



Deuteronomy 26:1-11

New Revised Standard Version

¹ When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it,

² you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name.

³ You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us."

4 When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God,

5 you shall make this response before the Lord your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.

6 When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us,

7 we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.

8 The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders;

9 and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

10 So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me." You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God.

11 Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.

The children of Israel had done as they were told... mostly. We need to remember that during the time of Joseph, they had been welcomed into the land of Egypt. It was only over the course of time that Egypt came to express the fact that the Israelites had worn out their welcome. Alarming, the followers of Yahweh had grown in number to the point that they might be considered a threat to Egypt and its citizens. So, the easiest way to solve the problem was turn this massive number of unwelcome people into a work force and then into slaves. They needed to be contained and controlled.

Unfortunately for the Egyptians, even in slavery conditions, the numbers of Israelites continued to grow.

You see, the Israelites hadn't really had a home. Abraham was basically a wanderer. So were Isaac and Jacob. Joseph didn't wander to Egypt. He was sold into slavery which took him to Egypt. So, when his family came to Egypt during the time of great drought, it must have seemed somewhat like a paradise and a great place to put down roots. After all, they had food, water, a roof over their heads and a relative in high places to keep them safe. They got comfortable... until it became uncomfortable.

The oppression by the Egyptians and the constant hope for something better left the minds of the Israelites if not exactly ecstatic, at least open to the possibility of something better. And while the Israelites were anxious to move forward, their fear of the Egyptians and possible retaliation was very real. When Moses showed up, people had hope. Here was someone promising them something better. Something better for both themselves and for their children. But to move them

past their fear, they had to have a lot of motivation. That motivation came in the realization of miracles and rhetoric so that when the time came to move, it was Pharaoh who pushed them out the door.

But we are a fickle people and it didn't take the Israelites long to start complaining and mess it all up which led to 40 years wandering in the wilderness, which became a time of reflection and preparation before entering the promised land. A time of being truly nomadic before settling down and becoming an Agrarian society..

And as they move from the wilderness into The Promised Land, we see a dramatic shift as they go from being Nomads and warriors to farmers and citizens. From the time of Joseph to Moses and then to Joshua and the the settling of The Promised Land, it was almost 300 years in the making.

The concept of first fruits was not high on the list for slaves and nomads. The lesson of offering first fruits to God had to be taught to a people that have been living on a shoestring, struggling in the Wilderness and were about to transition into working fertile fields and pastures.

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The Promised Land lay before them, just beyond the Jordan River.

They had to be reminded once again on how they had come to this land of milk and honey. They had to be reminded of who was responsible for their new home. They also had to be reminded of what they had been delivered from.

Consider all this from a Christian perspective where we look at the fact that Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness fasting and praying before He faced the temptations of Satan. In a weakened and deprived physical state, He was able to overcome temptation far beyond what we believe is humanly possible. Jesus knew the source of His strength and refused to deny His relationship with His Father. The Israelites had spent 40 years in the wilderness and most of them could not remember the trials that they faced in Egypt except by stories they had been told. Even with Manna and Water, life had been brutal in the Wilderness. So when they were finally in a position to settle down, it would have been so very easy to forget how they arrived at the promised land. It would have been so easy to put the past behind them and bask in a dream bath of milk and honey.

Why, as a people, are we so quick to forget where our blessings come from and yet, we have no problem remembering those who have done us harm? Why do we not embrace the Psalmist when he says:

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.

My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth.

Psalms 121:1-2

We don't normally appreciate our time in the Wilderness. We can be truly thankful when that time comes to an end. We may even celebrate and give thanks and praise to God. But then, like the children of Israel, we may find ourselves so comfortable that we forget how we got where we currently reside and it takes a wilderness to remind us. It is truly a vicious cycle. Which is why we need constant reminders of our past. That doesn't mean that we let the past define us. It simply keeps us from forgetting how God has moved in our lives to bring us to where we are now.

I want to provide context for our Deuteronomy passage beyond a comparison of 40 years in the wilderness for the Israelites and 40 days in the wilderness for Christ. I say this because when we talk about these events we tend to focus on the dark aspects of the Wilderness all the while ignoring that the fact that the Wilderness is not just a time of trial, but a time of preparation for greater things to come. Sometimes, we have to be prepared to receive the blessing in order to appreciate the blessing. Without the wilderness, the Israelites could never have appreciated the Promised Land. Likewise, 40 days in the Wilderness and the victory over the temptations, launched Jesus' three year ministry which ultimately led to the cross and resurrection. It prepared Him for what was to come.

