

Essential Truths III: Working With God

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The Birthright

Your life in Christ is defined by birthright. Everything – your salvation, your relationship with God and, as we shall in this module, even your ministry – flows from your birthright as a child of God. In **John 1:12-13**, we discover:

“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave *the right* to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.”

This verse is further amplified in **Galatians 4:4-5**, where Paul writes:

“But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law to redeem those under law, that we might receive *the full rights of sons*.”

The full rights of sons! Notice what Paul says? The *full* rights of sons! When you believed in Jesus, you not only received reconciliation with God. You not only became a son of God, you also received all the rights that went with that sonship.

This shade of meaning is often missed in our generation. When we think of being a son of God, we generally think in terms of relationship, since this is what sonship means today. But in biblical times, sonship meant far far more than just *being* a son. It also meant *doing* the things that a son was supposed to do.

▶ **The Birthright** ◀

Taking the Baton

The Great Commission

The Body of Christ

The Ministry of Every Believer

Joining the Work of God

The Tree of Life

Ministry of Reconciliation

Filled with the Spirit

Ministry to the Body

Sent into the Harvest

Speaking the Word of God

A Lifestyle Gospel

Salt of the Earth

Enforcing the Victory

Signs and Wonders

A New Kind of Leadership

Establishing a Daily Church

Making Disciples

The New Wine

The Goal of Ministry

As we have emphasized many times throughout the Biblical Studies Course, being and doing are closely related. What we do flows from an understanding of who we are. So before we begin exploring what God has called us to *do* as Christians, let's re-establish who he has called us to *be*.

Discovering Your Birthright

Your new birth experience in Christ carries with it a birthright. *Websters International Dictionary* defines birthright as:

“A right, privilege, or possession to which a person is entitled by birth.”

As a child of God, you have rights, privileges and possessions to which you are entitled by birth. These rights, privileges and possessions are described by **Romans 8:17**:

“Now if we are children, then we are *heirs* – heirs of God and *co-heirs with Christ...*”

Or as **Galatians 4:7** puts it succinctly:

“...since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.”

Sonship and heirship go together. Yet all too often, we have viewed heirship mostly in terms of blessing – what we *get* from God. But heirship is far more than this. As an heir of God, you have inherited not just the right to *enjoy* being a son of God. You have also inherited the right to *act* as a son of God.

Son of the Right Hand

Read Genesis 35:17-18

When Jacob's youngest son was born, two names were given to him:

- **Ben-Omi**, which means “son of my trouble” (given by his mother)
- **Benjamin**, which means “son of my right hand” (given by his father)

Although the child was born in sorrow and death, Jacob overruled the first name to give the second. In the same way, you were born into God's kingdom through the pain, suffering and death of the Lord Jesus. But rather than calling you “son of my trouble,” the Lord has called you “son of my right hand.”

Read Psalm 16:11

The right hand of God holds a special significance in Scripture, representing the full power and authority of God (**Psalm 20:6; 118:15**). Take a look at these scriptures and note how often Jesus is associated with the right hand of God.

Read Matthew 26:64

Read Mark 16:19

Read Luke 22:69

Read Acts 2:33-35

Read Acts 5:31

Read Acts 7:55-56

Read Romans 8:34

Read Ephesians 1:20-21

Read Hebrews 1:3,13

Read Hebrews 8:1

Read Hebrews 10:12

Read Hebrews 12:2

Read 1 Peter 3:21-22

Jesus is *the* Son of the Right Hand. But in Christ, you too have found your place at the right hand of God. In **Matthew 25:32-33**, Jesus describes how in the last days, he will separate the sheep from the goats, putting the former on his right and the latter on his left. But in one sense that separation has already taken place! You are *already* seated at the right hand of God in Christ! (**Ephesians 2:6**). In Christ, you too have become a Son of the Right Hand!

Read Colossians 3:1

The Son of the Right Hand is given another description in Scripture. He is called the Firstborn. **Colossians 1:15** tells us:

“[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, *the firstborn* over all creation.”

What an unusual statement! What does the Bible mean when it calls Jesus “the firstborn over creation”? Is it (as the Jehovah’s Witnesses claim) that Jesus is nothing more than the first created being?

Read Hebrews 1:5-6

Here again we see Jesus described as God’s Firstborn. This verse tells us:

“And again, *when God brings his firstborn into the world*, he says, ‘Let all God’s angels worship him.’”

We need to understand the meaning of the word “firstborn” before we can understand why God would call Jesus his Firstborn. Let’s take a closer look at the meaning of this word. As we shall see, it has a great bearing on our understanding of our birthright and ministry in Christ.

