

EXODUS: Lesson Eight, Sinai: Priesthood and Special Observances

Leviticus 16, 23, 25

Subject: God ordained special observances and feasts for Israel's benefit.

Main Idea: Celebrating what God has done should be the joyful response of every believer's heart.

Principles:

1. *The Old Testament system of sacrifices was inadequate and anticipated the permanent, perfect sacrifice of Jesus.*
2. *Believers should celebrate God's past work in our lives.*
3. *God offers us rest in Him.*

Introduction

Joy is the glad response of the Christian's heart to what God has done for us. Is your life one of joy and celebration?

The books of Moses record the first celebrations of a number of special Jewish holidays. Many people of Jewish heritage still observe these, along with several others that were instituted much later in Israel's history (Purim, Hanukkah, and Tisha B'Av). Those that were instituted through the Mosaic Law include three major feasts, two special holy days, and special periods of rest. We will consider each of these in the order they are covered in Leviticus: the holy Day of Atonement, the three major feasts (a second holy day falls within one of them), and the periods of rest.

The Israelites were *commanded* to keep these observances so that the meaning behind them would be preserved for successive generations. Many had Messianic implications. Christians have given some of these celebrations new names to better reflect the manner in which Christ fulfilled them. We celebrate out of gratitude rather than obligation; is the joyful response of our hearts.

I. The Day of Atonement (Celebrating Forgiveness) – Leviticus 16

A. The Israelites' Role in the Celebration

- i. Most Important Holy Day: The ancient Israelites observed two holy days: The Feast of Trumpets on the first day of the seventh month and the Day of Atonement on the tenth day of that same month. The Day of Atonement was the most important and most holy day on the Israelites' calendar, so much so that sometimes, it is simply referred to as "The Day." It is now more commonly known as *Yom Kippur* (*Kippur* is translated as "atonement").

- ii. Recent History: On October 6, 1973, Egypt and Syria launched an attack on Israel, hoping to gain back territory Israel had won in the Six Day War in 1967. The day on which they attacked was Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Many Israeli soldiers were away from their posts observing Yom Kippur. After several days, they were able to rally. They fought back impressively, retaining the land that was encroached upon and even gaining additional land from Syria in the Golan Heights. Since this attack occurred on the Day of Atonement, it has given “The Day” new significance for modern day Jews.
- iii. Rest, Fasting, and Confession: Regardless of which day of the week the tenth day fell, it was to be a day of Sabbath rest (Leviticus 16:31) and self-denial (Leviticus 16:29, 31). This meant strict fasting. Presumably, the truly contrite would have used it as an opportunity for personal confession of sin.

B. The Process of Atonement

- i. High Priest’s Preparation
 - 1. According to the oral rabbinic traditions (the written form of which is known as the Mishnah and was completed in 120 AD),ⁱ the high priest began his personal preparation for the ceremony a full seven days prior to the Day of Atonement, leaving his home and remaining at the Temple day and night. During that time, he rehearsed his responsibilities so that when the day arrived, he would not make a mistake.ⁱⁱ On the Day of Atonement, the high priest washed and clothed himself. He would not put on his ornate high priestly garb, but dress more simply, in a linen tunic, with linen undergarments, linen sash, and a linen turban.
- ii. The Sacrifices: On the Day of Atonement, five animals were brought to the Tabernacle area: one bull, two goats, and two rams. The high priest’s responsibilities centered around three main sacrifices. First, he made a sin offering (the bull) for his own sin and that of his household. Next, the two goats were offered for the sins of the people (only one would be sacrificed). Finally, after atonement had been made, the priest sacrificed burnt offerings, one ram for himself and one ram for the people as sacrifices of dedication. Since the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, Jews no longer offer sacrifices at all. Orthodox Jews anticipate a rebuilt Temple in which they can resume this practice.
- iii. The Rituals: Specific rituals accompanied each of the sacrifices, the most significant of which involved entering the Most Holy Place and the scapegoat.

