

God Claims the Firstborn

PHBF 3.4.12

TEXT: Ex 13:1-16

Scr. Reading: Ex 13:1-16

Words for Kids: firstborn, devote, Jesus GETTING OUT: Exodus, part 1

[SOS verses: Exodus 15:1-17]

How to remember an event as important as the Exodus? Three ordinances:

- Passover
- The Feast of Unleavened Bread
- The Consecration of the Firstborn

[review the story? 400 yrs of slavery, call of Moses, promise of deliverance, got worse before it got better, plagues – creation reversal, assault on Egypt’s gods, death of firstborn→deliverance]

Each commemorates the Exodus, but each brings out a different aspect:

- Passover – the Lord passed over Israel – “he struck the Egyptians but spared our houses” (Ex 12:26-27) = protection from the wrath of God
- Feast of Unleavened Bread – the Lord brought out Israel’s hosts from Egypt – “what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt” (Ex 13:8) = their hasty, sudden deliverance from their enemy
- Consecration of Firstborn Son – the Lord struck the firstborn of Egypt – “the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.” (Ex 13:15) = God’s ownership of them

The Principle (v 2). “Consecrate to me all the firstborn.”

What does it mean to consecrate? Your version might have the word “sanctify” or “dedicate.” All of these words mean “to make holy, to set apart, to devote to God.” God says, “Devote all your firstborn, child or animal, to me.” It seems like an unusual command. Why devote them? How is this consecration done? When should they do it? The following verses explain...

Why devote the firstborn to God?

The reason given in verse 2 is straightforward: every firstborn thing belongs to Him: “Whatever is first to open the womb... is mine.” Note that this is the reason for, not the result of, consecrating the firstborn to God. The firstborn do not become His when they are consecrated. That reasoning is exactly backward. They are His as soon as they are born—when they “open the womb,” as the text puts it. The parents’ act of consecration simply shows that they recognize God’s prior claim on their firstborn child.

Exodus 34:19 says the same thing: “All that open the womb are mine.” Here in our own text, verse 12 makes the same point: “the males belong to the LORD” (NAS, NIV). NOTE: Unfortunately, the ESV and KJV render this clause with a future tense that makes the verb sound like resultant action: “the males shall be the Lord’s.” But grammatically, the NAS is more literal and more accurate. The verb is not future; in fact, there is no verb supplied at all. It literally reads “Every firstborn that comes from an animal you have: the males to/for the Lord.”

So every firstborn thing belongs to the Lord. He has claimed them for Himself; therefore, He expects His people to honor His claim by devoting all firstborn to Him. Why? Because He created us and therefore owns us. We and everything have belong to Him. When He asks for the firstborn, He is simply claiming part of what is His anyway:

Deuteronomy 32:6 *Do you thus repay the LORD, you foolish and senseless people? Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you?*

Why then just the firstborn? If God created everything and owns everything, why would He ask for only the firstborn of the flock or family? Because the firstborn in a family or the firstfruits of a harvest were considered the best:

Genesis 49:3 *Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, and the firstfruits of my strength, preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power...*

Exodus 23:19 *The best of the firstfruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the LORD your God.*

God, as the first and best, deserves the first and best of everything we produce or receive. This understanding seems to be written on the human heart, and it's as old as the creation itself. The clearest demonstration of this is found in Genesis 4, in the story of Cain and Abel.

Genesis 4:2-5 *Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. ³ In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, ⁴ and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, ⁵ but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.*

Why was Abel's sacrifice accepted and Cain's rejected? Nothing in the context indicates that Cain's bloodless sacrifice was the problem. In fact, the word for "offering" is literally "tribute," which was a bloodless sacrifice (used in Gen 32 of Jacob's present to pacify Esau, "grain offering" in the Law). These offerings were not atonement for sin; they were an acknowledgement of God as their superior and sustainer. Grain was quite acceptable for this purpose. Blood was not the point. Giving God the first and best was the point. Notice again the text, especially the subtle contrast between what Cain brought and what Abel brought. Abel brought the firstborn from his flock; Cain brought merely "an offering." Abel brought the best; Cain brought a token. But God doesn't want a token. He wants the first, the choice selection, the very best.

