

Exodus 11:4-7 – The Firstborn Children

“About midnight will I go out into the midst of Egypt: 5 And all the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sits upon his throne, even unto the firstborn of the maidservant that is behind the mill; and all the firstborn of beasts. 6 And there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there was none like it, nor shall be like it any more. 7 But against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue, against man or beast: that ye may know how that the LORD puts a difference between the Egyptians and Israel.”

Ex 4:23 *And I say unto you, Let my son go, that he may serve me: and if you refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay your son, even your firstborn.*

The focus of our study this morning is on this simple passage and the thought about the slaying of firstborn children. Why would God do such a thing? Why didn't he just kill Pharaoh? Why didn't God go through the land and slay all the evil men of the land? Or why didn't He go through the land and kill all the adult males? Why the firstborn, and why children?

One of the things I like about an in-depth study of the Scripture is that we can pause on a subject and explore that matter extensively comparing Scripture to Scripture. The other thing I like about a small Bible study group is that questions and subject matters are brought up that are not the main theme, but we can discuss them and explore them together. That is the case this morning.

The question that came up this morning is...

1. What is the significance of firstborn children?
2. Why God chose to kill the firstborn children (whether babies or adults)?
3. Why would God kill innocent babies? Were those babies lost? Did they go to hell or were they saved?

1

The first question is why the firstborn?

God had a special place in his heart for the firstborn, not just the firstborn males, but also the first to open a mother's womb. They were special in the eyes of God.

Exodus 13:2 says, "*Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether man or animal.*"

Numbers 3:13 "*for on the day that I smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I hallowed unto me all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast: mine shall they be: I am the LORD.*"

The firstborn are precious to God. They are set aside, sanctified, or consecrated by God for a special blessing. Genesis 49:3 explains it most clearly, "*Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, and the beginning of my strength, the excelling in honor, and excelling in power:*

God speaks of David as if he were His firstborn in Psalm 89:20-29
20. *I have found David my servant; with my sacred oil I have anointed him.* 21. *My hand will sustain him; surely my arm will strengthen him.* 22. *No enemy will subject him to tribute; no wicked man will oppress him.* 23. *I will crush his foes before him and strike down his adversaries.* 24. *My faithful love will be with him, and through my name his horn will be exalted.* 25. *I will set his hand over the sea, his right hand over the rivers.* 26. *He will call out to me, 'You are my Father, my God, the Rock my Savior.'* 27. *I will also appoint him my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth.* 28. *I will maintain my love to him forever, and my covenant with him will never fail.* 29. *I will establish his line forever, his throne as long as the heavens endure.*

God speaks of Israel as his firstborn

Ex 4:22 *And you shall say unto Pharaoh, Thus says the LORD, Israel is my son, even my firstborn:*

In other words the firstborn represented the father's pride and joy. He is the apple of his eye. Thus, when God struck the firstborn He struck a man at the core of his heart. God was striking him where he lives.

2

The second question is like the first, but why the children? Why did God strike down innocent children?

Note that the all firstborn to be killed was not necessary a little ones. A firstborn man or woman of any age was the target of the angel of death. But we must assume there were some innocent children among them.

Throughout the Old Testament we see things we do not understand. When the Israelites went to battle with their enemies, why did God command them to destroy all of the inhabitants, men, women and children? We shout, “That’s not fair!”

To many atheists the thought that God should cause the death of innocent children is immoral. Yet they themselves advocate their right to take the life of an innocent unborn child up to and even after birth.

Richard Dawkins, the foremost atheistic spokesperson justifies his rantings and railings against the God of the Bible because God is mean:

“The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”

Yet he goes on to declare that human life is evolutionary and without moral law and without eternal consequences since there is no afterlife.

It is ridiculous to listen to such rantings when the author himself, the self-appointed judge of God, advocates the killing of infants with impunity, because there is no moral law in the universe and no God.

We believe that God is the author and finisher of all life. Every living human being has died because God commanded it, determined it, set the boundaries, even the days and months of his life. God gives life and has the right to take away that life as He chooses. Life belongs to Him. Even Abraham asserts this when in the face of imminent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah he states, “*Shall not the Judge of the earth do right?*” (Genesis 18:25) God has the right and privilege to destroy life that he placed on the earth when He judges that life to be detrimental to the life of the righteous. Several cases illustrate God’s righteous judgment: The Flood – Genesis 7, the firstborn

children of Egypt – Exodus 12, the Midianites – Numbers 31, and the Amalakites – 1 Samuel 15. It is clear from Scripture that God has no joy in destroying wicked people. Ezekiel 18:23 and 33:11 reiterate, “*God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked.*” It is as if God is pruning life of poisonous branches that He might save the tree.

We readily admit that we do not understand the justice of God. We are not God, therefore we cannot know His secret designs, plans and wisdom. Isaiah 55: 8-9 says;

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as high as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

When God calls for the death of the wicked or the innocent it is because He is the Author and Finisher of all life. “*The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.*” (Job 1:21) We must not that in Job’s innocence God took away from him his children in one hour, he wealth in another, and his health in yet another, without explanation. But Job maintained his integrity toward God “*and did not sin is accusing God falsely.*” (Job 1:22)

3

The third question is to me the most important for us from a theological perspective: Were those children lost? Did they go to hell?

We can understand God judging the adult firstborn children because they had a chance to hear and understand God's word and rejected it. This third question is a theological one that goes beyond the Egyptian firstborn. It opens the discussion of whether children with heathen parents are lost when they die or are they in some way special to God as innocents and taken to heaven?

That is a huge question and the Bible provides no direct answer, but we can decipher the mind of God on the matter by comparing Scripture to Scripture. I have provided you with several papers by men wiser than I to help you sift through this issue.

