



My Father was a wandering Aramean

First Fruits Sunday

January 13, 2018

scriptures: Deuteronomy 26:1-11

First Fruit Offering

If you would, open your Bibles to the book of Deuteronomy chapter 26.

Today is first fruits Sunday. Today we will lay out the principle of the first fruit but the offering itself will be open today through the end of the month. We do not want anyone to give today who has not already prayed about what to give.

We always do this at the beginning of the year... we take a first fruit offering which, coming out of all of the spending that our church has to do in December, this is a way to help the church kick off the year in strength... and of course today we will show you Biblically why we believe there is something powerful about doing this at the beginning of the year.

But please note this also before we get into the teaching. This is not meant to put pressure on you to do something that you can't afford to do. We give these sermons to teach you principles that are laid out in the Bible for your benefit, and the financial piece is a part of the Biblical model for the churches ability to move forward...

If you are here and you are new and you are thinking "I knew it! Churches just want my money!!!" - listen, keep your money.

We exist FOR YOU!!!! To live the love of Jesus in a way that through us, He is made obvious TO YOU. And so that is why the church, as a body, as a collective... takes seriously things like the first fruit offering. Not only for the seed that it plants into your own year spiritually, but practically it is a seed into the work that year after year here we have seen more and more and more fruit from.

First, lets tackle this question:

Why take a first fruit offering?

The Bible says in Nehemiah 10 that “we obligate ourselves to bring the first fruit of our ground and the first fruits of all fruit of every tree, year after year, every year, to the house of the Lord.” - and then it goes on to talk about more offerings and tithes and then ends by saying:

“we will not neglect the house of the Lord.”

Again, you will understand this more when we lay out this principle in a few minutes, but the church does not run without the people of God making it run.

I used to get really nervous before giving sermons about giving, until I started seeing the fruit that came from it not only in the lives of the people who give... but practically through the way that the church has been able to use the gifts to bring the Gospel to thousands of people in extremely tangible ways. We have made so little go SO FAR and that has given me confidence to come up here and share a message like this.

God has ALWAYS taken care of his church, and we have each and every year expanded our reach in the community and we are believing that this year will be the same.

But I do want to say this...

The first fruit offering is a seed into the year, for the MISSION of Courage Church. The mission of Courage Church is Reconciliation. Us, being Christ’s ambassadors to reconcile the world back to God.

We did a teaching on this back in October, but one thing that we have learned over our time here so far is to hold MISSION very very tightly, while holding vision somewhat loosely. - MEANING: we can make our plans (and we do) but we know that it is God who directs our steps and ultimately brings the harvest. So sticking to the job HE has given us in the Bible is more important than the specifics of how it all looks.

and the reason that that matters on a day like today is because if you think that you are BUYING something when you give an offering... you just aren't. You are sowing something... you are planting something that ONLY God can bring a harvest from. God gives the growth.

So, for instance, the first year we did first fruits, we did it based around VISION... we said we were going to buy a house with the money to house short term missions teams and interns... and we raised the money for the house, and about 18 months later we finally got Courage House number one, but the moment that offering was taken, the pressure was on to get the house.

We aren't doing it that way anymore... there may be times when we take special offerings for specific things like that, but that's not this. This offering is about mission... about allowing us to DO WHAT WE DO for people. We believe that the Holy Spirit has given us visions for some amazing things that our church hopes to one day do... but in the Bible, what Jesus CLEARLY GIVES US is not a vision, it is a mission. And if you believe you are buying into a vision, and down the road that vision shifts because maybe God tells us to do it differently... or maybe WE realize "oh my word, we are trying to give the community something that it doesn't even need" - if you have bought into a specific idea then when that idea doesn't come to pass the way you thought it would, that creates a tension that need not exist.

So, after a more careful reading of the Old Testament and a better understanding of it, we give it for the same reason as Nehemiah states:

"we will not neglect the house of the Lord."

Also, when we teach Old Testament... Old Covenant... you MUST understand that we are teaching it as principle and NOT as law. And there has to be that distinction... if you hear today as "I have to do this" you are hearing it wrong. In the most practical sense, the first fruit offering is seed into your own family spiritually and into the Kingdom of God physically.

ALL WE ASK YOU TO DO IS TO PRAY.

we do not give you a percentage to give or ask for a certain number... and in fact before anyone gives to this offering, we ask you to PRAY FIRST.

we ask you to ask God... God... What do I give? What would you have me to give as a seed into this new year... both in my life, and in the church?

