Firstfruits, Worship, and Crossing the Jordan

Ministry · February 11, 2024

The Firstfruits Offering — Worship Before Service

Deuteronomy 26 gives instructions for a ceremony that was to take place when Israel came into the land: the offering of the firstfruits. The Israelite was to take a basket of the first produce of the ground, bring it to the place where God had caused His name to dwell, set it before the priest, and declare a summary of God's mighty acts — from Jacob the perishing Aramean who went down into Egypt, to the deliverance, to the land flowing with milk and honey. Then he was to set it down before the Lord, worship, and rejoice.

Before any instruction about service appears in the chapter, there is this: worship. The firstfruits offering was not service. It was worship — the Israelite entirely occupied with who God is and what He had done. The basket was the outflow of a heart filled with gratitude for the land flowing with milk and honey, and with a consciousness of what bondage in Egypt had been and what deliverance from it meant.

The application to us is direct. We have been delivered from a worse Egypt — this world and its bondage — and brought into a better Canaan, the heavenly places in Christ Jesus where every spiritual blessing is already our possession. Do we live in one room of that house? The Lord gave Israel the whole land, and they were expected to explore and possess every corner of it. He has given us all heavenly blessings in Christ. The question is how much of that we have entered into and are enjoying, and whether the overflow of that enjoyment is producing worship.

> *A perishing Aramean was my father, and he went down to Egypt... and Jehovah brought us forth out of Egypt with a powerful hand... and he hath brought us into this place, and hath given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. — Deuteronomy 26:5–9*

Worship is not a service conducted at an appointed time, led by an appointed person, following a set program. It is the outflow of what is in my heart — the expression of my personal occupation with who the Lord is and what He has done. David had this in abundance, and it comes out throughout the Psalms: I will bless Jehovah at all times, His praise shall continually be in my mouth. That was not the Psalm being sung; that was the worship already in his heart finding expression in the Psalm.

Worship Then Service — and the Lord's Specific Mind on Both

After the firstfruits, the chapter turns to service — the tithes distributed to the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, the widow. And with that comes a remarkable declaration: I have done all according to thy commandment. I have not transgressed nor forgotten any of thy commandments. Look down from thy holy habitation and bless thy people.

The Lord has a specific mind about service just as He has a specific mind about worship. The Israelite was not to bring firstfruits to any place he chose; there was one place where the Lord had caused His name to dwell, and that is where they were to bring it. We may have all kinds of natural ideas about what service looks like, and some of them may draw on genuine gifts or abilities. But the question is always whether it is the service the Lord has directed, in the way He has directed, for the people He has directed us toward.

The chapter closes with a charge to personal faithfulness: keep His statutes, His commandments, His ordinances, and hearken to His voice — in all things, including those that no one else sees. The Lord knows the secret sins, the private departures, the inward wanderings. If I am seeking to lead someone to the Lord

while conducting myself unfaithfully in the things only He can see, what power is there in my testimony? If I am still reaching back for the leeks and onions of Egypt, it is very hard to tell someone about a land flowing with milk and honey.

Reuben and Gad — Comfortable Before They Crossed the Jordan

Numbers 32 provides a sobering parallel. The children of Reuben and Gad looked at the land east of the Jordan — good land for cattle — and asked Moses if they could have it as their inheritance, staying there rather than crossing over with the rest of Israel. Moses's response was immediate: shall your brethren go to war and shall ye abide here? He pointed out that this was what Israel's parents had done at Kadesh-Barnea — been discouraged from entering the land — and he told them plainly: ye discourage the children of Israel from going over into the land that Jehovah has given them.

Their hearts were for their cattle, not for the full possession the Lord had intended for them. They were happy enough to have crossed the Red Sea — glad to be out of Egypt. But the Jordan was another matter. There was work on the other side of the Jordan, enemies to dispossess, land to conquer. Here the land was already good. Why go further?

The same temptation is real for us. We may be glad to be out of Egypt — glad to be saved, grateful for what we have been delivered from. But crossing the Jordan means something more: entering into the full heavenly possession, possessing all that Christ has won, pressing in to the riches of what is ours. That takes exercise. It means feeding the new nature in the Word, praying, entering into heavenly truth. And when that effort is not made, we sit in the desert — not in Egypt, but not in Canaan either — and call it good enough.

The Rich Young Man — A Heart on Its Possessions

Matthew 19 provides a New Testament echo of the same principle. The young man who came to the Lord had kept all the commandments — or so he believed. And the Lord, who searched his heart, put His finger on the one thing that stood between him and full discipleship: his large possessions. Go, sell what thou hast, and give to the poor — thou shalt have treasure in heaven — and come, follow me. He went away grieved, for he had large possessions.

He crossed the Red Sea, so to speak — he had done the outward religious things. But he would not cross the Jordan. His heart was on the wrong side of the river. And in the record of Scripture, we never find that he was saved.

The lesson is not that wealth is necessarily the barrier. The thing the Lord pointed to was whatever held the young man's heart. For Reuben and Gad it was cattle. For the rich young man it was his wealth. For us, the question is: what is it? What holds me back from giving everything, from crossing fully into the possession the Lord has prepared? It might be time, or comfort, or reputation, or relationships, or simply the habitual pull of what is familiar.

The Early Assembly — No Delay, No Reservations

Acts 2:37–47 shows us what it looks like when none of these barriers are present. Those who heard Peter's word on the day of Pentecost were baptised — apparently immediately. They persevered in the teaching and fellowship of the apostles, in the breaking of bread and prayers — no delay. They had all things common and sold their possessions and substance to distribute to any who had need. The Lord added to the assembly daily those that were to be saved.

How much time did it take the new nature to be ready to do God's will? The new nature is always ready. It was the old nature that would have required preparation, calculation, negotiation. The new nature, born of God, tends naturally toward obedience. The delay in our obedience is almost always the old nature's resistance, not the new nature's unreadiness.

When those early believers sold their possessions and gave everything, the Lord was not only asking about money. The question is how much of anything — time, energy, reputation, comfort, plans — we are willing to give. Ye are not your own, ye are bought with a price. The Lord's claim is total. The challenge is not to give something, but to hold nothing back from Him who held nothing back from us.

> *I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified. — Acts 20:32*

—