

Thanksgiving Service

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[0 : 0 0] This evening, let's turn with God's help to Exodus 34, looking at verses 22 and verse 26, these two verses together.

Exodus 34, verses 22 and 26. You shall observe the feast of weeks, the first fruits of wheat harvest, and the feast of ingathering at the year's end.

And verse 26, the best of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring to the house of the Lord your God. Israel had three major feasts, annual feasts or festivals, they're sometimes called, that they were required to keep in obedience to the Lord's instructions.

And each of these feasts was significant in what it set forth. First of all, there was the feast of unleavened bread, also called Passover, which would correspond to around March time of our year. If you think about the calendar that we follow, Israel's calendar would correspond in the feast of unleavened bread or Passover to our March time of year.

[1 : 1 6] And the second feast was the feast of harvest or the feast of first fruits, which would correspond to around our May time. So there's that gap from March through to May between the first great feast and the second one, the feast of weeks or the feast of harvest, also called the feast of first fruits.

Third feast was the feast of feast of feast of feast. Third feast was the feast of tabernacles or the feast of booths, which would again be corresponding to about our September time.

And as these three feasts were set for Israel, the year very much revolved in many ways round those feasts and other days that God had, of course, specified, such as the great day of atonement. And as we focus on these feasts, we're going to just pick on the second one this evening because it relates to the theme of Thanksgiving. That's the feast of weeks or the feast of harvest or first fruits, also called Pentecost in the New Testament as the Old Testament recedes.

So the first of the feast of first fruits or harvest or weeks is what's mentioned here in this passage in Exodus 34. You shall observe the feast of weeks, the first fruits of wheat harvest.

[2 : 3 6] And verse 26, the best of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring to the house of the Lord your God. And in fact, our harvest, Thanksgiving, in many ways goes back to this practice in Israel, which was followed down the generations and comes through into the New Testament.

And so we build upon that theme of Thanksgiving in relation to the good things that God gives, mentioned particularly in the Old Testament as the produce of the ground and the animals that God gave them to use for their own daily life as well as for sacrifices to the Lord.

So our harvest, Thanksgiving, in many ways, is closely connected to the feast of first fruits or wheat harvest or Pentecost.

I want to just divide it into two related times, really, just looking briefly, simply, first of all, at the first fruits of the Old Testament harvest.

And then secondly, the first fruits of the New Testament harvest, as we find references to that in the New Testament. And we'll look at a couple of verses there that help us to pick up the theme in the New Testament.

[3 : 5 4] So first of all, the first fruits of the Old Testament harvest. You shall bring the best of the first fruits of the ground. You shall bring to the house of the Lord your God.

The first thing that first fruits was to indicate to the people of Israel was that the whole harvest belonged to God. Not just the bit that they were going to give him in the first fruits that they were dedicating.

They were required to consecrate and bring that to the house of God to offer it to God to consecrate it as the Lord's. It really represented the entire harvest.

The whole of the harvest, you could say, was represented in that portion of first fruits. And they were really indicating, by giving this to the Lord, this was why one of the things the Lord was himself seeking to teach the people, is that every single aspect of what they had been given in the harvest was actually the Lord's.

It belonged to him. It had come from him. It was only by his blessing that they received it. The entire crop belonged to God. And they were to give the first fruit to him as an indication that they accepted that, that they recognized that the whole of this bounty and of this plenty in this land that God had taken them into was actually the Lord's.

[5 : 24] Properly speaking, ultimately speaking, that's who the harvest belonged to. And that follows into our own association with the bounty that God gives us.

We don't necessarily nowadays, where we are situated, have much to do with the actual harvest or the ingathering of crops from the field.

Nothing like the extent, of course, to which that used to be the case in our own island setting, though you still find some crops being grown and harvested at the proper time of year.

But if you go to the mainland and you find these great fields filled with wheat or with barley or whatever other crops are grown, you will find how important this time of year is to those who actually produce the crops, to those who are going to receive the crops and make use of the crops and the various ways in which they're used.

And anyone brought up in a farming community will realize very well the importance of the harvest time and the tension that exists in the farmer's mind and those who work on the farms around the harvest time, in case the weather breaks, in case the crop is ruined, in case there's a gale that lodges the crop, as they call it, and it goes flat and it becomes useless.

