

The Feast of Firstfruits

preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on May 6, 2018

This morning we are turning to the third sermon in a seven part sermon series on the seven feasts described in the Old Testament, which God instituted to guide the life of His people over the course of a calendar year. The seven feasts are as follows: Passover, Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits, Pentecost, Trumpets, Day of Atonement, and Tabernacles.

Quickly reviewing what we have covered so far, in the first sermon in the series we explored the institution of the Passover meal in the days of Moses and the elaborate rituals that had been added to the feast by the time of Jesus. We also looked at the journey of the ceremonial Passover lamb from the fields of Bethlehem, where it was born, to its entry into Jerusalem on the shoulders of the High Priest on Palm Sunday, to its examination in the Temple by the multitudes, and to its slaughter in Jerusalem on Good Friday. As we looked at the journey of the ceremonial Passover lamb we noted the parallels to Jesus' journey to the cross.

In the second sermon in the series we looked at the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Following in the pattern of the first sermon we noted how unleavened bread was prepared. First, it was made without yeast, which is a symbol of sin. Then it was thoroughly beaten in the kneading process. When it was baked it was striped and pierced. Just like Jesus, the sinless Son of God and Son of Man who is the bread of life.

And now turning to God's Word, we will be looking at the third Old Testament feast, the Feast of Firstfruits. Our Scripture reading for this morning, is Leviticus chapter twenty three, verses nine through fourteen.

Leviticus 23:9-14

9 The Lord spoke to Moses: 10 Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the Firstfruits of your harvest to the priest. 11 He shall raise the sheaf before the Lord, that you may find acceptance; on the day after the sabbath the priest shall raise it. 12 On the day when you raise the sheaf, you shall offer a lamb a year old, without blemish, as a burnt offering to the Lord. 13 And the grain offering with it shall be two-tenths of an ephah of choice flour mixed with oil, an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord; and the drink offering with it shall be of wine, one-fourth of a hin. 14 You shall eat no bread or parched grain or fresh ears until that very day, until you have brought the offering of your God: it is a statute forever throughout your generations in all your settlements.

In ancient times, people's lives revolved around the agricultural cycle. Depending on the country in which you lived that cycle would vary according to the latitude of the land, and the timing of the rainy season and the dry season.

In Jesus' day, the planting season occurred during the winter, sometime between November and January. The three common grains that were planted were wheat, barley, and oats. In that region of the world, barley is ready for harvest in April and wheat and oats are ready for harvest in May.

In our Scripture reading today, as part of the Feast of Firstfruits, the people of Israel were commanded to bring an offering from their fields and present it to the Lord. Since barley was the first grain to ripen, it was the grain that was brought to the Temple as part of this celebration.

The way the process worked was as follows. During the winter months, each farmer would section off a tenth of their land with red ribbon before any crops were visible. The section of land they would partition would be the portion of their field where past experience taught them that the best yield would be produced. The reason a tenth was sectioned off is given in the Law of Moses, where God commands the Israelites to set aside one tenth of their yield, from their field and from their flock to be presented to the Lord.

From this section of land, that had been dedicated to the God of Israel, the people would harvest a sheaf of barley at the time of Firstfruits, and they would bring it to the Temple along with the lamb, flour, oil, and wine that were part of the sacrifice.

As we read in today's reading, the people of Israel were not allowed to eat anything from the current year's crop until the sheaf of barley had been presented to God along with the rest of the offering.

Also important to note, the Feast of Firstfruits occurs in conjunction with the feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread. Given the fact that in the Jewish way of accounting for time a new day starts at twilight, and given all the references to special Sabbath days listed in the different feast texts, it makes it hard for me to get everything straight in my mind about which day is what, however, from what I have read, it appears that Passover was on the fourteenth day of the month of Nisan, Unleavened Bread started on the fifteenth, and Firstfruits was on the sixteenth or perhaps the eighteenth day of the month. Pentecost, also known as the Feast of Weeks, occurred fifty days later. In the Jewish calendar Nisan coincides with our March or April.

