

The Firstborn of God and the Redemption of Israel

Exodus 12:43–13:16

March 22, 2026

While out of town last week I finished a book I've slowly been working through—Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. And to be honest, I did *not* love the first 150 pages. In fact, when a friend asked if I was enjoying it, I didn't say, "no," but I *also* didn't say "yes."

However, *after* I finished it last week, the *first* thing I wanted to do was read those first 150 pages again. After the final page, so many earlier things made *so much* more sense. Masterfully, Dickens had left breadcrumbs everywhere.

That book wasn't the only thing I read last week. I also began the book of Deuteronomy. As you know, the events in *that* book are 40 years *after* the events in Exodus—as Israel prepares to enter the Promised Land. And as I've read *that* book, I've been reminded of something we've said repeatedly, that is, *later* revelation often sheds light on earlier events.

We might make the connection in this way. Dickens didn't *just* write the first 150 pages of *Two Cities*. And Moses didn't *just* write the book of Exodus. This book is intended to be considered within the context of the Pentateuch—at *least*.

So, let's fast-forward 40 years and stand with the Hebrews on the border of Canaan. And as we do, maybe we'll hear some things they still haven't gotten over. Deuteronomy 10:14 is one example: **Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the highest heavens, the earth and all that is in it. Yet on your fathers did the LORD set His affection to love them, and He chose their descendants after them, even you above all peoples, as it is this day.**

Deuteronomy 10:21 is another example, when Moses extols the God that delivered: **He is your praise and He is your God, who has done these great and awesome things for you which your eyes have seen. Your fathers went down to Egypt seventy persons in all, and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars of heaven.**

Of course, I could've chosen *dozens* of passages from Leviticus, Numbers, or Deuteronomy that connect to what we're considering today. So, why bring up *those* two verses? First, because forty years later Moses is *still* reveling in the blessing of God upon a people. Secondly, in this *later* text, he tells us more explicitly *why* God chose to bless them, why He delivered them from the hands of the Egyptians.

The whole world was His. Yet He chose Israel. Why? Because He'd set His heart upon them. Deuteronomy makes that plain.

But is this affection out of nowhere? Not at all. In fact, if we're looking for a *why* behind this deliverance, we might rewind back to Exodus 4, before Moses *ever* confronted Egypt. In that passage, Moses was to tell Pharaoh: **Thus says the LORD, "Israel is my son, My firstborn"** (Ex. 4:22).

1. The Feast of Israel's Sons (12:43–51; 13:3–10)

We've already considered the *what*, *when*, and *how* of this Passover feast—*what* they were to eat, *when* they were to eat it, and *how* it was to be eaten. We've also talked, somewhat, about the *who*. At the beginning of the instructions for this meal, Moses was to speak to the gathered **congregation of Israel** (12:3). The Passover meal was for *them*. In fact, it was to *them* that the *what*, *when*, and *how* instructions were given. However, to be more specific, and to clear up any wrong-headed notions—it was for them *and* those willing to become *one* with them. Last week's text indicated that a **mixed multitude** departed Egypt with the Hebrews.

And it's with *that* in mind that we read verse 43: **The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "This is the ordinance of the Passover: no foreigner is to eat of it.** To be sure, if we stop reading there, it *sounds* as if there's a fixed boundary, one determined by ethnicity alone. But we *don't* stop reading at verse 43. Verse 44 reads: **but every man's slave purchased with money, after you have circumcised him, then he may eat of it.**

So, there is a *who* of this meal. It's *not* for everyone. There *are* boundaries. But the boundaries were *actually* boundaries related to a covenant. Because at *this* point—for an outsider—circumcision marked entrance into the covenant community. That seems to be the ordinance mentioned back in verse 43. It was the sign that preceded participation in the Passover meal. And if you're not convinced, the same truth is reiterated in verse 48: **if a stranger sojourns with you, and celebrates the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near to celebrate it; and he shall be like a native of the land.**

I bring this up, in part, because it's a misnomer that the God of the Old Testament wasn't concerned about the good of the nations. Genesis 12 was clear. God called a people to Himself so that *through* them He might work. In them *all* the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3). God separates a people *from* the world for the *good* of the world.