Meaning of the Firstborn

In order to understand why Jesus is called the Firstborn of God (and what this has to do with us), we need to look into the Old Testament and there is no better place to begin than to take a page from a very familiar story.

Read Genesis 37:2-35

Most of us are familiar with this story, one of the most common stories told to children. Why was it that Joseph’s brothers were so jealous of Joseph that they plotted to kill him? What, in their eyes, was his crime?

The key verses can be found in **Genesis 37:3-4**:

“Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.”

We note that the older brothers’ hatred of Joseph equally matched their father’s love of him. But look at how that love was expressed: Jacob made Joseph “a richly ornamented robe” (NIV) or “a coat of many colors” (KJV). This passage indicates that it was because of this coat that the brothers “saw that their father loved him more than any of them.” What did this coat mean to Jacob? What did it mean to Joseph? And what did it mean to Joseph’s brothers? How did it represent the deep love that Jacob had for this young son?

The coat that Jacob made for Joseph was nothing less than the robe of the firstborn. It signified that Jacob had chosen Joseph to be his firstborn, and the other brothers recognized this immediately. Their response to Joseph after sharing one of his dreams was: “Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?”

It was the firstborn son who ruled over the father’s household. This is what the brothers were referring to when they spoke of Joseph “reigning” and “ruling” over them. After this, the Bible records how “they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said” (**verse 8**).

Did you see something interesting? It wasn’t the *dreams* of Joseph that sparked his brothers’ hatred. The dreams simply *fueled* that hatred. The root of their hatred was actually their father’s intense love for Joseph, a love that had been expressed in the giving to him of the robe of the firstborn. *This is why they hated him. This is why they plotted to kill him and this is why they eventually sold him into slavery.* They saw Joseph, the second youngest son, usurping authority over them and, through the recounting of his dreams, already beginning to exercise the rights of the firstborn.

Read 1 Chronicles 5:2

What a remarkable statement! Even though Joseph was the youngest, even though Judah was the one through whom God’s Anointed eventually came, “the rights of the firstborn belonged to Joseph.”* In fact, Joseph was later to be called “the prince among his brothers” (**Deuteronomy 33:16**).

Although the firstborn was *usually* the first son born, it was not always those who were first born who received the firstborn status.

Read 1 Chronicles 26:10

Here we see another example in the Bible of a younger son being counted as the

* From Jacob’s point of view, the selection of Joseph as his firstborn was natural. If you read the story found in **Genesis 29:1-30**, you will discover that of his two wives, it had always been Rachel that Jacob loved. His marriage to Leah was the result of deceit on the part of his father-in-law, Laban. Rachel gave birth to only two sons – Joseph and Benjamin – dying with the birth of the youngest. Jacob’s intense love for Rachel was transferred to her sons, Joseph and Benjamin (note **Genesis 44:20**), and he counted Joseph, the firstborn of Rachel, as his true firstborn and heir.

firstborn. Shimri, although not the eldest of his brothers, was appointed as firstborn. This fact alone shows that the term “firstborn” was not simply a description of birth. It was a description of status. This is why Jesus, though not created, is called “the firstborn over all creation.” This title identifies the *status* of Christ in relation to creation, not his birth in relation to it.

Let’s take a look at another example, this time the account of Jacob blessing Ephraim and Manasseh, the sons of Joseph.

Read Genesis 48:8-20

This passage richly illustrates the culture of the firstborn. In these verses, we see a number of things take place:

- **Verse 14** – Jacob “reached out his *right* hand and put it on Ephraim’s head, *though he was the younger*, and crossing his arms, he put his *left* hand on Manasseh’s head, *even though Manasseh was the firstborn*.” It was customary for the right hand to be placed upon the firstborn, who was recognized as “the son of the right hand.”
- **Verse 15** – Jacob “blessed Joseph” in the blessing of his two sons. In Bible times, the father and his son (particularly the firstborn) were seen as one. This union of father and son also comes through in Jesus’ declaration, “I and the Father are one” (**John 10:30**) (see also **10:38; 14:9-13**).
- **Verse 16** – Jacob prays, “May [Ephraim and Manasseh] be called by my name and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac...” Part of the status of the firstborn was the identification of the son with his father and forefathers. He was the next in line, carrying on their heritage and carrying on their name. Thus Jesus came in his Father’s name (**John 5:43; 17:11-12**). The name he has “inherited” from his Father is superior to every other name (**Hebrews 1:4; Philippians 2:9-10**). This is the same name that we now bear as Christians (**1 Peter 4:16**).
- **Verse 17-18** – When Joseph sees his father’s hands crossed over, with the right hand on the youngest and the left hand on the oldest, he is “displeased.” In fact, he tries to replace his father’s hands according to custom, with the right hand on the eldest, and these are his words: “No, my father, *this one* is the firstborn; put your right hand on his head.”
- **Verse 19-20** – But Jacob knows what he is doing and insists that the right hand stay upon Ephraim. Then the Bible tells us: “So he put Ephraim ahead of Manasseh.” What Jacob was doing was declaring Ephraim, though second-born, to be the firstborn.