1. *Entering the Most Holy Place*: On the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would enter the Most Holy Place several times as he made sacrifices for his own sin, for that of his family, and for the people. This was the only day of the entire year in which he would enter that portion of the Tabernacle.
 - a. The only furnishing within that innermost room of the Tabernacle was the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark was a golden chest that contained the tablets of the Law, a golden jar filled with manna, and Aaron's rod (Hebrews 9:4). Its lid was the Atonement Cover (sometimes called the Mercy Seat). God's presence (in the theophany of the cloud) was between the two golden cherubs with their outspread wings on either end of the Atonement Cover. As we have learned, the Covenant recognized God as the ruler of His people. The Most Holy Place symbolized His throne room and the Ark itself symbolized His Throne. This may explain why the Atonement Cover, the *Kapporet*, is sometimes called the Mercy Seat, even though it was not a seat of any sort, the notion coming from the idea that God was seated on His throneⁱⁱⁱ.
 - b. Entering God's holy presence was very dangerous. Therefore, the priest was instructed to carry burning incense in first, in order that the smoke would screen the Atonement Cover and the priest would not die. According to Jewish legend, a rope was tied around the high priest's waist or legs so that if he was struck dead, someone on the outside could pull his body out.^{iv} Then the priest carried in some of the blood of the bull (his own sin offering), sprinkling it on and before the Atonement Cover. Finally, he repeated the procedure with the blood of the sacrificed goat (for the atonement of the people).
2. *The Scapegoat*
 - a. While the priest only offered one animal, the bull, for his own sins and that of his household, two goats were involved in atoning for the people. Lots were cast to determine which goat would be sacrificed and which would serve as a scapegoat. The Hebrew term for the word translated "scapegoat" is sometimes misunderstood, but this scapegoat was *not* a sacrifice to goat gods or to Satan, as some have suggested.

- b. The high priest took the blood of the slain goat into the Most Holy Place, as previously described. However, the procedure for the scapegoat was different. The priest put his hands on the head of the live goat and confessed the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites, symbolically transferring them to the goat. This live goat was then led outside the Israelite camp, into the wilderness, where it symbolically carried away the people's sins. According to the Mishnah, the scapegoat was pushed over a cliff to its death, in order that it might not happen to wander back into the camp.^v
- c. The sacrifice of the one goat for the sin of the people and the "carrying away" of sin by the other are beautiful pictures of what the Lord Jesus did for us by His atoning sacrifice. By His death, He paid the debt owed for our sin, turned God's wrath from us, and carried away our guilt. As Psalm 103:12 says, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us."

iv. Making Atonement for the Sanctuary

1. According to Leviticus 16:15, when the priest sprinkled the blood of the goat on the Atonement Cover and in front of it, he was making atonement *for the Most Holy Place* "because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites." After the priest atoned for the Most Holy Place, he repeated the blood splattering process in the outer room, the Holy Place (16:17), because it was also in the midst of the Israelites uncleanness (these two rooms constituted the Tabernacle). Lastly, the altar (probably, indicating the Bronze Altar in the courtyard, on which sacrifices were made^{vi}) was cleansed by having blood smeared on its horns. Thus, from the innermost part of the sanctuary working outward, all areas of the sanctuary were cleansed from the pollution of Israel's sin.
2. "Sin and uncleanness are conceived of as giving off a toxic vapour (sic) that pollutes holy objects such as altars and holy places in the Tabernacle. If these things are not cleansed by sacrificial blood being smeared or sprinkled on them, it becomes impossible for God to dwell there (16:16, 19). Ultimately this would lead to the Israelites dying 'by defiling my Tabernacle' (15:31), just as Nadab and Abihu did (16:1 cf. 10:1–3)." ^{vii}

C. Purpose of the Atonement: This leads to an important question, one that is widely debated: what exactly was the purpose of the Day of Atonement? For what or for whom was atonement made? There is no question that the Day of Atonement purified the Tabernacle from the contaminating effects of the people's sin (16:15, 16, 18). The controversy surrounds whether or not the Israelites were forgiven of their sins and if so, for which sins.

