Firstfruits And The Faithfulness Of God

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Preacher: Nate Taylor

[0:00] All right, if you have your Bibles, you can turn back to Leviticus 23. I know what you're thinking, not another sermon on Leviticus. I know you'll just have to bear with me.

No, seriously though, Leviticus can actually be, it can be a very confusing book because a lot of it seems so foreign. There's a lot of ritual, and in today's society sometimes ritual sounds boring, like it's a burden.
But you've got to understand, the people of God, the Israelites, they would have loved Leviticus. It wouldn't have felt like a burden, it would feel like a blessing. Because what they want to know is how can we actually be a holy people?
We've met a holy God, what does it look like for us to be a holy people? Because at the heart of Leviticus is this idea that because God is holy, his people are supposed to be holy.
And there's sin, so we've got to account for that. And Leviticus deals with that and teaches God's people how to be holy. And part of their holiness had to do with their calendars.
[1:05] How they told time was part of their holiness. And they would have these holy days. That's where we get our word holiday from, right? Holy day.

These days of rest and celebration, repentance and hope. And in keeping these different feasts, they would remember who they are and who God is.
They would remember what God has done. The things that he has done in salvation history so that they are who they are. But it wouldn't just be a looking back.
It would also tie into the ordinary parts of their life and specifically living in an agrarian society. And so you ask, why go through all of these feasts?
Because we're only talking about one of them and there's seven in this chapter. Why do all of that? I mean, the Feast of Weeks, it was the second of three of the feasts where all of the men, at least the women and children, were invited.
[2:04] But they didn't have to come. But the men would have to make a pilgrimage to, at first would be the tabernacle, later the temple for the feast. That is a lot of effort. Stop what you're doing and let's go.

I've gone on a holiday with three young kids before. It's not always restful. Never done it. Hiking to Jerusalem. It's a lot of effort. Why do that?
Well, it's because, simply, some things are so important that we want to remember them and not to forget them. Some things are so important that we know we must remember them and it would be a tragedy if we forgot it.
I think we know this intuitively. Just think about a holiday that's coming up, Remembrance Day. Right? What do we do? Well, we stop and we remember. How did we get here?
Well, it's because people have gone before us and they've served and they've sacrificed on our behalf. And we don't want to forget that. To forget that would be a tragedy to the United Kingdom, right?
[3:08] We do it in America, too. Slightly different way. We see the importance of remembering. And what do you get? You get a red poppy, right? There's this visible sign to remember.

It helps you to look back to what's happened, but also you're looking forward with hope for peace. Right? There's a symbol attached to the great event that points back and it points forward.
And you and I, we all tell time somehow. We all have different rhythms to our life. For some people in Glasgow, it's Scottish Premier League. Right? For other people, it's tied to the school year.
Or maybe it's anniversaries and birthdays for some of you. We all tell time and have rhythms in some way. And in Leviticus 23, God is calling his people to tell time according to who he is and what he's done for them.

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And now, you know, you and I, we're no longer required to keep the feasts like the old covenant people. We're in the new covenant. Right? But at the heart, what it is teaching in remembering what God has done still applies to us.
[4:15] To rejoice in him. To remember his faithfulness. No less important now than it was back then. So before we start to talk more about the Feast of Weeks, let me pray for the preaching of God's word.

Oh, Father, I ask that the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts would be pleasing to you. Would you help us to remember and rejoice as we listen to your word?
Would you give us thankfulness and would you continue to grow a harvest of righteousness through your ordinary means of grace? We pray this in Christ's name. Amen. Let's talk about the Feast of Weeks and we have four questions.
First off, what is the Feast of Weeks? Secondly, what does it teach us? Third, why do we need it? And then lastly, how does it change us? So what was it? What does it teach us?
Why do we need it? And how does it change us? So what was the Feast of Weeks? All right, so we're talking about the Feast of Weeks, but remember I said the context is helpful. There's all these different feasts that are kind of building a rhythm to the nation of Israel's calendar year.
[5:22] And there would be four feasts in the spring and then three in the fall. Okay? And so the Feast of Weeks would be the last of the four in the spring. So you'd have the Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and the Feast of Firstfruits.

