

Sermon 41, Two Sanctifying Rites of Redemption, Exodus 13:1-16

Proposition: Exodus 13 describes two rituals that signify redemption from Egypt and make God's firstborn people holy — the annual feast of unleavened bread, and the one-time redemption of the firstborn.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the chapter before us continues to present ritual truth, along much the same lines as the previous chapter. This is a way of thinking, and a

way of communicating truth, in which we have little experience. Even the very word “rite” or “ritual” conveys to us the impression of hackneyed, stale, going-through-the-motions religion. Ritual is, in the contemporary Protestant/broad evangelical mind, something that Roman Catholics do, and which is vaguely unbiblical and even un-Christian. But I want you to drop those preconceptions and look carefully at the text with me. The literal meaning of Exodus 13 is not all about breaking the neck of donkeys and getting rid of leaven for seven days. The literal meaning is spelled out by Moses, through structure, diction, summary, and more — and it is this: Rightly used, the rites of unleavened bread and firstborn redemption are means of making Israel holy by teaching it to remember how God delivered His people from Egypt and brought them into the Promised Land. In other words, though we do not celebrate this feast or consecrate our firstborn as Ancient Israel did, we are still a people holy to the Lord, and we still express and engender that holiness in the once-for-all rite of baptism and the oft-repeated rite of feasting on unleavened bread. And so we need to learn that these rites were not about going through the motions; they signified the holiness of God’s people and served as reminders of all that God had done for His people in bringing them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. And since we are still God’s holy people whom He has delivered from Egypt and whom He’s bringing into the Promised Land, we need to listen and learn about these rites of holiness so that we too can be holy.

I. Making the Firstborn Holy, v. 2

As you should know by now, one of the most important things to look for in any passage of scripture is a frame, where the same word or idea comes up at the beginning and end. This passage lacks such a frame — but instead of a frame, it has a heading. The words of God to Moses begin with a single command: Sanctify the firstborn. It seems to me that this command is the heading that specifies the content of the rest of the section. As you can tell just by reading the rest of the section, we first have a reference to sanctifying the firstborn, then a long treatment of the feast of unleavened bread, and then a discourse on redeeming the firstborn. Now, did God somehow forget about the firstborn for a few minutes and talk about unleavened bread before remembering the original topic? The answer is no. That, in addition to being stupid, is a hypothesis of desperation. It is much more reasonable to understand that the heading says “Now for material on sanctifying the firstborn.” Then we understand that the rest of the passage presents two aspects of that process, that is, two different sanctifying rites. Both the feast of unleavened bread and the dedication of the firstborn males are ways in which God signifies the holiness not just of literal firstborns within Israel, but of His whole people, His Firstborn Son whom He brought out of Egypt.

Once we understand that structural consideration — that the chapter is about holiness, and specifically about two signs of holiness — then the rest of the meaning quickly falls into place. We are going to learn something about how holiness is signified and even sealed through ritual — two rituals in particular, but really, the text is applicable to all rituals that God has mandated for His people.

A. Human Firstborn

Verse two informs us that holiness is a category which cuts across species lines; it is broader than humanity, and applies also to animals.

Right away, then, we see something about holiness: It is not primarily an ethical category! Being holy is not the same thing as being good. It is incredibly important that we get a biblical understanding of holiness, because holiness is obviously an important Bible topic, and something demanded of every Christian. But what is it? Well, whatever it is, it is something that an animal can be too.

B. Animal Firstborn

God's message to Moses is clear: both human firstborn sons and animal firstborn males, among all the domestic animals that you own, belong to God in a special way. We can boil this down to the statement that holiness means existing for God. It's a statement about the purpose of your life. You might think that the proximate purpose of your donkey's firstborn male colt is to provide you transportation and work. But God wants you to revise that understanding and to know that its ultimate purpose is to serve and glorify Him. Same with your son: All human beings exist to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. But that purpose applies in a special way to firstborn sons, who are to be given to God in a way that illustrates that all God's people belong specially to Him.

Holiness means that you are for God. Your purpose is nothing less than His glory. And so, both rites that this chapter describes are all about signifying holiness and even, in a certain sense, producing holiness. That's why we should pay attention to them: They tell us about holiness, and holiness is what we need to have in order to please God.

II. Sanctifying Rite I: The Annual Feast of Unleavened Bread, vv. 3-10

So what can we discern about the first rite that Moses describes?

A. The Point: Remember!, v. 3

Well, Moses makes it clear at the beginning that rite is about far more than going through the motions. The rite is about memory. Remember! Remember what? The day on which God delivered you from Egypt. In other words, if you abstain from leavened bread for a week, you've just done something worthless unless it motivates you to remember that God delivered you out of Egypt.

B. The Context:

And so Moses moves into the context in which this rite finds its meaning. That context is the whole exodus story.

1. Exodus from Egypt, vv. 3-4

You abstain from leavened bread for seven days because you were in the house of bondage and God brought you out. It was on the 14th day of the first month, the month of Abib, that you were delivered. You had to eat unleavened bread on that day because you didn't have time to deal with bread rising and spewing all over the place.