So, yes, there are boundaries. Those that refused to observe the practices of this set-apart community had no right to claim membership in it, nor to observe its feasts.¹ The end of verse 48 could not be clearer: **no uncircumcised person may eat of it.** However, it's noteworthy that God didn't hold the Israelites to a different standard than the outsider. Verse 49: **The same law shall apply to the native as to the stranger who sojourns among you.**

So, as Alec Motyer notes, "The non-Israelite had a decision to make: whether to remain as a resident alien or personally to embrace Yahweh and His promises."²

I think the parallels are relatively clear. As we've said, Passover is the shadow, the Lord's Supper the substance. *That* meal is what the Passover prepared God's people for, what it pointed to. And though in the New Testament, baptism isn't *exactly* like circumcision—based on Colossians 2—we'd say, instead, that baptism corresponds to *spiritual* circumcision.

Nonetheless, the ordinance of baptism is also a sign. And that ordinance *is* what marks entrance into the New Covenant community.

So, like the non-Israelite, *we* have a choice to make. Will we believe, and belong—to God and to His people?

It's a delivered people that eat the meal of deliverance. Because to eat it rightly is to eat remembering rescue. Chapter 13:3 connects these dots: **Remember this day in which you went out from Egypt, from the house of slavery; for by a powerful hand the LORD brought you out from this place. And nothing leavened shall be eaten.** And it's a feast they were to *continue* eating, even when they finally arrived in the land promised.³ Chapter 13:5: **It shall be when the LORD brings you to the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, which He swore to your fathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, that you shall observe this rite in this month.**

As we noted in Deuteronomy earlier, after *decades* in the wilderness—forty years later—they were *still* not to get over what God had done on their behalf. Deuteronomy 8 warns them: **When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you. Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you**

¹ Doug Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC, 308.

² Alec Motyer, *Exodus*, BST, 137.

³ Phil Ryken, *Exodus*, 371.

today; otherwise, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them, and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (Deut. 8:10–14).

God desired that His delivered people *never* move past their deliverance. They were *never* to think, live, or act as if they'd delivered themselves. Nor were they ever to think, live, or act, as if they were worthy of such a deliverance. To remind them, He gave detailed instructions, for both the Passover and for the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

And then He gave them yet another thing to help them remember. And to preview what's ahead, in chapter 13:1: **Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Sanctify to Me every firstborn, the first offspring of every womb among the sons of Israel, both of man and beast.**

2. The Firstborn of Israel's Sons (13:1–2; 13:11–12; 13:15b)

The LORD gave them *another* ceremony intended to *both* remember what the LORD had done, and to point them to what He would one day do. Like us, they ought not cross the street of their present without looking both ways—past and future.

This ceremony focused on the firstborn. You don't have to read far into the Scriptures to see that the firstborn carried particular privileges and responsibilities in that era.⁴ The firstborn was the firstfruits of the family. In a significant sense, the firstborn represented *all* the offspring. For this reason, to sanctify or consecrate the firstborn was to do the same for every other blessing that family received.⁵

So, why did God ask these families to consecrate, or sanctify, their firstborn? The end of verse 2 answers: **it belongs to Me.** Now, if we think broadly, Deuteronomy 10:14 helps us once again: **Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the highest heavens, the earth and all that is in it.** Psalm 24:1 echoes that reality: **The earth is the LORD'S, and all it contains.** That's true. It's *all* His.

But that's not *all* this signifies. The firstborn belongs to Him not *only* because He created them, but because He spared them. Last week we considered the death of every firstborn that God Himself did not Pass over. In mercy, He'd told them how they might be delivered. Therefore, going forward, every firstborn son was a living reminder of that long night.

