Consecration of the Firstborn

Whether in the church or the secular world, leadership involves motivating people. Transactional leaders tend to incent others by linking rewards to specific performance in the hope of building loyalty. This often results in followers who are focused on short term results. Transformational leaders take a longer view and try to inspire others to buy in to a culture based not just on tangible rewards but the personal satisfaction and pride of being associated with something of lasting value. During my professional career I observed leaders of both stripes as well as how employees responded to the two management styles. Leadership is important but so is followship (if that’s a real word). A transactional leader may not be successful with employees who want to be transformed and a transformational leader may not be effective with employees who are constantly looking for bonuses. I noticed the last slide on the screen at the end of Steve’s excellent sermon on Sunday read “Prepare to follow”. In chapter 13 we see that God was trying to transform the Israelites who seemed to be more interested in the transaction of “Get us out of Egypt.”

The chapter begins with God’s instruction to Moses that every firstborn male human or animal was to be consecrated to God. God had purchased the freedom of the Israelites through the killing of the firstborn of the Egyptians and would require the firstborn to be redeemed. He told Moses that the Israelites were to commemorate the day they came out of Egypt because of God’s mighty hand. God had identified this commemoration as the Feast of Unleavened Bread in chapter 12 and repeats His instructions on how it was to be observed. God told Moses they would celebrating their escape from slavery when they entered Canaan, the land promised to them. It does appear that they observed Passover annually before entering into Canaan (see Numb. 9:5). God also told Moses that they were to pass this commemoration down to future generations and that it was to be observed year after year. He told Moses that the observance should be like a sign on their hands and a reminder on their foreheads and that the law of God was to be on their lips. This evolved into the Jewish tradition of wearing phylacteries which were small leather boxes containing scriptures. Jesus criticized the scribes and Pharisees for wearing large, ostentatious phylacteries in their attempts to appear more holy. He said that everything they did was done for others to see (see Matt. 23:5). He contrasted that with His call for humility in verse 12. The scribes and Pharisees were familiar with the instruction of Deuteronomy 11:18 which reads “*Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.”*  They observed the latter and ignored the former.

In verses 11-13 God expounds on his requirement for consecration of all firstborn males including the seemingly odd statement “*Redeem with a lamb every firstborn donkey, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck”*. Donkeys were unclean animals which could not be sacrificed so a lamb would have to be substituted. On the other hand, donkeys were useful animals and a family might be tempted to keep the animal thus the requirement to break its neck which would be a sacrifice of something of value. Verses 14-16 repeat God’s instructions to tell the Passover story to future generations.

The last few verses of the chapter deal with the long desert route on which God led the Israelites in the pillars of cloud and light.

In this chapter God was emphasizing: 1. The importance of annually observing the Passover and making certain that children were taught about it so that they would in turn teach their children and; 2. Requiring consecration of firstborn males. These requirements were so important that God repeated his instructions. God wanted the Israelites to realize that this was more than just bringing them out of Egypt, it was the beginning of fulfilling the covenant made with Abraham generations earlier and that they were His chosen people. It was God’s desire to transform them from a collection of tribes to a nation that would worship and obey him. God also knew their hearts, however and his chosen route for them along the desert road was because he knew how fragile they were in their relationship with him. Rather than being transformed, the Israelites were almost all transactional. As we will see as we continue our study, their attitude as they wandered in the desert seemed to be “What have you done for me lately?” Early in my career I learned that relationships established on price will almost always be based on price.