[6 : 42] The harvest time is such a critical moment in the farming calendar and it's right and proper, though perhaps much less so in actual fact nowadays, but it's right and proper that in association with the intake, with the harvest, there is a thanksgiving to God.

And in the older days, it would certainly have been much more common than it is nowadays for these communities to be together at a time of harvest, when the harvest was in, to rejoice that it was in, that it was successfully gathered in, but not only to rejoice in that, but to give thanks to God, to the God of the harvest, to the God whose harvest it was, but who had given it to them so as we would enjoy it.

So our thanksgiving to God actually is pretty much the same in principle. God gives us so much to enjoy. It's not just the matter of harvest, but as we'll see, the first fruits of the New Testament harvest really major on the spiritual aspects of the harvest that God brings us spiritually, the spiritual crops by which we are fed spiritually in the gospel.

But even looking at it in Old Testament terms, God very kindly leaves us the most to enjoy for ourselves.

He demands the first fruits of Israel's harvest, but he leaves the rest to them. And that reminds us of the kindness of God. He could have said, and he could have said especially at times when they as a people had declined and gone away from God, that he was now demanding the whole of the crop to be offered to himself, that they deserved none of it for themselves.

[8 : 29] But instead, it's constantly the first fruits. That's the portion of it they give to God, this much smaller amount than the whole, indicating not only that the whole thing was God's, but that he had given them so much else in addition to the first fruits, to use for themselves, to be for their benefit.

The whole is God's. The second thing it teaches us, the first fruits of the Old Testament harvest, not only is it true that the whole is God, but the best is God's.

They were not to give him the worst parts of the harvest. They were not to give him the bits that weren't hardly usable for themselves. They were to give him the best. They were to give him the choice parts of the harvest, the very best of the grain or of the produce.

God was satisfied with nothing less. And when you go through the prophets and you find so many things that the prophets had to say about the decline that had set in amongst the people and how that decline had been, was seen in their behavior, in their way of life, and in their disobedience to God and their failure to follow the likes of these regulations.

If you go to, for example, Malachi's prophecy, the last book in the Old Testament, you'll find one of the complaints of Malachi or of the Lord through Malachi is that the people were content to give God the lambs of the flock that were not fit to be used themselves, for themselves.

[10:07] The worst of the flock. Those that were lame. Those that had defects. Those that really weren't up to much as far as their own use was concerned. Now that was completely contrary, as you know, to what God required.

God required the best. God required the unblemished. The best of the flocks. And here they were. And an indication of their decline was that they were keeping the best for themselves. And that really the leftovers would do for God.

And we gather here in Thanksgiving tonight and realize that in our Thanksgiving, not only are we confessing that the whole thing belongs to God, the multitude of gifts and of produce and of spiritual blessing that he gives us, but he enables us to enjoy the largest portion.

But in addition, he requires and he deserves the best. The best of our time. The best of our minds. The best of our time of day to worship him. The best of our use of the Lord's day, for example. The very best of all that we can give to God.

[11:19] It should be in our thoughts that God requires the first fruits. God requires the best portion of what we can give him. Not just something at the end of the day.

Not just something when our mind is so tired that we cannot really concentrate as we should upon reading his word or prayer. The best belongs to God.

And God deserves the best that we can give him. I know that our own best is still not enough and we have to actually seek that God receive it from us through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Only through him is anything that we give him acceptable. Even when we return our gifts to him, we still depend on his blessing so that they will prove to be a blessing to his cause.

And indeed it seems to me that it was quite an appropriate practice and still is a practice that when the offering was taken at services in the past, in some places at least the offering was taken to the front of the church or of the gathering, not for show, not to show off or anything like that, but to just place it there and then there was a word of thanks given to God.

[12:39] A recognition that this was God's giving to them first and they were giving back to God what they themselves had received from him or a portion of it. So the whole is God's.

The best is for God, but also the best is from God. We're thankful tonight that the things we receive from God are the richest provisions that God himself could design for us.

