



May 17, 2024

That Six Foot Circle of Oak

Warm hellos once again friends, brethren, fellow laborers, spiritual family, and scattered children of God from here on the Gulf Coast. My wife and I pray and hope this finds you doing well, and that again your week has been blessed.

Gayle and I were blessed to be able to visit brethren in Tennessee this past week. On Monday we took a few hours and traveled to Nashville. We've traveled and served scattered brethren around the world over the years, visiting famous sights and locations at times while in the vicinity. But, we had never been to the Grand Ole Opry after nearly 40 years of marriage.

The Grand Ole Opry is a regular live country-music radio broadcast originating from Nashville, Tennessee, on WSM, held between two and five nights per week, depending on the time of year. It was founded on November 28, 1925, by George D. Hay as the WSM Barn Dance, taking its current name in 1927. It is the longest-running radio broadcast in U.S. history. Dedicated to honoring country music and its history, the Opry showcases a mix of famous singers and contemporary chart-toppers performing country, bluegrass, Americana, folk, and gospel music, as well as comedic performances and skits. It attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors from around the world and millions of radio and internet listeners.

While there we took a backstage tour and something struck me that tied into an analogy of the upcoming Feast of Pentecost. Regular performers at the Grand Ole Opry can be inducted into the organization as a member. Opry management, when it decides to induct a new member, directs an existing member to publicly ask them to join, usually during a live episode; an induction ceremony happens several weeks later, where the inductee is presented with a trophy and gives an acceptance speech. Watching some of the inductees' reaction via recorded video was moving.

On stage of the Opry is a six-foot circle of oak cut from the corner of the original Ryman's stage and inlaid into center stage at the newer venue where we toured. Artists on stage usually stood on the circle at some point as they performed, and most modern performers still follow this tradition. Most artists when inducted as a member of the Opry stood within that circle. To stand there and accept the membership meant that they were one of a select 2-3 per year given such honor.

So here's what made me stop and think. Within the plan of our Father and His Son is a Holy Day, set aside to remind us that we too in this age have been selected by responding to His calling to be part of something only a very few will initially be asked to be part of. Yes the "Firstfruits" of an eventual much larger harvest to be part of His family!

Does it make us better, smarter, more special? No. Does it give us opportunity to be one of those who will help millions of others at a later time to better understand what God plans for all mankind and too be part of His Divine family? Yes.

The Hebrew word for "firstfruits" is *bikkurim*, "the first of the crops and fruit that ripened." It is from Strong's #1069, *bakar*, which refers to that which "bursts the womb," as does a firstborn child. God considered the firstborn children of humans and animals as His (Exodus 13:1-2), and the Israelites were required to redeem their firstborn (verses 11-16). As one commentator, Jesse Wisnewski, writes, "The Israelites saw these first fruits as an investment into their future. God told them that if they brought their first fruits to Him, He would bless all that came afterward."

At the time of the cutting of the Wavesheaf offering, when the count to Pentecost begins, our Savior was resurrected from the grave, at the close of the weekly Sabbath. The following morning, a Sunday, He was presented to God the Father as the First of the Firstfruits at the time the sheaf was waved before God at the Temple. At the other end of the count, on the fiftieth day, the rest of the

firstfruits are offered for acceptance before God in the form of two wave loaves of fine flour baked with leaven.

Leaven symbolizes the sin—the corruption in them—which, try as they might, they cannot purge by themselves. They must be redeemed from their sins. Thus, along with the two loaves, "*one kid of the goats as a sin offering*" was required (Leviticus 23:19).

Jesus Christ became the First of the Firstfruits when He rose from death and was accepted by God. The elect of God have symbolically died with Christ in baptism and have been raised from the watery grave to spiritual life in Him. Christians are called "firstfruits" in the New Testament (James 1:18; Revelation 14:4). Although they still sin from time to time, the Father accepts them because of what Christ has done on their behalf. The apostle Paul affirms this in Romans 6:3-5. "*Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore, we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection.*"

So, what should Christians do now, as firstfruits of God's plan of salvation? The apostle James instructs us to be "*swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath*" (James 1:19), invaluable advice in these days of confusion. He also urges us to "*lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness*" (James 1:21) and "*be doers of the word, and not hearers only*" (verse 22). As our Savior set us an example by His life, we must set an example for others by the conduct of our lives (I John 2:6).

In the harvest analogy, if Christ is the First of the Firstfruits, and God's chosen are called firstfruits, it is implied yet others will follow, develop, and grow to maturity, comprising God's main harvest. While not the firstfruits in God's plan, they, too, will have the opportunity for redemption, deliverance, and eternal life. God desires that all mankind will be saved (see Romans 11:26; II Peter 3:9), and as we read in the Resurrection Chapter, there is an orderly salvation process (I

Corinthians 15:23). The firstfruits will have an essential part to play with Christ in bringing that great harvest to conversion.

So, Pentecost is a big deal! Traditionally, the Jewish people believe that God gave the Ten Commandments on the Day of Pentecost, which, while it cannot be conclusively verified, is certainly plausible. Of course, Acts 2:1-4 shows us that it was on Pentecost when God sent His Holy Spirit upon the members of His new church. Consider that if the disciples had not gathered to keep the Day of Pentecost, they would not have received the Holy Spirit, an idea still valid today. The Holy Spirit enables God's people to obey His commandments in their spirit.

In addition to our Savior, the First of the Firstfruits and the firstborn from the dead (Colossians 1:18), God has invested His time and energy in us as His firstfruits. He is hard at work, too (John 5:17). If we remain faithful, we remain an integral part of His plan of salvation. Through His grace, we are a part of His "promise to come" and become a blessing to all of humanity.

So, just like standing in that circle as have a few performers over the years, we too are called and blessed to similarly be in a special group as "Firstfruits". (By the way, my wife and I had a picture taken of us standing in that circle on the same stage.) Each time I look at that picture at the Opry I'll be reminded that we (you and I) are blessed with His calling, but also have a responsibility to stay committed to Our Father and Son with this calling as our biggest job still lies ahead!

Arms up friends! Our sincere prayers and thoughts are with you daily. Thanks in advance for your heartfelt prayers for us.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Scott Hoefker', with a stylized flourish at the end.

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