



Studies in the Book of Exodus

Text

Exodus 4:18-31

Topic

When God sought to kill her son,
Zipporah was ready with a flint knife to circumcise him

Title

"It Slices... It Dices... It Circumcises"

Some men wouldn't want their wives to remarry someone else in the event of their death, but not Heinrich Heine. The German poet left everything to his wife. But there was one stipulation: She must remarry. His will read, *"Because then there will be at least one man to regret my death."*

It's one of the many weird wills that you hear about. Like the lucky dog who inherited \$12 million when his owner, businesswoman Leona Helmsley, died. And I mean "dog." Helmsley left the fortune to her Maltese, Trouble. It's not because she didn't have any heirs. Helmsley's grandchildren received less than the dog, according to her will, though a judge reduced the sum to a cool \$2 million.

Then there was Charles Millar. A Toronto lawyer and businessman, he left his sizable assets up for grabs to pretty much any local woman. In his will, he said that all of his estate should be left in a cash sum to the married Toronto woman who could birth the most children in the decade following his death. It became known as the “Stork Derby,” and many women vied for a chance to claim the prize. In the end, four women tied for it, with nine children each. Two-runners up were given a small amount for their efforts.

No one dies in our verses, but I got thinking about inheritances because the word “firstborn” is prominent throughout:

- God names Israel as His “son... [His] **firstborn**” (v22).
- Moses’ message to Pharaoh is, “let My son go that he may serve Me. But if you refuse to let him go, indeed I will kill your son, your **firstborn**” (v23).
- Moses own firstborn son figures prominently in these verses.

A lot of unusual things happen in these verses - things that have commentators baffled and befuddled. Whatever secondary issues arise, the primary theme is the firstborn.

I’ll organize my comments around two points: #1 It’s Because Of The Firstborn That You Can Be Saved, and #2 It’s Because Of The Firstborn That Israel Will Be Saved.

#1 It’s Because Of The Firstborn That You Can Be Saved

(v18-23)

The very first mention of the “firstborn” in Exodus is in our verses. It’s the first of many. God’s confrontation with Pharaoh builds through nine plagues until finally the Lord says in chapter eleven,

Exo 11:5 and all the **firstborn** in the land of Egypt shall die, from the **firstborn** of Pharaoh who sits on his throne, even to the **firstborn** of the female servant who *is* behind the handmill, and all the **firstborn** of the animals.

One of the commentators I read this week said, “Remember that in the Old Testament, physical things became spiritual truths in the New Testament. They were like an object lesson of God's true intent realized in Jesus.”

What spiritual truth was God showing mankind in the death of the firstborn? Remember that the Israelites would be spared the death of their firstborn when they sacrificed a lamb for each household, and applied its blood on their doorposts. When God saw the blood, He would pass-over their homes.

The spiritual truth they were being shown was this: The blood of an innocent lamb, properly sacrificed, could substitute for a human being, saving his or her life.

Centuries later, Jesus would be announced as “the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world.” His sacrifice substitutes for the human race - for “whosoever will believe in Him” - saving a person for eternity.

The life or death of the firstborn of Israel and Egypt was “an object lesson of God’s true intent realized in Jesus.” Keep all that in mind as we read the narrative.

Exo 4:18 So Moses went and returned to Jethro his father-in-law, and said to him, "Please let me go and return to my brethren who *are* in Egypt, and see whether they are still alive." And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace."

Common courtesy ought to be practiced at all times. Moses had been with Jethro forty years, and I'm guessing he was his "Number One guy."

Jethro would also be missing his daughter and the grandkids.

We should always think of how our decisions will impact those we love. In the end, we must follow the Lord's definite leading; but we should do so with humility.

There are those who suggest that Moses, when he said he wanted to see if the Hebrews were "still alive," was being less than forthcoming about his real mission. Maybe; but Moses was under no obligation to explain everything to Jethro. Sometimes an abbreviated version of your story is the best way to communicate.

