

**International Sunday School Lesson**  
**Study Notes**  
**December 20, 2015**

**Lesson Text: Exodus 13:13b-15; Luke 2:22-32**  
**Lesson Title: Dedication of the Firstborn (Christmas)**

**Introduction**

At first glance, the two widely separated passages of Scripture for this week's study may have caused you to sigh rather than rejoice. They have nevertheless a beautiful connection and Christmas message. They both focus on the subject of the dedication of the firstborn and the significance it held in Jewish history. As we study from Exodus and Luke today, we need to remember the importance of Israel's deliverance from Egyptian bondage through the blood of the Passover lamb, and our deliverance from sin through the blood of Jesus Christ. It is essential we emphasize the scriptural truths of the dedication of the firstborn this and every Christmas season.

As Exodus 13 opens the nation of Israel was on her way, marching out of Egypt toward a life of freedom in the Promised Land. They were eating the last of the unleavened bread as they left their life of bondage behind. They had celebrated their first Passover with their bags packed and waited on marching orders. As they set out under the leadership of Moses, word was passed around that from now on they would consecrate every firstborn to God.

From the beginning, God insisted that His people pass down to the succeeding generations the story of what had happened in Egypt and how they had been redeemed (Exodus 13:8, 14). Along with keeping the Passover, the practice of dedicating their firstborn animals and sons to the Lord would serve as a reminder of the price paid for their redemption. When a firstborn animal was sacrificed, or in the case of a donkey, redeemed by substituting a lamb, it gave parents a great opportunity to discuss redemption with their children. The same was especially true at the birth of a first son in the family. Parents could explain how God rescued the firstborn of the family on the night of the Passover (Exodus 12:12-13). The offering of the firstborn was to continue after they reached the land of Canaan (Exodus 13:11).

Being a firstborn male Israelite carried great significance in the nation. Each time a firstborn male, man or beast, came into the world that firstborn had to be sanctified, or set apart for God's possession. It was a practice Jews took seriously. Thus, Joseph and Mary brought their firstborn son to the temple and dedicated him to the Lord.

**The Dedication of the Firstborn Established (Exodus 13:13-15)**

### Verse 13

“...and all the firstborn of man among thy children shalt thou redeem.”

If you read the entirety of verse 13 you will find God’s law concerning the firstborn of a donkey. In addition to the clean animals that are to be redeemed or sacrificed, the donkey could not be sacrificed because it was considered an unclean animal. If a substitute was not given for the donkey, its neck was to be broken so it would die. Under no circumstance was a firstborn donkey to be offered to the Lord. However, a lamb could be substituted for the firstborn donkey.

The “firstborn of man,” or the first male son born, had to be “redeemed.” “Redeem” means “to buy back through the payment of a price.” Since there was to be no child sacrifice in Israel, a lamb must be substituted for the firstborn male son just like a lamb was substituted for them in Egypt during the first Passover. In other words, the firstborn son was redeemed by a replacement, in this case, a lamb.

### Verse 14

“And it shall be when thy son asketh thee in time to come, saying, What is this? that thou shalt say unto him, By strength of hand the LORD brought us out from Egypt, from the house of bondage:”

In this verse, God is telling the father what to tell his son. This verse presents a scenario that must have occurred numerous times throughout Israel’s history. A firstborn son would see a father offering a lamb to God after the birth of his first son and ask, “What is this?” His father would then explain how he had offered a lamb for him when he was born and then connect this most sacred process to deliverance “out from Egypt, from the house of bondage.”

The spiritual roots and heritage of Israel was directly connected to the “strength of the hand of the LORD.” The Israelite families needed visual and verbal confirmation of who they were and how they became the people they were.

### Verse 15

“And it came to pass, when Pharaoh would hardly let us go, that the LORD slew all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man, and the firstborn of beast: therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all that openeth the matrix, being males; but all the firstborn of my children I redeem.”

In this verse, God is telling the father why he must tell his son. The Lord gives the specific reason for requiring the redemption of the firstborn. It lies in the

hardness of Pharaoh's heart and the tenth plague upon the land of Egypt (Exodus 12:29-31). Because of Pharaoh's stubbornness and refusal to let the Israelites leave Egypt, God killed the firstborn males, animal and human. But, He spared the "firstborn" of Israel because of the shed blood of the Passover lamb. They would not be alive had it not been for the mercy of the Lord.

