

Dedication of the Firstborn and God's Special Guidance for the Journey

Exodus 13

Exodus 13 - *"Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ² 'Consecrate to Me all the firstborn, whatever opens the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and beast; it is Mine.' ³ And Moses said to the people: 'Remember this day in which you went out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage; for by strength of hand the Lord brought you out of this place. No leavened bread shall be eaten. ⁴ On this day you are going out, in the month Abib. ⁵ And it shall be, when the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, which He swore to your fathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, that 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 seven days. And no leavened bread shall be seen among you, nor shall leaven be seen among you in all your quarters. ⁸ And you shall tell your son in that day, saying, 'This is done because of what the Lord did for me when I came up from Egypt.' ⁹ It shall be as a sign to you on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the Lord's law may be in your mouth; for with a strong hand the Lord has brought you out of Egypt. ¹⁰ You shall therefore keep this ordinance in its season from year to year.*

¹¹ "And it shall be, when the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as He swore to you and your fathers, and gives it to you, ¹² that you shall set apart to the Lord all that open the womb, that is, every firstborn that comes from an animal which you have; the males shall be the Lord's. ¹³ But every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb; and if you will not redeem it, then you shall break its neck. And all the firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. ¹⁴ So it shall be, when your son asks you in time to come, saying, 'What is this?' that you shall say to him, 'By strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. ¹⁵ And it came to pass, when Pharaoh was stubborn about letting us go, that the Lord killed 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 males that open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.' ¹⁶ It shall be as a sign on your hand and as frontlets between your eyes, for by strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt."

¹⁷ Then it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, "Lest perhaps the people change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt." ¹⁸ So God led the people around by way of the wilderness of the Red Sea. And the children of Israel went up in orderly ranks out of the land of Egypt. ¹⁹ And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for he had placed the children of Israel under solemn oath, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here with you." ²⁰ So they took their journey from Succoth and camped in Etham at the edge of the wilderness. ²¹ And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so as to go by day and night. ²² He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day or the pillar of fire by night from before the people."

Background Notes

Exodus 12 recounts the institution of the Feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread at the time of the Exodus from Egypt. The beginning of chapter 13 reviews the importance of these two feasts, and how they were to be kept annually when the people came into the good land that God was giving them.

Notice from verse 5 that the land of Canaan was previously the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites -- but the Lord was giving it to the children of Israel. So the Jews have a biblical right to the ancient land of Canaan. This Land was never given to the Palestinians – God gave it to His chosen people, the Jews. The Jews are the true “Palestinians”! They did not steal the Land, and they are not occupying land that they don’t have a right to occupy. The biblical right to the Land, of course, would not justify any improper actions by the present secular State of Israel today, such as killing Arabs who live in the land originally given to Israel. However, the biblical right to the Land does justify the nation of Israel in defending itself from terrorists and those who want to eliminate Israel and the Jewish people. In the future, when the nation of Israel turns back to the Lord, He will restore **all** the land that He originally gave to the nation of Israel.

Notice that Israeli parents were told to use the occasion of the Feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread as an opportunity to explain God’s redemption of His people out of Egypt. Verse 8: *“And you shall tell your son in that day, saying, ‘This is done because of what the LORD did for me when I came up from Egypt.’”* What a lesson for us! We should take every opportunity possible to explain God’s plan of redemption to our children and grandchildren. Are we doing that? The celebration of Christian holidays (such as Christmas and Easter) and the celebration of the Lord’s Supper are excellent opportunities to follow this biblical pattern.

“It shall be as a sign to you on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the LORD’s law may be in your mouth; for with a strong hand the LORD has brought you out of Egypt” (v9). The Jewish use of phylacteries, even to this present day, is based on verses 9 & 16 of this chapter, and on passages in Deuteronomy 6 and 11. Phylacteries are small, hard leather pouches that contain Scripture, particularly the “Shema” of Deuteronomy 6:4: *“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!”* Phylacteries are bound onto the foreheads and forearms of Jewish worshipers by long leather straps.

Doctrinal Points

1. God’s people should dedicate their children to the Lord.

Because God had saved the firstborn of the children of Israel in Egypt, the firstborn were to be given to God in dedication or consecration—both humans and animals. The firstborn animals were to be given to the Lord as sacrifices. The firstborn humans obviously were not sacrificed, but rather they were redeemed. Numbers 18 says that the firstborn were to be redeemed, or bought back, by giving five shekels of silver for the Lord’s work.

