

The big 50 - a study on the Feast of Pentecost ... Leviticus 23:15-21

We are shining the spotlight today on number 4 of the Seven 'Feasts of the Lord' as outlined for us in Leviticus 23 - a wonderful chapter that shows us God's calendar of redemption.

These were divided into two main groupings - the last 3 are known as the 'autumn' feasts: number one is Trumpets or Rosh Hashanah; that's followed by the most solemn of all the Jewish festivals, Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement; the last one is one of joy and celebration, it's Succot or Tabernacles.

The first four took place in the Springtime: one was Passover - here is God **redeeming** his people ... followed immediately by seven days of Unleavened Bread - here is God **nourishing** his people ... on the day after it started, there is one day marked out for the feast of Firstfruits - here is God **gaining** his people ... the last of the four is Pentecost - here is God **empowering** his people.

This one is referred to usually as Shavuot (Sha-voo-OTE) ... it's sometimes called the Feast of Weeks (more about that in a minute or two); it's observed for a single day - in our calendar, it usually falls somewhere in the months of late May/early June. For a Jewish person, it occurs on Day 6 of the month of Sivan. The PowerPoint slide will give you some idea of where and when it fits in to the grand scheme of things. This year it begins at sundown on Saturday 8 June.

You can read all about it at your leisure, a few verses in Leviticus 23:15-21 and over in Numbers 28:26-31. And, to impress you, I've even put the Hebrew word up there for you!

Here's the reason why they do it; and, again, it's rooted in Scripture - in verses 15 and 16, we read: 'From the day after the Sabbath, the day you brought the sheaf of the wave offering, count off seven full weeks. Count off fifty days up to the day after the seventh Sabbath, and then present an offering of new grain to the Lord.'

You and I often speak of this feast as the Feast of Pentecost - more often than not, among Jewish people, it's referred to as the Feast of Weeks, Hag Hashavuot. And the reason why is obvious from the verses we read together - seven weeks were counted out from the Feast of Firstfruits to this one! In Jewish-speak, it's called 'the counting of the omer'. Simple!

The Feast of Firstfruits marked the beginning of the spring **barley** harvest - the Feast of Pentecost, however, marks the beginning of the summer **wheat** harvest. And that's why it's sometimes called 'the Day of Firstfruits' as in Numbers 28:26.

And here's the fairly obvious one - in the Greek language, Shavuot was known as Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:1) - it means fifty, since it was celebrated 50 days after Pesach or Passover.

As we know, there are seven feasts in total ... of these seven, three were decreed by the Lord as 'annual feasts' - some translations portray them as 'solemn feasts' ... that marks them out as different and distinctive; all the men were obligated to present themselves at the Temple in Jerusalem on this occasion.

We know that from Deuteronomy 16:16-17, where we read: 'Three times a year all your men must appear before the Lord your God at the place he will choose: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles. No man should appear before the Lord empty handed: Each of you must bring a gift in proportion to the way the Lord your God has blessed you.'

That means, there was corporate worship in Jerusalem at the Temple ... it also impacted the lives of ordinary people in their homes and in their local community. On this day, they were exhorted to offer a freewill offering to the Lord - that was an act of thanksgiving and gratitude for the many blessings which they enjoyed, they were to rejoice before the Lord, and they were to remember that the Lord had liberated them from bondage in Egypt. You see ample evidence of that in Deuteronomy 16:9-12.

It's very interesting to see what took place in the temple on this day - the service was very similar to the one held seven weeks earlier for the Feast of Firstfruits ... but there is one huge difference that makes this one unique. We read in Leviticus 23:17 that the people were to bring two long, flat, leavened loaves of bread ... these loaves and two lambs were seen as a peace offering and they were then waved before the Lord on Shavuot. The priest waved them before the altar forwards and backwards, then up and down. When that was done in verse 20 they were set aside for the priests to enjoy later on that day.

That was fine so long as the Temple was still standing in Jerusalem - but we all know from

history what happened in AD70. What would the people do? How would they celebrate the annual feast days?

The Sanhedrin convened in AD140 in Usha, a village near modern day Haifa - that's when they took the decision to switch the focus from a harvest festival to one that celebrated the giving of the Torah to Moses. From then on the Feast was associated with the giving of God's Law to the people at Mount Sinai - as we all know, this is the ultimate how-to live manual. They did it because this event occurred in the third month, we know that from Exodus 19:1.

The Law is the heart of the Jewish faith and it's based on their redemption from bondage. It highlights the character of God - and, in light of who he is, all that he demands from his people. When they made this change in focus, the Jewish people became known as 'the people of the book' ... and, to this day, when the Ten Commandments are read in the synagogue, the worshippers will stand.

