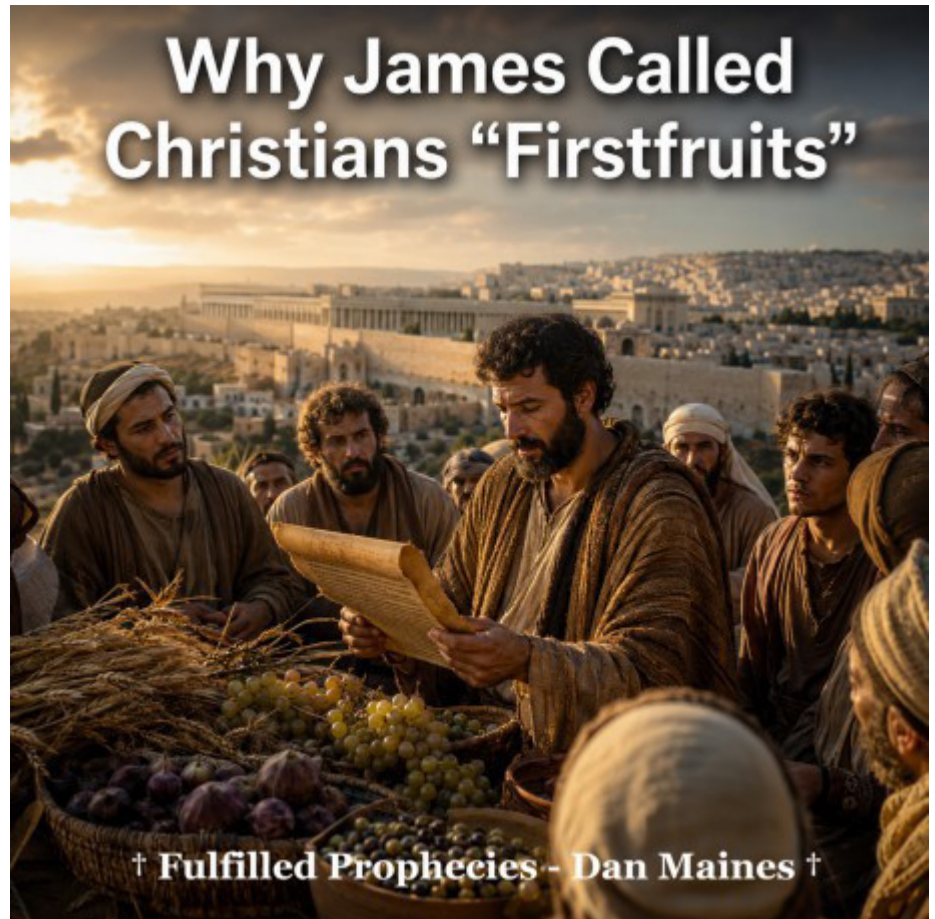


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Why James Called Christians "Firstfruits"



By Dan Maines

Why James Called Christians "Firstfruits"

Introduction

† James used one word that opens an entire biblical picture of covenant fulfillment, firstfruits.

† James wasn't simply telling believers that they were important to God. He placed them inside the harvest language of Israel's Scriptures.

† Under Israel's covenant calendar, firstfruits weren't the entire harvest. They were the beginning of the harvest, the portion gathered first that demonstrated the rest of the harvest was

approaching.

† This makes James 1:18 much bigger than a statement about individual salvation. James called first-century believers firstfruits because they were living at the beginning of the great covenant harvest Jesus had already announced.

† Jesus said the harvest was present in His generation, the apostles were sent into that harvest, Pentecost occurred on Israel's harvest calendar, and Revelation later pictured the faithful remnant as firstfruits.

† The question is simple. If those first-century believers were the firstfruits, what harvest were they anticipating?

† The answer runs through the teaching of Jesus, Pentecost, the apostolic mission, and the approaching end of the age.

James 1:18

In the exercise of His will He gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.

† James wasn't writing thousands of years after Christ to describe a distant generation. He wrote to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion and spoke directly about what God was doing among believers in their own time (James 1:1).

† Their conversion through the word of truth was evidence that God's promised harvest had begun. They were the early covenant gathering produced through the gospel.

† This also explains the urgency throughout James. The coming of the Lord was near, the Judge was standing at the doors, and those believers were told to remain patient until the precious fruit of the earth was gathered (James 5:7-9).

† Firstfruits and harvest belong together. James begins his letter by calling them firstfruits and later describes believers waiting patiently for the precious fruit associated with the Lord's approaching coming.