- i. Leviticus 16: As we read through Leviticus 16, it seems evident enough that atonement was made for the sins of the priest and of the people. Two of the sacrifices were sin offerings (16:6, 9, 11, 33). The scapegoat carried away the people's sin (16:10, 21-22). Furthermore, 16:30 says the Israelites would be "clean from *all* [their] sins", verse 33 says for "*all the members* of the community," and verse 34 says atonement was made once a year for "*all* the sins of the Israelites."
- ii. Other Passages: However, when we compare what Leviticus 16 says and what other Scripture passages say, the answer to the question is not so clear. As we saw in the last lesson, Leviticus 4-6 said that the sin and guilt offerings only atoned for specific, unintentional sin. Secondly, Numbers 15:30-31 distinguishes between these "unintentional sins" and sins committed with knowledge (sometimes called "high handed sins"), stating emphatically that "anyone who sins defiantly, whether native-born or foreigner, blasphemes the Lord and must be cut off from the people of Israel. Because they have despised the Lord's word and broken His commands, they must surely be cut off; their guilt remains on them" (Numbers 15:30-31). Simply put, these verses state that there was no provision for sins that were committed knowingly. Furthermore, in discussing the Day of Atonement, the author of Hebrews states, "But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had *committed in ignorance* [my emphasis]" (Hebrews 9:7).
- iii. All Sins or Some? So which sins were forgiven on this important day?
 1. Some scholars insist "the special atonement ritual averted the wrath of God for *all the sins* [my emphasis] of the people for the past year."^{viii} The only "apparently limiting factor to the efficacy of this national Day of Atonement for the individual was a proper heart attitude of penitence and faith, which was also true of the individual sacrifices."^{ix} Kenneth Matthews explains, "the forgiveness of the people is a critical part of the intent of the chapter, and one is justified in arguing that atonement for the high priest and the congregation is more the focal point of the chapter than the purification of the Tabernacle."^x
 2. However, Gordon Wenham, an expert on the Book of Leviticus, insists that the main purpose of the Day of Atonement was to

cleanse the Tabernacle. He points out that Leviticus 16 begins with the Lord's reminder to Aaron (through Moses) of what happened when his two oldest sons defiled the Tabernacle. He concludes that the Day of Atonement was designed to avoid this calamity being repeated.^{xi} Writing for the Jewish Publication Society, Baruch Levine supports this view: "The primary objective of expiatory rites like the ones set forth in chapter 16 was to maintain a pure sanctuary... This ancient view of Yom Kippur is somewhat different from that which came to predominate in later Judaism, especially in the centuries following the destruction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem in 70 [AD]. Atonement for the sins of the people eventually replaced the purification of the sanctuary *per se* as the central theme of Yom Kippur."^{xii}

3. Some agree that the purification of the sanctuary was the primary focus but hasten to add that the high priest *also* offered the sacrifice for "the sins the people had committed in ignorance... meaning unintentional, inadvertent sin."^{xiii} If this is correct, at the very most, *only some* of the sins of Israel were forgiven: those which could have been atoned for through the normal procedure of sacrifice, outlined earlier in Leviticus, but had not yet been recognized as sin. Kent Hughes is among those who agree that the old system of sacrifices offered only limited efficacy and that no provision was made for premeditated sins. "What could [the person who sinned deliberately] do?" Kent writes. "Only one thing—come to God with a contrite heart and throw himself on God's mercy," as David did in Psalm 51. That was how David was forgiven. "Thus, we see that the spiritually informed in the Old Testament came to understand that their only hope was a repentant heart and God's grace."^{xiv}
- iv. What shall we conclude? First, it is possible that when Leviticus 16 says atonement was made for "*all* the sins" of the people, all the Israelites' *unintentional* sins is what was meant. Second, if atonement was made for the *entirety* of the Israelites' sins on the Day of Atonement, the relief was tremendous but short-lived. By the following day, there was no provision for deliberate sins for another year and unintentional sins still required ongoing sacrifices. Third, God has always looked at the condition of our hearts (Psalm 78:5-8, 32-37). King David sinned willfully by committing adultery with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11-12) but was forgiven because he genuinely repented. He wrote, "My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise" (Psalm 51:17). At best, the old system of sacrifices was inadequate and awaited a permanent, perfect sacrifice. Jesus provided a better sacrifice (Hebrews 9:23). His death atoned for *all* sin, deliberate and unintentional alike.