Those would get kind of grouped together. And then a little while later, seven weeks later, you'd have the Feast of Weeks. And then in the fall, you'd have more feasts. You'd have the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and then the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles, depending on how you want to refer to it.
So, if you go back, the Feast of Weeks is in this first grouping in the spring. So Passover, it would happen in March or April. Israel, their calendar was based on the lunar year, so it would move around.
But it would be on the 14th of Nisan, the month, not the car. And the people would remember the Exodus at the Passover, right? They would remember how, because of the blood of the Lamb sacrificed, the angel of death passed over them, and they were brought out of slavery.
And then that would happen on a Friday. And the very next day would be the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which was the same but a little bit different than the Feast of Passover. And that would happen on the Sabbath, okay?
[6:38] The 15th of Nisan. And then the Feast of Firstfruits would come on the very next day, the 16th of Nisan. And so the Feast of Firstfruits would happen on the first day of the week, a Sunday, okay?

And the Feast of the Firstfruits is important. It would coincide with the barley harvest. That would be the first of the grain harvest, right? And so what would happen was that they would bring a sheaf, it says, meaning like a bundle of the first bit of their crop, of the barley harvest.
They'd tie it up and they'd bring it to God to sacrifice. And the priest would take it, and did you see that thing? It says it's a wave offering. They would literally wave it in every direction in front of the altar.
And what that was kind of communicating was that all of this belongs to God. It is wholly given to the Lord.
And we're bringing the first little bit because it's his. And we're trusting him as a firstfruits that he's going to bring in the rest of the barley harvest.
[7:43] We're bringing the first little bit because that's how much God means to us. And now then we get to our feast, the last of the spring feasts, the Feast of Weeks. It was the final feast of the spring.

And the Hebrew is Shavuot. If you have a Jewish friend and you talk about Shavuot, they would know exactly what you're talking about. You're talking about the Feast of Weeks. Devoted Jewish people would still celebrate this.
And it would happen in May or June because it's happening seven weeks after the Feast of Firstfruits. Seven times seven. And did you notice in the thing it says 50 days?
It's not because people of Israel couldn't do math. Seven times seven is 49. Why is it talking about the 50th day, right? Well, it's because it would be called inclusive reckoning.

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So just a smaller example. Sunday to Sunday they would count as eight days because they would count the first Sunday and the last Sunday. So seven times seven is 50 in Israeli math in the Old Testament.
[8:42] And the barley harvest, it would have started 49 days earlier, the Feast of Firstfruits. And in the meantime, what were you doing? Doing a lot of harvesting, right?

And now you're waiting for the next harvest, which would be the wheat harvest. So you've finished the barley harvest and now you bring the firstfruits of the wheat harvest. And you go on this pilgrimage and you bring it to the Lord.
And you're celebrating. Look, God has provided. He is generous. Look at the barley harvest that we have. We gave the firstfruits to him and he is true to his word and he has blessed us.
And we've brought in more. And now we're bringing in this next firstfruits in the wheat harvest. And we're dedicating it to the Lord again. And this time in bringing it, it would be displayed in two loaves of leavened bread.
If you remember the feasts before, Feast of Unleavened Bread. No yeast, nothing to rise, flat bread, right? But now it's new leaven. And it comes in and these loaves, they get brought and as a wave offering again, given to the Lord.
[9:48] And you're going like, man, this is so different from my life, right? But if you grew up on a farm, the grain harvest, these grain harvests would be the backbone of their life.

I mean, this is literally their daily bread, right? Remembering to trust the Lord for everything. And so along with the wheat and the leavened bread loaves, they would bring seven lambs, one bull, and two rams.
And they offer it again to the Lord, waving it before the altar. This is from God. It belongs to God. In fact, the whole harvest is his. And he gives it to us because he's a loving God who provides for us.
And the people then, at each feast, if you read the whole chapter, you'd hear this repetition. They're told to have a holy convocation. That means they go into corporate worship, right?
And not only that, but they're told to lay aside their work. Now, I don't know this because I grew up in cities, but I've watched shows about farms. When the harvest starts to come, you have to move quickly.
[10:51] And so you really have to trust the Lord to wait before you go back and continue to bring in the harvest. It don't work. And at a later point in Israel's history, not exactly sure when, this Feast of Weeks started to get connected to the giving of the law at Mount Sinai.

Because remember, so Israel, they leave Egypt starting at the Passover. And in the book of Exodus, it says at the third month, they arrived at Mount Sinai. So we don't know if it's exactly 50 days, but that would fall in that amount of time.
And certainly by the time of the New Testament, that is what they connected with. That God gave his law as a gift to bless his people at Mount Sinai. And still to this day, you go and you ask your Jewish friend about Shavuot.
The number one thing that they would say that they celebrate is the giving of Torah. How much of a blessing that is. How much that distinguishes them as God's people.
All right, so that's what the Feast of Weeks was. Second question, what did it teach the Israelites and by extension us? Okay, what does it teach us? I'm going to list three. There's actually a few things, but I'm just going to list three things.
[12:03] First off, the Feast of Weeks taught God's people that he is the one who provides. And that they could trust him. It's a simple recognition. The earth and all of its bounty belongs to the Lord.