In those senses, and in *many* ways I did not mention, they belonged to Him. And to remember this, they were to sanctify their firstborn, **both of man and beast** (v. 1).

How? We'll start with the animals. Verse 15 says, **I sacrifice to the LORD the males, the first offspring of every womb.** Every womb of every animal was to remind them that this particular blessing did *not* proceed from them.⁶ Every good and perfect gift was from above (James 1). Interestingly, and this is *something* of a side-note, God makes explicit in verse 13 how they were to handle the firstborn of a donkey. It seems that every animal wasn't to be sacrificed. Instead, some would have a substitute—for a particular purpose. Verse 13: **every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb.**

That's the first time in Exodus we see this word for "redeem." And it leads into the *how* of sanctifying every firstborn of man. The end of verse 13 reads: **and every firstborn of man among**

⁴ Stuart, 311.

⁵ Ryken, 370–371.

⁶ Every good and perfect gift was from above (James 1).

your sons you shall redeem. The end of verse 15 reiterates this: **but every firstborn of my sons I redeem.**

We have to flash forward to Numbers 18 to see *how* the firstborn son was redeemed. And if we did, we'd note that there was a redemption price of five shekels (Numb. 18:16). When the firstborn was a month old, part of this consecration or sanctifying of the firstborn, was to redeem him by a payment.

The point is this: God decided, and communicated to His people, what they were to sacrifice and *what* they were to buy back among all that belonged to Him.⁷ And should the firstborn son of man be restored to a family, God determined that he *must* first be purchased.

This too was intended to remind them of the Passover. Keep in mind all we've considered over the past few weeks. And hear Michael Morales here: "The nation's epic deliverance was itself reduced to a singular household drama: the sparing of the firstborn son. That is, the Israelite firstborn son not only represented the sparing of his household, but he represented the redemption of Israel as God's firstborn son."⁸

The LORD said as much back in Exodus 4. This is a people on whom He'd set His heart.

This particular consecration—and redemption—helped them to remember the Passover. But it *also* prepared them for what the LORD would one day do. Generation after generation, they set apart their firstborn. It was ritual after ritual, over and over again. It gave them categories to understand something about their God, and something about what He'd do. They set apart—repeatedly—their firstborn. And then, in the fullest sense, God set apart His, not to redeem *Him*, but to redeem them.⁹

Further, in an escalation that can't be overstated, the redemption He brought about wasn't obtained by some measly price, some amount of shekels you or I might earn over the span of a month, year, or even lifetime. A lifelong Jewish fisherman named Peter said it this way: **you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ** (1 Peter 1:18).

The truth is that Israel *was* God's firstborn. He chose them because He'd set His affection on them. To read the Passover rightly is to know that what unfolds is *not* the mere rescue of slaves, but the redemption of a son.

However, if we read *ahead*, even just to *next* week's text, we'll see them fall, fail, grumble, and long to be back in Egypt. So, the Father sent His Son to be all that Israel was intended to be, and to save His people from all that they/and *we* have failed to do.

Another lifelong Jewish man named Paul wrote about that reality: **For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren** (Rom. 8:29). And another that knew Israel's story quite well wrote *this* in the book of Hebrews: **you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.**

He goes on to say that we've come to Jesus, **the mediator of a new covenant** (Heb. 12:22–24). As we noted, truths of an unblemished lamb, of blood spilt in their place, and of deliverance from slavery, were passed down. And today we add the category of firstborn son—a son set apart for a purpose. The practice was embedded in the life of a community.

⁷ Stuart, 317.

⁸ Michael Morales, *Exodus Old and New*, 76.

⁹ Ryken, 376.

And *then*, shadow became substance, a ritual became actual redemption, and slaves became sons.

All of this intricate and detailed *what, when, is how* is set up that God's people might remember.