What this story illustrates is that the firstborn was a *conferred* status. Although often associated with being born first, there are plenty of exceptions to the rule. Another example of this is David.

Read Psalm 89:19- 27

David was the eighth son of Jesse (**1 Samuel 17:12-14**), yet God selected him from among all his brothers (**1 Samuel 16:6-13**) and “appointed” him as his firstborn. As one commentary, *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, explains:

“What is meant [by being appointed as firstborn] is that God symbolically adopts him and places him in the number one position in his family. ‘Firstborn’ is thus the place of honor and leadership which the Davidic king is said to occupy.”¹

Read Exodus 4:22

Read Jeremiah 31:9

Once again we find the term firstborn applied, this time not to an individual but to the nation of Israel and to the tribe of Ephraim.

“In neither of these passages (nor anywhere else in the Old Testament) is there even a hint that God in some way gave birth to Israel. What he is saying is that he has designated this nation as his number one nation, the one closest to his heart. To injure this nation is to injure God and to feel the consequences. The symbolic consequence in Exodus is that Pharaoh loses his own literal firstborn son. Thus we see that a nation put in the number one place can also be called a ‘firstborn.’²

It is in this sense that Jesus is called God’s Firstborn. He has the supreme position. He is, quite literally, the “number one” Son.

Read Philippians 2:9-11

The Birthright of the Firstborn

Now that we have seen what the Bible means when it uses the term “firstborn,” let’s now take a look at the birthright of the firstborn. This birthright included three things:

Special Position

Being the “firstborn” was all about headship within the family. The firstborn was the father’s “right-hand man.” He represented the father’s authority to the family and represented the family to the rest of the world.

We see this position of authority clearly in **1 Samuel 20:29**, where Jonathan gives the excuse that David’s brother (the firstborn) had “ordered” him to return to Bethlehem. The firstborn’s order carried with it the full authority of the father.

Special Inheritance

Part of the firstborn’s birthright was a double portion inheritance (see **Deuteronomy 21:15-17**). According to *Holman’s Bible Dictionary*:

“If a man had two sons, his estate would be divided into three portions, and the older son would receive two. If there were three sons, the estate would be divided into four portions, and the oldest son would receive two.”³

We see this double portion inheritance alluded to in Jacob's blessing of Joseph's two sons (see **Genesis 48:5-6**). Jacob declares:

“Now then, your two sons born to you in Egypt before I came to you here will be reckoned as mine; Ephraim and Manasseh will be mine, just as Reuben and Simeon are mine.”

Joseph, as Jacob's firstborn, received a double portion inheritance. From that point on, Joseph's descendants were grouped into not *one* tribe (like the other brothers) but into *two* full-status tribes – Ephraim and Manasseh.

Special Responsibility

The firstborn held responsibility for the welfare of the rest of the family. This was why he received the double-portion inheritance – not just for his own benefit, but in order to help the rest of the family in time of need.

We see this sense of responsibility being expressed by Judah (at that time the one recognized by Jacob as his firstborn*) in relation to the safety of Benjamin.

Read Genesis 43:8-9

Read Genesis 44:18-34

Judah was expressing not just his privileges as firstborn of the family, but also his responsibility. He not only represented the authority of his father, he also took upon himself the penalty of his younger brother's supposed error.

Now with these three things in mind – the position, inheritance and responsibility of the firstborn – let's take one more look at a very familiar story, hopefully in a brand-new light.

The Parable of the Firstborn

Read Luke 15:11-32

Armed with an understanding of the privileges and responsibilities of the firstborn, this story takes on a whole new level of meaning.

- **Verse 11-12** – As we have previously noted, the story is about *two* sons – an older brother and a younger brother. The older brother was, according to custom, the firstborn, with all the rights and privileges associated with that position. When the father divided his inheritance amongst his two sons, the older brother would have received a double portion of the inheritance.
- **Verse 13** – We know what the younger brother did with his inheritance – he “squandered his wealth in wild living.” But the question remains: What did the firstborn son do with his portion of the inheritance?
- **Verse 29** – This verse implies that he did absolutely nothing with it. He

* Reuben was firstborn by birth order (**Genesis 46:8**), but lost this status when he slept with his father's concubine, thus dishonoring his father (**Genesis 35:22; 49:3-4**). Simeon and Levi, next in line, were also disqualified as firstborn because of their violence, in disobedience to their father's wishes (**Genesis 34; 49:5-7**).

probably took all the title deeds and carefully stowed them in the bottom drawer of his bedroom closet. He then proceeded to slave in the fields with the rest of the hired help. He was the firstborn son, but did not live like the firstborn son.

