

Text: Exod. 13:1-16

Title: "The Lord's Firstborn"

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Introduction: I am the firstborn son of Jack and Carolyn Hobi, so I read passages like ours about the term *firstborn* with a special interest, and I have come to the conclusion that in our day it fails to refer to the significant position in the family, which it referred to in Bible times.

For example, I tried to claim the right of the firstborn on my last trip to South Carolina. It so happened that my younger brother, Kent, was there. He had gotten there a few days earlier and had claimed the only guest bedroom that my dad has available for us when we visit his house. When there is more than one who must bed down for the night, someone must be on the couch.

Even before I arrived I anticipated the problem this might create for my ability to enjoy a sound night of sleep, so I reminded my dad and brother that I was the firstborn, arguing unsuccessfully that given my position in the family, Kent should give up his bed and sleep on the couch so that I could be in the guest bedroom. Kent, of course, refused with my dad's full support, and instead they reminded me of that wonderful biblical truth that I often forget, "The first shall be last, and the last shall be first."

So perhaps it is understandable if today, as we read about the firstborn in Exod. 13:1-16, we fail to fully grasp the significance of what the Lord is establishing in this passage. It is not an insignificant thing in the Bible to be the firstborn. I want us to see this fact from three other Bible passages as we begin this morning:

(1) Col. 1:15-16, “[Jesus Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: for by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him and for him.”

Someone made all that was created, and He did so for Himself, and because that is who He is, He is the firstborn of all creation. Clearly, to be the firstborn is no small matter.

In Revelation 5 the Apostle John sees a vision of the title-deed to the universe, a scroll with seven seals. He weeps as it seems for a moment that no one is worthy to claim the deed as His own inheritance. Then He sees the Lamb-having-been-slain take the scroll, and when He does heaven explodes with praise for Him in verses 12-14, “saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever. And the four beasts said, Amen. And the four and twenty elders fell down and worshipped him that liveth for ever and ever.”

Clearly, the title *firstborn* is an important label, and amazingly it happens to be one that Jesus shares with us when we trust Him as our Lord and Savior. Our other two passages tell us that.

(2) First, the Lord referred to the nation of Israel as his firstborn (Exod. 4:22, “And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the Lord, Israel is my son, even my firstborn”); and then He does so with reference to His church as well

(Heb. 12:22-23, “but ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn [plural], which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect”).

And so as Israel leaves Egypt after 430 years of slavery, the Lord their redeemer wants them to understand that they are not slaves anymore. Now they are sons, and not only sons, but firstborn sons, in line to receive the inheritance God had promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He wants them not only to understand this, but also to remember who it is that had made it so (v. 16).

Let’s understand and remember what He has done ourselves this morning by learning four things about the blessings that belong to God’s firstborn children from Exodus 13.

I. The Lord’s firstborn are blessed with holiness (vv. 1-4).

Illustration: I mentioned that I am the firstborn of Jack and Carolyn Hobi. I was blessed to be born to a couple who raised me as Christian parents. I have a mom and dad who explained to me that when I was born, they gave me to the Lord.

I shared last Mother’s Day a poem my mom adopted from the mother of General MacArthur. I have it in her handwriting framed on my office wall as a reminder to me of whom I belong to. Mom modified the poem to speak of the way that she and dad had given me to the Lord, and so it ends this way: “Be yours then the task, if task it shall be/To force the proud world to do homage to me,/Be sure it will say when its verdict you’ve won,/’He reaped as He sowed, Lo! This is His son.”

Application: You and I who have trusted Christ as our Savior are not the firstborn of just anyone. We are the firstborn of the holy God of heaven. I am His son, and it is the first blessing of our position as God's firstborn that we are sanctified as belonging to Him in holiness.

Paul put it this way: "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

In our passage the Lord says the same thing in three simple words: "You are mine" (v. 2b). "Once you were Egypt's, but now you are mine." And then in verse 3, He reminds them how that happened: "by strength of hand the Lord brought you out from this place." That truth is the foundation for any good thing that comes from the life of a believer.

C. H. McIntosh explains, "All our doings must be 'because of that which the Lord hath done,' and not in order to get anything from Him"; "Hence, therefore, everything done in order to get life is a dead work, inasmuch as it is done without life – the life of Christ, the only true life, the only source from whence good works can flow" (pp. 164, 165; see Heb. 9:14).

As God's firstborn children, we are blessed with the holiness of those who belong to Him, all because of what He has done. It is by grace through faith that we are saved, not by works, nor by our own natural righteousness. By nature we are slaves of Egypt. By the Lord's mighty hand, we are His holy firstborn. Do we aspire to live holy lives in response?