D. Final Steps on the Day of Atonement: Once the two rams were offered as whole burnt offerings, the priest removed his sacred clothing and washed again before putting on his regular attire. The hides of the sin offerings were carried outside the camp (since they were considered contaminated by sin) and burned. The individuals handling the scapegoat and the burning of the hides also washed. According to the traditions in the Mishnah, at the end of the Day of Atonement, the people who were present accompanied the high priest to his home and feasted there with him.^{xv}

Summary Statement: The Day of Atonement had to be repeated year after year to remind the Israelites of their sin (Hebrews 10:3) and to provide a means by which God could continue to dwell among them until Christ came.

Principle: *The Old Testament system of sacrifices was inadequate and anticipated the permanent, perfect sacrifice of Jesus.*

The old system of sacrifices was a shadow of a good thing that was to follow, not the reality (Hebrews 10:1). From the beginning, it was obvious that the system of sacrifices was incomplete. God was revealing His plan of salvation gradually. Not only did these sacrifices have to be repeated again and again, Hebrews tells us they did not cleanse the conscience of the worshipper. They just reminded them of their sin (Hebrews 9:9, 14; 10:2-3).

None of us enjoys being reminded of our sin. Many preachers and so-called “Bible teachers” find it easier never to mention the unpopular topic. They are quick to tell others how much God loves them. They are eager to talk about the riches that are ours in Christ. They write books about claiming God’s promises and living a positive life. All the while, they ignore the fact that these good things *only belong to sinners who have recognized their sin and repented of it*. The Gospel is the good news only after we accept the bad news that we are sinners! The truth of sin is at the heart of the Gospel. Any honest person is forced to acknowledge the presence of sin in the world and in people’s hearts. It explains so much about life.

Leviticus 16 teaches that the Israelites’ sin contaminated the Tabernacle. God could not continue to dwell among them unless the Tabernacle was annually cleansed. Sin contaminates. The fact that every person’s heart is sinful and that sin has a polluting effect explains the world’s evils and injustices, death, and mankind’s restlessness and search for meaning. Sin separates us from our Creator, and the world is not as it was meant to be.

Illustration: A 2011 economic report cited that increasing numbers of millionaires and billionaires are killing themselves due to depression or high stress. “Many wealthy people have the same complaint: That their money fails to bring them contentment.”^{xvi} The rich, the highly educated, and the famous seem to have everything the world offers, yet the suicide rate of this demographic is notable.

Surely this is an indication that things are not the way they should be. People are restless, and apparently, those with all the resources to search the planet for meaning and satisfaction have come up empty. Many religions offer explanations for life's trouble, but only one offers a permanent solution: the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Those who do not find *Him*, do not find lasting satisfaction elsewhere.

Jesus offers us reconciliation with God, and in Him, we have what our hearts were previously missing. Our atonement is something we should celebrate! But not all celebrations are lively. Some, like Yom Kippur, are solemn.

Application: How can we commemorate our atonement?

First, by regularly confessing sin. Is confession part of your *daily* prayer life? When we receive Christ's forgiveness and invite Him to be our Savior, we receive forgiveness of our sins, past, present, and future. After that, our sins do not put our salvation at risk, but they grieve Him and become a barrier to intimate fellowship and power for His service. Ongoing confession enables us to enjoy the benefits that are ours in Christ.

Second, we should express thanks to God every day for His provision of Jesus, a perfect and permanent sacrifice. How thankful we should be that we do not have to bring animal sacrifices day after day to atone for our sins! Thank Him that His sacrifice also cleanses your conscience. Thank Him that, because Jesus has made atonement for you, you can go directly and confidently to God's throne and draw near to Him (Hebrews 10:19-22).