Leviticus 23:10-11

Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, When you enter the land which I am going to give to you and you gather its harvest, then you shall bring in the sheaf of the first fruits of

your harvest to the priest. He shall wave the sheaf before the Lord for you to be accepted; on the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it.

† Israel already understood the meaning of firstfruits. The first sheaf wasn't disconnected from the harvest. It announced that the harvest had begun.

† God built this pattern directly into Israel's covenant calendar. Firstfruits came first, then the gathering continued toward its completion.

† James didn't invent a new agricultural metaphor. He used language deeply rooted in Israel's Scriptures and covenant life.

† When James called believers firstfruits, his Jewish readers would've immediately understood the harvest significance behind the word.

Leviticus 23:15-17

You shall also 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. You shall bring in from your dwelling places two loaves of bread as a wave offering, made of two-tenths of an ephah; they shall be of a fine flour, baked with leaven as first fruits to the Lord.

† Fifty days after the first sheaf came the feast later known as Pentecost. Once again, God called the offering firstfruits.

† This gives Acts 2 powerful covenant significance. The Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, and about three thousand people received the word and were added (Acts 2:1, 41).

† That wasn't an accidental date on God's calendar. The gospel harvest was being gathered on a feast specifically associated with firstfruits and harvest.

† What Israel had celebrated agriculturally became a powerful picture of what God was accomplishing through Christ and the gospel in the last days of the old covenant age (Acts 2:16-17).

Matthew 9:37-38

Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore, plead with the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest."

† Jesus didn't describe the harvest as something beginning thousands of years later. He said the harvest was already plentiful.

† The disciples themselves were being prepared as workers in that harvest. Their mission wasn't detached from the prophetic expectations of Israel, it was part of their fulfillment.

† Jesus was standing among covenant Israel, seeing the multitudes, and announcing that harvest time had arrived.

† James later calling believers firstfruits fits perfectly within the harvest mission Jesus had already begun.

John 4:35-36

Do you not say, 'There are still four months, and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I tell you, raise your eyes and observe the fields, that they are white for harvest. Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that the one who sows and the one who reaps may rejoice together.

† Jesus couldn't have made the timing much clearer. The disciples weren't supposed to say the harvest was still far away. The fields were already ready for harvest.

† The harvest had begun during Christ's ministry and would continue through the apostolic mission.

† Jesus connected this gathering with fruit for eternal life. This wasn't merely about crops, it was about people being gathered into the life of God's kingdom.

† James' firstfruits language belongs naturally inside this same first-century harvest setting.

Matthew 13:39-40

and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels. So just as the weeds are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the

end of the age.

† Jesus directly connected the harvest with the end of the age. The Greek word translated world here is *aion*, referring to an age.

† This wasn't teaching the destruction of planet Earth. Jesus was describing a harvest connected with the conclusion of an age.

† That fits the entire New Testament setting. The apostles said they were living at the ends of the ages, the last days had arrived, and the consummation was approaching (1 Corinthians 10:11; Hebrews 1:1-2; Hebrews 9:26).

† James' firstfruits therefore belonged to a harvest that was moving toward the end of the old covenant age.

† Firstfruits at the beginning and harvest at the end form one continuous covenant picture.

Acts 2:41

So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.

† Pentecost gives us a dramatic picture of the firstfruits harvest in action. About three thousand people received the apostolic message in a single day.

† The gospel wasn't waiting for a distant prophetic clock to begin. The gathering was happening right there in Jerusalem.

† Israelites from many nations had gathered for the feast, heard the gospel, and were brought into the community of Christ (Acts 2:5-11).

† The harvest language of Israel's feast calendar and the actual gathering recorded in Acts fit together beautifully.

Romans 11:5

In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice.

† Paul specifically said there was a remnant at that present time. That places the gathering firmly within the first-century covenant transition.

† God hadn't forgotten His promises to Israel. He was fulfilling

them by gathering the faithful remnant through Christ.

† The firstfruits weren't evidence that God's promises had failed. They were evidence that God's promises were being fulfilled.

† The remnant according to grace became part of the believing people of God while unbelief brought covenant judgment upon the hardened portion of Israel (Romans 11:7-10).

Revelation 14:4

These are the ones who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are celibate. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These have been purchased from mankind as first fruits to God and to the Lamb.

† Revelation uses the same firstfruits language. These faithful followers of the Lamb were purchased as firstfruits to God and the Lamb.

