

Christian Holidays #10

by: Ronald L. Dart

Imagine yourself sitting in a room with 120 of the first disciples of Jesus. You have been through an emotional roller coaster over the last two months from Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem as the Messiah, to His ignominious arrest and torture and death, and then back up to His resurrection again, and you all saw Him alive. Some of you even saw him ascend into heaven.

Well, by this time you're expectant, but you have no idea of what is coming. He told you to wait in Jerusalem until you were empowered by power from on high, and now it's Pentecost, the 50th day after Christ's resurrection. You have all come together to observe the feast of Pentecost, as you have all your lives. Suddenly with no warning, the room is filled with a great roar, something that causes you to put your hands over your ears and something very much like fire shimmers across the ceiling of the room and a little stream of that fire descends upon each person sitting in that room.

You know, this would be the epitome of what we would call a hair-raising experience, wouldn't it?

And each of you then find yourself with the ability to speak in a language that you have never spoken before, and bursting with a message about the wonderful works of God.

It would be an unforgettable experience wouldn't it? Energizing, empowering, but you know the experience is not what this was about. The experience only lasted for a little while and then faded away. The disciples were left to ponder what the experience was all about and what it meant? It was clear enough, right from the start, that what was important was not so much the experience but the meaning of what happened.

The Temple Was a Stage

What the disciples were coming to understand was that the Temple was a stage upon which this drama was played out and that drama was the story of Christ. All their lifetime they had kept a series of holidays which the world today looks at as Jewish holidays. Now these Christians as they came into a new phase of their life were beginning to realize that these holidays played out on the stage of the Temple were nothing more than the story of Christ and what God is doing.

I call this series of articles Christian Holidays, because the festivals, the holy days of the Bible are Christian in the sense that they tell the story of the plan of God as it played out in Christ.

All these holidays had an Israelite historical meaning, but they foreshadowed the work of Christ. They sit in the Scriptures like a rock in the stream from which we can look back over history, and forward into the future.

Great Loss to Christianity

One of the great losses to Christianity was the abandonment of the Christian Holidays of the Bible with their dismissal as merely Jewish institutions as nominal Christianity charged off into the sunset doing its own thing.

Surely one of the greatest of the Christian holidays is Pentecost because it was on this day that the church was empowered to do its work. It was on this day that this incredible event occurred, and one of the great mysteries is why half of Christendom observes Pentecost and half doesn't?

On the day of Pentecost, that first Pentecost of the New Testament Church, no one even thought of abandoning the festival. They were far too high with the experience.

What Does Pentecost Mean?

But even on this day of Pentecost, one question had to be dominant in every mind, once you look past the incredible experience of the day, what did it all mean?

The men who came running to hear and see this event were all amazed, according to Luke, and they were in doubt, saying one to another, "What in the world does this mean?" And some of them said, "Well, big deal. These guys are just drunk with new wine" (Acts 2:13).

Finally, "Peter stood up with the eleven and lifted up his voice and said to them, "You men of Judea, all you who dwell in Jerusalem, be this known unto you, listen to my words, these men are not drunk as you think. After all, boys, it's only the third hour the day (Nine o'clock in the morning). This is that which is spoken by the prophet Joel," and then Peter reaches way back in the past and pulls down a prophecy from the second chapter of the book of Joel.

Here's what Peter quoted Joel as saying, "It shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams, and on my servants, and on my handmaidens will I pour out in those days of my spirit and they shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17-18).

All Flesh

It seems doubtful that Peter even here fully understood all of the implications of Joel's prophecy. He was seeing with his own eyes part of the phenomenon. He was seeing the sons and the daughters filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesying, he saw that. But in the light of his later conduct, it's doubtful that he considered the implications of that one little phrase "all flesh." I will pour out of my spirit upon "all flesh", for Peter and the others, still had not gotten through their minds, the truth that God was breaking the faith loose from the Temple, from Jerusalem, and in particular from the Jews alone.

It would later become apparent to Peter that when God said 'all flesh', He meant what He said.

And in the event, the pouring out of the Spirit was all encompassing, old, young, male, female, and I have to conclude based on Peter's citation of Joel, that there were women present, who received this gift as well.

