

# 119

## MINISTRIES

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### Should We Redeem Our Firstborn?

One of the commands in the Torah is to redeem our firstborn sons. Here at 119, we advocate for keeping other Torah commands, like resting on the sabbath, and wearing tzitzit. So then, shouldn't we be redeeming our firstborn sons as well? In this teaching, we will address this question. To do so, we will read the commands that instruct us what we should do with our firstborn, we will dig into the symbology and purpose behind those commands, and finally, we will discuss what practical things we can do today to obey God in this area.

Let's begin by defining what a "firstborn" is. Most of the Hebrew words translated as "firstborn" come from a root word, *bachar*. *Bachar* means to bear new fruit (Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, H1069). This "new fruit" can be firstborn men and animals, as we see in this scripture from Exodus:

#### Exodus 13:1-2

The LORD [YHWH] said to Moses, "Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine."

Here the firstborn is exactly what we would expect: it is the child or animal who is born first, who "opens the womb." So, people or animals can be firstborn, *bachar*. However, crops can also be firstborn. In this next verse, we see the word *bikkur*, which also comes from *bachar*, used to describe the first produce of the year:

#### Exodus 34:26a

The best of the firstfruits of your ground you shall bring to the house of the LORD [YHWH] your God.

So, the Scriptures describe three kinds of firstborn: firstborn people, firstborn animals, and firstfruits of crops. All of these kinds of firstborn were to be offered to YHWH. For our purposes, we can divide these firstborn offerings into four categories: national first fruits offerings, individual first fruits

offerings, firstborn offerings of animals, and the redemption of the firstborn sons. Let's take a look at these categories one at a time, starting with the national first fruits offerings.

## **National First Fruits Offerings**

There were two times in the year that the priests would make a firstfruits offering on behalf of the entire nation of Israel: once during the week of unleavened bread, after Passover (Leviticus 23:9-14), and once at the festival of Shavuot, also known as Pentecost (Leviticus 23:15-21). Both of these offerings are described in Leviticus 23:

### **Leviticus 23:10-20**

[W]hen you come into the land that I give you and reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest, and he shall wave the sheaf before the LORD [YHWH], so that you may be accepted. On the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it. And on the day when you wave the sheaf, you shall offer a male lamb a year old without blemish as a burnt offering to the LORD [YHWH]. And the grain offering with it shall be two tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil, a food offering to the LORD [YHWH] with a pleasing aroma, and the drink offering with it shall be of wine, a fourth of a hin. And you shall eat neither bread nor grain parched or fresh until this same day, until you have brought the offering of your God: it is a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings. You shall count seven full weeks from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering. You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath. Then you shall present a grain offering of new grain to the LORD [YHWH]. You shall bring from your dwelling places two loaves of bread to be waved, made of two tenths of an ephah. They shall be of fine flour, and they shall be baked with leaven, as firstfruits to the LORD [YHWH]. And you shall present with the bread seven lambs a year old without blemish, and one bull from the herd and two rams. They shall be a burnt offering to the LORD [YHWH], with their grain offering and their drink offerings, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD [YHWH]. And you shall offer one male goat for a sin offering, and two male lambs a year old as a sacrifice of peace offerings. And the priest shall wave them with the bread of the firstfruits as a wave offering before the LORD [YHWH], with the two lambs. They shall be holy to the LORD [YHWH] for the priest.

These firstfruits offerings came from the first harvests of grain in Israel: the wave sheaf offering came from the first reaping of the barley harvest (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 3.10.5). Fifty days later, two loaves of bread were offered, made from the first reaping of the wheat harvest (Exodus 34:22; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 3.10.6). Both of these firstfruits offerings symbolize life coming up from under the ground. That is to say, they symbolize resurrection. They symbolize Jesus—whose Hebrew name was Yeshua—who is called the “firstfruits” from the dead:

### **1 Corinthians 15:20**

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Yeshua is the firstfruits of those raised from the dead. Those who belong to him will be resurrected as well, as this passage goes on to explain:

### **1 Corinthians 15:21-23**

For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the

firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ...

As the first to overcome sin and death, the first to be resurrected to eternal life, Christ is represented by the first of the firstfruits offerings, the wave sheaf. This is why, just like the wave sheaf was offered on the day after the sabbath (Leviticus 23:11) Yeshua's resurrection was revealed on the day after the sabbath:

**Matthew 28:1**

Now **after the Sabbath**, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.

