

**The Feasts of the Lord**  
*Studies on the Feasts Appointed  
by the Lord for Israel*

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A Myrtlefield House Transcript



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## Introduction

### **PASSOVER and UNLEAVENED BREAD**

PASSOVER	14th day of the first month
UNLEAVENED BREAD	15th day of the first month

One feast followed on immediately after the other; they could not be separated. They were historically associated with *coming out of the land*. The Israelites ate unleavened bread at their exodus from Egypt because they left in a hurry. They took their dough mixed up in their rags and their kneading troughs, and off they went.

In later Jewish history these two feasts combined were often referred to as *the Feast of Unleavened Bread*. They did not have the time to make the normal leavened bread, and thereafter during the centuries they celebrated the fact of their hasty exit from Egypt by keeping a Feast of Unleavened Bread for a whole week.

There was a small gap until two more feasts were added, which also went together. They were in celebration of the corn harvest, which occurs early in Israel's year, in May or June.

### **FIRSTFRUITS and PENTECOST**

FIRSTFRUITS	When the corn was still green a sheaf was presented before the Lord as firstfruits of the coming harvest.
PENTECOST	Fifty days later two cakes were baked from the new corn and presented before the Lord as firstfruits of the ripened harvest.

These two were celebrated at an indeterminate time after Passover and Unleavened Bread. That had to be so since the harvest had to reach an appropriate stage, which did not occur on the same day each year.

The time of Pentecost was determined by the time of Firstfruits; it was fifty days later. In the Old Testament it was known as the Feast of Weeks, while its New Testament name is Pentecost. The Greek word *Pentecost* means 'the fiftieth day.'

Then there was a long gap with no feasts at all; until in the autumn there were three feasts in celebration of the grape harvest, all hustled together in the seventh month with only a fortnight between them.

### **TRUMPETS, THE DAY OF ATONEMENT and TABERNACLES**

TRUMPETS	The silence was suddenly broken by the blast of trumpets. This was the signal for them to reap the harvest. They had to assemble themselves together and prepare to meet the Lord.
THE DAY OF ATONEMENT <sup>1</sup>	The most solemn feast; a day of penitence, examination and confession of sins.
TABERNACLES	A happy feast for seven days, extended to an eighth day, when they lived in booths and took time to remember how their ancestors had come out of Egypt and had lived in tents as they journeyed to their inheritance.

The two harvests of corn and grapes were concerned with the reaping of the harvest *in the land* to which they had been brought for their inheritance.

*There were, and still are, feasts among the Jews that are not included among these seven. Since they are not mentioned in the early part of the Old Testament, they are not dealt with here.*

***PURIM** is mentioned in the Book of Esther, and **DEDICATION** is mentioned in John 10:22 and in 1 Maccabees.*

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<sup>1</sup> On the Day of Atonement in 1973 the Egyptians took the opportunity of this feast, Yom Kippur, to attack Israel.

## The Feasts of the Lord

*Reading: Leviticus 23:1–11, 15–16, 21, 23–28, 33–36*

Leviticus, it must be confessed, is not everybody's favourite book of Scripture. Not many people use it as their bedtime reading and there are reasons for that. Its major message is:

Consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am the Lord your God. Keep my statutes and do them; I am the Lord who sanctifies you. (20:7–8).

If we are to understand these feasts of the Lord in their proper setting, we should spend a few moments allowing the Spirit of God to write again in our hearts this fundamental message to all who claim to be the redeemed of the Lord. There is an obligation on us to be holy, because God is holy (1 Pet 1:15). These feasts were one method God used to help his people in the development of holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord (Heb 12:14).

### **The negative side of holiness**

If we ask the book of Leviticus to tell us what holiness is, it will reply by giving us several different component parts. One of them is concerned with all the rules and regulations that forbid physical, spiritual and moral uncleanness. The prohibitions, 'You shall not . . . and if you do, then you must be cleansed from the uncleanness that is involved.' That is the negative side of holiness.

Nowadays the negative side of Christianity does not get people jumping for sheer joy; they are found half-apologizing for it and trying to emphasize the positive side of Christianity. In some ways that is good, but the negative side of holiness is important. We are glad that God sets his face against all impurity, just like we are glad that doctors take a very negative attitude towards germs. We pray that they always will and that the permissive age will never enter hospitals. Imagine a doctor, about to operate on an appendix, saying that he is not as strict on this matter of germs as his forefathers were. I think we would prefer that doctors were more progressive on the negative attitude to germs and unclean things. We must never let the attitude of the present age creep into us individually or into our churches. The call from God is 'Be holy, as I am holy.' He is exceedingly negative when it comes to physical or spiritual germs.

## **The positive side of holiness**

But holiness is not only negative. 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Lev 19:18). This second of the two great Old Testament commandments tells us that one of the major evidences of holiness is to be warm-hearted and to have a positive attitude towards our neighbours.

[Jesus] said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' (Matt 22:37–39)

To love your neighbour as yourself means a lot of different things. For example, 'You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people' (Lev 19:16). That would mean an end to all gossip. In all we do we should think, 'Would I like someone to do that to me, tell that story about me, drive that kind of bargain with me?' If we would not like it, we are not to do it to our neighbours; we are to love our neighbours as ourselves.

## **Holiness means being free to live for God**

Then there is another side to holiness, and what a lovely and vivid metaphor it is.

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves. And I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect. (Lev 26:13)

God found these people in Egypt, their backs broken with slavery; he redeemed them, desiring that they should be holy. What will holiness mean to them? It will mean that they can now go through life as free men with their shoulders back and their heads up. No longer were they bondmen; by God's grace they were free!

God wants to make us free from bondage to guilt, but he also wants to make us free in all the affairs of daily life. Free from those attitudes that would make us slaves to our homes, our duties or our businesses. He wants to make us walk upright so that we may feel confident in his grace and power; not as slaves to the guilt of our past or to the responsibilities of our present, but as free men and women. That does not mean that we should be lazy. God is not lazy. Let us remember, in all reverence, that he does not have to work for a living. What he does, he does for the sheer joy of doing it and he will fill the whole of eternity with his glorious activity. But he never makes himself a slave to it and he wants us to learn that the secret of true, holy living is not to make ourselves into slaves.

For that reason, God ordained that Israel should have their year interspersed with seven major holidays. They were seven occasions when the Israelites left their daily routine of work and rested—not by going to the beach with their children, but by taking the time to rest and think about God and to be with God. There is a recurrent phrase through the details of these feasts, 'You shall not do any ordinary work' (e.g., Lev 23:7–8). And there is a little paragraph interjected before the details of the seven feasts where God reminds them about the weekly day of rest, the Sabbath. He was trying to get something across to them when he told them to observe a weekly Sabbath and also when he told them to observe seven holidays each year during which they were not to do any ordinary work.

## The Sabbath

In Israel the Sabbath was observed for two major reasons. *First,*

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Exod 20:8–11)

God made the heaven and earth in six days and rested on the seventh day. He made the seventh day holy, so Israelites were to work six days each week and rest on the seventh day. Why? To remind them that God made the world—they didn't make it! When we go about sad-faced, heaving and sighing, you would think we had the responsibility for keeping the whole universe going, but we do not. God made it and he made us; but not so that life should crowd out our joy and gladness and burden us with an impossible slavery. He made us to be free. Sin would make slaves of us, but he redeemed us so we may increasingly know what it is to be a freeborn child of the God who made everything.

If we are wise, we shall learn the spirit of this. We are not obliged by the requirements of the law to observe one day in seven as a Sabbath, but we allow ourselves time from our daily work—and indeed, from our spiritual responsibilities—to sit back and rest in God. We are to contemplate the fact that it is he who has made us and that he said, 'I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save' (Isa 46:4).

There are many who have burdens that are utterly crushing. Don't criticize them and say that they should have a smiling face, or that they are a bad testimony for Christ. That would be very hurtful. They may have personal pain, bereavement, or sorrow in their family. Those people should not reasonably be expected to laugh and smile. Life brings great burdens, but even under the burdens God invites us to pause and remember that it is he who started the whole world and us in it. He longs to carry us, and we shall find true rest of heart when we learn to let God carry the heaviness.

### *The second reason Israelites were to observe the Sabbath*

Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. For six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day. (Deut 5:12–15)

The Sabbath, a day of rest, was enjoined on Israel to remind them that once they were slaves in Egypt and God delivered them out of bondage. So now they were also to allow their servants a day of rest. We have been redeemed by God and brought into rest, so we have the responsibility if we are employers to see that we do not make life a misery for our employees. In consequence of this ordinance the nation of Israel has, even to this day, kept the Sabbath—externally at least. By the time of the New Testament, however, we find that they had made two main mistakes. (1) They thought they couldn't trust God, so they were tempted to work on the Sabbath. If a Jew in a competitive line of business saw someone up the road open his shop on the Sabbath, he might feel that he could not afford to keep his store shut and so he broke the Sabbath law. That failure to trust God took away his rest and turned life once more into slavery. (2) At the other extreme there were some religious people who turned the Sabbath into a legal enactment that had to be kept with the strictest observance. They added all sorts of rules and regulations that God never intended and turned the Sabbath of rest into a bondage of misery. Against that background, our Lord presented himself as the Creator Incarnate, the upholder of heaven and earth, the heir of all things and he stands before us still, saying,

All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matt 11:27–30)

### **What does the Lord mean by 'rest'?**

Matthew then illustrates what his rest is through two stories about what happened on two consecutive Sabbaths. As we look at these feasts of the Lord we shall be thinking about the Old Testament equivalent of this offer of the Lord Jesus. He offers to those who trust him the true Sabbath, the true keeping of rest—from the guilt of our past, our failures and our sins; in the present as we go out to work with his easy yoke upon our souls and his kindly government controlling our behaviour. May God help us to learn these lessons.

