

Exodus 13:1-16

Introduction

For the past six weeks, we've been in "Act II" of this drama of redemption. Remember there was the introductory act of the staff turned into a serpent. Then there was the first main act which consisted of the nine plagues, divided into three sets of three. And then Act II, which is an entire act all wrapped up in a single plague – the tenth plague. The final "Act III" will be the crossing of the Red Sea, and the Israelites' song of celebration and praise.

Now as we've seen, the 10th plague and Israel's deliverance from Egypt here in "Act 2" is *interwoven* with a number of other massively important themes – the Feast of Cover-over, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and as we're about to see this morning, the consecration of the firstborn. One of the ways this *interweaving* of all these themes is accomplished is with the building of "sandwiches." This morning, we come to the 3rd sandwich. (See chart on page 8) The theme of the two bookends, or the two slices of bread in this sandwich, is the consecration to the Lord of all the firstborn in Israel. This consecration of the firstborn can only be rightly understood in light of Israel's exodus from Egypt, and so sandwiched between the two bookends (or slices of bread) we have an emphasis on remembering the exodus. And then sandwiched in between this emphasis on remembering, we have a short review of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

I. Exodus 13:1–2¹ — The LORD said to Moses, "Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine."

If the removing of leaven from the houses for the Feast emphasizes the setting apart *from*, then this *consecration* emphasizes more of the setting apart *unto*. It's a dedication or the devotion of something to be wholly the Lord's – for His exclusive use and at His complete disposal. In the book of Numbers, this consecration is described as an *offering up* of *devoted things* to the Lord. (18:14-15) Later on in Exodus the Lord will speak of the consecrated firstborn being *given* to Him. (22:29; cf. *dedicate* in Deut. 15:19) And so here in chapter thirteen, we might emphasize these words: "The Lord said to Moses, 'Consecrate *to me* all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is *mine*.'"

So now the question is, what does this "consecration" actually look like and mean in real life – both for man and for beast? Let's skip ahead now to our second slice of bread in the sandwich.

II. Exodus 13:11–13a, 15b — "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, 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. Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck." ... "Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all the males [of animals] that first open the womb."

¹ Other Scriptures on the consecration of the firstborn not given careful attention here are these: Exodus 22:29–30; Exodus 34:19–20; Leviticus 27:26–27; Deuteronomy 15:19–23

We see again that the emphasis here is not so much on setting apart *from* (although that's assumed in "setting *apart*"), but the setting apart *unto*. "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**." ... "Therefore I sacrifice **to the Lord**..." Here again is the "offering up" or the "giving" of something to be wholly the Lord's – for His exclusive use and at His complete disposal.

And what does that mean in real life? Well, there's no question about what it means for the firstborn of animals. It means that they are to be sacrificially put to death, and offered up to God on the altar. The only exception here is a donkey, or any other unclean animal that's raised not for its meat, but only as a beast of burden. This animal was not to be sacrificed on the Lord's altar. Instead, a lamb (that was not a firstborn), was to be offered up in its place. In other words, if the donkey was "redeemed" with the lamb, then the donkey could continue to be used by its owner for as long as it lived. But if the owner refused to redeem the donkey by offering up to the Lord a lamb in its place, then at the least he must kill the donkey. Breaking the donkey's neck probably refers to some form of humane death² that avoided any hint of *sacrifice* – since a donkey was never to be offered on the Lord's altar. So the point is: If a man won't redeem his donkey with a lamb, then he's not allowed to get any use or benefit from that donkey because it is the Lord's by divine right – it is exclusively and wholly the Lord's.

But where did all this come from? What does it all mean? Let's look at verses 14-15.

III. Exodus 13:14–15 — "And when in time to come your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him, 'By a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. For 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 [of animals] that first open the womb.'"

When Yahweh Himself "personally" entered into the land of Egypt, He exercised His sovereign, irrevocable rights to and over *all* of His creation by killing the firstborn of every animal. The point here isn't that Yahweh had any less of a right to the second and third born of the animals. The Lord says in Psalm fifty:

✓ Psalm 50:10–12 — Every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine.

So here in Exodus, God has clearly demonstrated His rights *to all* by killing those that are made to **stand for** and **represent** all the rest. And it's **because** the Lord killed all the firstborn of animals in the 10th plague, when He brought the Israelites out of Egypt, that **therefore** the Israelites are now to offer up to the Lord all the firstborn of their own animals on the altar.

