 instead of 8,600
 - 1) This is called the Lucianic recension
 - 2) Some think this is a solution to the problem
 - 3) But Lucian apparently took it on himself to “correct” the original; Jerome viewed his work scornfully

c. Hebrew numbers often problematic and subject to copying errors

Keil & Delitzsch: “possibly in v. 28 we should read שלש for שש (8300 for 8600).”³

Probably the most likely solution, because given what follows, it seems 22,000 Levites is the correct number.

III. The numbering of the firstborn (40-43)

- A. The Lord had Moses number all the firstborn of Israel from a month old and upward (at this point in time only) (40)
- B. The Levites were to be substituted for the firstborn of Israel (41)
- C. The number of the firstborn of Israel was 22,273 (42-43)

IV. The ransom of the firstborn (44-51)

- A. The whole tribe of Levi (22,000) taken “instead of” the firstborn of Israel (44-45)
 - 1. This substitution is a one-time event: settled at setting out from Sinai
 - 2. The substitution includes the animals of Levi for the firstborn animals of Israel (but no count mentioned)

Key concept: substitution

- B. The ransom of the overage: 273 must pay the price of redemption (46-48)
 - 1. The price is five shekels per head
 - “Five shekels was the standard price of a slave in the Late Bronze Age in Egypt and Mesopotamia and amounted to six months’ wages for the average day laborer.”⁴
 - 2. The price to be given to Aaron

³ Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament: The Pentateuch*, trans. James Martin, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 23.

⁴ R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers*, The New American Commentary 3B (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 100.

3. The passage emphasizes by repetition (49-51)

- a. You will pay the price (46-48)
- b. They did pay the price (49-51)

Key concept: there is a price for substitution

In Israel to this day, this ritual occurs (called "*pidyon haben*"⁵)

- After 30 days, the father invites the 'Kohen' to his home
- A kohen is "a supposed descendant of Aaron"⁶
- The child is presented to the kohen, and the father declares his mother is an Israelite and this is her firstborn son
- The kohen asks if the mother has ever had a stillbirth, then asks the father "which he would rather have, the child or the five silver shekels which he must pay"⁷
- The father says he prefers his son, and pays the five shekels
- The kohen lays hands on the head of the son and pronounces the Aaronic blessing (Num 6.24-26)

Num 6.24-26 The LORD bless you, and keep you;²⁵ The LORD make His face shine on you, And be gracious to you;²⁶ The LORD lift up His countenance on you, And give you peace.'

⁵ "*Pidyon Haben*," in *Wikipedia*, November 26, 2023,

https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Pidyon_haben&oldid=1186869478.

⁶ T. Lewis, "Firstborn, Firstling," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr et al. (Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915), 1114.

⁷ "*Pidyon Haben*."

Conclusion:

We have gone through all that to explain the procedure, and add a line to our understanding of the Law of the Firstborn:

1. The concept of substitution undergirds the law of the Firstborn
2. The concept of uncleanness demands a substitution
3. **The substitution involves a price [new line]**

In the introduction, we asked the question, which is often asked about redemption: who is paying the price of the redemption? To whom is it paid?

Historically, some thought God had to buy men back from Satan, a horrible thought, really.

Here is what the law of the firstborn teaches us: the price of the firstborn goes from the **redeemed to God**

How so? The price of redemption for the 273 came from who? From Israel.

To whom was it paid? To Aaron — as the representative of God.

What does that mean for the whole doctrine of redemption?

- The firstborn is mine, says God
- The firstborn are a stand in for the whole family (“all are mine,” is what God is really saying)
- How do we pay the ransom?

The unclean donkey pays with its life.

The unclean man must be kept separate from the tabernacle: he needs a stand in, a substitute, or else he must die.

What can we pay?

Here comes the God-man. He says, “Pay me.” Pay with a coin worth more than five shekels. Pay a price worth infinity.

Pay with the life of the Son of God.