

May 13  
Lesson 11 (NIV)

## BRINGING

# FIRSTFRUITS

DEVOTIONAL READING: Ephesians 4:25-5:2

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Leviticus 2:14; 23:9-22

### LEVITICUS 2:14

<sup>14</sup> “If you bring a grain offering of firstfruits to the LORD, offer crushed heads of new grain roasted in the fire.”

### LEVITICUS 23:9-14, 22

<sup>9</sup> The LORD said to Moses, <sup>10</sup> “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘When you enter the land I am going to give you and you reap its harvest, bring to the priest a sheaf of the first grain you harvest. <sup>11</sup> He is to wave the sheaf before the LORD so it will be accepted on your behalf; the priest is to wave it on the day after the Sabbath. <sup>12</sup> On the day you wave the sheaf, you must sacrifice as a burnt offering to the LORD a lamb a year old without defect, <sup>13</sup> together with its grain offering of two-tenths of an ephah of the finest flour mixed with olive oil—a food offering presented to the LORD, a pleasing aroma—and its drink offering of a quarter of a hin of wine. <sup>14</sup> You must not eat any bread, or roasted or new grain, until the very day you bring this offering to your God. This is to be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come, wherever you live.’”

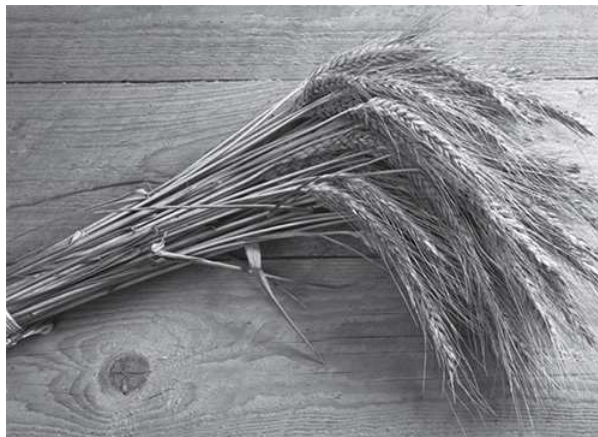


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<sup>22</sup> “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you. I am the LORD your God.”

### KEY VERSE

*“Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘When you enter the land I am going to give you and you reap its harvest, bring to the priest a sheaf of the first grain you harvest.’”—Leviticus 23:10*

### LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Describe the firstfruits offering and its purpose.
2. Relate the firstfruits concept to the new covenant.
3. Adjust one behavior in order to live biblically as a firstfruit.

### LESSON OUTLINE

#### Introduction

- A. Marking Time by God’s Calendar

## B. Lesson Background

I. Preparing Firstfruits ([LEVITICUS 2:14](#))II. Offering Firstfruits ([LEVITICUS 23:9-14](#))A. Presentation ([vv. 9-13](#))B. Proper Time ([v. 14](#))*Put Him First*III. Sharing Blessings ([LEVITICUS 23:22](#))*“Gleaning” Today*

## Conclusion

## A. Firstfruit Facts

## B. Firstfruit Application

## C. Prayer

## D. Thought to Remember

## Introduction

### A. Marking Time by God’s Calendar

Cultures have different ways and traditions of marking time. In contemporary Western culture, January 1 is significant. It serves the official purpose of marking the beginning of the year and the unofficial purpose of reminding people that the “holiday season” is over.

The months of November and December are the important months in the holiday season, especially for the retail industry. Unofficial special days such as Black Friday (the day after Thanksgiving) and Cyber Monday three days later have become cultural staples for bargain hunters. But modern culture changes quickly. Recent years have seen Brown Thursday added to the unofficial calendar of retail merchandising.

Cultures not only mark time differently with regard to specific calendar dates but also in terms of seasons. Some cultures have only two seasons: rainy and dry. For those of us who experience four seasons, spring is the season of new life, with Easter a fitting holiday in that regard as we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus.

For the ancient Israelites, the first and seventh months were particularly important. As agrarian people, their existence was closely tied to their crops. Their major celebrations revolved around gratitude to God for what he had done for them in the past and how he was sustaining them in the present. Today’s lesson focuses on one such celebration.