So we know what it meant for an Israelite to consecrate to the Lord the firstborn of his animals. But what about the firstborn of his sons? "Consecrate to me **all** the firstborn. **Whatever** is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, **both of man** and of beast, is mine."

² Cf. Motyer

IV. Exodus 13:13, 15 — “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*” ... “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, *but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.*”

When Yahweh Himself “personally” entered into the land of Egypt, He exercised His sovereign, irrevocable rights to and over His creation by *also* killing all the firstborn of man. And once again, just like with the animals, the point isn’t that Yahweh had any less of a right to the second and third born children. Instead, God has demonstrated His rights *to all* by killing those that are made to *stand for* and *represent* all the rest.

Now let’s remember the logic in the case of the firstborn animals. *Since* the Lord killed all the firstborn of the Egyptian’s animals in the 10th plague, *that’s why* the Israelites are to offer up to the Lord all the firstborn of their animals on the altar. So what will this mean when it comes to the Israelites’ firstborn sons? Now that’s a sobering and a fearful thought, and we’re wrong if even for a moment we take anything at all for granted.

Here’s where we learn the *difference* between the death of the firstborn in Egypt, and the consecration of the firstborn in Israel. Yes, God killed all the firstborn sons in Egypt, and that was according to the good pleasure of His holy will. (cf. Rom. 9:14-23) But there was no secret delight in this. There was no “pleasing aroma.” The Lord says in Ezekiel chapter eighteen, “I have *no pleasure* in the death of anyone,” (18:32) and even more specifically in Ezekiel thirty-three, “I have *no pleasure* in the death of the wicked.” (33:11; cf. 18:23) But here in the consecration of the firstborn, we have something that’s intended to bring Him *delight* – something that’s intended to be acceptable and pleasing in His sight. We read in Numbers:

- ✓ Numbers 18:17 — The firstborn of a cow, or the firstborn of a sheep, or the firstborn of a goat... are holy. You shall sprinkle their blood on the altar and shall burn their fat as a food offering, with a pleasing aroma to the LORD.

When God was redeeming His people in Egypt, He killed all the firstborn of animals as *a sign of judgment*, and of His *sovereign claims over all creation*. So now God commands His redeemed people to offer up to Him on the altar all the firstborn of the animals as *a pleasing aroma* – willingly acknowledging His *sovereign claims over all creation*, which He displayed in their redemption. Can you see, here, both the intimate connection, and the essential difference?

So now we ask again, What about the firstborn of man? What about those who, unlike the animals, have been created in the image and the likeness of God? Yes, God may kill all the firstborn sons in Egypt as a sign of His judgment and His sovereign claims over all creation. But when it comes to a firstborn son being *offered up* to Him as a willing acknowledgment of His sovereign claims over all creation, there’s only *one* possible way that such an “*offering*” can actually be *pleasing* to Him. And what way is this?

Remember the Lord’s command: “Every firstborn of man among your sons *you shall redeem.*”

Notice that *God* isn't doing the redeeming here – rather, we have a father redeeming his son. But what is this son being redeemed *from*? He's not being redeemed from the Lord(!), but only from one specific *way* of being offered to the Lord – the way of death on the altar. And so the lesson that this redemption price teaches is that however the firstborn son is to be offered up to the Lord, it must be in some sense the substitute – and therefore somehow the *equivalent* – of his being offered up to the Lord in death, like the firstborn animal being offered up on the altar. What we learn from the redemption and consecration of the firstborn son is that he is to be devoted *wholly* to the Lord—for His *exclusive* use and at His *complete* disposal—not in death, but in *life*.

So what was this offering up in life actually supposed to look like?³ We read something rather interesting in Exodus chapter twenty-four:

- ✓ Exodus 24:4-5 — [Moses] rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain... And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD.