Everything that we have is his. And we possess it as stewards. It's not ours. He's given it to us and we are supposed to steward it for his purposes. So of course we can give a first fruit.
Because it's his all along. He's the one who orders our time and orders the seasons. He sends the rain. He sends the drought. And we have to trust him.
We have to live by faith. And just like he provides the crops, he is going to watch over you. Or to put it like Jesus says in our reading from Matthew 6, Look at the birds of the air.
They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns and knit. Your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And just like at Mount Sinai, God begins the Ten Commandments.
[13:05] He doesn't start with the first commandment. Instead, he starts by reminding his people of his provision. I'm the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt. He reminds them of his provision

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and then he gives them the law.

He instructs them in how to be a light to the nations. How to be holy. How to look different. And it's by remembering his provision and trusting him. Second thing that the Feast of Weeks teaches us is the importance of being a community.
These feasts that got celebrated, they were not individualistic, just you and God celebration. It would be a big deal to the community.
It would bring people together for worship and for fellowship. More than just a weekly Sabbath. You didn't have easy jet in that time in order to get away for a quick little family holiday.
And so these pilgrim feasts, whether it was just the husband going or the whole family, they would be like the highlight of the year. To get to be together with God's people, to sing his praises, to remember, to celebrate.
[14:12] Celebrating a feast. It wasn't private, individualistic, religious thing. It was communal. Just like when we take the Lord's Supper, we're not supposed to do it on our own, in a room by ourselves, serving ourselves.

No. We're supposed to be fed by God's representatives as his people together. And while there was different levels and moments of solemnity in these feasts, and different feasts were a little more solemn than others, I don't know if you noticed it in this, it was supposed to be fun and celebratory. It's not a sub-Christian thing to gather as God's people and to celebrate and to have fun and to rejoice. It's not the only thing we should do, but it befits a community whose God that we serve, his kingdom is one of righteousness and peace and joy.
Third thing that the Feast of Weeks teaches us is the importance of not just being a community, but also being a generous community. In verse 22, at the end of our passage, there's this repetition of actually something God has stated earlier in Leviticus 19.
If something gets repeated in the Old Testament, in the Bible, it means it's important. That's how they say, hey, look at this. That's how they underline and bold something. Did you see what it was? And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest.
[15:36] You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner. I am the Lord your God. What would the temptation be? Hey, listen, I'm a capitalist just like everybody else, but I'll try to be generous towards God.

I'll bring the first fruits. Oh, no, wait, now you're asking me to save a little bit more than the first fruits for somebody else? You would be tempted to go, can I just, can I glean a little bit further, right?
I already did this first fruits thing. And God says, no. These people are to look out for the disadvantaged and the poor and to save something for them. Why?
Well, because that's the kind of God that Israel serves. Remember, he is a generous God. He is holy, so they're supposed to be holy. Part of his holiness is his generosity. And so for God's people, we are then called to be generous too, because that's the way that God is.
And did you notice, God has all of the people in mind for this feast, the poor and the sojourner. They shouldn't be left out. In fact, one commentator in Leviticus, he notes all these different sacrifices that got brought.
[16:43] You got the sheep and the ram and the bull and the wheat and stuff like that. He said for many Israelites, this would be too much for them to afford. And so what would happen then is this must have been something as a community a lot of times that they would bring.

So what does this mean for us? Keep bringing your donations to the food bank, right? But we can go beyond that in generosity. We can keep an eye out for ways to serve those in need. And when we picture people that we want to be part of our church, we should picture all different sorts of people.
The Scott and the immigrant. The rich and the poor. The young and the old. The buttoned up and those rough around the edges. Because that's who God desires to come in and to celebrate his generosity and his provision.
So we learn that God's provision and trustworthiness, we learn about that and the importance of being a community and not just any community, but a community of generosity. Third question then. Why do you need this? Why did Israel need this? Right? Seven feasts seems like a little bit much, right? Like couldn't have been six, couldn't have been five, couldn't have been three. Seems like a lot. Well, two reasons.

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[17:51] And it's this. Is that they were prone to forget. And that they were prone to idolatry. See, they were prone to forget. They were very quick. In the book of Exodus, it's not long after God has brought his people through the Red Sea and they sing a song of celebration.