The firstborn of unclean animals, like the donkey, were not to be sacrificed, but rather redeemed with the sacrifice of a lamb (a clean animal), and if not, the donkey had to be killed (v13). Numbers 18 says that unclean animals could also be redeemed by giving five shekels of silver for the work of the Lord. There was no middle ground or “getting around the Law” with regard to unclean animals. They were either redeemed or put to death.

Numbers 18:15-17 reiterates these laws concerning the firstborn. These verses were addressed to Aaron the High Priest. Numbers 18:15-17: *“The first offspring of every womb, both man and animal, that is offered to the Lord is yours. But you must redeem every firstborn son and every firstborn male of unclean animals. When they are one month old, you must redeem them at the redemption price set at five shekels of silver... But you must not redeem the firstborn of an ox, a sheep or a goat: they are holy. Sprinkle their blood on the altar and burn their fat as an offering made by fire. But you must redeem every firstborn son and every firstborn male of unclean animals.”*

We have a spiritual lesson here. As sinners we are unclean people. We must either be redeemed or put to death—eternal death. There is no middle ground, no way to get around God’s laws. Either you come to Jesus Christ, who paid the price of your redemption, or you will remain under the wrath of God, die in your sins, and suffer eternal death.

There’s an additional lesson for us today in these laws about the firstborn, and that’s our doctrinal point: God’s people should dedicate their children to the Lord. We’re not talking here about infant baptism or some religious ritual. No! But when children are born into the families of believers, we should recognize that they are a gift from the Lord, and in our minds and hearts and prayers we should give them back to God. We should pray that God would use their lives for His glory. We should pray that we would not selfishly manipulate our children for our own purposes. We should follow the pattern of Mary and Joseph that we see in Luke 2:21-23 (NIV): *“On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise Him, He was named Jesus, the name the angel had given Him before He had been conceived. When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord’), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the law of the Lord: ‘a pair of doves or two young pigeons.’”* Notice the quotation in Luke 2:23 from Exodus 13: Every firstborn male shall be consecrated to the Lord. God’s people should dedicate their children to the Lord.

2. God’s people should follow the direction of the Lord.

God led His people through the wilderness by means of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. The pillars of cloud and fire not only guided the children of Israel, but also reminded them and assured them of God’s presence with them. It also offered protection for them, as we’ll see in chapter 14.

So, we see from these verses that the children of Israel were not some rag-tag band of fugitives fleeing from Egypt! No, they left in orderly ranks, in martial array (v18). They took the bones of Joseph with them to be buried in the Land of Promise, as Joseph had requested in Genesis 50. And they followed the direction of the Lord.

Notice verse 21: *“And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so as to go by day and night.”* The Lord went before them to lead them -- what a lesson for us! The Lord promises to give us direction in this life if we will follow Him. Proverbs 3:5-6 says, *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and don’t depend on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths.”*

Remember this good old Sunday school song: “My Lord knows the way through the wilderness -- all I have to do is follow!” **God’s people should follow the direction of the Lord.**

Practical Application

Remember, the shortest way is not always the best way!

Verses 17-18, once again: *“Then it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, ‘Lest perhaps the people change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt.’ So God led the people around by way of the wilderness of the Red Sea.”*

These verses tell us that God purposely did not lead His people along the Mediterranean coast, along the ancient trade route known as the “Via Maris.” That was certainly the shortest way to Canaan (and the way that Holy Land tour buses used to follow as they went from Egypt to Israel.) The way God chose to lead them was longer and more difficult -- through the rugged and mountainous Sinai Peninsula. Why? One reason is that there were Egyptian forts and fortresses located along the Mediterranean coast, and the Lord did not want His people to be fearful and change their minds when they saw Egyptian military forces. Besides, God had promised Moses at the burning bush that He would bring His people Israel to Mount Sinai (Exodus 3:12). Remember that? And of course, the Lord wanted to further show the children of Israel His power and protection in the great miracle of crossing the Red Sea! So, the Lord did not lead His people in a straight line from Goshen to the Promised Land.

There’s a practical lesson here for us. Isn’t it true that we tend to like the straight line, or want to follow the shortest and easiest way in life? But God’s ways are higher than our ways (Isaiah 55:9). Sometimes it’s hard to understand God’s leading in our lives, especially when it seems that He’s leading us along a difficult path. He may not take us by the “shortest way” or the easiest way because He wants to teach us valuable lessons about Himself and about how He will protect and sustain us along life’s journey.

So, when the path in your life seems difficult and long, remember that the Lord will always guide us in the best way. And the shortest way is not always the best way!