

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

Holy Days Leviticus 23:1-22

Intro: The main theme of this section (21-24) is on the necessity of Israel showing due reverence to the holy things of the Lord. Israel's God is holy and those things that belong to Him are also holy and Israel was commanded to not only respect the holiness of their God but to reflect it as well, in their actions and attitudes and the way they treat the Lord's things and obey His commands. The first 2 chapters (21-22) focus on the responsibilities of the priests and how they were to conduct themselves in their ministry. Since the priests ministered in the tabernacle, you could say that these 2 chapters dealt with the sanctification of place while in ch23 the focus shifts to sanctification of time. Our text lists the Lord's holy times; 7 annual feasts Israel was commanded to observe and celebrate and, it describes in particular, how and when Israel was to observe them. While each of these times has a unique focus, they all concentrate on some aspect of who the Lord is or what He has done for His people.

Calendars are a normal part of our daily busy lives but they weren't that important to ancient Israelites. They worked from dawn til dusk, counted the months by the phases of the moon and watched the seasons come and go. Each day was a sacred gift from God. But, God did give Israel a calendar that was tied both to the rhythm of the seasons and the history of the nation. It was an unusual calendar because it not only summarized what the Lord had done for them in the past but it also anticipated what He would do for them in the future. These feasts, while describing actual holy events, were also rich with symbolic and prophetic significance. The salvation work of Jesus Christ, the founding of the Church and the future of the people of Israel are all illustrated in these 7 holy events.

Some of these feasts were only celebrated after Israel entered the Promise Land so they anticipate that promised event but all of these festivals had a dramatic narrative character to them. By participating in them, Israel rehearsed the mighty acts of God that were performed on their behalf, which was a history of redemption. Even after they were in Canaan, the only reason they could be in the land and could grow crops is because the Lord had redeemed them with a mighty hand and brought them up from the land

of Egypt. He then guided and protected them in all their wilderness wanderings. The festivals belong to the Lord, they are His sacred occasions, and the people were to observe them as a way of fulfilling the command, “Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy” (19:2).

1-2 – This introduces 2 of the text’s main themes: feasts and holy convocations. The word feasts has nothing to do with eating. In fact, on the Day of Atonement, the people fasted. The word simply means appointed times; the times at which religious holidays were to take place. The Lord declares these appointed times to be My feasts because they are focused on Him (just as I call 9/26: my Birthday). A holy convocation gives the idea that during each of these feasts, all the people met together as a congregation but that was not always the case. There were some special gatherings on some of the special days but the word basically means proclamation or announcement. The Lord appointed and announced these holy events and the people celebrated them faithfully by stopping work and observing any rites that were connected to that holy day.

3 – Oddly enough, the weekly Sabbath is 1st on the list but its not one of the appointed festivals. In fact, it seems that there was no actual assembly that met on the regular Sabbath day. The priests had certain duties to perform on the Sabbath but there’s no recorded command for ritual activity on the part of the people. As a holy convocation, it was a proclamation of holiness; that is, it was proclaimed as sacred and holy and Israel kept the day holy by refraining from work, not by any service of communal worship.

So why is it listed here? The Sabbath was the sign of Israel’s covenant relationship with the Lord (Ex 31:12-17). By observing it, the Israelites reaffirmed the covenant every week and proclaimed the Lord as the One who created all things in 6 days and ceased from work on the 7th. The 7th day is here called a Sabbath of solemn (or complete) rest; the people could not do any work at all, whether plowing or harvesting (Ex 34:21), baking or boiling food (Ex 16:23), preparing a fire (Ex 35:3) or gathering wood (Num 15:32-36). This stands in contrast to other special days on which limited work could be done (6-8). In either case, refraining from work helped to set a day apart as holy.

But, while some people in Israel initially had a difficult time accepting the Sabbath regulations, we should understand that such a rest was a great

blessing. Who doesn't like a day off? I mean, if they're passing them out, I'll take 2! Imagine what a wonderful benefit a weekly day of rest must have been for the ancient laborer and the farmer in his weary round of work. How much more wonderful would this have for the Israelites, who were accustomed to back-breaking labor piled on them as slaves in Egypt. They didn't have any days off back there! And yet, with His typical grace, the Lord commands the Israelites to proclaim their loyalty to Him (observing Sabbath) in a way that brings them the blessings of much needed rest and refreshment.

There are other reasons the Sabbath is mentioned 1st on this list. It's the only ritual listed in the Big 10 and is the only one that specifically declares imitating God as the motivation for its observance. As such, the Sabbath can be seen as the premier example of a holy day and these festivals are to be regarded as "Sabbath-like." Just as the Sabbath belongs to the Lord, it serves as the prototype for these other festivals, which also belong to the Lord. Finally, the Sabbath was the 7th day and the motif of "7" plays out significantly in these festivals: the 1st occurs on the 14th day of the 1st month (two 7s); there are two 7 day festivals; two of the festivals are separated from each other by 7 7s of days; 3 festivals take place in the 7th month and there are extra Sabbaths in the festivals. Whenever the Lord "7s" something, He's reminding His people that what He says and does is complete and dependable. Nothing can be added to it.

