



THE GARDEN

9 WEEK BIBLE STUDY

embrace

PASTOR SHANNON MAROCCO

Glorify God with all your wealth,
honoring him with your firstfruits,
with every increase that comes to
you. Then every dimension of your
life will overflow with blessings
from an uncontainable source of
inner joy!

PROVERBS 3:9-10 TPT

First Fruits

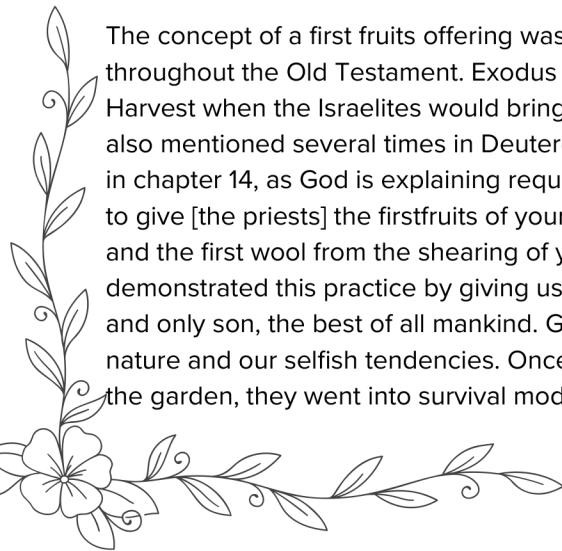
Big Idea

Why does God want us to give? What can we offer the Creator of the universe? What gift could we possibly lavish upon the King of Kings and Lord of Lords? And why would He need us to give Him the first fruits of our labor?

The men and women of the Bible lived an agrarian lifestyle, meaning that their primary means of subsistence was the cultivation of crops and raising of domesticated animals. At harvest time, they would offer the "bikkurim," which translates to "promise to come." This first fruits offering was a bold act of faith, effectively saying, "You, God, are worthy of my first and best even if I'm not certain there will be more later."

The concept of giving the first fruits to God goes all the way back to Cain and Abel. Cain probably grabbed whatever leftover scraps he had collected from the compost pile when it was time to go make an offering to God. Whereas Abel brought the best of what he had. Bringing our first fruits extends beyond giving our tithes every week; tithing is simply the act of returning to God what is rightfully His. Bringing our first fruits means offering God our very best.

The concept of a first fruits offering was repeated again and again throughout the Old Testament. Exodus 23:16 talks about the Feast of the Harvest when the Israelites would bring the firstfruits of their labor. It's also mentioned several times in Deuteronomy (14:22, 26:1-2, 26:10), and in chapter 14, as God is explaining required offerings, He says, "You are to give [the priests] the firstfruits of your grain, new wine and olive oil, and the first wool from the shearing of your sheep." God the Father demonstrated this practice by giving us His first fruits: Jesus, His one and only son, the best of all mankind. Giving goes against our sinful nature and our selfish tendencies. Once Adam and Eve were cast from the garden, they went into survival mode.



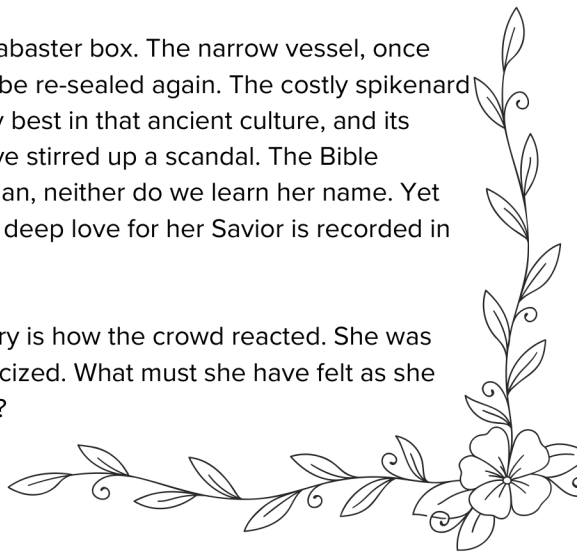
Gardening became difficult and yielded little of worth. Every morsel would have been worth its weight in gold, and any belonging would have been fiercely protected. Greed is the powerful personality trait cultivated in the heart of our natural selves when we are in survival mode. We instinctively fight to protect our own desires and comforts.

Ironically, God placed this burning desire inside us at the moment He breathed life into our lungs. It's the desire He created which would cause us to yearn for Him and seek out His presence. But when we were expelled from Eden and separated from God's presence, the enemy twisted that desire and used it to draw us further from the Garden and further from the Gardener. When we are dragged away by that evil desire and enticed, the desire gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death (James 1:14-15).

Yet even though giving goes against our nature, God calls us to be cheerful givers. In 2 Corinthians 9:7, Paul urges the church to give generously, but not in response to pressure. "For God loves a person who gives cheerfully." Giving is an expression of our love for God, just as His love for us was expressed by His ultimate gift: that of His one and only Son whom He gave freely to be the sacrifice for our sin. In order to go against our nature and become cheerful in our giving is by loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Out of our love for Him will flow an instinctive desire to worship Him, and cultivate a yearning for His presence. Perhaps the greatest reason for us to give God our first fruits is that it is an act of worship, and it aligns our hearts with the Father's.