If you are new here, and you say "I am not sure we want to give to that" please - don't give. Listen to the sermon, learn about the principle... KNOW THAT THERE IS NO CONDEMNATION IN THIS PLACE...

God always takes care of our church. But for the people who felt that nudge in their gut like "hey, I feel like God wants me to do something..." of course we would say to go with that.

it's between you and God.

We just ask that everyone be faithful to what God puts on your heart.

So today we are going to look at the classic Old Testament passage about the first fruit. I will share a little about the principle of the first fruit, which we laid out in much detail a few years back, and then we will focus on one particular line that really stands out to me in this thing and that line of course, is:

My Father is a wandering Aramean.

Okay, here we go!

So Deuteronomy 26:1-11

"When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance and have taken possession of it and live in it, ² you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place that the Lord your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there. ³ And you shall go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him, 'I declare today to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our fathers to give us.' ⁴ Then the

priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down before the altar of the Lord your God.

⁵“And you shall make response before the Lord your God, ‘**A wandering Aramean was my father**. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. ⁶ And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. ⁷ Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. ⁸ And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. ⁹ And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, *‘a land flowing with milk and honey.* ¹⁰ And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O Lord, have given me.’ And you shall set it down before the Lord your God and worship before the Lord your God. ¹¹ And you shall rejoice in all the good that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.

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There was a man named Jacob who wrestled with God.

He came out of his mother’s womb grabbing the heel of his twin brother Esau (25:26).

His mother, Rebekah was an Aramean who married Abraham’s son Isaac, and Genesis 31 (41-42) tells us that he lived for 20 years in Aram.

When the Bible spoke of Jacob and Esau, it said that Esau was skilled hunter, but Jacob was quiet, and tended to dwell in tents. He moved around a lot. (Genesis 25:27), but from his birth story to adulthood, he had always sought the rights of the first born, which he was not.

He tricked his brother Esau into giving him his birthright, and he stole the blessing that his Father Isaac had intended for Esau.

He worked for 7 years to earn the hand of Rachel in marriage, only to be given Leah instead and had to work another seven for Rachel.

He would later rob his Father-in-law and run away with his daughters and household gods.

Jacob spent a lot of his life on the run... wandering. Hiding. Being chased. Having to reconcile over and over again for the pain that he had caused so many.

Eventually he landed in Canaan and lived as an alien in that land... until a severe draught fell upon Canaan, forcing Jacob to move with his sons to Egypt...

they were refugees, leaving a land destroyed by famine, seeking a home in a place that was flourishing, and they found their way to a place called "Goshen" where Jacob's son Joseph had gained unbelievable favor with Pharaoh. It truly is one of those "providence of God moments" that we can't get very into today...

But there is this moment in Genesis 47, when Pharaoh asks Jacob's sons... "what is your occupation?" to which they respond saying:

"your servants are shepherds, as our Fathers were" (47:3)

Who your Father was, and what your Father did, was a defining part of the type of life that you lived. It was not enough to just say "we are shepherds" - instead, they had to make it clear "we come from a long line of shepherds"

We don't come from nowhere. We continued the family business. We honored the past by making sure the legacy continues.

Then, when Pharaoh turned to Jacob, Pharaoh asked Jacob "how old are you?" and this is how Jacob responded:

"My life of **wandering** has lasted a hundred and thirty years." He then said: "the years have been few and the years have been difficult" (47:9 GNT)

Now, 130 years doesn't seem like a *short life*, but when you think about how much of that was spent on the run and never settled, you realize it is possible to live a long life and yet harvest so little fruit.

It is possible to live your life stuck in a pattern that keeps resulting in all the things that you never wanted.

In other words, Jacob tells Pharaoh: “life didn’t always turn out how I expected it to. I worked for one thing, and got another. I worked for Rachel, and was given Leah. I betrayed my Father and screwed over my brother. I robbed my Father in law.

I hurt people that I never thought that I would hurt, in order to build a life that has ultimately gotten me no closer to who I want to be. Looking back, the years flew by, and they were really really painful... but here I am.

I don’t know how I got here.”

But as the story goes, Pharaoh tells Joseph to have Jacob settle in THE BEST OF THE LAND, in the midst of all of that.

Jacob, their Father... was a wandering Aramean.