### B. Lesson Background

The beginning of the Jewish year is called *Rosh Hashanah*. This phrase appears in the Hebrew Bible only in [Ezekiel 40:1](#), and scholars debate what exactly it is referring to in that passage.

The Jews ultimately ended up with two calendars. The religious calendar began with the month of Aviv ([Exodus 12:2; 13:4](#)), also called Nisan ([Esther 3:7](#)). On the civil calendar, the month called Ethanim ([1 Kings 8:2](#)), later known as Tishri, serves that purpose; that is six months after the beginning of the religious new year. *Rosh Hashanah* begins the civil new year.

Most important on either calendar were the three annual pilgrimage events: the Festival of Unleavened Bread (combined with Passover), celebrated in March or April; the Festival of Harvest, celebrated in May or June; and the Festival of Ingathering (also called Tabernacles or Booths), celebrated in September or October ([Exodus 23:14-17](#)). The first and third of these are weeklong observances. Between them is the single-day Festival of Harvest, which is also called the Festival of Weeks or the day of firstfruits (see [Exodus 23:16a; 34:22a; Leviticus 23:15-21; Numbers 28:26-31; Deuteronomy 16:9-12, 16](#)). This is the subject of today’s lesson.

The Festival of Weeks designation points to seven weeks of grain harvest. On day 50, the day that is seen to conclude this harvest, the Israelites celebrate Pentecost, a later designation that reflects the number 50.

The correspondence between agrarian-based holidays and God’s saving acts on behalf of his people were not mere coincidence. God acted powerfully to create a people and settle them in the promised land. The Israelites were to recognize that their presence in the land was a gift. The land really belonged to God, and he allowed the people to dwell there by his gracious provision. But as today’s text opens, the people were not there yet. The setting of today’s text is, rather, the encampment at Mount Sinai, where the Lord gave his law to Moses for the people (see [Leviticus 27:34](#)).

## HOW TO SAY IT

Aaronic *Air-ahn-ik*.Aviv *Ay-viv*.Baal *Bay-ul*.Canaan *Kay-nun*.Corinthians *Ko-rin-thee-unz* (*th* as in *thin*).Deuteronomy *Due-ter-ahn-uh-me*.ephah *ee-fah*.Ethanim *Eth-uh-nim*.Ezekiel *Ee-zeek-ee-ul* or *Ee-zeek-yul*.Leviticus *Leh-vit-ih-kus*.Nisan *Nye-san*.Rosh Hashanah *Rawsh Huh-shuh-nuh*.Sinai *Sigh-nye* or *Sigh-nay-eye*.

tabernacle *tah-burr-nah-kul*.

Tishri *Tish-rec*.

## I. Preparing Firstfruits

([LEVITICUS 2:14](#))

<sup>14</sup> **“If you bring a grain offering of firstfruits to the LORD, offer crushed heads of new grain roasted in the fire.”**

There are many kinds of *firstfruits* that can be offered to the Lord. The offering described here is a *grain offering*. Grains cannot be ground into flour suitable for baking until the moisture is removed; hence the need for the grain’s being *roasted in the fire* (compare [Leviticus 23:17](#)).

## II. Offering Firstfruits

([LEVITICUS 23:9-14](#))

### A. Presentation ([vv. 9-13](#))

<sup>9, 10a</sup>. **The LORD said to Moses, “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘When you enter the land I am going to give you**

Having left Egypt by God’s design and protection, they need instructions regarding how to conduct themselves in *the land* he is going to give them. Since the land is ultimately his, it must be cared for according to those instructions.

<sup>10b</sup>. **“and you reap its harvest, bring to the priest a sheaf of the first grain you harvest.**

To bring a *sheaf of the first grain* of the harvest is a requirement, not an option or a guideline. The very first portion of the crop to be harvested is known as the firstfruits. It is the part that the farmer is most excited about because it serves as a sort of sign or down payment of the full crop to come. It assures the farmer that all his hard work of tilling, planting, and watering is beginning to pay off.

