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# Pentecost



A Day of Power for All People

*Fullness of Time series*



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# The Fullness of Time

## SERIES PREFACE

ESAU McCauley, GENERAL EDITOR

Christians of all traditions are finding a renewed appreciation for the church year. This is evident in the increased number of churches that mark the seasons in their preaching and teaching. It's evident in the families and small groups looking for ways to recover ancient practices of the Christian faith. This is all very good. To assist in this renewal, we thought Christians might find it beneficial to have an accessible guide to the church year, one that's more than a devotional but less than an academic tome.

The Fullness of Time project aims to do just that. We have put together a series of short books on the seasons and key events of the church year, including Advent,

Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. These books are reflections on the moods, themes, rituals, prayers, and Scriptures that mark each season.

These are not, strictly speaking, devotionals. They are theological and spiritual reflections that seek to provide spiritual formation by helping the reader live fully into the practices of each season. We want readers to understand how the church is forming them in the likeness of Christ through the church calendar.

These books are written from the perspective of those who have lived through the seasons many times, and we'll use personal stories and experiences to explain different aspects of the season that are meaningful to us. In what follows, do not look for comments from historians pointing out minutiae. Instead, look for fellow believers and evangelists using the tool of the church year to preach the gospel and point Christians toward discipleship and spiritual formation. We pray that these books will be useful to individuals, families, and churches seeking a deeper walk with Jesus.



# I

## Pentecost

A FEAST OF FIFTY DAYS, FIRST FRUITS,  
AND HARVEST

*When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they  
were all with one accord in one place.*

ACTS 2:1 NKJV

When you hear the word *feast*, what mental images come to mind? I imagine a large celebration filled with close family, dear friends, and tons of good food. To have a feast is to celebrate! And yet this aspect of the celebration of Pentecost often goes unconsidered.

In this chapter I endeavor to explore and examine with you the various feasts with which Pentecost is identified. From a biblical perspective, Pentecost has been known by many names in the Hebrew Old Testament that translate into themes pertinent to our Christian-Judeo spirituality.

## A FEAST OF FIFTY DAYS

The first Hebrew name for Pentecost in the Old Testament is *Hag Hashavuot*, or the Festival of Weeks, *Hag* meaning “feast” or “festival” and *Shavuot* meaning “periods of seven.”<sup>1</sup> The Feast of Weeks was celebrated on the “fiftieth day after the ceremony of the waving of the omer of barley, which itself was to take place on the day after the Sabbath after Passover (Leviticus 23:15-16).”<sup>2</sup> This chronological reference specifies the amount of time between Passover and Pentecost. Often so much attention is given to the actual day of Pentecost as narrated in Acts 2, along with the supernatural events surrounding it (“a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind,” and “tongues, as of fire”), that equally if not more important events go unnoticed. I have always asked myself why Luke, the writer of Acts, uses the phrase, “When the day of Pentecost had fully come . . .,” what does “fully come” mean? Also, other than Jesus’ command to assemble in Jerusalem, what other reason would there be for Luke to bring to his readers’ attention the fact that “they were all with one accord in one place”? This is where the theme of Pentecost as a feast celebration that counts the day by day encourages the reader to focus on and celebrate the fifty days within Pentecost instead of the actual day of Pentecost.

Unlike its two contemporary festivals (Passover and Sukkot), Pentecost as the Feast of Weeks is the only festival where the Israelites were commanded to count the days leading up to the actual feast (Leviticus 23:15-16; Deuteronomy 16:9). In fact, each of the fifty days of Pentecost were not only to be counted but were treated with importance, and were days of rejoicing. For early Christians, “every day was treated in the same way as Sunday, that is, with no kneeling for prayer or fasting,” according to Bradshaw and Johnson.<sup>3</sup> This particular focus on honoring or celebrating the fifty days of Pentecost reminds me of the notion of the sanctification of time in Abraham Heschel’s work *The Sabbath*:

While the deities of other peoples were associated with places or things, the God of Israel was the God of events: the Redeemer from slavery, the Revealer of the Torah, manifesting Himself in events of history rather than in things or places. Thus, the faith in the unembodied, in the unimaginable was born. Judaism is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time.<sup>4</sup>

This notion of the sanctification of time—especially during periods of uncertainty such as pandemic fatigue,

financial stress, religious apathy, and relational struggles—can be found in the counting of days in Pentecost. It reminds us once again of God’s sovereignty over the processes of our lives. And it could be one of the reasons Luke was so determined to start his narrative by stating, “When the day of Pentecost had fully come.”