† Once again, firstfruits language appears in a book filled with imminent first-century expectations. The things revealed were shortly to happen, and the time was near (Revelation 1:1, 3).

† These firstfruits belonged to the generation living through the transition from the old covenant age into the fully established new covenant order.

† The pattern remains consistent. Firstfruits appear before the completed harvest, not thousands of years after it.

James 5:7-9

Therefore be patient, brothers and sisters, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Do not complain, brothers and sisters, against one another, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door.

† James brings the harvest picture directly into his discussion of the coming of the Lord. The farmer was waiting for the precious fruit, and James told his readers to be patient in the same way.

† He didn't tell them the coming was thousands of years away.

He said it was at hand.

† He didn't tell them the Judge would someday approach a distant generation. He said the Judge was standing at the doors.

† This connects beautifully with the beginning of the letter. In chapter 1 they were firstfruits. In chapter 5 they were waiting for the approaching completion associated with the Lord's coming.

† The beginning and ending of James therefore carry the same harvest framework, firstfruits had appeared, the fruit was maturing, and the coming of the Lord was near.

† The harvest they anticipated was the covenant gathering and separation connected with the end of the old covenant age, culminating in the judgment that Jesus had placed within that generation (Matthew 23:36; Matthew 24:34).

Historical References

† Josephus records the catastrophic events surrounding Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70, including famine, internal violence, Roman siege, massive death, captivity, and the destruction of the city and sanctuary. His account provides historical background for understanding the covenant judgment that overtook that generation. Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, Books 5-7.

† Tacitus also records the Roman campaign against Jerusalem and describes the city as being under siege during the reign of Vespasian. His Roman perspective independently confirms the historical setting of Jerusalem's final catastrophe. Tacitus, *Histories*, Book 5.

† Eusebius later recorded the tradition that believers in Jerusalem were warned and departed before the war, settling at Pella. This is significant when considered alongside Jesus' warning that His disciples were to flee when they recognized the approaching judgment. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 3, Chapter 5.

† These historical writers don't establish the doctrine. Scripture establishes the doctrine. Their writings help confirm that the first-century generation actually experienced the historical

judgment and covenant upheaval Jesus and the apostles had warned about.

How It Applies To Us Today

† We aren't the firstfruits generation waiting for the old covenant age to end. They were.

† We live on the completed side of the covenant transition they were experiencing.

† Their firstfruits status shouldn't be removed from its first-century setting and stretched across thousands of years.

† We can rejoice because the kingdom they were entering has been established, Christ reigns, and access to God isn't through an earthly temple, priesthood, or sacrificial system.

† We don't wait for the destruction of the old covenant order. That judgment happened in history.

† We proclaim the gospel from the victory of Christ and the reality of the new covenant, knowing that what the firstfruits anticipated reached its covenant goal.

† James 1:18 isn't a small statement. It's another piece of the New Testament's harvest timeline. Firstfruits had appeared because harvest time had arrived.

Q & A Appendix

Q: Why did James call first-century Christians firstfruits?

A: Because they were the early covenant gathering produced through the word of truth during the harvest Jesus had already announced (James 1:18; Matthew 9:37-38; John 4:35-36).

Q: Does firstfruits imply something more was coming?

A: Yes. In Israel's harvest pattern, firstfruits represented the beginning of the harvest, not its completion (Leviticus 23:10-17).

Q: What harvest were they anticipating?

A: They were living through the gospel gathering and covenant separation associated with the end of the old covenant age (Matthew 13:39-40; James 5:7-9).

Q: What does Pentecost have to do with firstfruits?

A: Pentecost was part of Israel's harvest calendar, and Acts records about three thousand people receiving the word on that very day (Leviticus 23:15-17; Acts 2:41).

Q: Was James expecting the Lord's coming in his readers' lifetime?

A: James told those believers that the coming of the Lord was at hand and that the Judge was standing at the doors (James 5:7-9).

Q: Are Christians today still waiting for that first-century harvest to be completed?

A: No. We live after the covenant transition those believers were experiencing. We now live under the established new covenant reign of Christ (Hebrews 12:22-24; Revelation 21:1-3).

† This is the fulfilled perspective we proclaim at Fulfilled Prophecies †

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Source Index

† James 1:18; Leviticus 23:10-11; Leviticus 23:15-17; Matthew 9:37-38; John 4:35-36; Matthew 13:39-40; Acts 2:41; Romans 11:5; Revelation 14:4; James 5:7-9

† Josephus, The Wars of the Jews, Books 5-7; Tacitus, Histories, Book 5; Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Book 3, Chapter 5

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