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Exodus 13:1-16

Seventeenth Message

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A FUTURE AND A HOPE – DEDICATION OF THE FIRSTBORN

SERIES : A THEOLOGY OF WORSHIP

This past summer, I had the opportunity to teach through the entire gospel of Mark at a conference of nearly fifty people. Every day was full of study, worship, stories and intense conversations. By day three, I was already quite tired from teaching two and a half hours each day, along with the rest of the activity. I got up early and went down to the dining hall to be alone with God. Spreading my day's notes out in front of me, I began to pray and ask God for strength and clarity for that day's teaching. Now this has only happened to me once before in my life, but clear as day, I sensed God's voice saying, "Stop! Just stop! You don't need those things, you just need ME."

I looked around and uttered a quiet "Oh."

That thought became my prayer that day. That moment became one of the most profound and important moments of my life. More on this story later.

Last week, we saw in chapter 12 of Exodus God's powerful and miraculous birthing of a new nation. In the dead of night, his mighty hand invaded the most powerful nation on earth, plundered it of its future, and from an oppressed, downtrodden people, birthed a new nation. This nation would have influence far greater than Egypt, Babylon, Greece, Rome, Germany, Great Britain, the Soviet Union and even the United States combined. This nation's influence would cut across all boundaries, physical, temporal, social, political and spiritual.

This nation, called by YHWH his "firstborn son," became the hope and future for the world. Through this ragtag group of nomadic shepherds, God would bring the One who would be the one true hope and future for mankind.

As we saw last week, God's great acts in delivering a people were very much like the birthing process. Tremendous contractions and birth pangs, accompanied by immeasurable pain, followed by a miraculous birth. New life bursting forward out of impossible circumstances.

Now once Israel has been birthed, God asks for a large price. He asks that all of Israel, corporately and individually, give back to him something of immeasurable value, commensurate with what he has done. He asks, in fact he demands, that the firstborn of every household, every stable and every pasture be consecrated, set apart to him. Each one is to belong to the Lord himself and serve as a living reminder of God's great acts.

So we must stop and ask: what does this mean? What does it mean to consecrate the firstborn? Does this mean anything at all for us today in the 21st century? Or is it all so much ancient practice that perhaps is mildly interesting but ultimately irrelevant to us?

Let's get into the text in chapter 13 of Exodus and see if we can unravel what God is doing here and what he might have for us today.

The first thing we'll note about the passage is that it breaks neatly into three parts: two sets of text about the consecration of the first-

born sandwiching YHWH's direction to Israel to celebrate the Feast of the Unleavened Bread each year. What at first glance seems to be a rather random collection of directions for the people actually proves to be a carefully constructed passage. Just like changing the bread on your sandwich and what goes in between determines the whole nature of your lunch, so these two sets of directions from YHWH modify and define each other.

We begin with verses 1 and 2 of chapter 13:

I. Consecration of the Firstborn (13:1-2)

Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Sanctify to Me every first-born, the first offspring of every womb among the sons of Israel, both of man and beast; it belongs to Me." (Exod 13:1-2 NASB)

The text gives us God's very direct words: your newborns belong to ME! You are to sanctify, consecrate, set apart all of them to me.

God's act of slaying the firstborn of Egypt while sparing the firstborn of Israel in order to bring about deliverance of the children of Israel is so great, so profound in its impact and consequence, that it must never be forgotten. It must be commemorated from generation to generation not just in ceremony, but in the identification of actual people and animals as symbolic representations of God's great action on behalf of his people. God entered time and space and transformed the natural order of events to redeem his people. The firstborn are to be set aside as special and unique, walking, breathing reminders of God's faithfulness.

Certain things serve as continual reminders of important and sometimes not so important events or seasons in life. When I see the Thanksgiving turkey coming out of the oven, it always takes me back to my Aunt Martha's old house in South Pasadena: the scents of great food, and memories of mischief with my cousins, the inevitable seating at the kids' table in the family room, usually a card table. I find that every time I notice my messy garage, I think of my dad and his perfectly kept space.