Again, this was the very same day that the wave sheaf offering, the first fruits offering, was given:

**Leviticus 23:11**

On the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it.

So, Christ rose on this day of firstfruits, because he was exactly what that holiday symbolizes: the firstfruits from the dead. However, he is not the only one called the firstfruits. Those who belong to Christ will be resurrected as well, and they are also called a kind of firstfruits:

**James 1:18**

Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

Those who belong to Christ will be the first to be resurrected after Christ returns (1 Corinthians 15:23; Romans 6:4-5; Revelation 20:4-6). As such, they are symbolized in the second batch of firstfruits, the wheat loaves that are offered on Shavuot. This is why the apostles' ministry started on the day of Shavuot (Acts 2:1, 42-47), the very day that these firstfruits of the wheat harvest were being offered. That was the beginning of them bringing new life to people from all nations (Acts 2:5; 2 Corinthians 3:4-6). So, to summarize, the wave sheaf, the firstfruits offering given after Passover, symbolizes Christ's resurrection, and the two loaves, the firstfruits offering given at Shavuot, symbolizes the resurrection of those who are in Christ.

## Individual First Fruits Offerings

Each year, the priests offered the wave sheaf and the two loaves as first fruits offerings on behalf of all Israel. But this was just a small fraction of all of the first fruits that were offered. Each individual Israelite would also give his own first fruits offerings. Individuals gave firstfruits offerings of grain (Leviticus 2:14-16), dough (Numbers 15:20-21), oil and wine (Numbers 18:12), fruit (Numbers 18:13), and generally anything that grew from the ground (Deuteronomy 26:2; Exodus 23:19; 34:26). These offerings were taken to the tabernacle and given to the priests. While the Israelites were giving these offerings, they were commanded to acknowledge the blessings God had given them and to rejoice:

**Deuteronomy 26:1-11**

When you come into the land that the LORD [YHWH] your God is giving you for an inheritance and have taken possession of it and live in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the LORD [YHWH] your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place that the LORD [YHWH] your God will

choose, to make his name to dwell there. And you shall go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him, 'I declare today to the LORD [YHWH] your God that I have come into the land that the LORD [YHWH] swore to our fathers to give us.' Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down before the altar of the LORD [YHWH] your God. "And you shall make response before the LORD [YHWH] your God, 'A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. Then we cried to the LORD [YHWH], the God of our fathers, and the LORD [YHWH] heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the LORD [YHWH] brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O LORD [YHWH], have given me.' And you shall set it down before the LORD [YHWH] your God and worship before the LORD [YHWH] your God. And you shall rejoice in all the good that the LORD [YHWH] your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.

So, we see that the purpose of these individual first fruits offerings was to show gratitude and appreciation for the blessings that God had provided.

## **Firstborn Animals**

Now, let's look at the firstborn animals. YHWH claimed ownership of all the firstborn male animals of Israel:

### **Exodus 13:12**

You shall set apart to the LORD [YHWH] all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the LORD's [YHWH].

These firstborn males could be given as offerings once they were eight days old:

### **Exodus 22:29-30**

You shall not delay to offer from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me. You shall do the same with your oxen and with your sheep: seven days it shall be with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to me.

An important note here is that there are two categories of animals: clean and unclean. Clean animals could be eaten, while unclean animals could not. So, clean animals could be offered as sacrifices, but unclean animals could not. The way the firstborn clean animals were given to YHWH is that they were brought to the tabernacle and sacrificed (Exodus 13:15; Numbers 18:17; Deuteronomy 12:17-18).

Whoever brought the animal would eat the sacrifice (Deuteronomy 14:23; 15:19-20), and the priests would take a portion of the sacrificial meat for themselves (Numbers 18:18; Deuteronomy 18:1-3). A firstborn unclean animal also had to be given to YHWH, but since it could not be sacrificed, it was instead "redeemed" by having a clean animal sacrificed in its place (Exodus 13:13; 34:20).

So, why were the firstborn animals offered? The practice of offering firstborn animals dates back to long before Moses; we see Abel offering the firstborn of his flock in Genesis 4:

### **Genesis 4:3-5a**

In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD [YHWH] an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD [YHWH] had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.

