

Chapter 2

The Firstborn From The Dead

I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. O Death, I will be your plagues! O Grave, I will be your destruction. (Hosea 13:14)

Death is a terrible enemy of humanity, its ever present shadow hangs over life from the moment of conception. No one is immune to its influence or to its unpredictability. For many, living daily with war, famine and plague, it is an ever present reality. It is a constant reminder of the frailty of human life which the Bible depicts as grass that withers (1Pet. 1:24), and as, “vapour which appears for a time and then fades away” (Jms. 4:14).

For many of its enemies, the human race throws up a champion (real or imaginary) who faces up to the enemy, takes it on face to face and inflicts a notable defeat. For example: the mighty warrior who wins a great victory against a seemingly invincible foe; the pioneering scientist who finds the cure for a life threatening disease; the proficient lawyer who defeats the unjust oppressor in court, etc. But who has taken on death and won the victory? The human race is remarkably silent, where is its champion for this battle?

History records only one who claimed during his life that he would take on death and defeat it; who told His followers that He would be killed and that He would be raised on the third day (Matt. 16:21); who claimed he had power to lay down His life and power to take it again (Jn. 10:18); whose followers gave testimony to seeing him alive after His death. That one is the Lord Jesus Christ, who rose triumphant from the grave, and showed Himself alive with many infallible proofs (Acts 1:3); no other religion dares to make such bold claims for its leader. For Christians, this belief that Jesus died and rose from the dead is a linchpin of their faith (cf. 1Cor. 15:1-19).

Death

Death and decay was never in God's intended purpose for the human race, or for His creation, just one commandment from the LORD God was given to Adam to keep him from death,

Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die. (Gen. 2:16,17)

As long as Adam kept that command his life was one of perfect pleasure, in unhindered communion with God, and without any of the unpleasant complaints of life with which we are so familiar now. However Adam fell, and in an act of blatant disobedience to God, took of the fruit of the tree of

knowledge of good and evil, and so death, sickness, decay and associated toil entered the world (Gen. 3; Rom. 5:12). The earth, instead of being a place of eternal blessing for humankind, came under the curse, and life on the earth became one of toil and hardship, terminated by physical death (Gen. 3:16-19).

Thankfully for the human race, God is gracious and merciful, and even there in the midst of sin and its condemnation, His lovingkindness shines through. In Gen. 3:15 the promise is given of a saviour, one who is to be of the seed of Eve, and who will bruise the serpent's head. This saviour became known to Israel as the Messiah. Through the many prophetic Messianic scriptures committed to Israel, it was recognised that the Messiah would be the one to rectify the effects of the curse, and restore creation to its intended glory as an eternal paradise, inhabited by eternal beings living in uninterrupted communion with Almighty God. The Messiah would be their 'champion', the one promised to them by God, accomplishing that which no man could by overcoming the Devil and death, and restoring harmony between Creator and created. This expectation is summed up in Daniel 9:24 where it says of the Messiah that "He will finish the transgression," "make an end of sins," "make reconciliation for every iniquity," and "bring in everlasting righteousness." The Messiah must of necessity, in order to accomplish His purpose, be the conquerer of death.

John's words that Jesus, is "the firstborn from the dead" are rooted in Old Testament teaching regarding firstborn sons, an understanding of this background will help understand John's insight into the Messianic fulfilment he sees in Jesus.

Firstborn of the Father

Scripture presents the special case of the firstborn son. Early in Genesis we find that certain privileges were bestowed on a father's firstborn son. The main privilege was the right of inheritance (i.e. the birthright), and the father's firstborn sons were due a double portion of the inheritance (Deut. 21:17). This privileged position carried with it the responsibility to continue the father's prosperity; the firstborn son, considered to be the might and beginning of his father's strength (Gen. 49:3; Deut. 21:17), would be expected to build upon his father's achievements in life. Such expectation continues today in many cultures, it is often assumed that the eldest son will continue the business of the father, develop it and uphold its good name and reputation; and it can be considered shameful when the son fails in that duty.

There are many such firstborn sons recorded in Scripture, some notably failed in their responsibilities and lost their rights:

- Cain, Adam's firstborn, the first of all firstborns murdered his brother and was replaced by Seth (Gen. 4:1ff; 4:25).
- Esau, Isaac's firstborn, who despised his birthright, and sold it to his brother Jacob for a pot of stew (Gen. 25:29).
- Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, had an immoral relationship with his father's maid, and lost the

birthright to Joseph (Gen. 35:22; 49:2-4; 1Chron. 5:1,2).

- Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord killed him, Perez taking his place (Gen. 38:7; 30).
- Amnon, David's firstborn, who raped Tamar his half-sister, for which he was murdered by Tamar's brother Absalom (2Sam. 3:2; 2Sam. 13).

Abraham

Abraham's situation presents an exceptional case: the matter of his inheritance had been a cause of concern, the Lord had promised him descendants, yet into his old age he remained childless. He seems to have come to a point where he felt the time was past, that he would go to his grave without an heir to continue his name, and the inheritance would pass to his senior servant. Abraham complained to the Lord, "I go childless and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus. Look, You have given me no offspring" (Gen. 15:2,3). In response the Lord promised, "one who will come from your own body shall be your heir" (Gen. 15:4). Some time later, Abraham being 86 years of age, and Sarah despairing of ever conceiving a child, Sarah persuaded Abraham to go in to Hagar her maid. Hagar conceived and brought forth a son, Ishmael. Later, when Abraham was 100 years old Sarah conceived and bore Isaac. Ishmael was Abraham's firstborn, but the inheritance did not go to him because he was not the child of promise, and Ishmael was cast out (Gen. 21:12; Gal. 4:21ff) - the Lord not allowing His plans which had eternal purpose and significance to be thwarted by the fleshly schemes of men. The Lord always keeps His promises!

Israel

The nation of Israel presents another exceptional case: the Lord through Moses told Pharaoh, "Israel is My son, My firstborn, let My son go that He may serve Me" (Ex. 4:22). God chose the nation of Israel for a special purpose of which the firstborn son is a type. Israel was called to be a holy nation representing the Lord, the Lord's purpose that they would be the head of all nations on earth (Deut. 7:6,7; 26:18,19). However, as prophesied, because of their disobedience the Jews were scattered from their land for a time (Deut.28:64-67); now in fulfilment of prophecy, the Jews, since 1948, have been returning to their land which is being restored to them (Deut. 30:3). God's purpose for Israel as the firstborn of nations still being worked out, and that day surely to come soon when Israel receives its full inheritance, and will be recognised by all as the chief of nations (Gen. 17:8; Isa. 14:1,2; Isa. 60; Jer. 31:7-12; Zech. 14:16,17; note also scriptures which speak of God as the Father of Israel, Isa. 63:16; 64:8; Hos. 1:11).

Firstborn of the Mother

Every father has his firstborn, it is equally true that every mother has her firstborn, and the word of God does make a distinction. From the time of Israel's escape from Egypt, and because of the death of the Egyptian firstborn, the Lord announced,

“Consecrate to Me all the firstborn, whatever opens the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and beast it is Mine.” (Ex. 13:2)

the reason given for this,

“On the day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I sanctified to Myself all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast. They shall be Mine, I am the LORD.” (Nu. 3:13)

There is a particular sense in which all males that opened the mothers’ wombs belonged to the Lord. For Israel this meant that all firstborn sons had to be redeemed and 5 shekels paid for their redemption (Nu. 3:40ff). Firstborn animals were sacrificed to the Lord, it was not acceptable to sacrifice children, and the Lord took the Levites to serve Him in their place (Nu. 3:12ff).

As with the firstborn of the fathers, there are several notable firstborns of the mother recorded in Scripture, interestingly, in comparison to the fathers’ firstborns, mostly seen in a good light:

- Isaac, Abraham’s second son, first and only son of Sarah, took the birthright over Ishmael because of God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah.
- Joseph, Jacob’s eleventh son, was the firstborn of his mother Rachel. Joseph, though despised by his brothers, eventually became their saviour and leader (Gen. 49:22-26).
- Samuel, firstborn of his mother Hannah, but not of his father Elkanah who had previous children from his other wife. Hannah gave Samuel to the Lord, and he became a great prophet and a leader of Israel (1Sam. 1:11).
- Jesus, the firstborn of Mary, born to be Saviour and ruler of the human race (Mt. 1:25; Lk. 1:32,33; Lk. 2:7).

For the firstborn son we can see that there were certain expectations for his life: The father’s firstborn was to represent his father, continue his father’s work, be the head of the family, inherit the father’s prosperity and receive special blessing; the mother’s firstborn was born to serve God. All of which we see perfectly fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah.

Jesus, Unique Firstborn Son

Several Scriptures mention Jesus as the firstborn:

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. (Rom. 8:29).

But when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says, “Let all the angels of God worship Him.” (Heb. 1:6).

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation . . . And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence (Col. 1:15-18).

