

Firstfruits

Exodus 23:14–19, 1 Corinthians 15:20–26

This is our second of three sermons on this text. Here are three annual feasts that Israel was to keep to the LORD—you need to remember these terms—the Feast of Unleavened Bread (also called Passover), the Feast of Firstfruits, and the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year (also called the Feast of Tabernacles). For simplicity, let us call them by their common names *Passover*, *Firstfruits* and *Tabernacles*. Passover is in early spring, Firstfruits is in April, and Tabernacles is at the end of harvest. The three annual feasts followed the agricultural year.

Today, our topic is Firstfruits. As we saw in our sermon on Exodus 22:29 awhile back, the law required that the *first* of all ripe agricultural products and juices (that is, the freshly-picked ripe foods themselves and the juices that were pressed) were to be offered up to God at the tabernacle.¹ This act of obedience expressed loyalty and commitment to God as the giver of every perfect gift. No specific quantity was commanded; that was a matter that was left up to the individual conscience.

On the morning after the Passover sabbath, a sheaf of new grain was to be brought to the priest and “waved” before the altar as an offering to the LORD in acknowledgment of his gift of fruitfulness.² What did this waving look like? In Exodus 29:27, which speaks of the prophet Moses ordaining Aaron and his sons to the priesthood, God tells Moses (I’m going to use the KJV here, which is closest to the original Hebrew): “thou shalt sanctify the breast of the wave offering, and the shoulder of *the heave offering, which is waved, and which is heaved up*, of the ram of the consecration.” Note that Exodus 29:27 speaks of “the heave offering, which is waved, and which is heaved up.” The word for “heaved up” is literally *raised up*: “the heave offering which is waved and which is raised up”—in other words, moved both from side to side and up and down. The original language suggests that worshippers, watching Moses’ actions at this service of ordination into the priesthood, would have seen Moses pick up the heave offering in his hands and lift it up and move it both from side to side and up and down—in other words, move it both horizontally and vertically in the shape of a cross!

This is significant. In the Old Testament there are foreshadowings of the cross. There are indications that the Messiah, the sinless One, when he came, would die on behalf of guilty sinners. Genesis 22 mentions Abraham offering his only son, Isaac, as a sacrifice upon an altar on Mount Moriah. Psalm 22 describes suffering and abandonment, with verses that Jesus quotes during his crucifixion. It includes imagery that foreshadows his death. The “suffering Servant” passage in Isaiah 53 speaks of a figure who suffers for the sins of others. In the book of Acts, Philip the

¹ Ex. 22:29; 23:19; 34:22

² Lev. 2:12; 23:5–6, 10, 12

evangelist, in answer to the Ethiopian eunuch's question ("of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man?") "opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus." Therefore, the biblical interpretation of the Isaiah 53 passage is that it was a prophecy speaking of Christ.

Then there's Zechariah 12:10, which mentions a figure being *pierced*—a reference to Jesus' crucifixion, which the apostle John in 19:34 refers to, where he records that "one of the soldiers with a spear *pierced* his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water" ties in to Zechariah 12:10 when he writes, "And again another scripture saith, They shall look on him whom they *pierced*."

So there are clearly prophecies of Christ's sacrificial death by *crucifixion* in the Old Testament. The sinless One would die for the guilty. He would suffer for the sins of others. His body would be pierced, and he would be lifted up on a cross, an event foreshadowed by "the heave offering which is waved and which is raised up" of Exodus 29:27.

With that background, then, let's look at the Feast of Firstfruits.

Remember, Israel was to keep three annual feasts to the LORD. As we saw last week, all physically fit adult males, heads of households, were to leave their families and homesteads and journey to the tabernacle three times a year to worship before the LORD. God promised that if they did this faithfully, he would protect their families and lands—no heathen armies would harm them while they were away at worship. The men would worship before the altar and hear the biblical instruction of the Levites. They would then return home and teach their families what they had learned. This teaching would be oral. The Word of God would be in their mouths and on their lips. They would explain the meaning and importance of God's worship to their families. They would train their wives and children in the meaning of what it was like to be God's covenant people—his special people in the midst of the heathen nations that surrounded them.

The first of the three feasts was the Passover. It would remind Israel that just as the God of heaven had looked upon their affliction while they were under bondage in Egypt, and had delivered them from Pharaoh and his slavedrivers and armies by his mighty power, so he, if they looked to the LORD by faith, would deliver his elect people from bondage to Satan into the glorious liberty of the children of God, if they walked with him by faith. This promise is for us, his covenant people who look to him in faith today.