Hence His demand for the firstborn. He created us, He owns us, and He expects us to acknowledge that by bringing Him the very best of us. It's not that the others in the family or the rest of the harvest doesn't belong to God. But the firstborn or the firstfruits represent the rest, implying that all the others belong to God as well.

What this means in Exodus is that when God took the life of the Egyptian firstborn, He was exercising His creation claim to the firstborn. Yes, the tenth plague was payback. It was God's justice for what the Egyptians had done to Israel's children by drowning them in the Nile. But it was more than retribution. It was entitlement – God was simply taking what was His, exercising (and extending) His right over the firstborn.

I say "extending" because the firstborn were already His by creation. The first reason for His claim on the firstborn was because He created all and therefore owns all. But here in our text, God gives a second reason for His claim on the firstborn:

Exodus 13:15 *When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all the males that first open the womb...*

In Passover, He was extending His rights over the firstborn—"purchasing," so to speak, special entitlement to the firstborn—by using an assault on Egypt's firstborn to effect Israel's liberation. This was the means God used which ultimately persuaded Pharaoh to release Israel. He could have liberated Israel any way He chose—a foreign army, payment in gold which He spontaneously created (like food in the wilderness), beamed them out of Egypt right to Canaan (a la Star Trek). But He chose to do it this way, via the death of Egypt's firstborn sons. Hence, Israel's firstborn sons took on a special significance from this point forward, always silently testifying to the redeeming grace of God.

Numbers 8:17 *All the firstborn among the people of Israel are mine, both of man and of beast. On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I consecrated them for myself,*

Why devote the firstborn to God? Creation and Redemption. These are His two claims on His people: He created them, and He redeemed them. Therefore, He expects them to give Him the first and best of everything.

[APP: How can I not make application here to our own giving?!]

How are the firstborn devoted to God?

Exodus 13:11-12 ¹¹ *When the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your fathers, and shall give it to you, ¹² you shall set apart to the LORD all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the LORD's.*

What does it mean practically for the firstborn to be "the LORD's"? It means that thing would be sacrificed to God. In a word, it means death.

Deuteronomy 15:19-20 ¹⁹ "All the firstborn males that are born of your herd and flock you shall dedicate to the LORD your God. You shall do no work with the firstborn of your herd, nor shear the firstborn of your flock. ²⁰ You shall eat it, you and your household, before the LORD your God year by year at the place that the LORD will choose. (cf. also Dt. 12:17-18; 14:23)

Later, the offering of the firstfruits or firstborn became food for the Levites (Num 18:14-15). The point is, God's claim on the firstborn meant that every firstborn thing had to be consecrated to Him by its own death.

This is what gives meaning to the death of the firstborn of Egypt. When God claimed what was His, it died. This is also what gives meaning to God's request of Abraham in Genesis 22.

Genesis 22:2 "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

Whatever could have motivated a holy, loving God to act this way? Isn't this command morally wrong and personally cruel? The simple fact is that the firstborn belong to Him. This seems to be why Abraham doesn't object. As far as he is concerned, this is entirely within God's rights and character. The Lord is treating Isaac as Abraham's firstborn, and as we've previously seen, God lays claim to the first and best of everything we have. Consecration of the firstborn requires death.

Abraham's attitude toward his son was so different from mine. "You can't ask for my son!" would be my reaction. But in those last two words I would betray my unbiblical thinking: "my son." He is not my son. He is God's, as are the rest of "my" children. As Creator and Redeemer, He has complete rights over us to do with us as He chooses. We have no grounds to object!

Romans 9:20-21 ²⁰ Who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" ²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honored use and another for dishonorable use?

