

The Harvest of Firstfruits

James' Epistle refers to important aspects regarding the redemption experience, that we are ultimately to become "...a kind of firstfruits of His creatures". What does this mean as it involves Believers in this New Testament Era?

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In James chapter 5, verse 7, we are reminded of the phenomenon of "*the early and latter rain*". What he was alluding to there is something generally known among God's true worshippers from ancient times, that phenomenon of there being an early and a late harvest. Two harvest periods - a lesser one in early summer and a much greater harvest at the end of summer. Their awareness was further illustrated in the harvest festivals God gave them to observe after coming out of their long and hard Egyptian bondage.

Those two harvests were known by two different names. The Holydays God gave to Israel reflected the annual grain harvests, and were known by the names: The Feast of Firstfruits (Ex. 23:16; Lev. 23:10 & 17) and the later Feast of Ingathering. (Ex. 34:22 & 23:16)

Mere Harvest Feasts?

But, were these only agricultural festivals, meant to celebrate the physical abundance they were given, or did the agricultural harvests correlate to what God is doing with respect to the redemption of mankind? This question lifts these observances from having only temporal application to having spiritual relevance. It is when we understand the meanings God placed in His physical Creation that we can better understand His Plan.

This study paper will focus on what we call the **spring** Holydays and the phenomenon of the Harvest of Firstfruits.

Where it All Began

The origins of the idea of ritualizing the physical field harvests have even more ancient roots than we might realize. In fact, it extends back to the

times Israel was in bondage in Egypt. In Exodus chapter 12 verse 2, God tells Moses something quite unexpected and highly unusual in the overall affairs of men. He told Moses to **change their calendar** by which they had long marked annual seasons. For the previous 2500 years, from the time of Adam, humanity had considered the late summer to be the start of the new year, in that Creation had been in the fall. ¹ From that point forward, the calendar they were to use for religious purposes was to begin in the spring (though the Old Testament doesn't use that term for the season as we do). ² What HAD BEEN the first month was thereafter to be regarded as the seventh. The benchmark they were to use for determining the first month of each year was to be the pending ripeness of the barley, (the Abib) the Wave Sheaf Offering, which was to be offered as the first of their firstfruits. This offering was to mark the ceremonial beginning of their first annual harvest.

The Fruit of Your Labors

What is particularly notable about the firstfruits harvest is that it had to be the yield of their own labors in the field. (Ex. 23:16) Grains obtained some other way (through trade or conquest) had no ceremonial acceptability. It was not business, it was to be personal. The first lesson about the firstfruits is that this harvest is emphatically personal!

¹ The dates listed in Genesis 7 and 8 reflect this.

² It's interesting to note that other ancient societies also employed **spring** as the start of the new year. For example, Rome's earlier calendar did so, as their seventh thru tenth months (septem; octo; novem; decem, the Roman numbers) revealed a year that had begun in March! The idea of beginning the year after the 'midnight' of the solar year (January) and starting a day at midnight, came into use later. More anciently, that was not the case. The ancient Roman calendar was also lunar.

The second lesson in this harvest is that the firstfruits of their labors were to be 'of seed which they had planted', and needed to be to be 'untouched'. No previous harvesting was to be done until such time as they'd presented a sheaf of their personal yield (the first-ripe barley) to the Priest to be waved, to be accepted for them. (Lev. 23:10-11) Acceptability was important. (As we see with regard to Cain's ancient offering, (Gen. 4:3) our personal attitude factors in also. That's why we must examine ourselves in this season of the year.).

But the waving of the first-ripe grains of their own personal harvest wasn't the only component of the harvest, the Feast of Firstfruits. In fact, there was another related ceremony. The waving of the first-ripe grains marked only the beginning of the harvest, but there was another occasion that marked the conclusion of this 'early' harvest. That other ceremony was derived from the former.

The wave sheaf offering was to be presented on a specific day, the morrow after the weekly Sabbath that occurred within another key Holyday season. One we haven't discussed to this point. (As each 12 lunar month 'year' was some 11 days short of a full solar year, it was necessary to include a 13th month about a third of the time. The pending ripeness of the barley determined when to add that 13th month). The weekly Sabbath within the seven days of Unleavened Bread provided the initial time for the Wave Sheaf offering. These two observances were symbiotic. It was important that the grain attain sufficient ripeness. Where the wave sheaf typically determined which new moon marked the start of the first month, the first month thus determined provided calendar dates for Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Passover's 'Shadow'

The Feasts of Firstfruits were not given through Moses by themselves. In the recitations which he wrote down, God first acquainted the children of Israel in Egypt with the announcement of pending tragedy, one that would involve the death of all the firstborn. This plague would take the lives of the firstborn of man and beast throughout the land, with the only exceptions being those who were 'covered' by the blood of a lamb, which they were to select on a specific day and offer at a specific

time, with the blood applied in a specific place in a specific way, (Exodus 12). By this action, Israel was introduced to a most important future spiritual event, which they were to observe each year throughout their generations.