This passage does not explain exactly why the firstborn were offered in Abel's time. However, we do know why the firstborn were offered in Moses' time. When God delivered the Israelites from their slavery to Egypt, he sent a plague that killed every firstborn in the land, both the firstborn of men and of animals (Exodus 12:29-30). However, this death passed over every house that had been redeemed with the blood of a lamb (Exodus 12:5-13, 21-23). This redemption of the firstborn is the reason that the Israelites were to give the firstborn offering:

### **Exodus 13:12-16**

You shall set apart to the LORD [YHWH] all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the LORD's [YHWH]. Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. And when in time to come your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him, 'By a strong hand the LORD [YHWH] brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD [YHWH] killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD [YHWH] all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.' It shall be as a mark on your hand or frontlets between your eyes, for by a strong hand the LORD [YHWH] brought us out of Egypt.

So, the reason that the firstborn male animals were sacrificed or redeemed was to commemorate how God saved Israel from their slavery in Egypt. These offerings caused Israel to remember their salvation, and the price that was paid for it.

## **Firstborn People**

In addition to the firstborn animals, YHWH also said that the firstborn sons—people—belonged to him. Of course, people could not be offered in sacrifice. So, then, how were they "given" to God? Well, just like unclean animals, the firstborn sons were redeemed. The way a firstborn son was redeemed was by paying five shekels of silver to the priests:

### **Numbers 18:15b-17**

...the firstborn of man you shall redeem, and the firstborn of unclean animals you shall redeem. And their redemption price (at a month old you shall redeem them) you shall fix at five shekels in silver, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, which is twenty gerahs. But the firstborn of a cow, or the firstborn of a sheep, or the firstborn of a goat, you shall not redeem; they are holy. You shall sprinkle their blood on the altar and shall burn their fat as a food offering, with a pleasing aroma to the LORD [YHWH].

As we mentioned before, the reason for this firstborn offering is to commemorate the way that God saved Israel from Egypt; God literally killed the firstborn in Egypt, and spared the firstborn of Israel. However, there is a further spiritual significance to the firstborn. The firstborn actually represent Israel itself:

### **Exodus 4:22-23**

Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD [YHWH], Israel is my firstborn 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 kill your firstborn son.’”

### **Jeremiah 31:9c**

for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

Why is Israel called the firstborn? Well, in ancient Mesopotamian culture, the firstborn son had a birthright—a special claim to his father’s inheritance (Deuteronomy 21:15-17; Karen Rhea Nemet-Nejat, *Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia* [Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998], p. 147). God gave Abraham a special inheritance (Genesis 12:2-3, 7), which had both physical and spiritual components. Physically, Abraham would inherit the land of Canaan (Genesis 12:5-8), but the book of Hebrews tells us that he also was seeking a “heavenly country” (Hebrews 11:16; see also Matthew 8:11).

Paul called Abraham both the “heir of the world” (Romans 4:13), and the father of those who have faith (Romans 4:12). Israel inherited their birthright from Abraham (Genesis 50:24; Deuteronomy 1:8), and they received both the physical and spiritual components of it. Israel was promised not just that their land would flow with milk and honey (Numbers 14:8), but also that it would have the spiritual blessings of justice and righteousness (Jeremiah 33:14-16). Also, as part of their birthright, Israel would spread this righteousness; they would be a blessing to all nations (Genesis 12:3; Zechariah 8:13; Deuteronomy 4:6-8; Isaiah 60:1-3). This birthright ultimately culminated in Messiah Yeshua (Galatians 3:16), the “heir of all things”:

### **Hebrews 1:2-4**

...in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the **heir** of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has **inherited** is more excellent than theirs.

Yeshua is called the “firstborn of all creation,” and the “firstborn from the dead”:

### **Colossians 1:15-18**

He is the image of the invisible God, **the firstborn of all creation**. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the **firstborn from the dead**, that in everything he might be preeminent.

So, as the firstborn heir, Yeshua has preeminence over all things. He is head over the world. He is also a blessing to the whole world, as it says in John:

### **John 3:17**

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

So, Yeshua, the king of Israel, is the ultimate expression of the firstborn inheritance. But that inheritance does not end with him. When we are in Yeshua, we are made “fellow heirs”:

### **Romans 8:16-17**

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and **fellow heirs** with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

### **Galatians 3:29**

...if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

As “fellow heirs” of life, we will be resurrected like Yeshua was. We too will receive eternal life as an inheritance:

### **Revelation 20:4-6**

Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus [Yeshua] and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.

