

A Kind of First Fruits

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[0 : 0 0] James chapter 1 we read that verse 18 of his own will begat he us with the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures. Now if we go back to verse 1 in James we see that James who is almost certainly the brother of our Lord is writing to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting. This means that James is writing to Jewish believers, this reference to the twelve tribes means that it is Jewish believers, the twelve tribes of Israel that scatter all over the Roman Empire and it is those Jewish Christians who are from a Jewish background now and with steeped in the Old Testament scriptures and tradition but who have embraced Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, as the fulfilment of all the scriptures, it is to them that James is principally in the first instance writing. Now why this matters is because this reference to the kind of first fruits, this is something which really only those with a knowledge and with an understanding of the

Old Testament scriptures would really get. Yes Gentiles might understand if it's explained to them what does he mean by first fruits, what's the context here but those who have a Jewish background, those who are steeped in the Old Testament scriptures and the Hebrew tradition and so on they would understand right away what he meant. So if we can just refresh our minds and memories we'll go back to Exodus 22 and see where the Lord begins to instruct the Israelites about the question of the first fruits. This is after the Ten Commandments and so on and now he writes to them in chapter 22 from verse 29 and 30 and 30, thou shalt not delay to offer the first of thy ripe fruits and of thy liquors, that will be the product of your vineyards and grapes and so on. The first of thy sons shalt thou give unto me, likewise shalt thou do with thine oxen with thy sheep, seven days it shall be with his dam but so with his mother and on the eighth day thou shalt give it me. So just as the beasts, the oxen, the sheep and so on were to be offered up, if they were clean beasts, to be offered in sacrifice, unto the Lord on the eighth day. The children, the firstborn males of the Israelites were to be circumcised on the eighth day, to be formally named, given to the Lord as a son of the covenant in that sense.

If we were to go back a little bit, we would see in chapter 12 where the Lord makes this requirement of ever being dedicated to him. For I will pass through the land of Egypt this night, he said, and both man and beast, and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment, and the blood shall be to you, taken upon the houses where he are. When I see the blood I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you when I smite the land of Egypt.

So the firstborn sons that were spared out of this, this was their protection, this was their blessing, because they were redeemed, and so they were to be given to the Lord, who took the firstborn out of all the land of Egypt from the Egyptians themselves.

But in chapter 13, we also read at verse 2, So the Lord claims everything that is firstborn, everything that is taken.

[3 : 4 9] And we go to verse 29 of chapter 12, Thank God, not that verse 29, but rather, When the Lord is taking that which is the firstborn of the creatures and the firstfruits of the land, it has to be redeemed, it has to be given to him.

That which is of the fruits of the land, that which is of the beasts of the field, they are dedicated, devoted to the Lord, and even, as we said, The firstborn of the children of Israel are to be taken as being the Lord's, specially given to him.

In Leviticus 19, we read at verse 23, When ye shall come into the land, and shall have planted all manner of trees for food, then ye shall count the fruit thereof as uncircumcised.

Three years shall it be as uncircumcised unto you, it shall not be eaten of. But in the fourth year, all the fruit thereof shall be holy to praise the Lord withal.

And in the fifth year shall ye eat of the fruit thereof, that it may yield unto you the increase thereof. I am the Lord your God. In other words, it's not yours till it's his.

[4 : 56] When you plant the trees of the field, and the first time they begin to bring forth fruit, of course it will be, it will be sort of like, say, if it was an apple tree, it became green and gnarled and hard little apples they produced.

And it would take two or three years for the fruit to become sort of sweet and fruitier and bigger, and more or less, as the tree gained in strength, and as the boughs were strengthened and as the fruit became more fulsome.

So it's partly for these practical reasons the Lord says, for three years you count it as uncircumcised, you don't eat, it's probably not safe for them to eat anyway. And then the fourth year, the first proper crop you can call your own, that's to be dedicated to the Lord.