Peter went on in Acts 2:19, "I will show wonders in heaven above, signs in the earth beneath, blood, fire, vapor of smoke, the sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood, before that great and notable day of the Lord comes, and it shall come to pass that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

This passage also kicked the door open to taking the gospel to the Gentiles, that last phrase was all-inclusive, 'whosoever' included Gentiles. So here we go all the way back to the prophet Joel.

We know also that it's in the prophet Isaiah that the Old Testament prophet prophesied the taking of the gospel to the Gentiles, something that all Jews and even including the apostles of Christ had a lot of trouble dealing with in the years just after Christ's ascension. Now the difficulty with this passage is that Joel is really dealing with an end time event, the day of the Lord.

Prophecy Is Dreamlike

There's a confusing thing about prophecy. It has a dreamlike quality. You know how it is when you dream, all the normal rules of time and space are suspended. You could be acting out events in one location and finish them in a totally different place. In a dream anything can happen. You can be starting out your events in a dream in one dimension of time and ending it in another. Prophecy is precisely the same way. Time means nothing, and space means nothing in prophecy. Attempts to interpret prophecy in conscious literal terms is generally futile.

Peter was sure he was seeing a fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. What he could not know was how soon or in what manner the rest of the prophecy might come to pass. The reference to

these same signs in Revelation places these events well into the future, but the empowering of the disciples, the opening of the door to the gentiles was a right now event.

But apart from taking the gospel to the Gentiles, what in the world did Pentecost mean?

What Did Pentecost Mean?

So when the New Testament Church on this day of Pentecost, after this momentous event had changed all their lives, what did Pentecost mean to them?

Peter continues in his speech in Acts 2:22 and said, "You men of Israel, hear these words, Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs which God did by him in the midst of you as you yourselves also know." Peter didn't have to recount the events of Jesus's ministry. The men in front of him on this day knew about it. Yes, they were from all over the empire. They had been born in other places, and they spoke those languages, but they had been living in Jerusalem during Jesus' ministry and they knew what He had done. The word was everywhere.

"Him," Peter said, "Jesus being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, God delivered him into their hands, he said. You then have taken and by wicked hands, have crucified and slain." Yes, but they didn't do it, did they? Didn't the Romans crucify Jesus? That is true, but they can't escape responsibility. They had been there. They knew. They were consenting to Jesus' death. They may even have been among those who were in the crowd who said "Let him be crucified." They can't escape this.

David

Peter goes on to say about Jesus in Acts 2 and verse 24, "Whom God has raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by death, for David speaks concerning him." Now here comes an interesting Psalm. He's actually going back to one of the Psalms written by David and most students of the Bible are aware of this.

David in the Bible is a type of Christ. He is God's anointed. He is, in a sense, because he was anointed to be king of Israel, a kind of Messiah, and often times he speaks in his Psalms in the first person as God's anointed, and he is speaking for Christ. Peter says, David speaks concerning Christ (Psalm 16:8-11), "I foresaw the Lord always before my face, for he is on my right hand, that I should not be moved. Therefore did my heart rejoice and my tongue was glad. Moreover my flesh shall rest in hope, because, you will not leave my soul in hell, neither will you suffer your holy one to see corruption. You have made known to me the ways of life. You shall make me full of joy with your countenance." Now what is interesting about this, just clarifying a couple of issues, when he uses the word 'hell' here, he's using the Greek word Hades, which doesn't mean someplace where people will burn forever, it is talking about the grave, and he says "You will not leave my soul in hell (that is in the grave), neither will you suffer your holy one to see corruption."

Now a couple of things. Not only did he realize that a resurrection was on the heels of death, but in this particular case, it is to come quickly, as it happens within three days and three nights (Matthew 12:40), that corruption has not had a chance to begin on the body.

Now Peter says this in verse 29, "Let's understand this men and brethren, let me freely speak to you of the patriarch David that he is both dead and buried, and his sepulcher is with us till this day."

