



This Week in the Word

Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens. Ps 119:89.



v

Bringing the First Fruits **Study Scripture: Leviticus 23:9-14, 22** **Lesson 8, May 12th, 2018.**

Key Verse

Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When ye be come into the land which I give unto you, and shall reap the harvest thereof, then ye shall bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest unto the priest:

Revelation 5:12

INTRODUCTION

Contrary to what many people believe, it is a fact that God is involved in human affairs, and accordingly is doing infinitely more than what people suppose. The ancient Festivals God gave to Israel enlighten our understanding about what God is doing and how He plans to save humanity.

After giving the Ten commandments God in Exodus 23:14-16 commanded Israel that there were to be three Feasts that had to be kept without any excuses, the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, The Feast of Harvest or the Feast of Firstfruits where the firstfruits of their labors were to be the focus of attention and obedience to God, and the Feast of Ingathering or the Feast of Tabernacles at the end of the year.

Note carefully there are two kinds of harvest, the first being the agricultural harvests that the Feasts commanded refer to, but note also that these represent another harvest, far more important, and this harvest is a spiritual harvest. Jesus referred to this latter harvest in Luke 10:1-2 and John 4:35-36, and this event is highlighted in the very important text of James 1:18.

The all knowing God knows what He is doing and He knows the end from the beginning. He knew what men before the Flood would do, and He knew what those after that experience would do. He established Israel and He watched while they were disobedient.

He watches while we today who have the Scriptures are disobedient and do not follow His commandments. But God the Father has revealed in a way that we can understand how He intends to come and reign and rule. May we therefore look and learn from this Study Scripture.

Four hundred years in a foreign, pagan land, many of those years lived in slavery were more than long enough to alienate a people from their roots, culture and their God. Such was the case with the Israelites as they arrived at Mount Sinai on their way to the Promised Land. They were a disparate group, aptly described as a mixed multitude and bereft of any national moorings.

Jehovah had exposed the gods of Egypt as impotent; the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea and destruction of the Egyptian army showed the fickle Israelites their God was powerful and on their side. They were ready to trust Him and the ground-work was in place for nation building. God would be front and center of national life.

God met the needs of the people as they journeyed. These needs included the provisions of water (Exodus 15:22-27; 17:1-7), food (Ex.16), and a victory over the Amalekites (Ex. 17:8-16). The interim destination was Sinai, and this new nation arrived in the third month (Ex. 19:1).

The Israelites knew that the Jehovah was God, but what did He expect from them? God was ready to tell them, and that was the purpose of their stay at Mount Sinai, which lasted almost a year (Numbers 10:11, 12). When God gave the people manna on the way to Sinai, they learned that God expected them to rest on the seventh day (Exodus 16:23-30), and that expectation was reinforced as part of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20). This was followed by His giving laws (Ex. 21-23) that collectively are called “the Book of the Covenant” (Ex. 24:7). These laws introduced for the first time the fact that the Israelites were to have seven festivals during the year (Exodus 23:14-17).

It is interesting to note how Jewish scholars look at the Feast Days and the meaning they attach to them, for this will give us some light on the idea that these Feasts Days are God’s calendar and are not merely meant as a holiday for people. It was felt that these were symbolic times that God designed to teach some critically important and fundamental truths that His people had to understand before they could achieve real happiness. The Feasts were therefore accordingly spaced, timed, and regulated, and their observances were detailed and carefully predicted. According to Jewish sages therefore:

“The new moon of Nisan marks the start of sacred time, Passover remembers the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb, the first day of Unleavened Bread remembers the Exodus from Egypt, the seventh day of Unleavened Bread remembers the crossing of the Red Sea, the counting of the Omer recalls the days before the giving of the Torah at Sinai, and Shavuot (the Feast of Weeks) remembers the giving of the Torah exactly seven weeks after the Exodus (on Sivan 6). Indeed, Shavuot at Mount Sinai is sometimes considered the day on which Judaism was born”.

We are now therefore looking at a Feast where the giving of the Torah on Shavu'ot was considered as the time when Israel was redeemed spiritually from their bondage to idolatry and immorality after the reflections called for on Passover which marked deliverance from physical bondage.

From the point of view of that agricultural society it was also a commemoration of the time when the first fruits were harvested and brought to the Temple.

The Feast coming fifty days after the Feast of First Fruits, was called Pentecost. Pentecost means fiftieth. Many therefore point to the “physical and spiritual significance of ‘Pentecost’ or the ‘Feast of Weeks’ and its fulfillment with the Messiah (Matthew 5:17-18; Luke 24:44-46. They emphasize that all of us must receive our own Pentecost individually which is the Holy Spirit being revealed in our consciousness”.

