

May 2015

Dear Brethren,

From the Philippines we send our warmest greeting to all of you. We are about to celebrate God's Feast of Pentecost this month. At Pentecost time each of us should ponder: How much have I grown in this past year? How much and what kind of fruit did I bear?

I remember well one of our visits to our brethren in Luzon, where Mrs. Rosita Canta, the wife of Mr. Corsino Canta, our minister there, received us warmly with an abundance of fresh vegetables and fruits that season. I noticed her happiness and enthusiasm when telling us that these fresh fruits and vegetables were harvested from her garden. Talking about growing of fruits and vegetables, every gardener knows the joy of picking fresh ripe vegetables grown under the care of one's own hands. And every grower has experienced the wonders of sweet, luscious fruit, hand-picked at the end of a long season.

Whether always recognized or not, these blessings flow from the Eternal God, who created the fruits, vegetables and other growing things to meet man's needs. Yet seldom do we stop to think that He is the One who also gave us the capacity to rejoice in the fruits of this food-production process. For even that joy is a type of what God Himself experiences in watching His creation blossom and bring forth fruit.

Having tied human beings so closely to the soil, God uses that physical dependency to teach us spiritual truth. For example, He created growing cycles that lead slowly but inexorably from one harvest to the next. This is true with mature trees, as well as annually planted crops. And in each case, He commands us to bring an offering of the first ripe fruits to Him, in thanksgiving for His blessing. "The first of the firstfruits of your land you shall bring into the house of the Lord your God" (Exodus 23:19; cf Numbers 18:13, *New King James Version* throughout unless otherwise stated). If we were to keep that simple command carefully, we would be continually reminded of who the Creator is and what He has done in our lives.

Jesus Himself referred to the care of fruitful plants as a physical type of what God is doing among humankind. He said:

I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit (John 15:1–2).

Through our relationship with Christ, drawing our strength from Him, we are able to bring forth the same kind of spiritual fruit that He did. In fact, our very Christianity is

judged by whether our fruit is good or bad (Matthew 7:15–20). In the parable of the sower, Jesus showed that spiritual growth comes from being planted in good soil, which is likened to hearing and internalizing the Word of God (Matthew 13:18–23).

When we see how God uses so many analogies based on agriculture, we can quickly recognize that there are spiritual lessons to be learned today from His instruction to Israel regarding their grain harvests. When the Creator brought the Israelites out of Egypt and reminded them of His weekly Sabbath day, He also instructed them in the observance of *annual* Holy Days.

These days were synchronized with the spring and fall harvest seasons. They therefore had self-evident physical meaning for Israelites who were so dependent upon the land. But of greater significance is the fact that they are physical types of God's spiritual plan of salvation for all mankind.

### **Symbolic Agricultural Year**

Each year the annual festivals begin with the Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread. The Passover is clearly portrayed in the New Testament as representing the death of Christ to pay the penalty for our sins. The Days of Unleavened Bread are symbolic of coming out of the "slavery" of sin (1 Corinthians 5:7–8).

Leviticus 23 lists all the Holy Days that God commanded Israel to keep. The weekly Sabbath is discussed first, followed by the seven annual days the Israelites were to observe.

Also included is instruction for a particular ceremony in which Israel is told to offer a "wave sheaf" to God:

Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: "When you come into the land which I gave to you, and reap its harvest, then you shall bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest. He shall wave the sheaf before the Lord, to be accepted on your behalf; on the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it" (Leviticus 23:10–11).

Once this offering was made, the grain harvest could begin. When the harvest was complete, the nation gathered to keep the Feast of Weeks (vv. 15–21). Today the Feast is called Pentecost. This New Testament English term is translated from the Greek. It means to "count fifty," referring to God's command to count fifty days from the offering

of the wave sheaf to the Feast of Weeks. This is how God instructed the Israelites to reckon the day of this Feast. In fact, it is the only one of the seven annual Holy Days that is not assigned a *fixed date* on the Hebrew calendar. And this is not a coincidence. Clearly God gave this unique method to reckon the Feast so that everyone would be reminded year by year that Pentecost is closely linked with the Days of Unleavened Bread.

How are Pentecost and the Days of Unleavened Bread related? The answer is found in the symbolism of the wave sheaf as it relates to the spiritual fulfillment of Pentecost.

This handful of grain was the first fruit offered to God at the beginning of the harvest. At the same time was offered "a lamb without blemish." All serious Bible students recognize that the Passover lamb—this lamb without blemish—pictured Jesus Christ. The Lamb of God likewise pictures the same Jesus, a man without sin, offered for the sins of the world. But now, this death without sin made possible His resurrection from the dead, and the wave sheaf shows His acceptance by God after He was raised. This explains why Jesus said to Mary Magdalene:

Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, "I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God" (John 20:17).

So Jesus, by the resurrection, became the "firstborn from the dead" (Colossians 1:18). But just as the wave sheaf marked the beginning of the early grain harvest, so also is Jesus the beginning of the early spiritual harvest.

