

Jesus and the Levite Redemption of the Firstborn

By Kyle Pope

The last plague the Lord brought upon Egypt, was the death of the firstborn. After Pharaoh lost his own child, he finally relented and let the Israelites go (Exodus 12:29-31). When this plague came upon the land, the firstborn among Israel were spared only because of the blood of the sacrificial lamb which was placed on the doorposts and lintels of their homes (Exodus 12:21-23). This event, in which death “passed over” Israel, would be memorialized yearly as one of the most important holy days of the Jewish calendar - Passover.

The annual observance of Passover was not the only time when the salvation of the firstborn was recognized. Given that God had delivered the lives of the firstborn of Israel, from that day forward God instructed - “Consecrate to Me all the firstborn, whatever opens the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and beast; it is Mine.” (Exodus 13:2). Every firstborn male animal belonged to the Lord. In the case of clean animals they were to be offered in sacrifice (Exodus 13:15b). Some unclean animals (i.e. the donkey) and all human beings were not sacrificed but rather redeemed (Exodus 13:13; cf. Numbers 18:15). This meant that a certain amount of money was to be offered to the Lord for the redemption of a human being. The redemption price was five shekels (Numbers 3:47-48).

When the tabernacle was set up and God set apart the tribe of Levi, the consecration of the firstborn again became significant. God instructed Moses - “...Number all the firstborn males of the children of Israel from a month old and above, and take the number of their names” (Numbers 3:40). When this was done the total number of those one month old and above was 22,273 (Numbers 3:43). God then instructed Moses - “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” (Numbers 3:45). Instead of only the firstborn of the Levites being consecrated, God declared that the entire Levite tribe would be His own. They would be neither redeemed, nor sacrificed but they would serve the Lord continually in worship connected with the tabernacle. These Levites, 22,000 in number, were accepted by the Lord as a substitute for the same number of those of the firstborn of Israel. Only the 273 firstborn of the children of Israel above the number of the Levites had to be redeemed (Numbers 3:46). Five shekels each was paid for the 273 non-Levite Israelites above the number of the Levites, to a total of 1365 shekels and the money was given to Aaron and his sons (Numbers 3:47- 51).

This situation shows the willingness of the Lord to accept a substitute in the place of the firstborn. Even though the Lord had commanded that firstborn males were to be redeemed, at that time 22,000 Israelites were dismissed from their liability to God. The Lord accepted the lives of the 22,000 Levites as payment in full towards His claim to the ownership of the firstborn. This is exactly what the redemption of Jesus Christ accomplished on behalf of mankind:

1. Jesus redeemed mankind from their debt of sin. The Bible teaches us that sin incurs a debt. Paul teaches us that - “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). The Psalmist reminds the rich man that his wealth cannot redeem this debt, declaring - “Those who trust in their wealth and boast in the multitude of their riches, none of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him— for the redemption of their souls is costly, and it shall cease forever” (Psalm 49:6-8). Only Jesus can pay this debt. Peter tells the Christian - “...you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.” (I Peter 1:18-19).

2. God accepted Jesus’ life in place of the lives of mankind. As God’s firstborn, Jesus was already consecrated to the Father. Yet, just as God accepted the Levites in place of the Israelite firstborn, God accepted Jesus’ life in place of ours. The Apostle John tells us what God

did in sending Christ - "...He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). Paul tells us that Jesus - "... gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father" (Gal. 1:4).

3. Christ's death paid man's redemption price. Not all of the Levites were the firstborn. They owed no redemption price themselves. Even so, their lives paid a price that they did not owe. Jesus owed no sin debt himself, but God accepted Jesus' life as payment in full for man's redemption price. Paul tells us - "...He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." (II Corinthians 5:21).

4. Christ's substitute will only redeem those who come to Him. The substitution of the Levites redeemed most of the firstborn among the Israelites. Yet, for 273 of the firstborn of Israel, the consecration of the Levites meant nothing, their redemption price was still required. Unlike the redemption which the Levites afforded the Israelites, Christ's sacrifice was sufficient to pay the redemption price for all mankind. Even so, for some the redemption of Christ accomplishes nothing, their redemption price is still required. If they refuse to come to Him, the debt of sin must still be paid!

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