They could have walked within a few minutes from where Peter was standing in making this statement, to David's tomb. They all knew where it was and he said "David's dead, and David is buried down there. His tomb is still with us, and his body has seen corruption, but he was a prophet (Acts 2:30), and knowing that God is sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh. He would raise up Christ to sit on His throne. He seeing this before spoke of the resurrection of Christ, that His, Christ's soul was not left in hell and neither did His flesh see corruption." Did you catch that? David knew. This is an important thing to understand. He wasn't wandering around in the dark. King David was a prophet and he knew what God was going to do and so he was saying that Christ would be raised up, that Christ would be raised from the dead, that Christ's body would not see corruption. He would only be in the grave for very little while, for three days and three nights.

Peter is establishing all of this, for the Jews standing in front of him, men who knew the Scriptures and who had responded nodding their heads to what he said about David in this case, and he says, "Let's understand this, David's dead."

Now in verse 32, Peter had this to say, "This Jesus has God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses." Wow, he's talking for at least eleven men, the apostles who were standing there, however, more than that, all the disciples of Jesus had seen that.

Now in Jewish law, in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word has to be established. Here we are fellows, eleven of us, and more if we need them, who are eyeball witnesses of the resurrected Jesus Christ. We're telling you, "Therefore, being at the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit. He has shed forth this which you now see and hear."

Who has? Jesus has! The actual shedding forth, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon the church at this time is something that Jesus had done.

He goes on to say in Acts 2:34, "David is not ascended into the heavens." He's buried. He's right down here. "But he says himself, the Lord said unto my Lord, sit on my right hand until I make your foes, your footstool. Therefore, let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made that same Jesus, whom you have crucified, both Lord and Christ."

How Would You Feel?

Now, I don't know how you would feel if you were standing in the crowd in front of Peter and Peter made eye contact with you, and he said, "Understand this my friend, God has made that same Jesus, whom you, you standing right there, you have crucified both Lord and Christ. When they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?"

Pricked in their heart. Indeed, I think, that is putting it mildly. To come to the realization that you have crucified the Christ, that He was now raised from the dead would have crushed a man's soul. After all the years of the expectations of the Messiah, after a lifetime of expecting and hoping and waiting for the Christ, to have been one of those standing there and saying "Let him be crucified" would've been a crushing blow.

Peter had a simple message when they said, "What should we do?" Peter said in Acts 2:38, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, for the promise is unto you and to your children and to all that are far off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call" and with many other words he did testify, and exhort, saying, "Save yourselves from this untoward generation."

Repent and Be Baptized

It's a simple message that when the conviction comes upon a person that you have sinned and through your sins you have crucified Christ.

The call is simply to repent, that is turn from your sins and live a righteous life. Be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. It's a simple promise, "Then they that gladly received his word were baptized and the same day there were added to them about 3000 souls. They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, breaking bread and offering prayers" (Acts 2:41-42).

What a time to have been in Jerusalem with 3000 baptisms in one day. It's kind of hard to visualize isn't it? To do the math. The breakdown of how many people had to be baptized per hour and how they went about talking to them, and how did they carry it out. They could not have taken a lot of time, but at the same time, I think their hearts were so full, so stretched, so expanded by what had happened that day that the decision, the carrying out of the baptism act, must have been easy and quick and very, very joyful.

So what did Pentecost mean to these disciples in this time and this place?

Pentecost

To the Jews and consequently to the Christians, Pentecost was not a standalone festival. It was known to the Jews also as the feast of weeks, and very importantly, the feast of first fruits.

All of their years of wilderness wandering as they observed this day is really a matter of observing the giving of the Ten Commandments because they had no first fruits in the wilderness until they entered the Promised Land. Pentecost as the feast of first fruits didn't mean much to them then, but it was the 50th day of something that had begun seven weeks ago.

In the Jewish economy it started with day one of seven weeks of harvest. It started with the offering of the first of the first fruits to God at the same moment that the resurrected Christ was presented to the Father on the morning after His resurrection.

Firstfruits

The story is told for it, initially the commandment for it is given in Leviticus 23, beginning in verse nine, "The Lord spoke to Moses, and said, speak to the children of Israel and say to them, "When you come into the land that I will give you, and shall reap the harvest of it, you shall bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest, and he shall wave the sheaf before the Lord to be accepted for you on the morrow after the Sabbath, the priest shall wave it."

Now what is the Christian connection to the first fruits? That is our question because that is what this is called, it is the feast of first fruits. It is the sheaf of the firstfruits. What did it mean to Christians?