The first fruits, as it were, the first proper fruits are to be to the Lord. And then, after that, you take whatever you desire, and you have regarded all of yourselves. But, we have to also bear in mind, the Lord is not so much seeking to cherry-pick the best.

He's not saying, no, if you've got 25 oxen, and one of them is really big and strong, and a really good one, I'll take that one. Rather, it's if you've got your herd of oxen, the first calf that is born, the first of the bullocks or whatever, that should be the Lord's.

[6 : 11] And if subsequently, other ones are bigger or better or stronger, well, that's yours to keep. God is not trying to simply cherry-pick and take the best for himself.

It's not like, you know, when we read of King Saul, when he began to build up his army, we read in the end of 1 Samuel 14, there was sore war against the Philistines all the days of Saul.

And when Saul saw any strong man or any valid man, he took him unto him. He wanted him for his army. Or like the Syrian king said to the king of Israel, he tried to sort of provoke a fight with him. He said, the messengers came again. This is in 1 Kings 20, and verses 5 and 6, they came again. Thus speaketh Ben-Hadad, saying, Although I have sent unto thee, saying, thou shalt deliver me thy silver and thy gold and thy wives and thy children.

Yet I will send my servants unto thee tomorrow about this time. And they shall search thine house and the houses of thy servants. And it shall be that whatsoever is pleasant in thine eyes, they shall feed in their hand and take it away.

[7 : 14] Whatever they want, they'll just help themselves to. This was pagan thievery, basically. But the Lord is not seeking, saying, right, let's see what you've got, which is your best.

I'm going to take this, and this, and this, because these are the best things you've got, and I want you to give me the best you've got. And in one sense, it would be right if we give the Lord the best. We should give the Lord the best, but with the first fruits, God is not requiring that. He's saying, look, before you do anything else, you take that which is the first of your flocks, the first of your herds, the first harvest from your field, and so on, and you dedicate that to me.

That's the first fruits. That's the origin of the first fruits here, because the Lord wants the Israelites to recognize that they don't have anything that he hasn't given them first.

And just as he first gives to them, he wants them to first give back to him, so that the relationship is mutual. Now, this sense even of giving the first of their children to be dedicated to the Lord, this is exactly what's happening, remember, with Jesus when he is presented in the temple after he is born, and then after that, we read in Luke chapter 2, when the days of her purification, according to the law of Moses, were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, that is, the baby Jesus, to present him to the Lord.

[8 : 45] As it is written in the law of the Lord, every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord, and to offer a sacrifice, according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtle doves, or two young pigeons.

So, they offer the sacrifice, they dedicate Jesus to the Lord, not because they're saying, this is the Messiah, so therefore, he must be given to the Lord, rather, let's say, this is our firstborn son.

The law requires our firstborn son be presented and dedicated to the Lord. He is, if you like, the first fruits of our marriage. So, he's being dedicated, devoted to the Lord.

And in that sense, this is the law being fulfilled. This is Jesus fulfilling the law, even in his infancy, in every detail. But, what James is saying here is not simply, right, whatever you've got, you Jewish Christians, spread throughout all the world, remember, you have to give the Lord the first fruits of all your income, all your money, all that you have, that would be a right, a right, an understandable

thing to write.

But that's not what he's really talking about here. He's not talking about simply returning the first fruits to the Lord, although we should. He's not even talking about tithing, although we should.

[10:05] He's not even mentioning, at this point, that the first fruits also had a very, very tactical application. It wasn't just about, well, God says you can do it, so do it.

The first fruits, once they were given in, they were then applied to either the priests, or the Levites, or the work of the tabernacle. They were devoted to the Lord to enable the work of the Lord to go on, to enable the priests to keep working at the tabernacle, to enable the Levites to keep, you know, fetching and carrying the water and the wood and bringing the beasts for sacrifice and transporting the tabernacle about wherever it had to go.

