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217 - Sanctification Of The Firstborn

1. Introduction

As instructions were given to Moses in preparation for the final plague on Egypt, a number of elements are set apart. These elements would become familiar to the Hebrews and students of the Bible as they have spiritual significance during the time governed by the Law of Moses and later. In this lesson we'll explore **The Sanctification Of The Firstborn** and the figurative elements involved.

2. The firstborn

A common understanding in families around the world is the importance of a firstborn child. In the beginning, firstborn males were significant as they would inherit the role of leadership in the families of the patriarchs. The firstborn child represents the continuation of the parents, their name and memory of their lives. The final plague on Egypt was to be the death of the firstborn which dealt a blow to the future of the culture. God told Moses that there would be such a cry in the land that had not been before or after this event. The judgment of God was executed against an arrogant nation that had oppressed the Hebrews for four generations out of fear turned to hatred. Attempts at controlling the population by killing male children did little to stop the growth of the slave population. The plague would not only affect humans but also the Egyptian's animals as well. When it was done the power of Egypt, already devastated by nine calamities, would be impaired for years to come.

In contrast to the death of the firstborn of Egypt, God gave instructions for the sanctification of the firstborn of the Hebrews, who would be preserved during the plague. The Passover represents the salvation of Israel's firstborn and therefore their future but in that salvation God made a distinction that foreshadowed the coming of the Messiah and his role in the ultimate fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham. In this lesson we'll discuss:

1. Instructions given to Moses at the time of the Passover
2. The treatment of the firstborn in the Law given at Sinai
3. Christ's identity as the firstborn of God, and
4. We'll discuss the idea of the firstborn as it applies to God and Christ

Let's take a look at each of these.

3. Instructions given to Moses at the time of the Passover

We can immediately get a sense of contrast between the Egyptians and the Hebrews as God gives instructions to Moses in preparation for the Passover. "***And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Sanctify unto me all the firstborn, whatsoever openeth the womb among the***

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children of Israel, both of man and of beast: it is mine.” (Ex 13.1-2). So, the final plague is to take the firstborn of Egypt while the firstborn of the Hebrews will be spared. We’ve covered the lamb’s blood used to mark their houses so that God would pass over their dwellings and spare them from the plague. Initially we might think that compliance with these directives will be enough. But there’s another stipulation; the firstborn of man and animals would not only be saved from death but they would be sanctified as belonging to the Lord. And there’s more that needs to be done.

The firstborn of humans and animals were therefore sacred, sanctified as belonging to the Lord. God provides additional conditions that needed to be met. God states, *“And it shall be when the Lord shall bring thee into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore unto thee and to thy fathers, and shall give it thee, That thou shalt set apart unto the Lord all that openeth the matrix, and every firstling that cometh of a beast which thou hast; the males shall be the Lord's. And every firstling of an ass thou shalt redeem with a lamb; and if thou wilt not redeem it, then thou shalt break his neck: and all the firstborn of man among thy children shalt thou redeem.” (Ex 13.11-13).* As we read these instructions the meaning may escape us but additional information is provided that makes the command clearer. In the following verses we have an explanation of the effect this will have.

“And it shall be when thy son asketh thee in time to come, saying, What is this? that thou shalt say unto him, By strength of hand the Lord brought us out from Egypt, from the house of bondage: And it came to pass, when Pharaoh would hardly let us go, that the Lord slew all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man, and the firstborn of beast: therefore I sacrifice to the Lord all that openeth the matrix, being males; but all the firstborn of my children I redeem. And it shall be for a token upon thine hand, and for frontlets between thine eyes: for by strength of hand the Lord brought us forth out of Egypt.” (Ex 13.14-16).

The firstborn were saved by God who provided the means for them to be spared from the plague. As they went forward and later settled in the land of Canaan they would be reminded of the terrible price that bought their freedom. The firstborn themselves would be reminded of the blessing they had received. Over time they would see their existence as dependent on the goodness of God and by offering the redemption would see the firstborn as a reminder of what God did for them and how much they owed the Lord for their land and nation. The redemption for animals was a lamb but as the Law is refined and more detail given we find another figurative element emerge.

4. The treatment of the firstborn in the Law given at Sinai

As the Tabernacle is setup and dedicated final elements of the Law are put in place as the people and their worship to God is structured. The firstborn of animals were to be redeemed with

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a lamb but God creates an exception for firstborn humans. This exception involved an exchange affecting the firstborn and the tribe of Levi.

In the inheritance that was given to the tribes of Israel one tribe was excluded from a physical portion. The Levites were to be the keepers of the holy things in the Tabernacle. They would function as teachers of the Law and serve the priest in his duties. God stated, ***“Bring the tribe of Levi near, and present them before Aaron the priest, that they may minister unto him. And they shall keep his charge, and the charge of the whole congregation before the tabernacle of the congregation, to do the service of the tabernacle. And they shall keep all the instruments of the tabernacle of the congregation, and the charge of the children of Israel, to do the service of the tabernacle. And thou shalt give the Levites unto Aaron and to his sons: they are wholly given unto him out of the children of Israel.”*** (Num 3.6-9). As we continue we see the exchange that is put in place.

“And I, behold, I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of all the firstborn that openeth the matrix among the children of Israel: therefore the Levites shall be mine; Because all the firstborn are mine; for on the day that I smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I hallowed unto me all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast: mine shall they be: I am the Lord.” (Num 3.12-13). Following this are instructions to take a census of the Levites and the firstborn throughout the tribes. Males that were one month old and above were counted (Num 3.14, 40). When the census was completed a comparison was made between the number of Levites and the firstborn of the people. The number of firstborn from the tribes other than Levi that exceeded the number of Levites were to be redeemed. Five shekels for each firstborn male was then totaled based on the count of 273,000 males above the number of Levites. The money was then presented to Aaron and his sons as an offering to the Lord.