Personal, but Spiritual!

In this meaningful season, it's easy to understand how one event could overshadow the other. But, while the first event is profoundly solemn, the related harvest event provides a hope, that of the resurrections. We can also discern from the symbiotic nature of these occasions that there's a connection between each of these springtime festivals. But, to consider what these connections are, we must broaden the focus of this discussion.

Passover, the fourteenth day of the first month, offers a great historical relevance as it involved the release of the millions of Israelites from their bitter Egyptian bondage. That release created a nation out of what had been a large family held under servitude. But, freedom was not free. It never is. It required a heavy price to be paid. Their release was effectively 'bought with blood', the blood of an innocent lamb. While out 'spoiling' the Egyptians, Israel was 'urged' to leave as the first day of the Exodus approached, (Ex. 12:33) but they were militarily 'driven' out as the last day dawned.(Ex. 14:23) Their departure from Egypt was not optional if they were ever to inherit the Promises made 430 years before. (Gen. 15:18 & Ex. 12:41)

It Took TIME to Leave Egypt

Their seven day trek out of Egyptian Territory, crossing the Sinai Peninsula, and the necessary eating of 'unleavened bread' while doing so (Ex. 12:39) established what later became memorialized as the seven Days of Unleavened Bread. These seven days are directly related to the Passover, and while commemorating a historical event, they also have a personal relevance. These days, in their spiritual application, correspond to our personal commitment to leave the spiritual Egypt that is our sin-bondage in society. But as this is well covered in other study papers, further explanation of that will not be offered here. It is the intent here to establish the relationship that exists between all of the spring Holydays. Each is related to the others.

So, within these seven Days of Unleavened Bread, there is a weekly Sabbath day. That Sabbath day provides the key day from which another distant observance is determined. The ‘morrow’ after this Sabbath provides day one of a fifty day count to the Feast of Pentecost. The Feast of Pentecost is also known as the “Feast of Firstfruits”, as it commemorates the end of the early harvest. It is also known by the term, the Feast of Weeks, as seven full weeks pass between the first day and the fiftieth. Pentecost then is also the morrow after the seventh Sabbath (something not achieved using traditional Jewish count methods). So we’re drawn to see the entire early harvest season as the harvest of firstfruits: The wave sheaf offering marking its beginning, with Pentecost marking its conclusion. This interval too has relevance to the spiritual lessons contained within these annual observances.

But, the firstfruits harvest would be indeterminable (and spiritually meaningless) without Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread. There are no firstfruits without these essential fundamental elements being established first. There are no Days of Unleavened Bread without Passover, and there is no Wave Sheaf Offering without the Days of Unleavened Bread, and there is no Pentecost without there first being a Wave Sheaf Offering! These seasonal observances are all part of a greater whole, which illustrates the plan of salvation as it relates to the individual.

Not Just “Jewish” History

While these events, the plagues -- particularly the 9th and 10th -- and the release from bondage, illustrate significant events in the establishment of the children of Israel as a viable nation in a hostile world, it’s not their historical significance that’s so important to the Christian, except as we draw from them lessons appropriate to the experience of personal conversion and ultimate salvation. Even those who disdain the practical observance of these days accept that they illustrate the elements of personal Salvation. Egypt represents sin, from which the Lamb of God is our only release. The death of God’s ‘firstborn’ stood as a substitute for their own, its blood being shed to exempt them (and in type us) from death and bondage of sin. This is elementary and quite well understood.

But it’s the revealing lessons contained within the spring harvest season, and the events leading up to the Day of Pentecost that is not so well understood.

Religion for the most part is only partly aware of how God’s plan of redemption is being implemented. If they understood the full implications of the firstfruits harvest, they would have a much greater awareness of what has to transpire in our personal lives. Without that understanding, a person’s quest for Eternal Life can be seriously impeded. It’s that important!

The FIRST Harvest

Not only that, but the Christian world would have a better understanding of the situation as it regards those not called to conversion in this lifetime. You see, there are **two** ‘days’ of Salvation, but that’s the focus of another study paper, “*The Days of Salvation*”. We will limit the discussion here to just this season and what it represents. But, understanding that the spring and early summer represents a first harvest season, we are introduced to the prospect of there being another! That other harvest is covered under the companion article to this one, titled, “*The Harvest of Ingathering*”.