They consider that Messiah commemorated the Passover through His death, burial and resurrection and the Feast of Pentecost was fulfilled with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the establishing of the New Covenant, all within the period covering Passover, the Feast of First Fruits when two loaves of “leavened bread” was waved before the Lord, (symbolizing and pointing to both Jew and Gentile receiving the Spirit, both standing before God), and then the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Note also that these Feasts were not tied to a particular calendar date, but to counting from Passover. .

Note also therefore that the first Feast which required obligatory attendance, the Passover, where only unleavened bread was to be eaten, was followed by the obligatory Feast of First Fruits which actually took place during the week- long Passover celebrations.

(Leviticus 23:4-8). Scholars remind us that it was held

“on the first day after the Sabbath that occurred in the midst of the week (vv.9-11).

Pentecost occurred fifty days after that Sabbath (vv. 15-16) and marked the culmination of what started at the Feast of Firstfruits”.

The Passover lambs were sacrificed on the 14th day of the month of Nisan, the first day of Passover was the 15th, and the Feast of first Fruits fell on the 16th of Nisan. One writer teaches us and calls to our memory:

“Bear in mind that on a Jewish clender, a new day begins when the sun sets, not when it rises. The portion of firstfruits at Passover was called the “omer”. It was forbidden to eat from the crop until this portion had been offered. (Leviticus 23:14)”

The symbolism of all these events are important given the probable meaning of how the Feast Days and Pentecost anticipates the history of future events as it relates to the open door to Gentiles coming into the blessings promised to Israel.

After the redemption celebrated by Passover we must look carefully at the meaning and implication of this Feast of Firstfruits which involved thanksgiving to God for the firstfruits of the grain and cereal harvest in the spring.

Note however the strange fact that this Feast of Firstfruits was instituted when Israel was still wandering in the wilderness and had neither land nor crops. One writer highlights for us the tremendous faith that God called for from His people by instituting this Feast. He notes:

“This required a great deal of faith on the part of the Israelites, as they would be giving the offering of firstfruits at a time when not much was ready to be harvested. They had to trust God that He would indeed provide the fullness of grain that had yet to come forth, something that from a human perspective was far from certain given the people’s utter dependence on the right amount of rainfall and so forth to give the best crop”.

So Israel was called on to observe by faith that God would lead the people into the Promised Land. They would, by giving God the future firstfruits, acknowledge that the good things God had promised them really belonged to Him. They had to trust the provision God had made for them, and acknowledge that the spring cereal crops would surely be followed by the other Fall crops and the other good things the nation would need to survive and prosper.

These meaning of these Feasts therefore demands serious consideration. We should remember our dependence of God and His gracious work on our behalf. We should recall what He expects from us for He requires faith and obedience to His commands.

God considered the Israelites (Lev. 17-20), the priests, the holy gifts, and the sacrifices (Lev. 21-22) as set apart to Him as holy. Hence He regarded certain days and times of the year in the same way (Lev. 23).

Leviticus 23 contains a list of seven festal days and periods of the year when the Israelites were to celebrate holy meetings. These were normally convocations (v. 2) when the Israelites assembled around the Tabernacle area. The recurring phrases “holy convocations” and “rest days” indicate that this calendar was primarily for the benefit of the ordinary Israelites.

The institution of national feasts or festivals also called God’s Appointed Times was an important plank in giving this initial “makeshift multitude” an identity as the people of God. These provided occasions for the people to meet together as a family of Israelites for the giving of thanks, fellowship, forgiveness, and spiritual dedication.

The timing and sequence of the festivals however carried significance beyond historic commemorations and harvest celebrations. These holidays look back, in time, to miracles that God performed for the world and for the Israelites. They also look forward in time to the work of Jesus Christ. They speak of God’s continuous provisions and together they promise God’s eternal care for His people.

Generally these convocations may be grouped as Spring festivals and Fall festivals. The first of the year was Passover followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Feast of First Fruits, these Spring Feasts all happening in March to April. The Feast of Weeks (Pentecost, Harvest) followed fifty days later in late May early June. The Day of Atonement, Feast of Trumpets and Feast of Tabernacles happened in September-October. Three of the festivals, Passover, Feast of Weeks and Feast of Tabernacles required all males over twenty-five years to come to Jerusalem.

