

SERMONS ON EXODUS: XIII
THE SANCTIFICATION OF THE FIRST-BORN
(Exodus 13)

I happen to have two siblings, two sisters, Shirley, who is five years my senior, and Beverly, who is almost eight years my junior. After Beverly was born some of my aunts and uncles used to kid me that now I was a ham sandwich. The 13th chapter of Exodus is something like that, sandwiched between two distinctive chapters, chapter 12, which deals with the Passover and the deadly 10th Plague, and chapter 14, which tells us of the crossing of the Red Sea. Chapter 13 is a sort of miscellany stuck between the treatment of the two major events that together constitute the Exodus.

Chapter 13 deals with three different topics. The first two, the Feast of the Unleavened Bread and the Sanctification of the First-born, seem to be, as Rabbi Cassuto notes, essentially appendices to the subject of the Passover. The third part takes up again the actual history of the Exodus, tracing the path of the children of Israel after they left, after they were driven out of, Egypt. The chapter may seem a miscellany, but there is nothing that is merely miscellaneous in Holy Scripture. All of it is there for a purpose, and will teach and nourish us if we will let it. The Apostle aptly reminded us, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (II Tim. 3:16-17). We just need to listen for the Word of God in the Word of God.

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The first of these seemingly disparate topics is the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which was to be celebrated through the years on the seven days following the Day of Passover, and so making a complete octave. Like the Passover, the Unleavened Bread is to be a reminder of God’s deliverance from Egypt. When the people left in a great hurry on that night of nights, they grabbed the bread before it was leavened and strapped the kneading bowls in their backs in the fold of their mantles (12:34). This, like the

instructions to eat the Passover meal in great haste with loins girded, sandals on feet, staves in hand (12:11), suggests the readiness that must always be ours for the Lord's redemption. It is certainly a call to alertness, to watch and wait, to be prepared, to keep our lanterns lit—all of those exhortations with which the New Testament is peppered to guard us against idleness, lethargy, despondency and sloth. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow urged us memorably in the same direction:

Tell me not in mournful numbers,
 "Life is but an empty dream!"
 For the soul is dead that slumbers,
 And things are not what they seem.

Life is real! Life is earnest!
 And the grave is not its goal;
 "Dust thou art, to dust returnest,"
 Was not spoken of the soul.

Two other lessons may be seen in the Feast of the Unleavened Bread. One points us to the newness of life that belongs to the people of God when redeemed from the bondage of Egypt. To understand this we must note that in the normal bread-making process a small piece of the leavened dough would be set aside each day as a starter for the next day's batch and so the procedure continues throughout the year. The exception occurs in the spring when the very first wheat is harvested. The first bread is unleavened. None of the old is added to the new. And so life begins afresh with the redemption from Egypt. It is a whole new beginning. This new life is the unleavened bread of springtime. Also the month in which the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread is observed becomes the first month of the year, replacing the old beginning of the year in the fall at harvest time. All of this newness of life is reflected in the New Testament when Christ who died at Passover, rose during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, thus giving new life to the world. St. Paul put it most clearly, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come" (II Cor. 5:17).

The other lesson, of course, is that in this feast the old leaven is purged away. Moses told the Israelites, "For seven days no leaven shall be found in your homes; for if anyone eats what is leavened that person shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel" (12:19), obviously stringent measures applied for serious reasons. Leaven is a picture of error and sin which must be purged. Jesus warned, "Take heed and beware of the leaven

of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Mt. 16:6). St. Paul, again to the Corinthians, ties all of this together, “Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us, therefore, celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (I Cor. 5:6-8). We cannot know the new and true life that is in Christ if we cling to the old leaven of sin.

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The second matter dealt with in this 13th chapter is the sanctification or consecration of the first-born. Here it is laid down that the first-born of man and beast belongs to the Lord. The latter, the first-born of the flock and herd, are to be offered up in bloody sacrifice. The first-born son, however, is to be redeemed, that is, another offering is to be made in his stead and for his sake, just as Joseph and Mary did for their first-born, Jesus, when they brought to the temple at his presentation two turtle doves and a pigeon, the designated offering for parents who were poor (Lk. 2:22-24).

Several motifs seem to be at play here. The first is that Israel, this new nation delivered from the womb of Egypt, belongs to God. They are his people. He is their God. Now, of course, the whole people is God’s, not just the first-born, but the same principle applies here that applies to the tithe and the Sabbath. The part stands for the whole. We consecrate to God the tithe, the first-fruits, the tenth, as a token that all that we are and all that we have belongs to God, and as a sign of our trust in him. “All that we have is thine alone, a trust, O Lord, from thee.” The same is true of the Sabbath. We set aside the one day of the week to signify that all days, all our days, belong to him. All Israel belongs to God, first because he is their creator, and secondly because he has redeemed them. The sanctification of the first-born reinforced the understanding that they belonged to the Lord. Rabbi Ibn Ezra wrote, “The Lord brought us out of Egypt for one purpose only, to serve him.”¹ Similarly, Rabbi Hirsch said,

It was not our hand that redeemed us from Egypt but the hand of God, restoring to us our own strength through His own great might for one purpose only and on one condition only, that it should be subordinated to

¹ Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot (Exodus)*, Part I, tr. by Aryeh Newman (Jerusalem: Eliner Library, 1993), p. 214.