Most likely the crop harvested in view is barley, which ripens before wheat (compare [Ruth 1:22](#); [2:23](#).) But here some additional details are provided about the offering that are not found in our earlier passage. A *sheaf* is a small bundle or armful. Of that portion, only a small amount is offered directly to God by being burned up. The majority of it goes to the priests to be eaten (see [Leviticus 2:1-3](#)).



Visual for Lesson 11. Start a discussion by pointing to this visual and asking, "How exactly do we balance these three with one another?"

The Aaronic priests depend on the offerings of the people for their livelihood since their devotion to working in the tabernacle keeps them from being able to reap regular harvests like everyone else ([Numbers 18:8-24](#)).

Providing for the priests is important, but it is not the primary reason for the firstfruits offering. It is more vital that the Israelites take time to recognize that it is God who is blessing them by his grace; they have not earned it ([Deuteronomy 9:5, 6](#)). They must never forget that he, not fictitious fertility gods such as Baal, is the source of all they will enjoy in the promised land. After a firstfruits offering is made, the Israelites will be free to enjoy the remainder of the harvest.

But what proportion of the people's harvest is to constitute the firstfruits offering? A specific proportion is not mentioned at this point, perhaps because the very nature of a firstfruits offering means that a specific proportion cannot be calculated. That is, one wouldn't know how to apply a proportional calculation until after the entire crop is harvested.

Even so, passages such as [Leviticus 27:30](#); [Numbers 18:21-29](#); [2 Chronicles 31:5](#); and [Nehemiah 10:35-37](#); [12:44](#) seem to suggest that a tithe (10 percent) is intended at some point. It's safe to conclude in any case that God does not want the people to give a set portion legalistically, as if making a mortgage payment. The Israelites are not to be thinking, "Here's your cut, God." Instead, their attitude should be, "I'm giving the first part in faith that there will be plenty of the remainder to meet my needs and the needs of my family."

**11. “He is to wave the sheaf before the LORD so it will be accepted on your behalf; the priest is to wave it on the day after the Sabbath.**

After receiving a firstfruits offering, the priest elevates it above his head to make clear that it is dedicated to God. The people believe that God’s blessing will result ([Proverbs 3:9, 10](#); [Ezekiel 44:30](#)).

*What Do You Think?*

What visual aids can you build into routines to remind you to be grateful for God’s provision?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

Regarding regular, daily routines (meals, etc.)

Regarding irregular, occasional routines (holidays, etc.)

Other

Historically, Jews have been divided over when this offering is to occur. Exactly what does *on the day after the Sabbath* mean? Some students point out that [Leviticus 23:15, 16a](#) demonstrates a definite connection between the Festival of Unleavened Bread and the day of firstfruits. God’s instructions show that an event within one festival is used to determine the timing of a festival that is to follow. Since Passover is discussed in the preceding section of [Leviticus 23:4-8](#), *the Sabbath* in the verse before us refers to a Passover Sabbath.

Others point out, however, that [Leviticus 23:9](#) begins a new section. So rather than pointing back to the Passover Sabbath, it points to the first Sabbath of the actual harvest. Under this proposal, the day of firstfruits in [23:9-14](#) is a different observance than the Festival of Weeks in [23:15-21](#). Ultimately, it’s more important to come to grips with the meaning and significance of the day of firstfruits than the day of its observance.

**12. “On the day you wave the sheaf, you must sacrifice as a burnt offering to the LORD a lamb a year old without defect,**

Israel’s offerings often involve a series of steps. The second step of this offering is that of *a lamb a year old*. It is important that this lamb be *without defect* because the one giving the offering is identifying with the offering. It is a way of saying to God that the worshipper is giving his best to him, not just the best of the flock but also the best of himself.

In contrast with the Passover observance, which looks to the past in celebration of God’s deliverance, the day of firstfruits looks to the future. Firstfruits are offered on the first day of the week ([v. 11](#), just considered), the beginning of the workweek after the Sabbath day of rest. The very idea of firstfruits implies there’s more fruit to follow, and that includes not only the grain offering just discussed, but also an abundance of livestock. Thus the worshipper need not fear giving the “best first” of his livestock—God always has more to provide!