We also commemorate Christ's atonement by meditating on its meaning. If you have access to good, Christian literature, read a good book on the work of Christ. It may not be the kind of reading to which you are accustomed, but you will undoubtedly be enriched and moved to rejoice over what Christ has done on your behalf. If these kinds of books are not available to you, to purchase or to borrow, you still can still practice Christian meditation by prayerfully dwelling upon and marvel over the wonder of Christ's atonement. Finally, we commemorate Christ's atonement every time we share the truth of it with others.

Transition: The Day of Atonement was *the* High Holy Day of the year for the Israelites. However, God put a number of other celebrations onto their calendar, including three great feasts.

II. The Great Feasts of Israel (Celebrating Our History) – Leviticus 23: Once the Israelites settled in Canaan, all the Israelite men were required to make a pilgrimage three times a year to “the place the Lord would designate” (Deuteronomy 16:16) for the national feasts of Israel (Exodus 23:17). Jerusalem was this place. The Lord’s temple was there. During these festivals, the population would swell beyond the city’s capacity. Leviticus 23 gives a calendar of the annual celebrations of Israel. All three pilgrimage festivals are discussed in this chapter, in addition to the two holy days and a brief mention of the Sabbath, which is elaborated upon in chapter 25. Leviticus 23 gives instructions for the three festivals in the order in which they fell on the calendar. Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread occurred in the spring. The Feast of Weeks (or Pentecost) occurred fifty days later in the early summer. The Festival of Tabernacles (covered at the end of the chapter) occurred in the fall.

A. Passover – Leviticus 23:4-8

- i. Independence: The Passover, known today by Jewish people as *Pesach*, is a remembrance of the night on which the Lord took the Israelites out of Egypt. On that night, the Lord put all the firstborn sons of Egypt to death. He “passed over” the sons of the Israelites who slaughtered a lamb and put its blood on their doorframes as a sign of their faith and obedience. The Israelites made a meal of the lamb and unleavened bread on that night, eating it in haste, in anticipation of their redemption from Egypt (Exodus 12). The first Passover was the occasion of Israel’s national independence. Therefore, the annual celebration of Passover/Unleavened Bread became their national celebration of independence until modern times, when May 14 became their Independence Day, honoring the day in 1948 when the State of Israel was established.
- ii. The Passover Meal
 1. The Passover was observed by sacrifice, followed by a meal with a very specific menu. Lamb from the sacrifice was the main course. Bitter herbs, symbolizing the bitterness of Israel’s bondage in Egypt, were served. Unleavened bread was also on the menu, reminding the Israelites that they left Egypt in haste, without time to wait for bread to rise. Later, the absence of yeast came to symbolize purity from sin.
 2. Over time, this menu was expanded to include greens dipped in salt water (recalling passage through the Red Sea and entrance into the rich Promised Land), roasted eggs (usually symbolizing springtime and renewal, but also considered a substitute for the sacrifice^{xvii}), and *charoet* (a paste made from fruit and nuts, the dark color and texture of which symbolized the mortar the Israelites used in building bricks in their enslavement^{xviii}). Wine was also served.

After the Temple was destroyed in Jerusalem (70 A.D.) and sacrifices could no longer be offered, Jews began placing a meatless lamb shank on a platter as a reminder that the Temple was gone.^{xix} All of these things constitute the meal known today as the Passover Seder.