If you were to look for the phrase “in the fullness of time” in the New Testament, you would find it only twice. Historically speaking, the first mention is found in Paul’s declaration of God sending his Son in Galatians: “But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons” (Galatians 4:4-5 NKJV). The second instance is found in Acts 2 as discussed above, which speaks of God sending his Spirit and is the text that serves as the main verse for this chapter. The expressions “fullness of time” and “had fully come” actually speak of two specific periods of time, one characterized by preparation and the other by fulfillment. Though different, both periods are interrelated. One of the facts of life is that often we are more preoccupied with the fulfillment of a thing than the preparation for that thing. What would



it have meant for those men and women in the upper room to have waited day in and day out for the promise of the Holy Spirit? How did they wait?

A Hebrew name given to Pentecost that is not found in the Old Testament but has rather been historically adopted and falls in line perfectly with the notion of Pentecost as a feast of the fifty days is *Z'Man Mattan Toratenu*, which translates into “the giving of the law.”<sup>5</sup> This particular historical designation speaks both to the belief that the Feast of Weeks correlates with the giving of the law at Mount Sinai and also to what the Festival of Weeks became after the temple was destroyed. Here Pentecost became a time for Jews to stay up all night rehearsing the book of Ruth and the giving of the law in Exodus 19–20, as well as the Decalogue or Ten Commandments, as later Jewish tradition described Pentecost.<sup>6</sup>

How are we encouraged by both the Old Testament and New Testament witness of Pentecost to wait on the Lord? Surely we no longer wait for the promise of the Holy Spirit, which has already been fulfilled, but we wait nonetheless for the things in which we believe.

Elisabeth Elliot famously said, “The devil has made it his business to monopolize on three elements: noise,

hurry, crowds.”<sup>7</sup> Pentecost as a feast of the day by day is a time when we rediscover the joy of waiting on the promises of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a time when we celebrate not only the fulfillment of a promise but also the preparation that moves us toward that promise. It is a time when we intentionally slow down and consider living not in the future to come or the past that was but in the day-to-day present that is.

Interestingly, unlike our modern Christian practice, the early church placed a special emphasis on the fifty days of Pentecost and even utilized biblical imagery to expand its spiritual meaning. While for today’s Christian the meaning of Pentecost resides mostly within the day of Pentecost, the early church fathers found prolific spiritual meaning in the symbolism of the fifty days. For example, Clement of Alexandria, one of the earliest Christian theologians, in arguing for the mystical meanings of numbers and geometrical ratios, saw the fifty days of Pentecost as resembling the width of the ark Noah was commanded to make. For Clement, the fifty days of Pentecost, like Noah’s Ark, was a “symbol of hope and remission or pardon.”<sup>8</sup> This concept of forgiveness and pardon was shared by Origen, another early Christian scholar and a student of Clement.

For Origen, the width of Noah's Ark was a reminder that "according to the law, indeed there was a time for forgiveness of debts every fifty years."<sup>9</sup>

The law Origen makes mention of is the law of jubilee found in Leviticus 25:8-17. There the children of Israel are commanded to set free all slaves and return all property that had been leased or mortgaged to the original owners every fiftieth year (Leviticus 25:10). This theme of forgiveness and pardon, although abundant in the early church's teaching regarding Pentecost, is one the modern church has ignored or has no knowledge of at all. Usually we attribute themes like forgiveness and pardon to seasons like Lent, yet we must not miss its centrality in Pentecost as well. With its focus on fifty days, Pentecost is a season of preparation and fulfillment as well as a season that counts the day to day and gifts us power to forgive as we ourselves have been forgiven.

### **A FEAST OF THE FIRST FRUITS**

The second Hebrew name found in the Old Testament for Pentecost is *Hag Habikkurim*, or the Festival of First Fruits. The Hebrew word *bikkurim* is connected to the root word *bekhor*, which refers to the firstborn. "On the

day of the first fruits, when you offer a grain offering of new grain to the LORD at your festival of weeks, you shall have a holy convocation; you shall not work at your occupations” (Numbers 28:26). As a festival of the first fruits, *Hag Habikkurim* required that either the firstborn man or firstborn animal be given to God: “Consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and animals, is mine” (Exodus 13:2). Honoring and obeying the command to dedicate to God the first fruits came with a promise of overflowing barns, vats, and new wine (Proverbs 3:9-10). “Later Tradition mandated that the first fruits be brought only from certain crops known as the ‘seven species.’ These were the seven products of Israel mentioned in Deuteronomy 8:8: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates (honey dates).”<sup>10</sup>