The 1st half of ch23 describes the 4 holy events that occur in the 1st half of Israel ceremonial calendar year (4-22) while the 2nd half lists the 3 holy events that occur in the 2nd half of the year (23-44). Seeing how long it has taken us to cover just the 1st 3 verses, I'm just going to call it and say we're only going to be able to deal with the first 4 feasts. We'll cover the last 3 feasts next time and then once we have determined what these feasts meant to the Israelites of the OT, we'll then discover how each one has been or will be embodied and fulfilled by Jesus Christ and thus, what these feasts mean to the church in the NT.

4-5 – One of the oddities of Leviticus is that a book that contains so much detail about sacrifice only contains 1 verse about Passover! Details for the Passover are seen in **Ex 12:1-13, 43-50**. The Israelites celebrated this Feast to remember that the Lord had delivered them from judgment (10th plague) and led them up from the land of slavery. By doing this in the

first month, Israel began their year by declaring that the Lord is a God who saves! This feast was so significant that special arrangements were made for those unable to celebrate it at the proper time (Num 9:10-12). Those who refused to partake were 'cut off' from their people (Num 9:13) which was the appropriate punishment since refusing was equal to denying the Lord's salvation and deliverance. It's comparable to a Christian refusing to participate in Communion.

The NT writers use the Passover to explain the death of Jesus, who was crucified at the same general time as the Passover and is described by Paul in I Cor 5:7 as our Passover lamb. This is a fitting metaphor since Jesus' sacrifice also delivers us from the Lord's judgment (I Thess 1:10) and leads us out of the slavery of sin into adoption as the Lord's children (Jn 1:12; Eph 1:5). It's during the Communion meal, instituted by Jesus at the Passover feast that Christians remember and proclaim that Jesus is our mighty Savior, the sacrificial Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world!

6-8 – This feast began the day after Passover and shared its purpose: to remember the Lord's deliverance of the Israelites from bondage. This was a 7-day long celebration that involved sacrifices and shared meals given in honor of the Lord. During these 7 days the Israelites only ate unleavened bread in order to remember the food they had eaten after being delivered out of Egypt. Each day they presented food offerings to the Lord and on the 1st and 7th days they held a holy convocation (gathering) which suggests they began and ended this feast with a special community celebration. On those 2 days they could do none of their ordinary work (farming), but they could prepare the food they would eat in celebration.

This feast was very significant: it was 1 of 3 feasts that all Israelite males, as representatives of their families, were required to celebrate at the tabernacle. Of course, it was also common for the entire family to attend. But, just like the Passover, Ex 12:15 says that anyone who refused to celebrate this feast was to be 'cut off' from the nation. Together with the Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread began each year as a tremendous declaration and celebration of the Lord's deliverance, which would've reminded the Israelites to follow Him with strong confidence in His salvation, great reverence for His power and great thankfulness for His redeeming grace. This makes it entirely appropriate that Jesus' death and resurrection, the ultimate displays of the Lord's redemption, happened

during this feast.

9-14 – As with other previous commands, this feast anticipated life in the Promised Land. That the Lord gave them the command to observe this feast was actually a promise that they would in fact come into the land and possess it. The Lords said, when you come into the land, not “if” you come into the land. Once there, they were to bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of their harvest (barley) as an offering of firstfruits to the Lord. By doing this, Israel acknowledged that the Lord was their provider, the One who graciously blessed them with the crops they needed to survive. In addition to this, by giving Him the firstfruits – considered to be the best of the harvest – they were declaring that the Lord was worthy of the best they had to offer.

The priest was to wave the sheaf back and forth before the Lord as a way of dedicating it to Him on the offeror’s behalf. This was to take place on the day after the Sabbath, a phrase that has led to much debate. Was this the next day after the last Sabbath of the Feast of Unleavened Bread or was it the day after the first Sabbath after the barley harvest? Either way, the fact remains that this event always occurred on the 1st day of the week (Sunday) and the goal of the feast was to seek the Lord’s favorable acceptance, something He delighted to show to His covenant children as they came in humble reliance before Him.

During this feast, the offeror was also to present a burnt offering (**12**), possibly to emphasize thankfulness for the Lord’s provision and to request that such provision would continue. The accompanying grain offering was to be twice the normal amount, most likely as an added expression of thankfulness to the Lord for the successful crops. The drink offering was the normal amount and it would have been poured out upon the altar. This offering constituted a complete meal for the Lord of drink, meat (lamb) and bread (grain).