- iii. Relationship to Festival of Unleavened Bread: At the time of the first Passover, the Lord instructed the Israelites to commemorate the occasion annually and include a seven-day festival to the Lord in which they removed all yeast from their homes (Exodus 12:15). This seven-day festival, called the Festival of Unleavened Bread, was closely linked with the observation of Passover. The names are used interchangeably. The Passover was observed on the fourteenth day of the first month. The Feast of Unleavened Bread began on the fifteenth and lasted for seven days. During the seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Israelites were to eat nothing containing yeast, reminding them of their haste in leaving Egypt. Sacred assemblies were to be held on the first and last days of the feast.
- iv. Firstfruits: Included in this same time frame was also the offering of Firstfruits, which was not actually a separate feast but part of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. On the first day after the Sabbath during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Israelites presented a sheaf of the first grain from their barley crop (a wave offering) a way of acknowledging the Lord's blessing on the land He gave them. A Burnt Offering, a Grain Offering, and a Drink Offering accompanied it. They were not to eat from their new crop until after they presented this first sheaf.
- v. Jesus and the Passover Week (Matthew 26:17-19, 27:1, 28:1; Mark 14:12; Luke 22:7-8; Exodus 12; Leviticus 23:5-8)
 1. According to the Gospels, Jesus enjoyed the Passover meal with His disciples the night before His death. Passover was on a Friday that year, but Jesus, knowing He would be crucified before sundown, celebrated the meal with His followers the prior evening. Today, Christians refer to that meal as the "Last Supper." Jesus changed the meaning of the elements of the meal, saying that the bread was a symbol of His broken body and the wine indicated His shed blood (Matthew 26:17-29).
 2. Jesus was crucified early the next morning, the day of Passover, the day on which the Israelites celebrated their redemption from slavery, the day they departed from Egypt. Paul wrote that Jesus is our Passover Lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7). His sacrifice was the one to which all previous sacrifices pointed.

3. Jesus rose the third day, Sunday, the day after the Sabbath. According to Leviticus 23, Firstfruits were to be offered on the first day after the Sabbath during the week of feasting, the same day Jesus arose. Surely, Paul had this in mind when he wrote, “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep... For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when He comes, those who belong to Him” (1 Corinthians 15:20-23).

B. Pentecost

i. Name and Purpose

1. The Feast of Weeks is alternately known as Pentecost. Today, Jewish people call it *Shavuoth* (meaning “weeks”). These names are derived from the fact that this celebration occurred seven weeks (plus one day) after the day of Firstfruits. In Jesus’ time, the Jews counted fifty days beginning with the first Sunday after Passover (this Sunday was included in the count), so that the day of Pentecost was a Sunday (the fiftieth day). After 70 AD, the counting was reckoned differently and the Jewish celebration of Pentecost began falling on various days of the week.^{xx}
2. This is the only one of the three major feasts given in the Law that did not commemorate a special Old Testament event, although Jewish tradition related it to the day Moses received the Law from God on Mount Sinai.^{xxi} It was an early summer festival, concurrent with the end of the wheat harvest. For this reason, it is also sometimes called the Feast of Harvest (Exodus 23:16) and is the Jewish national festival of thanksgiving.

- ii. Observance: In addition to a wave offering of bread *with* leaven, the Israelites were also required to offer Burnt and Fellowship sacrifices. These were accompanied by Grain and Drink Offerings. Although Pentecost was a particular day, the celebration traditionally occurred over a week’s time. In modern times, it is only a one or two-day celebration. Leviticus 23:22 inserts instructions that the Israelites were to ensure the poor were provided for from their crops. The celebration of God’s blessing on their harvest gave occasion to remember the poor. The Israelites were told to leave the edges of their fields unharvested and also leave the gleanings behind. God expects His children to be generous to the needy (Proverbs 14:21, 31, Isaiah 61:1, and Jeremiah 22:16).

- iii. The Christian Observance of Pentecost: According to the book of Acts, after Jesus ascended to heaven, His disciples followed His instructions to remain in Jerusalem, where they would receive His promised gift of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus. Acts 2:1-4 tells us that it was on the day of Pentecost that the Holy Spirit arrived.

C. The Seventh Month and Tabernacles: The month in which the Feast of Tabernacles occurred was the first month in Israel's civil calendar but the seventh month in its religious calendar. This was a very special month. Seven is a number associated with completeness or perfection in the Bible. The seventh month of Israel's religious calendar was filled with three celebrations, spread out over the course of the month.