All the practical, ongoing work of, we might say, the gospel, although it was the law in those days, that also was what the first fruits were applied for.

They had a practical application, and everything God does, and everything He requires of us, is not simply a spiritual command, but you will find time and time again that there is a practical, earthly benefit in it.

Take what we mentioned about the fruits there a few moments ago as a piece of point. If you try to start eating the fruit of a tree, as soon as the fruit has begun to, it's begun, the spindly little tree has begun to first produce fruits, they're going to be too small, they're going to be too hard, they're not going to be edible.

[11:30] You have to leave it a few years until the tree is strengthened, until it's able to bring forth ripening sweet fruit that's able to be eaten. God is giving a command, but the command has very practical benefits.

Likewise, when God gives all the commands about cleanliness and hygiene and washing and everything before you eat, and so on, this is levels of hygiene that we only began to practice in this country towards the end of the 19th century, when we began to understand about bacteria and hygiene and the need for cleanliness and so on, God is already giving this command thousands of years before, and the Jews, of course, received it as a spiritual command that they had to obey, because God said, but we now know that there were extremely good practical reasons for it as well. Practical reasons that men could not possibly know, but that God knew. Nothing that God commands or does is for nothing. It's never just sort of, you do it because I say it and that's it.

There will always be benefit with it. This is one reason why if somebody really wants their lives to be blessed and to be making something of their life, the best thing you can do, even from a selfish point of view, is give your life to the Lord, because there will be spin-off benefits, there will be side effects, there will be good benefits to giving your life to the Lord that will have practical application, practical fulfillment.

Now, that's not a moment, of course, to pretend it up to a relationship with the Lord. It should be Him that we love most of all, but all I'm saying is that even if it was for selfish reasons, it will be the best way you can serve yourself, by serving the Lord, because there will be practical benefits to it, just as there are with all His commands.

[13:29] Of His own will, He begat us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of His creatures. So, James isn't talking simply about crops and fruit and beasts of the field.

He's talking now in spiritual terms about the kind of first fruits. So, in other words, out of the human race, God has chosen particular souls to be saved, to be His, to be with Him from all eternity.

And it's like, just as the first fruits is a portion of the whole crop, so the same are a portion of the whole human race. And amongst those who are saved, of course, we might even say that, you know, Christ is like the first fruits of them.

He's like the first return to the Lord, the dedication to the Lord. And that's what we read in 1 Corinthians, chapter 15, verse 20, and then 23, that now is Christ risen from the dead and become the first fruits of them that slept.

And in verse 23, every man in his own order, Christ the first fruits, afterward they that are Christ at His coming. What does that mean with regard to Christ? It means that of all those who have ever died or ever shall die, Christ is the first one to be presented, as it were, to His Father in His resurrection body and in all His glory.

[14:57] His resurrection is the first resurrection. All those who are in glory just now, having pre-deceased Jesus or pre-deceased us or anything else, it is their souls which are with the Lord in glory just now.

But their bodies, their resurrection bodies, shall join their souls at the last day when all the dead are raised and those who are to be redeemed will be raised.

incorruptible. But, for now, it's their souls that are there, but Jesus is there in His perfection, in His fullness, in His resurrection glory. He is the first fruits, if you like, of them that's left.

Christ the first fruits, afterwards those that are of Christ at His coming. But James is here referring now to the Lord's people as a kind of first fruits out of the whole human race.

Now, the first fruits, as we said, are not those which are chosen because necessarily they're the fullest and the ripest and the sweetest or the strongest of the oxen or whatever.

[16:03] It's just the first crop, the first of the oxen, the first of the sheep, the first of the harvest and so on. Now, obviously there are believers in every age, in every stage of history.

How can we say, well, it's the first ones, the first ones that are born and the first ones that are brought into the world. That would just mean Adam and the first generation. They would all be the first fruits. So, how can we say that we are the first fruits then?