These feasts had both solemn and festal features and were to become national occasions and help define the people of God as a nation. Except for Passover, they were enunciated at Mount Sinai as integral parts of the covenant between Yahweh and His people. One writer notes insightfully:

“Now, when we look at the feasts of Jehovah in the light their occurrence in Leviticus Chapter 23, we have to conclude that first of all the significance of the feasts has reference to the history of the nation Israel. That is these seven feasts were by interpretation references to the nation Israel and to their spiritual experiences. But by type, that is as they look forward to the new age of the time of the coming of our Lord, they referred to the entire program of the divine redemption through Israel’s Messiah ...

Now, let me illustrate that by the use of the Feast of the Passover just for a moment. In the case of the feast of the Passover this was, as you well know, a memorial of the deliverance of the children of Israel out of Egypt. But we know from the New Testament that Feast of Passover also pointed forward to the sufferings of our Lord upon the cross for the lamb which was the basis of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt when the blood was placed on the doorposts is, ultimately, the Lamb of God who shall take away the sin of the world. We also will notice as we go along that these feasts are prophetic of the entire history of the nation Israel which begins with the feast of Passover as the opening feast and concludes with the feast of tabernacles which is a reference to their ultimate re-gathering and settling in the land of Palestine and also as the recipients of the kingdom of God upon the earth.”

Today’s lesson is about the Feast of First Fruits, one of those that required the presence of adult, male Israelites in Jerusalem. This Feast is best considered in the context of all the Feasts as its place and features fit into God’s redemptive program for His people through their Messiah and by extension the Church which has the same Messiah.

THE TEXT

DETAILS TO NOTE IN THE CONTEXT OF OUR STUDY

Verses 4 – 5. Beginning in this verse of Leviticus 23 are recorded the ‘feasts of the Lord, holy convocations’ to be proclaimed in their seasons. The first was Passover which historically marked the birth of the nation. It was a signature occasion and fittingly set the month Abib (Nisan) in which it occurred as the first month of the Jewish calendar. It happened on the fourteenth day of the month.

Now the Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, “This month shall be the beginning of months for you; it is to be the first month of the year to you. (Ex.12:1). When Moses commanded the congregation of Israel concerning the first Passover, they were still the slaves of the Egyptians. The day following this Passover meal, they were free physically, but with much of the spiritual bondage.

Abib (Hebrew) means green. It suggests the singular expression of spring: the re-greening, or re-birth. Although Leviticus gives only a few words to this holy day, it is by reason of Passover that Abib marks the beginning of the sacred Jewish Calendar.

The Passover historical record is in Exodus 12 and there we read the main feature was the unblemished lamb that was killed, roasted, eaten and its blood painted on the door posts and lintel of each Israelite dwelling. On that particular night the Israelites experienced redemption from Egypt and the firstborn in Israelite homes were spared from the Destroying angel; while the firstborn were killed in all Egyptian homes.

The Passover lamb was both ‘typical’ and prophetic in Israel’s real and redemptive history, a fact to which the prophets wrote and which the apostle Paul applied as he exhorted the Corinthian church;

(1 Cor.5:7). (See last week’s lesson). One writer notes:

“This feast is the first of the series of feasts because that, of which it speaks, redemption, is the beginning of the history of the nation Israel. Her history really begins with redemption. Redemption is the beginning of life for all not only of Israel as a nation but it is the beginning for all who have experienced redemption through the Lord Jesus Christ. So Passover suggests then the redemption of the nation and, therefore, the beginning of life for them.”

Verses 6 – 8. The Feast of Unleavened Bread lasted seven days and began the fifteenth day of Abib, immediately after Passover. The details are in Exodus 12-13 however the features mentioned here are of importance.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread immediately follows Passover which pictures redemption or salvation. The eating of unleavened bread for a week is the main feature of the Feast of Unleavened Bread and thus it becomes a picture of sanctification, the necessary and logical follow-up to redemption. Leaven is often used to represent sin particularly in the New Testament and its absence following redemption is the next milestone in the redemption plan. This feast reminded the believing Israelite that he needed to live a clean life since God had redeemed him by the blood of the Passover lamb, (1 Cor. 5:6-8; Gal. 5:9).

Paul made this application as he addressed sin in the Corinthian Church. “... Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump. Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us:

Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

The seven days is a complete circle of time, the whole of life and so the once and for all sacrifice of the Passover lamb for our salvation is followed by the continuous observance of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The apostle figuratively used these two Old Testament feasts to exhort the Corinthians, reminding them that they were saved through the shedding of the blood of Christ and that their salvation should be followed by a life of holiness, a life of walking in the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. This is an obvious lesson for the whole church of Jesus Christ.