You know what comes right afterwards? Grumbling and complaining. Like, did you see the plague thing? And like the walking through the Red Sea? No, but what about right now?
They're so quick to forget what's come before. And they need to remember. You know, we can be very quick to forget God's provision in our life.
And so what does that mean? It means we need to cultivate remembrance. Cultivate ways where we have the eyes to see his provision and we tell those stories. This is why we tell testimonies. And not just testimonies of the whole story, but maybe in the middle. It's a first fruits. You're seeing something God has done and you don't know how the story's gonna end. But you wanna tell it.
[18:52] And in doing that, you wanna grow your faith. And hopefully that encourages others towards faith also. This is why we need the Lord's Supper. Not infrequently, but frequently. Because we are prone to forget and we need to be reminded through tangible signs what God has done for us.

How he's provided. It's not just that they were quick to forget us. It's also that they were quick to run to different idols. You know, God is giving these instructions before they entered the land. Leviticus, they're not yet in the land. It's not till they get to the land that they're gonna be able to plant crops and to have a harvest and things like that. And what's coming in the land? Well, there's Canaanites.
And the Canaanites have all these gods like Baal. And they weren't just any kind of a god. They were the local gods. The temptation would be to go, hey, okay, yeah, we've got this Yahweh thing and he did this salvation thing and that's great.
That'll cover our religious life. But wouldn't it be good to hedge our bets and just throw a little bit of sacrifice towards the local gods? After all, they're local. They know the local problems, right?
[19:56] They can help us with the harvest. That's not the type of God that Israel serves. His claim to things as creator is total and whole. You know, we're tempted towards the same thing.

We say, okay, yeah, God, thank you for that salvation that you've brought, but maybe I could hedge my bets by paying a little bit of tribute to the God of consumerism or to the God of comfort. Maybe we could water down the Bible to make it more palatable to modern ears.
Local problems, right? Maybe we need a local God for it. But the Feast of Weeks and what the rest of the Bible says is, uh-uh. You can't do that. You can't do that. The God of your land is the God of the whole universe, and you have to live with faith in Him alone.
And we see the proneness of Israel to turn away, not just right after the Exodus, but at the thing that they celebrated later at the Feast of Weeks. Remember we said Mount Sinai, the giving of the law? What happens? God comes down in thunder and cloud, and they are in awe of Him, and Moses goes up, and when He comes down, what have they done?
They've built a golden calf. Prone to forget, and prone to run to idols. You need to build this cultivation of redemptive memory. So we've seen what the Feast of Weeks is, what it teaches us, and why the people needed it.
[21:11] Last question. How does that change us? Right? How does this actually change us? And we said earlier that, you know, in the New Covenant, we're not required to keep the feasts of the Old Covenant, so am I just like talking for all this time for absolutely no reason?

You're just like, all right, just everybody ignore this and go home. No. No. I hope not. The teaching in the heart of it remains. And maybe then there's something that's more transformative in them than even what we've said before.
And maybe if you've been in church a while, you kind of know where we're going with this. Because the Feast of Weeks, if it was seven days times seven weeks, and you add a day to get to 50, later on, when you get to the time of the intertestamental period and then the New Testament, this Feast of Weeks became known as Pentecost.
Right? Because Pentecost means 50th. And what would happen then is that they would celebrate the harvest and they would celebrate the giving of the law. And there's this guy named Jesus who shows up.
And these feasts, they were the shadow and he is the substance. He is the Passover Lamb who takes away the sins of the world. And on what day does he rise from the grave?

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[22:27] On a Sunday. The Feast of the Firstfruits, which is why Paul refers to him in 1 Corinthians 15 as the Firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. And 50 days after his resurrection, you write, Jesus has ascended, he's gone back to heaven, and his disciples, they're gathered in a room at the Feast of Weeks, at the Pentecost.

And you can imagine, they're gathered in this room and probably somewhere not too far away from them, the two leavened loaves are being brought and waved in front of an altar.
But they're gathered in this room because Jesus has told them to go and to wait. And a sound like a mighty rushing wind comes and the Holy Spirit is poured out. And they get propelled out as his witnesses.
And what's happening, you see, is this overlapping of the Firstfruits. I'm not talking about barley and wheat anymore. Jesus, he is the Firstfruits of the resurrection.
And do you know what Paul calls the Holy Spirit in Romans 8? Another Firstfruits. There's this promise of hope and restoration and a harvest and renewal at the end of time.
[23:36] And it gets drug right into the present. It's so real. It's like a Firstfruits. You trust God and you trust his character so much because of what he's done.