- i. Festival of Trumpets: The first day of the month (which would have equated to New Year's Day in the civil calendar) trumpets were sounded to announce the New Year, explaining why the celebration is called the Festival of Trumpets. Today, the Festival of Trumpets is known as *Rosh Hashanah*. It was ordained as a day of Sabbath rest on which a sacred assembly occurred and offerings were presented to the Lord. This day has always been closely linked to the Day of Atonement, which occurred on the tenth day of the same month. The days between the two have been traditionally considered a time of preparation for the solemnity of the Day of Atonement.^{xxii} They are Israel's two traditional holy days.
- ii. Name and Purpose of the Feast of Tabernacles: The Feast of Tabernacles, also known as the Feast of Booths, Ingathering, or *Sukkoth*, occurred on the fifteenth day of the same month and lasted for seven days. It was the most prominent of the ancient celebrations and an especially joyful occasion (Leviticus 23:40b; Deuteronomy 16:14-15), a welcome event after the somber Day of Atonement a few days earlier. It started and ended with days of Sabbath rest. The most distinctive feature of the festival was the construction of temporary huts out of fruit and leafy branches in which the Israelites were to live during the week of celebration. It commemorated Israel's desert wanderings, during which they had lived in temporary shelters ("booths" or tents/tabernacles). The Feast of Tabernacles also celebrated the occasion of the ingathering of their autumn produce, marking the end of the agricultural season. A great number of sacrifices were offered each day of the celebration (Numbers 29:12-39). The mandatory reading of the Law that was to occur every seven years also took place during this feast (Deuteronomy 31:10-13).

- iii. New Testament Significance: This third feast also has New Testament significance. John 7 tells of Jesus attending this feast and teaching in the temple courts. By His day, the rabbis had added a tradition in which the priest poured out water on the altar.^{xxiii} According to Exodus 15, 17 and Numbers 20, the Israelites repeatedly grumbled about lack of water in the desert. Surely, finding water was foremost on their minds during their years of desert wandering. On the final day of the feast, Jesus stood and loudly proclaimed, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them” (John 7:37-38). Perhaps nearby, as He spoke, the priest was pouring the water on the altar. Jesus was referencing the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, of which He is the source.

D. Conclusion: The great feasts of Israel reminded them about what God had done in their past. The Feast of Passover reminded them of His deliverance from their enslavement in Egypt. The Feast of Pentecost, although it did not have a historical link, reminded the Israelites of God’s provision through their harvest that year. It was, therefore, a celebration of His work in their recent past. The Feast of Tabernacles commemorated God’s presence among them during their difficult years of tent dwelling in the wilderness. It is clear that while the New Testament explains the Old, the Old Testament anticipates the New. Ultimately, we find Jesus Christ at the center of both Testaments; “nowhere is the continuity between the [Old and New] testaments so clear as in the calendar.”^{xxiv} The Jewish Passover has become the Christians’ Good Friday. Their Firstfruits is our Easter, and their Festival of Weeks is our Pentecost. In all of these, we celebrate God’s work in our lives.

Summary Statement: Israel’s feasts were intended to cause the Israelites to reflect on God’s involvement and faithfulness in both their recent and distant past.

Principle: *Believers should celebrate God’s past work in our lives.*

Of course, this does not mean we should live our lives focused on the past. That would be detrimental to our spiritual growth. However, celebrating what God has done is an important reminder of what He is capable of doing today and tomorrow! The Israelites’ feasts reminded them of God’s goodness to them, corporately and individually. Our Christian celebrations and observance of Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost serve the same purpose.

Perhaps there is also a more daily way we can celebrate God’s work. He is writing a unique story with each of our lives for the praise of His glory (Ephesians 1:6, 12) that includes specific things He has done in redeeming, sanctifying, and using each believer. They are part of our ever-developing testimony to His grace.

Application: Sharing what God has done in our own lives is a wonderful way of bringing joy and celebration into everyday life. Our “story” is a celebration of His greatness. When you talk about your past with others, do you consciously highlight God’s role in it? What part of your life story would cause others to consider that God might be greater than they thought?