Who were these “young men” who were functioning as priests for the people of Israel? It seems likely that they were consecrated firstborn sons. But if so, that's soon to change. Listen to these verses in Numbers chapter eight. The Lord said to Moses:

- ✓ Numbers 8:9-11, 14-19 (cf. Exod. 32:26-29) — You shall bring the Levites before the tent of meeting and assemble the whole congregation of the people of Israel. When you bring the Levites before the LORD, **the people of Israel shall lay their hands on the Levites**, and Aaron shall **offer the Levites** before the LORD as a wave offering **from the people of Israel, that they may do the service of the LORD...** Thus you shall separate the Levites from among the people of Israel, and **the Levites shall be mine**. And after that the Levites shall go in to **serve at the tent of meeting...** For they are **wholly given** to me from among the people of Israel. **Instead of all who open the womb, the firstborn of all the people of Israel, I have taken them for myself**. 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, and **I have taken the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the people of Israel**. And I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and his sons from among the people of Israel, **to do the service for [in the place of; Ashley] the people of Israel** at the tent of meeting.”

So what would all this have meant for you if you were a firstborn son living in Israel, or if you were an Israelite who had a firstborn son? When the Levites were *first* consecrated to the Lord, the number of the Levites was matched with the number of the firstborn in Israel. There were 273 *more* firstborn than Levites of serving age. So for these 273 “extra” firstborn, a “redemption price” was set at five shekels per person which was to be given to Aaron and his sons, the priests, just as the Levites had also been given to Aaron and his sons. (cf. Numbers 3:39-51) *After* this

³ We read in verses 11-12: “*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, you shall set apart to the LORD all that first opens the womb.” Apparently, there was some sense in which this consecration and redemption of the firstborn didn't go fully into effect until Israel arrived in the Promised Land. (cf. Stuart)

first “transaction” when the Levites were *first* officially consecrated to the Lord, we assume that all future generations of firstborn still had to be redeemed by the payment of the five shekel redemption price. So later on, in Numbers chapter eighteen, the Lord says this to Aaron, the High Priest:

- ✓ Numbers 18:14–18 — Every devoted thing in Israel shall be yours. Everything that opens the womb of all flesh, **whether man or beast, which they offer to the LORD**, shall be yours. Nevertheless, **the firstborn of man you shall redeem...** And their redemption price (at a month old you shall redeem them) you shall fix at five shekels in silver.

So even *after* the Levites had taken the place of the firstborn, all the firstborn in Israel were still to be “offered” to the Lord. Almost a thousand years later, after their return from exile, we hear the people of Israel renewing their commitment to the Lord with these words:

- ✓ Nehemiah 10:35–36 — We obligate ourselves... to bring to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God, the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, as it is written in the Law.

So we might picture the scene like this: A Jewish couple welcomes into their home their firstborn son. But they know that this baby boy is not by any rights their own. Just like the firstborn of all their animals, so their firstborn son is to be given wholly to the Lord. But *unlike* the firstborn of the animals, their firstborn son must be wholly offered up to the Lord not in death on the altar, but in a life set apart for Yahweh’s *exclusive* use – a consecration in life that was to be understood as the equivalent to a firstborn animal’s consecration in death. And so when their baby boy is a month old, they make the journey to the tabernacle to pay the redemption price for their son of five shekels of silver.⁴ But having paid the redemption price, and having offered up their firstborn to the Lord, we might imagine the priest blessing them, and then reminding them that the Lord had already received from His people their offering of the Levites to serve in the place of their firstborn sons. And so this couple returns home *with* their son, *knowing* that day and night at the Tabernacle, the Levites are constantly, and unceasingly on duty, wholly devoted to the service of the Lord. (cf. 2 Chron. 8:14; 2 Chron. 31:16) And knowing, too, that since their firstborn son actually *stood for* and *represented all*, therefore the Levites must also have been offered up to the Lord as **their own representative**. Remember Exodus chapter four:

- ✓ Exodus 4:22–23 (cf. 19:5-6) — Thus says the LORD, **Israel is my firstborn son**, and I say to you [Pharaoh], “Let my son go **that he may serve me.**”

Conclusion

I wonder how much of this has felt foreign and strange to us. And if it has, I wonder how much of the reason is because we’ve not grasped the actual, full extent of God’s sovereign claim upon our lives. When God was redeeming His people in Egypt, He **killed** all the firstborn of man not only as **a sign of judgment**, and also as a sign of the actual, full extent of His **absolute and sovereign claims** over all human beings. So *after* God had redeemed His people, He commanded them to offer up to Him all the firstborn of their sons not in death on the altar but in life –

⁴ Wenham suggests that five shekels of silver might have been the equivalent of six months wages.

willingly acknowledging His *sovereign claims over all mankind*. Here was a life that was to be offered up *wholly* to the Lord – for His exclusive use and to be always at His complete disposal. Here was a consecration in life that through the payment of a redemption price was to be understood as the *equivalent* of a firstborn animal being offered up to the Lord in death.