It's like you can come and say this right now. This is the beginning of something new. This is the future. Come right now. And in the book of James, you know what we get called as Christians?
A Firstfruits. Meaning that this is the first part of the harvest. And there's more to come. And what do the people of Israel do after they celebrated the Firstfruits?
After they celebrated what God has done in the harvest in this little beginning. They went home and they sat around and twiddled their thumbs, right? No! They went back and they labored and they worked and they continued to cultivate the harvest trusting that God is the one who's going to bring it in.
Jesus says, the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest. And do you remember we said at Pentecost, at the Feast of Weeks, the people of Israel started to celebrate the giving of the law at Mount Sinai.
[24:41] Just like at Mount Sinai, it was like a birthday for the people of Israel as they're constituted as a nation. And it's at Pentecost, it's at the Feast of Weeks in Acts chapter 2, that it's like a birthday for the new Israel, the people of God.

And at Mount Sinai, Moses, he ascends the mountain, right? And what comes down? The two tablets of the law with his ten commandments. But the people have already given themselves to idolatry of a golden calf and 3,000 people die.
But at the new and the better Pentecost, Jesus ascends, he goes up, and what does he come down with? The Spirit who enters into our hearts and writes his law, not on stone tablets, but in our hearts, assuring that we can actually follow him and he is going to use us to be a light to the nations.
And how many people are saved? 3,000. There's a harvest of souls that Christ has in store for his people. And the fact that we're worshiping in Glasgow is proof of that.
You know, Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks, it not just answers what were we saved from, but what are we saved for. And that is a harvest of righteousness, seeking God's kingdom to come in our hearts and in the lives of others and in the world.
[25:58] There's a TV show that my wife Erin and I like to watch some years ago. It was when we first started to search for a house to buy. We were like house crazy, looking at different things and we liked to dream.

We didn't have enough money to buy some big thing, but we'd watch TV shows about it. And there was this one called Fixer Upper. Does anybody have, it probably didn't make its way across the ocean. Fixer Upper, all right, we got a Texan here so he knows what Fixer Upper is.
It was about this couple, Chip and Joanna Gaines, this very cute couple from Waco, Texas, Christian couple actually. And what they would do is they would help people as they would go and they'd buy a house, but it would never be like the perfect house.
It would be one that was run down and falling apart in different ways and they would have to fix it up for people in order to provide for them. And so there would always be this point in the show at the very first part is they show some sketches.
They show on the little computer screen, this is what your house could look like. Do you want to do the design this way or that way? You know, it's this view of the future. It's this view of restoration.

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That gets brought in right then.
[27:02] And they start to make decisions about it. That's what the Feast of Weeks is like. And even more Pentecost with the Gentile church. Future brought in. And after deciding what parts of the house they want to fix up, it doesn't just happen.

They don't just snap their fingers and go, oh, here it goes. What happens next was Chip's favorite day of all of the remodel. Demo day. Demolition. Demolition. Going in and knocking down these old walls.
You see, that's what happens in the Feast of Pentecost. It starts with a demo day. In other words, it starts with repentance. Tearing down this old way of life.
This old way of clinging to our personal preferences and idols. And the real work begins for a Pentecost people of spirit-empowered mission with the blueprints in our hand.
You start the work of restoration and renovation. Right? You're tearing down the old and you're starting to build this new, leaning into this vision of the people of God that are generous and loving and celebratory and humble.
[28:09] And we order our lives around God's ways and we seek to bring in a harvest. How do we celebrate the Feast of Weeks? How do we celebrate Pentecost? We celebrate it in the same way as the old covenant people of God at the heart with faith and with obedience.

And if the Feast of Weeks is the shadow and Christ in His giving of His Spirit is the substance, then we keep the feast by clinging to Christ. By turning away from idols and our own self-effort and clinging to Him and trusting Him in the mission that He has before us.
And as we do that, here is the promise. He is going to bring in a harvest of righteousness. He will not leave you alone. You can bank on it. It's the first fruits.
Let's pray that Lord would help us within this. Father, we thank You for how You provide. There are certainly seasons of famine, yet even in those we can know Your promises are true.
And in those we can experience Your presence. Would You stir our faith to be a people who celebrate Your faithfulness regularly? Give us eyes to see. Give us hearts that are generous because we know that all we have is Yours.
[29:19] Give us mouths that invite others in to the harvest celebration. Would You give us lives that seek to grow a harvest of righteousness?

And would You help us to do this not just on our own but together as Your people? We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, the first fruits of the resurrection. Amen. Amen.

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