

# The First Born

Exodus 13:1-2, 11-16

Nothing is sacred in our culture today. Nothing is set apart as special, holy. Everything is ordinary, common, profane. So there is nothing sacred, including God. God, when he is given attention in our culture, is but ordinary. He is like one of us. And as that attitude creeps into the church, it shows up as the absence of reverence in worship, the absence of any ability to consider worship as something inherently different from the ordinary, common, profane matters of life. One of the foundational causes of that attitude is clearly the disdain with which many professed Christians view the Old Testament and Old Testament worship. That worship is considered by many to be just a bunch of stories about men killing animals and pouring out blood—nothing to do with modern life and worship.

But, oh, there is much more for us than that. Especially in Exodus. This is a book about salvation, and therefore, a book about worship, for it is worshipers whom God seeks when he saves. And in our day, we have much to learn about worship. So this afternoon our focus is upon the sacrifice of the firstborn among Israel, sacrifice as worship!

For our benefit, I should turn that around. For then we can begin to understand what worship really is all about.

## **I. WORSHIP AS SACRIFICE.**

Worship is a sacrifice.

I admit that I often speak about worship with a negative definition--such statements as “worship is not entertainment.” And, indeed, it’s not. That serves as a necessary rebuke and ought to be a correcting influence upon the prevalence and popularity of entertainment based worship services so common especially in large mega-churches.

But simply saying what worship is not doesn’t tell you what worship is! So let me define it positively. Worship is a sacrifice. It is something you offer to God, something sacrificial. Something that costs you!

Consider the great illustration in 2 Samuel 24. David had sinfully taken a census and was stricken by God with a pestilence in which 70,000 of the people died. He repented, and asked God to relent from his discipline. We read then in,

2 Sam. 24:18 And Gad came that day to David and said to him, “Go up, erect an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.” 19 So David, according to the word of Gad, went up as the LORD commanded. 20 Now Araunah looked, and saw the king and his servants coming toward him. So Araunah went out and bowed before the king with his face to the ground. 21 Then Araunah said, “Why has my lord the king come to his servant?” And David said, “To buy the threshing floor from you, to build an altar to the LORD, that the plague may be withdrawn from the people.” 22 Now Araunah said to David, “Let my lord the king take and offer up whatever seems good to him. Look, here are oxen for burnt sacrifice, and threshing implements and the yokes of the oxen for wood. 23 “All these, O king, Araunah has given to the king.” And Araunah said to the king, “May the LORD your God accept you.” 24 Then the king said to Araunah, “No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price; nor will I offer burnt offerings to the

LORD my God with that which costs me nothing.” So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver. 25 And David built there an altar to the LORD, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. So the LORD heeded the prayers for the land, and the plague was withdrawn from Israel.”

The key verse in that David’s response to Araunah’s gracious offer of land. “No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price; nor will I offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God with that which costs me nothing.”

Worship has to cost something! That’s the nature of a sacrifice. That’s what we miss today, in the self-absorbed pleasure and comfort seeking age in which we live. Worship is a sacrifice. It is a sacrifice that you offer to God.

With that in your mind, I hope you are ready to learn about worship from the Old Testament, for although the actual animal sacrifices have been abolished in the New Testament, the principle remains in effect--the principle of sacrifice. And what was the sacrifice God required of Israel?

v.2

The firstborn! The firstborn belonged to God as a sacrifice. This would be what was identified as the “whole offering” or the “burnt offering”, meaning that the whole animal would be burned and given to the Lord. It represented the complete and total dedication of the worshiper! And there is a clear New Testament fulfillment of this sacrifice, found in,

Rom. 12:1 “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.”

There it is. This is where I strive to teach you about the nature of worship. Worship as sacrifice, your spiritual worship, as that verse is often well-translated. Present your bodies as a living sacrifice. So everything we read in Exodus about the death of the firstborn has reference to the sacrifice of your whole life. Again, the idea is sacrifice--giving something up, even your whole life itself, as an act of worship to God. In that context, the whole question of, “What did I get out of it” becomes almost irrelevant. It is a sacrifice to God.

But before we go into more detail about the meaning of this, let me emphasize that for Old Testament Israel and for us, these are,

#### **A. Sacrifices offered by those already redeemed.**

These are not sacrifices of redemption, sacrifices of atonement. There is no propitiation in this sacrifice, no satisfaction of God’s justice or wrath. Here, the sacrifice of worship is offered by those whom he has redeemed out of Egypt. So we read,

v.11-12a

Don’t miss that introduction, for it is crucial for all the applications to our lives today. When the Lord redeems you, when the Lord saves you, this is what you ought to sacrifice to him! Go back to Romans 12. Paul begins, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God.” Not, “I beseech you therefore, wicked sinners, by the threat of condemnation, to serve God!” Not at all. His appeal is based

upon the mercies of God, mercies Paul has spent eleven previous chapters in Romans defining for us!  
Most clearly,

Rom. 3:21 “But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, 22 even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

Therefore, on that basis, sacrifice your whole life as your reasonable service of worship! Sacrifice to God as those who are the recipients of his saving promises.

