

Part 2: Biblical Themes in the Old Testament

I. Reconciliation with God

27. God's Firstborn

The passage from Hebrews 12 that I quoted at the end of the previous lecture speaks of God's covenant people, reconciled through the blood of Jesus, coming to the heavenly Jerusalem and "*to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven*" (v. 23). That word—firstborn—is a significant one which helps us understand the privileges and responsibilities of those whom God has reconciled to himself by grace and entered into covenant with. So, we should look at what it means to be part of the church of God's firstborn.

To start with we need to note that in the cultures of the ancient Near East, the eldest or firstborn sons held the position of honor among their siblings. In Israel their privileges included a larger inheritance, a special blessing from the father, a position of leadership within the family, and an honored place at meals. In a family without sons, these privileges and responsibilities fell to the eldest daughter. This probably helps explain why tradition had it that the eldest daughter should be first to marry. (Hence Laban's concern that despite Jacob's request, Leah be married before Rachel (Gen. 29). And King Saul's initial offer to David of his oldest daughter Merab rather than the younger Michal (1 Sam. 18).)

The priority of the firstborn was upheld even if a father actually preferred another son. Deut 21:15-17 addresses this: "*If a man has two wives, and he loves one but not the other, and both bear him sons but the firstborn is the son of the wife he does not love, when he wills his property to his sons, he must not give the rights of the firstborn to the son of the wife he loves in preference to his actual firstborn, the son of the wife he does not love. He must acknowledge the son of his unloved wife as the firstborn by giving him a double share of all he has. That son is the first sign of his father's strength. The right of the firstborn belongs to him.*"

There were exceptions to the rule but these were certainly contrary to expectation.

- Some exceptions were because of moral failure: Jacob gained the blessing of the firstborn only by misleading Isaac into believing that he was Esau. God had intended all along that Jacob instead of Esau receive the blessing, but not by way of deception. Another exception was made for Jacob's firstborn, Reuben. As 1 Chron. 5:1 tells us, his rights as firstborn were given to the sons of Joseph because Reuben had "defiled his father's marriage bed."
- Other exceptions were by God's direction and appointment. It took an order of God for Abraham to give Isaac, rather than Ishmael, the blessings due the firstborn. Four generations later, Joseph tried to correct his father's apparent mistake when Jacob prepared to give the younger, Ephraim, the blessing due the firstborn, Manasseh, but acquiesced when Jacob, evidently under God's direction, persisted. And hundreds of years after this, although Samuel's anointing of David for kingship was not technically a firstborn blessing, Jesse was quite surprised that it wasn't given to his eldest son, or at least one of those older than David. But this too was by God's appointment, as Samuel indicated and as confirmed in other biblical literature, eg. Psalm 89:27 – "*And I will appoint him (David) to be my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth.*"

Israel itself was intended to be regarded as a sort of special exception among the nations of the world. It certainly was not the oldest of the nations, but was declared by God to be his firstborn. The first reference to this is God's instruction to Moses to tell Pharaoh that Israel was his firstborn son (Ex. 4:22).

There was no mistaking the implications. In this milieu, it was a significant honor for God to refer to Israel as his firstborn, and also a significant affront for Pharaoh to try to steal the one selected to inherit God's wealth and blessings. God would not stand for it; he told Moses to tell Pharaoh: "I told you, 'Let my son go, so he may worship me.' But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son" (Ex. 4:23).

After repeated exchanges between God and Pharaoh, and many plagues to demonstrate God's right to Israel's service, this is just what happened. God exercised his claim on the firstborn of Egypt by putting them to death. Then, everyone in Israel and in Egypt knew that Yahweh was the Lord and Master of both Israel and Egypt. And Pharaoh had no choice but to let the Israelites go.

It should be noted, however, that Israel's position as God's appointed firstborn was not without danger to them as well. The people of Israel were not immune from God's judgment on the firstborn of Egypt unless they carefully followed his instructions and applied the blood of the Passover lambs to the doorposts and lintels of their dwellings. Then their firstborn were spared from death and became part of the victory parade that left Egypt. As a reminder of the deliverance that God had brought about, he decreed an annual celebration of the Passover, and the dedication to him of the first offspring of every womb.

By rights, the lives of all Israelites were forfeit to God as the one who had redeemed them.

- Ex. 13:1-2 *The LORD said to Moses, "Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether human or animal."*

Israel was not surprised to find out that when Yahweh brought them out of Egypt, they now owed him their firstborn. The firstborn of Israel were to be used in the practices and support of the worship of the Lord. They were to be set apart, to be made holy so that they could serve as ties to bind God to his people. For as it was, there was a great gulf between them, a gulf that could be bridged only by God's continuing grace.