Pentecost is the day the Jewish people recall that God met them at Mount Sinai ... and, on top of that, they celebrate the fact that this was the time and place of the spiritual birth of the nation of Israel. That's when twelve tribes were fused into one corporate nation! The more you get into this Feast, the more you discover - there's a few traditions linked closely to it. One, it's a custom to read the book of Ruth at this time. Why? Well, the story revolves around a family that are going through incredibly tough times.

And it's harvest - for Ruth, it's the barley harvest and Shavuot is a celebration of the

end of the barley harvest and the beginning of the summer wheat harvest.

It also highlights the fact that Ruth was a foreigner from Moab - yet she was someone who lovingly embraced the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and who happily showed her allegiance to his Law. A story with a terribly sad beginning and a terrifically happy ending.

It also serves as a reminder to the people that here was someone in tremendous need in every sense - it's clear that Ruth trusted God for her needs and, in a remarkable way, he provided for her through Boaz. Actually, in this story, you have a beautiful type of our redemption in a greater than Boaz - thank God, today we have in Jesus someone who is our kinsman-redeemer.

Another fascinating custom is that observant Jews will stay up all night - you'll find them in the synagogue engrossed in a study of the finer points of the Law - they'll dissect it, and discuss it, and debate it. All night long!

That said, it's all fairly well structured - they will talk over the opening and closing verses of each book of the Old Testament as well as the entire book of Ruth. And, inevitably, there will be breaks for coffee and cheesecake!

Talk about sweet things - well, that's another custom at Shavuot ... the eating of dairy foods as a reminder of the land flowing with milk and honey! There'll be cheesecakes, cheese blintzes (which are scrumptiously delicious - they are made of cheese rolled in pancakes and fried in a skillet).

For you and me who love the Lord Jesus and who seek to follow the great truths that are in his Law ... what does all this mean for us

and to us? Has it been fulfilled in some way? Is there more to it than meets the eye?

I love to see it from this angle - the Lord Jesus honoured the day of Passover by his death on the cross at Calvary ... God the Father honoured the day of Firstfruits by raising Christ from the dead ... the Holy Spirit honoured the day of Pentecost by his descent as we read in Acts 2:1 - and, guess what, that happened 50 days after he rose from the dead.

See how it all ties in so perfectly together; there's nothing random here, it's like pieces in a jigsaw, designed by him! The first Pentecost saw the birth of the nation of Israel, the second Pentecost witnessed the birth of the Church - that's made up of people gathered from the ends of the earth who have a vibrant relationship with Jesus.

As an aside, you'll notice in Acts 2:1-4 that there are four activities assigned to the Holy Spirit. One, the Holy Spirit came and he came right on schedule; two, the Holy Spirit baptised - as a direct result, all the believers were united in a spiritual unity.

This actually helps us understand why the priest brought two loaves ... at Firstfruits, they brought a sheaf of grain as an offering, but at Pentecost, these grains had been ground, they had been made into flour, they had been baked into two loaves. The loaves speak of the corporate body of the church, not individual grains but grains united to one another! That's the thought behind one body, one bride, one building as in Ephesians.

But why did he bring two loaves? Because believing Jews were baptised into the Body at

Pentecost (Acts 2), and in Acts 10 believing Gentiles were baptised into the Body of Christ - one baptism of the Spirit, but it took place on two different occasions. God has his way of doing things! You find echoes of that truth in Ephesians 2:14-18 where Paul refers to 'one new man' - two loaves, one offering!

Why was there some leaven in these loaves? Because there is sin in the church, we are not perfect, we are not sinless, we have our flaws and our failings - we let each other down and we let the Lord down. There is leaven in all our lives ... until we are promoted to Glory.

The third activity of the Holy Spirit is that he filled all those present ... and the fourth is that he spoke through them. The link there with you and me is fairly obvious - we have been immersed into the body of Christ, we are indwelt by him from the moment of our conversion and that's a permanent relationship, the challenge is for us to be filled with the Spirit on a daily basis, and then for us to allow him to speak through us to people in today's world.

Can you recall what happened in the immediate aftermath of Moses receiving the Law from God? The people were fed up as they waited for Moses to come down from the mountain - and they blatantly sinned when they committed idolatry with the golden calf. God's verdict was instant and the party was over - when the mess was cleared up, there were 3,000 people dead! Sin has a terrible end.

What a mega difference when Shavuot was fulfilled and the Holy Spirit was given. We read in Acts 2:41 that 'those who accepted

his message were baptised, and about 3,000 were added to their number that day.' That's what grace does! The Law reveals sin that condemns us, but the Spirit of God reveals the Saviour who rescues us.

Just in closing, take a look at the final slide and that'll give you some idea of the many differences between the giving of the Law and the giving of the Spirit ... significant, in every way - today, though, we are grateful to God that we can 'keep in step with the Spirit' as we walk in the light of his law.