"Therefore," or as a result, the "first male that opens the womb, I redeem." Literally, the first male out of the womb belongs to the Lord.

*Note: There is nothing in the world that could take the place of a Jewish father explaining this to his children, especially his firstborn son. We should never underestimate the value of truth. There is nothing that can substitute for it. Have you told your children the truth about God's redemption? Raising your children in God's house, exposing them to the salvation of sinners, singing songs and hymns about your faith, attending baptismal services, hearing the saints testify to God's saving grace and goodness, all of these are important to make a connection to God's redemption. Christians need the same confirmation through biblical teaching, training, and corporate worship the Israelite had through the dedication of the firstborn. Please do not confuse what was happening in Israel with tradition. This was not just about carrying on a "tradition." It was about communicating truth.*

### **The Dedication of the Firstborn Exercised (Luke 2:22-32)**

While Luke 2 is the most familiar and read Scripture concerning the birth of Christ, this section seems to be filled with useless information. At first glance, there really is not much to see. Why does Luke tell us about turtledoves, pigeons, an old man, and the law of the Lord? What do these things have to do with Christ and Christmas? This seemingly insignificant section contains some wonderful truths about the Christ child and is connected with the dedication of the firstborn in Exodus 13.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus said, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). From the beginning of His earthly life, even before He could walk or talk, He fulfilled the requirements of God's covenant with the Israelites.

#### Verse 22-24

"And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord; (As it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord;) And to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons."

The “days of purification according to the law of Moses” involved what is called “ceremonial uncleanness” for the Jewish mother. Leviticus 12:1-5 describes the process: *“And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, If a woman have conceived seed, and born a man child: then she shall be unclean seven days; according to the days of the separation for her infirmity shall she be unclean. And in the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. And she shall then continue in the blood of her purifying three and thirty days; she shall touch no hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying be fulfilled. But if she bear a maid child, then she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her separation: and she shall continue in the blood of her purifying threescore and six days.”*

The first part of Mary’s “days of purification” lasted for seven days. On the eighth day of life for a newborn male, circumcision was required (Genesis 17:11-12; Leviticus 12:3). Luke tells us, *“And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called JESUS”* (Luke 2:21). Then Luke says, *“And when the days...”* signifying another period of time. For the next thirty-three days, Mary observed Old Testament laws by keeping herself and Jesus away from general contact with people and from daily routines. It was part of the purification process that lasted for no less than forty days.

After the “days of Mary’s purification were accomplished, she and Joseph “brought Jesus to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord.” (This presentation was a separate matter from Jesus’ circumcision). The “law of the Lord” given through Moses required “every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord.” That means the child must be separated and dedicated to the Lord. Literally the child was considered a holy offering to the Lord. Mary and Joseph presented their firstborn, Jesus, dedicating His life to God. Of course, Mary and Joseph returned home with Jesus after presenting him. The presentation and their offering was a reminder that their son belonged to the Lord.

For all children, regardless of birth order or sex, the parents were to bring a sin offering (Leviticus 12:6-7). Mary and Joseph brought a “pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.” This offering showed that Mary and Joseph were poor. It also indicates they had not yet seen the wise men, since their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh would have provided them the financial means to exchange those gifts and buy a lamb for an offering.

The poor offering of a “turtledove or two young pigeons” draws attention to the fact Jesus endured humiliation for sinners from the beginning of His human existence. It must have been humbling and maybe embarrassing for the poor, such as Mary and Joseph, not being able to afford a lamb. Even as a babe, Jesus endures humiliation so you would not experience the humiliation you deserve, as you trust in Him.

### Verse 25

“And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him.”

From the obedience of Mary and Joseph obeying the law of the Lord regarding a sacrifice for their newborn son, Luke turns his attention to tell us the story of a devout Jew who was anxiously awaiting the arrival of the Messiah.

