

Read Exodus 23:14-19, Luke 2:41-51

An unsanctioned rite of passage, at least for males around the age of 16-18, is to have a party for his friends or even for an entire high school class while his parents take a short weekend trip out of town. One of my sons did exactly that. We had never left the boys unsupervised for the weekend but thought, hey, it was time; we needed to give them a little “room” to exercise some independence. On the other hand, being wise parents, we didn’t want to give them too much “rope” so we had friends in the neighborhood spying on the house while we were gone. Well, it happened - that unsanctioned party. We found out soon after returning, when our anxious friends called us over to their house for the purpose of informing us about this event.

While a party is a self-determined “command” for teenage boys who want to belong, certainly other events demand celebrations and feasts, like weddings and graduations, and we understand the importance of such celebrations. Likewise, God commands His children to hold three parties during the year, three sacred but celebratory festivals, days long, to acknowledge and enjoy God’s provision.

As we recited earlier from the Westminster Shorter Catechism, *What is the chief end of man? To glorify (honor) God and enjoy Him forever.* (7.001)

It seems it’s a command no one resists. We heard Dub Guthrie tell the Scripture of how Jesus celebrated one of these festivals as a child. Three thousand years has passed since God instituted these festivals, and yet Jewish people still keep the same festival days.

There is a reason these festivals have lasted. They are God's way of engaging us in God’s magnificent plans for humans. That is why they are important to study and understand. So let’s begin.

The first celebration is the Festival of Unleavened Bread. It begins after the early spring harvest, the day after Passover and lasts for seven days. It commemorates Israel’s rescue out of Egypt.

We recall Passover, with its special dinner when the lamb’s blood was put on the doorposts to “protect” the people as the angel of death passed by. We recall that this was a family event where the kids learned all about how God miraculously rescued Israel from terrible slavery. This is the festival Jesus’ family went to when He was 12. All of Nazareth traveled to Jerusalem to participate. All of them took their offering. It was a big deal.

The next day began the festival of unleavened bread. The people were to rid their homes of anything that might contain yeast, which represents being “puffed up” with pride and sin. So the blood of the lamb could not be offered with anything containing yeast, or leaven.

I’ve seen this. When living in LA, I went to a Jewish celebration of the feast of unleavened bread. The small synagogue had a kitchen and all the countertops, insides of cabinets, and even refrigerator shelves were covered with heavy duty foil. Incredible care is taken to clean and rid their houses of any trace of leaven. People clean for an entire month in preparation for this celebration.

God tells the people, *you are not to come empty handed*. They were commanded to bring the “first fruits.” That was the first bundle or cluster of the harvest. It was waved in the air before the Lord, acknowledging that God was their source. It’s a statement of trust that God would continue to supply bountifully.

This is over and above the weekly offering of tithes. This is a special offering. One sided relationships don’t work well at all. You must be actively involved in this incredible relationship with God. This relationship with God is a two-way street.

So let’s think of the meaning of this festival. It celebrates a miraculous rescue using the blood of a perfect lamb and bread with no leaven. People bring God the first of their barley harvest, waving the branches while singing songs of praise. The symbolism seems clear to me. This feast paints a picture of Christ; Christ whose blood was spilled to rescue us, Christ who had no sin at all, Christ for whom palm branches were waved, who gives us the bounty of salvation.

God points us to Christ and God says celebrate! It’s something to sing about.

The next festival has three names. Shavuot means “the day of the first fruits.” It’s also called the festival of weeks because it occurs seven weeks after the first harvest festival. Its Greek translation is “Pentecost,” meaning 50 days, and it occurs on the exact date the Holy Spirit first came on the disciples.

This festival points to the coming of the Holy Spirit. The believers gathered at Pentecost were the first fruits of the Holy Spirit. In this festival God points us to the Holy Spirit and God says celebrate!

It’s something to sing about.

God designed these festivals for people to acknowledge and celebrate God’s blessing. God said, *do not come empty handed*. Why? Because faith requires involvement. Faith requires ownership and honor. You wouldn’t dream of going to a birthday party or a wedding without a present. God says each one is to present a freewill offering. The size of the gift depended on one’s ability to pay. Then all of them were to rejoice together before the Lord and enjoy the party.

You see the theme? God has a part, we have a part. It’s a relational thing. Give and take on both sides. God gives; we give. God gives so much more – and we are allowed to enjoy it!

The third festival is called the festival of booths. The picture you see is a modern-day picture of booths made for this celebration. They are life-sized little shelters to commemorate the tents Israel lived in while in the wilderness. They are made out of things grown from the ground, like tree branches or corn stalks or bamboo. For seven days the family eats their meals in the shelter and some even sleep there.

What fun for children! Children were included. Religious leaders even spent time with a 12 year old talking about the faith. God speaks to all ages. Let’s realize the importance of providing

ministry for all ages here at FPCD. Currently we need teachers who will engage with all ages of children. Will you step up?

Take a look at this next picture. It's a picture of Shavuot this year in Jerusalem. Cindy Bayer, who lives there writes, "Jews stayed up all night reading the Torah and reciting the harvest-themed story of Ruth. Before dawn, thousands streamed into the Old City, singing and dancing their way to the Western Wall, filling the plaza to capacity."¹

Do you wonder if it looked like that in Acts, when the first believers were together waiting for that "Holy Spirit" Jesus had promised?

Very early in the morning that day of Pentecost, that festival of Weeks, an amazing thing happened. There was a tremendous outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It rocked their world. They thought, *what is happening?* And everyone thought they were drunk! But believers started sharing the good news of Christ and 3,000 people got saved that day. They were the first fruits of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2). That's what this festival refers to.

Dr. Dale Bruner says the Holy Spirit is very shy. That doesn't sound shy. Perhaps it's not the Holy Spirit who is shy; perhaps it's us. We still tend to wonder, *who in the world is the Holy Spirit?* So the Spirit seems shy because our vision of the Spirit is so small, like this (picture shown of small drip coming out of faucet).

But Jesus says God's gift of the Holy Spirit is like streams of gushing, flowing water. (picture shown of gushing water) When Jesus was at the festival of Booths once, on the last day He stood and cried out, "*Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and let those who believe drink from me. Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water*" (John 7:37-39). He meant the Spirit. It's a gift.

Are you thirsty? Come be part of the celebration. But don't come empty handed. Bring your best gift and celebrate God's goodness to you.

God calls us to celebrate. A lifestyle of faith is lived by active participation. Let the celebration be joyous, for God has given us the very BEST.

AMEN

¹"Jerusalem Journal #158" by Cindy Bayer; http://www.placeofstoriesisrael.org/site/index.php?Option=com_content&view=article&id=85&Itemid=59, accessed 5/30/2010.