- **Verse 22** – Upon the return of the younger son, the father does something very unusual, something that would have jarred the ears of Jesus’ audience. He orders that three things be given to the younger son – the best robe, a signet ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. These three things were symbols of the firstborn heir of the father. The fact that the father gave them to the younger son highlights two things: firstly, the magnanimous grace that the father extended toward the wayward son (a beautiful picture of God’s total “turn around” grace extended toward you); and secondly, the fact that the older son was not wearing the robe of the firstborn, the signet ring of the firstborn, and the sandals of the firstborn. The father gave them to the younger son because the older son was not using them.

The older brother had a distorted and erroneous picture of his position within the father’s household. In all three areas – his position, his inheritance and his responsibility – the older brother failed to recognize his rights as the firstborn.

When the younger son failed to return to the father, it should have been the responsibility of the firstborn to go seeking for him. The error of the prodigal was not just counted as an individual error – it was also a slight against the family and upon the father’s name. It was the older son who should have sought to correct this error, redeeming the younger son from his destitution and restoring him back to his father. Yet this never took place, all because the older brother never saw himself as the firstborn of his father. He failed in all three areas of being firstborn:

- He failed to take his position
- He failed to use his inheritance
- He failed to take his responsibility

Jesus – the Firstborn

Now let’s look at someone is not only *called* firstborn, but also *acted* as firstborn. As Firstborn, Jesus is described as having a preeminent position in three spheres:

- Firstborn over all creation (**Colossians 1:15**)
- Firstborn from the dead (**Colossians 1:18; Revelation 1:5**)
- Firstborn among many brothers (**Romans 8:29**)

Jesus is the “firstborn over all creation.” As we have already seen, this does not mean that Jesus was created first, but rather that he has a special status over creation (**Colossians 1:15-17; Hebrews 1:2-4**).

From the moment of creation, Jesus has held special *position*, *inheritance* and *responsibility*. When mankind fell, unlike the older brother of his parable, Jesus took his responsibility as Firstborn.

- As “firstborn over all creation,” Jesus laid down his life and became “firstborn from among the dead.”
- Through his resurrection, Jesus brought many sons into glory (**Hebrews 2:10-11**) and so became “the firstborn among many brothers.”

When the Father declared over Jesus, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” (**Matthew 17:5**), this was a declaration of Christ as the Firstborn, the one who would fully represent the Father (note also **Hebrews 1:1-3**).

The Church of the Firstborn

Read Hebrews 12:22-23

This verse describes how we have become part of the “church of the firstborn.” This is a very revealing description. The term used here “firstborn” is not singular (referring to Christ) but plural (referring to Christians). Thus this could be translated “...you have come...to the church of the firstborn [ones].”

Remember how **Romans 8:17** describes us as “heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ”? “The designation ‘firstborn’ suggests [our] privileged position as heirs together with Christ, the supreme firstborn and ‘heir of all things.’”⁵ *Holman’s Bible Dictionary* further expands on this:

“Christian believers, united with and as joint heirs with Christ, enjoy the status of ‘firstborn’ in God’s household.”

Jesus is the Firstborn *by right* – in his relationship to us, he will always be “the firstborn among many brothers.” But the remarkable news of the Gospel is that Christ has included us in his birthright (**Romans 8:17; Ephesians 2:6**). In him, we are now called “the firstborn ones” *by grace*.

Like Christ, we too now have special position, special inheritance and special responsibility. We are surrounded by a lost world. Will we be like the older brother who neglected the status of being firstborn? Or will we be like Jesus who, as the eternal Firstborn, sacrificed all to bring a lost creation back to His Father?

This is the beginning point of ministry. It is only by recognizing your birthright as a firstborn heir in Christ – with special position, special inheritance and special responsibility – that you are ready to begin ministering into a prodigal world.

¹ *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, excerpted from *QuickVerse 5.0*.

² *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, excerpted from *QuickVerse 5.0*.

³ *Holman’s Bible Dictionary*, excerpted from *QuickVerse 5.0*.

⁴ Expert Commentary on Hebrews 12:23, *Compton’s Interactive Bible NIV*.

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