However, what was unusual about God's rules was the circumstances whereby the people could redeem the firstborn to be sacrificed. God said that lambs could substitute on the altar for firstborn donkeys. And he said that every firstborn son of Israel was to be similarly redeemed. God didn't want Israel to sacrifice her sons; that was an abomination to him. He would accept an animal in their place. And Israel was happy to comply, although at certain points in their subsequent history, and under the influence of pagan neighbors, firstborn sons were sacrificed.

That may have been what happened in Israel during the reign of the wicked King Ahab. 1 Kings 16:34 reads, "*In Ahab's time, Hiel of Bethel rebuilt Jericho. He laid its foundations at the cost of his firstborn son Abiram, and he set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, in accordance with the word of the LORD spoken by Joshua son of Nun.*"

Centuries before, Joshua had told the people of God's desire to preserve the ruins of Jericho as a constant reminder that they had not conquered the Canaanites by their own strength but with the supernatural help of the Lord. But Ahab scorned the message proclaimed by Jericho's ruins and instead, commissioned Jericho's rebuilding to enhance his own reputation. It was significant then that Ahab's architect and builder lost his sons in the project, whether by the direct hand of the Lord or because Hiel, with Ahab's blessing, practiced child sacrifice.

What God really wanted was that all firstborn sons, as representatives of Israel's strength, be set apart for his service in their life rather than by their death. After all, Israel's main duty was to live for God, not to die for him. That's why God made provision for Israel to redeem their firstborn sons, a pattern of substitutionary sacrifice that had already been established in Abraham's time when God provided a ram as a substitute for Isaac.

But now, God was more specific about what Israel had to do. He told them (Num 3:45): "Take the Levites in place of all the firstborn of Israel...The Levites are to be mine. I am the LORD." Ever afterwards the Levites had special privileges, but also immense responsibilities, with the result that their failures were punished more harshly than those of the rest of Israel. Remember, for example, God's sentence of death upon Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu when they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord (Lev. 10:1-3). And also Uzzah's death when he dared to touch the Ark of the Covenant during its transportation from the house of Abinidab to Jerusalem in the time of David (2 Sam. 6:3-7).

All of God's regulations about the firstborn and the Levites who represented them were designed to facilitate the knowledge and dedication required of the whole community of God's people; the whole community was God's firstborn, with all the privileges and responsibilities that signified. And foremost among these privileges and responsibilities was the wholehearted worship of the Lord. Remember the basic truth God had proclaimed to Pharaoh. "*Israel is my firstborn son... Let my son go, so he may worship me.*" (Ex. 4:22-23).

We might paraphrase God's message to Israel in his rules regarding the firstborn something like this: "Remember that I own you; you'll remember that as you set apart for my service the firstborn of your children and animals. Experience my grace in the substitutionary sacrifices that I allow. Remember and celebrate your departure from Egypt; that will keep you humbly dependent. In fact, keep these teachings always before yourselves and your children so that you will always worship me and me alone."

It turns out that God's requirements are pretty similar today. The important difference is that Jesus Christ has taken the place of all the firstborn who were set apart for God's service. By Christ's one sacrifice he has rendered bloody sacrifice obsolete, for he has fully satisfied in himself, God's requirement for holiness. Christ is the preeminent firstborn in whom all the qualities and riches of his Father are concentrated. So Paul in Col 1 calls him the firstborn over all creation. His inheritance is as broad as the universe. Furthermore, by the resurrection which followed his sacrificial death, he became the firstborn from the dead, and one whose rule extends beyond the universe to death itself. What's more, through Christ, you and I can have access to the full inheritance that belongs to firstborn children.

Before Christ, however, Israel's conception of their inheritance as the firstborn of God was centered on the Promised Land. Every tribe had an assigned inheritance there, and every family within every tribe. And if God's rules for life there were followed, no family's piece of the Promised Land could be taken away. But now we've come to understand that what we've been given in Christ is much bigger and better than a piece of land; we share in the life of Christ himself—an inheritance that will not spoil or fade or pass away. And after his second coming we'll be introduced to more glories yet. But this also obligates us to pay even closer attention than Israel did, of our duties as God's firstborn children.

Deut. 14:2 captures the essence of what was often emphasized to Israel: “*You are a people holy to the LORD your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the LORD has chosen you to be his treasured possession.*” “A people holy to the Lord” and “a treasured possession.” Perhaps we can understand this better if we focus on the duties of those who held special offices within Old Testament Israel. I’m speaking of Israel’s prophets, priests, and kings.

