



THE PASTOR'S PEN

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“Pentecost, Then and Now”

A major celebration in the life of the church is upon us! On the fourth Sunday in May this year, the festival of Pentecost arrives with all its celebration and praise. It is a time of worship and thanksgiving, a time of prayer and feasting. Some may ask why do we celebrate the Pentecost and what are we to learn from it? What is it that makes the Pentecost so special? These are important questions that Christians should know and understand. So without further delay, let us take a few moments to see what we can find out about Pentecost that makes it so special.

Originally the day and the festival were called *Shavout*. It was one of the three major festivals, along with Passover and Tabernacles, that every member of the tribe of Israel was commanded to keep in Old Testament times.

Commanded by God, while he was on top of Mt. Sinai, Moses wrote down the details for the rites, worship services and special holy days to be kept by the Children of Israel. For forty days he stayed on the mountain and listened to God. When he came down from the mountain, Moses had with him the Ten Commandments that had been inscribed by the finger of God upon the two stone tablets and the information that is contained in the Books of the Law (Genesis - Deuteronomy).

It was God's plan and purpose to set up for His people special holy days and festivals during the year. These special events in the Jewish calendar were to represent and teach the people about what God had already done for them. But these holy days and festivals were also designed to teach about what God was going to do to bring about His plans for the salvation of the world.

Beginning with Passover, which memorialized the Children of Israel's release from the bitter bondage of slavery in Egypt, God also used this festival to teach about the world's future release from the bitter bondage of slavery to sin and death. Next came Pentecost, which was the Old Testament version of our modern "Thanksgiving." It was a time for the Children of Israel to celebrate and praise God for His bounty and goodness, which He poured out upon them. Yet in God's plans, it was also to be the time that He would pour out the blessing and the presence of His Holy Spirit upon humanity with the beginning of the Church. Finally there was Tabernacles. Tabernacles was a weeklong camping festival held right after the fall harvest. For eight the Children of Israel lived in tents and lean-tos to commemorate their living in tents after leaving Egypt and before they arrived in the "Promised Land." This festival was also used by God to show that after the death and resurrection of Christ, there would be a space of

time (the age of the church) before the second coming of Christ and our entry into our “Promised Land,” the kingdom of heaven.

This month, we want to take a closer look at this second celebration, the Feast of Pentecost. We want to know more about Pentecost and what it means to us in the church today.

It is in the Book of Leviticus that God commanded the Children of Israel to keep the Passover on the 14th day of Nisan. Then, from the next day, a “week” of Sabbaths were to be counted until the wheat harvest (Lev. 23:10-11). This was to be the next major festival that the Children of Israel were to keep in honor of God and what He had done for them. It was also to prepare them for the second step in God’s plan for the salvation of the world. This second celebration was called *Shavout*, a Hebrew word that refers to the “seven Sabbaths” or seven weeks between it and the Passover (actually it is the day after Passover plus forty-nine more days for a total of fifty days after Passover).

The feast of *Shavout* was also called “first fruits.” It was given this name because the festival was primarily a time of thanksgiving to God. The Children of Israel celebrated and worshipped during *Shavout* by offering to God the very first fruits of their harvest each year. In this way they honored and praised God. Also by giving to God the first parts of their harvest, the people were also reminded how God had put them first and poured out His blessings upon them.

By the first century, when Jesus was preaching in the land of Israel, this festival was also known by the title *Pentecost*, the Greek word for “fiftieth day.” During those previous 1,500 years, the idea had been stressed during the Pentecost celebration that God had poured out His blessings on the land and on the people. So when God was ready for the next step in His plan of redemption, the people were also ready to understand that the Day of Pentecost was the time for God to once again pour out His blessings and His Spirit on all creation. When that happened, the Church and God’s final plan for the redemption of humanity became a reality and even more cause for celebration.

Today we continue to celebrate the Day of Pentecost in the Church. We celebrate it as the birthday or the beginning of the Church. For nearly 2,000 years, we have been reminded by the festival how God was at work in the lives of the Children of Israel and at work in history to bring about salvation for a lost creation. The day also reminds us of the Holy Spirit coming into our lives at our baptism, just as we are reminded of how the Spirit came into the lives of the apostles and first Church members.

Pentecost teaches us that we are to put God first in our lives and praise Him, just as He has put us first and given His Son for us. That is why it is so important for us to celebrate and to remember this day. For if we forget the day, how much longer before we forget the lessons that it reminds us of?

Blessings and happy First Fruits,

James