

Truth for Today

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Four Special Old Testament Days: Pentecost

I suppose the majority of people like special events such as birthdays and anniversaries. These occasions provide opportunities for a time of celebration. We might not enjoy the fact that we are another year older as we celebrate our birthday, but the presents, the party and those extra treats make the event well worth while!

There are many references to feasts in the Bible, commencing in Genesis through to Revelation. We have Abraham in Genesis 21 preparing a great feast when Isaac was weaned, and in Revelation 19 we have the marriage supper of the Lamb. Feasts, suppers, banquets are words used to describe mainly occasions of great joy but, sometimes, that of judgement (see Revelation 19:17).

In Luke 14 we have the man who gave a great supper and invited many, saying, "Come, for all things are now ready." In this story, told by the Lord Jesus, we have an illustration of the Gospel call, how some refused and others were compelled to come to the feast.

Pentecost is the Greek word which means fifty, and in the New Testament became another name for the Feast of Weeks which was the celebration of the end of the grain harvest. The celebration took place on the day after seven weeks from the Feast of Firstfruits; or in other words when fifty days had passed. The Feast of Firstfruits was the commencement of the grain harvest.

In Leviticus 23 there are eight feasts described, one weekly feast, the Sabbath day, and seven annual feasts. The eight feasts are distinct from all other feasts in that they were appointed by God. The annual feasts commenced with the Passover celebration on the fourteenth day of the first month of the religious year, the month Abib, and culminated on the fifteenth day of the seventh month Tisri, with the Feast of Tabernacles.

The feasts all had historical significance for the nation of Israel. Out of the seven annual feasts, there were three that were compulsory for the men to keep at the place where the ark of God was located. Deuteronomy 16:16 states, "Three times a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, at the Feast of Weeks, and at the Feast of Tabernacles; and they shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed. Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the LORD your God which He has given you."

All the feasts are connected; they describe God's dealings with His people. The feasts show God's basis for blessing and trace God's goodness to His people Israel. The Passover was a reminder of God's great deliverance through to the feast of Tabernacles, God's intended time of rest and great blessing for Israel.

Before proceeding with the detail of the Feast of Pentecost and the teaching relevant for us today, let us briefly remind ourselves of the appointed feasts. For completeness we will start with the Sabbath.

The Sabbath day feast stands apart from all the other feasts as this was a weekly celebration. The Sabbath was first mentioned as such in Exodus 16 in connection with the giving of the manna. The manna was the heavenly bread sent down by God to feed His people Israel during their wilderness travels. Although God had introduced a day of rest after finishing His work of creation, it is not until the establishment of the laws of God's covenant with Israel that the Sabbath takes on a greater significance. God's rest was broken by Adam's sin. In the Sabbath, God looks forward eventually to a new day of rest with His people Israel. God insisted that the people held to a day of rest, although it was often transgressed. When we consider the high pace of activity to which we are subjected today, and the traditional day of rest now discarded, it is of little wonder that stress is on the increase with its associated devastating impact on family and society in general. Was God right after all in making provision for one day off in seven?

The Feast of Passover has its origin in the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, the land of bondage. The feast is a future reference to the true Passover lamb, Christ, who gave Himself on the cross at Golgotha. "Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us" 1 Corinthians 5:7.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread is connected with the Passover. In Exodus 12, we are told that leaven had to be removed from the houses of the Israelites and no leaven eaten for seven days. In this feast, we have a beautiful illustration of the Christian life: those who are redeemed from the bondage of sin removing from their lives the old way of life marked by sin. It is generally accepted that leaven always speaks of sin and our old sinful nature. Paul, speaking of the Christian life in 1 Corinthians 5:7-8 states, "Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth".

The Feast of Firstfruits occurred during the feast of Unleavened Bread and marked the commencement of harvest time. This feast took place on the day after the Sabbath. For the Israelites it was another acknowledgement of God's goodness. The sheaf taken from the field represented what the harvest would be like. This feast coincided with the day of our Lord's resurrection; He has become the Firstfruits. The Lord said, "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the labourers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into His harvest", Matthew 9:37-38. It is time to bring the lost into salvation.

The Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, signalled the end of the wheat harvest. This feast is connected to the previous and is also celebrated on the day after the Sabbath. Two feasts which occur on the first day of the week bring in an extra dimension to the ways of God. Israel is very much connected with the Sabbath. Christianity is connected to the First Day of the week. We will consider this feast in more detail later.

The Feast of Trumpets. This feast and the two following all occur in the seventh month. Trumpets were sounded to give direction to the people. They were used in the camp during the wilderness, used in times of warfare and on occasions of public assembly. The significance of this feast would be symbolic in alerting the people to the other two remaining feasts of the year.

The Day of Atonement was of great importance to the nation of Israel. It marked the annual need for the nation to be cleansed and put once again on a right basis with God. It required the work of the High Priest, the various sacrifices and the sprinkling of blood on the mercy seat. This is in contrast to the one perfect sacrifice of the Lord Jesus.

The Feast of Tabernacles was at the end of the vintage harvest, a time of joy, wine which cheers both God and men, Judges 9:13. The Israelites made temporary shelters and lived in them for a week. Israel again remembered their deliverance from Egypt, the wilderness time and the coming into the Promised Land. This feast speaks of the coming millennium kingdom reign of Christ, when Israel especially will be celebrating their Messiah's return and kingdom reign, and the nation's recovery to a place of prominence, see Zechariah 14.