The Israelites learned this lesson through the ritual of the consecration of the firstborn. It was their profound reminder that they were created

and redeemed by God, and thus, they owed Him everything. Did God ask them to put their firstborn children to death? Of course not.

Exodus 13:13 Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem.

The firstborn belong to Him. They are His by right, and if He is to relinquish that right, a substitute must be provided. If His people are going to retain the use or enjoyment of their firstborn, they must buy them back (redeem them) at a price. What price? The same price as consecration—death. Redemption requires the death of a substitute. The redemption of the firstborn can only be accomplished through death.

- In the case of Isaac, God provided a ram. He exercised His right to Abraham's firstborn son by taking a replacement instead of taking the son of the promise.
- In the same way, Israel's firstborn were replaced (redeemed) by the death of the Egyptians. The firstborn of every womb belong to God, but He did not claim what is rightfully His with the Israelite firstborn. Instead, He accepted a substitute—the Egyptians.
- In our text (v 13), a lamb substitutes for a donkey. If not redeemed, the firstborn animal must be destroyed: "break its neck."

In each case, the Lord accepted a replacement in the place of the firstborn son. By redeeming their sons, the Israelites learned that God owned this child, and his life existed at God's pleasure and for His glory.

And here, ultimately, is the point of God's claim on the firstborn: to remind His people that everything they have exists at His pleasure and for His glory. Firstborn sons were consecrated to the Lord by their life, not by their death. Firstborn sons were devoted to God, not by their death, but by a life of work and worship in the tabernacle/temple. The clearest example, of course, is Samuel.

1 Samuel 1:11 Hannah vowed a vow and said, "O LORD of hosts, if you will ... give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life."

And Samuel spent his life in service to God at the tabernacle. Eventually,

the Lord took the tribe of Levi for this purpose, substituting for Israel's firstborn sons and devoting themselves to a life of work and worship in the temple:

Numbers 8:17-18 ¹⁷ For all the firstborn among the people of Israel are mine, both of man and of beast. On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I consecrated them for myself, ¹⁸ and I have taken the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the people of Israel.

But until the Levites were appointed, God claimed Israel's firstborn sons through the death of a substitute and a life of service to Him. This seems to be what is happening when the people receive the Law at Mount Sinai:

Exodus 24:5 Moses sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD.

The "young men" are likely Israel's firstborn sons who have been consecrated to God.

What does this mean for us?

1. Accept Jesus as God's firstborn Son who stands in as your redemption.

Firstborn son of Mary and Joseph (Luke 2:7, 22-23). He is the only Son of His Father, the beloved son on whom God's favor rests.

In the OT, the firstborn son is redeemed by the offer of a substitute. In Christ, the Firstborn Son redeems by offering Himself as a substitute. In Christ, God does not waive His right to the firstborn. He claimed it in full. This time, God's Firstborn Son is not protected. No substitute is offered. Instead, he is treated more like Egypt than Israel, bearing God's wrath. In Christ God claims His firstborn and takes the Son as the redemption price for a whole host of adoptive children, brothers and sisters of the Firstborn.

Romans 8:29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

But it gets better—in Christ we become firstborn children right along

with Him, with full access to the rights and privileges of the Firstborn Son. Hebrews 12:23 calls us "the assembly¹ of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven."

2. Live consecrated to God. Rom 12:1-2

Romans 12:1-2 I appeal to you therefore, brothers,¹ by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.² Do not be conformed to this world,¹ but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.²

3. Give your firstborn—and your everything—to Him.

Abraham's story shows how hard it is to give your firstfruits to God. But what was at stake? Preeminence in the heart. God said to Abraham, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." (Gen 22:12) How will we learn it?

- by embracing this principle in our heart
- by realizing that redemption means reorientation—the redeemed become the property/servants of the redeemer. We are not our own. We are bought with a price. (Heidelberg Catechism, 1 – LOVE it!!)
- by sending our children out for the gospel

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