We live in an age sadly distraught by all sorts of unrest that takes its terrible toll on our minds and nerves, and hence on our bodies. We need to know the rest of heart that Christ speaks of, and take our spiritual holidays—to come apart with God from our ordinary work and even from our spiritual work, and allow the Lord to refresh our souls and put within us a sense of his rest. Then we can go out to work again; stronger because we are the more secure and more effective since we are the more at peace.

### **What the feasts meant to the original Israelites**

Now let us think briefly of these feasts at the literal level—what they meant to the original Israelites. Most of the men were farmers who had their acres and animals that God had given them when they came into the promised land and most of the feasts were concerned with agriculture in one way or another.



## Passover

At the beginning of the year, the Feast of Passover was a reminder of how God had delivered their forefathers out of Egypt. It encouraged the farmer or any other Israelite to think about the past. Of course, the past has significance for the present. You can imagine farmer Zechariah saying, 'If God had not delivered my forefathers out of Egypt I would not have this farm.' It would renew in him a sense of gratitude to God for his great redemption. It would have been an unhappy thing if he had become so engrossed in his farm that he forgot what he owed God and that should speak its practical lesson to our hearts.

We would do well to take time to sit down and think, 'If it had not been for Christ and his redemption, where would I be now? What would I have now?' All we have and all we hope for we owe to the redeeming work of Christ. The Lord tells us that we should come together and remember him. Will we ever become so busy—even in spiritual work—that we will not come to the Lord's Supper? Do we really want to be holy and find rest of heart? Then the Lord knows best, and he instituted for us Christians a weekly meeting where we may come and think about the past.

Unlike most of us, the ancient Israelites lived so close to nature that they could marvel at the lovely creation around them. Farmer Zechariah would plant his wheat as usual. Perhaps one day he would start to wonder, 'Will it come up this year?' Then he saw a tiny blade of wheat poking its way up through the sod. How did it happen that by putting one seed of wheat into the ground he got sixteen or maybe sixty seeds out of it? If it did not happen, we would all starve. If we only got one seed out when we put a seed into the ground, the whole world would come to a stop. The very life of the community depends on it. It is an amazing miracle that it comes up every year.

But it is so easy in this busy world, living in our cities, to be in such a hurry that we do not have time to reflect on the wonders of nature. For rest of mind and relief from some of our anxieties and nervous tensions, we cannot do better than to do what God told Israel. He said we are to take time off to consider nature and learn to wonder at those humble miracles that go on all around us; and let our wondering turn to praise and worship of the great God who made it all and keeps it going. If we find it hard to trust God, we should look at nature; the very process that gives us our daily bread is a miracle that we cannot reproduce.

## Tabernacles

At the end of the year, when they had gathered in the corn harvest and the subsequent grape harvest, there was the Feast of Tabernacles. They went out, made themselves booths, and lived in them for a whole week. They were well stocked up with their grapes and had a great holiday away from their homes. They had time to think back over all the ways God had led them. Their forefathers had been slaves in Egypt; God had brought them out. Then they had spent forty years footslogging across the Sinai Peninsula, which was not very pleasant. He had said he would bring them into the promised land, but those forty years had tested their faith. Now, as they sat in their booths with their hearts full of joy, with the new wine and the figs and everything else, they were to remember the way God had led them; they were to sense in their hearts that not one good word had failed them of all that the Lord had spoken

(Josh 21:45). He had proved to them that he had fulfilled his promises and, as they thought of the coming year with whatever difficulties it might bring, they were to remember to trust and praise him. Last year he was as good as his word, even though they had not trusted him as they should and they were to continue to trust him until they got to the end of life's journey.

We too shall eat the very 'grapes of heaven' and look back and see the way the Lord led us. Against all Satan's insinuations, God had proved as good as his word, and more grand than his word. May God grant that we shall not feel ashamed of ourselves and have to ask why it was that we doubted God so much.

When I stand with Christ on high,  
Looking o'er life's history,  
Then Lord shall I fully know,  
Not till then, how much I owe.<sup>2</sup>

As the years went past, these feasts came to have other meanings besides the literal aspect. Like our Christmas, the Feast of Tabernacles was such a happy time for the children. They wondered how long it would be until the next one, counting the days and feeling like it would never come. But when they had kept it thirty-five or fifty-seven times, it came round so fast that it seemed as though they were scarcely back into the house before it was there again the next year and they knew exactly what was going to happen each time it came. There were some who began to regard the yearly feasts as the same old things going round and round again, and they wondered if that was all life was going to be.

Think of our years: Christmas, New Year's Day, Good Friday, Easter, Whitsun (Pentecost), Christmas, New Year's Day and so on. Is life going somewhere?

## Firstfruits

At the Feast of Firstfruits, the farmer in Israel would be truly thankful for the corn having gone into the ground and dying, coming up again and producing his sheaf. If it hadn't come up, he would have had no business and he and his family would have died. Then he got to thinking, 'What will happen when I die? Do I come up again?' They had looked forward to coming into the promised land and reaping the harvest, but when they had eaten the grapes and they were gone once again, was that all there was to it?

God was ready with the answer for them, 'No, that is not all there is to it!' His words are marvellous, and beyond description,

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death for ever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, 'Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Murray McCheyne (1813–43), 'When this passing world is done'.

This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.' (Isa 25:6–9)

Glorious as the harvest was, it was really only a faint glimmering in advance, at the physical level, of a vastly more glorious future that God had waiting for them. God said, 'I shall bring up my vintage wine one of these days. You have not tasted wine yet; you have not known what joy is yet. One day I shall make this a feast of wine, well prepared. I shall wipe away tears and death itself shall be swallowed up in victory. And then you shall be so full of unutterable joy!'

And they would say, 'Yes, we always thought there was more to it than this!'

When death is swallowed up in victory, how men shall laugh and cry in the very joy of their gladness, and their tears will be done away with forever.

Isaiah is a bona fide Jewish prophet in the Old Testament. Speaking by inspiration in terms of 'The Great Harvest' he already sees it as a prophecy of greater things to come at the end of this age, and indeed at the end of the world. This is not some private interpretation of the feast, or even a quotation from the New Testament; so it is obvious that we shall have to think of these feasts at the prophetic level as well as at the practical level.

It shall not seem strange to us as Christians, either, to take another step. Even before the time of Christ, as they celebrated the Feast of Passover remembering how they had left Egypt, the Jews felt that one day the Messiah would come at Passover. To this day an Orthodox Jew will open his door in expectation for Messiah to arrive during the Passover meal. And that expectation came true!

On one occasion as Passover drew near there trotted down into the streets a humble donkey and on its back was Zion's King—lowly and meek of heart, riding into Jerusalem to keep the Passover (Zech 9:9; Matt 21:5)—the very Lamb of God himself! It was not an accident that he came on that occasion, for the God who sent Christ to die was the God who made the world, who stands behind its history, and who planned Israel's holy days and their redemption. He planned it in advance so that men might know when the reality came that it was real. Therefore, as we Christians look back at Israel's ancient feasts and notice how and when Christ came, we conclude that it was not by accident. When Christ died on a cross in Jerusalem at the time of Passover, we see the accuracy of the ancient prototype. He was 'delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God' (Acts 2:23).

## **Pentecost**

The Lord Jesus Christ rose again from the dead and fifty days later, on a certain Feast of Pentecost, the disciples were gathered together and the Holy Spirit came down from heaven. This was the inauguration of something the like of which had never been seen before. It was a glorious new reality and the effects of his coming are with us still. A new age dawned on that day of Pentecost. As the Feast of Pentecost was closely related to the Feast of Firstfruits, so the coming of the Holy Spirit is closely related to our Lord's resurrection. 'Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep' (1 Cor 15:20).

As we continue our studies we shall be thinking at various levels. Firstly, at the practical level of these ancient feasts; then what the Jewish prophets saw in them; and finally at the deeper significance of Christ being the reality of those pictures and shadows. The picture is interesting enough in itself, but we shall be asking ourselves, 'If there is a spiritual reality corresponding to the pictures, have we got the reality?'

Some folks spend happy evenings looking through holiday brochures, at the pictures of the beautiful hotels, glorious beaches with palm trees, blue sea and sky. They buy their tickets and go to the place of their choice and they find themselves making comparisons with the brochures. The hotel is not quite as stylish as in the photograph, the food is not too bad. But that beach—the picture was marvellous, but the reality is more wonderful still.

Imagine telling your friends that you were going on holiday to Majorca and showing them the pictures in the brochure; then in June, when you were supposed to be away, they meet you in the local supermarket.

'Why are you not in Majorca?' they ask.

'But I am,' you reply, and you show them the brochure with its beautiful pictures. They would look at you and your brochure and begin to wonder. Who would be so silly as to confuse the picture with the reality?