## **B. Sacrifices by the recipients of God’s saving promises.**

Again, from the Old Testament context,  
v.11

And the clear connection between the promise of God and the response of sacrificial worship is expressed in,  
v.5

People of God, the promise of that land is to us! The covenant promises made to Abraham are fulfilled in us! The blessings of God are given to us, the church, the Israel of God.

Heb. 13:15 “Therefore by Him [as we read in Hebrews 13:15] let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name.”

Where did that language come from? From the Old Testament. Worship as a sacrifice of praise to God. Hebrews goes on with that language in the very next verse,

Heb. 13:16 “But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.”

So worship is the offering of our sacrifices, as those redeemed according to the gracious promises of God. I will come back to that whole concept of the cost of a sacrifice in just a few moments, but first another aspect of the nature of this worship we are to offer to God. It is a sacrifice, but part and parcel with that sacrifice we find,

## **II. WORSHIP AS TESTIMONY.**

It is a declaration of our redemption!

v.3

And, v.16

It is a sign and a memorial. It is a public proclamation of our salvation. And that’s what is so wrong about introducing partisan politics into a worship service. That’s what’s so wrong about sermons being mere motivational speeches or simply lessons in morality. This is not a self-help group and my goal is not simply to teach you how to live better lives or how to handle all your troubles.

This is a service for us to declare by means of a memorial that we belong to Jesus Christ. In our worship, we are to declare the truth and the reality of our salvation. It is,

### **A. A declaration of our salvation.**

We are to proclaim Jesus Christ, and exalt God the Father whose eternal plan and purpose it was to send “His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

As we have seen in verse 3. “Eat no unleavened bread.” And why? “The Lord brought you out of this place.” And remember from last time, they had unleavened bread because they all had to leave so quickly. When God delivered them out of Egypt, they simply didn’t have time to put yeast into their bread dough. They left in haste, and the unleavened bread then became the appropriate symbol of that departure. A symbol of their salvation. And as such, a declaration of it!

Just as a wedding ring symbolizes a marriage relationship, so also it makes a public declaration. A very important one! So it was with this sacrifice of the firstborn,  
v.16

And notice the repeated emphasis upon,

### **B. A declaration of God’s saving power.**

v.3 “...by strength of hand the LORD brought you out of this place.”

And,

v.16 “...by strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt.”

God did it! That’s the proclamation of our worship. God did it all, for Jesus is both the author and the finished of our faith.

It is a very compelling observation that much of modern worship is intensely focused upon the subjective experiences of man! If you analyze the lyrics of many contemporary praise songs and choruses, the great predominance of the first person is obvious. “I” and “we” are used with incredibly obvious repetition. With very little exposition or development of the nature and character of God. In short, they are simplistic, and man-centered. They appeal to the senses rather than to the mind, the external emotions rather than the declaration of the glories of God.

Yet, the biblical pattern of singing in the Psalms, while not ignoring the subjective experiences of man, are deeply devoted to a God-centered focus that is rich in doctrinal content and deep in the objective awareness of God and his power to save. So when you sing about your salvation, you really shouldn’t sing, “I have decided to follow Jesus.” Much more appropriate would be, to use a very familiar hymn, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.”

The subject of worship songs ought to be the glories of God, the attributes of God. The power of God. God himself is the subject. Consider just one example,

Ps. 29:1 “Give unto the LORD, O you mighty ones, Give unto the LORD glory and strength. 2 Give unto the LORD the glory due to His name; Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness. 3 The voice of the LORD is over the waters; The God of glory thunders; The LORD is over many waters. 4 The voice of the LORD is powerful; The voice of the LORD is full of majesty. 5 The voice of the LORD breaks the

cedars, Yes, the LORD splinters the cedars of Lebanon. 6 He makes them also skip like a calf, Lebanon and Sirion like a young wild ox. 7 The voice of the LORD divides the flames of fire. 8 The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; The LORD shakes the Wilderness of Kadesh. 9 The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth, And strips the forests bare; And in His temple everyone says, "Glory!" 10 The LORD sat enthroned at the Flood, And the LORD sits as King forever. 11 The LORD will give strength to His people; The LORD will bless His people with peace."

Worship is to be a declaration of God's saving power in our salvation. And finally, getting back to that idea that it ought not to cost us nothing, we see,

### **III. WORSHIP AS CONSECRATION.**

v.2

It is not simply that God requires sacrifices from us, but that those sacrifices represent and express this idea of consecration. It is repeated in,

v.12

The word translated "set apart" in verse 12 literally means to "pass over." Or, "cause to pass over." So it is that worship is passing over of what we have and possess to God, for his glory and honor. "Set apart" is not a good translation, also is "devote." Some translations actually use consecrate, as we read in verse 2. That word in verse 2 is more significant, it is the verb form of the word for holiness, which also means set apart. It means to set apart something from common, ordinary use for a special purpose.