Israel’s prophets had the task of conveying God’s desires to the people. In fact, the prophet often prefaced his words by saying, “Thus says the Lord.” Then would follow whatever God wanted his people to know, often words of reproof for sin and calls to repentance, and depending on the response to these things, either words of judgment or of forgiveness and pardon. Sometimes prophets reminded the people of God’s will as previously revealed through Moses and his successors. But sometimes too, they were given new revelations specific for the occasion. These might also include predictions of future events. The messages of true prophets needed to be heeded while the false prophets needed to be vociferously rejected. If, for example a prophet incited rebellion against God (cf. Deut. 13:5) or if his ostensible prediction from God didn’t come true (cf. Deut 18:22), he was to be considered a false prophet.

There were prophets in Israel’s early history: Moses, Miriam, Samuel, etc. But the prophets became particularly active after Solomon’s death and during the decline in faithfulness that marked the history of both Israel and Judah in the years before God finally sent them both into exile for their apostasy.

A second important office in Old Testament Israel was that of priest. The priests had the divinely appointed role to be mediators between God and the people; they represented God to the people and the people to God. Among their responsibilities was to offer the appropriate sacrifices for sin and to facilitate rituals of purification for what had become impure or defiled. Along with these sacrifices and rituals they had a special task of intercession: pleading the cause of the people before God. They also were required to teach the people the law of God so they might live as God intended.

Before the time that Israel was led out of Egypt and given the Ten Commandments and other laws of God, the priestly functions had largely been performed by the heads of families or tribes. For example, after the flood it was Noah who built an altar and sacrificed burnt offerings to the Lord. Abraham did the same, sacrificing a ram to the Lord, after God released Isaac from the altar of sacrifice. Job also offered sacrifices to God on various occasions. But in Moses’ day, the Levites, and particularly the family of Aaron were consecrated to be the priests for the whole community of God’s people.

King was a third office in ancient Israel, albeit one that was not functional during Israel’s first centuries in the Promised Land since Yahweh himself was considered to be Israel’s rightful king. Eventually, however, the prophet Samuel was given permission by the Lord to accede to the people’s persistent requests for a human king. God had long before established the protocols for such a king (cf. Deut. 17:14-20). He had to be someone of the Lord’s choosing, and once appointed, had to make sure to stay devoted to the Lord by avoiding some common practices of kings—the accumulation of large numbers of horses and wives—and engaging in another practice—the writing out for himself and regular re-reading of the law of God.

These things would help keep his heart pure and enable him to ensure the peace, prosperity, and welfare of the nation. David was widely regarded as the ideal among the kings of Israel. He certainly had his share of problems, but Israel was unified under his leadership and he was said to have done what was right and just for all his people (2 Sam. 8:15).

These three offices within Old Testament Israel find their ultimate expression within one person who fulfills them perfectly. As prophet, Jesus proclaimed the word of God more powerfully and perfectly than any who had come before. In fact, his very life was part of the proclamation, since, as the gospel of John claims, he is the very Word of God made flesh. And he made clear the message that God had been proclaiming all along to and through Israel: Our need to repent of sin and return to God. But he also has given us a new understanding, that he himself is the only one through whom this return can happen.

Christ is not only the prophet to proclaim the necessity and possibility of reconciliation with God; he is the priest who achieved it. He did so with a perfect sacrifice for sin—himself. He was both the priest and the sacrifice. Jesus' sacrifice took place once only, but He still continues as our great High Priest, the One through whom all acceptable prayer and praise is made to God. What's more he now sits "at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us." Rom 8:34

The right hand of God is the supreme position of authority in heaven and on earth. In other words, Jesus is king. He continually expands his church by calling sinners to repentance and graciously forgiving them. He rules over his church by his Holy Spirit in such a way as to enable the defeat of the power of sin in us. And he preserves and protects his people, and will continue to do so until the day when he has vanquished all opposition.

Christ then is our chief prophet and teacher, our only High Priest, and our eternal King. But by virtue of our incorporation into the body of Christ, we share in his anointing to these offices.

- All believers are prophets: when we publicly profess our faith in Christ Jesus, when we speak to others about what God is doing in the world, and when we speak out against evil and injustice of all kinds.
- All believers are priests: when we bring ourselves as sacrifices of prayer and praise and service to God, and also help others through prayer and example, to have a relationship with God.
- All believers are kings; when we so rule our own lives that we continually invite the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit, and when we live in a way that others, seeing our good works, may glorify our Father in heaven.

All of this is what God had in mind when he designated Israel his firstborn and rescued them from slavery in Egypt. That was one of the first installments of what we now have in Christ and which will eventually culminate in glory, in "the heavenly Jerusalem" where untold thousands of angels gather before God with what Hebrews 12:23 calls, "the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven."

In the meantime (this side of heaven) we who have been reconciled to God—we firstborn who are in covenant with God—need to learn more about embracing God's priorities. That's the subject of the next three lectures.