So as we think about these feasts, we shall be thinking of one of the ways that God had of making his people holy. It was the way of rest; he longed that they would find true rest of heart. As we enjoy the vivid pictures we shall thank God for them, but we shall ask, 'Have I got the reality they speak of?' That reality shall be far more wonderful than the pictures. Remember again the invitation of our Lord,

Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matt 11:28–30)

We shall think of the wonders of his person and the fact that he can give rest from the gnawing of a guilty conscience and fear of the future. May he make himself known to us, calm our hearts and give us rest in himself so that we may be strong to live and work for him, and to please him as we progress in holiness.

## The Feast of Passover

*Reading: Leviticus 23:4–8; Mark 14:1–2; John 2:13–15; 6:1–4; 18:28*

Israel's year was punctuated by certain holy days, which God himself had instituted for the good of his people. It was not that God disagreed with work, even with hard work; he is a tremendous believer in work. What a sane and salutary thing it is to have a job of work to occupy muscles and brain. God instituted these holidays because he was against slavery and it is so very easy in this fallen world for work of various kinds to descend into being slavery. God was against slavery in Israel in regard to their daily toil; he is still against slavery when it comes to the matter of our Christian salvation and the manner in which we lead our Christian lives.

### **Not a spirit of slavery**

Paul tells us, 'You did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"' (Rom 8:15). It is a very kind and loving thing of God to tell us about the Holy Spirit's working in our lives in negative terms. We are surrounded, both without and within, by all sorts of urgings and demands, and at times we need to be able to know which of them are from God's Holy Spirit and which are false urges that would lead us into slavery. If younger Christians find urges within themselves that terrify them, or run their Christian work into a kind of bondage that somehow they feel they dare not stop—for if they did they would in some way be displeasing God—they should bear this verse in mind. God's Holy Spirit will never reduce our lives to slavery; we have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear. God wants hard work and sacrifice from us, but certainly not slavery.

Young people sometimes start with good and admirable zeal for the Lord. They set about serving him, praying, witnessing and striving until, before they are aware of it, they become so involved that their nerves are frayed and they may become victim to psychological urges that will drive them towards breakdown. Sometimes they find that they cannot stop, for the voice that urges them simulates the Holy Spirit and they feel that it would be a sin to stop. It is a merciful provision of our Father, and absolutely typical of his heart, that he reminds us that the Spirit by whom he leads us is not a spirit of slavery.

This is basic to our preaching of the gospel. In Galatians 4 and 5 Paul rehearses for us the story of Abraham and the births of Ishmael and Isaac to remind us again of the terms of our justification and our Christian inheritance. We need to pause, reflect, and allow God's Spirit to fill our hearts with that sense of freedom, so that all our work may be done in the spirit of free sonship.

Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? 'Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.' So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (Gal 4:28–5:1)

It is no accident that the holidays in Israel's year began with the Feast of Passover. It formed for them the beginning of the year, being in its first month. The Israelites were very much like us; they had several new years each year. We have a New Year each January, after Christmas. The schools, colleges and universities have a New Year each September or October. Some people say that life did not begin for them until they got married, so they celebrate their wedding anniversary each year. For the purpose of politics, Israel had a different new year; but their year of redemption—of spiritual experience and relationship with God—had its beginning marked by the Feast of Passover.

### **The cost of redemption**

That was for a very good reason. There would not have been a nation to celebrate any new year had it not been for Passover. The first Passover was that tremendous occasion when God visited them in Egypt, redeemed them, and set them free to work with him and serve him. This reminds us at once that there can be no true serving of God until we know the grace and wonder of personal redemption through Christ. God's original Passover was precisely and explicitly a deliverance from the house of bondage. They were slaves before, and God visited them for the express purpose that they should be slaves no longer but be free to worship and serve him as his freeborn sons. He instituted this yearly feast of remembrance so that as the years went by they might annually be reminded of God's tremendous intervention to set them free from bondage. He purposed that the yearly remembrance of that deliverance should be the means of keeping them free and save them from lapsing again into all kinds of slavery.

There would be, among others, two prominent elements in their remembrance. Firstly, how God visited Egypt and delivered them through the blood of the Passover lamb. With solemn and humble gratitude, they remembered the cost of that deliverance from the wrath of God, and with it came a godly concern that their lives should be maintained free for the service of God. Secondly, they would recall how God had delivered them not only by the blood of the Passover lamb, but also with a stretched-out arm and mighty power demonstrated at the Red Sea. If they would start wondering from time to time how they could find strength to perform all the duties God had laid on them, they would be reminded of the source of that strength and the power that God exerted to set them free. Thus each generation would be moved to experience for themselves the power of that self-same God and that seems to be where the lesson lies for us today.

Knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of

a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you. (1 Pet 1:18–20)

We too look backwards to a historic event; to that central event in all human history when Christ, the Lamb of God, died for our sins to redeem us and set us free. Indeed, we have an inalienable freedom purchased by the blood of Christ. It is God's will that we constantly remember it as the very basis of everything. Spiritual experience begins here, and to it all spiritual experience must constantly recur. So as we recall the redemption purchased for us by Christ, we too shall find the secret of living a life in full spiritual freedom.

Nevertheless, the New Testament tells us we are under obligation to lead a life of service for God. Have we ever come through a patch in life where the commandments of the Lord seemed grievous and irksome to us, and appeared as a kind of slavery? Has the recurrence of the Lord's Supper ever seemed to bind us? Has the responsibility to witness ever made us wish that preachers would move on in their sermons? If we have never had such feelings, we are unusual indeed! What is it that will take the sense of slavery out of our Christian life and work? It is the realistic remembrance of what it cost our Lord Jesus Christ to redeem us. If we forget the cost of that precious blood, then presently our hearts will start to protest that God is expecting too much from us.

If we become like the servant in the parables (Matt 25:14–30; Luke 19:11–27), who protested that his lord was a hard man, reaping where he did not sow, gathering where he did not winnow and always expecting something for nothing, then our Christian duty will appear to be a slavery imposed by a hard master. However, our protests will stop if our hearts are constantly impressed by what it cost Christ to shed for us that infinitely valuable blood. We will come to agree with Paul, that offering our bodies as living sacrifices is our reasonable service (Rom 12:1).

### **The power of God with us**

But even with the best will in the world, there will come into our lives a sense of slavery if we forget that we do not have power in ourselves but that the infinite power God demonstrated when he raised Christ from the dead also dwells in us (Eph 1:19–20). By the power of God, Christ was raised from the dead and ascended into the heavens. That same power is presently available to us in our daily chores and in our spiritual ministry.

We need times of quiet away from service; otherwise caring for the family, the emotional strain of looking after young children (which is greater if they are teenagers), the complexities of work and all those thousand-and-one things that fill so much of our time will crumple us. In our feeling of defeat we shall sense the bitterness of slavery. May God give us wisdom to take our times of spiritual rest and holiday to think again of the great work of redemption at Calvary, the resurrection and the ascension, so that he may open our hearts and minds to perceive that reservoir of power that is available to us.

Sometimes God shows his people these things by lightning flashes of revelation, but most of us have to learn gradually. Our spirits must be given time to repeat, and repeat, and repeat his lessons and, bit by bit, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man (Eph

3:16), as we gradually learn to use the power that God has available for us. The ebb and flow of God's programme for our lives is spiritual work and then spiritual rest.

The Israelites, then, were commanded to keep this first feast of their year, and for centuries multitudes of godly Jews devotedly kept this Feast of Passover. They prayed and gave their thanksgivings to God, and God heard and blessed them. There were many in Israel, like Hannah, Miriam, Joseph and Hezekiah who did as God told them to do and they were blessed. But it is so easy with a recurring celebration, like Passover or the Lord's Supper, for it to become a formality or routine and its impact is lost. It was hard for Israel always to remember the reality, because they dealt almost exclusively with symbols. Let us profit from their mistake lest we should be guilty of the same thing.

### **Four visits of our Lord Jesus to Jerusalem to celebrate the feasts**

On four occasions in John's Gospel we are told how the Lord Jesus went up to Jerusalem to celebrate a feast of the Jews; three of those were Feasts of Passover. In his lovely way, John pictures our Lord going up with the festal crowds. What fun it was! They could leave their harrows in the barn for a while and forget what the new year's crop was going to be like. They got dressed up in their Sabbath-best and went off with their families. Presently down the way, as the little side roads joined the main roads, the trickle of pilgrims grew into a great caravan. At night around the campfires they sang the psalms about going up to Jerusalem and how tremendous it would be when they got there; 'I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord!" Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!' (Ps 122:1-2). And then, coming out over the top of Mount Scopus, they would see the city. What a thrill for the little ones in the family to see it for the first time! What a tremendous occasion it was—that mixture of holiday and holy day, when long-lost relatives came together for the feast.

John tells us to look at one person in the crowds. This otherwise indistinguishable figure is God incarnate, going up with the pilgrims to keep the feast. Why? He is the God whom they claimed to worship; he is joining in, listening to the way they sing, reading their hearts as they say the prayers, watching what their actual response is to the public reading of holy Scripture, searching always, wanting to be sure that they have the reality behind the outward ceremony.

When he went up to the temple, what do you think he found? Well, there would be uncles and brothers talking about the past year, its business and inflation. Would they start talking about what they had been enjoying of the Lord during the year? Was Uncle Hezekiah saying that he had found what God had said to Moses to be a real thing; the experience of their nation way back in Egypt was not some magic, as they used to think when they were children? He had been experiencing it at the personal level and he was telling his brother that the power of God was wonderful. Is that what they were discussing? No! Jesus found them selling oxen and doves, and making a packet of money out of changing the pilgrims' money for the offerings in the temple. He was so incensed that he cast them all out and they were indignant. They thought they were being realistic. Money does not fall off trees, this temple took forty-six years to build and money was needed for it.