At any rate, Jethro gave his blessing, and Moses was off to Egypt.

Exo 4:19 Now the LORD said to Moses in Midian, "Go, return to Egypt; for all the men who sought your life are dead."

Earlier in this chapter Moses had been offering excuses to stay in Midian.

Perhaps God anticipated Moses offering as another excuse that he was wanted, dead or alive, and would be killed should he return. God eliminated the excuse before Moses could say it.

Exo 4:20 Then Moses took his wife and his sons and set them on a donkey, and he returned to the land of Egypt. And Moses took the rod of God in his hand.

The “rod of God” was either Moses’ shepherds crook, or the smaller rod all shepherds carried. It was God’s because of His promise to perform wonders and signs through it.

Right after Moses married Zipporah, we were told they had a son who they named Gershom. We don’t learn the name of his second son until chapter eighteen. It’s Eliezer.

Moses had been in the desert forty years. These boys were grown men.

Exo 4:21 And the LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do all those wonders before Pharaoh which I have put in your hand. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.

Let’s get right to what we think about God saying He would “harden [Pharaoh’s] heart.” Commentators count ten passages where we are told that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. There are ten other passages where we read that Pharaoh hardened his own heart.

Pharaoh hardened his heart in the first sign and in all the first five plagues. Not until the sixth plague is it stated that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart (9:12).

Thus we say that Pharaoh had every opportunity to repent, but refused, and the result was that God left him to the rebellion in his heart. The hardening God did was to let Pharaoh be confirmed in his own choice to disobey.

Pharaoh was no mechanical man, predestined to disobey God. He could have chosen otherwise. It's been illustrated this way: "The same sun that melts butter also hardens clay."

Opponents to this view like to quote from the Book of Romans, chapter nine, where Pharaoh is mentioned, and where God is compared to the Master Potter who has power over clay to make it whatever He wants.

What they ignore is that it's a reference from the Book of Jeremiah. In its original context, God goes on to say He will mold a nation one way or another **based on their free-will response to Him:**

Jer 18:7 The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy *it*,

Jer 18:8 if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it.

Jer 18:9 And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant *it*,

Jer 18:10 if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it.

Does that sound deterministic? Does it indicate God has predestined the response? No.

God let Moses know up front what He foreknew. Pharaoh would resist him.

Has it occurred to you how many of God's great servants had ministries in which men would not heed them? Isaiah... Jeremiah... Ezekiel. If you're being faithful to God's Word and to your work for Him, you may or may not see conversions. In fact, the result you see may be a hardening against God.

Exo 4:22 Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD: "Israel *is* My son, My firstborn.

Spiritually speaking, God **was** Father to Israel. It was His miracle of opening up Sarah's womb to conceive Isaac when she and Abraham could no longer have children that led to the "birth" of the nation of Israel.

Here's the thing: Firstborn is more a *title* than it is about birth order. There are sons in the Bible who were born first but who were *not* the firstborn:

- Ishmael was born to Abraham and Sarah *before* Isaac, but Isaac was considered the firstborn, and the inheritor.
- Likewise Esau was born to Isaac and Rebekah *before* Jacob, but he sold his birthright to Jacob who was then the firstborn who inherited the blessing.

Firstborn does not mean "first" in chronological order. It means "first in rank," firstborn by way of preeminence with all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of a "firstborn."

Many nations existed before Israel became one under Moses. They weren't the first nation but they were to be considered the firstborn. The further fact the Savior would come from Israel would only enhance their preeminent status among the nations.

Exo 4:23 So I say to you, let My son go that he may serve Me. But if you refuse to let him go, indeed I will kill your son, your firstborn." ' "

God is not a bully. God wasn't acting like the Mafia. God was preparing for the Passover, when He would show the salvation available in the substitutionary sacrifice of the ultimate firstborn son, Jesus.

Jesus is the firstborn Who must die for all others to live.

