

Lesson 6 – Firstfruits (Reishith ראשית)

Observed - 16 Nisan (March / April)

The Observance

Leviticus 23:9–14 (ESV)

⁹ And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ¹⁰ “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land that I give you and reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest, ¹¹ and he shall wave the sheaf before the LORD, so that you may be accepted. On the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it. ¹² And on the day when you wave the sheaf, you shall offer a male lamb a year old without blemish as a burnt offering to the LORD. ¹³ And the grain offering with it shall be two tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil, a food offering to the LORD with a pleasing aroma, and the drink offering with it shall be of wine, a fourth of a hin. ¹⁴ And you shall eat neither bread nor grain parched or fresh until this same day, until you have brought the offering of your God: it is a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings.



Firstfruits are offerings given for the spring **barley harvest**.

The first ripe sheaf (firstfruits) of barley was offered to the Lord as an act of dedicating the harvest to him.

On the day of Passover, a marked sheaf was bundled and left standing in the field.



On the next day (the first day of Unleavened Bread) the sheaf was cut and prepared for offering on the third day.

On this third day (the day of Firstfruits, the day after the Sabbath), the priest waved the sheaf before the Lord towards the four different points of the compass. He then took a part of the grain and threw it into the fire of the altar. Once the offering was accepted, the remainder of the harvest was then acceptable before God

Counting the days then began and continued until the day after the seventh Sabbath, the 50th day. This 50th day is called Shavuot or Pentecost.

The Resurrection

Jewish people rarely celebrate Firstfruits today, but it has great significance for followers of Jesus as the day of his resurrection. Jesus rose on the third day of Passover season, the day of Firstfruits (Luke 24:46–47), giving new meaning to this agricultural holiday.

In our previous lesson, we learned that Jesus died as our Passover Lamb. That was not the end of the story, however! When the Temple stood, Firstfruits was observed the day after the Sabbath of the Passover. The Sunday after Passover would be the observance of Firstfruits. Passover had begun when Jesus died, and on the third day, early that Sunday morning, the priests were in the Temple offering up the firstfruits of the harvest. At this very time, our Messiah and High Priest was raised from the dead, offering up Himself as our atonement. In so doing, He became the firstfruits of the rest of the harvest of believers in Him. Therefore, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 15:20–28 (ESV)

²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴ Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷ For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “all things are put in subjection,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. ²⁸ When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.

- Firstfruits gave assurance that the rest of the harvest would be accepted: *“he shall wave the sheaf before the LORD, so that you may be accepted”* (Leviticus 23:11). The offering of the wave-sheaf sanctified the whole harvest.
- The resurrection was proof that God accepted Jesus’ sacrifice for our sins, *“who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.”* (Romans 4:25). Thus, the rest of the harvest may be accepted in Him as well! God does not just barely accept us, but in the Messiah, He is delighted and well pleased with us. He accepts us completely.

Background Passages

Leviticus 23:9–14 (ESV)

⁹ And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ¹⁰ “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land that I give you and reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest, ¹¹ and he shall wave the sheaf before the LORD, so that you may be accepted. On the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it. ¹² And on the day when you wave the sheaf, you shall offer a male lamb a year old without blemish as a burnt offering to the LORD. ¹³ And the grain offering with it shall be two tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil, a food offering to the LORD with a pleasing aroma, and the drink offering with it shall be of wine, a fourth of a hin. ¹⁴ And you shall eat neither bread nor grain parched or fresh until this same day, until you have brought the offering of your God: it is a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings.

Luke 24:46–47 (ESV)

⁴⁶ and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, ⁴⁷ and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

Romans 4:23–25 (ESV)

²³ But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, ²⁴ but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, ²⁵ who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

1 Corinthians 15:20–28 (ESV)

²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴ Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷ For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “all things are put in subjection,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. ²⁸ When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.

FIRST-FRUITS—The first-fruits of the ground were offered unto God just as the first-born of man and animals.

The law required, (1.) That on the morrow after the Passover Sabbath a sheaf of new corn should be waved by the priest before the altar (Lev. 23:5, 6, 10, 12; 2:12).

(2.) That at the feast of Pentecost two loaves of leavened bread, made from the new flour, were to be waved in like manner (Lev. 23:15, 17; Num. 28:26).

(3.) The feast of Tabernacles was an acknowledgement that the fruits of the harvest were from the Lord (Ex. 23:16; 34:22).