### **What had gone wrong?**

When they were first released from Egypt, in their first thrill of freedom, God proposed they build a tabernacle. They came with their gifts and so pestered Moses to take their mountains of offerings that he had to tell them to stop. But now the farthings had to be squeezed out of them and the whole thing was turned into a charade of business. God was being represented to the people as though he was in religion to make money; out to sell salvation to the highest bidder. And when they asked for a sign and Christ said, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up' (John 2:19), they thought he spoke of the literal temple. They had not a clue what he meant. He spoke of that divine power that would raise his body from the dead and set him at the right hand of God in the heavens, but such talk of the power of God to those people was Double-Dutch. They were celebrating Passover without a notion of personal experience of the power of God.

Watch the shadowy figure emerge from the darkness one night during Passover. It is the rabbi himself, the professor of theology in Jerusalem, Nicodemus (see John 3). Now we will find out where things had gone wrong. Our Lord speaks to that man about the power of God, experienced at the personal level. He tells Nicodemus what it means to be regenerate by the workings of the Spirit of God, to be born again of water and of the Spirit. Theologian of many years though he was, he too had not a notion. He had read it many times in Ezekiel's prophecy (e.g. Ezek 36:25–27), and still his mind was dark as to the power of God.

As Christians, we have that fundamental experience of the power of God, we are born again of his Spirit. As Paul says, 'We are not children of the slave but of the free woman' (Gal 4:31); but we shall never be anything better than slaves until we learn and experience at the personal level what it means to be children born into his family, loved by the Father, and forever free.

On one occasion, just before the Feast of Passover, Jesus was up north in Tiberias, not far from the Sea of Galilee. There he fed the multitudes and gratefully they ate the loaves and fish. John records, 'The Passover . . . was at hand' (John 6:4). So with the time for eating the Passover approaching, our Lord spread a feast and invited the people to eat what he had miraculously provided. They came clamouring the next day, asking for another free meal. He had to say to them that they wanted him, not because they had seen any sign in what he had done the day before, but because they wanted a free meal. Jesus answered them saying, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves' (v. 26).

It was meant as a sign to show them that in their midst was the true manna—the bread that came down from heaven to feed their forefathers as they crossed the desert to their inheritance. Now in their midst was the Bread of God. The loaves were meant to lead them to him, but they were not interested.

'When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?"' (v. 60).

Presently our Lord had to remark, 'Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?' (v. 62).

That sounded like fanaticism to them. What was it all about? Where was he before? Where was he going to ascend to?

Indeed, John has to record, 'After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him' (v. 66). They could not understand him when he talked about going back to where he had come from, so they went back to Jerusalem and kept the Passover—but there was not much in it.

### **It was not enough to eat the Passover; they had to step out on their journey**

How little they had learned over the centuries! When they kept that first Passover Feast, they had to be prepared, specially dressed, their loins girded, a staff in their hands, sandals on their feet. Why? Because it was 'the Lord's Passover'! If they ate the food of the Passover and really believed what God was saying through it, then they should be expecting the door to open at midnight and they would begin a journey that would take them far away to their inheritance. To eat the Passover and not be prepared for the journey would be a sad contradiction in terms.

Behind the historic Passover and the literal journey across the Sinai wilderness to a literal Palestine, there is a bigger journey that starts with a bigger redemption and a bigger Passover that leads men and women in the steps of Christ through this world and on into the inheritance that lies beyond.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you . . . Therefore, preparing your minds for action . . . conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile. (1 Pet 1:3–4, 13, 17)

We are redeemed, but do we have our 'minds prepared for action'? Are our minds actively thinking it out, are we working out the logical implications as to how we should be journeying? Are our eyes on the goal, are we making progress—not just chronologically on the calendar, but spiritually? To be redeemed and not journeying is a contradiction of what Passover stands for.

### **A wrong system of values**

Then there came the last Passover that our Lord attended (John 18:28). The Jews assembled and refused to go into Pilate's hall to accuse Christ and further his execution lest they be defiled, because they wanted to keep the Passover. They kept it, but it had become an utterly empty and meaningless thing. Once their forefathers had been in Egypt under the domination of a cruel Pharaoh, God had broken their chains and set them free. Now, in that moment, those responsible leaders hugged their chains to themselves.

Coming to the end of his Gospel, John records our Lord's conversation as the cross drew near. Three times he repeated the phrase, 'the ruler of this world' (12:31; 14:30; 16:11). He was the cruel master over so many of those who kept the Passover. Think of Caiaphas, so enamoured of his place in society as high priest and his comfortable occupation under the Romans that he would choose his career and position in this world rather than God's Christ. Think of Judas, whom the ruler of this world had claimed as slave for only thirty pieces of silver. They were dangled so close to his eyes that they blotted out God's divine Son and all

that went with him. And what do you think of those disciples who were sitting around when Judas began complaining about the money being spent on Christ? Did the ruler of this world perhaps think of insinuating himself into their hearts a little? He is always up to his tricks. It is not always in great things like wealth or exalted position that he gets his grip on our hearts, but often by little things here and there. He will move us from 'using' this world, until we love it; whatever we say with our lips, when given the choice we will choose things rather than Christ.

That is *worldliness*. We can be worldly with very respectable things. Satan can get us to adopt an attitude of heart towards things that are good, lovely, legitimate, or even God-given, until we just take them without allowing them to lead us eventually to God. Our only protection is to dwell constantly near our Lord and near in spirit to his cross. Rules and regulations will never deliver us from worldliness. What a sad mistake some have made who, with all goodwill, have tried to save themselves and their fellow Christians by inventing all sorts of rules.

Worldliness is an attitude of heart. The only cure for it is to abide by the cross where the Lord Jesus was put to shame for us; to remember who he was and is, and all the incalculable possessions of glory that are his. He surrendered them all, without reserve, to redeem us. That is his system of values! When we see that Jesus Christ is the Son of God—and we wake up to the fact that it was not some lowly carpenter, but God's own Son, who for our sakes became poor (2 Cor 8:9) and died in poverty to redeem us—there will be born in our hearts the secret to overcome the world.

For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? (1 John 5:4–5)

### **The Feast of Passover was immediately followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread**

In fact, so immediately that there was not a day's gap between them. So closely were they together that in subsequent Judaistic history the Feast of Unleavened Bread was, so to speak, extended backwards to include Passover. In Israel, the one could not be kept without the other; both had to be kept together. Unleavened Bread inevitably followed Passover, as night follows day.

The historical reason for this is given to us in Exodus 12:39. The Israelites left Egypt in a hurry and they did not have time to go through the process of making dough and leavened bread. As the years passed the Jewish rabbis came to see in the Feast of Unleavened Bread, not only that reminder of a historical fact, which they never forgot, but an added significance. To them, leaven was a symbol of corruption and they swept their houses clear of all leaven for the time of that feast. This symbolized the cleaning out of the unclean thing that comes to roost in one's life from time to time. So they searched their houses high and low for leaven and cast it all out, feeling that it was symbolic of a yearly spring-cleaning and casting out of all that was foul, corrupt, and corrupting from their lives.

It is not a bad idea to have such a yearly spring cleaning. Perhaps some of us should do it more regularly, but a yearly stocktaking would be a good thing as well. What have we been allowing, perhaps unconsciously, to infiltrate our lives during this past year? Has there been a deterioration in our standard of holiness? The Apostle Paul learned this idea as a young Jew and he uses it in to illustrate a practical exhortation for Christians.

Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Cor 5:6–8)

Just as Passover was followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread, so personal redemption is followed by a holy life where ‘leaven’ has been cast out. What was originally done for a practical reason has come to have a deeper spiritual significance. The practical lesson is that those who are redeemed and set free, never again to be bondmen (at least not by God’s fault), cannot say that this gives them licence to do as they wish. In Romans 6:16 Paul says, ‘Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey . . .?’ It doesn’t matter whether you are a Christian or not, if you yield yourself to some sin, for all practical purposes you shall be a slave to that sin. That is how we are built. If we constantly do a thing that is wrong, it builds up a habit that we cannot break, and so we become slaves. Even when we have been redeemed, set free, and made sons of God, we should not indulge in licence and evil things. The habit of them will become slavery. Claiming to be redeemed by the blood of Christ brings with it an irrefutable obligation to live a life of holiness. But it will not happen automatically; it will only happen when we cooperate with the Holy Spirit and by his grace diligently search the ‘rooms’ of our lives and exclude what is unworthy. This has at least two levels of reference.

### *1. Corruption in church government and discipline (1 Cor 5)*

It is a grave subject, but an exceedingly important one that will become more important as the years go by. Church government and discipline is in the very message of the gospel that we preach. Imagine a Christian church, witnessing and preaching the gospel to their neighbours; since they are human and beset by frailty, weakness and ‘the flesh,’ some grave anti-social lapse occurs in their midst. What are they to do? They must publicly disown it. If they do not, they will not only dishonour the name of Christ, but they will make the gospel ludicrous. There is no true gospel that says you can be saved and then it doesn’t really matter if you live a life of sin. The church that overlooks such activity is fast on the way to denying the very gospel that it preaches.

