

Introduction: We return to the Thessalonian letters this week with Paul's confidence in God's electing work in 2 Thessalonians 2:13. No matter how deceived the world is in its refusal to love the truth in 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12, the Thessalonians are secure because they are "chosen to be God's first-fruits" in verse 13. As the English Standard Version puts it, translating Paul's prayer of thanksgiving for the Thessalonians: "*But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the **first-fruits** to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.*"

Can there be a more promising description of the believer than "chosen by God to be His first-fruits"? Oh, may the Lord make us fruitful, and save us from the terrible danger of being, as the ESV of 2 Peter 1:8 puts it, "ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Monday: read 2 Thessalonians 2:13 and Leviticus 23:9-14. In keeping with the idea of first-fruits, we remember how a sheaf of grain from the first harvest in the Promised Land in Joshua 5:10-12 was offered to the Lord. This was in obedience to the command of Leviticus 23:9-14, where the priest was to take the sheaf of grain and "wave" it before the Lord as a symbol of the new life for God's people in the land of Canaan. It was not to be burned as a sacrifice, but "waved" as a symbol of joyful thankfulness to God. In just this way, Jesus rose and took His newly harvested resurrection body up to Heaven, there to represent us as the first-fruits of the new creation. This is why, in 1 Corinthians 15:20's description of His resurrection, Jesus is called "the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep."

Meditate and Pray: Thank Jesus for sharing His resurrection power with us. He will not leave us in the grip of death, but will raise us in the likeness of His own glorious body – upon His victorious return to gather His harvest. Even now, by faith He can give life to our mortal bodies, so that sin is no longer our master, since we have been raised with Him spiritually even as we will one day be raised physically. Hallelujah!

Tuesday: read 2 Thessalonians 2:13 and Leviticus 23:15-22. God the Father knew, beginning in Old Testament times, how hard it would be for us to believe that there is a new, regenerated life for us to live by faith. How can we truly be redeemed from the old way of life? The scars of this sin-sick and dying world are ever with us, and we struggle daily with sin's deadly effects – even as believers. For this reason God repeats the festival symbolizing the offering of first fruits in Leviticus 23:15-22. Fifty days after the barley harvest of first-fruits, there was to be a second similar dedication of the wheat harvest to the Lord in the form of two loaves given to the priests as a second wave-offering of the first-fruits of the land in Leviticus 23:17.

Why two loaves? Well, some scholars say that, if Christ is raised as the first wave offering of "new grain" in Leviticus 23:9-14, then our being raised to new resurrection life is depicted by this second wave offering of two loaves. In the New Testament, moreover, we are called "one loaf of bread and one body" (1 Corinthians 10:17)! But leaven still infects us, as we continue struggling, even as Christians, with the effects of sin in every area of life. Well then, how fitting that these two loaves in Leviticus 23:17 are baked with yeast – a symbol of sin, for example, in 1 Corinthians 5:7, which says: "Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast – as you really are." How patient and realistic God is in accepting our lives as an offering of first-fruits, even though we still have the polluting effect of sin (leaven) in our members. Despite how tainted we in fact are, Paul can still declare in 2 Thessalonians 2:13 that we are chosen to be "first-fruits"!

Bible notes

Pastor Carl Durham

August 16, 2020

Meditate and Pray: What a great incentive to hate sin when God accepts from our hands the offerings of our lives, even though so tainted with sin! Well may we sing of such gracious acceptance in hymn # 457 in our Trinity Hymnal:

*Come, Thou Fount of every blessing,
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet,
Sung by flaming tongues above.
Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it,
Mount of Thy redeeming love.*

*O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.
**Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.***

Wednesday: read 2 Thessalonians 2:13 and Leviticus 23:18-21. As if to further underscore our wretched condition as loaves containing the “yeast” of sin, and our dire need for daily grace if the offering of our first-fruits is to be accepted at all, Moses stipulates in Leviticus 23:18-19 that a huge number of burnt offerings and sin offerings must be sacrificed along with the two loaves of the wave offering. This was to stir up gratitude in the worshipping Israelite, to make all aware of how their offerings to God could be accepted only when covered with rivers of sacrificial blood.

In the same way, how is it that we can offer to God our first-fruits, asking Him to purify the tainted offerings of our imperfect acts of worship? Only through the river of blood which flows from Christ's wounds on the Cross! Without blood, there can be no offering up to God of any wave offerings from us! Without blood there can be no forgiveness! May the bloodiness of all our worship remind us of Christ's sacrifice by which we, along with all our gifts, are accepted! Meditate and Pray: “Wretched men and women that we are, who will deliver us from this body of sin? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Thank God that He accepts our offerings as perfect offerings of pure grain because they have all been cleansed, before they are offered, in Christ's blood. Does not hymn # 457 speak to this as well?

*Here I raise my Ebenezer;
Here by Thy great help I've come;
And I hope, by Thy good pleasure,
Safely to arrive at home.*

*Jesus sought me when a stranger,
Wandering from the fold of God;
He, to rescue me from danger,
Interposed His precious blood.*

Thursday: read 2 Thessalonians 2:13, Exodus 12:12-20 and 1 Corinthians 5:7-8. As we think further of God's determination to progressively rid our lives of sin, purifying our offerings of “first-fruits” to Him, keep in mind the original Exodus story of how yeast was first treated as a symbol of sin. God commanded His people in Egypt to sweep all yeast out of their homes on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread in preparation for His coming down in judgment and saving power to redeem them from Egypt. When the Lord drew near to “pass over” Hebrew homes while striking dead all the first-born of the Egyptians, there was to be no yeast in any Israelite home – showing how necessary purity among God's people was when God drew near in saving power.

But notice also the good news contained in this command to get rid of all yeast: God only commands us to sweep away the sinful leaven of our lives *while at the same time promising His*

Bible notes

Pastor Carl Durham

August 16, 2020

Meditate and Pray: Energized by that promise of redemption, how eagerly Israel must have swept their houses clean from leaven that first Passover eve! May we do the same, knowing that “Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us, therefore, let us keep the feast” (1 Cor. 5:7-8).

Friday: read 2 Thessalonians 2:13, Leviticus 23:16 and Acts 2:32-37. We notice finally this week that this second wave offering of first-fruits was to take place 50 days after the first wave offering (Lev. 23:16) – “the day after Passover” as Joshua 5:11 declares. Well, is that not when the church celebrates Pentecost, 50 days after Passover? How fitting, then, that God sent His Spirit at Pentecost as proof that He was claiming us as His “first-fruits”! It is the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ, poured out from Christ’s throne, as Acts 2:33 indicates, who is the great Purifier and Destroyer of the leaven in our lives! He will make us an acceptable offering of “first-fruits” to the Lord!

No wonder Paul is so confident and full of joy as he declares to the Thessalonians in 2 Thessalonians 2:13: *“But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the **first-fruits** to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.”*

Meditate and Pray: Let this be our closing prayer for this week’s notes: *“Great Holy Father, thank you for giving us a pure and spotless Lamb to be our Passover sacrifice, and that as our risen Savior He has poured out His Holy Spirit to do that great heart work of purifying our hearts from the leaven of sin. And – most glorious of all – thank you that the great cleansing agent of the yeast of sin in our lives is nothing less than the love of God which the Holy Spirit pours into our hearts. Thank you for the great, expulsive power of the love of God – able to progressively expel the hated corruptions of sin. Help us, Lord, to hold onto the Spirit’s cleansing power. Please make Paul’s prayer in 2 Thessalonians 3:5 true of us, that we are being led increasingly into “God’s love and the perseverance of Christ.” In the Name of our great persevering Savior, Jesus, Amen.*