One writer adds: "...this feast is an object lesson in righteousness. As the family cleans the house and searches for all leaven, they play out the process of sanctification. It is a reminder of God's righteousness. For those of us who are Christians, this Feast of Unleavened Bread reminds us of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit as He searches out and frees us from the sin that inhabits our house. As Psalm 139:23-24 says, Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way.

Verses 9 – 14. The third festival was the Feast of First Fruits and again this feast carried prophetic and redemptive overtones.

The term "Sabbath" does not always mean the seventh day of the week, but the day of rest, although the weekly Sabbath was always the seventh or last day of the week; hence not only the seventh day of the week (Exodus 31:15, etc.). Now also the Day of Atonement (the tenth of the seventh month), is called "Sabbath," and "(Shabbath) (shabbathon)" (Leviticus 23:32; Leviticus 16:31). As a day of rest, on which no laborious work was to be performed (Leviticus 23:8), the first day of the feast of Mazzoth is called "Sabbath," irrespectively of the day of the week upon which it fell; and "the morrow after the Sabbath" is equivalent to "the morrow after the Passover" mentioned in Joshua 5:11, where "Passover" signifies the day at the beginning of which the paschal meal was held, i.e., the first day of unleavened bread, which commenced on the evening of the 14th, in other words, the 15th Abib.

By offering the sheaf of first-fruits of the harvest, the Israelites were to consecrate their daily bread to the Lord their God, and practically to acknowledge that they owed the blessing of the harvest to the grace of God. They were not to eat any bread or roasted grains of the new corn till they had presented the offering of their God (Leviticus 23:14). This offering was fixed for the second day of the feast of the Passover, that the connection between the harvest and the Passover might be kept in subordination to the leading idea of the Passover itself (see at Exodus 12:15.).

But as the sheaf was not burned upon the altar, but only presented symbolically to the Lord by waving, and then handed over to the priests, an altar-gift had to be connected with it, - namely, a yearling sheep as a burnt-offering, a meat-offering of two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil, and a drink-offering of a quarter of a hin of wine, - to give expression to the obligation and willingness of the congregation not only to enjoy their earthly food, but to strengthen all the members of their body for growth in holiness and

diligence in good works. The burnt-offering, for which a yearling lamb was prescribed, as in fact for all the regular festal sacrifices, was of course in addition to the burnt-offerings prescribed in Numbers 28:19-20, for every feast-day. The meat-offering, however, was not to consist of one-tenth of an ephah of fine flour, as on other occasions (Exodus 29:40; Numbers 28:9, Numbers 28:13, etc.), but of two-tenths, that the offering of corn at the harvest-feast might be a more plentiful one than usual.

It included the presentation of the first-fruits of the spring barley harvest when the people came into the Promised Land. The Israelites were also to offer a lamb, flour, and wine, all this would be representative of God's provisions of spiritual and physical food and drink for His people. The offerings were presented on the day after the Sabbath following Passover.

Significantly the ancients regarded the first-fruits (Heb. shavuot) as a kind of down payment with more to follow. The sheaf was evidence that a harvest awaited.

Jesus arose from the grave on this day as the first-fruits of those who sleep in death (1 Cor. 15:20).

He is the representative man who in His resurrection is identified with and stands with all of the redeemed. When He came forth from the grave He was the 'ensample' of others 'out in the field'.

In terms of Christianity, it is worth noting that the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the connection of that monumental event to the Sabbath links His resurrection to this wave offering which was made after the Sabbath. He is, Himself, a first fruits offering according to Paul: "But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep". (1 Corinthians 15:20).

Christians are still out in the field. The first fruits has been raised from the dead, our Lord Jesus but just as the first fruits of the barley harvest was the sample of a full harvest in the field, so His resurrection is the prototype and guarantee of the resurrection of others, the resurrection of you and me, whom He represents. So it is not surprising then that we read at our resurrection we shall have a body like unto His, own glorious body.

Jesus' resurrection is the assurance of our resurrection. Passover is our redemption, Unleavened Bread is our sanctification, FirstFruits is our promise of eternal life and resurrection.