This has not always been seen clearly in the past. In the dark medieval ages it was completely forgotten, as sinister evils were practised and openly tolerated in the midst of those using the name ‘Christian.’ Even during Reformation times, it was not seen all that distinctly. There were godly men, sometimes called ‘the step-children of the Reformers,’ who pleaded with men like Luther and Zwingli to return to Scripture and exercise godly discipline by having in their congregations only true believers and to excommunicate those who were guilty of grave, public misdemeanour. But many of those dear men of God returned to the

former ways and insisted on having churches that cooperated with the State and refused to cast out people who were guilty of enormous sin.

Protestantism has inherited a very large difficulty. Luther is often quoted in the context that church discipline should not be attempted, 'Our Lord told us to let the tares grow on with the wheat, and forbade pulling up the tares, lest the wheat should also be rooted up in the process.'

The Lord did say that; but he said it to the angels and not to us (Matt 13:24–30). The field in which the wheat and tares are sown is the world, not the church. Those instructed to leave the tares are not the elders of the church but the angels who are responsible for the judgment at the end of the age. To apply that parable to church discipline is to completely confuse two utterly different categories. What a sad confusion of the gospel it has become when people who have no experience of Christ are allowed to imagine themselves members of a Christian church. When the man stands to preach the gospel, they do not know if he is talking to them or not, for they have been led to think we are all Christians. In the context of church discipline, Paul tells us: 'Purge the evil person from among you' (1 Cor 5:13).

## *2. Corruption in civic life*

In Mark 14 we read that the feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread were coming near, so the high priests were making their arrangements to keep that feast, which speaks of sincerity and truth, but they sought how they might take him by craft.

It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him, for they said, 'Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people.' (Mark 14:1–2)

They came with their schemes to the garden, and Judas came to help with the arrest. He did it with a kiss—how low can a human heart fall? If he must be an enemy, why can he not be an honest enemy; why must he stoop to such craft?

And Jesus said to them, 'Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me.' (vv. 48–49)

'Tell me,' said Christ, 'what were you expecting to find in a garden at this hour of the night? Have you come out against a political activist or terrorist? If I am a terrorist, why did you not arrest me when the people were around? They might have given you some support.' They knew he was not a terrorist; he was unarmed, but they wanted to make it look good for the crowds the next morning when he would be dragged, bound, through the streets by an armed guard. That would give the impression that they had found him up to some low deed. Public life can indeed be corrupt. How shall we judge sincerity?

And Jesus said to them, 'You will all fall away, for it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered." But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.' Peter said to him, 'Even though they all fall away, I will not.' And Jesus said to him, 'Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.' But he said

emphatically, 'If I must die with you, I will not deny you.' And they all said the same. (Mark 14:27-31)

Was Peter sincere when he said, 'Lord, if it is necessary, I will go to death with you'? As far as we know he was sincere, but it was not well-informed sincerity. Jesus said to him, 'Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.'

Were the disciples sincere as they sat in the Upper Room with our Lord, when three times he told them that he would not take another glass of wine until everything was fulfilled? 'Truly, I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day that I drink it new in the kingdom of God' (Mark 14:25). Wine was something you drank two or three times a day with meals in Palestine. Could the cross be so near that he would not drink another glass of wine with them? They thought they were sincere, but the disciples could not have dreamt it was so near. They had been disputing about who should be first and chief (Matt 20:20-28); then our Lord said, 'One of you will betray me!' (Matt 26:21). They could not grasp that. Surely their hearts could not be so evil?

Evil is nearer than we think! From their experience we too must learn not to trust our own judgment. It is bad enough to tolerate malicious gossiping over dinner tables, but it is a fearful thing to sit at the Lord's Supper having spread or about to spread some malice about a fellow Christian. We are worse than we think we are; so may he make us realists and sincere. We can but tell the Lord, as best we know how, that we want to serve him. He will search us, prove our hearts, and see if there is any wicked way in us, and there is enough in his love, grace and power to help us.

Was our Lord sincere? Let us listen to him as he approached the cross to accomplish our redemption. 'And he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will' (Mark 14:36). It was no superficial tide of excitement that carried our Lord to the cross. He prayed with all the sincerity of his heart that the cup might pass; but as emotions are not our final guide, neither were they his. Having looked at the very last degree of what it would mean, he said, 'Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done' (Luke 22:42).

We are saved because in him and in his life there was no leaven; nothing but absolute sincerity and complete truth. May God make us like him. May he take his word and purify our hearts, and lead us yet more to discover his grace, love and power so that, as freeborn children, we may journey resolutely towards home.

## The Feast of Firstfruits (1)

*Reading: Leviticus 23:9–22*

When these ordinances were given to the Israelites they were not yet in the promised land, they were still journeying. They had been redeemed from Egypt, so they understood the meaning of the feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread. What would it be like when they entered the promised land, when at last they got to the end of their journey and entered into their inheritance? They had never had an inheritance before. When they were in Egypt they scarcely owned their own bodies, so they must have journeyed with great expectation and thrill. Many of them did indeed; but alas the record tells us that some of them began to forget that there was an inheritance. They forgot the purpose behind their redemption—it is only the beginning! If we want to understand the remaining feasts, we should try to identify with them in their experiences.

They were told that when they entered into their inheritance, every year they would reap the harvest. It would fall into two parts: the corn harvest, and after an interval the grape harvest. So for the first time they sowed their corn and watched it grow. When the fresh corn came through the ground and grew up into the ear, they were to take a sheaf of that green corn and offer it as firstfruits to the Lord.

### **Putting God first**

It was a reasonable enough request from God that they should offer to him the first of what they got. If he had not redeemed them, they would not have had a harvest at all. They owed it all to him! It was a small request that they should offer the firstfruits to the Lord, and it is a small request for us. It is possible for us, too—who have been redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, freed from the wrath of God, who shall never come into condemnation—to forget that there is a purpose behind being redeemed. God has given everything to us, and therefore he has first claim on it. It is not good enough to offer the worn-out ends of our lives to God and to go about spiritual things as if they are only a hobby that we do when there is nothing more important. We would have nothing, had it not been for our redemption in Christ. He is the divine landlord of all we have and he has the right to claim the first place.

The reaping of their inheritance proved to be a great joy for many years. As the process repeated itself, the prophets began to enquire whether or not these annual feasts of the Lord had more than just an agricultural significance. Let us look, then, at some of the passages in which God outlines the significance that these feasts will have in a coming day.

### 1. Zechariah 14:1–4

Behold, a day is coming for the Lord, when the spoil taken from you will be divided in your midst. For I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city shall be taken and the houses plundered and the women raped. Half of the city shall go out into exile, but the rest of the people shall not be cut off from the city. Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley, so that one half of the Mount shall move northwards, and the other half southwards.<sup>3</sup>

Through his prophet, God is speaking of that glorious event when Christ shall come in all his power and glory. He shall return as literally as he went away; his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives. When the great battle has been fought that shall put down the beast and his minions Christ shall reign supreme.

### 2. Zechariah 14:16

Then everyone who survives of all the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Booths.

When our Lord returns and sets up his kingdom, this Feast of Tabernacles shall take on a significance that it never had before. It shall be celebrated, not merely by the nation of the Jews—then restored to God and believing in Jesus as their Messiah—but also by the whole world. All nations shall send their representatives to Jerusalem to celebrate that feast. Glorious as it was in the days when Israel celebrated it as an agricultural festival, it has an added prophetic value pointing to the end of the age when Messiah shall come and establish his reign and every nation throughout the whole world shall be blessed. What a feast of rejoicing that shall be!

### 3. Isaiah 25:6–8

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death for ever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

Thus God's purpose was to get them an inheritance so vast that it should form the very reign of Messiah when he comes to set up his kingdom.

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<sup>3</sup> Many expositors say these words should be taken metaphorically, but there is no reason in Scripture for not taking them literally.



## What these feasts are meant to teach us

As Christians we should see more in these annual feasts of Judah and Israel than mere agricultural festivals. Perhaps, like the author of the book of Job, the farmer watching his crops growing in the springtime might well have wondered at the miracle of nature.

For there is hope for a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that its shoots will not cease. Though its root grow old in the earth, and its stump die in the soil, yet at the scent of water it will bud and put out branches like a young plant. But a man dies and is laid low; man breathes his last, and where is he? As waters fail from a lake and a river wastes away and dries up, so a man lies down and rises not again; till the heavens are no more he will not awake or be roused out of his sleep. Oh that you would hide me in Sheol, that you would conceal me until your wrath be past, that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me! If a man dies, shall he live again? All the days of my service I would wait, till my renewal should come. (Job 14:7–14)

The corn that fell into the ground and died would rise again. The God of creation has so engineered his physical creation that it should become an object lesson for us. The Lord Jesus came into our world; at Passover time he was crucified and three days later he rose from the dead. Just as the corn falls into the ground, dies, and rises again, so is the resurrection of human beings.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. (1 Cor 15:20–24)

Paul carried the gospel message through the synagogues and market places of the Roman Empire. When he described how resurrection will take place, he borrowed agricultural similes, but he came across all sorts of objections.

‘You talk about a resurrection body; you say our bodies will be raised; what will our bodies be raised of?’

Today people ask the same questions. ‘Are you going to tell us that all the bodies that ever died will be raised? Where is God going to get all the phosphorous from? Don’t you know that when people die the phosphorous goes into the ground, up into the grass, and the cattle eat it, and it gets into us eventually? If all the people who ever lived and then died were to rise all at once, where would they get all their phosphorous from?’