*Burnt* offerings are unique in that they are turned completely into smoke. They are not cooked for human consumption, but burned up so that the smoke ascends to God. Though God sometimes acknowledges the pleasing aroma of offerings (see [v. 13](#), next), he does not need the food ([Psalm 50:12, 13](#)). These offerings are about what Israel needs: the people need to keep God first by returning to him the first of the blessings that they have received from him. They owe their abundance to their gracious heavenly provider. Should they forget that, they will begin to drift from the life God has called them to live.

*What Do You Think?*

How do you ensure that you’re offering God your best?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

In preparing your heart for worship

In preparing to participate in a Bible class

Other

**13a. “together with its grain offering of two-tenths of an ephah of the finest flour mixed with olive oil—a food offering presented to the LORD, a pleasing aroma—**

To mix the *grain offering* (see comments on [Leviticus 2:14](#), above) with *the finest flour* and *olive oil* constitutes the third step of the firstfruits offering. *Two-tenths of an ephah* computes to about 6.2 quarts; this amount of flour weighs about 6.6 pounds. This is twice the normal amount of flour used for grain offerings (see [Leviticus 6:20](#); [Numbers 28:13](#)). Olive oil is produced by the hard work of crushing and grinding.

**13b. “and its drink offering of a quarter of a hin of wine.**

The *drink offering* is step four. This signifies a joyous occasion. *A quarter of a hin* computes to 41.4 fluid ounces or 1.22 liters. Drink offerings are also described in [Exodus 29:38-42](#).

## B. Proper Time ([v. 14](#))

**14. “You must not eat any bread, or roasted or new grain, until the very day you bring this offering to your God. This is to be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come, wherever you live.”**

For the offering to fulfill its intended function, the Israelites must not *eat* of any produce of the promised land until the firstfruits *offering* is given to God. To eat of the produce before offering the firstfruits to God is to indicate that the food is theirs to do with as they wish. But since the whole purpose of the offering is to focus on God as the provider, it is more than appropriate that the Israelites acknowledge him properly before they begin to indulge themselves.

### PUT HIM FIRST

Rick Warren often teaches about the importance of putting God first when it comes to personal finances. The author of *The Purpose-Driven Life* explains that in whatever area of your life you desire God’s blessing, you put him first in that area.

“You want God to bless your business? Put him first in your business. You want God to bless your marriage? Put him first in your marriage. You want God to bless your time? Put him first in your time. You want God to bless your finances? Put him first in your finances.”

The prescribed offering of firstfruits served to remind the ancient Israelites that the Lord was the one who could be trusted to provide secondfruits, thirdfruits,



fourthfruits, etc., after the firstfruits were given to him. The people were to focus first on God, not themselves.

And so it is with Christians. Regular giving is not optional (1 [Corinthians 16:2](#)), and that is a good thing because each gift requires us to focus on the one who ultimately receives the gift: God. But the primary firstfruit he desires is us ourselves. See [James 1:18](#).

—D. C. S.

*What Do You Think?*

How will you apply the firstfruits principle today?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- Regarding firstfruits of your time
- Regarding firstfruits of your talents (abilities and spiritual gifts)
- Regarding firstfruits of your treasure (money and other tangible resources)

### III. Sharing Blessings

([LEVITICUS 23:22](#))

**22. “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you. I am the LORD your God.”**

God does not generously give to the Israelites so they can stingily hoard his gifts and focus on themselves. The firstfruits offering is one way to keep them from doing so. The verse before us is another.

Sharing takes various forms for the Israelites. Here, God requires his people to underharvest their fields intentionally. They must leave a portion of the harvest in the fields *for the poor*. This command may be difficult for many Israelites to obey. Famines are not unknown ([Genesis 12:10](#); [1 Kings 18:2](#); [Acts 11:28](#); etc.), and hoarding is a temptation ([Luke 12:18, 19](#)).