How can James mean that? I would suggest to you it's this way. It's like what Ephesians tells us that we are predestined from all eternity. Verse 4 of Ephesians 1 According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and without blame before him in love. This is what he's done. The Lord has chosen his people to be his own before all time. He's chosen them from all eternity. In other words, before he even brought the human race into being, before he created Adam, before he created the heavens and the earth, already in the mind of the Lord, in the will, of his own will, he begat us with the word of truth and we should be a kind of first fruits of this creature.

He already knew those who would be his. He had already set the times and the stages in the world's history when they would be conceived in their mother's womb, when they'd be born, the years that they would live, when they would die, and so on.

[17:32] He knew exactly who he would have for his own. He conceived that in his own mind, the will begotten by his own will. He begat us with the word of truth and he identified them and he made them his own from all eternity, unbeknown to them, so that when the human race came into being, those who were his were already set apart from all eternity.

They were a kind of first fruits, already known about, already predestined, already set apart for salvation. The first to be even thought of in the mind of God are the redeemed.

That kind of first fruits. He has conceived them in his mind, in his will. He has known exactly who they will be, how they will be, what their names will be, when they will live, what countries they will be from.

He has already all of this in his own mind, of his own will. He begat us with the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits to him.

So in that sense, you could say in a chronological, historical sense, they are conceived of in the mind of God before even the human race is brought into being.

[18:51] We are in that sense the first fruits in one sense there. Also, however, the first fruits are, as we recognize, that which is specifically dedicated to the Lord.

It is made holy not simply because it's the first calf that comes out or it's the first lamb that's born or it's the first crop of a vineyard or a field or whatever, but because it has been set apart to the Lord, it is made holy thereby.

And this is also what James means here, of his own will, he begat us with the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures. Historically, once the human race comes into being, we are not, of course, of the first generation or even the tenth generation or the twentieth.

You know, there's 2,000 years AD of generations before us and there's, what, 4,000 maybe more years worth of generations before that.

Of all these generations from the time of creation onwards that people have been. We can't say, we are the front, we are the first fruits. We are the first fruits in the sense of being devoted to the Lord, dedicated to the Lord, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

[20:15] Now, of course, we could go further, we could extrapolate further, we could say, out of all creation, God made the sun and the moon and the stars, he made the beasts of the field, made the fish of the sea, all of this is the handiwork of God and it glorifies it.

Mankind, of course, you could say, is at first fruits in the sense that he is the pinnacle of creation made in the image of God, male and female.

That is the most God-like of all his works of creation. But amongst all his God-like works of creation of the human race, he has set apart a portion for himself.

And in that sense, those who are thus devoted to the Lord are this kind of first fruits. Set apart to the Lord and not just in a sort of sit-in-your-hands-do-nothing spiritual sense, but rather we said that the first fruits, when they are carved off, when they are taken off from the harvest, from the flock, from the herd, they are then given a practical application.

The practical application is to further the work of the Lord, of the law, the tabernacle, the witness, and the worship in the midst of the people of Israel. All the harvest, all the first fruits of the flock and the herd and the crops and so on are applied by the priests and the Levites and the work of the tabernacle and so on.

[21 : 45] And we ourselves, likewise, are to be applied to further the work of God's kingdom. We might not be sent as missionaries abroad. We might not be called into particular as we see at ministries or specifically Christian works, but we are called upon to be Christian where we are, to be Christian in our workplace or to be Christian in our homes where we may be the only Christian in that home.

To be Christian in our walks of life. To be the light on the path. To be the salt on the food. To be the seasoning and the sweetening and the leavening of the society into which the Lord has called us and where he has placed us.

Now you see, I might say to myself, I really don't like being in this cold, wet, rainy climate. Why didn't the Lord cause me to be made and created and say, hey, to see the sights of the islands? Couldn't I be there in a Pacific paradise like I have palm trees and sunshine and coconuts and a beautiful lagoon and so on? That would be really nice. Lots of sunshine, lots of good weather and I could be a Christian there and I could build a bamboo church and I could tell everybody about Jesus and I could be a Christian there.