The short answer is...

God holds people accountable to His revelation and their response to it. An infant or anyone born with impaired mental capacity is treated as an innocent, even though they were born with the sin of Adam within their hearts. David said, *"Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me."* (Psalm 51:5) and Psalm 58:3 says, *"The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies."*

But does God hold a child or infant accountable for Adam's sinful nature? Romans 1:18 sheds some light on this issue when Paul said, *"The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all unrighteousness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness..."*

God's mercy covers the unborn child and the innocent infant. Therefore, it is God's mercy to take the lives of innocent children so that they are not condemned with the world. In effect, God is rescuing them from a life of pagan sin and rebellion. He snatches them out of the fire as it were. He redeems them from the hand of the enemy. We could say *"they were chosen in him before the foundation of the world"* to be redeemed from the hand of the enemy. Instead of seeing God's cruelty we should see God's mercy.

Do they therefore go to heaven? We do not know from Scripture.

But we do know from Scripture that ...

- 1) God is love: – *God is love*” (1 John 4:8 & John 3:16)
- 2) God is just: – *“Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you.”* (Psalm 89:14)
- 3) God is merciful: – *“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” Therefore, it does not depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.* (Romans 9:16)
- 4) God is Good: – *“God is good to all; he has compassion on all he made.”* (Psalm 145:9)
- 5) God doesn't want anyone to perish: *“God is not willing that any should perish but all should come to repentance.”* (2 Peter 3:9)
- 6) Children have an angel in heaven: *“That in heaven little children's angels behold the face of the Father”* (Matthew 18:10)
- 7) Jesus loves little children: *“Let the little ones come to me and forbid them not, for such is the kingdom of heaven.”* (Mark 10:14)
- 8) God is compassionate: *“It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not.”* (Lam. 3:22-23)

It is certain that some things remain a mystery to us because God has not clearly declared them to us. Therefore, we must leave little pagan children in the hands of God who will always do what is right. We trust in His mercy.

**“The secret things belong to the Lord our God,
but the things that are revealed belong to us and to
our children forever.” – Deuteronomy 29:29**

Application: Lessons for us:

- 1) God the judge of the earth will do what is right. – Genesis 18:25

- 2) God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked – Ezekiel 18:23, 33:11
- 3) God's thoughts are not our thoughts, ways not our ways – Isaiah 55:8-9
- 4) He (God) is not willing that any should perish but that all come to repentance. – 2 Peter 3:9
- 5) Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not for such is the kingdom of heaven. – Mark 10:14
- 6) The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and our children for ever. – Deuteronomy 29:29

INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION

*THE HOPE OF SALVATION FOR INFANTS WHO DIE WITHOUT BEING BAPTISED**

2.5 Hope and Prayer for Universal Salvation

Roman Catholic View

68. Christians are people of hope. They have set their hope “on the living God, who is the saviour of all, especially of those who believe” (1 Tim 4:10). They ardently desire that all human beings, unbaptised children included, may share in God’s glory and live with Christ (cf. 1 Thess 5:9-11; Rom 8:2-5; 23-35), in keeping with the recommendation of Theophylactus: “If he [our God] wants all men to be saved, you should also want it, and imitate God”.^[97] This Christian hope is a “hope ... against hope” (Rom 4:18), going far beyond any form of human hope. It takes its example from Abraham, our father in faith. Abraham put great trust in the promises that God had given him. He trusted (“hoped”) in God against all human evidence or odds (“against hope”). So Christians, even when they do not see how unbaptised children can be saved, nevertheless dare to hope that God will embrace them in his saving mercy. They are also prepared to make a defence to any one who calls them to account for the hope that is in them (cf. 1 Pet 3:15). When they meet mothers and parents in distress because their children died before or after birth, without being baptised, they feel urged to explain to them why their own hope for salvation can also extend to those infants or children.^[98]

69. Christians are people of prayer. They take to heart the admonition of Paul: “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all” (1 Tim 2:1). This universal prayer is acceptable to God who “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of truth” (1 Tim 2:4), and to whose creative power “nothing is impossible” (Job 42:2; Mk 10:27; 12:24-27; Lk 1:37). It is based on the hope that the whole creation will finally share in the glory of God (cf. Rom 8:22-27). Such a prayer is in line with St. John Chrysostom’s admonition: “Imitate God. If he wants all to be saved, then it is reasonable that one should pray for all”.^[99]

3.2. *God's Merciful Philanthropia*

80. God is rich in mercy, *dives in misericordia* (Eph 2:4). The Byzantine liturgy frequently praises God's philanthropy; God is the “lover of man”.^[107] Moreover, God’s loving purpose, now revealed through the Spirit, is beyond our imagining: “what God has prepared for those who love him” is something “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived” (1 Cor 2:9-10, quoting Is 64:4). Those who grieve over the fate of infants who die unbaptised, especially their parents, are often themselves people who love God, people whom these words should console. In particular, the following observations can be made:

81. a) God’s grace reaches all people and his providence embraces all. The Second Vatican Council teaches that God does not deny “the assistance necessary for salvation” to those who, without any fault of their own, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who, with the help of grace, “strive to lead a good life”. God enlightens all people “that they may at length have life” (cf. *LG* 16). Again it teaches that grace is “active invisibly” in the hearts of all people of good will (*GS* 22). These words apply directly to those above the age of reason, who are making responsible decisions, but it is difficult to deny their applicability also to those below the age of reason. The following words, in particular, seem truly universal in their scope. “For since Christ died for all, and since all are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine [*cumque vocatio hominis ultima revera una sit, scilicet divina*], we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery” (*GS* 22). This profound sentence of Vatican II takes us into the heart of the loving purpose of the blessed Trinity and stresses that God’s purpose exceeds our understanding.