

# The Feast of Firstfruits

## Background

Firstfruits marks the beginning of the grain harvests in Israel. Of the crops sown in winter, barley is the first grain to ripen. For the Feast of Firstfruits, a sheaf (a bundle of stalks tied together) of barley is harvested and brought to the Temple as a thanksgiving offering to the Lord. It represents the entire barley harvest and serves as a pledge that the rest of the harvest will be brought in. Keep in mind that Passover occurs on the 14th day of Nisan; Unleavened Bread begins on the 15th day of Nisan and goes for seven days; and Firstfruits takes place on the 16th day of Nisan.

Firstfruits is seen primarily as a time marker. It marks the beginning of the grain harvest in Israel. It also marks the countdown to the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), which is celebrated 50 days after Firstfruits. As a result, this period of time is known as the Sefirat Ha-Omer (“the counting of the omer”) because of the ritual of counting the days from Firstfruits to Pentecost

## The Biblical Observance

### *The regulations for Firstfruits (Lev. 23:9-14):*

- A sheaf of barley is to be brought to the priest at the Temple. He waves the sheaf before the Lord for acceptance.

- Accompanying sacrifices are to be brought as well: an unblemished male lamb of the first year, a drink offering of wine, and a meal offering of barley flour mixed with olive oil.
- The people are forbidden to use any part of the harvest in any way until after they offer their firstfruits to the Lord. (Tieths and offerings).

***The ritual for Firstfruits (Deut. 26:1-11):***

- Firstfruits is to be observed, “When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance ...” (v. 1).
- The firstfruits are to be brought to the priest and the giver is to say, “Today I acknowledge to the Lord your God that I have entered the land the Lord swore to our fathers to give us” (v. 3).
- The priest takes the firstfruits and places them before the altar at the tabernacle (later the Temple), and the giver recites the story of God’s deliverance of the Jews from Egypt and the giving of the Promised Land (vv. 4-10).
- The giver then bows down and worships the Lord (v. 10).
- The giver joins the priest and even the foreign resident among the people in rejoicing in all the good things the Lord has given him and his household (v. 11).

In Scripture, both the *nation* and the *family* observe Firstfruits.

### For the nation:

- A special barley crop is raised just outside Jerusalem in the Ashes Valley. Just before Passover, representatives of the Sanhedrin, Israel's ruling religious body, mark off part of this field and designate it as firstfruits.
- At sundown on the 15th day of Nisan (the start of the 16th day), a three-man delegation from the Sanhedrin leads a multitude of observers to the barley field with sickles and baskets. They reap one *ephah* (about 3/5 bushel) from the designated firstfruits and bring the grain back to the Temple.
- On the morning of the 16th day, one *omer* (about two quarts) of the barley flour is mixed with  $\frac{3}{4}$  pint of olive oil, with a small amount of frankincense sprinkled on it. The priest then waves it before the Lord as Lev. 23:11-13 instructs and burns a small amount on the altar. The rest is given to the Levites.

### For the family:

- Each family marks out the firstfruits of its barley harvest, usually with a cord, and on the morning of the 16th day brings the firstfruits to the Temple, along with a lamb or, if the family is poor, two turtledoves or young pigeons for a burnt offering. The man who brings these – the head of the household – might say with great feeling, "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord."

- As the priest holds the lamb or the turtledoves, the man confesses his sins, and then the priest, in accordance with Lev. 1:10-17, kills the sacrificial animal(s).
- Standing face-to-face with the priest, the man repeats the familiar Firstfruits prayer: “Today I acknowledge to the Lord your God that I have entered the land the Lord swore to our fathers to give us” (Deut. 26:3).
- The man then hands the priest a basket containing the *omer* of barley as his Firstfruits offering. The priest places his hands under the basket and slowly waves it before the Lord as the offering bearer continues his prayer: “My father was a wandering Aramean. He went down to Egypt with a few people and lived there. There he became a great, powerful, and populous nation. He led us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. I have now brought the first of the land’s produce that you, Lord, have given me” (Deut. 26:5, 9-10).
- The priest then takes a handful of the grain and tosses it into the fire. The offering bearer falls on his face and worships the Lord.
- • With the requirements now fulfilled, the man rejoins his family.

## The Modern Observance

The sacrifices and offerings of Firstfruits are not offered today since there is no Temple. The only surviving ritual is the counting of the *omer*, the days from Firstfruits to the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost).

## The Fulfillment

Jesus rose from the dead on the third day of Passover (Nisan 16), on the day of Firstfruits, completing the prophetic picture the spring feasts painted of His work of redemption: **death** (Passover), **burial** (Unleavened Bread) and **resurrection** (Firstfruits).

Paul proclaims in 1 Cor. 15:20-22: “But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man [Adam], the resurrection of the dead also comes through a man [Jesus]. For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.”

“The resurrection of Jesus is the guarantee and the beginning (firstfruits) of the final harvest, or resurrection, of all mankind. The Messiah fulfilled the prophetic meaning of this holy day by rising from the dead to become the firstfruits of the resurrection, and He did it on the very day of Firstfruits.” (*The Feasts of the Lord: God’s Prophetic Calendar from Calvary to the Kingdom*, p. 86)