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WHAT'S IN A NAME?



Names are important to God and so they should be to us. God, and sometimes people, frequently name individuals as well as places in accordance with their destiny, or to point out some aspect of their character. For example, God changed Abram's name to Abraham (Genesis 17:5) to reflect God's promise to make him the "father of many nations." Similarly, Abraham's wife Sarai was renamed Sarah ("princess"), undoubtedly to reflect her character as a "mother of nations" (Genesis 17:15–16).

Sometimes God gives a name that is not the name used in daily life; in 2 Samuel 12:24–25 the son of David and Bathsheba is named Solomon, the name by which he is known throughout the Bible; yet verse 25 says, "Because the LORD loved him, he sent word through Nathan the prophet to

name him Jedidiah”—which means “beloved of the LORD.” Likewise with places: when Jacob encountered God, “he called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz” (Genesis 28:19; “Bethel” means “house of God”).

Even so, the feasts of the Lord have meaningful names. The Bible often uses more than one designation to describe what happens during the holiday, as well as the themes and underlying significance of the celebration. In this chapter we will examine six names for the Feast of Pentecost, and the themes suggested by those names.

1. HAG HA-SHAVUOT

Have you ever noticed that one of the most challenging hours of the week comes just before you leave your home to attend a worship service? We rush about trying to get ready. Minor conflicts can become major crises and everything seems to take longer than expected. Imagine if getting ready for the worship service involved preparing for a journey that would take you far from home. Now imagine that not only you and your immediate family, but all your neighbors and friends are planning to journey with you, in a giant caravan of people heading off to worship. Preparation and planning would certainly set that worship service apart from the ordinary ones throughout the year. Such was the case with the Feast of Pentecost, which is best known in the Bible by its Hebrew name, *Hag ha-Shavuot*, or the Festival of Weeks.

(Note: If you mention this holiday to a Jewish friend, drop the “Hag ha” and use the name “Shavuot,” which is how Jewish people refer to the holiday. Equally common among European Jews is the Yiddish pronunciation, “Shavuos.”)

“And you shall observe the Feast of Weeks, of the first-fruits of wheat harvest” (Exodus 34:22 NKJV). The Hebrew word *hag*, in English “feast” or “festival,” is related to the Arabic word *haj*, a familiar word in the practice of Islam. *Hag* implies a pilgrimage.¹ Pentecost was one of three festivals that required such a pilgrimage: “Three times in the year all your men shall appear before the Lord, the LORD God of Israel” (Exodus 34:23 NKJV).

The Hebrew word *shavuot* means “periods of sevens” or “weeks.”² Yet the Feast of Weeks is not celebrated for weeks—or even one week. It is actually a one-day festival.

The name of the holiday does not describe the actual manner in which we celebrate it, as the Feast of Tabernacles does, nor does it point to the historical origin of the feast, as does Passover. Rather *Hag ha-Shavuot* is a chronological reference, pointing to the amount of time between Passover and this holiday.

God commanded the Israelites to count seven weeks from the day after Passover until the day when we are to celebrate this holiday, *Hag ha-Shavuot*. That is why the Bible calls it the Feast of Weeks.

“And you shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering: seven Sabbaths shall be completed. Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath; then you shall offer a new grain offering to the LORD” (Leviticus 23:15–16 NKJV; see also Deuteronomy 16:9).

The sense of anticipation or expectation connected to this holiday cannot be overstated. The holiday arrives as the climax of a season marked by a countdown beginning the day after Passover and lasting for seven weeks. This countdown emphasizes the theme of godly anticipation unique to this holiday. We don’t count the days leading up to Passover

nor do we count the days leading up to the Feast of Tabernacles. Pentecost, or the Feast of Weeks, is the only festival for which God commanded such a countdown.

Have you ever talked to a bride-to-be who is counting the days and hours until her wedding? Or to a student who is counting the days until summer vacation—perhaps even graduation? All the activities of life begin to organize themselves around this special time, and as anticipation for the event grows, people begin counting the days. That is the quality of expectation God built into this particular holiday as He required the children of Israel to count the days leading up to it. The famous rabbi Maimonides likened this exercise to someone who is waiting for their closest friend, counting the days and yes, even the hours.³

So as we think of the Feast of Weeks, we recognize that God intended for us to anticipate this celebration, to count, to expect—and that is one of the themes that will continue to unfold throughout our study of this festival.

2. HAG HA-BIKKURIM

A second name for the holiday is *Hag ha-Bikkurim*. You'll remember that "Hag" means festival or pilgrimage and "ha bikkurim" is Hebrew for the firstfruits.

