

The Feasts of the Lord, Part 1 – First fruits

Leviticus 23:9-17

Introduction

Lent is a time of fasting, but fasting is always preparatory to feasting. While a bit ironic to focus on feasts in Lent, it is also quite appropriate. In the OT God gives Israel 7 feasts to observe throughout the year, plus the weekly Sabbath. We are going to study these seven feasts and see how each points uniquely to Christ. The feasts will not be treated in seasonal order, but rather matched up with the readings which best associate with them through our Lenten journey. For example, Maundy Thursday has a clear and unequivocal connection with Passover, thus we shall study Passover at that time, rather than today. Leviticus 23 is the place where all the feasts of Israel are described together.

Looking at the broad theme of feasts in Scripture, we see a pattern emerge. The Lord is gracious to provide a feast for his people, the trouble with the people and their sin, is that they (and we along with them) want to make our own feasts rather than trust God to provide one. Eden: feast of the fruit of the Garden, refused by Adam and Eve; Israel in the Wilderness: the people complain that they would rather have Egypt's food than what the Lord would provide for them; Jesus: parables of those who are invited to the wedding feast but refuse, or show up dressed their own way and are kicked out. The Lord prepares a banquet for His people, but they don't want to come, or they want to bring their own food or come on their own terms. Heaven is not a pot luck! However, God's way of bringing salvation to his people is not by withholding (like the cosmic miser he may be mistakenly caricatured to be), but by giving, and giving generously of both his blessings and ultimately of himself.

General notes on the Feasts: while seasonally located (4 in the spring, 3 in the fall) with a clear connection to the agricultural year, the feasts are not based on any sort of astronomical event (solstice, equinox, etc.) but on the actions of God in saving his people. The spiritual realities to which the Feasts clearly point are fulfilled in Messiah, the Christ.

Overview the seven Feasts

Spring (four)

1. Passover (14 Nisan)
2. Unleavened bread (15 Nisan → seven days) / pilgrim
3. First Fruits (16 Nisan; second day of the week of Unleavened Bread)
4. Weeks (*Shavuot*), seven weeks from First fruits, 49 days, on the next day 50th, thus aka Pentecost / pilgrim

Fall (three)

5. Trumpets (*Rosh Hashanah*), 1 Tishiri (later this was the start of Israel's civil year)
6. Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*), 10 Tishiri
7. Tabernacles (aka Tents), 15 Tishiri / pilgrim

Feast of First fruits – summary

- Marked the beginning of the grain harvest season; barley was the first to ripen.
- The people were forbidden to use any part of the harvest in any way until first fruits had been offered to the Lord.
- A sheaf (*omer*) of barley was harvested and presented to the Lord at the Temple; it was representative of the harvest as a whole.
- The priest would wave the grain in thanksgiving – called a wave offering
- Also required were: a sacrifice of a male lamb, a wine offering, and a meal offering (barley flour mix w/ olive oil).
- The ritual instructions for FF are in Deut. 26:1-10
- FF served as a marker for the beginning of the harvest season; it also was the marker to begin counting to the next feast, Weeks/Pentecost. Seven weeks (49 days) from FF were to be measured, then on the next day, the 50th day was the feast of weeks. This marked the giving of the Law at Sinai.
- FF fell on the third day from Passover (Easter: Jesus rose ‘on the third day’)

Meaning/Significance

- God declares repeatedly in Scripture that the first things belong to him: grains, produce, livestock, and even first-born children, were his. The represented the whole, and indicated that the whole were also in fact God’s, but he laid claim directly to the first – their lives were forfeit to Him.
- According to Mosaic Law (Numbers 18:16) all first-born sons were to be presented to the Lord when they were one month old. However, God provided a means by which the first born son could be redeemed, that is set free from lifetime service to God at a ceremony where five shekels were paid.
- At one month of age Jesus was presented in the Temple, and we have a beautiful account of this in Luke 2:23ff, where the old prophet Simeon declares Jesus to be the Messiah (Song of Simeon).

Fulfillment

- Two points: one is law (application), the other is Messianic redemption.
- There is a direct application to the concept of FF for us today. When we give to God, be it tithe/contributions to the church, offering our time and abilities, are we giving God the first part of what we have? Very often we end up giving God our leftovers.
- Messianic fulfillment: 1 Cor 15:20, “But now Christ is risen from the dead and has become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.”
- If Jesus died on a day of Passover (14 Nisan), he lay in the tomb on 15 Nisan (the beginning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread), and rose from the grave on 16 Nisan, the Feast of First fruits, on the third day.
- Thus the resurrection of Jesus is the guarantee of the first fruits of the Resurrection; humanity’s redemption from death.