Continuing on with our examination of Firstfruits, in the days of Jesus, Jewish tradition says that as the lambs were taken off the Temple Mount and put in the ovens by the people, the high priest and his entourage would take their lambs into their chamber inside the Temple Mount and put them into the ovens. Then, the high priest would lead his entourage over the Kidron Valley bridge on the side of the Mount of Olives, where the priests had previously planted the barley for the Firstfruit offering. The Levites would then bind ten stocks of barley together which were still rooted in the ground. After this the high priest and the Levites would go back to their chambers and eat the Passover lamb.

During this time, it is said that the high priest had to remain in seclusion for three days on the Temple Mount, which was the time between the sacrifice of the Passover lamb and the presentation of the Firstfruits offering. The reason he was to be secluded, and not touched was so he would not be defiled. This immediately makes me think of Jesus who was also in seclusion for three days after the Passover and who said to Mary on the morning of his resurrection, “Don’t touch me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.”

At the end of the weekly Sabbath, the high priest and his entourage would leave their chamber with baskets and sickles. Once they were sure the sun had set, in front of thousands of on looking Israelites, they would cut the standing stocks of barley. The high priest and Levites would then take the barley in their baskets to the Temple and grind the barley to make loaves of bread. Then the high priest would take them and offer them as a Firstfruits offering to God on the morning of the first day of the week. Until this was done, no one was to eat of the Firstfruits of the barley harvest.

This brings us the heart of the matter. Like Passover and Unleavened Bread, the Lord Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Feast of Firstfruits, as well as all the Jewish feast days, new moons, and Sabbaths. So, how does he fulfill the Feast of Firstfruits? In 1 Corinthians and Colossians, the Apostle Paul describes Christ as “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep,” “the firstfruits” of those who “shall be made alive,” and “the firstborn from the dead.” Thus, Christ is the Firstfruits of the future harvest of the resurrected righteous.

Making the comparison between the two, just as Israel was to bring the sheaf of the firstfruits of the harvest on the first day of the week and wave it before the Lord, Christ rose on the first day of the week and ascended to the Father. And just as the one sheaf represented the whole harvest, the resurrected Christ represents the full harvest of souls at the end of this age of sowing and planting. In other words, Christ is the great Firstfruit sheaf that has been reaped and waved in the

presence of God assuring the resurrection to eternal life of the saints.

This truth, that Christ is the Firstfruits of the resurrection forms the crux of Paul's argument against the Corinthians' mistaken view of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. The future bodily resurrection of believers is guaranteed by God's acceptance of Christ as the Firstfruits of the resurrection. Therefore, if there is no bodily resurrection of believers, then Christ Himself has not been raised, since these two resurrections are inseparably united to one another.

The reason this is so is because in the Old Testament, Firstfruits means the first part of a harvest, which guarantees its eventual completion. Thus Christ's resurrection is the proof and guarantee that we who are in Christ shall also arise from the dead. In Colossians 1:18 we read that Christ is "the first-born from the dead." The fact that Christ is here called the first-born implies that those who are his brothers and sisters will arise from the dead, so that, as we learn from Romans 8:29, Christ might be "the first-born among many brethren." In John 14:19, in fact, Christ specifically says to his disciples, "Because I live, you will live also."

Thus, Christ's resurrection is the representative beginning of the resurrection of believers. In other words, the term seems deliberately chosen to make evident the organic connection between the two resurrections. Christ's resurrection is not simply a guarantee; it is a pledge in the sense that it is the actual beginning of the general event. In fact, on the basis of this verse it can be said that Paul views the two resurrections not so much as two events but as two episodes of the same event. Christ's resurrection, therefore, is the Firstfruits or pledge that God the Father will bring about the future bodily resurrection of His people.

This is the message of the Feast of Firstfruits. It is a recognition that God is the giver of life and that we owe God everything. It is a recognition that we, in response to all God has done, ought to honour God first in all matters of life, and we ought to give God our very best. It is also a sign pointing to God's ultimate redemptive purpose in the world. It is a reminder of the coming harvest, not of grain, but, of souls. And finally it is a reminder of our great hope, that our resurrection to eternal life is guaranteed because God has accepted His Son, Jesus Christ, who was the Firstfruit offering of the harvest of mankind. This is the good news that God's Word declares to us through the Feast of Firstfruits. May we have ears that hear and hearts that understand.