Speaking of first fruits, I am almost always terrified to hear modern clergy and laity alike refer to first fruits in the context of wealth or prosperity. While there is an economic concept tied to the notion of first fruits, the actual Christian spiritual practice comes not from the offering of natural grain or wheat but from Christ himself. Cyril of Alexandria, a Christian bishop and doctor of the church, in

speaking of Pentecost's Old Testament practice of offering the sheaves and first fruits, states that these must now be interpreted in light of the life, passion, death, and resurrection of Christ: "Then contemplate the first-fruits of renewed humanity, that is to say, Christ Himself, in the figure of the sheaf and in the first-fruits of the field and in the first ears of grain, offered in holy oblation to God the Father."<sup>11</sup> Cyril's characterization of Christ as both sheaf and first fruit offered to God leads Jean Daniélou to conclude:

The feast of the harvest is seen to be the figure of the Resurrection of Christ under the double aspect which characterizes the content of the feast; first it is an offering, and this is a figure of the offering of Christ to His Father, of the sacrificial character of the Resurrection; and secondly, it is an offering of first-fruits; and Christ is Himself the first-fruits of redeemed humanity.<sup>12</sup>

When we think about a reinterpreted Pentecost spirituality in the light of Christ, two major themes should be prominent and celebrated in relation to the concept of first fruits. First, the theme of sacrifice as an offering should remind us that in giving our time, our finances,

and even our talents and gifts, we are (to some extent) modeling the sacrificial and resurrected nature of Christ, who paid it all through his own sacrifice (Hebrews 10:11-14) and who rose from the grave, ascended, and presented himself to his Father (John 20:17; Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9-11). Celebrating Christ as our offering (Hebrews 9:28) should be a standard practice in the life of the believer. Yet many times our own sacrificial giving of our lives, talents, and monetary gifts is hampered by regret and suspicion. Pentecost is the feast in which we are reminded that God loves a cheerful first fruit giver.

Second, above and beyond any economic gift or gift of time we might make, nothing can replace the offering of ourselves as a renewed and redeemed humanity (Psalm 107:2; Ephesians 1:7; 4:22-24). As 1 Peter reminds us, in and through Christ we are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, his own special people, that we may proclaim the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9). Therefore, our first fruit Pentecost offering should be first and foremost that of a redeemed and renewed life in and through Christ, which as a consequence means we have gifts of finances, time, and talents to offer.

## A FEAST OF THE HARVEST

The third Hebrew name given to Pentecost in the Old Testament is *Hag Hakatsir*, which means the Festival or Feast of Harvest: “You shall observe the festival of harvest, of the first fruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field” (Exodus 23:16). Pentecost celebrated the end of the barley harvest and the beginning of the wheat harvest.<sup>13</sup> Both barley and wheat as grain crops would have been planted together in autumn, yet barley matured quickly while wheat took much more time.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the wheat harvest took up the whole spring, up to mid-May. According to Sejin Park, “The completion of harvest was a natural opportunity for celebration since it signified divine blessing and material abundance, and was a natural point in the agricultural cycle to take a break from work.”<sup>15</sup>

In the Gospels, Jesus refers to the harvest when he observes the throngs of people who come to him during his teaching and healing ministry:

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are

few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” (Matthew 9:36-38)

Imagine this scene. In the Gospels of both Matthew and Luke, Jesus looks out into the multitude and is moved with compassion toward them. Yet he tells his disciples to pray that the Lord of the harvest might send out laborers. I’ve always asked myself why Jesus didn’t tell his disciples *they* were the laborers—to go and reap this harvest now? The answer is that the disciples had not yet been filled with power. And just as those in the natural world had to wait fifty days for the harvest to completely come in, so the disciples had to wait fifty days, not only for the things they had seen and experienced to take root and produce fruit within them, but to be filled with the Spirit.

The difference now is that instead of taking a break to celebrate the end of the hard work, we are sent out in the power of the Spirit to reap the ever-growing and ripening harvest. This is why Pentecost continues to be a harvest feast or celebration, because we celebrate the fact that finally, at Pentecost, the laborers were sent into God’s harvest. Hallelujah!

While there are those who are entertained by notions of acknowledging only two sendings in the Christian narrative



(God sending his Son and God sending his Spirit in the filioque), believers need to pay close attention to the Pentecost account, which teaches that there are actually three sendings in the New Testament. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is sent by the Father and comes in order that we, those who receive the Spirit, might be sent out into the world (harvest) to make disciples (Matthew 28:19). As the Feast of Harvest reminds us, we are the empowered laborers who look upon a ripe harvest of souls in need of reaping.

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