That would be so much nicer and in fact, you know, if the Lord had done it a couple of hundred years ago or fifty years from now into the future, that would be better. I don't like this time in which I lived just now.

[23 : 18] Well, the thing is, friends, God doesn't make mistakes and if God had wanted you to be a South Sea Islander, he'd have made you one. If he wanted you to be a Greenlander, he'd have made you one.

If he wanted you to be from Zambia or from Afghanistan or India, he'd have put you there and if he wanted you to be two hundred years ago, he'd have made you then or fifty years from now.

He might still be alive fifty years from now, but he'd have put you there. God doesn't make mistakes, which means that God's precise intention is that you and I should be exactly where we are when we are.

It means that he has a purpose for whatever ineffectual witness we may think we have. He intends us to be Christians for him in our place of work, in our home, in our life, in our walk, in all that we do. He intends us to shine for him, to be used for him, to have that practical application of the first fruits, that they're not just to be stored away in a cupboard and then to rot, that the harvest gathered in wasn't just to be put away into a grain store and just left there for years and years and years.

[24 : 35] And the flocks and the herds that were set apart weren't just to be sort of left to roam free or just slaughtered and leave the meat to rot. No, they were to be sacrificed, they were to be given to the Lord and they were to be used.

Now, sacrifice means a giving up. It doesn't necessarily mean the slaughter of the beasts. They could be applied for the food or for the subsequent breeding purposes of the priests or of the Levites in the old times.

But the point is that all of the first fruits then, the physical first fruits would be used for a purpose that would further the Lord's kingdom. And if we are to be to the Lord a kind of first fruits, since he has conceived his own children in his mind and his will from all eternity, they are in that sense very much the first, the first fruits of the entire human race.

But also from amongst the human race across all the ages, they are that portion which is devoted, dedicated to him. It's not just for a spiritual pie in the sky kind of relationship.

We have a devoted relationship, a spiritual relationship with the Lord and that's got to matter. It's going to be the first and most important thing to us. But there is also the practical application, the practical benefit that wherever we are, whatever we do, whatever we go, and whoever we speak to, we do it as those with Christ in our hearts and in our lives.

[26 : 09] That our speech should be that which we come of Christians. That our behaviour should be that which we come of Christians. That the way we do business, that the punctuality with which we keep our appointments, that the kindness that we show to those who may be in distress or in need is that which the world would not normally do, but which we do for love of Christ.

And whenever we do that, we do bear his light. We do shine a little light in the dark corners. We do sweeten and savour the tasteless harshness of this world because we are called upon to do just that.

To live for him, to make a difference for him because we are devoted and dedicated to him. Out of all humanity, out of all the human race, he has, for reasons known only to himself, chosen those whom he has set apart for salvation.

And he hasn't chosen them because they were the best or the most accomplished or the most successful or the most athletic or the most good-looking or the most rich or whatever it might be. He has chosen them simply out of love for them which we cannot fathom. And the more a believer is able to look into his or her own heart and see there all the darkness and all the sin and all the unworthiness, the more it is a cause of wonder and amazement that they were ever chosen at all.

[27 : 40] And sometimes the devil might persuade him, well, maybe you're not really chosen. Because look at all the sin in your heart. Look at all the evil you. If you were a real Christian, you wouldn't have that sin in your heart. If you were a real Christian, you are a sinner.

A sinner saved by grace. A soul redeemed by the power and the blood of Christ. Of his own will he begat us, brought us forth into the world with the word of truth.

We are not ourselves the truth. He is the truth. Jesus says, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man cometh unto the Father but by me. If you were worthy enough to come to the Father by yourself, you wouldn't need a saviour.

You couldn't be a Christian. A Christian is the only one who comes by Christ. A Christian is the only one who belongs to Christ, who is born again of Christ. It is not those who are whole who have need of a physician but those who are sick.