2. Entrance to the Promised Land, v. 5

And the rite gains further meaning by being tied to the Promised Land as such — as a land God swore to give. Moses specifies what land it is by naming five nations and saying what the land is like. But the overall point is clear: The feast of unleavened bread finds its value in the reality of deliverance from Egypt and provision of a place to live.

C. The Rite

1. Time: The Week Following Abib 14, v. 6

That said, what exactly do you do? Well, like any good holiday the basic framework is very simple. You set aside the week beginning on the 15th of Abib. This includes the evening before, when you start getting ready — rather like our Christmas Eve today.

2. Menu: Anything but Leaven, vv. 6-7

And then — you eat anything but leaven. Raised bread, sourdough, — it disappears from your house. Bring on the pancakes, muffins, waffles, and crackers. Tank up on noodles and dumplings. But don't touch any leaven, because leaven is left over and saved from batch to batch and thus leaven means bringing Egypt with you.

3. Conversation: Teach Your Son How God Brought You Out, v. 8

But here is the difference. You know that this verse reflects one of my all-time pet peeves. I positively loathe holiday celebrations at which the alleged holiday being celebrated goes unmentioned. Yuck! You know, the Christmas dinners where we never mention the birth of Christ, the Labor Day picnics where we don't hear a word about the struggle of organized labor against capitalist reptiles and union-busting among both capitalists and socialist/communists, the July 4 picnics where you'd never know you were an American (except for the tablecloths) and the Memorial Day cookouts where you never hear a word about the fallen. These things drive me bonkers. Let's get this straight: A holiday is not an excuse to eat with your friends. A holiday is an occasion to remember! A Memorial Day picnic should be more solemn than a July 4 picnic. Easter should be the biggest celebration of the year. Labor Day needs to include some definite history lessons and a nod to current union-busting and union-creation around the world. Well, why do I say this? Because God says it! "You shall tell your son on that day." Not "You can mention it if you get around to it." Not "It's always cool if the reason for this celebration comes up." No. God says that the whole reason you're doing this is to remember! And if you don't talk about it and teach the next generation, how are you going to remember? So brothers and sisters, I beg you to make it your mission to remind people at every holiday what that holiday is about. Especially make it your mission to instruct your family about Christian holidays, particularly the Sabbath (which God appointed) but also Christmas, Easter, and any saint or martyr's day that you commemorate.

D. The Function, v. 9

After all, the function of this feast is described in three different terms.

1. A Sign

The first is as a sign. A sign points to something beyond itself. The keeping of the feast of unleavened bread is equivalent to a string tied around your finger. It's like putting a sticky note

that says “God brought you out of Egypt” on your palm. Every time you move your hand, you’ll see it there. This is the good version of a tattoo. Just as when you get a regular tattoo, every time you see it you’re reminded of that night of drunken idiocy, so every time you celebrate the feast of unleavened bread you’ll see a sign that points to redemption.

2. A Reminder

And indeed, God describes the celebration as a reminder. You know you’ve been brought out of Egyptian slavery when . . . you don’t eat leaven for a week in March. Just as the Sabbath is a reminder every week that we don’t have to work for a whole day, because God provides, so the feast of unleavened bread is a reminder that we left Egypt in haste at the moment of God’s deliverance.

3. A Prompt

Finally, the feast is a prompt. In English classes you have a little paragraph that asks you a question and tells you to write an essay in response. Well, this feast of unleavened bread is a prompt that says not “write an essay” but “recount the word of God.” If you’re celebrating deliverance from Egypt, you’d better be reciting the very words of Scripture that explain what’s going on.

Is this a feature of your holidays? Does your family know why you keep the Sabbath? Are they aware of the Biblical reasons for what you do on the Lord’s Day? Maybe you have a big family meal at lunch. Maybe you have ice cream on Sunday nights, like we do. Maybe you have a big family meal on Saturday night. Maybe you have a family bike ride to church every summer Sunday. We also don’t do laundry on Sunday. This isn’t because God forbids it specifically, but because He declares that it’s a day of getting to spend time with Him — not a day of drudgery and daily work like the other six days. If you’re working on Sundays, you are cheating yourself of God’s gift to you.

So make sure that your holidays prompt you to speak the word of God. Otherwise, you won’t find them very sanctifying. Make sure they prompt you to recount the mighty deeds and redemption of God; otherwise, again, they won’t contribute much to your sanctification.

E. The Reason: God Brought You Out of Egypt, vv. 9d-10

The whole reason Israel was called on to keep the feast of unleavened bread is that God brought them out of Egypt. It really happened, and so they really celebrated it. And their celebration really sanctified them. It not only showed that they existed for God and His glory; it helped them to do so more consistently and openly.

III. Sanctifying Rite II: The One-Time Redemption of the Firstborn, vv. 11-16

Well, the second part of the chapter addresses not the feast of unleavened bread, which was an ongoing celebration comparable to our Lord’s Supper and Sabbath Day, but the one-time dedication of the firstborn males to the Lord. Notice, credo-baptists who reject infant baptism because there is no NT example of a child being baptized, that there is no Biblical example at all of a non-firstborn-male being dedicated. So just be careful what sorts of Bible arguments you deploy.