In this instance God puts in place an offering that will be made for the firstborn in each family. Being sanctified to the Lord would mean serving God in some manner the Lord would specify. If we think about this it would create a great deal of confusion and complexity in the nation to keep a census of the all the firstborn, present them to the priests and have duties assigned, but God’s plan simplified this and provided a figurative link to the future. The solution was simple, redemption would be paid for the firstborn but it would be the Levites who provided service in their place. By doing this they would have a continual reminder of their deliverance from Egypt and the fact that as firstborn they really belonged to the Lord. The substitution would also put the Levites in a place of respect since they would be in service to God throughout their lives. The sanctification of the firstborn would then be permanently coupled with the idea of belonging to God, service, being redeemed for a price and set apart. We’ll see how these elements combine later in the life of Christ and the church.

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5. Christ as the firstborn of God

We've seen that the firstborn in a physical sense is the primary successor to the family patriarch. An inheritance is associated with this as well the responsibility of guiding the family. When it comes to the Messiah and references that name Christ as the firstborn of God there are problems that arise. Some reject the idea of Christ as deity and believe that Jesus was a created being who was given the role of prophet by God. Examining the scriptural account we find that the idea of the firstborn isn't just birth order. It can also refer to a position of preeminence in a spiritual sense. In order to understand this we need to review what the Bible has to say about Christ's relationship to God and how this manifests as the plan to redeem mankind is completed.

We know that Jesus was with God in eternity before the world was created. John writes, ***"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made."*** (John 1.1-3). There are some points in this reference that need to be highlighted. First is that Christ, referred to as the word, was with God in the beginning. Secondly, Christ is the agent through whom God created the physical universe. This is also stated by Paul in his address to the Colossians.

Speaking of Christ Paul states, ***"Who 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: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist."*** (Col 1.15-17). In this passage Paul not only confirms the deity of Christ and his role in creation he also aims us in the direction of preeminence which is held by a firstborn as exemplified in the statement that he is ***"before all things"***. Paul adds that this was the plan of God who made Christ the head of the church and refers to him as the ***"firstborn from the dead"*** (Col 1.18).

The nature of Christ is also described in similar terms in the book of Hebrews as the writer compares attributes of Christ with God. The writer describes Christ as ***"the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person"*** (Heb1.3). This analogy refers to the making of a coin which is created by stamping material with a likeness that then matches the original in all respects. We see in these descriptions that Christ is part of the godhead and is therefore deity and was also a key part of God's plan to save mankind.

God uses familiar terms and ideas when conveying his word to humans. The idea of a son and firstborn would bring to mind familiar relationships. We see that God sanctified Christ as the sacrifice for the world and then sent him in a physical form when the time was right (Gal 4.4, Heb 10.5). We see confirmation of this in the scriptures. When Christ was baptized by John ***"the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and***

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lighting upon him: *And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*” (Matt 3.16). When Christ was with Peter, James and John and was transfigured with Moses and Elijah, God confirmed that Christ was his son as “... *a voice came out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son: hear him.*” (Mark 9.7). Christ referred to God as his father stating he had come to complete the work God had given him (John 5.17, John 4.34).

God’s role as a father can also be seen in the fact that while Christ has been sanctified and placed in a position of preeminence, Christ remains subject to the Father. As I just noted Christ referred to the fact that he had come to complete the work of the one who sent him. Paul told the Philippians that Christ, “... *made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*” (Phil 2.7-11). It was the will of the father that a sacrifice was offered for the sins of the world. It was God’s determination that this would be done by Christ. Christ came into the world, inhabiting a physical body created for him and offered the final sacrifice for sin for all time completing the Father’s plan.

Paul adds another note to this demonstrating that Christ was indeed subject to the father. As he answered questions concerning the second coming Paul outlines what will happen when Christ has gathered the saved to him. Paul writes, “*Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. For he hath put all things under his feet. But when he saith all things are put under him, it is manifest that he is excepted, which did put all things under him. And when all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all.*” (1 Cor 15.24-28).

God used a familiar concept, that of the firstborn, as he judged Egypt, saved the Hebrews and sent Christ into the world to save mankind. We have an example of humility, obedience and exaltation by God that will remind us of the relationship we’re to have with the Lord. Other ideas of inheritance, substitution and redemption are woven together in this image so we can understand the power and wisdom of God.

6. What we’ve learned

- a. God sanctified the firstborn pairing this with judgment, life, death, blood and sacrifice

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- b. Sanctification of the firstborn pointed to the coming of the Messiah
- c. In the Law of Moses a price for redemption of the firstborn was determined
- d. The Levites were taken in place of the firstborn of the children of Israel to represent God before the people
- e. Sanctification of the firstborn was paired with judgment, life, death, blood and sacrifice
- f. God utilized a familiar concept to convey powerful images and truths
- g. The term “firstborn of God” applied to Christ doesn’t mean he was a created being but instead defines his relationship and role in respect to God the Father

7. Next

One of the most well known objects created and placed in the Tabernacle was one which was sometimes as misunderstood by the children of Israel as it is now. The subject of numerous legends, documentaries and films few items are as well known as this. In the next lesson we’ll examine **The Ark Of The Covenant & Mercy Seat** and the figurative elements they represent.