Spending time in The Wilderness forces us to get back to the basics. It forces us to remove all the distractions from our lives. It allows us to hear our own breathing. It emphasizes how precious life is and how our conscious can come alive. It removes all the barriers between us and our Heavenly Father and strips away the things in our lives that we thought were important, making them small and insignificant in the grand scheme of things. We are forced to become reliant on someone other than ourselves for our very survival. If we lean into that reliance on our creator it becomes a place where we can not only survive, but also thrive! We must find meaning and purpose beyond the physical. It places us squarely in a position to understand the source of our blessing, the provision of our strength and the essence of our very existence. In the beginning, God spoke... and we are. And the very raw nature of that is something to be celebrated.

There is great debate over the authorship of the first five books of the Bible known as the Pentateuch. Most conservatives lean towards Moses as the Author while others tend to believe that there was more than one author. However, many conservatives also believe that Moses had other resources to pull information from when authoring these books. So, who really wrote Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and the book of our focus today, Deuteronomy? Is it so very important to know? Or is it more important to understand the context as well as the spiritual and historical implications? All we truly know is that from the author's perspective, the Israelites are about to cross the Jordan River into the

Promised Land. That God is not going to allow Moses to enter the Promised Land and that Joshua is about to take over as the leader for his people. But we cannot discount what Moses has been teaching in the wilderness. We read in Exodus 23:15-16

“Celebrate the Festival of Unleavened Bread; for seven days eat bread made without yeast, as I commanded you. Do this at the appointed time in the month of Aviv, for in that month you came out of Egypt.

No one is to appear before me empty-handed.

Celebrate the Festival of Harvest with the firstfruits of the crops you sow in your field.

Celebrate the Festival of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in your crops from the field”

We can appreciate the Festival of Unleavened Bread because of the Exodus from Egypt. But it is more difficult to understand the Festival of Harvest with first fruits and the Festival of Ingathering at harvest time because the Israelites have been wandering in the Wilderness and there were no first fruits or harvest.

We can only put this into context when we understand that the Wilderness was preparation for a time when there would be first fruits and harvest time.

The author of our passage in Deuteronomy truly wants the people that are about to possess the land before them to understand the nature and source of that blessing. The writer also wants the people to understand the process of bringing the first fruits to God. This is mandatory to helping them remember and be conscious of that source. To be grateful to God for His provision. To be passionate before God for His grace. To understand the nature of God as caregiver, rather than warrior.

God is unfolding himself before His children showing them that He is so much more than they can comprehend at any given moment. He is all things. He is multi-dimensional. He is complex in nature, but His message of love for His people is really quite simple.

When God asks us to celebrate First Fruits, what are we really talking about? That first harvest by the Israelites wasn't something they earned. After all, they didn't plant the trees and crops. Instead, they acquired them when they came into the Promised Land. So, the First First Fruits were truly an unplanned gift from God. The celebration of First Fruits was put into place so that every year after that first year, the children of God would remember who their provider was. Every year, the first harvest of the season belonged to God.

Do not get this confused with tithing. Tithing is that 10% of all that we gather that we return to God to serve the ministries that he allows us to serve in. No, the giving of First Fruits is the giving over to God the entire first harvest of the year. But unlike the Tithe, once it is given over, it is then used in celebration to proclaim the bounty exemplifies the nature of God as He provides for us.

So we bring the first fruits in celebration; understanding that God not only provided these fruits but also that he prepared us during our time in the wilderness so that we could truly appreciate these first fruits and how important it is for us to acknowledge the process as well as the result.

As for the celebration itself, it is not for us alone. It is a celebration that includes those who receive the first fruits, those who also have first fruits to bring, those who helped harvest those first fruits, and also everyone one else around us, including those who not involved in planting, harvesting or receiving those first fruits.

As we see in verse 11 of our scripture:

Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.

And nearly 1500 years later, we hear the words of Luke 2:9-11

An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

The God of heaven and earth delivering as first fruit the salvation of all people. And this message is reiterated in John 3:16-17.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.

For God sent not His son into the world to condemn the world but that through Him the world might be saved.

A message for all the world. A celebration for all mankind at the table of our Lord. A celebration of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the first fruit of our Heavenly Father, given to us out of love and grace.

So, we embrace the table. Embrace the Harvest. We embrace the ordinances of our faith. We embrace our times of study and prayer. All to constantly remind us of the bounty that God has presented before us through the gift of his Son.

As we examine our circumstances and consider our service during this season of Harvest, let us take time to remember that this season is being used by God to prepare us for what is to come. Think back to the story of Ruth and what lay Beyond the Harvest. Just over the hill is what God has prepared for us. The Promised Land is just on the other side of the river and with it comes the opportunity to bring to God our first fruits as we remember all that He has done for us and all that He is going to do for us. May we each keep our eyes on the promise while we serve our savior by lifting our neighbors and sharing our table with everyone around us.

Amen