Before we discuss what exactly dedication is, we need to see the context in which Moses introduces it.

A. The Context: Entrance to the Promised Land, v. 11

Once again, this is all about coming into the promised land. Giving your firstborn sons and animals to the Lord is something that you do when you've come into the land of Canaan. Notice the order: God gives you a land. Then He asks you to give your firstborn to Him. If you belong to God, then you have already received so much from Him. All He asks in return is everything. This is not because God is a slave driver; His yoke is easy. But make no mistake: the message is definitely one of submission to the Almighty, not of autonomy.

B. The Rite, vv. 12-15

So, that said, how exactly do you give your firstborn males to Yahweh?

1. Setting Aside Firstborn Males for Yahweh, v. 12-13

a) Sacrificing Clean Animals, Numbers 18:17

Well, this passage is a bit light on details. Numbers 18 fills it out a bit. Because the firstborn of clean animals are holy — that is, they exist for God — then you have to offer them in sacrifice. Once you get a breeding mother sheep, goat, or heifer online, then the first thing you do with it is to offer its firstborn in sacrifice to Yahweh. Now, for cattle especially, this can run into some money. If you have a large flock, you're offering a lot of firstborn male animals to God.

They belong to God; they exist for Him. That's what holiness means. And so they have to be killed in sacrifice.

b) Paying 5 Shekels for your Son, Numbers 18:16

But what about your son? He is holy too, but he is not to be killed. God never demands human sacrifice, except for the sacrifice of Himself in the person of His own Son. You simply had to pay five shekels of silver for your son; and in addition, God announced that He had taken all of the Levite men as substitutes for the firstborn sons from the other tribes.

c) Killing Unclean Animals or Sacrificing a Clean Animal in their Place, v. 13

Finally, if you owned any unclean animals, you either had to kill them in a way that couldn't be mistaken for sacrifice, or else sacrifice a clean animal in their place. The donkey is mentioned here because it was generally the only unclean animal that an Israelite of Moses' day was likely to own. Horses and pigs were not commonly found in Israelite stables.

So these three kinds of sacrifice — the life of firstborn animals, and your silver for your son — were to teach Israel about the price and danger of holiness. To belong to God is not easy or cheap. To belong to God is something that will cost you everything. Holiness is not something you get in your spare time. It is the dedication of the total life to God; it is existing for God, not for something lesser.

2. Teaching Your Son How God Brought You Out, vv. 14-15

What this means, then, is that you need to teach your son how God brought you out. You need to tell him about the power of God. You need to tell him about the horrors of Egypt. You need to tell him about Pharaoh's hard heart, and God's mighty hand that crushed Pharaoh's resistance by

killing his firstborn son. “You see, son, you are alive today and Pharaoh’s son isn’t. That’s because you know you belong to God; we gave you to God. We paid money as a sign that you belong to God. And therefore the onus is on you to live for God, not for yourself, not for pleasure, not for stuff, not for fame and learning, but for God. He gave us this land, and He gave us you, and you are His.”

Do you teach your children this? The firstborn shows what is true for all of your children. The fruit of your body, just like the fruit of your work, belongs to Yahweh. If you refuse to give it to Him, watch out: you could end up like Pharaoh.

C. The Function, v. 16

This dedication of the firstborn — the cash payment, by the way, has been replaced by water baptism, partly because of the well-known propensity of religious leaders to develop imaginative new services and charge fees in proportion — serves the exact same purpose as the feast of unleavened bread.

1. A Sign

First of all, it is a sign. It points to something beyond itself. That something is the holiness of God’s whole people, who are His corporate firstborn. The baptism of children today points to the holiness of the whole church. The dedication of children and sacrificing of animals then sent the same message: God is holy, and His people are holy too, for they belong completely to Him — even their children and animals. Any theology that overlooks this, or that posits that what you do with your children and your animals is of no consequence to God, is an unbiblical theology.

2. A Reminder

And this rite is a reminder. The word translated “phylacteries” in the NASB means “something worn on the head,” possibly a headband. The point is that it’s something always in front of your nose, a constant inescapable reminder. Just like you put something by the door so you don’t forget it when you leave, so you pay the money for your sons or sacrifice your animals so you don’t forget that God delivered you from Egypt and you belong completely to Him now.

D. The Reason: God Brought You Out of Egypt, v. 16c

God delivered you.

And so, brothers and sisters, don’t neglect the rites of holiness. You are His. You belong to Him. And so live like it by celebrating the Sabbath and the Lord’s Supper and baptizing your babies. Otherwise you’ll forget that you exist for God and start thinking you exist for yourself. That’s a lie — but it’s a compelling one that will take you in unless you keep being reminded by the rites of holiness. Engage in them with a whole heart and mouth that speaks the word of God, and they will help you become holier — just like the firstborn Son whom God sacrificed to save the world for Himself. God is not asking you to give anything which He’s not willing to give. So believe and trust Him. Amen.