To some people that is an insuperable difficulty. As though the Almighty was hard up for a little phosphorous—didn’t he make it in the first place! The difficulty is not where God will get the phosphorous, it is a question of relationship. What is the relationship between the body that was put into the ground and the body that shall rise from it?

Paul calls on various things that we see in nature to illustrate this:

But someone will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?' You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. (1 Cor 15:35–38)

Look at the farming world for instance, he says. You sow a bare grain and what you get out is remarkably different from what went in. A brownish, wrinkled, bare grain goes in and out comes something beautifully green and luscious, with forty grains on it. A beautiful sheaf, a lovely bloom with spikes and hazels. It is different from what went in; yet you cannot get something out without putting something in. There is a vital connection somewhere between the two.

This applies also to our bodies. We are not altogether the same as we were some years ago. Except for those in our brain, the cells are constantly changing. We are not what we used to be; yet somehow we retain our identity. There is a connection between what is now and what there was. God is able to do it so let us be content to leave those mysteries there.

But if we would understand what the Bible means by *resurrection*, we must look a bit further. Plato, the Greek philosopher, talked about the survival of the 'never-dying soul.' He doubtless got it from the Pythagoreans, then in the medieval age it crept into Christendom and it still survives. (Have the gospel preachers been listening to Plato?) He also taught that the body is a very poor thing and a wise man would keep as far away from the body as he possibly could. He maintained that if the soul got mixed up with the body too much, the soul would become contaminated and then it would have to go through a kind of purgatory to be cleansed.

From those wrong and foolish notions have sprung centuries of misery for generations of people. They got it into their heads that the human body was evil, and that true spirituality was in keeping away from it. From this there arose ideas of forbidding to marry and being harsh to the body. But God made the body and he is determined that we shall have bodies eternally. He has given to the human body the supreme compliment; God himself has been manifest in flesh.

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory. (1 Tim 3:16)

It is a wonderful thing to contemplate this mystery. In the process of redemption, the Godhead has been changed, and our blessed Lord shall retain his holy and glorified body eternally. The human body is a glorious thing and what shall it be when we reach our inheritance and have a 'body to be like his glorious body' (Phil 3:21). Poets and artists have raved about the glory of even our present human bodies. They collect the better specimens of them and have remarked on their superb beauty. But even at its best, it is a natural body 'from the earth'—descending from Adam, a living soul like Adam. The new body will be a different kind of thing; the Second Man, the Lord from heaven, is a 'life-giving spirit.' If we have borne the image of the earthy, so we shall bear the image of the heavenly, but still human.

The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. (1 Cor 15:47–49)

Is it possible, then, for a human to have a different kind of body and still be human? Yes. There is in this world a substance called flesh, says Paul, as he draws another analogy from nature. Whether it be human, animal, fish, or bird, it is all flesh. As there are different kinds of flesh, so there shall be different kinds of human bodies. The bodies that we have now are soulish, natural, bodies. One day we shall have a body like unto our Lord's body, a spiritual body, a body of glory (Phil 3:21). He is the firstfruits!

For not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is of one kind, and the glory of the earthly is of another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory. So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. (1 Cor 15:39–44)

### **Sickness is not a sign of being unspiritual**

So far we have arrived simply at the firstfruits, not at the full harvest, and we must be realists. There are some Christians who tell us that because Christ died for us we can claim not only the forgiveness of our sins but also physical health, as this was bought for us by the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. If we grow sick, we have a right to claim healing from God, and if we do not claim it we are unspiritual. That is utterly wrong, totally unscriptural, and in the end cruel. All Christians die—is that because they suddenly become unspiritual? No, if we could claim such healing we would not die.

In Romans 8:23 Paul says: 'We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.' We do not yet have the redemption of the body; we still groan, even though we have received the firstfruits of the Spirit.

But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. (Rom 8:10–11)

The apostle calls our bodies mortal, and that remains true. *Mortal* means 'subject to death.' When we become Christians we receive Christ, and he is in us; but that does not mean that in that moment our bodies are changed from being mortal to immortal; they remain mortal. Because of the fall we were born with the sentence of death hanging over us. Except for Jesus, every baby that has been born into this world has been born thus. And if the Lord does not

come first we shall all grow old, decline, and die because of sin, original sin. When we come to Christ that sentence of death on our bodies is not altered.

Yet it is true that sometimes God does heal us, according to his gracious and good purposes. Sometimes he uses medicine to heal us and sometimes he dispenses with the means and still heals us—which prompts us to say that a miracle has been done. We thank him for it, but we cannot claim such miracles as our right. If God does not grant them, we have no reason to think that it is because we are unspiritual. Even though we groan within ourselves, we have in our bodies at this very moment ‘the Spirit of him who raised up Jesus from the dead.’ The power is already in us that shall one day transform our bodies and turn them into bodies like Christ’s glorious body.

We do not know what mechanisms there are that carry the identity of the human personality. What mysteries there are in us! But whatever those elements are that carry the continuum of personality, alongside them is the Spirit of God. God’s Holy Spirit is already implanted; we are ‘in him,’ and he is ‘in us.’ The roots of our personality already have been changed; they are no longer dependent on this failing flesh but are rooted in the eternal Spirit of God himself.

### **The firstfruits of the harvest and the forerunner**

Historically, the Feast of Firstfruits led on to its own harvest, which took place after Pentecost. At Firstfruits the barley was green; later it turned brown and was harvested. There will be a firstfruits that shall bring a bigger harvest. When Jesus Christ our Lord rose from the dead on that third day, he became the firstfruits of them that slept (1 Cor 15:20). When shall that harvest be? It shall be when our Lord returns,

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. (1 Thess 4:14–17)

Before we leave the Feast of Firstfruits, there is another side of our Lord’s resurrection to be considered. As to his body, he is the firstfruits—he shall come for us and take us to glory. But he is firstfruits in another sense too. He is our forerunner.

So that . . . we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf . . . (Heb 6:18–20)

*Firstfruits* says that there is a harvest coming. *Forerunner* says that a whole cavalcade is coming, so he has entered within the veil, informing heaven that there is a vast cavalcade coming.

You can know by the way the forerunner is treated how the cavalcade will be treated when it arrives. When the president of the United States proposes to go to China, he does not just turn up some afternoon hoping that the Chinese will welcome him. For him not to be welcomed would be a shocking blow. So he takes the precaution of sending a forerunner who goes and sees the Chinese; and if they like the look of him, then it is safe for the president to come.

Christ is risen from the dead and has gone in as the forerunner for all those who are coming behind him. He made it known from the very moment he entered glory that he was not entering for himself alone but on behalf of all the great harvest coming behind him. How was he received? He was received with open arms,

We have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven . . . But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. (Heb 8:1; 10:12)

In two thousand years he has not been asked to move one centimetre. It is comforting to know that when he received our Lord Jesus Christ, God knew that he came representing us. What a Firstfruits! What a Forerunner!

In the ancient world the Jews waved the sheaf of firstfruits before the Lord. The idea is like that of a child; if he wants you to look at something and you do not look at once he will wave it in front of you. God already knew that the harvest was coming, but the priests still waved the sheaf before him. We stand here in the wilderness and 'wave' Jesus Christ our Lord before God, saying 'Look at him, I am coming behind him. You accepted him and in him you have accepted me.'

The harvest itself came fifty days after the waving of the firstfruits sheaf. The barley crop looked beautiful and the time had come for reaping. But when they put in the sickle, almost immediately the operation was suspended. No one ate any of that corn until they had threshed some, milled it, and from that first batch of fresh-ground corn they made two cakes and offered them as firstfruits. They would be making cakes all the rest of the year out of the corn they were about to reap, but right there and then, those first two cakes were offered to the Lord as a firstfruits of what was to be.

### **Pentecost and the firstfruits of the Spirit**

Once a year at the Feast of Pentecost, two cakes made with leaven plus the appropriate sacrifices were offered to God. So it was no accident that fifty days after our Lord rose from the dead, Jerusalem was shaken by the sound of a rushing, mighty wind, and the Holy Spirit came down from heaven. What was it for? To form the firstfruits of what our inheritance will be. Paul describes Christians as those 'who have the firstfruits of the Spirit' (Rom 8:23); and in Ephesians 1:13-14 we are told that we are 'sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance.' At the spiritual level, we are already able to reap the firstfruits

of our great inheritance; we do not have to wait until we get home to glory. We can enjoy the earnest (the token in advance), the firstfruits, now.

Peter reminds us that, in a very real sense, our inheritance lies ahead,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Pet 1:3–5)

But we have the firstfruits of that inheritance now, we have God's Holy Spirit. It is tremendously significant that the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost. Our Lord told his disciples, 'Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I go not away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you' (John 16:7). While the Lord Jesus remained here on earth, the Holy Spirit would not come. When our Lord went away, then the Spirit came. This significance has to be emphasized.

### **A unique event**

What do we mean by 'the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost'? Some people talk of it as if it were just a little bit more, a somewhat heightened degree of what had already been happening down through the centuries. But that is not true; it is not an adequate explanation. Just as our Lord's sacrifice was a unique, historic event, and there was never a resurrection like his before, the day of Pentecost was an indescribably large, significant and unique historical event, and we must not underrate it.

The Holy Spirit had been in the world before. He had come on Gideon, David, Samson, and others; but in the sense of Pentecost, he had never come before. So what does his 'coming' mean? Let us use an analogy with our Lord — 'No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known' (John 1:18).

So, who were those three men who came to Abraham's tent in the heat of the day and talked with him?

