



FIRST FRUITS

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Your Bible is divided into two collections of writings. The first 39 volumes are known as the Old Testament or the First Covenant. The latter 26 books and letters are known as the New Testament or the New Covenant, or the Covenant of Jesus Christ.

The Old Testament bears the New Testament concealed, while the New Testament carries the Old Testament revealed.

In contrast to a common persistent ignorance, the Old Testament is *not* archaic literature of little contemporary value that has been replaced by the New Testament, but it holds the very underpinnings of the Gospel which announces our salvation through Jesus Christ.

Apart from the recognized symbols of prophetic and poetic writings, even the narratives are rife with real-world imagery that reveals principles and laws that are at work in multiple aspects of life, even 21st century life. Today, I will speak about one such cluster, and try to unpack for you its relevance to a life with God in this present world.

Three Feasts

Let's begin on Mount Sinai, where God spoke face-to-face with Moses, and gave His divine Law to the descendants of Israel.

Moses reported these words of God to the people:

Exodus 23:14 "Three times a year you shall celebrate a feast to Me.

¹⁵ "You shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Passover)... [as when] you came out of Egypt.

¹⁶ "Also you shall observe the Feast of the Harvest of the first fruits of your labors from what you sow in the field; also the Feast of the Ingathering at the end of the year when you gather in the fruit of your labors from the field.

These three national festivals provided in perpetuity multiple annual opportunities for fellowship and worship among the people of God, and, in later years, invited them to make pilgrimage from their hometowns to Jerusalem, the centerpiece of their religion, where God would meet and speak with His chosen people.

The Feast of Passover.

The Feast of Pentecost.

The Feast of Tabernacles (tents).

The Feast of Harvest or Firstfruits celebrated the “first fruits of the people’s labors” in the field. This was also known as the Feast of Weeks, for it culminated the seven-week period that began with Passover. It should be of particular interest to us, since the Greeks knew it as Pentecost (meaning “fifty days”).

What Are First Fruits?

“First fruits” initially referred to the barley harvest in the earlier part of the year (May-June). The later ingathering (September-October), to which the early offering pointed, was the wheat and grape harvest.

“Fruits” can mean many things, as we’ll see, but “first” just means FIRST (not second, and not last), though it certainly implies MORE.

A tithe of that early barley harvest represented a “thank you” to God for His provision, and also a prayer of faith for the harvest still to come. A backward look to the past, with gratitude, and a forward look to the future, with hope.

Here are some of the references to “first fruits”:

Exodus 34:26 “You shall bring the very first of the first fruits of your soil into the house of the Lord your God.

Leviticus 23:10 “Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘When you enter the land which I am going to give to you and reap its harvest, then you shall bring in the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest.

2 Chronicles 31:4 Also [Hezekiah] commanded the people who lived in Jerusalem to give the portion due to the priests and the Levites, that they might devote themselves to the law of the Lord.

⁵As soon as the order spread, the sons of Israel provided in abundance the first fruits of grain, new wine, oil, honey and of all the produce of the field; and they brought in abundantly the tithe of all.

Nehemiah, and the people who were rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem agreed to “bring the first fruits of our ground and the first fruits of all the fruit of every tree to the house of the Lord annually.” (Nehemiah 10:35)

Proverbs 3:9 Honor the Lord from your wealth and from the first fruits of all your crops; 3:10 then your barns will be filled completely, and your vats will overflow with new wine.

Ezekiel 44:30 "The first of all the first fruits of every kind and every contribution of every kind, from all your contributions, shall be for the priests; you shall also give to the priest the first of your dough to cause a blessing to rest on your house.

Our Produce

So, the first fruits of the harvest or the produce of one's labors, were to be a token of thanks, a gift offered in faith and gratitude to God, who supplies all our need. In a farming society like ancient Israel, that made common sense, and still does in many parts of the world.

But in a cash economy, like ours, the produce is another kind of green. Yet, the principle of first fruits (or the tithe, the first tenth) still applies, since it is the favor of God which enables us to make a living, even though we study and work for it.

So, the principle of first fruits also applies to our income, whether we are paid by the hour, or the day, or the week, or the month. In recognition and honor of our Provider, we bring the first fruits, the first 10% (not the second or the last), as a token of thanks for what He has provided and also our continuing hope in God for our future provision.