I'm continually posting notes all over the house to remind me to do something or contact someone. In ancient Israel, all firstborn were to be living notes all over the house. Every time you looked at your firstborn son or daughter, sheep or goat, or any other creature in your family or household, they would be a reminder of what God had done in delivering you from your enemy.

This was not a foreign concept in ancient societies. Tenant farmers would pay their rent via the first fruits of their produce. Not only did this acknowledge the ownership of the land by someone else, but "by extrapolation, [it was] an acknowledgement of sovereignty."¹

Fathers know that there is something transcendently special about that moment when they hold their firstborn child for the first time. It is a moment of heaven meeting earth. To think that God involves you in his miraculous work of creation and then gives you the privi-

lege of holding and caring for this precious one! Imagine him saying then, “Now give your son back to me!” Imagine Hannah giving up Samuel, Abraham giving up Isaac.

In Israel, YHWH is saying: “This one belongs to me. This firstborn is mine.” The word used here is the Hebrew *qadash*, meaning set apart—holiness, sanctified in terms of position, status or relationship. This one is an important symbol, playing an important role.

Now our text takes what seems to be a random turn. From God’s command that the firstborn be given to him, the writer takes us to Moses’ direction to the people to celebrate a new feast each year, the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

II. The Feast of Unleavened Bread (13:3-10)

And Moses said to the people, “Remember this day in which you went out from Egypt, from the house of slavery; for by a powerful hand the LORD brought you out from this place. And nothing leavened shall be eaten. On this day in the month of Abib, you are about to go forth. And it shall be when the LORD brings you to the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, which He swore to your fathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, that you shall observe this rite in this month. For seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a feast to the LORD. Unleavened bread shall be eaten throughout the seven days; and nothing leavened shall be seen among you, nor shall any leaven be seen among you in all your borders. And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, ‘It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt.’ And it shall serve as a sign to you on your hand, and as a reminder on your forehead, that the law of the LORD may be in your mouth; for with a powerful hand the LORD brought you out of Egypt. Therefore, you shall keep this ordinance at its appointed time from year to year. (13:3-10)

This text is actually a fairly close repeat from material we looked at two weeks ago in chapter 12. And just as here, the account of the feast is sandwiched between instructions from God for a feast. In chapter 12, it’s the celebration of Passover.

In both cases, the essence of what God is doing is defined and deepened by what surrounds it. But before we can go there, we first need to discern what’s at the heart of this declaration from God. That clue comes in the examination of the literary structure of this text. It looks like this:

- A. Commemorate this day (3)
- B. Out of Egypt, out of slavery by YHWH’s mighty hand (3)
- C. Eat nothing with yeast (3)
 - D. TODAY – you are leaving (4)
 - X. Observe –when he brings you to the sworn land of milk and honey (5)
 - D’ FESTIVAL – on the 7th day (6)
- C’ Eat unleavened only – no yeast (7)
- B’ Tell your son... YHWH brought you out of Egypt with His mighty hand (8-9)
- A’ You shall keep this ordinance (10)

Now the nation of Israel is nowhere near Palestine yet. They have a long way to go. Nevertheless, God is already telling them about the celebrations they will have once they get there! Their future is so certain, their hope so secure, that YHWH is already laying out the party

plans. What this text is all about then is what we see at the literary center: “...when he brings you to the land... he swore to your fathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey...” (v. 5).

Everyone needs a sense of hope and a future. It was one thing for Israel to be released from the tyranny of their enemy Egypt. But they needed more. They needed to know where they were going and what it would be like. They needed to know that there was more ahead than wilderness, more ahead than heat and sand and ultimately death. They needed to know more than that old bumper sticker: “Life stinks and then you die.”