Then the Lord said, 'Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me. And if not, I will know.' So the men turned from there and went towards Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the Lord. (Gen 18:20–22)

Two of them were angels, and they went on to Sodom. The third one was addressed as 'the Lord.' Who was he? As no one has seen God at any time, the person Abraham saw must have been the one whom we call 'the second person of the Trinity.' In his pre-incarnate days, long before Bethlehem, he visited Abraham.

Though he visited Abraham, Jacob, and Samson's parents, yet his coming to Bethlehem was not just one more of those early visits. *It was something utterly distinct and different.* He came and stayed here in human form, he had left heaven and was living in our world. Yet he said, 'And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that

are pleasing to him' (John 8:29. 'Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me' (John 16:32). But there was another sense in which he was absent from the Father, 'I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father' (John 16:28).

When we talk about the coming of the Saviour to Bethlehem—it is a unique thing. He was God living among us. 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth' (John 1:14). And it was in that very sense that our Lord said the Holy Spirit was going to come.

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. (John 14:16–17)

The ancient agricultural feast of Pentecost points to that unique Pentecost in all history, when God the Holy Spirit came and took up his residence in human beings as a firstfruits or 'the earnest' (Eph 1:14 KJV). He has come and that guarantees the full payment. He does not come and go with the ups and downs of our fluctuating emotions or experiences. He is here, resident and he will never leave us until he has us in glory, bodies and all. He is the security, the first payment, the earnest that guarantees to everyone who has trusted Christ the final and full payment of the inheritance.

So that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. (Eph 1:12–14)

### **How did Moses know how to get the feasts in the right order?**

Why did he not put Passover elsewhere? Ponder that question and when you reach a conclusion, see what implications it has for the inspiration of holy Scripture. Even otherwise 'lonely' and not very often-frequented parts of an obscure book like Leviticus are just as inspired as any other part of Holy Writ.

What wonderful things God has done for us. We who were beggars and slaves have experienced his great redemption and we stand at this point in history where we can look back on these actual historic events. Jesus Christ, that true and literal man, has risen from the dead, and one day we shall have bodies just like his. The Holy Spirit has come, and we can see so clearly in the Scriptures all the tremendous implications of having within our bodies that gracious Person. We are inseparably linked with him and he shall bring us home to God. As we praise God for these things may they become increasingly real to us, so that we shall even now begin to reap the harvest of that glorious inheritance that God has secured for us in our Lord Jesus Christ.

## 4

## [The Feast of Firstfruits \(2\)](#)

*Reading: Leviticus 23:15–17, 20–36, 39–44*

Thus far in our study of the Feast of Pentecost, we have thought about the Holy Spirit's coming to reside here; dwelling in those who have trusted the Saviour, and permanently residing in them until he brings them home to glory.

We must now think about some other important features of that feast. Its special feature was the offering of the two loaves of firstfruits, waved before Jehovah, along with their particular animal sacrifices. The significance of these two loaves baked with leaven is something we must not miss, and we must also see what the New Testament says about it at the spiritual level.

Expositors may differ about leaven in the parables in the New Testament. It is undeniable that in the Old Testament, particularly among the Jews, leaven was regarded as a bad thing. That was perhaps because it promoted fermentation. It made their bread bigger of course, and better in taste. For whatever reason, however, the Jews regarded it as symbolizing something bad.

The New Testament tells us that on the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came down from heaven and, according to Romans 8:23, Christians received the firstfruits of the Spirit. The Spirit constitutes for us the firstfruits of the glorious inheritance that awaits us when the Lord shall come. In similar vein, Ephesians 1:13–14 tells us that the Holy Spirit is the guarantee of our inheritance. We have both a foretaste and a guarantee of that glorious, full inheritance that awaits us. God means us to enjoy these things, but we must not be selfish and put our own enjoyment and feelings first. We come to the meetings if it suits us; we study God's word if we get a kick out of it; we pray if we experience certain raptures of delight. But what does God get out of it? What is there in us that the Holy Spirit has accomplished for God? Why did God save us? There is more to it than saving us from the wrath to come. We are saved so that we may serve him.

### **Why have we been saved?**

According to Ephesians 1, God has at least two purposes:

1. 'Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, *that we should be holy and blameless before him*' (v. 4).
2. 'Making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven, and things on earth. In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined



according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ *might be to the praise of his glory*' (vv. 9–12).

In the coming age God has the one who shall head up the whole of his administration, Jesus Christ our Lord. Under him will be his redeemed people, trained and ready to engage with Christ in all the tasks that God has in mind. Before that active side of God's purposes there is a passive one, which comes first. It is that we should be 'before him.' What does that mean? Is there much of a purpose in being 'before him'?

Ask a married man why he married his wife. Did he just want someone to cook his meals, or dig his garden, or clean his house? Even if he did, they were not the primary reasons. There is a higher reason; that she might be 'before him.' In early days nothing would have delighted him more than her sitting before him so that he could just look at her! Men are not content just to have their wives in the kitchen twenty-four hours a day, they want them to sit down beside them and talk. The value of life is more than mere activity; it is having a friend 'before us.' Children become bored stiff just sitting still and talking to someone, but mature folks find delight in having someone whose company they can enjoy.

Almighty God, who is in need of nothing because he is perfect, deliberately chose to need us. Wonder of wonders, he created us that he might have us before him, to gratify his heart and fill it with joy! It is the most tremendous compliment he has paid us, in making us and redeeming us that we should be before him. We do not need to wait until the fulfilment of that great purpose, we can be in his company now. Of course our conversation may be rather limited. 'God, help my arthritis; give me a good job; help my little boy to pass his exam.' One day we shall be better company for him, but we do not have to wait. The coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost has already begun that great work in us. Even in this imperfect world, still beset with sin, we can be before him and gratify his heart.

The loaves had leaven in them, but with what pride the farmer in Israel would reap his corn, mill it fine, and offer it to God. And with what pride and joy does God's Holy Spirit take men and women and bring them to Christ for cleansing from sin; thus cleansed, forgiven, and made holy, he presents them to God to be 'before him.'

### **Why were there two loaves?**

Paul talks about two groups, Jews and Gentiles; those who called themselves 'the Circumcision,' and those who were uncircumcised.

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called 'the uncircumcision' by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both

have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. (Eph 2:11–19)

Paul was brought up in the very narrow circle of Judaism and to him the Gentiles were unclean, Israel was the chosen people. When God revealed to him the mystery that the Gentiles in their millions, as well as Jews, could be harvested and presented to God, his heart danced for joy. It was a vastly bigger harvest than anyone had ever dared to think. It was this that made him grasp his 'sickle' and run all the way round the empire trying to reap in some of the harvest for God. How could he sit still and content himself with a few thousand pious Jews in their synagogue in Jerusalem? Jews and Gentiles were one new man; Gentiles were no longer strangers, but fellow-citizens.

In Leviticus 23:22 Moses tells us that they were not to harvest in every last grain. If some ears and straws were dropped on the ground, they were to be left and they were not to reap into the extreme corners of their fields. They had to leave some for the strangers. Now that the Gentiles are no longer strangers, they are not just picking up the odd bits that fell here and there but are equally eligible for all the wealth of God's inheritance. Jew and Gentile are brought together into one body. Paul tells us that all who trust the Saviour have been baptized into one body, both Jews and Gentiles.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Cor 12:12–13)

If we are Christ's we have been baptized with the Holy Spirit. Let no one rob us of this glorious fact. Every believer has been baptized into one body and made to drink of that one Spirit.

## **The Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles**

From the conclusion of the corn harvest until the next cluster of feasts, there was a gap in Israel's calendar. Then, in the first three weeks of the seventh month, the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles followed closely on each other, the last feast having a prophetic significance.

### **The Feast of Tabernacles**

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death for ever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, 'Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us.

This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.' (Isa 25:6–9)

When Messiah came, God would make them a feast of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined; and there would come what the Rabbis called 'the messianic banquet.' He would wipe away all tears and death itself would be swallowed up in victory.

### **The Feast of Trumpets**

Leading up to this great crescendo, this was the first of these three feasts. The silence in the ceremonial calendar was suddenly broken by the blast of trumpets. This was the sign that the next cluster of feasts was about to begin and they were to reap the second harvest, or the next stage in the one harvest. The trumpets called them to assemble and prepare to meet the Lord.

### **The Day of Atonement**

Now we meet a difficulty. The feasts of the Lord are meant to be prophetic, and we can see that easily enough in Passover, Firstfruits, and Pentecost; and perhaps Trumpets may have something to do with the Lord's second coming. The Epistle to the Hebrews makes it quite clear that in Israel the Day of Atonement came round every year. There was a remembrance made of their sins, and therefore they never had a perfect conscience. By contrast, Christ offered one sacrifice for sins forever and sat down, so we need no other sacrifice, nor do we need to offer his sacrifice again.

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. (Heb 10:11–14)

But how can the Day of Atonement be prophetic, as it seems to be out of order? Surely atonement was made at our Lord's first coming at Calvary, and he is never going to die again.

#### *1. The Day of Atonement is not Passover*

The ceremony on the Day of Atonement was a very detailed and involved thing. When Christ died at Calvary, some part of it was indeed fulfilled; yet another part was fulfilled when he entered heaven. But there is a very notable part of that ceremony on the Day of Atonement that has not yet been fulfilled.