Some will want to harvest every bit of grain and store all they can for the future. This seems the smart and responsible thing to do. Yet God disapproves of this. He wants his people to share selflessly. So he requires those who have been blessed to leave some of the blessing behind for others to reap and enjoy. Ruth, a Moabite widow, is perhaps the most prominent example of this procedure in operation ([Ruth 2:1-3](#)), and she ends up as an ancestor of Jesus ([Matthew 1:5](#)). What an impact!

God promises to bless those who share with the needy as he commands ([Deuteronomy 24:19](#)). So the Israelites face a choice. They can do the frugal thing by harvesting every square inch of their fields, or they can obey God, trusting him to provide for their needs. Life as God's people has always been a life of faith day in and day out.

*What Do You Think?*

How can we apply [Leviticus 23:22](#) today without violating [2 Thessalonians 3:10](#)?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- In personal helping situations
- While serving on a benevolence committee
- Other

#### “GLEANNING” TODAY

A ministry in Atlanta practices a modern form of the law of gleaning, allowing low-income parents to obtain toys for their children at Christmas by charging only half the retail price. Bob Lupton, the initiator of Pride for Parents, used to have wealthier families buy extra presents for free distribution.

The youngsters were excited to get the toys, and mothers were gracious but subdued. But if the father was home when the toys were delivered, he'd disappear out of embarrassment. Lupton's revised plan enabled parents to “glean” from the “fields” of others and maintain the dignity of providing for their children in the process. As Lupton explained, “What we found was, parents would rather work and pay for the toys that would bring joy to their kids on Christmas, much more so than standing in the free toy line with their proof of poverty.”

Since Jesus reminded us that the poor will always be among us ([John 12:8](#)), we will always have multiple opportunities to help them. The challenge is to do this in a way that fosters a sense of dignity and not dependency for those receiving help.

What would have to happen for you to embrace rather than ignore these opportunities?

—D. C. S.

## Conclusion

### A. Firstfruit Facts

The Jewish people were under the boot of the Roman Empire when Christ came. Many Jews were living in the promised land, although it didn't feel like it ([Acts 1:6](#)). Many other Jews were scattered throughout the Roman Empire ([James 1:1](#)). Since taxes were paid to a pagan government in both cases, the Jews undoubtedly felt as if they were paying rent to Rome wherever they lived. How can one pay firstfruits to God when that which would constitute such an offering goes to Rome?

Jesus did not reverse this. He did nothing to regain control of Canaan for his people. Instead, he died for their sins and sent them to live among all nations as witnesses to his kingdom. Wherever Christians live, we are resident aliens or exiles on foreign soil (1 [Peter 1:1](#)). That is indeed God's will as it lines up with the Great Commission ([Matthew 28:19, 20](#)), but firstfruits giving can be difficult when secular governments take so much in taxes right off the top.

Monetary giving is important, and the New Testament has principles for so doing ([Matthew 6:1-4](#); [1 Corinthians 16:2](#); [2 Corinthians 9:6, 7](#); etc.). There are

indeed certain parallels between old covenant and new covenant expectations for giving, but we should not press these too far since the old law is nailed to the cross ([Colossians 2:14](#)).

Still, the firstfruits concept should be deeply meaningful to Christians. Christ is designated as “firstfruits” ([1 Corinthians 15:20, 23](#)). As a result of Christ’s redeeming work, we “have the firstfruits of the Spirit” ([Romans 8:23](#)). The result is that we ourselves have become “a kind of firstfruits” ([James 1:18](#); [2 Thessalonians 2:13](#); compare [Revelation 14:4](#)).

### B. Firstfruit Application

But what does it mean to be “a kind of firstfruits”? Linking together the New Testament passages just mentioned leads to the conclusion that our witness is to center on representing the newness of life we have in Christ. Do others see the good result of Christ’s redemptive work in us, or do they see something else? Are we being salty salt, bright light, a city on a hill, and stars shining in the universe? When people look at us, do they catch a glimpse of the good news of God’s salvation?