How often you go through the Apostle Paul's writings, just to go no further than that, and when he describes the blessing and describes the salvation that God in Christ has made over to his people, what word do you often find coming across and describing that blessing and that abundance?

That's the word abundance. How abundantly he has blessed us in Christ Jesus. With what fullness has he blessed us in Christ Jesus. These are harvest words.

These are words that go back to the Old Testament fullness of harvest. The abundance that God gave them as they worked the ground and as they produced the various livestock that they required.

[13:52] It wasn't a meager portion that God enabled them to enjoy, but a plenteousness. That's why he described it before they ever went to Canaan and before they ever left Egypt, that he was going to take them into another land, a land that flows with milk and honey.

They're still wonderful words, descriptive words. The richest of produce, the milk and the honey, that conjure up in the mind such fullness and flavor and typifies the blessing from God.

Well, he didn't just say I'm taking you into a land in which you're going to find milk and honey, but it's a land that flows with it. It's a land of abundance.

As indeed the report of the spies or the investigators of the land as they came back, although their report was not received by the majority of the people because they were afraid of the sons of Anak, the Anakims.

But you remember they came back with these massive clusters of the fruit of the produce of the land and gave a report on how wonderful that land was.

[15:16] And that's exactly as God designed it for them, a fullness of blessing. What do you have in the gospel? What do you have but a fullness of blessing?

What do you have but the abundance that is in Christ Jesus as our Savior? What do you have of forgiveness from God? It's not a meager portion, it's an abundant forgiveness.

It's a portion that covers all your sins from sight. What do you get when Christ's righteousness is made over to you in your justification? Does it just cover a bit of your person and a bit of your reputation?

No, it covers it all. It's the righteousness of Christ in its entirety. You have the whole Christ. Everything that Christ has actually died for is made over to his people. And we thank him tonight that we are not a people who experience just a meager ration from God to keep us alive spiritually and no more from day to day. [16:15] but an abundance, fullness, a blessing corresponding to the land that flows with milk and honey.

The best belongs to God as we give him of the first fruits. But we receive the best from him and we receive it in fullness.

So there's first the first fruits of the Old Testament harvest. The whole harvest belongs to God. The best of it belongs to God and is to be given in the first fruits.

And the best that they receive is from God. Everything they receive as we receive is the very best that God can give and designed for our benefit.

Then what about the first fruits of the New Testament harvest? Well, the Old Testament harvest by and large becomes a spiritual harvest as you enter the New Testament and as you find the emphasis throughout the New Testament on the way in which God blesses the people.

[17:25] The reference to the land disappears pretty much with the Old Testament. It's actually made its way through into the inheritance, spiritual inheritance that now belongs to the people of God that in Christ is theirs in heaven, the kingdom of God, everything that's associated with all of these great themes and the spiritual harvest of blessing that actually comes through Christ to us as God's people.

The first thing to take note of is that Christ himself is the first fruits. That's described for us in the New Testament and it's particularly in the likes of 1 Corinthians and chapter 15.

Before I read the verses just recall for a minute when the death of Christ took place. Well, it took place as you well know at Passover time, a time corresponding to the festival of Passover and the festival of unleavened bread, the first of the great feasts or festivals that we mentioned out of the three.

So his death took place at this time, the Passover, and then on the first day of the week he rose from the dead, three days after he was buried. So you notice in 1 Corinthians 15 in relation to that resurrection of Jesus, this is how Paul actually puts it in verses 20 and 23.

He's arguing, of course, about the reality of resurrection and that there is such a thing as resurrection from the dead. And he goes back to the resurrection of Christ, first of all, to prove that if Christ is risen then the resurrection of his people follows from that.

[19:15] And if Christ has not been raised or risen from the dead then there is no hope for us. There is no resurrection for ourselves if there isn't his resurrection going before and first ahead of that.

So this is what he's saying in chapter 15 and look at verse 20 there for example. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

That's those who have passed away who are no longer in this life. Christ has been raised from the dead the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

And then verse 23 you find the same reference there to first fruits each in his own order. Christ the first fruits then at his coming those who belong to Christ.

So Christ as the first fruits reminds us and teaches us just similarly or following the pattern of the Old Testament the first fruits of the crops were given to God as a portion of the whole.