The fact Pharaoh's firstborn would die the night of the first Passover if they failed to apply blood only accelerated the inevitable. **Anyone who does not avail themselves of the blood of the final Lamb is dead already.**

The death of Pharaoh's firstborn was therefore avoidable.

I just said that Jesus was God's firstborn. How is that, since He said Israel was His firstborn?

There's a famous verse in Hosea; it's Hosea 11:1, and it says, "When Israel *was* a child, I loved him, And out of Egypt I called My son." It is applied to Jesus in Matthew 2:15, where we read,

Mat 2:15 and [Joseph and Mary were] there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, "OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON."

Jesus is thus identified with Israel. The nation of Israel is God's firstborn; but being eternal as God, and having come through Israel as a man, so is Jesus God's Firstborn.

In Exodus chapter four we are being schooled in spiritual truth. The sacrificed Lamb of God and His blood can substitute for you and be salvation.

Or you can take your own punishment for sin - death followed by eternal damnation.

#2 It's Because Of The Firstborn That Israel Will Be Saved (v24-31)

The privileges of the firstborn, for Israel, were (as stated by the apostle Paul), "the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service *of God*, and the promises; of whom *are* the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ *came*" (Romans 9:4-5).

After the Jews rejected Jesus at His first coming, many would conclude that Israel has no official place in God's plan.

That is an erroneous and unbiblical conclusion. God is not through with Israel. He can't be, because many of His promises to save and bless them as His firstborn are unconditional.

As we read the next few verses, keep in mind that God has made an unconditional covenant with Israel.

Exo 4:24 And it came to pass on the way, at the encampment, that the LORD met him and sought to kill him.

Now that's weird. Or at the very least, unexpected. What was going on?

We'll see in the next two verses that Moses' firstborn son had not been circumcised. But before we talk about that, ***who do you think God was going to kill?***

Before you answer "Moses," let me point out that only personal pronouns are used. We are only told the Lord met "him," and sought to kill "him." The "him" is not made clear.

It's most likely that God sought to kill Gershom - **not** Moses. Probably the best reason for thinking this is that the whole flow of these verses is about the living or the dying of the firstborn of Israel and of Egypt. It therefore makes sense that the "him" is Gershom, the firstborn of Moses.

Exo 4:25 Then Zipporah took a sharp stone and cut off the foreskin of her son and cast *it* at *Moses'* feet, and said, "Surely you *are* a husband of blood to me!"

Exo 4:26 So He let him go. Then she said, "*You are* a husband of blood!" - because of the circumcision.

I need to read a long passage from Genesis so that we are up-to-speed on the importance of circumcision to the Hebrews.

Gen 17:1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I *am* Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless.

Gen 17:2 And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly."

Gen 17:3 Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying:

Gen 17:4 "As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations.

Gen 17:5 No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations.

Gen 17:6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.

Gen 17:7 And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you.

Gen 17:8 Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

Gen 17:9 And God said to Abraham: "As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations.

Gen 17:10 This *is* My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised;

Gen 17:11 and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you.

Gen 17:12 He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant.

Gen 17:13 He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.

Gen 17:14 And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."

God was acting through Moses to deliver Israel. He was living-up to His covenant promises to Abraham. A big part of that covenant was for Israelites to be circumcised. Those not circumcised were to be "cut off from [their] people." In His actions against Gershom, God was thus emphasizing the covenant.

Somehow Zipporah was aware that God would kill her firstborn if he remained uncircumcised. I wish we knew more about what happened. Did an angel stand in their way, intent on killing Gershom? Did he suddenly fall terminally ill?

What was it like when Zipporah said, "I know what to do," and approached her adult son with a sharp flint?

What was Moses doing? What about Eliezer - was he also circumcised? (Just because it doesn't say he was, it doesn't mean he wasn't).

"Husband of blood." Repeated twice - as if that somehow helps us to understand what Zipporah meant.