Oh, how total and absolute are the claims of God upon you and me! The firstborn sons in Israel were only meant to be a picture of the true and actual reality of God’s claims on *all* – even on all of *us*. And so as we see the Levites—who were offered up in place of the firstborn—on duty day and night, serving in the house of the Lord, we see a very vivid picture of the only kind of life that can ever be acceptable and pleasing to the Lord. (1 Chron. 9:33; Psalm 134:1) There is no room for half-heartedness here. There is no room for compartmentalizing our life—our time, our money, our words and actions, our thoughts—into the sacred and the mundane, or the Christian and the secular. We are to be so wholly offered up to the Lord in life as to be the equivalent of those firstborn animals that were offered up to the Lord in *death* on the altar. We are to be so wholly offered up to the Lord in life as to be the equivalent of the Levites, who were constantly on duty, day and night, serving and working in the house of the Lord.

Have we been treating God casually, as though somehow He might require from us anything less than *all* of who we *are* 100% of the time? Listen again to what the Lord said in Exodus thirteen:

- ✓ Exodus 13:14–15 — And when in time to come your son asks you, “What does this mean?” you shall say to him, “By a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. For 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, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.”

And so we see that these two realities – salvation and consecration – can never be separated. If God does not claim His holy and irrevocable rights in judgment and death, as He did in Egypt, then He always and without fail claims them in redemption and consecration.

Are you redeemed? Are you living as one consecrated, and wholly offered up to the Lord? What will this mean for your relationships? What will this mean for your priorities? What will this mean for your choices – *today*? What will this mean for your daily living of all of life from the time you wake up in the morning to the time you lay down again at night?

But lest any of this should begin to feel like a burden hard to bear, let’s never forget that our consecration flows from our redemption – and never the other way around. If He has redeemed us, then we know that our consecration is also guaranteed as the work of His grace in us. In the Feast of the Cover-over lamb we see our salvation and redemption. In the Feast of Unleavened Bread we see our calling *as a saved and redeemed people* to be wholly set apart *from* all that is unholy and profane. And now in the consecration of the firstborn, we see our calling *as a saved and redeemed people* to be wholly set apart *unto* the Lord. In Luke chapter two, we read:

- ✓ Luke 2:7 — And [Mary] gave birth *to her firstborn son* and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

And then in verses 22-24:

- ✓ Luke 2:22-24 — [Joseph and Mary] brought [the baby, Jesus] up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”).

Jesus was the only firstborn son who truly lived that life that was in every way, wholly consecrated to the Lord. And so He qualified to be our unblemished Cover-over Lamb. And now *we* can say with Paul:

- ✓ Galatians 2:20 — I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Now maybe we can more fully understand and even rejoice in these familiar words:

- ✓ Romans 12:1-2 — I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, 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.

Let me close with the first question and answer from the Heidelberg Catechism:

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ, who with his precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and redeemed me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must work together for my salvation. Wherefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready henceforth to live unto him.

PART III – The 3rd “Sandwich”

Exodus 13:1-2 – Consecration of the FIRSTBORN

1 The LORD said to Moses, **2** “Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine.”

Exodus 13:3a – Remember the EXODUS

3 Then Moses said to the people, “Remember this day in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of slavery, for by a strong hand the LORD brought you out from this place.

Exodus 13b-7 – UNLEAVENED BREAD

No leavened bread shall be eaten. **4** Today, in the month of Abib, you are going out. **5** And when the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which he swore to your fathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you shall keep this service in this month. **6** Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a feast to the LORD. **7** Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days; no leavened bread shall be seen with you, and no leaven shall be seen with you in all your territory.

Exodus 13:8-10 – Remember the EXODUS

8 You shall tell your son on that day, ‘It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt.’ **9** And it shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes... For with a strong hand the LORD has brought you out of Egypt.

Exodus 13:11-13 – Consecration of the FIRSTBORN

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. **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.