"Also on the day of the firstfruits, when you present a new grain offering to the LORD at your Feast of Weeks, you shall have a holy convocation. You shall do no customary work" (Numbers 28:26 NKJV).

The Hebrew word *bikkurim* is related to the root word *bekhor*, which means firstborn. The idea of firstfruits is connected to the principle of the firstborn in Scripture. The Bible tells us that the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals belong to God:

Consecrate to Me all the firstborn, whatever opens the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and beast; it is Mine. (Exodus 13:2 NKJV)

The Jewish tradition of *pidyon ha-ben*, the redemption of the firstborn, is based on God's claim in the above Scripture. In Numbers 3:40–51, we see that following the Exodus, God required a census and a price paid for every firstborn male of the children of Israel. This was a very practical way to demonstrate His claim to His people, helping them understand what they owed Him, and what He was willing to accept, by grace, instead. Even as Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus to dedicate Him in the Temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:22), so we see throughout the Scriptures the firstborn were especially to be dedicated to God.

In the same way as God claims the firstborn, He tells His people that the firstfruits of the ground also belong to Him. Thus this festival of *Hag ha-Bikkurim*, Festival of Firstfruits, speaks to us of the importance of dedicating our first and our best to the glory of God.

Scripture promises a direct connection between our dedication and God's provision. "Honor the LORD with your possessions, and with the firstfruits of all your increase; so your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine" (Proverbs 3:9–10 NKJV).

This passage and principle should not be used to raise false hopes that prosperity is attainable in proportion to what we give. It would be foolish to calculate one's giving based on what one expects to receive in return. Giving that is motivated by what one will receive is not giving at all. The key to this verse is to honor the Lord. When we recognize that all we have belongs to God, we honor Him. When we dedicate ourselves and the firstfruits of what He provides for His use,

we honor Him. When we trust that giving our firstfruits for His special use will not leave us destitute, we honor the Lord. This leads to His blessing. He blesses us because we acknowledge that we and all we have are rightfully His, and He blesses us because in giving back firstfruits, we demonstrate our trust that He intends to continue to provide for us. This is instructive for all of God's children. Honoring the Lord with our firstfruits is part of the dedication and trust He expects and deserves.

3. HAG HA-KATZIR

A third name for the Feast of Pentecost is *Hag ha-Katzir*, which simply means the festival of the harvest. This is likely the earliest name given. We find it in Exodus 23:

Three times a year you shall celebrate a feast to Me. You shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread; for seven days you are to eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, at the appointed time in the month Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. And none shall appear before Me empty-handed. Also you shall observe the Feast of the Harvest of the firstfruits of your labors from what you sow in the field; also the Feast of the Ingathering at the end of the year when you gather in the fruit of your labors from the field. (Exodus 23:14–16 NASB)

Most of us are far removed from an agrarian society such as the Israelites experienced during Bible times. Almost everything we eat has been at least partially prepared by someone else. But in ancient Israel the cycle of sowing and reaping was absolutely central to the existence of the Jewish people; it was part of the day-in, day-out rhythm of life. The

Feast of Pentecost was an important juncture in that cycle of harvest. It commemorated the ending of the barley harvest and the beginning of the wheat harvest in the land. The emphases of the harvest festival are the themes of God's provision and our gratitude to Him for His covenant faithfulness.

This gratitude and the joy that comes with it are central to another harvest festival, the Feast of Tabernacles.⁴ In both harvest festivals God commanded the children of Israel to rejoice.

Leviticus 23:40 (NKJV) refers to the Feast of Tabernacles: "And you shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of beautiful trees, branches of palm trees, the boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days."

Deuteronomy 26:10–11 (NKJV) refers to the Feast of Firstfruits: ". . . and now, behold, I have brought the firstfruits of the land which you, O LORD, have given me.' Then you shall set it before the LORD your God, and worship before the LORD your God. So you shall rejoice in every good thing which the LORD your God has given to you and your house, you and the Levite and the stranger who is among you."

Don't you love these commands to rejoice? The apostle Paul echoes and expands on them in Philippians 4:4: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice!"

It may seem odd that God would have to command His people to be joyful. But which one of us does not get weighed down by the cares and the troubles and the woes of this world? We sometimes forget the things for which we ought to be grateful, and gratitude and joy go hand in hand. So God comes to us in His Word and through festivals like this and says, "Stop. Stop your preoccupation with the cares of life, stop with all the worries that weigh you down, stop and

be happy about what you have, and for God's sake, have a good time!" A lot of people think of religion in general and Christianity especially as being a sour, dour, unhappy way to live. People have told us, "I don't want to follow Jesus because I'll have to stop having fun." If only they could understand God's heart for His people. He commands us to rejoice.

