

Numbers 18:15

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Every thing that openeth the matrix in all flesh, which they bring unto the LORD, whether it be of men or beasts, shall be thine: nevertheless the firstborn of man shalt thou surely redeem, and the firstling of unclean beasts shalt thou redeem.

Analysis

Every thing that openeth the matrix in all flesh, which they bring unto the LORD, whether it be of men or beasts, shall be thine: nevertheless the firstborn of man shalt thou surely redeem, and the firstling of unclean beasts shalt thou redeem. The *peter rechem* (פֶּטֶר רֶחֶם, "that which opens the womb")—every firstborn—belonged to God by right of Passover redemption when He spared Israel's firstborn while striking Egypt's (Exodus 13:2, 11-15).

However, God distinguished between clean and unclean, human and animal. Firstborn humans required redemption (*padoh tiph'deh*, פָּדוּה תִּפְּדֶה, "you shall surely redeem")—they couldn't serve as priests or sacrifices but must be bought back. Similarly, firstborn of unclean animals (donkeys, camels, etc.) must be redeemed or killed, not sacrificed. In contrast, firstborn of clean animals (cattle, sheep, goats—verse 17) were sacrificed, not redeemed.

This system taught substitutionary atonement—something valuable must be given to release what belongs to God. Every Israelite family constantly remembered that their eldest son's life had been bought back through priestly mediation. This pointed forward to Christ's redemption—He who knew no sin became sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21), the ultimate substitutionary sacrifice redeeming all who believe.

Historical Context

The redemption price was five shekels (verse 16), payable when the child reached one month old (establishing viability). This practice continued throughout Israel's history. Luke 2:22-24 describes Jesus's presentation at the temple with Mary's purification offering, though the text doesn't explicitly mention the five-shekel redemption payment (possibly because as God's Son, He ultimately wasn't 'redeemed' but came to redeem). Modern Jewish practice continues Pidyon HaBen (redemption of the firstborn) ceremonies where Orthodox families 'redeem' firstborn sons from a Kohen (descendant of Aaron) using silver coins.

Related Passages

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Study Questions

1. How does the requirement to redeem firstborn sons keep the gospel of substitutionary atonement before families constantly?
2. What does it mean that you belong to God by right of redemption and must be 'bought back' through Christ's blood?
3. How should remembering that your life was purchased at infinite cost affect your daily priorities and choices?

Interlinear Text

כָּל	פֶּטֶר	הַ חֵם	לְכָל	בָּשָׂר	אֲשֶׁר
H3605	Every thing that openeth	the matrix	H3605	in all flesh	H834
	H6363	H7358		H1320	
וְיָבִיאוּ	לִיהוָה	הָאָדָם	הַבְּהֵמָה	וְיִהְיֶה	לִי לְ
which they bring	unto the LORD	of man	beasts	H1961	H0
H7126	H3068	H120	H929		H389
וְתִפְדֶּה:	וְתִפְדֶּה:	אֶת	בְּכוֹר	וְאֶת	הָאָדָם
redeem	redeem	H853	and the firstling	of man	H853
H6299	H6299		H1060	H120	and the firstling
					H1060
וְתִפְדֶּה:	הַטְּמֵא	הַבְּהֵמָה			
redeem	of unclean	beasts			
H6299	H2931	H929			

Additional Cross-References

Exodus 34:20 (Redemption): But the firstling of an ass thou shalt redeem with a lamb: and if thou redeem him not, then shalt thou break his neck. All the firstborn of thy sons thou shalt redeem. And none shall appear before me empty.

Exodus 13:2 (Parallel theme): Sanctify unto me all the firstborn, whatsoever openeth the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and of beast: it is mine.