II. The Lord's firstborn are blessed with a personal relationship (vv. 5-16, "you" singular, and "I/me").

Illustration: One of the nice things about being the firstborn of Jack and Carolyn Hobi is that it is really a unique relationship that I have been blessed with, which I do not really have to share with my other siblings. Being the oldest is not always the easiest thing to be, but it does make me unique in a way my brother and sisters are not.

Application: I am struck by the importance of a simple detail in this passage about what it means to be God's firstborn. Prior to verse 4, all the personal pronouns and verbs are plural in form. Beginning in verse 5, they all become singular. Our KJV does the best job among English translations of preserving that feature of the text (v. 3: "*ye* came out"; v. 5 "when the Lord shall bring *thee* in to the land"). Verse 8 is a personal profession of a father's faith communicated to his own son.

God's firstborn have an individual, personal, one-on-one relationship with Him as their Father. Once they used to say, "That is their God." Then they found themselves saying, "That is our God." But now each one comes to the place of salvation, wherein he finally says: "That is my God."

Hear Paul again: "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live. Yet not I, but Christ liveth in me. And the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." He did it for them; He did it for us; but it saves us when we know how to say by faith, "He did it for me."

III. The Lord's firstborn are blessed with an inheritance to pass on (v. 5-12).

Illustration: Maureen and I named our firstborn son *Brandon* because the book of names we had told us that it meant *beacon on a hill*. What Jack and Carolyn did for me, to sanctify me as belonging from infancy to the Lord, Maureen and I did with our children, beginning with our firstborn. We named Kara after my mom, and Kent after my brother, because we want their lives to serve the Lord like those lives.

Application: The firstborn children of God possess a family inheritance that they want to see passed from one generation to the next. It is an inheritance, the Scripture tells us, that is incorruptible and undefiled and that never fades away because it is reserved in heaven for us (1 Pet. 1:4). No prodigal can waste away this inheritance – it is indestructible. But it must still be treasured and passed from fathers to sons. Fathers are mentioned in verse 5 and sons in verse 8.

The point of the ceremonial instructions of the Passover and the rite of the firstborn is summarized in verse 9. What God did for the fathers, he did for us, and he did for our sons. We want the generations who follow us to remember this. It is a truth that affects the forehead or the mind, the hand or the work, and the mouth or the tongue. What we say to our sons must be backed up by what we believe with our minds and what we are willing to work with our hands. In the rites of ceremony and worship, mind and hand and mouth signify God's truth to those who must follow us. May we not be the last generation to know the truth about what God's mighty hand has done for His people because we failed to pass it on.

IV. The Lord's firstborn are blessed with redemption (vv. 13-16).

Application: In Israel there were two kinds of animals, clean animals and unclean animals. The donkey was one of the unclean animals, and it is used here as a representative for

the category to say that firstborn baby donkeys do not have to be sacrificed, because they are unclean. Instead, a clean animal, a little lamb, should be substituted. What purpose does the Lord have in mind for these two categories of animals and this instruction?

The answer is simply that there have been only two kinds of people – on the one hand the clean, the perfect sinless Son of God, Jesus Christ; and on the other the unclean, everyone else including you and me, defiled by our sinful condition.

When it comes to the human race, we are on the donkey side of this equation, and Christ alone is the spotless lamb. Clean animals could be sacrificed as pictures of Him because they were designated clean. Unclean animals had the better blessing, though. They were redeemed by a clean substitute.

Every firstborn who survived the 10th plague in Egypt did so only because a substitute was killed in his place – the Passover Lamb. When we put our trust in Calvary's Lamb, we become the firstborn who survive God's just and eternal judgment on our sin because we too have a Substitute whose blood was shed for us. Verse 15 tells us how you and I must be saved this morning: "all the firstborn of my children I redeem." He does so with His own blood as our Lamb when we simply ask Him to do so by faith. "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:21).

Conclusion: I have been reading Genesis in my devotions again, and recently I came upon the passage where Esau sells his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of soup. The Bible says he despised his birthright. The father's blessing was part of the birthright that Esau sold that day, but still he thought he could change the terms of the agreement, claim to be Isaac's firstborn, and still receive that blessing. He lost everything. The rite of the firstborn must not be despised.

Perhaps you are living a life that knows little of the blessings of God's firstborn – little holiness, little personal relationship with the Lord, little appreciation for the need to pass along our inheritance. If so, it may be that you know very little of the blessing of redemption.

Was Esau a saved man? Bible readers have no assurance of this. What assurance do Bible readers have of your salvation? What assurance do you have? Do you care more than Esau for the blessings of your birthright as God's firstborn?

“A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction – the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

–David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*