

# The Law Of The Firstborn

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*"Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity and the excellency of power."*

So says Jacob to his son Reuben in Genesis 49:3. In ancient Israel, the firstborn child in every family was considered to be extra-special. This apparent favoritism within each family was not just a Hebrew tradition, it was also a set of rules given to them by God through Moses.

Frequently throughout the Bible, instructions regarding firstborn children appear in close proximity to instructions for the spring festivals. Why? It seems strange to think that they could be related topics. Is there a connection between firstborn children and the Passover and Unleavened Bread? If so, what is its significance?

## Firstborn Set Apart

Even before the time of the Exodus, the Israelites were accustomed to give special treatment to their firstborn. This is apparent from the book of Genesis in the stories of Esau and Jacob, Rachel and Leah, Reuben and Joseph, and Ephraim and Manasseh. Yet, as He commissions Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt, God identifies Israel as His firstborn: "Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the Lord: Israel is My son, My firstborn. So I say to you, "Let My son go that he may serve Me. But if you refuse to let him go, indeed, I will kill your firstborn"' (Exodus 4:22-23).

God's warning to the Egyptians that He would kill their firstborn was part of the plan from the beginning. It was not, as *The Ten Commandments* movie would have one believe, a last minute decision to which God resorted when all the other plagues failed to achieve His desired effect. In His mercy, God repeats His warning to Pharaoh, giving him plenty of opportunity to repent: "[A]ll the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne, even to the firstborn of the maidservant who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the beasts" (Exodus 11:5).

Throughout Exodus 12, God gives Moses detailed instructions on how to keep the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Then, at the beginning of chapter 13, seemingly out of the blue, God ever-so-briefly introduces the setting apart of the firstborn: "Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Sanctify to Me all the firstborn, whatever opens the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and animal; it is Mine'" (Exodus 13:1-2).

In verses 3 to 10, He continues to give detailed instructions for the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Then, in verse 11, He returns to the subject of the firstborn and furnishes some more thorough rules:

And it shall be, when the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as He swore to you and your fathers, and gives it to you, that you shall set apart to the Lord all that open the womb, that is, every firstling that comes from an animal which you have; the males

shall be the Lord's. But every firstling of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb; and if you will not redeem it, then you shall break its neck. And all the firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. (verses 11-13)

The word *redeem* means "buy back." If a family's firstborn donkey was critical to their livelihood, they could buy it back from God by offering a lamb in its place. Of course, God did not demand that His people offer their firstborn children as literal human sacrifices. They, too, were to be bought back by means of a lamb sacrifice.

So it shall be, when your son asks you in time to come, saying, "What is this?" that you shall say to him, "By strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. And it came to pass, when Pharaoh was stubborn about letting us go, that the Lord killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animal. Therefore I sacrifice to the Lord all males that open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem." It shall be as a sign on your hand and as frontlets between your eyes, for by strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt. (verses 14-16)

This relationship between the firstborn and the Feast of Unleavened Bread is repeated later in Exodus:

The Feast of Unleavened Bread you shall keep. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, in the appointed time of the month of Abib; for in the month of Abib you came out from Egypt. All that open the womb are Mine, and every male firstling among your livestock, whether of ox or sheep. But the firstling of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb. And if you will not redeem him, then you shall break his neck. All the firstborn of your sons you shall redeem. And none shall appear before Me empty-handed. (Exodus 34:18-20)

God gives additional instructions in Exodus 22:29-30:

You shall not delay to offer the first of your ripe produce and your juices [*the outflow of your presses*, RSV]. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to Me. Likewise you shall do with your oxen and your sheep. It shall be with its mother seven days; on the eighth day you shall give it to Me.

Here, God tells the Israelites that their firstborn cattle and sheep must be offered to Him on the eighth day of life. Likewise, the firstborn of the Israelite children—or rather the redeeming sacrificial lambs with which the parents bought back their newborn babies from God—must be offered on the babies' eighth day of life. In the case of a boy, this coincides with the day of his circumcision. The baby was "presented" to God at this time, and, although the parents had redeemed the baby, God still claimed the firstborn as being special to Him and still belonging to Him!

Note that the eighth-day presentation and offering were peculiar to the firstborn and was in addition to the sin offering and burnt offering (pigeons, turtledoves, or lambs) that were required for every other newborn baby and for the ritual purification of the mother: "Speak to the children of Israel, saying, 'If a woman has conceived, and borne a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days. . . . And on the eighth day [he] . . . shall be circumcised'" (Leviticus 12:2-3).