The second of the three annual feasts was the Feast of Firstfruits. The farmers of Israel would journey to the tabernacle, taking along their first ripe fruits and grains to be waved before the LORD in a crucifix pattern. This taught the people year by year that the fruitfulness and plenty of the land was not a given, but a divine gift from the God of heaven to his obedient people. The firstfruits of the harvest were given back to the LORD as an expression of the people's faith that the

whole—everything that they labored for, everything that they enjoyed—came from the Father’s hand and belonged to the LORD. As the apostle James would later phrase it, “every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning” (Jas. 1:17).

Here is a lesson that we particularly—living in a prosperous society in the twenty-first century, free from want, enjoying plenty and prosperity—need to learn as well. Especially as we witness photos of famine and scarcity in war-torn areas—famine, scarcity and starvation caused many times to a great degree by our own government in its constant promotion of war. We need to know—and our children need to remember—that living in a land of plenty is a gift from God. Prosperity arises from the blessing of God and is *not* a given. Plenty today could well turn into famine tomorrow. Every good and perfect gift comes from God. It is he who gives us the power to get wealth. The farms and fields around us, that provide our food, do so because of God’s blessing. God has promised that “while the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease” (Gen. 8:22)—but these blessings are not automatic. They are bestowed by a generous God as his people are faithful to him and work and labor and pray for his glory.

Do we experience plenty and prosperity? We need to remember that everything we have is a gift from God. Everything we have belongs to him. We need to develop an attitude of thankfulness. Many people have an attitude of entitlement. They feel that they are *entitled* to happiness, to a decent living, to enjoy the good things of life. When they don’t experience these things, they feel that God has cheated them. They view God as somehow *obligated* to provide the things they feel they are entitled to enjoy, and if he doesn’t, they hate him.

The Christian knows that life is to be lived to the glory of God. Man’s chief end is to glorify and enjoy God. But the world gets this backwards. Many people—even some Christians—feel that *God’s* chief end is to glorify *man*, and if he doesn’t, man is entitled to pout!

The apostle Paul writes, “Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do *all* to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). This is the Christian’s duty—this is every person’s duty. But man falls short of this. He wants to turn it around and say, “Whatever God does, he must do to the glory of *man*.” Sinners want to make *man* the center of the universe. They want to glorify *man*. They view God as a servant whose duty is to make man happy. But there is a spiritual lesson. If we live for happiness, we will never achieve it; we will *not* be happy. But if we live for God—sincerely desiring *his* glory—then we will enjoy happiness as a byproduct. To make happiness the goal is never to achieve it. To make the glory of God the goal is to achieve happiness.

To summarize the Feast of Firstfruits, the law required that the Israelites were not to delay to offer the first of their ripe fruits, the first of their juices and the firstborn of their sons. The first sheaf of new grain every year should be offered; it would be waved by the priest in a cruciform pattern before the altar, from side to side and lifted up, prefiguring the cross of Christ. Every individual was required to consecrate to God a portion of the firstfruits of the land. This indicated the believer's agreeing that everything he owned was a gift from God, and was being offered to God as an expression of his thankfulness in acknowledgment of God's marvelous gift of fruitfulness.

Firstfruits teaches us that the first part is to be offered to the LORD as an expression that *the whole* belongs to the LORD. Whatever we have is a gift from God. Ultimately, we can take no credit for it. He has given us the gift of life. He has given us all various gifts and abilities that we need to use in service to him. The gift of sanity, the gift of a working mind and body, the ability to work and hold down a job, the ability to understand instructions and get along with people and perform useful work—all these are gifts from God. We are responsible to develop these gifts for God's glory, but we can't really take credit for them.

The Feast of Firstfruits is part of the ceremonial law. It cannot be observed today. The ceremonial law has been fulfilled and is no longer binding. It is no longer an obligation. The central sanctuary has been replaced by the decentralized church. We don't need to journey back to the land of Israel three times a year to offer gifts to a levitical priest. There *is* no levitical priest! There is no more temple on the temple mount in Jerusalem. The Lord Jesus Christ sent the Roman armies under General Titus to destroy the city and the temple that had rejected him. Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed in AD 70, never to be rebuilt. The Lord Jesus is the Great High Priest after the order of *Melchizedek*, not after the order of Aaron.

The specific Old Testament ceremony is no longer mandatory, but the requirement of thanksgiving and of offering the first part of our increase to the Lord is still our moral duty.

The Feast of Firstfruits cannot be observed today. But the moral aspects of this law remain. All of us are required to offer our *bodies* as living sacrifices. All of us are required to offer everything that we have to the Lord. All of us should say, "Lord, I am yours. Use me as you will for your own glory. May the life I live be a testimony to the Lord." To fail to do that is to be an idolator, to worship something *other than* the true God.