It might, if we translate it differently. One language scholar said, “the phrase often translated as *“husband of blood”* does not necessarily mean “husband,” but rather, “one bound” in a covenant of blood, in this case referring to Gershom’s circumcision.”

Ziporah’s words might simply have been a declaration that now that he was circumcised, Gershom was bound to the covenant God had made with Abraham.

I like that; it’s simple and to the point.

Why so dramatic? On a very basic level, how would it look for the deliverer of Israel to be in violation of the one sign of the covenant? It would have been a total hypocrisy. At the very least, it would have misrepresented God at a time when it was super important to reveal Him accurately.

I suppose I should spend a few minutes talking about circumcision as a religious ritual for today. It isn’t necessary. There are many passages that reveal this, but none better than Acts chapter fifteen. It recounts the church council in Jerusalem where “And certain *men* came down from Judea and taught the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (v1).

After much discussion, the conclusion of the matter was, “that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, *from* sexual immorality, *from* things strangled, and *from* blood” (v19-20).

In fact, we have no obligation to observe any Jewish rules or rites or rituals. They were the shadow of which Jesus is the substance. We walk in the light - *not* in the shadows.

Why Moses failed to practice it on his sons eludes me, but I can understand it. He was far from his people, with no hope of ever seeing them again. In a situation like that, I can see Moses immersing himself in the Midianite culture.

I offer a fascinating comparison for what it's worth:

- Abraham knew what it was like to sacrifice his firstborn. In Genesis chapter twenty-two God tells him to take Isaac - an adult in his thirties - and offer him as a sacrifice on an altar. Abraham obeyed, and God provided a substitute sacrifice at the last moment.
- In Moses' case, the near death of his firstborn was his own fault; but still he would know a little about what it was like to almost lose him.
- God, of course, would send Jesus, the Firstborn Who would *not* be saved from sacrifice at the last moment, but Who would fulfill all the terms of the covenant God had made with His people, and with all humanity.

Exo 4:27 And the LORD said to Aaron, "Go into the wilderness to meet Moses." So he went and met him on the mountain of God, and kissed him.

The Lord was working at both ends. Moses had been made aware of this at the burning bush; God had already set it in motion.

We see so little of what is going on. God really is working at the other end, for your good and His glory.

Exo 4:28 So Moses told Aaron all the words of the LORD who had sent him, and all the signs which He had commanded him.

Big brother Aaron offered no excuses or objections. Perhaps the continuing oppression in Egypt had steeled him for confrontation.

Exo 4:29 Then Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the children of Israel.

Israel wasn't a nation with laws; not yet. They were tribal, governed by elders of each family.

He'd been gone forty years, but the return of Moses would have been a notable event. It wouldn't have been hard to get the elders interested.

Exo 4:30 And Aaron spoke all the words which the LORD had spoken to Moses. Then he did the signs in the sight of the people.

Exo 4:31 So the people believed; and when they heard that the LORD had visited the children of Israel and that He had looked on their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshiped.

Hope at last, after more than four centuries, for deliverance.

God had not forgotten His covenant with Abraham. In fact, the incident involving circumcision showed how committed God was to keeping His end of the covenant. His promises to Israel were so important that He was ready to enforce the killing of a descendant who was uncircumcised. That's attention to detail.

In the New Testament we read Paul's words, "I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, *of* the tribe of Benjamin. God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew" (Romans 11:1-2).

We go on to read, "And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "THE DELIVERER WILL COME OUT OF ZION, AND HE WILL TURN AWAY UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB..." (11:26).

God's plan is on track. We ought to remain faithful serving Him, pointing everyone to the Lamb of God.

You know who else is called firstborn? **Christians.** The writer of the Book of Hebrews calls Christians, "the general assembly and church of the **firstborn** who are registered in Heaven..." (12:23).

If you are a Christian, you have a preeminent position as sons and daughters of God, Who inherit all spiritual blessing in heavenly places. You are firstborn when you receive Jesus as your Substitute on the Cross.

Your heart - is it butter? Or is it clay?