Verse 15 - 16. Here the next feast is mentioned and this festival had several names: Harvest, Weeks

(Heb. Shabuoth), and Pentecost (Gr. pentekostos). It happened at the end of the spring wheat harvest, fifty days after Passover, which is the day after the end of the seventh week. Pentecost means fiftieth day. This feast was a thanksgiving festival, and it lasted one day. The people offered God the first-fruits of the wheat harvest as a thank offering for His provision for their physical and spiritual needs. The evidence of true gratitude is generosity, so the Israelites were instructed to leave the corners of their fields unharvested so the poor could glean,

(Lev. 19:9-10; Deut. 24:19-21).

Prophetically the Holy Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost and there was a great harvest of souls and some regard the occasion as the birth of the Church.

Interestingly, at the Feast of Pentecost we read in verse 20 that the priests are to wave bread of the firstfruits before the LORD. We imagine that it is an easy matter to wave the bread of the firstfruits. The priest need only lift them upward and swing them back and forth to symbolize their being given to the Lord. It becomes a custom that one of the two loaves (Leviticus 23:17, above) is given to the High priest and the other to the priest who officiates at the service.

The waving of the two lambs is more problematic! It is sometimes suggested that the priest lifts and waves each animal while it is still alive; after they are sacrificed, the breast, thigh, and at least one loaf is waved—toward the east and back, and then up and down.

The underlying idea is peace and harmony with God in all spheres of the peoples' lives and as always God may only be approached through a mediator and sacrifice.

One writer notes how God dealt with His people on this occasion:

The whole of the years' harvest was placed under the gracious blessing of the Lord by the sanctification of its commencement and its close; and the enjoyment of their daily food was also sanctified thereby. For the sake of this inward connection, the laws concerning the wave-sheaf and wave loaves are bound together into one whole; and by this connection, which was established by reckoning the time for the feast of Weeks from the day of the dedication of the sheaf, the two feasts were linked together into an internal unity. The Jews recognized this unity from the earliest times, and called the feast of Pentecost Azqereth (Greek, Asartha'), because it was the close of the seven weeks".

Verse 22. These stipulations were given earlier (Leviticus 19:9, 10), so why is it repeated in conjunction with the Festival of Weeks? The answer may be that since this is a harvest celebration, it is appropriate to mention one of the laws of the harvest: God is concerned for the welfare of those in need. The harvesters are to reap so that there will be something left for the poor and aliens.

It is noteworthy that harvested grain is not simply to be provided for the poor and for the foreigner. Rather, those in need are to go to the fields and do the work of harvesting themselves. An outstanding example of this practice is found in the book of Ruth.

The intent is that the blessings of the land are to be accessible to the needy.

(See 2 Thessalonians 3:10 and 1 Timothy 5:3-16). God still expects our expressions of gratitude to include provisions for the poor.

The Lord was in the process of providing for His people by giving them a land that flowed with milk and honey, a land where they could flourish (Deuteronomy 31:20). The Lord was also providing ways for His people to remember the source of their blessings: they were to have festivals that enabled them to join with others in celebrations in the giving of thanks. Passover, Unleavened Bread, Weeks, and Tabernacles—they are reminders of the blessings of harvest and/or famous events in the nation's history. God is good, all the time!

CONCLUSION

Jeremiah 2:3 describes Israel as the firstfruits of God's harvest and it clearly was a pledge of a greater harvest as God redeemed Israel and brought redemption to the nations of the earth that came to accept the sacrifice of His Son, the firstfruits of those resurrected from the dead. The Holy Spirit thus came as promised to permanently indwell believers and initiate what some regard as the birthday of the church (Acts 2). The Bible does not say why God chose this occasion for the church to begin. But the way that it was celebrated made it the perfect tool to fulfill God's plan to spread the gospel from Jerusalem into Judea, Samaria, and "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Note carefully what God has done. He has used the time that Jews consider the time of the giving of the Torah, and the time to celebrate the gracious harvest given by the Lord to make the Torah a matter of the heart, written by the Spirit of God, so that they who received Him would yield fruitful lives, physically and spiritually, in the praise of God.

May we recognize the establishment of God's New Covenant with His people, both Jew and Gentile as He wrote His commandments on our hearts.

Remember therefore who you are. You are not your own. There is God who owns you and who is the only One that can give you strength to live lives pleasing to Him. He has sent His Son to you. The Scriptures always speak of Him and the Holy Spirit has come to testify of Him and to turn your hearts to Him alone. May you focus on Him.

It deserves special mention that now during our lifetime God is calling those that are the firstfruits. They are those who have accepted the call of Christ, been changed by the Holy Spirit, and are now led by Him.

The task of the firstfruit is to serve the Lord by bringing the truth of salvation to all peoples still following the dictates of the evil Prince of this world.