



"It's a job that's never started that takes the longest to finish."
—J.R.R. Tolkien

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The Endurance of the Firstfruits (Part One)

The day of Pentecost, also known as the Feast of the Firstfruits and the Feast of Weeks, is unique among the annual [holy days](#) because [God](#) requires us to count to determine when it falls each year: "And you shall count for yourselves from the day after the [Sabbath](#), from the day that you brought the sheaf of the [wave offering](#): seven Sabbaths shall be completed" ([Leviticus 23: 15](#)).

The Hebrew word translated as "count," *spar*, has some intriguing aspects that can enhance our appreciation of this feast. *Strong's Concordance* gives the basic meaning as "to score with a mark, as a tally or record." Making a mark or even a cutting helps a person keep track of the number of something. It can imply "to inscribe," as one might do with a penknife.

Spar can even mean "to celebrate" because a celebration often involves a *recounting* of a past event. In addition to being translated "count" and "number," it is also rendered as "to declare," "to tell," "to scribe." Finally, it can also denote "to show forth," as when a person brings evidence to light. All of these are linked to the idea of recording something for future use.

With this background, what is interesting about *spar* is that its primary usage *always* has to do with either something that has happened in the past or is happening in the present. It has to do with recording and recounting rather than forecasting—that is, rather than counting in advance. Its usage has virtually nothing to do with looking ahead, with speculating on the future.

This time-related fact aids us in understanding why God commands us to [count to Pentecost](#) every year. We typically count out the days to Pentecost so we can place the day on a calendar and know when to observe it. Doing this is a necessary activity, and there is certainly nothing wrong with it.

However, *spar* implies that we count—or tally—*as we go along*. It suggests that we, in some way—perhaps just in our minds—inscribe the tally of the seven weeks as we progress from Wavesheaf Day to the Feast of Weeks. Counting ahead of time certainly fulfills the instruction, but remember that this Hebrew word possesses a sense of tallying as one proceeds.

A second word in the instructions in [Leviticus 23:15](#) also has a higher meaning than appears at first glance. "Completed" or "full" (*English Standard Version*) describes the seven Sabbaths of the count. The basic meaning of this word, *t m î m*, is "complete" or "entire." However, in 95% of the places this word appears, a moral dimension is present, taking the meaning of "complete" or "entire" to a higher level.

In these instances, it is typically translated as "perfect," "blameless," "upright," "sincere," or "without blemish." God uses *t m î m* when He describes Noah as "perfect" among his contemporaries ([Genesis 6:9](#)). He uses it again when telling Abram to walk before Him and be "blameless" ([Genesis 17:1](#)). Scripture uses it repeatedly to describe sacrifices that were to be "without blemish" ([Exodus 12:5](#); [Leviticus 1:3](#); [Numbers 6:14](#); etc.).

The idea of "complete" or "entire" is certainly present in these words, but the way it is used indicates far more than just "not lacking any parts." It implies *complete in a moral sense*. So, while "seven Sabbaths shall be completed" literally means that the count must contain seven full weeks (rather than partial weeks), the strong moral overtones of *t m î m* are such that these particular Sabbaths are associated with perfection, blamelessness,

uprightness, sincerity, and absence of moral blemish. In type, then, these seven Sabbaths represent the *process* of the firstfruits becoming spiritually complete, that is, perfect, blameless, and absent of moral blemish—in short, the progression toward putting on the full [image of God](#).

Taking a step back from these details, we realize that Pentecost draws attention, not to a single day, but to a whole or entire duration of time. We can see this in its name: the Feast of Weeks. The festival comes at the end of that block of time, but the day would be incomplete without our marking the time leading up to it.

Like all the other holy days, we observe Pentecost each year to bring to mind certain foundational spiritual principles. In this case, the duration of seven weeks leading up to the feast day reminds us of the growth process that occurs between when God accepts the Wavesheaf on our behalf and when He harvests us in the resurrection. Using the day-for-a-year principle ([Numbers 14:34](#); [Ezekiel 4:6](#)), the fifty days of the count stand for the fifty years of an adult's converted life.

Naturally, not all of God's people are converted for a full fifty years. Stephen was martyred within just a few years of the founding of the church. History indicates that all the apostles (except John) suffered martyrdom before their fifty years were up, yet John lived for many more than 50 years after his conversion. So if a person is baptized at age fifty, it does not mean that God will make him live to be a hundred years old to get the full fifty "days" in. But just as the number seven represents spiritual perfection in Scripture, so the seven Sabbaths of the count to Pentecost represent the time during which He is spiritually perfecting us, regardless of the number of literal years.

Pentecost is a feast day, meaning it is a celebration—a celebration of success, of completing a task well. If we have ever tried to grow a garden, let alone tried to farm, we know that there is good reason to celebrate when we bring in a successful harvest simply because so many things can go wrong. We typically do not celebrate something that is a foregone conclusion. We celebrate when there is success after a great deal of hard work and perhaps even some risk.

And so it is with this Christian walk—we celebrate, in advance, the success of the spiritual harvest because, although we know that things can and do go wrong, we also know that God will complete the work He has started in us ([Philippians 1:6](#)). We can be confident and joyful that He will do His part, so all we have to worry about is whether we will do ours, which will be our concern in Part Two.

- David C. Grabbe

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Pentecost and Hope](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

In the account of Simeon in Luke 2:25-30, what did Simeon do to sustain his hope? Simeon's life serves as a precursor to that of God's called-out ones, demonstrating the elements necessary to bring a person to spiritual maturity. The first is hope in God's law. Like Moses, we stand as a kind of mediator, meticulously digesting God's law in order to teach it to the rest of mankind. The second is hope in God's Holy Spirit, which enables us to overcome, produce fruit, and provide witness. The third is hope in God's judgment of the Pentecost offering, representing us, presented to God for inspection, evaluation, and acceptance. The fourth is hope in being God's firstfruits, the wave loaves that are totally consumed by the Priest in His service, giving us hope that we will indeed be in His Kingdom.

From the Archives: Featured Article

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by David C. Grabbe

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