And so now, every year when the Israelites bring the first fruits to the priest they quote this little paragraph, that is now considered to be a historical creed... that begins by saying “My Father was a wandering Aramean.” - who went down to Egypt, as a refugee, but there became a great nation.”

But then the tide begins to turn.

Exodus 1 begins by telling us that the descendants of Jacob in the land of Egypt were 70 persons... but then they multiplied into a GREAT NATION.

but the larger they became, the more of a threat Egypt saw them as, so in order to prevent an uprising, the Egyptians oppressed them and humiliated them and had their foats on their back, turning them into slaves.

This lasted for 430 years.

The writer is bringing ALL OF THIS BACK TO MEMORY... Deuteronomy 26:7-8

“Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders.”

Remember how the ten commandments start: I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD, WHO BROUGHT YOU OUT...?

Before God gives Israel a single command, He first asks them to remember. In fact, the way the Hebrews read the Ten Commandments is actually like this: Command One: I am the Lord your God who brought you out.

Number two: Have no God's before me.

It was just so important to remember where you came from, who you once were, and how the God of all grace met you in that impossible situation, and did something miraculous on your behalf.

My Father was a wandering Aramean.

My Father was a refugee. Who went to Egypt with nothing, and yet God blessed him and took care of his family.

Our ancestors were slaves, UNTIL GOD BROUGHT THEM OUT.

verses 9-10:

“And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now **I bring the first of the fruit of the ground**, which you, O Lord, have given me.”

My Father was a wandering Aramean.

Why does it matter that they remember where they came from? why they remember who they were before God did what God does:

If you don't hold extremely fast to the miracle that God did your life and in your family then it can be very easy when you see people who are two, three, four steps behind you still struggling, to think "well, that is their problem... I pulled myself out of my circumstances, they can do the same" - when in reality YOU DID NOT PULL YOURSELF OUT. and keeping that at the forefront of your mind will keep you from elevating yourself over someone else because your circumstances maybe seem to be better.

And I think that's the first piece to this. It's simple... and it's not the only piece... but it's very important. Who you are IN CHRIST is NOT who you deserve to be... yet grace got ahold of your life and made you something that you could never be without it.

And it has invited you to be a part of the world's largest family, on the world's most important mission... the mission of reconciling people.

Like, if you see a refugee, and you remember that you once were a refugee... shouldn't that have a profound impact on the way you treat refugees? If you used to be poor, and you know that part of your first fruit was going to feed the poor, wouldn't that have a profound impact on whether or not you hesitate in giving that gift? You see the world through someone else's eyes BECAUSE THOSE USED TO BE YOUR EYES.

My Father was a wandering Aramean.

See, when the Israelites would approach the priest with their offering, they did it knowing that they were giving this gift, AS A SEED FOR THE WHOLE COMMUNITY.

It was given knowing that everyone was going to reap some part of this thing, in one way or another... and if you are on the upper side of the class, you remember that it wasn't always that way.

So this is, in brief, what would happen:

The Hebrew word "*bikkurim*" - is a word we translate as "first fruits" - now, **The bikkurim is the part of the harvest that ripened and came forth before the rest of the harvest did.**

And this is incredibly significant. All of the pieces to this concept... Because the things the Bible tells Israel to recite here piece together the entire story of Israel... how God brought them to where they are... the connection that they now have TO GOD... what God has done for them with previous harvests... AND... this is the big one... WHAT GOD IS GOING TO DO WITH THE NEXT HARVEST.

See, when the *bikkurim* comes forth, you still don't know what the rest of the harvest is going to be. ALL THAT YOU KNOW FOR SURE IS THE BIKKURIM.

And in the ancient world, they gave that part. The part that came forth before the harvest. All of it. They gave it out of the uncertainty of a new year.

Not knowing for sure if it was going to be a great year or a crappy year. Not knowing for sure what the harvest would be. So as soon as the *bikkurim* came forth, what would happen was the farmers would go out, and they would tie a little scarlet ribbon around it to mark it as "set apart" - knowing that was for the Lord.

We actually did a bit of a narrative sermon a few years ago about the correlations between the first fruit offering and Jesus... all the way down to the process...