Let us now consider the Feast of Pentecost. The feast had its associated offerings but there was something new included. There was the NEW grain offering. It was new for two reasons: it had leaven included and it was baked as two loaves. If it was one loaf, we might have considered a representation of one person or one nation. If there had been twelve loaves, then we may have looked for a connection with the twelve tribes of Israel as in the Shew Bread. Now we know that one of the feasts specifically insisted that leaven be removed for one whole week, and we have considered Paul's instruction about removing leaven from our lives. Why then do we have leaven in this offering?

Although the annual feasts are historic, they are also prophetic in that they trace the purposes of God for Israel. Some events are passed; others are yet to be fulfilled. The significance of the feasts of Firstfruits and Pentecost, however, extend beyond the nation of Israel. These two feasts connect with God's wider plans, which extend to include in their scope all other nations.

The Feast of Firstfruits coincided with the commencement of the Feast of Unleavened Bread and was on the day after the Sabbath. We can link the Feast of Passover and the slain lamb with the death of Christ as the Lamb of God e.g. John 1:29, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" We can then link the Feast of Firstfruits with the resurrection of Christ, the first day of the week, the day after the Sabbath following the Passover. "Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming", 1 Corinthians 15:23

The significance of the Feast of Pentecost is explained when we come to Acts 2, "Now when the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance."

In order to bring about that spiritual harvest for God there needed to be ability and power. The coming of the Spirit in this way was promised by the Lord Jesus, "I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows

Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you." John 14:16-17. This is the first distinctive difference which comes to light in the New Testament concerning God's dealings with men in this the Christian day.

So the Feast of Pentecost became that great day when the Spirit of God came down into this world and brought about two amazing things. The first was the formation of the Church of God collectively. The second concerns individual Christians, in that they now have the Spirit of God dwelling in them. Universally there is one Church, although for geographical reasons the one Church is represented in various localities wherever Christians gather together. There is no repetition of Pentecost for every new believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. After that first Pentecost we are told, "Having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise", Ephesians 1:13. The indwelling Spirit is the divine Person who links all believers together throughout this whole world.

The Spirit of God is also the divine Person who gives the power for the the work of the Gospel. In Romans 1:16 Paul writes of himself, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also to the Greek". We now see the meaning of the two loaves. The Lord's commission was, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature", Mark 16:15. Initially the Gospel commenced in Jerusalem on that day of Pentecost and went out to the nation of Israel.

Philip the Evangelist took the Gospel that next stage further by going to Samaria, Acts 8, and so became the first person to reach out beyond the bounds of Israel, taking the next step to fulfil the Lord's commission.

It was Peter who extended the Gospel beyond Samaria when he was sent to Cornelius, a Roman soldier, Acts 10. However, it was Paul who went out further and further taking the Gospel to many other nations. This preaching of the Gospel expanded gradually with an increasingly growing band of preachers and has continued to this day. The two loaves surely speak of the two groups of people, Jew and Gentile. The Jew had the law but sinned and the law only showed their sinfulness. The Gentile did not have the law but were also sinners. Paul in the first three chapters of Romans shows clearly that no matter what kind of person we may be, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God", Romans 3:23.

Going back to Leviticus 23, we see the two loaves offered to, and accepted by, God. It is only as believers on the Lord Jesus Christ, whether from Jewish or Gentile background that we can be accepted by God. Our acceptance is based on the death of Christ. The power of the Gospel came to us and, through the work of the Spirit of God, we were brought to repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus.

There is no other way outlined in the Bible for a complete and total acceptance before God. So, in Ephesians 2:14-16, Paul writes concerning the uniting of Jew and Gentile together into one body. Speaking of Christ, in verses 14-16, "[Christ] Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of division between us, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity."

We see in the Middle East today, the conflict, the enmity between Jew and Gentile. It has gone on since the days of Abraham. But, when a Jew and a Gentile are saved then that enmity is gone and both can live together in peace because they have a different perspective on events and are united by the Spirit of God, in Christ. Sadly, today, many Christian groups do not get on together. How we have departed from what God intended that we should be as all belonging to the one family of God!

Now we can understand why leaven is found in this "new grain offering". Believers were sinners and God's judgement for sin fell on Jesus. Our sins have been dealt with at the cross. We can link the judgement there with the two loaves being baked, before they were presented to God and accepted as a suitable offering.

Now as believers we have a new kind of life to live, not in our old sinful ways before conversion but in the power of a new life given by God. In 1 Corinthians 12:13 we read, "By one Spirit we were all baptised into one body - whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free - and have all been made to drink into one Spirit." This is Pentecost in the New Testament setting, showing that in this new company there are no national or social differences and that the Spirit is the unifying Person of this new company.

In Genesis 11 we are told of the tremendous enterprise to build a tower to reach heaven. Man sought by his own efforts to reach God. God defeated their plan by causing confusion in the language so that the people could no longer understand one another. That day of Pentecost, when the Spirit of God came to this world to establish the church in power, was symbolically seen as divided tongues in appearance like fire. What grace! Now there was that which united where once the divided tongues had separated. How wonderful is our God. Our oneness now will only be surpassed when every believer is with Christ in glory.

In closing let me quote from a poem by FC Burkitt,

*Praise for the Holy Spirit given,
Our Teacher and our Guide,
By whom from heaven's unbounded store
Our every need's supplied.*

Lord, we give thanks for another day. Bless Your people wherever they may be and encourage them in service for Yourself. Help us also to be in heart and in practice what Pentecost truly represents. Amen.

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