On the Day of Atonement, the high priest came out to the big altar that stood in the court, in full view of the assembled nation. There the elders solemnly laid their hands on the head of a goat, which was the sin offering. They confessed their sins, the goat was slain and its blood was caught in a basin there in the court in the sight of all.

Next, the high priest took the blood and disappeared into the holiest of all, to appear in the presence of God on their behalf. He sprinkled the blood before and on the mercy seat. He did this on this one occasion only.

Then he operated the third part of the ceremony. Leaving the presence of God, he came out once more and appeared before the people a second time. He then had to take another goat, *the scapegoat*, and offer it as a sin offering. His work was scarcely ever done.

There were three appearances: the appearing in the court for the slaying of the goat and the shedding of its blood; the appearing in the divine presence to present that blood before God; and the appearing again in the court in front of all the people to offer another sacrifice for sin, the scapegoat.

The writer to the Hebrews observes that in the work of Christ there is something that corresponds to all three appearances.

For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgement, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. (9:24–28)

1. At Calvary he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. That will never need to be repeated.
2. He now appears in the presence of God for us. He has gone in as our firstfruits and forerunner.
3. He shall appear the second time, apart from any sin offering, unto salvation.

As sure as the other appearances, this third bit shall be fulfilled when he comes to take us home.

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. (1 Thess 4:16–17)

## *2. The Day of Atonement has solemn repercussions*

The sacrifices for the yearly celebration of the Day of Atonement are not detailed in Leviticus 23. They have been described fully in chapter 16, so they are not repeated at length in chapter 23. But one feature is mentioned over and over again; the Israelites were to 'afflict themselves' (16:29, 31; 23:27, 32). And he who did not do so would be 'cut off'. 'For whoever is not afflicted on that very day shall be cut off from among his people' (23:29).

Even now, the Day of Atonement is the most solemn feast in the Jewish year. It is a day of penitence, examination and confession of sins. The services in the synagogues are long. Year by year, century after century, the Jews afflict their souls. To what purpose? The majority of Jews see no prophetic significance in it as some of their prophets did, but the ancient ceremony demands it.

## Feast of Booths

Zechariah tells us about this glorious feast that shall come one day,

And the Lord will be king over all the earth. On that day the Lord will be one and his name one . . . And it shall be inhabited, for there shall never again be a decree of utter destruction. Jerusalem shall dwell in security . . . Then everyone who survives of all the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Booths. (14:9, 11, 16)

He talks about the Lord defending Jerusalem 'on that day.' What day is he talking about? God did not destroy the Romans in AD 70 when they attacked Jerusalem. The Roman Empire lasted a long time after AD 70. They came up again in AD 131–133, razed the city and turned it into a city of the Gentiles. But the Lord did not destroy the Gentiles then. He has not as yet defended Jerusalem and destroyed the nations that came against her. Zechariah is talking about a day that is still future.

On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley, so that one half of the Mount shall move northwards, and the other half southwards. (v. 4)

It is described in the New Testament in 2 Thessalonians 1:7–10:

when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marvelled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

And in Revelation 6:15–17:

Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?'

The beast and the false prophet shall be taken, and their nefarious deceptions brought to an end. But before that, Zechariah tells us about the preliminary preparation for that universal celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles,

And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over

a firstborn. On that day the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning for Hadad-rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. (12:10–11)

It will be a great day of mourning, when Israel shall afflict their souls before the Lord. 'When they look . . . on him whom they have pierced' with inexpressible contrition they shall say, as Isaiah said long ago,

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isa 53:4–6)

Israel shall be restored, 'The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob' (Rom 11:26). What a harvest that will be! In the midst of Paul's imprisonments, shipwrecks and broken-heartedness with the behaviour of his converts, there were times when his soul was lifted in delight at the glory of the expectation of what God would do. He could see the beginning of that mighty harvest; he was involved in part of the reaping. God has not cast off his ancient people, but their fall has led to the blessing of the Gentiles. The casting away of Israel has meant the salvation of millions of Gentiles. If Israel's loss has become the riches of the world, how much more their restoration. God has not finished with them yet. It shall be veritable 'life from the dead'! 'For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?' (Rom 11:15).

### **The second stage of the harvest**

There was a second stage of the harvest. It gave way to the Feast of Tabernacles, when men forgot their groans and tears and difficulties, put on their holiday-best and went camping with God for the sheer delight of it. God commanded that they do this. They joined in that week of freedom and release, which they could not enjoy for the rest of the year. They lived in booths and took time to remember how their ancestors had come out of Egypt, and God had made them live in tents as they journeyed across the Sinai Peninsula to their inheritance. There had been many dangers, and some of them concluded that because the journey across the wilderness was so long, there was no inheritance to go to. Some had lost heart, but some persevered and came through.

So it is with us. As we shall look back on life's journey and pilgrimage, we shall smile over those problems and heartaches that now seem so insurmountable and we shall understand why God led us that way.

The people of Israel liked being in their booths so much that God gave them permission to have an eighth day as well. Seven days, and then an eighth! Of course it always ended, and they went back home. But the time is coming when it shall not end. There is a millennium coming, and afterwards a glorious 'eighth day' that shall never end. The programme is that the Lord shall come for us and raise the dead saints and change the living ones, and we shall be caught up together to meet him in the air. Death shall be swallowed up in victory.

That is not true now. Death is still a defeat; but when children get tired and beyond themselves, sleep is no disaster. As we lay our elderly loved ones to rest, we comfort our hearts that they sleep in Jesus until the Lord comes (1 Thess 4:14). But when death attacks a man or woman in his or her prime, what an ugly thing it is, what a defeat. We should cry if we have to when we sorrow over the death of a loved one. *It is not supposed to be a victory.* But although that battle is lost, the war will not be lost. When the Lord comes, he shall raise the dead and change the living:

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' 'O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 15:51-57)

And there is something more wonderful still. 'For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death' (1 Cor 15:25-26). Death shall be abolished altogether. On this side of 'the great veil' it is called *death*; on the other side it is called *hades*. They are two counterparts of one temporary institution. One day Christ shall abolish them, and they will give way to the eternal.

### **Living water and the light of life**

So the Israelites kept their Feast of Tabernacles until the eighth day, and then they went home. They did not know then what we know now. They were standing far back in the spiritual time chart. Little by little their prophets began to tell them that, glorious as those feasts were, they were only shadows of something bigger to come. But very few of them understood it. As the centuries went by these feasts developed simply into holidays and scarcely anything more. They added extra details to make them more colourful and significant. Amongst other things, they went down to Siloam and brought up a golden pitcher of water every day and poured it at the base of the altar. On the last day of the feast, they did it twice. This was to remind them that in the wilderness God opened the rock and poured them out water. At that time of the year the farmers found the ground as hard as iron. If God did not send the rain there would be no sowing, and therefore no harvest; so they poured out the water.

They lit their oil lamps in the women's quarters in the temple to remind them of God going before them in their journeying in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. They also lit lights, which were pretty against the night sky but soon lost in the darkness. Surrounded by the dark paganism of the multitudes of the nations, they were content with their outward ceremonies; they had not arrived at what God planned for them in their inheritance.

Then one year, into their Feast of Tabernacles, Christ came. He saw all the ceremonies and the light and water. How far from arriving they were; hardly any of them even understood

the symbolism of the sacrifices. How few there were who were waiting for the Messiah or had any concern for spreading God's word among the Gentiles. At the last day of the feast they had poured out the water and were shaking their branches. 'Save now, Lord, we pray,' they cried.

The last of the water fell at the bottom of the altar and a voice was heard over the temple concourse. 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, "Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water"' (John 7:37-38). There was great disputing and division among the people, but eventually each man went to his own house and Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

Early the next morning he came again into the temple, all the people came to him and he sat down and taught them. 'Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life' (John 8:12). This was the one who could cast light on the real problem of guilt and offer forgiveness. He could deliver from the power of sin in their daily lives and cast light over the grave itself—living water, light of life.

Was this not the young man from Nazareth? He has gone too far this time! Annas and Caiaphas would now have to get rid of him. They had just put on the biggest ceremony of the year, and when they have done their best he gets up and suggests that there are some who are not satisfied—they are still thirsty and walking in darkness. So they went home to plot his death.

### **A better country**

The multitudes packed up their booths for that year and settled comfortably back into their routine. Jesus didn't have a house to go to. How could he settle down in a world like that? And we are glad that he didn't settle down but his eye went out to the Gentiles and gave us a chance of drinking from the living water and having the light of life.

As we live out our lives, we don't know how near we are to the sound of the trumpet. We are not yet the saints we would hope to be, nor do we know God's word as we would like to. Have we just settled down to the round of meetings, or do we have the harvest in view? Let us move on as pilgrims until we hear the trumpet sound and God puts in his sickle to begin the last phase.

Though now we see in a mirror dimly (1 Cor 13:12), God has wonderful prospects before us. 'But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city' (Heb 11:16). He will surprise us with glories and blessings beyond our present imagination, and he has even given us hope for this sorry old world when Christ shall come again. He has opened our eyes and hearts so that we may begin to enter into his plans and purposes, and he has given us his Spirit as the earnest of our inheritance.

Let us seek his help not to settle down in contentment with the necessary routine of our lives but to rise up to the privilege of being 'before him' so that even now we can mean something to him and learn to converse intelligently with him. May he stir within us a holy unrest, and may our light of testimony shine brightly until the Lord comes and takes us into our eternal inheritance.



## About the Author

**DAVID W. GOODING** is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.