So farmers would go out first and wrap a scarlet ribbon around the *bikkurim* to set it apart...

and in Matthew's Gospel we have this moment when Pilate washes his hands of Jesus blood... He basically says "I won't have anything to do that," and the crowd then says "his blood will be on us and our children" -

then they take Him to the governors headquarters, where they strip off all of his clothes, and then they wrap him in a scarlet robe. (Matthew 27:28)

The next step in the first fruit, is the the giver would take their fruit, put it in a basket, and as Deuteronomy 26 says “place it into the hands of the priest” -

and Jesus, while on the cross said these words “FATHER, INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT” (Luke 23:46) -

and then Leviticus 23 says the priest would then lift the basket up into into the air as a dedication... just like Jesus said this about himself “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself” - when I am lifted up on the cross... that will be the offering that will BENEFIT EVERYONE...

The harvest will follow.

So when Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:20-21

“Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

What he is doing is showing us that the Resurrection of Jesus is only the beginning of what God is going to do in renewing humanity... it is only AFTER He did what He did that He could draw us to Him. He set the ultimate example of letting go of the things that we hold dear so that a greater purpose can be achieved.

I absolutely love the imagery that we get around Jesus, that over and over again shows us that He is the Messiah that the Old Testament promised would come, and the fulfillment of the things that they had heaped upon their people.

Even the first fruit... it used to be an obligation... now its a privilege but more importantly its a choice.

and there is something different that has to take place in your heart in order for you to be able to relinquish control of what is yours not knowing for sure what is coming. Tithing is awesome, there are many rewards from it... but with tithing, you have an amount that you have ALREADY received... and

you look at that number, and you take 10% away from that number... and you are still left with 90.

First fruit, especially the full Biblical first fruit, is literally given WITHOUT ANY IDEA if you are giving the only harvest you will get this year... or if you are giving what will be only a fraction of what will return to you. You just don't know.

That is why I love this creed that Moses told them to recite...

My Father was a wandering Aramean.

When you are wandering, you have no-where to plant your seeds that you may reap a harvest. You have no land. You have no home.

And now here you are... and maybe you don't know what the harvest is going to be yet... BUT YOU KNOW THAT GOD HAS BROUGHT YOU THIS FAR AND THERE IS CERTAINLY NO REASON FOR HIM TO ABANDON YOU NOW.

and when I think about our community... I have to tell you that there are a lot of days in which I deal with a lot of uncertainty about how God is going to do the things that we believe He is going to do here... but what I know for sure is this: God has brought us this far, and there is certainly no reason for him to abandon us now.

Now, I want to bring this together for you in a way that I hope is a blessing.

I have been noticing a pattern over the last few years... maybe it is just social media... and the information about everybody that blasts me in the face every day, I don't know... but it seems like every year everyone seems to post about how they are so glad the previous year is over. Every now and again you will see a "best year ever" post, if someone got married or had a baby or reached some life milestone... but for the most part it feels like the common theme every year lately transitioning from one to the next is "Thank God that's over."

Like, life doesn't seem to be getting better for most people. Its almost as if we are slaves to something, and maybe we don't even know what it is that is controlling us.

We don't even know who's foot is on our back.

And I've read this passage in Deuteronomy 26 for years, and honestly, I have thought about it for years and tried to figure it out for years... the real reason why? why say these words? There has to be more... and suddenly this week, two things about this just clicked. And I want to share them with you.

First of all...

Deuteronomy was written BEFORE the Israelites entered the promised land. In fact, today's passage began by saying:

When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you

When... you aren't there yet! but *when* you get there, and you have something to give... don't keep it for yourself.

Moses was making them see something that wasn't there yet, and insisting that they learn to be generous before they have anything at all to be generous with.. and to me, this is just incredible. He was making arrangements for what the process WILL be when the land belongs to them, laying out what will be as if it is what already is...

And this is the type of vision that I want. One that says: wherever we end up... whatever it looks like, we are going to always be generous. We are never going to be about ourselves alone and we are always going to be about the community the God called us too.

Moses tells them to make this declaration during the first fruit... as in... WHEN THAT TIME COMES... when you have that first harvest... this is what you do, BUT FIRST, BEFORE YOU GIVE IT... this is what you say... My Father was a wandering Aramean. And then he says to go into this section that just seems like babbling, about Egypt, and oppression.

Then it hit me:

Jacob, the wandering Aramean... left Canaan BECAUSE THERE WAS NO HARVEST.

There was no fruit, and to stay would have been suicide for him and his family.

and he ended up in Egypt... where things went really well for his family for a bit, but ultimately it lead to an entire nation of people being put in slavery.