It is those who are sinners who have need to be redeemed. It is those who know their sin-sick reality who have need to be washed in his precious blood. That's what makes you a Christian.

[28 : 49] You know that Christ has done this for you. You don't know why. You can't understand the reason why he would do it but he has done it. You don't know how necessarily it is that you became the person that you did from the physical union of your own parents but nevertheless, just as they begat us physically, so God of his own will begat he us with the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

We who, before any of those around us perhaps, in the environment where we live, in the environment where we work, perhaps we may be the only Christian or the first Christian.

Maybe we're there to influence others. Ephesians 1 verse 12, that we should be to the praise of his glory who first trusted in Christ. And there's always going to be someone who's the first believer in any situation.

When the gospel comes to new lands and new places which you've never heard of, there's always the missionary that brings us and he or she is the first believer in that place. And then, by the grace of God, eventually there will be converts and somebody will become the first convert in that particular place.

Now, Paul writes in one of his letters, I haven't got the reference in front of me, I'm sorry, but he speaks about somebody who is the first fruits of Achaia. In other words, the first person in Corinth or the surrounding area to be converted.

[30 : 21] And there's always one who is the first. And then somebody follows on from that and somebody from that and so on. That kind of first fruits. And wherever we go, we will at some point or other be in a situation where we may be the only Christian in the room, the only Christian in the workplace, the only Christian perhaps in the home, the only Christian perhaps in the gathering or the meeting that we're in.

It doesn't mean that you have to stand up and start evangelizing right away, but it does mean that the way you behave and the life that you lead and the way you conduct yourself and the grace that you ought to be able to convey is that only what you have because it's in you first.

And it's in you first not because you're a good person. It's in you first because Christ has put it there. And when it's within us, it's meant to come out. You know, you get these things in the shops,

you sort of, diffusers, they call them, you know, where you get a kind of scent or you put sticks in them or whatever.

It's meant to sort of cause the scent of the fragrance to diffuse out into the room. It's not meant to be like the old-fashioned kind of air freshener, squirt, squirt, like we had in the 70s, you know, air fresheners that would squirt out of our pan here, there, everywhere, which wasn't the most subtle thing, but this is meant to be subtle.

It's meant to be diffusing a fragrance out into the room. And that may be more what we are called upon to do, to diffuse out the grace of God because there will be places wherever we go where we may be the first one, the only one perhaps, who is a believer in Christ, a follower of Christ.

[32 : 05] And God has intended precisely that. He didn't put you in the South Sea Islands. He didn't put you in Afghanistan or India or France or wherever. He put you here.

He put you in these islands in this present day because He intended you right here, right now, in this present age to be His, to be a witness for Him, to be that portion of humanity, that first fruits that would be dedicated to Him and would have a practical purpose and application.

Yes, you must never neglect that vertical relationship, that spiritual relationship between you and the Lord because that is vital. That is your umbilical cord to the nutrient of heaven and without that the baby in Christ dies.

So we have need of that ongoing relationship but we are called upon rather to be this first fruits, this difference that we are called upon to make of His own will He begat us with the word of truth.

He's not lying when He calls you to follow Him. He's not lying when He offers you the forgiveness of sin. He's not lying when He says you'll be saved if you trust and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[33 : 24] Well, the word of truth of His own will be begat us that we should be a kind of first fruits.

We are not grain, we're not wheat or barley, we're not oxen and sheep and goats and we're not grapes in the vineyard, we're not all these physical fruits but we are a kind of first fruits.

We are the first fruits in that sense of humanity because before He made humanity He'd already conceived in His own mind all those that would be His.

First fruits in that sense. First fruits also in the sense of devoted and dedicated to the Lord. First fruits in the sense of having a practical application of making a difference to every life that we touch being there for now to diffuse the fragrance of the gospel in all places where the Lord has intended us to be for such a time as this.

Let's pray.