“Simeon’s” name means “to hear.” He was a “just and devout man” which means he lived separated from the low morals and lack of reverence in his day. He also “waited for the consolation of Israel.” The “consolation of Israel” was a common messianic reference in Isaiah denoting comfort and solace (Isaiah 40:1; 49:13; 51:3). There was an expectancy in Simeon’s heart, based on God’s promise, that God was about to intervene in the world. He lived on the promise God had given him looking daily for the Messiah.

“The Holy Ghost was upon him” reflects the spiritual power operating in Simeon’s life. The ministry of the Holy Spirit was very active in the birth of Christ and is essential for any revelation from God and Scripture as seen in the following verse.

### Verse 26

“And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ.”

No doubt this godly Jewish man had prayed many times, “Lord, do not let me die before I see the Messiah.” Who knows how long he had waited to see the fulfillment after “it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.” The “revelation” that came to Simeon was very unusual and special. He believed what the Holy Ghost revealed. He would not die until he saw the Messiah. This expectation undergirded by a holy life filled each day of Simeon’s life with joyful expectation.

### Verse 27-32

“And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law, Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said, Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.”

In the same way Simeon knew he would see the Christ before his death, he “came by the Spirit into the temple” on the same day Mary and Joseph “brought in the child Jesus.” There is no coincidence here. This is all divine providence and guidance by the Holy Spirit. Again, Mary and Joseph are “fulfilling the law” in regard to their firstborn son.

Do you think Luke is overstating their regard for God’s law? Take note of Luke’s repetition: “according to the law of Moses” (verse 22); “As it is written in the law of the Lord” (verse 23); “according to that which is said in the law of the Lord” (verse 24); “after the custom of the law” (verse 27). Luke’s point is Jesus, from His birth, from His childhood, obeyed the law of God. That was absolutely essential for Him to be a teacher in Israel. But more importantly, it was absolutely essential for Him to be our Savior.

When Simeon took Jesus “in his arms,” he offered the Lord a hymn of praise. First, Simeon celebrates the fulfillment of God’s promise to him *personally*. He says, “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word.” Simeon is now content to die because he has seen God’s promise fulfilled. Second, Simeon celebrates the provision of a Savior to the entire world, both Jew and Gentile. He says, “For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.” The Jews believed Messiah was their deliverer, but they struggled with the idea of Christ being the Savior of all men. Simeon’s praise declared the baby he held to be Savior of the world.

Take note of Simeon’s emphasis on “eyes, seeing, light, and glory.” These are all powerful words describing this little baby Simeon is holding to be nothing less than God Himself in a human body! The “Lord” had “prepared” the body of the baby Simeon held so all the world could see God’s plan of salvation (Hebrews 10:5). The baby Jesus was a “light” of revelation to the Gentiles and the “glory” of God’s people Israel. “Glory” is the Greek word *doxa*, translated from the Hebrew term *kabod*, which speaks of the radiant splendor of God’s character. This precious baby Simeon held was God’s visible presence in a world of sin.

*Question: Do you view Christmas like Simeon? Do you approach Christmas with the understanding that it is a day when God fulfilled His promise? Christmas was warm and real to Simeon, both in his heart and his arms. Is Christmas real to you?*

## **Conclusion**

Unlike the firstborn in Israel during the tenth plague, Jesus was not spared from death. He came to die on the cross so every sinner could become a son of God (John 1:12). It is easy during the Christmas season to forget how Jesus, God’s firstborn, was treated. Being God’s firstborn, does not mean Jesus was born first like a firstborn child in a family. Colossians 1:15 calls Jesus “...*the*

*firstborn of every creature.*” That speaks of His preeminence, not that He was a created being.

Jesus is the perfect image of God. God Himself condescended to the span of a virgin’s womb and was born in a human body. Simeon held that little body in his arms and declared him to be the long-awaited Messiah. None of this would have occurred if Mary and Joseph had disregarded the law of the firstborn. When Simeon held Jesus, He was perfect God, perfect man. The Apostle Paul said it like this, “*But when the fullness of time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law*” (Galatians 4:4). Because Jesus lived in perfect obedience, He was able to save sinners who were likewise under the law, but not obedient to it.

Amen.