And God knows our propensity to forget: both the promises he has made and his loyal love in the past and present. So to his people he directs that they must commemorate this day. As Walter Bruggeman says: “present-tense well-being causes disregard of past-tense tribulation. Moreover, such forgetting causes a disregard of dependence on YHWH and a sense of one’s independence, autonomy and self-sufficiency. The purpose of the festival is to keep the past present, authoritative, and powerfully identity-giving.”²

Note also that the declaration contains both corporate and individual notes: “Moses said to the people, ‘Commemorate this day.’” Later he says, “On that day, tell your son, ‘I do this because of what the LORD did for me.’” God’s salvation work functions on both levels. In our egocentric culture, it’s not so difficult for us to grasp the notion of God doing a great work in the lives of individual people. We often forget, however, that God is doing a great corporate work as well. In the gospels, we see Jesus delivering an entire pagan nation through one healed demoniac (Mark 5:7-8). In Acts, we see God convert 3,000 in one day through Peter’s preaching (Acts 2:41). In Capernaum, we see Jesus save an entire family through the healing of a royal official’s son (John 4:46-54). Jesus delivers entire families, communities and nations. In the summer of 2003 at our Junior High river camp, twelve of our students stepped forward to declare to the world through baptism in a gorgeous clear river that they belong to Jesus. God crosses boundaries, cultures and generations without regard for man’s conventions and methods.

Also, consider the bread. The unleavened bread, *matsot*, so central to the feast, clearly represents the hurried state of the people as they prepared for God to open the gates of Egypt. I’m persuaded, however, that it is also a wonderful device for reminding the people of God in a very tangible manner. Every time you eat that dry, crispy bread, you have a reminder of what God has done, engaging all the senses: the eyes see flat, hard bread; the nose senses no fragrance from a soft, risen loaf; the tongue tastes the somewhat bitter, dry taste; the hand feels the brittle, uneven texture; the ears hear the crack of the leavenless wafer rather than the quiet softness of a fresh loaf. Continual observance incorporating the dry unleavened wafer also provided a sharp contrast to the abundant land; the land gushing with milk and honey, thereby welling up renewed appreciation for all of God’s blessings. God knows how quickly Israel will forget what he has done for them and from where they have come. They must have this continual reminder.

I’m often asked if I miss the business world I left five years ago. I love that question, because it’s a great reminder to me of what God has done. I enjoyed my business life, but I’m passionate about what I’m doing now. I sometimes forget that, however, when I walk into the Junior High room at 8:00 on a Sunday morning to find nearly a hundred kids amped up on donuts and hot chocolate. So keep asking...

Now our story turns back to the command to sanctify the firstborn. Moses details for the people what God desires, and at the center of the text, we see that which we might not expect.

III. Dedication of the Firstborn (13:11-16)

“Now it shall come about when the LORD brings you to the land of the Canaanite, as He swore to you and to your fathers, and gives it to you, that you shall devote to the LORD the first offspring of every womb, and the first offspring of every beast that you own; the males belong to the LORD. But every first offspring of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, but if you do not redeem it, then you shall break its neck; and every first-born of man among your sons you shall redeem. And it shall be when your son asks you in time to come, saying, ‘What is this?’ then you shall say to him, ‘With a powerful hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. And it came about, when Pharaoh was stubborn about letting us go, that the LORD killed every first-born in the land of Egypt, both the first-born of man and the first-born of beast. Therefore, I sacrifice to the LORD the males, the first offspring of every womb, but every first-born of my sons I redeem.’ So it shall serve as a sign on your hand, and as phylacteries on your forehead, for with a powerful hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt.” (13:11-16)

In most ancient cultures, it was the firstborn who was at the center of a family’s hope. It was the firstborn who held the key to carrying on the family name, legacy and wealth. The firstborn was of paramount importance, vested with the leadership role upon the father’s death. The firstborn garnered more respect, received a larger inheritance, and was given the best of the father’s blessings.

Now YHWH is redefining matters. He tells Israel that no longer do the firstborn belong to them, they belong to him. Not only that, the firstborn are not the hope and future of Israel. YHWH himself is Israel’s hope and future. He is the one who has avenged Pharaoh’s slaying of the firstborn of Israel and will deliver the people from slavery. He is the one who will give them a land of their own, a piece of paradise gushing with milk and honey. He will dwell with his people, give them a reason for being, and make them great among the nations.