Consider the woman with the alabaster box. The narrow vessel, once broken, would never be able to be re-sealed again. The costly spikenard it contained symbolized the very best in that ancient culture, and its careless use certainly would have stirred up a scandal. The Bible records no words from this woman, neither do we learn her name. Yet her act of ultimate devotion and deep love for her Savior is recorded in all four gospels.

What we do know about her story is how the crowd reacted. She was met with anger and verbally criticized. What must she have felt as she approached the party that night?



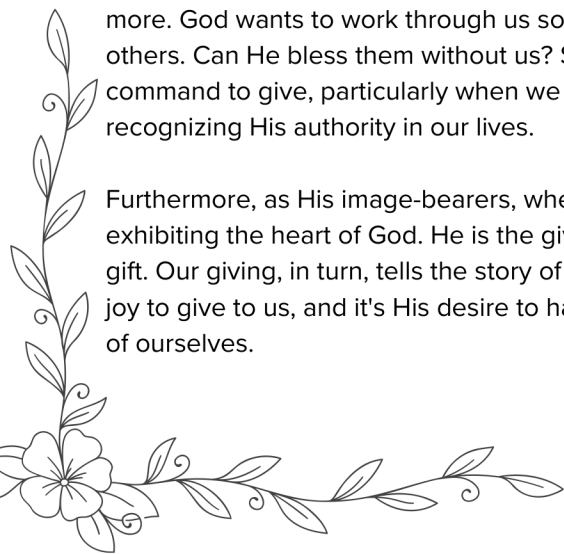
Did she hesitate when she saw the crowd? Or was she blinded to everyone else as she focused on Jesus?

Have you ever felt so strongly compelled by love that you didn't care what anyone around you thought or said? I imagine that the moment she met Jesus' gaze, the rest of the world faded; she wasn't there for them. She came for the audience of One, with the sole purpose of lavishing her love upon Him. As she poured the oil over Him, anointing Him as an act of sanctification, she was honoring Him as One who had been chosen by God. The aroma of her fragrant perfume would have filled the room. There would have been oil on her hands, her arms, perhaps even her cheeks as she wiped her tears. Whether the surrounding crowd understood what she was doing or not, they all would have left that night smelling of spikenard.

When we worship God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, when we offer Him our first and our best, it shifts the entire atmosphere, and leaves a lasting impact on us and those around us. This is why God wants us to give sacrificially in every area of our lives. He deserves more than our leftovers and after thoughts. He deserves our very best, our first fruits, our everything. Through our worship, as we give and surrender first fruits to Him, the world around us begins to reflect His nature, His beauty, His love.

God asks us to give not because He needs our money, but because He needs our surrender. In God's economy, we receive more by giving more. God wants to work through us so that we can be a blessing to others. Can He bless them without us? Sure! But when we obey God's command to give, particularly when we offer our first and best, we are recognizing His authority in our lives.

Furthermore, as His image-bearers, when we give sacrificially, we are exhibiting the heart of God. He is the giver of every good and perfect gift. Our giving, in turn, tells the story of His salvation. It brings God great joy to give to us, and it's His desire to have us share in this joy by giving of ourselves.



Discussion

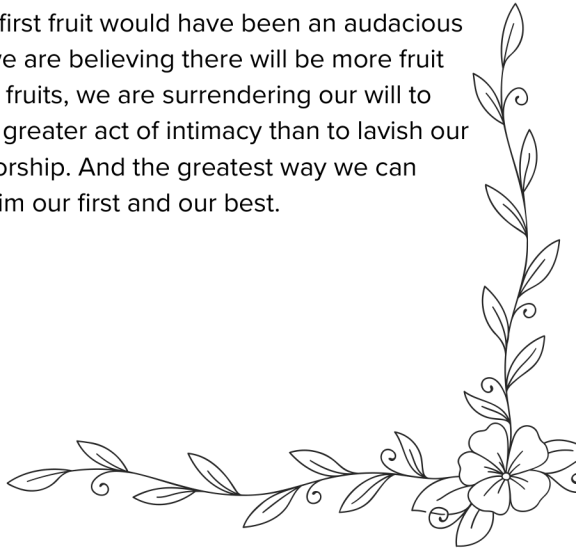
How do we become "cheerful givers?" (2 Corinthians 9:7)

What does it mean to you personally to give your first and best?

Fear and greed both prevent us from giving. Can you identify how they work in you?

Takeaway

In horticultural terms, giving the first fruit would have been an audacious act of faith; it would mean that we are believing there will be more fruit to follow. When we give our first fruits, we are surrendering our will to Him. This is the key: There is no greater act of intimacy than to lavish our love upon the Father through worship. And the greatest way we can worship Him is through giving Him our first and our best.



*My Fragrant
Worshiper,*

How I love that you meet me at the beginning of the day, before you're pulled in many directions and your mind is consumed by your lists of must-do errands, and give Me the first fruits of your day.

I know it's not always easy nor convenient to do so.

The speed of life can be dizzying. Keep coming, My child. Keep rising before the sun to voice your love and concerns to Me. Keep slipping into that prayer closet unseen by others.

I hear you.

I see you.

I receive your worship with gladness!

I will answer!