

In the past six weeks, we have studied Beth Moore's *Stepping Up: A Journey Through the Psalms of Ascent*. And, throughout this study, we have delved into the significance of The Feasts of Israel to Christianity. To wrap up our study, we'll be celebrating Shavuot (otherwise known as The Feast of Weeks or Pentecost) in a traditional manner at 3:00 pm at Solomon's Porch Coffee House. Until then, I'll be sending you information about this important holiday.

"You are to count seven complete weeks, starting from the day after the Sabbath, the day you brought the sheaf of the presentation offering. You are to count 50 days until the day after the seventh Sabbath and then present an offering of new grain to the Lord. Bring two loaves of bread from your settlements as a presentation offering, each of them made from four quarts of fine flour, baked with yeast, as firstfruits to the Lord . . . The priest will wave the lambs with the bread of firstfruits as a presentation offering before the Lord . . . On that same day you are to make a proclamation and hold a sacred assembly." Leviticus 23:15-17, 20-21

Harvest Feasts and Firstfruits

Though you've probably not heard of Shavuot, you've likely heard of its more common name, Pentecost. It's a harvest festival, meaning it was a day to gather at the temple to celebrate the bringing in of crops. The feasts of Israel center around three such harvest festivals, each represented by a piece of the agriculture of the land: barley during Passover, wheat during Shavuot, and other fruits and produce at Sukkot (also known as The Feast of the Tabernacles).

You might, like me, be wondering why so much fuss was made about grain. Israel is a dry region, almost a desert in most places--two short rainy seasons keep the whole land from being desert. These rains were important to keep the population alive. It makes sense, then, that a number of customs and laws had to do with gratitude for God's provision via the land.

Think on this:

1. Those of us in prosperous, high-tech countries are largely indifferent to the success or failure of crops. We let others worry about it for us. Are all people in our time free from concern about the success or failure of crops?
2. Are those of us in prosperous countries really invulnerable?

In Israel, the responsibility for crops and animals rested with each clan. The involvement was hands-on. Most people were, at the very least, closely involved in the process that provided their food, dramatically affecting the way Israel worshipped.

Leviticus 24:5-6 says this, "Take fine flour and bake twelve loaves of bread, using two-tenths of an ephah for each loaf. Set them in two rows, six in each row, on the table of pure gold before the Lord." Remember, Israel had 12 tribes. What would be the significance of keeping loaves before God at all times in the temple?

In Israel, there was bread at every meal. In addition, Israelites kept olive oil and wine on the table in the temple. Grain, fruit of the vine, and the press of olives – these were the staples of Israel’s diet. And worship and food went hand-in-hand in that country for obvious reasons. Think about it: We need God like we need food. And we are profoundly dependent on God to bring the food.

Read Leviticus 23:17. What does the idea of giving God the firstfruits say about God, our pantries and us?

We can only begin to understand the feasts of the Bible when we begin to understand just how much people relied on God for food. Worship wasn’t about attending a meeting once a week or just listening to the Torah being read. It was about survival.

At Passover, the barley was just beginning to ripen. At Shavuot, the wheat was just ripening. At Sukkot, the crops were all in, including grapes, olives, figs, almonds, and more. God told Israel to bring Him the first of every crop and the firstborn of every animal. Additionally, the Israelites kept 12 loaves and some oil and wine before God in the temple at all times. These offerings were to serve as the consistent reminder that He is our Provider, a concept often lost in a generation in which we aren’t in need or want for much of anything. The truth is, though, we’re always one disaster away from hunger. We should not forget what was obvious to the ancient peoples – God is our Bread of Life.

A Pilgrim Feast

Before there even was a temple, there was only a tent called the tabernacle. It moved from place to place, eventually resting for a long time in central Israel in a settlement called Shiloh. Later, David brought it to Jerusalem. Then Solomon replaced the tent with a magnificent building of Jerusalem stone, cedars of Lebanon, gold, bronze and colorful cloth.

The temple is significant to Shavuot because it was one of the three pilgrim feasts, along with Passover and Sukkot. In other words, people made a pilgrimage to the temple for this feast. It didn’t matter if you were nearby in Jerusalem or if you were far away in Samaria or Dan. You made the journey.

Every home for miles around Jerusalem was full around the time of these pilgrim festivals. People even slept in the animal stables, if they were lucky enough to have relatives in the city. The rest brought tents. Rain wasn’t a worry since it wasn’t the rainy season.

But the experience began long before the actual feast. The journey itself was a worship experience. The roads were packed around the time of the feast as families, clans and entire towns traveled together to the temple. Or more appropriately, they *went up* to the temple, since Jerusalem rests on a small mountain. That’s why the Psalms of Ascent are thus called (because of the ascent up the mountain and the ascent up the temple stairs).

Think of the Psalm 121 verse, “ I raise my eyes toward the mountains. Where will my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of Heaven and Earth.” While walking up to Jerusalem, people would sing these very psalms. Fellow Israelites were camped and congregating all around. It was a huge crowd. The atmosphere was charged with worship and awe.

After all the build-up and anticipation, they finally arrived at the temple. But when they got there, they didn’t go inside. The temple was not a building where people went inside to worship. It was where sacrifices were offered and the place from which the priests and Levites led psalms, prayers and musical worship; but the people stood in open air all around the front. In fact, due to the crowds some people might not have been able to get closer than half a mile. But if you were close enough to see the smoke rising from the altar, you were in the “good seats”.

The service did not last just an hour or so. Instead, the music, chanting, and worship lasted from night to day to night.

People didn’t worship like this every week. There were no synagogues – local centers of worship – until much later in Jewish history when the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 C.E. During the temple days, this all-out worship with crowds in the hundreds of thousands and even millions only happened for the three pilgrim feasts.

Think on this:

1. Describe what you think it would be like to worship around the temple in a setting like Shavuot. How would it be like and unlike worship services you’ve been a part of?
2. How is this picture similar and different from the picture you have of Old Testament worship you had in your mind?
3. Does this sound more like worship or a party? What’s the difference? What’re the similarities?

If you think this sounds like a huge party in Jerusalem -- that’s not far from the truth. And if the feast was a party, so was the time leading up to it. These weeks were referred to as a time of “counting the omer” (*omer* is the Hebrew word for a sheaf of grain). God gave instructions about this buildup in Leviticus 23:15-16. In a time before printed calendars, this meant literal counting: 50 days from the sheaf of grain offered at Passover. There was a countdown to the big meeting in Jerusalem.

This custom has stood the test of time. In a modern Jewish home, counting the omer is an activity to do with kids. Each day you would make a mark on a special calendar to count the days. In the evening, there is a blessing to recite for each day of counting.

This time of counting was also a time of great anticipation. The time from the firstfruits of Passover, the barley, to Shavuot, the firstfruits of wheat, is 50 days. Barley was easier to grow. It was used to make the common bread – the bread of

the poor man. Wheat, on the other hand, made finer bread. Wheat was the good stuff.

In the seven weeks leading up to Shavuot, there was also a good deal of prayers, specifically for good weather. A hot, desert wind could blow through the land and shrivel the wheat. So those weeks were filled with counting, prayer and hope: Let the wheat be good this year. *Let us eat the bread of life.*

Think on this:

1. Can you think of ways that counting the days could be a form of worship?
2. How can thankfulness for food become a more consistent part of your worship?
3. How can the example of the temple worship inspire your personal worship experience? How about the experience of your community?