What is more, this rejoicing is a community event. It is not something that we're supposed to experience alone but with all of God's people. And we are supposed to remember where we came from. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and do this. Remember that once you were strangers and aliens and so, God tells Israel, find some strangers, some aliens, and share some joy with them. This is what it means to rejoice. Showing grace to others who are in need reflects how you understand and appreciate God's grace in your own life.

Jewish tradition later added the reading of the book of Ruth as a ritual to celebrate this festival (see chapter 4). First, the events of the book take place during the barley harvest, making it a seasonal story, appropriate for the festival. More than that, Ruth was a stranger and an alien who received much kindness and grace from Boaz, a wealthy Israelite. Boaz, in accordance with Leviticus 19:10; 23:22, did not harvest the very full extent of his field in order to provide for Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi. Boaz was faithfully following God in this season of firstfruits. He showed gratitude to God by being gracious to others. Even so, our attitude toward others should reflect awareness of all God has done for us.

4. Z'MAN MATTAN TORATENU

Z'man Mattan Toratenu means the season of the giving of our Law. This fourth name is not found in the Bible but was given by the rabbis. Exodus 19 provides a clue as to why the rabbis added this name to the Festival of Weeks.

In the third month after the sons of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. (Exodus 19:1 NASB)

The chapter goes on to describe the giving of the Law. The third month of the Hebrew calendar is called Sivan, and the Feast of Weeks falls on the sixth of Sivan. The rabbis concluded that this historical event happened in conjunction with the celebration of this feast we now call Pentecost. While the Bible doesn't give us the specific date when the Law was given, it is not at all unreasonable to believe the giving of the Law converged with this feast. We will return to discuss this point in greater detail when we come to the celebration of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2. For now it is sufficient to say that in the Jewish community the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai has become integrally connected to the celebration of this harvest festival. This adds another theme to our study: the relationship between law and grace.

It is traditional, therefore, not only to read the book of Ruth but also the story of the giving of the Law in Exodus 19 and 20, including the recitation of the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments.

5. ATZERET

A further rabbinic title given to the festival is *Atzeret*, which has been translated “withdrawal,” “conclusion,” and “convocation.” *Atzeret* is the most common word the rabbis use to refer to this festival, but in the Bible it is not actually used of this holiday at all. However, Scripture does use *atzeret* to refer to the last day of Passover and the eighth day of the Feast of Tabernacles. It is most commonly understood to mean a concluding convocation. Unlike Passover and Tabernacles, Pentecost is a one-day holiday, and as on the other two holidays, the Israelites were to withdraw from their regular work (see Leviticus 23:21; Numbers 28:26). The sages of Judaism used *atzeret* to refer to the one-day celebration because they didn’t want to limit the celebration of the giving of the Law to just one day. They insisted that the Torah should be celebrated every day of the year, with a special concluding celebration at Pentecost. Therefore, in the Talmud, *atzeret* is the preferred name.

6. PENTECOST

The last name for this festival is best known among Christians. *Pentecost* is actually a Greek word meaning fiftieth. “Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath; then you shall offer a new grain offering to the LORD” (Leviticus 23:16 NKJV). This name for the festival, like the Feast of Weeks, once again emphasizes the idea of counting. Whether we count seven weeks or forty-nine days after Passover, we arrive at the same fiftieth day.

Pentecost is used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, and so it became the common reference to this festival in both the Jewish and Christian communities.

There can be no doubt that the Feast of Pentecost was important to the early church, chiefly because the early church was a Jewish church. In Acts 20:16, Luke tells us Paul was hurrying to get back to Jerusalem, if possible, by the Day of Pentecost. In 1 Corinthians 16:8 Paul tells the Corinthians, “I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost,” and so twice we see Paul making reference to his own schedule in keeping with this counting up to the Feast of Weeks.

Of course the greater significance for the church came as a result of what happened to the disciples on this feast day as it followed on the heels of Christ’s resurrection and ascension.

“And when the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place” (Acts 2:1 NASB).

There is no way to overstate the historic significance of what occurred in that room in Jerusalem. It forever changed this festival, making it a key date on the Christian calendar by adding an astounding new theme: the work of the Holy Spirit in the church, specifically in the arena of missions and evangelism. We will cover this in detail in chapters 6, 8, and 9.

Just as the Festival of Passover, with all its historic meaning, also pointed forward to the death and resurrection of Jesus, so the Feast of Pentecost pointed forward to another pivotal event in the history of the church. To truly appreciate what happened in that room, we should explore the rich background of the Old Testament festival in all of its fullness.