[20:22] and what it said was this is part of the whole harvest and we're giving this to God as the best of the produce. Now you follow that principle into the New Testament the spiritual harvest and what do you have?

Christ is the first fruits. What does that mean? It means that the whole harvest of salvation which includes Christ and his people join together the first fruits of that is in Christ's own resurrection. And the first fruits of Christ himself in the resurrection is really saying this is the first portion of this great crop of victors over death.

Those who are going to be victorious over death. Those who are going to share in Christ's resurrection at their own resurrection when it comes. But this is the first fruits.

This is the batch if you like of the harvest that first comes to be given to God. Christ himself the first fruits. And not only is that part of the whole crop today tonight for which we give thanks this crop of salvation of those who have victory over death in Christ but something else about the first fruits is

important and that is that the remainder of the harvest is sure to follow.

[21 : 44] You see in the Old Testament when they brought the first fruits as part of the harvest in acknowledging that the whole harvest was God's they were really saying this is an indicator that the rest of the harvest is secure.

It's been gathered in. It's now in our possession. And Christ as the first fruits of that spiritual harvest in his resurrection is a statement by God saying here is all the proof you need that the whole harvest will be completed.

That the harvest will be gathered in absolutely and surely as surely as the first fruits of Christ himself in his resurrection has already been gathered in is already with God has already been presented to God.

So it follows assuredly that the whole crop of his saved people are going to follow him into the house of God where the harvest will be stored for eternity.

And that's why we give thanks tonight that we know the significance of the first fruits and the link between the first fruits in the New Testament and the first fruits of the Old Testament as we've been reading and taking as our primary text from Exodus 34.

[23 : 12] you shall keep this feast. You shall bring the first fruits into the house of God. And here in the New Testament the first fruits and the resurrection of Christ has been brought into the house of God and the rest of the harvest is sure to follow.

Do you sometimes become a bit shaky about your assurance of salvation? Do you become a little bit uncertain? as to whether or not you have a hold of that salvation in Christ whether you share in that great harvest of righteousness that Jesus has procured?

Well if sometimes we do as we do have that lack of assurance or that uncertainty the thing to do then is not to actually go to yourself and look for evidence of the resurrection in yourself or of resurrection and you being brought to life by God spiritually the thing to do is to go to the resurrection of Jesus and to ask yourself as he said in fact to Martha I am the resurrection and the life do you believe this?

And if you believe this then you're joined to him and when you're joined to him you are certainly going to follow him into the house of God in heaven because he as the first fruits has gone in already ahead of you but not without you being united to him it's just the one harvest the first fruits and the rest of the crop are just connected together so closely that it's ultimately one crop and so it is with Christ and his people he is the head they are his spiritual body he is the saviour they are his saved people but always united to him attached to him as the first fruits of the harvest so Christ is the first fruits secondly in the first fruits of the New Testament harvest we find in the New Testament that the Holy Spirit is the first fruits and that takes us to what actually exists in ourselves by God's blessing and the way that God brings his spirit and gives us his spirit to live within us he wrote that in Acts chapter 2 one of the great points the pivotal points in the history of the church the day of Pentecost and it's very interesting again to compare the Old Testament times of the festivals and our feasts and the way these things happened in the New Testament and the Old Testament feast of Passover was then followed by the feast of harvest or the feast of weeks and that was 50 days or so after the feast of

Passover and the feast of Passover and it's exactly the same principle in regard to the New Testament spiritual harvest because at Pentecost the harvest follows Passover exactly in the same way and indeed with the same precision as in the Old Testament days Pentecost followed the Passover where Christ's death took place and Christ's death having taken place and his being raised from the dead and ascended to glory this feast of this feast of Passover or of weeks then follows on from that feast of first fruits now that leads to us seeing that the Holy Spirit is spoken of as the first fruit of our redemption of our salvation and for that we need to go to the likes of Romans chapter 8 and especially verse 35 and this is something that gives us another little dimension to the idea of first fruits and our cause of thanksgiving