Thus, on the eighth day, a baby boy is to be both circumcised and redeemed. Later, another offering is to be given:

She shall then continue in the blood of her purification thirty-three days. She shall not touch any hollowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary until the days of her purification are fulfilled. But if she bears a female child, then she shall be unclean two weeks as in her customary impurity, and she shall continue in the blood of her purification sixty-six days. When the days of her purification are fulfilled, whether for a son or a daughter, she shall bring to the priest a lamb of the first year as a burnt offering, and a young pigeon or a turtledove as a sin offering, to the door of the tabernacle of meeting. (Leviticus 12:4-6)

Notice, she could not make this offering until the time of her purification ended.

Then [the priest] shall offer it before the Lord, and make atonement for her. And she shall be clean from the flow of her blood. This is the law for her who has borne a male or a female. And if she is not able to bring a lamb, then she may bring two turtledoves or two young pigeons—one as a burnt offering and the other as a sin offering. So the priest shall make atonement for her, and she will be clean. (verses 7-8)

Originally, it appears that God set apart all firstborn children as His to be used in His service. When He instituted the Levitical priesthood, however, He substituted Levite priests for His service in place of the firstborn of the other tribes.

Now behold, I Myself have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the children of Israel. Therefore the Levites shall be mine, because all the firstborn are Mine. On the day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I sanctified to Myself all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast. They shall be Mine: I am the Lord. (Numbers 3:12-13)

Number all the firstborn males of the children of Israel, from a month old and above, and take the number of their names. And you shall take the Levites for Me—I am the Lord—instead of all the firstborn among the children of Israel, and the livestock of the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the livestock of the children of Israel." . . . And all the firstborn males . . . were twenty-two thousand two hundred and seventy-three. (verses 40-41, 43)

Take the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the children of Israel, and the livestock of the Levites instead of their livestock. The Levites shall be Mine: I am the Lord. And for the redemption of the two hundred and seventy-three of the firstborn of the children of Israel, who are more than the number of the Levites, you shall take five shekels for each one individually. . . . And you shall give the money . . . to Aaron and his sons. (verses 45-48)

Also notice Numbers 8:16-18:

For they are wholly given to Me from among the children of Israel; I have taken them for myself instead of all who open the womb, the firstborn of all the children of Israel. For all the firstborn among the children of Israel are Mine, both man and beast; on the

day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I sanctified them to Myself. I have taken the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the children of Israel.

Additional instruction appears in Numbers 18:15:

Everything that first opens the womb of all flesh, which they bring to the Lord, whether man or beast, shall be yours [the Levitical priesthood's]; nevertheless the firstborn of man you shall surely redeem, and the firstborn of unclean animals you shall redeem.

It appears that, even after the institution of the Levitical priesthood, God still claimed all the firstborn of Israel as His own and as special to Him. Later, after the Jews' return from captivity in Babylon, they reinstated ordinances "to bring the firstborn of our sons and our cattle, as it is written in the Law, and the firstlings of our herds and our flocks, to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God" (Nehemiah 10:36).

### **Fulfilling the Law**

Many years passed in the land of Israel. Much history transpired, and a great many things changed. Even though the Levitical priesthood was becoming increasingly corrupt, God's rules regarding the firstborn were still upheld among the remnant of the Jews. Now Jesus Christ, who had just come into the world as a firstborn—both of His heavenly Father and of His physical mother, Mary—was about to begin a life of obedience to His own laws:

And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. . . . And when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the Child, His name was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb. (Luke 2:7, 21)

On Jesus' eighth day of life, He was circumcised, and, as a firstborn, He was dedicated to God's service. It is interesting that Luke makes no mention of Mary and Joseph offering a lamb as a redeeming sacrifice, though he does record the sin and burnt offerings that they presented later on the fortieth day of His human life:

Now when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every male who opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, "A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." (Luke 2:22-24)

This omission appears to be because:

1. Jesus Himself was to become the redeeming sacrifice to which all other redeeming sacrifices had pointed since Moses' time;
2. His physical life was now completely dedicated to God, as had been pictured by all the other firstborn since Moses' time; and
3. He was not to be redeemed from a life of total service to God, neither by the offering of a lamb nor by the service of the now corrupt Levitical priesthood. The imperfect

Levitical priesthood, which had pictured His perfect life of service since Moses' day, was soon to be set aside, and His own priesthood (after the order of Melchizedek; see Hebrews 6:20) would be reinstated.