(4.) Every individual, besides, was required to consecrate to God a portion of the first-fruits of the land (Ex. 22:29; 23:19; 34:26; Num. 15:20, 21).

(5.) The law enjoined that no fruit was to be gathered from newly-planted fruit-trees for the first three years, and that the first-fruits of the fourth year were to be consecrated to the Lord (Lev. 19:23–25). Jeremiah (2:3) alludes to the ordinance of “first-fruits,” and hence he must have been acquainted with the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, where the laws regarding it are recorded.¹

FIRSTFRUITS (דְּבָרֵי הַבְּרִיאָה, *bikkurim*; ἀπαρχή, *aparchē*). The first and best part of the harvest of crops or processed produce, animals, and firstborn sons. “Firstfruits” also refers to ceremonies in relation to the initial portion of the harvest. It is also used figuratively in reference to: Israel as a nation, the believing remnant within Israel, the 144,000 in Rev 14, Christians in general, certain individual Christians, Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

Literal Usage in the Old Testament

For Israel, the concept of “firstfruits” meant putting the Lord first in every part of life. That included the harvest, the shepherding of flocks, and child-bearing—especially in regard to the feasts and sacrificial system of the Law of Moses. The firstfruits were used for the support of the Levitical priests. It was their inheritance among God’s people (Deut 18:4). Deuteronomy 26:1–11 specifies how individual firstfruit offerings were to be brought before the Lord.

During Passover, all Israelites were to “bring the first sheaf” of their harvest to the priest for him to “wave the sheaf before the Lord” (Lev 23:10–14 HCSB). This is referring to the barley harvest, which began several weeks before the wheat harvest. Exodus 34:22 tells of the firstfruits of the wheat harvest during the feast of Pentecost, which is elsewhere called “the day of firstfruits” (Num 28:26 HCSB).

Figurative Usage in the Old Testament

Jeremiah 2:3 contains the only non-literal use of “firstfruits” in the Hebrew Bible. Early in his ministry, Jeremiah announced to Judah: “Israel was holy to the Lord, the firstfruits of His harvest” (HCSB). The mention of holiness infers that the primary meaning is that Israel is *best in quality, spiritually speaking*. However, the sense that Israel might be the initial part of the Lord’s spiritual harvest cannot be excluded.

¹ Easton, M. G. (1893). In [Easton’s Bible dictionary](#). New York: Harper & Brothers.

Figurative Usage in the New Testament

The term ἀπαρχή (*aparchē*) is used in the New Testament in reference to a wide range of subjects called “firstfruits.” The nuance of *best* from the Old Testament usage is seen in Jas 1:18, where Christians are called the “firstfruits” of God’s creation. The remaining uses all emphasize the shade of meaning of the “first part of a larger harvest.”

Christ being raised from the dead is the “firstfruits” of the future resurrection (1 Cor 15:20, 23). Paul calls Epaphroditus and the household of Stephanas “the firstfruits of Achaia” (i.e. among the first to believe in Christ in southern Greece; Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:15 HCSB). In Romans 8:23, the Holy Spirit is the “firstfruits” of all the spiritual riches believers will have in the presence of the Lord.

The remaining two uses play off the only figurative use in the Old Testament (Jer 2:3). In Romans 11:16, the believing remnant (“firstfruits”) of Israel is said to be “holy,” echoing Jer 2:3. A few verses later, the promise is laid out: A time will come when “all Israel will be saved” and made holy (Rom 11:26–27). The 144,000, earlier said to be Israelites (Rev 7:4–8), are described as having been “redeemed from the human race (i.e. all humankind) as the firstfruits for God and the Lamb” (HCSB). This is just before the mention of “the eternal gospel” (Rev 14:6) and the harvest of salvation and judgment (Rev 14:14–20).

Bibliography

- Burge, Gary M. “First Fruits.” Pages 300–01 in the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. Edited by G. F. Hawthorne, R. P. Martin, and D. G. Reid. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993.
- Ridderbos, Herman. *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*. Translated by J. R. DeWitt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975.
- Rigsby, Richard O. “Firstfruits.” Pages 313–15 in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*. Edited by T. D. Alexander and D. W. Baker. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003.

A. BOYD LUTER²

² Luter, A. B. (2016). [Firstfruits](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.