But the harvest of firstfruits is special, and offers a hope for not just those **in** it but also those who will be provided opportunity to be in the later harvest. This harvest is the key to the other!

Milestones of Personal Salvation

Illustrated within the historical events surrounding the release of Israel from bondage, we see the basic steps that lead us through the process of Salvation. Some may object to the word ‘process’, but they do so from a comprehensive ignorance. First, the most essential event is the provision of the Lamb of God, our Passover (1 Cor. 5:7). The application of that blood on our behalf (effecting the remission of our sins) leaves us with the mandate to exclude sin from our lives. Being forgiven, we are to be no longer subject to the bondage of sin (its guilt) and we are called upon to no longer continue in it!

That brings us to the full lifetime (represented by the seven days of Unleavened Bread) of putting sin

(leaven) out of our lives. Paul understood. He emphasized to a Gentile congregation that since Christ was our Passover, we should “*keep the feast ...with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.*” Not only that, but that we should “*purge out of ourselves ... the old leaven.*” (1st Cor. 5:6-8) No, observing Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread were not just Jewish observances. Under the New Covenant they’d become fully incumbent upon Gentiles as well! Why? Because they picture the vital components of conversion, excluding sin from our lives, and more importantly, from our character. When we come ‘under grace’ we are forbidden to continue in sin! (Rom. 6:1-2; 12 & 15-19) We are to break free of our personal bondage to sin and become bond-slaves of righteousness. (Rom. 6:16-18) That righteousness is pictured by our partaking daily of **unleavened** bread also while we diligently exclude that which is leavened.

But, as any Christian knows, easier said than done!

That brings us to the next element in the process, that of the firstfruits, or more correctly said, the first of the firstfruits. (1 Cor. 15:20-23) The wave sheaf offering represented our Passover, after having been raised from the dead, being accepted up to stand before the Throne of God in Heaven, to be accepted for us. We see that ceremony in Daniel 7:13-14 and then what was said at it in Psalm 110:1. (Both verses, which when blended, got Jesus a prompt and predictable death sentence! (Mk. 14:62)) Why THE Firstfruits Offering had to be accepted for us (not just Himself) was that He had to serve on our behalf in an intercessory capacity. We alone are incapable of maintaining a sinless life. We need assistance. Our elder Brother intercedes for us continually. (Heb. 7:20-25 & 6:20 & 9:11-15 & 1 Jn. 1:7-9, etc.) Christ is our Wave Sheaf Offering.

So we see the beginning event of the first harvest being the ascension of Our Lord to serve as the ongoing intercessor for us. He is the beginning of that harvest. But we aren’t spiritually ready for harvesting in this life. It takes a full lifetime of overcoming both ourselves and the sin by which we are so easily overwhelmed. A full lifetime is represented by the seven days of Unleavened Bread, a period of completion. But, we are not ‘harvested’ firstfruits at the end of our lives either.

There’s a waiting period, of undetermined duration, represented by the length of time between the end of that week and the Feast of Pentecost.

Bringing in the Sheaves

While Pentecost is also known by the name: “The feast of Firstfruits”, we are able from that to realize its place in the Harvest season’s conclusion. Pentecost, known to have many other associations, such as being the day of the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai, as well as being the day that the Holy Spirit was given, it is also known as the founding date for the New Testament Church. But it also portends another future significance: It illustrates the completion of the first harvest, by the resurrection of the righteous dead into a glorified immortality, as we read of in places such as Revelation 14:1-5 & 20:6. The resurrected firstfruits are there shown standing with Christ on Mount Zion. Pentecost also represents the conclusion of the first spiritual harvest. During any harvest, at least those using manual methods, grain stalks were cut and bundled into standing sheaves, left in the field for a time. Those were, a short time later, gathered up together and brought in for the processing of their grains.

While some may identify the actual calendar date of the Second Coming and first resurrection as being at the start of the later harvest season, (for which there is abundant evidence) we should recognize Pentecost as the illustration that it is, the completion of the first harvest season. Christ, our Wave Sheaf was ‘accepted up’ for us on Wave Sheaf Day, the ‘morrow after the Sabbath’, which was also the day just after His resurrection. That awareness lends significance to the prohibition of His being touched prior to that ascension. (Jn. 20:17) He’s the first of the Firstfruits, the firstborn of many brethren, the prototype of what we are destined to become in the main firstfruits harvest.

“Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain.” (James 5:7) *“Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.”* (James 1:18) 