Him alone. The yoke of Egyptian bondage was removed from us, in order to be replaced by the yoke of heaven, since “he is only free who accepts the yoke of Torah”.²

Did not our Lord say similarly, “You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free,” and again, “Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, . . . for my yoke is easy and my burden is light”?

The instruction about the consecration of the first-born has an obvious connection with the many references to the first-born that have occurred hitherto. When the Lord first appeared to Moses at the bush he said, “I have seen the affliction of *my people*” (3:7) and told Moses he was sending him to deliver “*my people Israel*” (3:9). As Moses is on the way God tells him more explicitly, “And you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the Lord, Israel is *my first-born son*, and I say to you, ‘Let my son go that he may serve me’; if you refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay *your first born son*” (4:22), which words were fulfilled, of course, with the tenth plague. Ismar Schorsch well observes that “the Exodus is perceived by the Torah as an act of adoption and rejection,” (the adoption of Israel, the rejection of Egypt) one, he says, that is “the final expression of the motif that dominated the Book of Genesis.”³ In distinction from the law of primogeniture that prevailed in ancient cultures whereby the first-born son was the most highly favored and received the entire estate of his father, we see in the Book of Genesis again and again the rejection of the first-born for another. Abel was approved, not Cain, the first-born; Jacob, not Esau; Joseph, not Reuben. It is character not privilege that is critical, faithfulness not favor. So there is in the Exodus an act of adoption and rejection. As he said, the Lord did make a distinction between Israel and Egypt (11:17). Pharaoh’s first-born son died and Israel, God’s first-born, his adopted child, lived—in order that in the greater plan of God there might be born of the house of Israel one who was truly and uniquely God’s Son, his first-born, his beloved, his only-begotten, whom God would give out of love for all the world in order that whosoever believes in him, Jew or Gentile, bound or free, might have eternal life. Those that believe are the chosen of God, his adopted children.

² Ibid., p. 227. Cf. U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, p. 152.

³ *Canon Without Measure: Torah Commentaries* (New York: Aviv Press, 2007), p. 224.

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The last part of this chapter tells how God led the children of Israel after they escaped. There were three routes from Egypt to the Land of Promise. Picture now in your mind's eye the geography of the eastern Mediterranean. There was a well-established road called 'the way of the sea' that led from Egypt northeastward following the coast of the Great Sea, and that road that would have taken the Israelites to the Promised Land in two weeks time. That option is not so much as mentioned. The road was heavily used by Egyptian tradesmen and the military, and the attempt to go that way would have been suicide. There was a middle route going basically eastward from Egypt and then gradually curving northward toward Beersheba and the Negeb. This route led through the land of the Philistines, and it was not taken either. The people were led rather southeastward toward the Sinai Peninsula, a long, arduous, circuitous route through the wilderness. One reason for the choice is stated. God chose not to lead the people along the middle route, "lest the people repent when they saw war, and return to Egypt" (13:17). The people just freed from long centuries of bondage would from the moment of their deliverance throughout all the years of their wilderness journey be ready to return to Egypt at the drop of a hat. They were out of Egypt but Egypt was not out of them. And don't blame them. The same is true of us. Rightly do we sing,

Prone to wander, Lord I feel it;
Prone to leave the God I love.
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for thy courts above.

Wandering from God is in our nature. We need to be alert, to be on the watch, as we were warned earlier, against that as well. The Christian life is a constant battle—against the enemy, yes, and against ourselves. Even St. Paul said, "That which I would do, I don't. That which I wouldn't, that I do. Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 7:14, 19, 24-25).

A second reason for the chosen route is the strategic one. God knew that Pharaoh would change his mind upon losing such an economic advantage and at the blow to his pride, and would therefore come after the people—but he would never expect the Israelites to go this way, toward the wilderness. The Israelites have always been the masters of the unexpected.

The third reason will be obvious again and again as the Book of Exodus unfolds. The Israelites were *not ready* to enter the Promised Land. They were newly born to freedom and needed to learn of God, to know his Law, to trust his ways—and they, like we, were slow learners—a forty year education through trial, doubt, rebellion, blessing, sustained only by the grace of God, but he did sustain and lead them. We are told here that from the beginning “The Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light that they might travel by day and by night” (13:21). And God will guide us both in the brightness of the day and through the darkness of gloom.

Do we need to be told that the way is long, the lessons many, the battles hard? Do we not know that God’s way is never the short way, never the easy way, never the broad way? We only need to know that it is *his* way—and that he will lead us if we will but wait upon him, and listen and follow.

This brief chapter, this miscellany, this in-between section with its many lessons, ends with the simple statement, “The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people” (13:22). It never will!

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