First Corinthians chapter 15, verse 20, "Paul writing about the resurrection to the Corinthians said this, "But now Christ is risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept." The connection is there. "For since Adam came death, by man came also the resurrection from the dead, for just like Adam all die, even so, in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order, Christ, the first fruits. Afterward, they which are Christ's at his resurrection." So, for Christians, the connection was almost automatic. They saw very clearly and quickly what all this meant.

Countdown of Seven Sabbaths

Now lets go to Leviticus 23 and verse 14, "You shall eat neither bread, nor parched corn, nor green ears, from this crop until the selfsame day that you have brought an offering to the lord your God: it is a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings. And you

shall count unto you from the morrow after the sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering; seven sabbaths shall be complete:"

Note this well. There was a countdown of seven sabbaths. So when Matthew says that "Mary first saw Jesus on the first day of the week," what he has said in the Greek is, "Jesus appeared to Mary on the first of the sabbaths," (The Greek word is not weeks but it is the word sabbaths in the plural.) Now we know it was a Sunday morning, so it had to be on the first day of the sabbaths that is of the seven sabbaths leading up to Pentecost.

Leviticus 23 and verse 15, "You shall count from the morrow after the sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering; seven sabbaths shall be complete: Even unto the morrow after the seventh sabbath shall you number fifty days; and you shall offer a new meal offering to the LORD."

Two Loaves are Firstfruits

Continuing in verse 17, "Bring out of your habitations two wave loaves of two tenth deals: they shall be of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven."

Now listen to what He says about the two loaves that are offered on Pentecost. That is on the day the Holy Spirit was poured out on these people and they baptized 3000 people in one day. He said, "You bring these out, they are the first fruits to the Lord".

Now, what would the church have imagined that this meant? Seven weeks after Jesus rises from the dead as the firstfruits, yet another offering is made that is called firstfruits. How would they have understood this?

Well, we know how James understood it, because in the first chapter of his letter, James, one, verse 16 he says this, "Don't make a mistake, my beloved brethren, every good and every perfect gift from above and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither a shadow of turning, of his own will He begat us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures."

So not only is Christ the firstfruits, so are we (the Church). But Christ is the first of the firstfruits and then along comes the remainder of us. When they wandered into the Temple on Pentecost and saw the priest with the two wave loaves that he was going to offer before God of leavened bread, now we're talking not about the resurrection of Christ, but the resurrection of the rest of us (the Church).

Now you may not realize this, but in Revelation 14, that famous number of 144,000, they are called the first fruits unto God and the Lamb. The church would surely have connected these two loaves of the firstfruits to the 3000 people that they baptized on that Pentecost.

Pentecost, in a sense looks to the day of the Lord, the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead, when the first fruits are presented to God.

Later Fruits

But there's a joker in the deck, and I wonder if you have caught it. Mind you, we are all the way down to the resurrection of the dead, the one hundred and forty four thousand are standing there and they are the first fruits of God.

The very term firstfruits suggest that there are later fruits, doesn't it? Otherwise, why are they the first? There are later fruits to be harvested after the firstfruits which in Christian doctrine comes after the return of Christ, the day of the Lord and the resurrection. Sobering thought, isn't it?

You see, in Palestine, there were two major harvests. Grain in the spring and fruit in the fall. Now what on earth is implied in this idea of firstfruits and later fruits? We will have to come to that later in this series on Christian holidays, but first I want to establish the harvest connection.

In Matthew 9, it tells us that Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every sickness and disease among the people, but when He saw the great crowds, He was moved with compassion upon them, because they fainted and were scattered abroad like sheep without a shepherd. And he said to His disciples, "The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few. Pray the Lord of the harvest to send forth laborers into his harvest" (Matthew 9:35-38).

You would have to be blind to realize that what Jesus is talking about is people not grain. It is these people out there who are scattered around like sheep without a shepherd. He says the harvest of these people is plenteous but the laborers are few. There's a lot of work to be done fellows.

For Jesus and His disciples the harvest was people for the kingdom. It was a repeated analogy in the New Testament for going out and evangelizing the people of the world so they could be harvested as the firstfruits to God.

Pentecost brings us up to the first resurrection, the harvesting of the saints for the kingdom of God.

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