Once again, the literary structure of this passage reveals the heart of the matter, the motivating factor for God’s declaration to his people:

- A. After the Lord brings you to the land... (11)
- B. Give to YHWH the firstborn of every womb (12)
- C. Redeem every firstborn (13)
- X. When your son asks... say, “With a mighty hand the Lord brought us out” (14)
- C’ When Pharaoh refused, YHWH killed every firstborn of Egypt (15)
- B’ This is why I sacrifice to YHWH and redeem my sons... (15)
- A’ It will be a sign... YHWH brought us out with a mighty hand (16)

The cost to redeem Israel and demonstrate to the world God’s sovereignty was enormous. All the plagues of Egypt could be attributed to “natural” causes save one: the mass death of all Egypt’s firstborn. While the previous plagues stood as polemics against the gods of Egypt, the death of the firstborn provided a stunning blow to the greatest empire on earth at the time: only the sovereign God of the universe could effect such an astounding blow. There was to be no

mistake about who was at work and who held the controls of life and death. That is how hardhearted we are: it sometimes takes the striking nature and finality of death to get our attention and break through.

But God was not demanding fair recompense from Israel for his actions. He was commanding Israel to REMEMBER. They must remember from whence they came, the cost paid to deliver them, and who brought about their miraculous escape. That is why the firstborn is dedicated. When your son asks why we do this, the stories should flow and the greatness of God is to be exclaimed.

Not only does YHWH want the firstborn of each human womb in Israel, but also of each animal. The ceremony, remembrance and celebration are to be so comprehensive that there is no chance that anyone in Israel could forget what God has done. Even each donkey is to be redeemed with a lamb—perhaps like Jesus set aside that donkey to ride into Jerusalem. Every firstborn among the sons is to be redeemed by sacrifice as well.

The ceremony and celebration are to be such a big deal that your son cannot help but ask, “What’s this all about, dad?” The answer goes to the root: “With a mighty hand, YHWH brought us out of slavery. As a result we live free, we live in relationship and we live in the land flowing with milk and honey—but a foretaste of what’s to come in eternity.” Is this not reason to celebrate? Yes it is!

The sacrifice of Egypt’s firstborn as the penultimate act of God’s work in Egypt (the final being the Red Sea miracle) also harkens back to Pharaoh’s desperate act to stem the growth of Israel in the days of Moses’ infancy. Pharaoh’s act was misguided and unsuccessful; God’s act accurate, sure and entirely successful.

So God is saying to Israel: No longer is your firstborn your hope and your future. The fact is, they belong to me, says the Lord. Instead, I am your hope and your future. Do not invest your lives in your firstborn Israel, invest your lives in ME. Then I will make you MY firstborn.

IV. Reflections

I want to reflect on a couple of thoughts today. Thoughts I hope will challenge all of us to examine where we seek our future and our hope. Thoughts that perhaps will begin to transform our thinking, rearrange our priorities and set us free to live with abandon in the light of God’s promises.

The first is a question:

A. What is our firstborn, and are we willing to give it up?

In our world today, we tend not to emphasize birth order so much, unless the therapists are telling us why our firstborns are so dysfunctional because of all our mistakes.

Whether we have children or not though, all of us have a firstborn. Because all of us have a place where we put our hope. All of us have a place where we vest in our future.

What is yours?

Perhaps it is your children. Maybe your happiness and satisfaction depend upon the success of your kids. If they are doing well in school, in sports, in music, then all is well. If they are achieving, then you are succeeding. If they are not, does your world come apart? Are you trying to fill the emptiness in your soul with your kids?

Maybe it’s your bank account, your stock options, your equity position.

Perhaps it's busyness and productivity. If you stop, you come face to face with the pain and reality of life. You feel as though your only hope is to keep going, keep filling the emptiness, keep productivity up and the demons of an uncertain future at bay.