[27 : 21] Romans 8 and verse 30 verse 35 but before that just look at verse 23 talking there about the creation longing as he puts it forwards towards the final establishment of the new heavens and the new earth effectively is what it's what it's about but he says not only does the creation groan and long for this we ourselves too who have the first fruits of the spirit groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons that's the redemption of our bodies so looking towards and hoping towards and expecting this resurrection ultimately for ourselves we have now the first fruits of the spirit and that means the spirit himself as the first fruits think of the harvest and the portion of it that's given to

God as the first fruits well this is our harvest our harvest of resurrection life that awaits us as the people of God all who trust in the Lord but already we have in ourselves the first fruits the first indicator of that harvest of resurrection life that awaits us where is that first fruit found it's in the Holy Spirit when the Holy Spirit lives in God's people in your soul what you find there is in fact in the spirit the spirit himself is the first fruits of the harvest and then verse 35 he follows on from that when he says that who shall separate us from the love of Christ shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or sword and you find the same thing also in 2nd Corinthians where you find the apostle dealing there with the abundance that we have in Christ and again dealing with the issue of resurrection in 2nd Corinthians chapter 5 where he's saying he who has prepared us for this very same thing what is that same thing this thing that he's talking about mortality being swallowed up of life this resurrection life this life post resurrection after the resurrection from the dead he who has prepared us for this very thing is God who has given us the spirit as a guarantee it's like a different word but it's the same idea that you have the spirit of God living in you as a Christian and that spirit of God is the first fruits of the harvest of heaven that heaven will be of resurrection glorified life

God has already given us given into our hearts that wonderful first fruits and again as it says in 2nd Corinthians 5 that is the guarantee of all that yet will be done and brought about by God the guarantee of the final harvest the third thing finally just in a word the first fruits of the New Testament harvest Christ the first fruits the Holy Spirit the first fruits and God's people are also termed first fruits for this we have to go to the letter of James and in James chapter 1 and verse 18 we're skipping about some verses but they're all very closely connected together through this theme of first fruits where he says there at James 1 and verse 18 we're talking there about God especially God the Father of his own will he brought us forth or begat us the old word is by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures or probably better translated a kind of first fruits of his creation now you know that the Bible speaks about the new heavens and the new earth which God is going to establish in the final order of the universe which we take it that the whole creation itself will after the judgment of God and after it is first of all as Peter puts it is burned up with fire and cleansed by the judgment of God but there will be then placed in its stead a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells and as an indicator of that or if you like as the first fruits of that new creation we ourselves as Christians are the first fruits of God's creation new creation the very fact that there are

Christians like ourselves in the world that God as a people that he has changed and into his heart he has placed the Holy Spirit is itself an indication that what he says in his word will indeed come to be true that he will establish a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells isn't it a great honor as a Christian to be described as the first fruits of God's new creation as the first installment already of the new heavens and the new earth of this final order that's going to be marked not by sin and darkness and the curse of sin over the whole universe but by righteousness a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells tonight we're thankful for so many things but we're thankful especially for God's blessings through the gospel the first fruits that remind us of God's bounty

God's plenty of how we owe it all to him of how we owe him the best of what he gives of how we receive the best things from him and how we find Christ as the first fruits through his resurrection already established as the first of that great crop of righteousness and of salvation and of how we have the Holy Spirit in our hearts the first fruits of our own redemption the guarantee of that glorious inheritance and how we are described all who believe and trust in Christ together as one as the first fruits of God's creation we've just spent about half an hour so much more yet to say so many more things to give thanks for so many things to contemplate for which we should give our thanks to God but that will do for the moment and there's enough in that for us to continue to give God thanks for his wonderful gift of Jesus Christ his son in whom we have redemption through his blood let's pray oh Lord of God we acknowledge that the richest portion of all that you give to us is in our saviour himself we thank you for all that comes with him as you bring him into the possession of your people through faith we bless you oh Lord for the promises that come to us in your word that remind us of that harvest that is yet to be a harvest that will be established where righteousness will mark your people and where nothing will interfere to mar or to spoil that great spiritual intake that awaits your people we ask oh Lord that you would bless to us all that we have deliberated on this evening and bless to us all that we receive from you practically in our daily lives help us to be

thankful that we know that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of

[36 : 16] God receive our thanks we pray in Jesus name Amen