3. The Future of Israel's Sons (13:7–9; 13:13–16)

In the future, both the ritual surrounding the feast and the one surrounding the firstborn would prompt questions from sons. Notice, first, verse 7: **Unleavened bread shall be eaten throughout the seven days; and nothing leavened shall be seen among you, nor shall any leaven be seen among you in all your borders.**

We noted *before* that the absence of leaven was *first* due to practical reasons—the urgency of that night. But in the years ahead the significance concerned the Hebrews *continuing* to live as if they'd been delivered. Leaven symbolized their former life. And what they'd observed in Egypt, what they'd lived around, was *not* to characterize them any longer.

The Passover was celebrated in the first month of the year. The Exodus was a new beginning for them. So, when their children asked, “Why the unleavened bread?” verse 8 answers: **You shall tell your son on that day, saying, “It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt.”** They were to remember their deliverance. They were *not* to move past it.

And it was to affect their lives going forward. Verse 9 explains: **And it shall serve as a sign to you on your hand, and as a reminder on your forehead, that the law of the LORD may be in your mouth; for with a powerful hand the LORD brought you out of Egypt.** As you are well aware, we've *not* come to the Ten Commandments just yet. That's Exodus 20. When the LORD spoke to Moses here, He was previewing something ahead. Which gets at a key aspect of the Passover, as well as the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It's not enacted *merely* that a memory might be preserved, it will come to remind them of a covenant to be kept. Some of the point of remembering is renewal.¹⁰

As we said two weeks ago, they didn't remove the leavened bread *so* that they might be delivered. They are delivered; and, therefore, they remove the leavened bread.¹¹

The way they lived would prompt questions. The feast would prompt questions. And it's to be explained. So was the ritual surrounding the firstborn. The end of verse 13 reads: **every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. And it shall be when your son asks you in time to come, saying, “What is this?” then you shall say to him, “With a powerful hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery.”** With each question, they were to make a beeline to what happened in Egypt. Their ongoing identity was to be that of God's chosen people rescued by Him.

But further, and more specifically, they were rescued from the death of the firstborn by faith. That's *why* they put the blood on the doorpost initially. And they *kept* showing that faith by dedicating their firstborn time and again.¹² Again, that son wouldn't exist if not for God's hand. Verse 15 makes that connection: **It came about, when Pharaoh was stubborn about letting us go, that the LORD killed every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and**

¹⁰ Stuart, 315.

¹¹ Later on, the law of the LORD will come to them, but it will *begin* with these words: **I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery** (Ex. 20:2).

¹² Stuart, 318.

the firstborn of beast. Therefore, I sacrifice to the LORD the males, the first offspring of every womb, but every firstborn of my sons I redeem.

Their rescue was a redemption. And they were to remember it. Verse 16: **So it shall serve as a sign on your hand and as phylacteries on your forehead, for with a powerful hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt.** And as they remembered, they were to continue being delivered from all the world offered them.

Conclusion

Years back I preached Luke 2 here, the story of 40-day old Jesus meeting Simeon at the temple. I bet you've read it dozens of times. Let's read it this morning with the breadcrumbs of Exodus 12 and 13 in mind.

Luke 2:22: **And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the LORD")**

Simeon saw a lot of firstborn sons, month after month. But when he saw this One, he sang. Anna saw Him too. Luke tells us how *she* responds: **At that very moment she came up and began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem** (Luke 2:38). She knew *this* Son set-apart was to bring redemption.

A redemption that would also come with a price. Earlier in our text, *another* detail was given about the Passover lamb. Chapter 12:46 said this: **you are not to bring forth any of the flesh outside of the house, nor are you to break any bone of it.**

Maybe that didn't seem significant to them when *they* read it. Maybe it didn't seem significant to us when *we* did. But it was significant for another lifelong Jewish man named John, who wrote this: **but coming to Jesus, when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out. And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe. For these things came to pass to fulfill the Scripture, "Not a bone of Him shall be broken"** (John 19:36).