We should also note that the Israelites could only partake of their new crops after they had brought the prescribed offering to the Lord. As we all know, thankfulness is one of the first emotions to evaporate. This requirement made sure the Israelites gave proper thanksgiving and honor to their bountiful King before they enjoyed His generous provision.

15-22 – This feast was known by several different names: in 2 other

passages it is referred to as the Feast of Weeks (Ex 34:22; Dt 16:10) since it occurred 7 weeks after the offering of the firstfruits of the barley harvest. In another passage (Ex 23:16) it's called the Feast of Harvest since it celebrated the firstfruits of the wheat harvest. After the Jews returned from exile in Babylon, this feast was known by a name that is more familiar to us – Pentecost, after the Greek word for fiftieth, since it occurred on the fiftieth day after the Feast of Firstfruits (9-14). It shouldn't seem odd to us that this 1 feast went by so many different names. It's the same with NT ordinance of Communion, which is also commonly known as the Lord's Supper and is also referred to in some congregations as the Eucharist. But, no matter what name was used for this particular feast; it was a celebration of the Lord's provision in the harvest.

Like the Feast of Unleavened Bread, this feast was very significant and counted as 1 of 3 feasts that all Israelite males were required to celebrate at the tabernacle. Just as in the Feast of Firstfruits, they were to bring an offering of the new grain of the harvest. But, instead of a sheaf from the harvest, this grain offering was to be prepared at home as 2 loaves baked with yeast (leaven) which were offered along with animal sacrifices. This was highly unusual! Generally speaking, Israelites were forbidden from offering any kind of yeast or leaven with a blood offering. But, leavened bread was acceptable when combined with a peace or fellowship offering (7:13) and this could explain why it's offered on this occasion of thanksgiving and praise. Leavened bread couldn't be presented on the altar but the priests could wave the loaves before the Lord to dedicate them to Him and then receive them back from the Lord.

The significance of this day is also shown by the extensive series of additional sacrifices offered (18-19). Not many Israelite households would have been able to provide so many offerings on their own and this makes it more likely that the offerings were brought by the entire community as was seen during the Feast of Unleavened Bread and will be seen later in the Feast of Booths. Still, many families would have been able to bring their own fellowship offerings (peace) so that they might enjoy a covenant meal before the Lord at the tabernacle. But, these weren't just random sacrifices. By making all these offerings, the Israelites were able to achieve atonement (purification/ burnt offerings), express worship and praise (burnt offering) and celebrate covenant fellowship (fellowship offering).

V22 concludes this section by repeating the command given in 19:9-10, except that it doesn't mention the vineyard, most likely because grapes ripen later in the year than wheat. Notice again that the Lord says, When you reap the harvest of your land... This command was given to Israel while they were still at Mt. Sinai and a long way from the land the Lord had promised to give them, 40 years long, as it were. Thus, this command was made in faith, with full assurance that the Lord would fulfill exactly what He had promised. This command established a law that provided a way for the poor and the stranger to eat by working for themselves and gathering what was left behind in the harvest. This was to serve as a constant reminder to Israel that all they have is a gift from the Lord and, as such, it was to be shared generously. This was an appropriate reminder considering the significance and purpose of this feast.

While the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread celebrated the Lord's deliverance from the old land, the offering of firstfruits and the Feast of Weeks anticipated the Lord's provision in the new land. Instead of looking to Canaanite gods like Baal to provide for their agricultural needs, the Israelites were to remember that the Lord who delivered them out of the land of slavery is the same Lord who would provide for them in the land promise!

If we get nothing out of this particular study from the day we should at least understand that, as modern day Christians, the same truth, the same reality applies right in our very own lives. You may be suffering from a health scare or a financial dilemma or even a crisis of faith. Whatever trials you are going through at the moment, no matter how dark the future may look or how helpless or hopeless you may feel, just remember that the Savior who brought you up out of the miry clay of sin, who loved you while you were in your sin and gave Himself for you when you were His enemy; that same Savior holds you in His hands, He has His hand on the thermostat and His eye on the fire. Your trials are bringing about spiritual refinement in your Christian walk, they're making you more like Christ.

Heb 5:8 says that, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. This doesn't mean that Jesus went from disobedience to obedience for He always and only did the will of His Father. What this verse means is that Jesus learned obedience by actually obeying. It's not that He learned how to obey but that He learned exactly what all is

involved in obedience. Jesus learned first-hand the experience of obedience and part of learning was the necessary endurance of suffering. If we're to be like Jesus then we also need to learn exactly what is involved in obedience and for most, if not all believers, that learning involves the endurance of suffering.

But, we don't suffer hopelessly and we won't suffer eternally. Suffering may endure for the night but joy comes in the morning! Our Lord suffered and died to save us from sin and He will be with us to comfort us in our troubles and, more importantly, He will provide our relief, He will lift up our heads and cause our hearts to rejoice again. We know that the Lord has done great things for us in the past and because of this, we can be confident He will do great things for us today, tomorrow and in the years to come. 😊