A drought lead the people of Israel to Egypt. The same Egypt that they escaped... and now, as they are at the tail end of THEIR WANDERING... about to enter the land that was promised to them... they say this.

Let me say this one more way to make sure you are hearing this:

BECAUSE THERE WAS NO HARVEST THE FIRST TIME, THEY ENDED UP SLAVES.

I look at the world... I look everywhere, and it feels like there is drought. Spiritual drought, emotional drought, discontent... and the EASIEST mindset to buy into is the one that says that it would be better in Egypt. Even after 430 years of slavery, at the first taste of freedom (with a little bit of frustration and uncertainty)what was Israel saying? it would be better in Egypt.

Its like we are slaves to a constant need to be somewhere else and our inability to be *here*.

we are all always someplace different in ours mind then where we are in reality... and quite frankly its very easy to live that way, especially if you never fully give yourself to anything. But the truth is, wherever you go, there you will be. There is a reason that Jacob's problems followed him everywhere he wandered... because he was always there. And until HE does something different, LIFE WON'T BE DIFFERENT.

You have to determine to be different in the place that God has called you, or whatever is next will be no different than what is right now.

God wants us to plant seeds because seeds take root, and where roots are planted... He, and He alone can bring growth.

But what Moses was making his people declare is that THIS TIME ITS GOING TO BE DIFFERENT because WE ARE GOING TO DO SOMETHING DIFFERENTLY.

Moses tells them "WE ARE NEVER GOING BACK TO WHAT WE WERE", when that BIKKURIM comes... that first fruit... even before you see the harvest... GIVE IT TO GOD.

Give it without knowing, because that is the ultimate form of trust... Israel had some serious trust issues when it came to God. They built a golden calf because Moses was on a mountain too long. When they wandered, they actually said that it was better when they were slaves... they always struggled to see what God was doing right in the midst.

Giving the *bikkurim* without seeing the harvest would have been extremely hard for them, and that is why Moses has to take them all the way back.

Remember what happened last time there was no harvest...

your nation was oppressed... enslaved and killed...

To me, its almost like an ancient reframing of the concept we hear about so often today... that if you always do what you've always done, you will always end up in the same place... its about determining beforehand that we are not going to live this new year controlled by old habits.

Moses says "before we even see what its like over there... before we know what our lives will look like, we are going to determine that first and foremost our lives will not be about ourselves. We will take care of others, and we will trust God to take care of us. We will live generously showing an upside model of life to a world run by greed. Because that is the way of

Jesus. And whoever loses his life will find it, but whoever tries to keep it is going to lose it anyway.

A harvest is something that ultimately is just out of your hands... but by saying these words you are making a declaration THAT I AM NEVER GOING BACK. That I am going to GIVE the first of the harvest to the one who brings the harvest because I can't control any of it anyway... He owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Psalm 50:10)

but thats what makes the *bikkurim* so powerful... because I can't promise you anything... I don't know what your year is going to be like... I don't know. I know that I am praying for you. I know that I am believing that God is going to do some amazing things in our church and in your life... and what I do know is this:

God honors people who trust Him.

And finances are not the only thing you can do to prove to God that you trust him, but they are certainly the thing that most of us hold on to the tightest. But lets make this a year of sowing.

Sometimes it will be financial... sometimes it will be sowing seeds of good deeds into the lives of the people who need you. Last year, our verse for the year was Galatians 6:9... its one of my all time favorite verses:

“let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season, we will reap, if we do not give up.”

Keep doing good this year. Keep loving people.

If there is one thing that I have realized since getting here, it is this:

It is out of my hands.

We just need to love people... we need to show up... but there is not a single thing that is in our hearts that we can accomplish on our own. For every single dream that God put on our hearts, to be honest, IT WOULD BE A MIRACLE IF THEY HAPPENED. and yet I still believe that it will.

But in the meantime, we aren't making our life's work about building an empire that we had some vision for... we are making our life's work about building people and helping them take that next step in their walk with Jesus.

All the things in our hearts, God is going to have to take care of that part of it. But when I look back at what we were, the life we once had... the people we once were...

I can say with confidence "we are never going back" - God has brought us through more trials and transitions and uncertainty than we ever imagined... and He is continuing to work today in our midst.

My Father was a wandering Aramean. A drought that he couldn't control lead to our oppression...

but we don't wander anymore. We are going to plant seeds, and take root.