God's people must recognize that all our wealth—all our increase, all our possessions—belongs to the Lord. It is a gift from him. It is not something to be taken for granted—yet so often we *do* take it for granted.

Whether we receive a salary, gain an income from a business, realize a profit from investments, or draw from a pension, the firstfruits belong to the Lord. What we have gained is a result of the Lord's blessing, whether we realize it or not. When he created man, male and female, he gave us the creation mandate: "Be fruitful, and multiply" (Gen. 1:28). Note well: the ability to *multiply—to increase—is from the LORD*. If God had not given man this ability, there would be only poverty and scarcity.

This is the creation mandate: "Be fruitful, and multiply." It is part of God's common grace to humanity. The word for "multiply" (רָבָה) is used a lot—about 275 times in all. Some of its meanings are *increase, bring in abundantly, enlarge, excel, be full, make great, heap up, yield*.³ Do you see what a blessing this gift of increase is? Worldlings may not appreciate this, but the Christian *must* appreciate it! The whole possibility of progress in this world is a gift from our loving heavenly Father. Praise be to God, from whom all blessings flow!

Are you thankful? I know that Thanksgiving holiday doesn't come for three months, but the Bible tells us, "Let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye *thankful*" (Col. 3:15). Being thankful is a continuous duty for every human, every day of the year.

Perhaps most of us have seen the Norman Rockwell painting of a family gathered around a table, praying before Thanksgiving dinner. Something in us yearns for the nostalgia of that kind of Thanksgiving feast. All of us ought to do our part to bring that about an attitude of thanksgiving in our own families.

I will never forget the first time I ate lunch with my next-door neighbor and his mother when I was a little boy. I was invited to come over for lunch with them, which was generous and hospitable, but when I got there I was struck by the fact that they did *not* say grace before the meal. They did not thank God for their food. My friend and his mother had me sit down with them at the kitchen table, and both of them immediately began to eat their food (I still remember, it was a bologna sandwich on white bread). Back home, my sisters and I would wait till Dad or Mom (if Dad was not there) had prayed and offered thanks for the food; *then* we would eat. In my childish innocence I thought that's how everybody in the world did it. I would learn by and by that that's *not* the case.

So we are to be thankful. We no longer have to take the firstfruits of our increase to a levitical priest and offer them to God in a special ceremony. But the principle of Thanksgiving remains. This is a duty incumbent upon every man—not just Christians. Romans teaches that men "are without excuse: because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were *thankful*" (Rom. 1:21).

³ Enhanced Strong's lexicon, רָבָה (Logos Bible Software)

Note those words: “neither were thankful.” God wants the *wicked* to be thankful. They are *not* thankful, so they will one day be judged.

Obviously, God wants everybody in the world to be thankful—but especially his children. Do you think God is going to be happy with you if you are not thankful? All of us should joyfully sing the words “Praise God from whom all blessings flow” from the heart.

Years ago, when Norma and I were first married, we had a family from church over for a meal. Norma served a very nice dinner. She had worked hard on it. When she set the food on the table, their little girl said, “I don’t like that!” She threw a tantrum and wouldn’t eat. The whole dinner time was very uncomfortable for us all as a result. I was a newly married man who was proud of my wife and thought she was a really good cook. I was not as sanctified then, and took it as a personal affront that that little girl did not like my wife’s cooking. When the guests had left, I vowed: we will never again have that girl over for a meal!

Now obviously I should have been more patient. God has given us a wonderful, beautiful earth. He has given us the ability to grow our food and provide for our needs. If you or I begin to take all his good gifts for granted and have a smart-alecky, selfish attitude—an attitude of entitlement, do you think God is going to be happy with us? We liked the parents, but their kid was annoying. She had an attitude of entitlement. She was not going to eat food that was not entirely to her liking. And she didn’t have the good sense to keep her thoughts to herself. She made it known to everyone at the table that that meal did not please her, and she deserved better!

When our Lord Jesus was on earth, at the beginning of every meal he would stop and thank God for the food. “He commanded the multitude to sit down on the ground. And He took the seven loaves and the fish and gave thanks, broke them and gave them to His disciples; and the disciples gave to the multitude. So they all ate and were filled” (Matt. 15:35–37).

Why did he do this? For an example to us. Jesus is the sinless One. He is thankful. We are sinners. We too often are *unthankful*. Jesus died for unthankful sinners. He took our sin upon him and gives us his perfect righteousness as a free gift. That’s the only way for us to go to heaven.

Are you sorry you have not been thankful? Do you want the forgiveness of sins? There is only one way to be saved, and that is through Christ. Ask him to save you. Become his follower. Profess your faith before the world. Ask him to give you a thankful heart. Following Christ is the way of happiness. Amen.