

Deuteronomy 16:9-12

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The Israelites were to celebrate the grain harvest in the Feast of Weeks to acknowledge the Giver of the harvest—the Suzerain (Ruler) LORD. This feast is to be accompanied by a freewill offering.

The second pilgrim festival the Israelites were to observe in the Promised Land was the Feast of Weeks. This feast is also called *the Feast of the Harvest* ([Exodus 23:16](#)) because it was celebrated seven weeks from the time the grain harvest began.

To celebrate the Feast of Weeks, the Israelites were to *count seven weeks* (v. 9). They were to *begin to count seven weeks from the time you begin to put the sickle to the standing grain*. The time when *the sickle* is put to *the standing grain* refers to the time when the grain harvest begins. This occurred in March-April. In [Leviticus 23](#), Moses explained to Israel how to determine the date for the Feast of Weeks. There, he told the Israelites to *count for yourselves from the day after the sabbath, from the day when you brought in the sheaf of the wave offering; there shall be seven complete sabbaths. You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh sabbath; then you shall present a new grain offering to the LORD* ([Leviticus 23:15-16](#)).

This account places the Feast of Weeks fifty days after the Passover/Unleavened Bread celebration. This would mean that the Feast of Weeks occurred in late May or early June. In the New Testament, this was called Pentecost ([Acts 2:1](#)). The word “Pentecost” is derived from the Greek word for “fifty.”

Once the Israelites calculated the time for the harvest festival, they were to have a celebration. It was at that time that they needed to *celebrate the Feast of Weeks to the LORD your God* (v. 10). It was to be a celebration designed to praise the Suzerain God for His provisions of the harvest for them. It was to be a national celebration, where Israelites gathered from the entire country. This would bring national unity to keep the covenant together. Since the core of the covenant was for each Israelite to love their neighbor as themselves, and avoid the forms of exploitation common among the pagan nations, it makes sense for them to gather regularly both to enjoy one another’s company in celebration, as well as to be reminded of their identity as a

covenant people under the reign of their Suzerain God. This would also remind them that they are to be self-governing under God's hand, rather than submit to human tyranny.

This celebration, Moses said, was to be accompanied by *a tribute of a freewill offering of your hand*. The *freewill offering* was a gift that was offered voluntarily. It could be any sacrifice offered by the worshiper, but it was to be given in proportion to *just as the LORD* their *God* blessed them.

Furthermore, this harvest festival was also to be a joyful celebration. The feast was an occasion at which the people were to *rejoice before the LORD your God*. Because of the LORD's generous provision, the worshiper's heart was to be full of joy and happiness as he celebrated the Feast of Weeks in the presence of the Suzerain (Ruler) God. The people were to have fun together. They were to enjoy one another's company. This would elevate the core commands of the covenant: the people were to love one another.

Accordingly, the worshiper was not supposed to enjoy this happy celebration alone. He was commanded to include *your son and your daughter and your male and female servants and the Levite who is in your town, and the stranger and the orphan and the widow who are in your midst*. Everyone who enjoyed the LORD's bountiful blessings was expected to participate in the celebration. They were to enjoy one another as well as to acknowledge the source of these blessings. It is interesting that only the wife/mother is not mentioned here. The reason is unknown, but likely it is because her attendance was considered a given.

The *Levite* was one who was part of the tribe of Levi, the tribe of Aaron the priest. The Levites did not have a land inheritance in Israel, but were ministers before the Suzerain God who assisted the priests in their duties. They had cities and grazing lands, but still relied upon the offerings of their fellow Israelites for their full sustenance. The national gatherings allowed opportunity for the people to express generosity to their fellow Israelites who served them in worship.

The term translated *stranger* (Heb. "gēr") can be better explained by the term "sojourner" since it refers to someone who resides in a foreign country who simply travels for pleasure or business ([Deuteronomy 5:14](#); [10:18-19](#)). The *stranger* would not have land and would be dependent to varying degrees upon the Israelites. But they were to be invited to participate as well. The joy and thanksgiving of the festival was to be shared by all.

This also applied to the *orphan* and the *widow*. These were also vulnerable parts of the population. An *orphan* usually refers to a child without a father. In ancient times the male parent was very important because, as the head of the family, he was responsible to protect and provide for his wife and children. Much of the energy required to grow food, build shelter, and provide protection came from the energy of human muscles. Therefore, a child without a father was considered defenseless and vulnerable. A *widow*, a woman who had lost her husband by death and remained unmarried, would also be vulnerable for the same reason as the *orphan*. Since male strength was a necessity to defend against exploitation (by other males), a single woman was often viewed as defenseless and vulnerable.

These three people groups (*stranger, orphan and widow*) were among the ones who had the least power in the Israelite society. Since the core of God's covenant with His people was for them to treat one another as they would want to be treated, these laws made special provisions for the vulnerable, to protect them from exploitation. The Suzerain LORD continually steered His people away from exploitative behavior of any kind, and toward loving behavior. God repeatedly encouraged the Israelite citizens to care for these people groups who were the most vulnerable to exploitation. When God later judged Israel, it was often because Israel was failing to give justice to the poor ([Amos 5:11-12](#)). In this case, the poor are to be included. They too are to rejoice and enjoy community along with everyone else at the festival.

This rejoicing was to be done *where the LORD your God chooses to establish His name*. God desired for all to gather. The central sanctuary where God's presence dwelt was the chosen religious site where the Israelites would go to celebrate the harvest and to give thanks to God. God does not yet disclose where He will *establish His name*. This will be disclosed later. The central place will initially be Shiloh, and ultimately Jerusalem.

While they were celebrating, the Israelites were to *remember that you were a slave in Egypt* (v. 12). It is important to maintain perspective. By remembering "We were once slaves" it should help the people have compassion for their neighbors who are suffering economic hardship. It is also important to face the reality of their dependence upon God. It was God who had delivered them. It would be their obedience to God that would bring them the prosperity that stems naturally from a nation of people dedicated to love one another as they would want to be loved. A nation that would unify around God's just and effective laws. Accordingly the people were to *be careful to observe these statutes*. They were not to ignore the LORD Who not only delivered them from

slavery in Egypt but also caused them to prosper in the Promised Land that He had given them.

In the New Testament, those who believe in Jesus for everlasting life were freed from being slaves to sin ([Romans 6:6](#); [Galatians 4:7](#)). We should also remember our deliverance, which will help us maintain perspective. We also should acknowledge our dependence upon God ([Matthew 6:11](#)) and live in gratitude. We have been freed from the law of death, and have been given the power of the Holy Spirit which allows us to be continually freed from the slavery of sin by walking in the Spirit ([Romans 6:17](#)).

Biblical Text:

⁹ You shall count seven weeks for yourself; you shall begin to count seven weeks from the time you begin to put the sickle to the standing grain. ¹⁰ Then you shall celebrate the Feast of Weeks to the Lord your God with a tribute of a freewill offering of your hand, which you shall give just as the Lord your God blesses you; ¹¹ and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you and your son and your daughter and your male and female servants and the Levite who is in your town, and the stranger and the orphan and the widow who are in your midst, in the place where the Lord your God chooses to establish His name. ¹² You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and you shall be careful to observe these statutes.