So it is that in worship, the sacrifice of the firstborn teaches us that our sacrifices of worship are to be,

#### **A. Set apart as holy to God.**

"Consecrate to me." Set apart to God. Considered holy, because it is given to God. Set apart from the common and profane use of ordinary life for the sacred use of religious worship. And here is that distinction between the sacred and the profane that I began with this morning. Worship requires that certain aspects of our life be set aside to God.

In a certain sense, you can say that all life is worship. That is to say, in the words of, 1 Cor. 10:31 "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

But, still, there must be this huge category of the sacred. And you must be able to move from the category of the common and ordinary into this arena of the sacred if you are going to worship God acceptably. You cannot worship God on the golf course, as is so often the trite excuse for not going to church, for you have not left the ordinary ground of normal life for that which God calls "holy ground." You cannot satisfy either the desires of your soul nor the obligations of God's law if worship is relegated to the sphere of the ordinary.

The sacrifices of praise in worship, being sacred, are entirely different from the context of a musical concert, for example. The sacrifices of worship are something entirely different even from what we might enjoy as a Bible study, or even a prayer meeting, or a fellowship dinner, or a picnic. All those things are good and profitable, but there must be this distinction between sacred and ordinary.

So this is the idea that I labor to help you see and understand. What we give to God in worship is set apart for him. It is holy to him.

Now, with the firstborn, the idea is that the firstborn represents all the rest of those who are born. So if the firstborn is literally consecrated to God, so also are all the others. If the firstborn of the cattle is holy to God, all the cattle is thereby represented as holy. If the firstborn son is consecrated, the whole of the family is seen to be holy.

We still have examples of that in our own experiences and worship, two that stand out clearly. First, the giving of tithes. The firstfruits of our increase. Set apart as holy to God. Given to God, as a testimony that all our wealth actually belongs to him! And second, the keeping of the sabbath day, the firstfruits of our time, signifying that all our time actually belongs to him. And we prove that, we prove that all we do is done for the glory of God, by setting apart the first day as sacred! Consecrating the first day as a sacrifice of worship to God. Setting apart as holy that day which God has prescribed for us in his law.

In Israel, there was a very familiar practice of consecrating things to the Lord. It was called “putting them under the ban.” The word for ban literally means “destruction.” It was something “devoted to destruction,” devoted to being destroyed just like these firstborn among the animals. The idea is that in our lives, there are things considered to be holy! That is, consecrated to God. And above all else, above anything else that might be said about worship, that is precisely what worship is all about. Ultimately setting apart our very lives as holy to God.

And here is where all this comes together. Those things set apart as holy to God are things which are,

### **B. Set apart as belonging to God.**

That’s why putting something “under the ban” meant killing it! It belonged to God, so it was to be destroyed. “It’s mine,” says the Lord.

Our sacrifices of worship consist of setting apart to God those things to which he lays claim. And let me go back to the sabbath day. Here is where this day becomes such a central aspect of our worship. The day is holy! The day belongs to God. It is not your own, so it is that you offer to God a sacrifice of that day.

Now, thankfully, in the New Covenant, all these sacrifices are delightful. Indeed, keeping the sabbath day holy means the same thing as delighting yourself in it. But that delight comes only when you separate yourself from the common, ordinary, profane activities of the other days, and devote yourself to the holy activities appropriate for the holy day. Most especially, worship. That’s why I urge you come to worship both morning and evening. It is a sacrifice of the whole day, the first day of our week. It is set apart as belonging to God.

Go back to our text. Verse 2, at the end. “It is mine.” That’s what God says about the firstborn. “It is mine.”

v.12

It's mine, say says the Lord. It is holy, to me. The firstborn of every animal. And of the family. So, in order to avoid actually killing the firstborn of your offspring, you have to redeem them. Since they are holy to God, since they belong to him, for you to keep them yourself requires a redemption. You can kill another animal in its place.

v.13

That's the sign! That's the testimony. That's the declaration. That's the worship God has prescribed for his people.

So I want you to consider your own life this afternoon, and apply these things to yourself. Ultimately, your whole life belongs to God and, therefore, your whole life is to be a living sacrifice to him. And here, as we gather together on this holy day in this holy place in the presence of our holy God, all that you do as specific acts of worship ought to be a demonstration of that greater reality.

So enter into this holy place, and offer to God those things he declares to be holy unto him. But be aware, it will cost you. It will cost you everything. It will cost you your life. For Jesus has said,

Luke 9:23 "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. 24 "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it."

So lose your life. Give it up, right here and now in this worship service. That firstborn animal killed and sacrificed at the Israelite feast of unleavened bread is to represent the living sacrifice of your whole life. Offer that sacrifice to God as you worship him today. Offer to him the sacrifice of your life.

And that is what worship is all about.