

Saved – Delivered - Redeemed

Saved. Delivered. Redeemed. Most church people use these words as though they were synonyms. But this story from Numbers 3 suggests to us that they are not. They are certainly closely related to each other, but each carries its own nuances. God's glorious plan for reconciling His people with Himself involves all three: salvation, deliverance, and redemption.

We see it in the story of the Exodus – as God saved His people from the final plague on Egypt. God went through the land, taking the life of the firstborn male in every family – as well as the firstborn of the livestock. But the firstborn male in every Israelite family was *saved* because of the blood of the lamb painted on the doorway. God passed over those homes.

Even though Pharaoh then told Moses to take the Israelites and get out of Egypt, they were not yet delivered. Pharaoh had told Moses three times before that some or all of the people could go, then changed his mind.

And he changed his mind even after the final plague. While the Israelites were camped out near the Sea, Pharaoh led his army into the desert to stop them. It was through the Sea that God delivered His people, by enabling them to cross and then sweeping the Egyptian army into the Sea. Their salvation came first – when they were spared destruction. Their deliverance then came – when they were freed permanently from their Egyptian masters.

But even then, they were not redeemed. There's a little verse in Exodus 13 that helps us to understand why that was necessary. It came between the passing over of the Israelite homes and the deliverance through the Sea. On the day the Israelites left Egypt, God told Moses, "Consecrate to (or set apart for) me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether man or animal."

Because God had taken the firstborn sons of the Egyptians and spared the firstborn sons of the Israelites, He claimed them for His own. That is why in Numbers 3:12 & 13, we read of God's telling Moses:

"I have taken the Levites from among the Israelites in place of the first male offspring of every Israelite woman. The Levites are mine, for all the firstborn are mine. When I struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, I *set apart* for myself every firstborn in Israel, whether man or animal. They are to be mine. I am the LORD."

Because God saved them, they belonged to Him. He set them apart for Himself. The word God uses here is "consecrated" – the same word He uses for those who will serve Him in the Tabernacle. But God was not going to take the firstborn male of every family for service in the Tabernacle. Because the firstborn son was a vital part of the Israelite culture – the one on whom the family's hopes were pinned, the one who would take care of Mom when Dad died – God was not going to disrupt the entire culture. Instead, He redeemed them with the entire tribe of male Levites. Although that altered the course of the Levites, they adapted and developed their own culture – which included pensions to take care of older Levites and widows.

You may have noticed that it was not an exactly one-for-one exchange. There were 22,273 firstborn males among the other tribes – probably counting only the ones born after the Israelites left Egypt. It only makes sense that God would redeem them with adult Levites, since very young boys cannot do much work in the Tabernacle. However, there were only 22,000 Levites – leaving 273 who were to be redeemed with cash: five shekels of silver each.

That may seem silly to set up an alternative redemption system for the handful of remaining firstborn sons – but it was not silly to God. This tells us that it was important to God that each of them be redeemed, because each of them was valuable. Scholars have bickered for thousands of years about whether these numbers are literal, symbolic, or inflated – but what matters here is that God deems all the firstborn valuable and worthy of redemption.

And please, don't get tripped up by the monetary value that was placed on them. At current silver prices, five shekels would be worth about \$36.50. That was the price set in Leviticus for a slave boy under the age of five: a low price because – as we just said – boys age four and under cannot do much work. The redemption money was to be given to Aaron and his sons for service in the Tabernacle.

Redemption Money. Have you ever been to a Redemption Center? They have them all over New England, where the states impose deposits on beverage bottles. You get your deposit back only if you recycle your bottles.

That launched a whole new industry: Redemption Centers. Sometimes it's a retired guy with a garage who collects your bottles. More recently, reverse vending machines have popped up – especially in grocery stores. You put your empty bottle in the hole and the machine gives you money.

Now non-profit organizations have gotten into the act. They set up places where you can drop off bottles – but you don't get any money for them. The Scouts or the food pantry or the women's shelter bags them up and takes them to redemption centers, and keeps the money to support their charitable work. Whoever does it, however it is done, the state exchanges money for your bottles. It redeems them because they have value – in that they won't wind up on the roadsides or in the woods or in the ocean.

Consecrating and redeeming the firstborn males was a reminder to God's people that everything they had belongs to God. The same principle was behind the tithe and the Feast of Firstfruits. It's all about redemption.

One of the most powerful stories of redemption in all of Scripture is that of Abraham and Isaac – his first legitimate son. God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac – and Abraham was ready to do it, but the voice of an angel told him to stop. It was then that he noticed a ram caught in a thicket – who took Isaac's place as the sacrifice. Isaac was redeemed with the blood of a ram.

And we have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb – God’s first and only Son. Paul often wrote of how followers of Jesus have been “bought with a price” – and a terrible price that was. Peter wrote about the price early in his first pastoral letter:

For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

That is our Gospel: that we have been saved from destruction by the death of Jesus, that we have been delivered from death by the resurrection of Jesus, and that we have been bought with the blood of Jesus to be His and His alone.

We have been redeemed because each of us is important to God. Each of us has value. So each of us had to be redeemed. We are God’s exclusive property.

Did you notice in our passage from Numbers how God-centered God’s redemption process is?

"*I* have taken the Levites from among the Israelites in place of the first male offspring of every Israelite woman. The Levites are *mine*, for all the firstborn are *mine*. When *I* struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, *I* set apart for *myself* every firstborn in Israel, whether man or animal. They are to be *mine*. *I* am the LORD."

Thinking about that should makes us wonder if we use the wrong language to describe our relationship with God. We make statements like, “Jesus is *my* Savior,” perhaps suggesting that He belongs to us when it’s the other way around. Maybe we should start saying, “I am the Lord’s,” or “I belong to my Savior.”

Thinking about that should change our thinking. You are valuable to God. So valuable that God redeemed you with the life of His only Son – His firstborn Son. Cherish that truth. Cling to it when you feel you don’t matter. When the world makes you feel small and insignificant, remind yourself that you belong to God, who bought you with the blood of His Son, Jesus.

Amen.