

## Firstfruits

In Leviticus 23 God commanded the Jewish people to celebrate seven feasts each year. These feasts are windows that reveal more of what God is communicating to us through his eternal Word, the Lord Jesus. They are described in more detail in an earlier talk entitled “Why did Jesus die exactly at Easter time?”

The first three of the seven feasts occur in a one-week period at what we call Easter. The Passover meal happens on the first evening of the seven-day feast of Unleavened Bread. The Firstfruits celebration happens on the first day after the Shabbat that occurs in the feast of Unleavened Bread, what we call Easter Sunday.

Jesus died exactly at Passover. Earlier attempts to kill him failed. Passover was the one time the Jewish leaders tried to avoid killing him but that is when he died. His resurrection, which we are celebrating today, happened on the third day, exactly on the morning of the Firstfruits celebration. So what does God want to teach us about the resurrection of Jesus from the Firstfruits celebration? We find the answer to this question in 1 Cor. 15v20-28. Notice first of all verses 20 and 23:

*<sup>20</sup>But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. <sup>23</sup>But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits*

Paul teaches us that Christ is the firstfruits. The word in Greek “aparche” means “an offering of firstfruits” and thus connects us back to the feast of Firstfruits in the OT.

The Feast of Firstfruits celebrated the very first of the various harvests that happened in Israel, the barley harvest. The wheat harvest occurs seven weeks later at what we call Pentecost. In the time of Jesus on the morning of Firstfruits the priests would go to a special patch of ground and cut a sheaf of barley, and bring it into the temple to offer it to the Lord. On Easter Sunday we celebrate the real firstfruits of which the OT firstfruits was a picture as 1 Cor. 15v20 tells us:

*<sup>20</sup>But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*

Christ is the first of the dead to be resurrected to life never to die again. Others such as Lazarus had been raised to life in the ministry of Jesus, but they would all die again. They were pictures of the coming resurrection but not the real thing. Jesus was the first of the real resurrection.

In the Old Testament there is not much teaching on the resurrection of the body. It does begin to appear in some of the prophets. One of the clearest passages is Daniel 12v1-3.

*<sup>2</sup>Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. <sup>3</sup>Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.*

From the time of the prophets onwards many Jews began to look forward to the time when the dead would be raised to life. Not all Jews believed this. The Sadducees who controlled the temple did not believe in the resurrection. Jesus had a debate with them and told them they were wrong. You can read this in Matt.22v23-33.

There is a big difference between saying “I believe in the resurrection of the dead” and what many people say “I believe in life after death”. The pagan Greeks believed in life after death. The Old Testament tells about the dead being in a place called Sheol. But the revelation that dead bodies will be raised to life one day is something new in the Bible. This is not reincarnation as eastern religions teach. In reincarnation souls pass from body to body as the bodies die. The resurrection of the dead means that we will each get a new body that will never die again. The resurrection of Jesus was the first example in history of that. That is why he is called the firstfruits.

*<sup>21</sup>For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. <sup>22</sup>For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. <sup>23</sup>But each in his own turn:*

Paul points out in verses 21 and 22 that just as the man Adam was the cause of death coming to the human race so Christ who was truly human as well as divine is the cause of resurrection coming to all.

There is an order to what happens as Paul tells at the beginning of verse 23:

*Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. <sup>24</sup>Then the end will come,*

After the resurrection of Jesus the next ones to be resurrected are those who have put their faith in him. Their resurrection will occur when Jesus returns, as Paul tells in verse 23. You can read a more detailed description of this 1 Cor. 15v50-57 where Paul also tells that not only will dead Christians get new bodies but also any Christian who is still alive when Jesus returns will have their old body changed into a new one without dying.

Is that then the end of the story? By no means, but it is not quite so easy to understand what Paul is referring to in verses 24 to 28. We need to turn to the book of Revelation chapter 20 for help and first read verses 4-5.

*<sup>4</sup>I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. <sup>5</sup>(The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection.*

This shows that there is more than one resurrection. After Jesus comes back and the dead Christians are raised to life there will be a long period when Jesus will physically reign on earth with his resurrected followers. This is called the millennium. Whether this is literally 1000 years is not important, but it will be real, physical and last a long time.

During this time people on earth who do not have resurrection bodies will be born, grow old and die. This is described in Isaiah 65v20.

*<sup>20</sup>“Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed.*

It is only at the end of this time that death will be finally destroyed, everyone will be raised to life and all will be judged by Jesus as we can read in Rev. 20v11,12 and14:

*<sup>11</sup>Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. <sup>12</sup>And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. <sup>14</sup>Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death.*

After this we are told in Rev. 21 and 22 that God will make a new heaven and new earth and the New Jerusalem, which is currently in heaven, will come down to earth. We will see the importance of this in a minute.

With this knowledge we can now return to 1 Corinthians and understand better what Paul is telling.

*<sup>24</sup>Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. <sup>25</sup>For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. <sup>26</sup>The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*

Jesus must reign until every enemy is brought under his authority, including death. Death will still operate during the time of the 1000-year kingdom amongst all who do not have a resurrection body. In addition, even though everyone on earth will outwardly submit to the rule of Christ, inwardly many will not accept it. This is proved at the end of the 1000 years when Satan leads a final great rebellion of people against Jesus and his followers as we are told in Rev. 20v7-9.

*<sup>7</sup>When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison <sup>8</sup>and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth—Gog and Magog—to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. <sup>9</sup>They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God’s people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them.*

It seems amazing that people who have had the privilege to live under the rule of Christ will rebel against him, but this gives us an idea of how evil sin is.

It is not until all these rebellious people and Satan himself have been judged and punished that it can truly be said that Christ has final authority over everything. Only then can it truly be said that “God’s kingdom has come and God’s will is being obeyed from the heart by every living being on earth”. Even then there is still more:

*<sup>27</sup>For he “has put everything under his feet.” Now when it says that “everything” has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. <sup>28</sup>When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.*

Although Jesus will now have authority over every single being in heaven and on earth, there is still One who Jesus acknowledges as his authority – his Father. Then Jesus says to the Father “ I have fulfilled your purpose and brought everything under my control, now I submit everything, including myself, to you”. This is the final reversal of the action of Satan who in his original form as the archangel Lucifer wanted to challenge the authority of God. In contrast Jesus, who has really got authority over everything, does not challenge God’s authority but submits to it so that God his Father is seen to be the supreme authority over everything and everyone.

When that point is reached something incredible happens. I said earlier that the New Jerusalem comes to earth. What is the New Jerusalem? It is the city where God’s throne is. When the city comes down, the throne comes down. When the throne comes down God comes down as described in Rev.21v1-3.

*<sup>1</sup>Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. <sup>2</sup>I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. <sup>3</sup>And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.*

The final phase of human history is not that man goes to be with God in heaven but that God the Father comes to earth to live with man. John tells us in Revelation 22v3,4 that we shall see God’s face.

*<sup>3</sup>No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. <sup>4</sup>They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.*

At the moment no person can see God’s face and live, we are too sinful to bear the glory of his holiness. Only when everything and everyone is totally pure can God come to dwell with his people. Then the words of Jesus will be fulfilled “*Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God*”. Matt.5v8. At present we can only see God reflected in the face of Jesus but then we will see him face to face.

The resurrection of Jesus is the firstfruits. One day the final glorious harvest will be revealed – we will have new bodies, the universe will be made new and the Father will live with us. Today we celebrate the first fruits of the resurrection from the dead looking forward to our own eternal destiny. Isn’t God’s word and his plan wonderful?

Graham Turner  
Easter 2010