

Redemption of the Firstborn

Every firstborn male creature was the Lord's. The Israelites were to sacrifice every firstborn male animal of their livestock – of their clean domestic animals: cattle, sheep and goats. The blood of the ritually clean animal was sprinkled on the altar at the tabernacle; the fat of the animal was burned to the Lord; the meat was given to the priests and their families for food.

The firstborn son, on the other hand, was to be redeemed. The Lord rejected human sacrifice, and yet the firstborn son of every Israelite family was special to the Lord. That son was to be devoted to the Lord, to a life of service at the tabernacle. However, the Lord chose the tribe of Levi to do this work as a substitute for the firstborn sons of the other tribes. And so the young lads of all the other tribes were redeemed from the work which was transferred to the Levites – redeemed for 5 shekels of silver. Instead of the eldest son of every family in Israel devoting his life to service at the tabernacle, the whole tribe of Levi was set apart for this work. But then the families had to pay 5 shekels of silver to the tabernacle to buy their boy back.

So that was the law concerning clean animals and eldest sons. But there was one more law concerning firstborn. And that was the law which concerned the firstborn of unclean livestock – of donkeys. *What to do with a donkey?* It could not be sacrificed at the tabernacle. Its unclean blood could not be sprinkled on the holy altar. Its unclean meat could not be eaten by the priests and their families. *What to do with the unclean donkey?*

The Israelite had a choice. If he wanted to keep it (after all, donkeys were important as beasts of burden) – if he wanted to keep the donkey, he could redeem it with a lamb. He then would have to bring a lamb to the tabernacle for sacrifice. The lamb would have to die for the donkey. If he did not want to sacrifice a lamb, then he had no choice but to break the donkey's neck. He had to kill it.

What is this all about? The context tells us that it has to do with the consecration (the setting apart) of the firstborn male of every Israelite woman and every domestic animal because of what God had done in Egypt, in the tenth plague.

You remember how that went. Israel was in slavery in Egypt. Moses had delivered the same message to Pharaoh king of Egypt many times: *Let my people go!* Pharaoh stubbornly refused. Plague after plague, he refused. And then the Lord really did something. He struck dead every firstborn in Egypt, both man and animal. The firstborn children and animals of the Israelites were passed over. They were protected by the blood of the lamb.

The night was called Passover. On the eve of the night, each Israelite family had to slaughter a lamb. They smeared the blood of the lamb on the doorposts of the house. Then they ate the lamb. When at God's command the angel of death came to strike dead every firstborn, he passed over the homes of the Israelites. They were protected by the blood of the lamb. But he killed the firstborn son of every Egyptian family and every firstborn male animal belonging to the Egyptians.

That day Pharaoh had had enough. He told Moses to take the Israelites and go. And God delivered His people with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

God had adopted Israel as His own – to be, as it were, His firstborn son. As a sign of that adoption, God said every firstborn son in Israel is Mine. As a memorial of that evening when God saved Israel and destroyed Egypt, the Israelites were to devote their eldest sons to God, and to sacrifice the firstborn of their clean livestock. It was a sign, a symbol, a commemoration of how the Lord had brought them out of Egypt.

And yet, we are left with that donkey. *Redeem with a lamb every firstborn donkey, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck.* What about this donkey? Every firstborn creature – man or domestic animal – must be given to the Lord. But since the donkey was unclean, it could not be presented in sacrifice. What then? Should it be allowed to go free from the universal law? No, it could not. God allows no exceptions. The donkey is rightfully his, and yet it cannot be offered to him. Catch-22. The Israelite seemed to be trapped by conflicting regulations.

There was only one thing to do – *break the unclean animal's neck. Or ...* redeem it. The donkey could be saved by the substitution of a lamb in its place.

That unclean animal, that donkey (let the reader not be too greatly offended) is us. Like it or not, we are the donkey. We are rightly the property of the Lord – the Lord who made us. But the problem is that we, because of our sins, are unacceptable to God. Our sins make us unclean. There is only one thing to do with the unclean – break their necks. Destroy them. Get them away from the presence of God. Or ... redeem them. Redeem them with a lamb, with the Lamb, the Lamb of God. The clean, pure, spotless Lamb of God, Christ Jesus.

The Lamb of God must stand in our stead. He must stand in as our substitute. If not, we must die eternally in the land of the broken necks.

Know and understand, beloved, believe and confess that the spotless Lamb of God has already been offered for you. He has redeemed you from the deadly curse of the law.

The Israelite must have wondered what to do when a firstborn male donkey was born. Which should die, the donkey or the lamb? He would have paused to estimate and compare. Which was more valuable to him: the lamb, or the donkey? Should he sacrifice the lamb to redeem the donkey, or should he break the donkey's neck?

The value of the two animals could be considered and compared. Whichever was of less value at the moment would die. But surely, there was no comparison between the value of our souls and the life of the Lord Jesus. And yet the Lamb dies, and man the donkey is spared. Christ died that we may live. Sinners bought with the blood of the Son of God! The blood of the Lamb was more precious than silver and gold. And yet that blood bought us – dust of the earth.

The breaking of a donkey's neck is one thing – a rather small thing. A small thing when compared to the wrath to come. The eternal wrath of God – that's much greater, much worse than the breaking of a donkey's neck. But that is the everlasting death from which Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, has redeemed us. As the donkey ran free when the lamb was sacrificed, so we run free because the

Lamb of God was sacrificed. Sacrificed on the altar of the cross. Like the donkey,
we run free.

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