Usually we think of the firstfruits of the Israelites’ flocks and crops being offered to God. But reversing the direction of the offering is [Jeremiah 2:3](#): “Israel was holy to the Lord, the firstfruits of his harvest.” The significance of this is in the very next line: “all who devoured her were held guilty, and disaster overtook them.” If such could be said about God’s old covenant people, is his love and protection for us any less?

#### *What Do You Think?*

In what ways would your life change were you to live consistently as a firstfruit of God’s new creation?

#### *Talking Points for Your Discussion*

In ways visible to others

In ways visible only to God

### C. Prayer

Faithful God, you have always given your best. And still we struggle to give back to you. We are tempted to hold back. We are tempted to store up treasures on this earth. We are then tempted to keep everything to ourselves. Lord, we need you to save us from our self-deception so we may live as your firstfruit witnesses to the world. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

### D. Thought to Remember

Live as firstfruits.

## INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at [www.standardlesson.com](http://www.standardlesson.com) or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

### Into the Lesson

Write each of the following on a separate index card: *medical bill, rent/mortgage, cable/satellite TV, charity pledge, phone, credit card, insurance, utilities*. Lay the cards facedown on a table. Then ask a volunteer to turn over two of the cards and read them aloud. Ask the volunteer to imagine having enough money to pay only one of the two bills. Which would it be?

After answer and explanation, turn the cards back over and mix. Ask another volunteer to do the same thing. Continue until everyone has had the opportunity to participate, but don’t let this drag out.

Lead into the Bible lesson by saying, “Life is a matter of priorities, isn’t it? The Bible tells us how to recognize what our priorities should be.”

### Into the Word

Say, “Firstfruits was a festival to celebrate the gift of God’s provision. Let’s learn more about it and what it means to us.”

Ask a volunteer to read aloud [Leviticus 2:14](#); [23:9-13](#). As the Scripture is being read, blow up a balloon, tie it, and write the word *PRIORITIZE* on it with a felt-tip pen. Say, “God commanded the Israelites to bring him offerings immediately after reaping the first of the harvest he would provide. How should these offerings have helped the Israelites keep their priorities straight?”

Ask another volunteer to read aloud [Leviticus 23:14](#). As it is being read, blow up another balloon, tie it, and write the word *PARTAKE* on the balloon. Then ask, “What requirement had to be met before the Israelites were permitted to partake of the food from the harvest? Why?”

Ask a final volunteer to read aloud [Leviticus 23:22](#). As it is being read, blow up another balloon, tie it, and write the word *PROVIDE* on the balloon. Ask, “After God had been given his portion, and after the Israelites had met (not exceeded) their own needs, for whom were they to provide? How?”

*Option.* Discuss the following New Testament references to firstfruits and the symbolism therein: [Romans 8:23](#); [1 Corinthians 15:20](#); [2 Thessalonians 2:13](#); [James 1:18](#). Expected observations on the latter three references are that firstfruits are part of the “crops” of God’s people and the “farmer” is God. Be sure to note, if no one else does, that firstfruit in the Old Testament primarily refers to agricultural bounty, with [Jeremiah 2:3](#) being an exception. Use the commentary to explore how that passage relates to Christians as firstfruits.

*Alternative.* Distribute pens and copies of the “Firstfruits Fill-In” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have students work in small groups to complete the verses.

After either activity say, “Let’s take this a bit further by exploring the significance in not just *giving* firstfruits, but also in *being* firstfruits.”

### Into Life

Give each student three slips of paper. Ask students to write a single word on each that describes their reasons for giving of themselves to God. Collect the slips,

shuffle them to ensure anonymity, and read them aloud. Discuss the most common words listed (possible responses are *feeling*, *command*, *gratitude*, etc.). Challenge students to pray about their giving of themselves for Christ's work in the week ahead.

*Alternative 1.* Tie or hold together the balloons from the Into the Word segment. Challenge students to apply today's Scriptures to modern times as you ask, "What would it look like to give God your firstfruits today in terms of these three words?"

*Alternative 2.* Distribute copies of the "My Giving to God" activity from the reproducible page. Have students work individually to reflect on their giving.