About this, many have asked, "Do we tithe from the gross or the net (after taxes and necessary expenses)?" If you depend most of all on the government, then pay Uncle Sam first. If you depend mostly on yourself, then pay yourself first. But if you depend on God to give you health and strength and provide for your needs, then give to Him first. That's what I do. Tithe first, taxes second, savings third, then I live on the rest.

It's easy for me to calculate my tithe, since no taxes are withheld from a minister's paycheck. I just divide the amount of each check by ten and write a check of my own to the church for that tenth of my income. If taxes are withheld from your paycheck, you'll need to find the "gross" earnings on your paystub, then write a check for a tenth of that.

What if you're self-employed and receive no paycheck? Well, you know what you take in from your business. Deduct your business expenses, and bring a tenth of the rest as a thank offering to God.

The Principle of First Fruits

As we've seen, "first fruits" were a literal offering of worship from our produce (or productivity) prescribed for the people by God. But the principle of first fruits also served as a Biblical symbol of greater things:

The nation of Israel was itself the “first fruits” of humanity, set apart as holy for the Lord –
Jeremiah 2:3 *Israel was set apart to the Lord; they were like the first fruits of a harvest to Him.*
As such, the nation was a token of God’s covenant faithfulness, and also the hope of all nations, to whom they were to present the True and Living God.

Then, Jesus Himself was the “first fruits” of the resurrected humanity –
1 Corinthians 15:20 *But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep (have died).*

His life-from-the-dead revealed what God has planned for all the redeemed: bodily life after death. Jesus first; then, the rest of us some time later.

Make no mistake, we Christians are not bound for an ethereal existence as disembodied spirits or a spiritual essence. We will have resurrected, physical bodies like Jesus does, no longer bound by time or space, nor subject to disease, decay, or death.

Resurrection is not a gesture; it’s a reality!

Just as real as the resurrection of Jesus, that caused those who knew Him best to gasp with wonder, and fall down before Him, exclaiming, “My Lord and my God!”, you will live even though you taste death. They may kill the body, but they cannot do more. And Christ will raise up your body on the Last Day, and you will never die again.

Christ, the first fruits of the resurrection, is our promise of that.

The Church, also, is the “first fruits” of the new humanity, brought forth by the Gospel – a people proclaiming the Good News about the Savior Jesus –

James 1:17 *Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. ¹⁸ In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.*

The Church is the expression to the world at large of God’s redeeming grace, and an expression to other people in our spheres of life of that same redeeming grace, given for all through Jesus Christ. We are the first fruits of the new creation that God is making through the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The Church is also the “first fruits” of the Spirit-empowered life –

Romans 8:23 *And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.*

The Pentecostal “taste” of the life of the Spirit is just a foretaste of the Spirit’s work in humanity. “This is that!” Peter exclaimed on that day, recognizing the beginning of the fulfillment of

Joel's prophecy. But this is not yet what it shall be...! There's so much more still to come, as we learn to yield to the Spirit's promptings and give our lives away in acts of lovingkindness.

The Church of today is not the final work of God's redeeming love; it is only the core of that work. What He will do *through* His Spirit-filled people throughout the ages to come has never before been seen.

1 John 3:2 Dear friends, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet been revealed. We know that whenever it is revealed we will be like him, because we will see him just as he is. 3:3 And everyone who has this hope focused on him purifies himself, just as Jesus is pure).

The resurrection of Jesus, and the Holy Spirit-empowerment of the church are good for the present, and also hold extravagant promise for the future. And that is the principle of first fruits. Both a backward and a forward look!

Giving thanks to God for the harvest just past was also a prayer of faith to secure the harvest yet to come. So it is for the resurrection of the righteous. So it is for the Heaven-sent, Holy Spirit-empowered revival of the church and reaching of the lost.

And so it is also for your necessary and anticipated income. Most would agree that the art and science of the mortician offers some job security. But if it's life-security that you want—grace to carry you through the inevitable lows and highs of life in this uncertain world—then look beyond what you do to earn money. Look at who you are and how you use money.

Don't use money just to secure yourself, like the man Jesus described, who built bigger barns to hoard his holdings, but couldn't delay his sudden death.

Instead, use your money to help others, to make friends for Jesus. Then, what you've spent will come back to you—pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, running over, and poured into your lap. Giving, not getting is the way. Generosity begets generosity.

That is the lesson of first fruits. Apply it throughout your life. God will receive your thanks and honor your faith. Your joy will overflow, and others will take notice. You will become Good News!

If we give God our first fruits, He will give us a harvest over which we may rejoice! Don't you need a harvest? I want a harvest for your life!