

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 Hebrew word *rechem* (רְכֵמָה, "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*, הַפְּדֵה תִּפְדֵּה, "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

H3605

Every thing that openeth

H6363

פָּרָט

רְחִמָּה

H7358

לְכָל

H3605

אֲשֶׁר בָּשָׂר

H1320

H834

וְאֲשֶׁר יִבְרָא

which they bring

H7126

לְיְהִיָּה

H3068

לְיְהִיָּה

H120

בְּאֵד מֶלֶךְ

H929

בְּבָהָמָה

H1961

אֲשֶׁר לְרַבְּיָה

H0

H389

בְּקָר אֲתָת תִּפְדַּה

redeem

H6299

בְּקָר אֲתָת תִּפְדַּה

H6299

H853

בְּקָר אֲתָת תִּפְדַּה

and the firstling

H1060

בְּקָר אֲתָת תִּפְדַּה

of man

H853

בְּקָר אֲתָת תִּפְדַּה

and the firstling

H1060

תִּפְדַּה בְּבָהָמָה הַטְמֵא הַבָּהָמָה

beasts

H929

תִּפְדַּה בְּבָהָמָה הַטְמֵא הַבָּהָמָה

H2931

redeem

H6299

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.