Jesus had a birth unlike any other, no human father and a virgin mother, yet on two accounts he was the firstborn, as the only begotten of his heavenly Father and as the firstborn of His mother Mary.

As the firstborn, only begotten Son of His Father (Mk.1:11; Mt. 17:5), He came to do His Father's will on earth and to fulfil the work that the Father gave Him. In all things doing His Father's will perfectly, and being the perfect representative of His Father's glory (Jn. 17:4). Jesus, as the firstborn son of His Father, is heir of all things (Heb. 1:1).

As the firstborn male of His mother He belonged to God, and like every other Israelite male child who opened the womb, He was presented to the Lord according to the law (Lk. 2:22,23). His whole life, in a way unmatched by any other, would be given in total devotion, obedience and surrender to His Father's will (Heb. 10:9).

Joseph, Type of Jesus

The life of Joseph is a wonderful type of the life of Jesus. Like Jesus, Joseph was his mother's firstborn, he was aware that he was born to be the leader of his family; he was despised by his brethren, and rejected by them, but in the process of time, and in fulfilment of God's will he became their saviour and leader. Jesus too, came to His own, and was rejected; he suffered on the behalf of others, and is now the Saviour of all; one day those, including Israel (Zech. 12:10ff), who rejected Him will recognise Him, and acknowledge Him as Lord of all.

Joseph went down from Canaan to Egypt, and from there he would save his brethren from the enemy of famine; Jesus came down from heaven to the earth to save His brethren from their enemies, the Devil and death,

Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the Devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. (Heb. 2:14,15)

As the firstborn Son, Jesus went ahead of His brethren; as their representative and as author and finisher of their faith, he took on their greatest enemies, tasting death on their behalf (Heb. 1:9); triumphing at the cross over demonic powers (Col. 2:15); His resurrection from the dead a declaration that He is the Son of God (Rom. 1:4); and having defeated these enemies He could proclaim,

“I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death.” (Rev. 1:18)

And so, the firstborn Son, who had existed from eternity with His Father in heaven, became the firstborn from the dead, the first and only man to take on the grave, and rise triumphant to eternal life; and so He freely offers the gift of eternal life to all who will believe on Him.

Resurrection

Jesus’ resurrection from the dead is a central tenet of Christian faith, as Paul notes,

If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile, you are still in your sins! (1Cor. 15:17)
however,

Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. (1Cor. 15:20).

This is the great Christian hope, the assurance and confidence of eternal life, the proof being that Jesus has gone before, tasting death, rising from the dead and is alive today. This living hope gives testimony of its reality: there is a calmness, a peace, a certainty, an absence of fear in believers’ lives in the way they face the prospect of death, such characteristics speak very eloquently to the unbeliever who has no such hope or certainty. In Jesus, we see the fulfilment of the prophecy about the Messiah that,

He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces. (Isa. 25:8)

The final victory over death and the Devil still awaits. Until Jesus returns His brethren still suffer physical death, but in knowing that Jesus is the resurrection and the life, and that though they may die, they will live (Jn. 11:25,26), they know that the final victory is certain, and remain steadfast and immovable, rejoicing in serving the Lord who is the Shepherd and Bishop of their souls (1Pet. 2:25). They look forward to life in His eternal kingdom where finally there will be no more curse (Rev. 22:3), God and His redeemed people dwelling together in eternal peace and righteousness (Rev. 21:3).

Jesus is the ‘champion’ who took on humankind’s greatest enemies, He is the deliverer promised throughout the pages of the Old Testament, He is the Messiah who fulfils all the Messianic prophecies. He has won a great victory over death on behalf of those whom He would call His brethren. To win that victory cost Him very much, He who knew no sin, became sin (2Cor.

5:21); He tasted death, dying a real painful death, in becoming the propitiation for the sins of the world, He took God's wrath against sin on Himself (Rom. 3:25; 1Jn. 2:2).¹ Not for Himself He suffered, but for those who would believe and receive Him as their Saviour, and who would become members of the "church of the firstborn, registered in heaven" (Heb. 12:23); and who, waiting to be conformed to His image, look forward to being with Him who is "the firstborn among many brethren" (Rom. 8:29); and gathering together will sing to Him, who is the firstborn from the dead, the song of Revelation 5:12:

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain
To receive power and riches and wisdom,
And strength and honour and glory and blessing.

Jesus is the most true, perfect and faithful firstborn Son, He is worthy, Hallelujah, what a Saviour!

¹ See appendix for discussion on propitiation.