Notice the similar language used to describe Christians. The Apostle James says we are "a kind of firstfruits of His creatures" (James 1:18). In addition, Pentecost is described as "the Feast of Weeks, of the firstfruits of wheat harvest" (Exodus 34:22). Thus the whole spring harvest was called firstfruits, out of which the wave sheaf had been taken in advance. Is it not plain then that God is continuing to reap spiritual fruit made in the image of Jesus Christ? This would certainly seem to be what is revealed through Paul's words when, speaking of a resurrection, he says: "But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming" (1 Corinthians 15:23).

Both Christ and His followers are likened to firstfruits, referring to the resurrection to life. In other words, an analogy is being used here to indicate that Christians are going to be harvested as fruit by the Creator God. And in this harvest Christ was the first to be resurrected, the "firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (v. 20).

But at this time, He alone has been resurrected to everlasting life. All others who have died in the faith are awaiting the sound of the last trumpet, when Christ returns to this earth as King of Kings.

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:16–17).

Following Christ's return, and the reestablishment of God's government on earth, the great fall harvest will begin. That time period is represented by the Holy Days observed later in the year. But today, during this age of the Church, the early harvest is still being reaped. So the growing cycle continues.

### **God Gives the Increase**

Notice how the Apostle Paul describes the role of Christ's ministry in cultivating those who are producing fruit for the harvest:

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building (1 Corinthians 3:6–9).

Now it starts to be obvious why Christ founded His Church on the day of Pentecost. For the nation of Israel was itself a physical type of God's spiritual Church to come. The Israelites were instructed in God's way of life and given His Law. The Creator even said to them:

I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live (Deuteronomy 30:19).

But being a carnal people they did not choose to obey God. Speaking of the difference between ancient Israel and the New Testament church, the letter to the Hebrews says, "For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it" (Hebrews 4:2).

So God does not ultimately desire that the carnal nation be His people. Rather He is creating a spiritual nation capable of serving Him through the power of His own Holy Spirit. This nation is made up of those who accept God's personal calling and surrender their lives to Him. They will be those who are reaped as part of the early harvest at the return of Christ. *We are*—the Church of God.

Now let us consider the marvelous events that marked the founding of the Church in the New Testament. As Jesus was preparing to leave this earth and return to the Father in heaven, He told His disciples:

But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8).

This power was not long in coming. A few days later, as the disciples were assembled together observing the Feast of Pentecost:

And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind. . . . And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance (Acts 2:2, 4).

Peter explained this phenomenon in an inspired sermon:

This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witness. Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear (vv. 32–33).

This was the power of the Holy Spirit, the very power of God, made available for mankind's use in living as Christ had lived. Now for those whom God called, there was access to Christ's faith. The power to choose life—everlasting life—instead of death was now given to the Church. This faith would make it possible to obey God's laws, not only in the letter, but in the broader spirit and intent. And most powerful of all, this faith would make it possible for us to seek forgiveness of sin through the sacrifice of Christ, our Passover. In other words, the gift of the Holy Spirit makes Christianity possible.

Paul says it eloquently in Galatians 2:20: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." And again: "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God" (Romans 8:14, *King James Version*).

This gift of the Holy Spirit must not be taken for granted. For God is not calling many in this age to receive it. Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44). Remember, this is the early harvest, small by comparison to the great harvest to come when salvation will be made available to all peoples.

## **Spiritual Fruit**

Continuing this lesson based on familiar agricultural themes, Jesus told His disciples, "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples" (John 15:8). Once again, we see what kind of fruit Christ does expect.

One good description is found in the book of Galatians. This section of Scripture contrasts the works of the flesh—that is, the natural way man lives—with the fruit of the Spirit.

Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness [licentiousness], idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like . . . (Galatians 5:19–21).

These actions are motivated by the carnal nature that is common to man—a product of the same nature of Satan the Devil, the god of this world.

Notice how different the fruit of the Spirit is, motivated by the power of God.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control . . . (vv. 22–23).

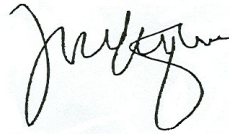
This is the fruit of the Christian. It reflects the attitude and actions of Jesus Christ, the Soon-Coming King, who will depose Satan and rule the world in righteousness.

The early harvest, pictured by the wave sheaf and the Feast of Pentecost, will be gathered at the return of Christ. Our place in this harvest will depend upon what kind of fruit we are producing as we live day by day. In Christ's parable of the wheat and the tares, He made it clear that a very different fate awaits the two groups based on their fruits.

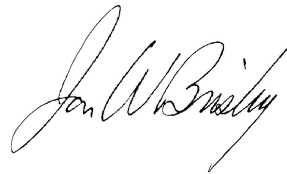
Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn" (Matthew 13:30).

The Feast of Pentecost teaches that God has offered us salvation today through a special calling. We have the opportunity to meet Christ at the resurrection and serve with Him as He brings those of mankind who qualify into the Family of God. We look forward to being gathered into His barn as the precious firstfruits of His harvest. Our salvation is proclaimed by the Apostle Paul in Romans 6:22: "But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life."

Your brother in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mario Roque". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "M".

Mario Roque

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jon W. Brisby". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "J".

Jon W. Brisby