### **1 John 2:24-25**

Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is the promise that he made to us—eternal life.

So, the redemption of the firstborn sons is a picture of the redemption of Israel. It reminds us of the spiritual birthright given to Abraham, that passed down to Israel, and that we have access to through Yeshua. Ultimately, it reminds us of the promise of eternal life that we have through Messiah, the “firstborn of all creation.”

## **What Can We Do Today?**

We've only scratched the surface of the meaning behind the redemption of the firstborn, but let's return to our main question: what can we practically do today to keep the commands concerning the firstborn? Can we keep these commands, just like we can keep the commands to rest on the sabbath and wear tzitzit? Well, presently, there is no temple and no physical priesthood, which are necessary components to keeping the firstborn commands. Things like keeping the sabbath and wearing tzitzit can be done whether there is a physical temple or not. However, the commands about the firstborn can only be kept when a physical temple and priesthood is in existence.

The national firstfruits offerings, given after Passover and during Shavuot, were performed at the temple or tabernacle by the Levitical priests. Without a temple or priesthood, these commands cannot be physically kept the way they are described in the Torah. Likewise, the individual firstfruits offerings were brought to the priests at the temple, but again, no such priesthood or temple exists today. The firstborn animal sacrifices also had to be slaughtered at the temple, under the direction of the priests. In fact, the Torah specifically says not to offer animal sacrifices at all unless they are offered at the temple:

### **Leviticus 17:3-7**

If any one of the house of Israel kills an ox or a lamb or a goat in the camp, or kills it outside the camp, and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to offer it as a gift to the LORD [YHWH] in front of the tabernacle of the LORD [YHWH], bloodguilt shall be imputed to that man. He has shed blood, and that man shall be cut off from among his people. This is to the end that the people of Israel may bring their sacrifices that they sacrifice in the open field, that they may bring them to the LORD [YHWH], to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and sacrifice them as sacrifices of peace offerings to the LORD [YHWH]. And the priest shall throw the blood on the altar of the LORD [YHWH] at the entrance of the tent of meeting and burn the fat for a pleasing aroma to the LORD [YHWH]. So they shall no more sacrifice their sacrifices to goat demons, after whom they whore. This shall be a statute forever for them throughout their generations.

As we can see from this passage, sacrifices were only permitted to be made at the tent of meeting, under the direction of the priests. Sacrificing firstborn animals today without having those things would actually be *against* the Torah.

Finally, the five shekel payment to redeem the firstborn sons was paid to the priests, so, again, since there is nobody to pay this redemption price to, there is no way to physically keep this command. We simply do not have the physical components that we need to keep these commands the way the Scriptures describe. However, we can implement some of the spiritual lessons that these commands teach us. For one, we can express gratitude toward God for the provisions he has given us. We can be thankful for what he has provided, both physically and spiritually. The firstfruits offerings were given at the festivals mentioned in Leviticus 23, so those are great times to especially focus on expressing gratitude to God.

Another thing we can do in the spirit of these firstborn-related commands is take time to remember God's salvation. Just like we remember God's salvation when we observe Passover, we can also remember it when we consider our firstborn sons. They are symbols, reminders of the new life that awaits all the sons of God, all those who are in Christ. Finally, we can acknowledge the responsibility we have as the firstborn in Christ. That responsibility is to be a blessing to the world, both physically and spiritually. Rather than hoard our inheritance to ourselves, we can do our best to use it for the betterment of everyone. We can physically take care of the widows, orphans, and poor, by providing them with the physical things that they need, just like the Scriptures instruct us to (Deuteronomy 24:19-22; 26:12; James 1:17). And, we can spiritually provide for all nations, by sharing the gospel with them, which can save their souls (James 1:21).

In conclusion, the Torah commanded that the firstborn of Israel should be offered to YHWH. The firstborn male animals and the first fruits of crops were to be given to YHWH through the priests, and the firstborn sons were to be redeemed with silver. All of these offerings symbolized YHWH's salvation of Israel, and they found their ultimate symbolism in the resurrection of Yeshua. Today, we cannot physically keep these commands, because we do not have a temple where we can bring these offerings, nor priests to receive them. However, we can live according to the spiritual lessons that these commands teach us, by being grateful for God's blessings, remembering God's salvation, and using what God has given us to bless others.

*We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at [www.testeverything.net](http://www.testeverything.net)*

**Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.**

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