Maybe you're like me. Maybe your firstborn is perfection and control. If all you do is perfect and tightly controlled, you need to ask, Why? What happens when life and events don't go according to plan? Is your hope dashed, your future in question?

I loved my father dearly, but as a young man he was beholden to alcohol to dull the pain of a fractured past and the pressures of life. As a result, I learned how to function in perfection. In perfection I found that no one would be upset with me, least of all my dad. A perfect Mark gave me the best chance of avoiding an explosion of anger. A perfect Mark meant praise at home and school.

But the pursuit of perfection breeds profound insecurity. And insecurity eats away at the soul. I know, because insecurity has eaten at my soul the way locusts destroy the crops. My response has been the pursuit of perfection. Not so much in all that I do anymore, but certainly in my public persona, what people think of me. All is well, all is under control. Sin is at bay. Rarely a misstep, rarely a misspoken word. The pursuit of a perfect public persona.

God has worked overtime on me this year. Beginning with the death of my father in the winter and ending where only the Master-Surgeon knows, he is systematically stripping me of the pretense. I'm tired of the façade. I'm tired of the game.

In his book *Soul Talk*, Larry Crabb makes a simple statement that pierced my heart: "There is nothing more harmful to the soul on its journey to God than living an unobserved life."³

I don't know about you, but I'm tired of living an unobserved life. I don't mean my public persona, I mean what's really happening inside. And that leads me to my second thought:

B. Are we telling our stories of deliverance?

Your story of deliverance must be told. Like the children of Israel, if yours do not hear your story of deliverance, they will never know their father, they will never know their mother and they will not know their true identity. Worst of all, they won't know of the Lord's goodness to you. God's acts of deliverance in our lives must be told.

I have a good friend who shared his story for the first time this summer in Romania. Entering in, he thought he had nothing to say. Indeed, he wasn't saved out of a prison cell in Folsom. He wasn't rescued from a life of drug addiction. God didn't pull him back from a near death experience. His life will probably never play on the best seller rack at the Christian bookstore.

But he shared with honesty. He shared his fears, his hurt, his weaknesses. My eyes welled up as I watched Americans and Romanians alike embrace my friend. For the first time, he was known. Perhaps there is still more to come. Regardless, for the first time he was known. And in that moment, he tasted heaven.

God so passionately wants to be our hope and future. He gave his Son that we might be delivered. Our enemy is not Egypt. It's not the Democrats. It's not the Republicans. It's not that devil-boss. It's not even Al Qaeda. Our enemy is the Evil One, the one who seeks to keep us bound in our sin, alienated from our God who loves us so. The gates are open, the sea is parted, the road to life clear and it's called Jesus.

Jesus says, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

When Jesus gathered his disciples to eat that final meal, he didn't just partake of the Passover with them. He redefined the Passover. No longer was a lamb to be slain and blood sprinkled on the doors. The Lamb has been slain and his blood of life is on your heart. No longer is the bread just symbolic of a physical deliverance, it is symbolic of the broken body of the ultimate Deliverer. By entering the feast, you are entering into deliverance, freedom, and the true future and hope.

The word from the Spirit in the dining hall at the conference became our unofficial theme that week. It was as though a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I felt free and refreshed, and enjoyed teaching the word so much. God wrested from my hands all the expectations and desires I had for the week and replaced them with a desire for him, only him.

Will you give your firstborn and let the Lord of the universe make you *his* firstborn? Will you trade it in for real life—a real hope and a real future? Will you tell your story and be known? There is nothing sweeter than to be called a son of the living God, a daughter of the Heavenly Father. "My Firstborn" says he. In him I am well pleased. In her I am well pleased. In my people I am well pleased."

1. Walter Brueggemann, "Exodus," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:785.

2. Brueggemann, "Exodus," 786.

3. Larry Crabb, *Soul Talk* (Nashville: Integrity, 2003), 188.