The offering of the two turtledoves or pigeons refers to the fortieth-day purification, not to the fact that Jesus was the firstborn. Again, this purification offering was required for all births, not just for the firstborn. Luke adds in Luke 2:27: "And when the parents brought in[to the Temple] the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law . . ." (Luke 2:27).

This "custom of the law" refers specifically to the fortieth-day purification offering at the Temple. This is proven by both Mary and Joseph being in attendance, a thing she could not do if she were still unclean. Mary was ceremonially unclean on Jesus' eighth day of life, when the firstborn and circumcision ceremonies were performed *at home*, not at the Temple (see Luke 1:57-59 regarding the circumcision of John the Baptist). Ceremonial purity was not necessary for these latter rituals.

### **Significance to the Church**

All these sacrifices and offerings were for Old Testament Israel. What is their significance to the people of God's church today?

This question actually has two answers, two explanations for the symbolism of the firstborn and its connection to the spring festivals. To find these answers, we need to turn back to the original instructions in Exodus 13. Like the son in verse 14, we ask, "What is this? What do these rules about the firstborn mean?"

God's says, "[Y]ou shall set apart to the Lord all that open the womb, that is, every firstling that comes from an animal which you have; the males shall be the Lord's" (verse 12). The firstborn of all clean, male animals (cattle, sheep, goats, etc.) were God's, and they were to be sacrificed to Him. Amazingly, these animals appear to represent the Egyptian firstborn, and thus represent a sin offering for us.

"And all the firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem" (Exodus 13:13). The Israelites were to redeem or "buy back" the firstborn of their children by offering a lamb in its place. These firstborn children represent the people of God's church today. The redeeming lamb represents Jesus Christ.

Notice God's immediate answer to the curious Israelite child's question in verse 14: ". . . you shall say to him, 'By strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.'" What does this mean to us? The Old Testament answer is only symbolic of its New Testament principle. God has brought the people of His church out of this sinful "world held captive." Verse 15 now takes on new meaning:

And it came to pass, when Pharaoh was stubborn about letting us go, that the Lord killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animal. Therefore I sacrifice to the Lord all males that open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.

Remember, the firstborn animals represent the Egyptian firstborn. God released Pharaoh's strong grip on Israel—His Old Testament firstborn—by killing Egypt's firstborn on that first Passover night.

Likewise, God released Satan's grip on the people of His church—His New Testament firstborn—by allowing His Firstborn Son, Jesus Christ, to be killed as our Passover (I Corinthians 5:7). We are then free to escape this world and our sins, just as Israel left Egypt on the first day of Unleavened Bread (Exodus 12:37-42).

Can the Egyptian firstborn symbolize our Savior, the slain Lamb of God? Though it seems an unworthy comparison, God inspired the apostle Paul to write that Jesus allowed Himself to be degraded to the bottom of the barrel—to become the lowest of the low—to personify a curse and sin itself. Notice Galatians 3:13-14: "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'), . . . that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith."

The redemption or "buyback" of the Israelite human firstborn is a reminder of the miraculous preservation of their firstborn on the first Passover night. It also looks forward to the church's redemption by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who became sin like the lambs that represented Egypt and the Egyptian firstborn. Paul says in II Corinthians 5:21, "For He [the Father] made Him who knew no sin [Jesus Christ] to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

Because Jesus willingly became sin for us, He has become our Firstborn Elder Brother:

- For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. (Romans 8:29)
- He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. . . . And He is the head of the body, the church; who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. (Colossians 1:15, 18)
- But when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says, "Let all the angels of God worship him." (Hebrews 1:6)
- . . . and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood. . . . (Revelation 1:5)

Finally, let us look at Hebrews 12:22 (RSV): "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering". This translation refers to these angels being "in festal gathering," just as we do during the spring holy days.

". . . to the assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect" (verse 23). We are part of God's church of the firstborn, God's special New Testament firstborn children! We should never let it slip our minds, especially after our pre-Passover self-examinations, that we occupy a unique and precious position before God!

We are the apple of His eye, just as our children are to us. He looks upon us, not as we are, but as what we can become:

These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb. And in their mouth was found no guile, for they are without fault before the throne of God. (Revelation 14:4-5)

This is our potential and what we are striving to attain. Our responsibility as regenerated children of God is to remain true and dedicated in lifelong service to God as members of the church of the firstborn!