Transition: The Day of Atonement was an annual occasion on which the Israelites somberly acknowledged and received God’s forgiveness. The three great feasts reminded them to celebrate God’s work in their recent and more distant past at least three times a year. God also instituted a series of special observances that revolve around the idea of Sabbath rest.

III. Periods of Rest (Celebrating Relief) – Leviticus 25: Not only was the seventh month a special month of celebration, every seventh day and every seventh year was also special. Additionally, after seven periods of seven years passed, an entire year of celebration and rest occurred, known as the Year of Jubilee.

A. Sabbath Day (Leviticus 23:3): The Sabbath was a day of rest instituted by God at the time of Creation. Genesis 2:2-3 says, “By the seventh day God had finished the work He had been doing; so, on the seventh day He rested from all His work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy because on it He rested from all the work of creating that He had done.” The Israelites were reminded of the importance of keeping the Sabbath a number of times in the Law of Moses (Exodus 16:26, 20:8-10; 31:13-16; 35:2-3; Leviticus 16, 23, 25, 26; Deuteronomy 5:12-15).

B. Sabbath Year – 25:1-7; 18-22

- i. Rest for the Land: The Israelites were instructed to plant and harvest crops for six years, and allow the land to “rest” in the seventh year, as a reminder that the land belonged to God. Practically speaking, the soil was enriched by a year of rest but, far more importantly, this was a testing of the Israelites’ faith in God’s provision. The Lord assured them they would have enough to eat. In fact, if they kept this practice, the Lord guaranteed that in the sixth year, the land would yield enough for three years (25:18-22). This would allow them to have food in the sixth year, food in the seventh year while the land lie fallow, and food in the next year while they planted and awaited the crop that would come from it. Sadly, 2 Chronicles 36:21 indicates that the Sabbatical year was rarely observed during the years the Israelites lived in Canaan. The verse says their seventy years in captivity outside the land not only punished the Israelites for failing to keep the Sabbath but also gave the land the rest it had not previously enjoyed.

- ii. Debts Cancelled – Deuteronomy 15: In the Sabbath year, all debts owed to Israelites by other Israelites were to be cancelled. This meant that an Israelite who sold himself to pay a debt was also to be released from his obligation (slavery). It is possible this was intended to occur after any six-year period of indebtedness rather than exclusively in the Sabbath year. However, Deuteronomy 15:9 seems to suggest it was a universally observed year. Some have suggested that the cancellation of debt was temporary, due to the hardship of not cultivating or reaping crops in the Sabbath Year.^{xxv}
- iii. Law Read – Deuteronomy 31:10-13 Another regulation, added in Deuteronomy 31, called for the Law to be read aloud to the people during the Feast of Tabernacles every seventh year.
- iv. A Rabbinic Tradition: According to rabbinic tradition, the Messiah was expected to come in a Sabbath Year. M.F. Rooker points out that John the Baptist began his ministry announcing Christ as the Messiah in such a year (A.D. 28-29).^{xxvi}

C. Year of Jubilee: Every fiftieth year (the year following seven Sabbatical years) was to be a Year of Jubilee. It was to begin on the Day of Atonement and be announced with a trumpet blast (25:9). It was a special year of celebration and liberation.

- i. The Land and the Year of Jubilee – 25:13-38
 - 1. *Rest*: As in the Sabbatical Year, the land was to rest in the Year of Jubilee. This meant two consecutive years of not planting crops every fifty years, a real test to the faith of the Israelites.
 - 2. *Return to Original Landowners*
 - a. When the Israelites came into the Promised Land, various tracts were deeded to each tribe and family. In the Year of Jubilee, all sold land was to revert to its original owner (25:23-24). Practically, this had the effect of guaranteeing family stability and ensuring that no family became fixed in poverty (25:14, 17). For this reason, the value of land that was sold was to be determined in consideration of the number of years it would belong to the new owner before it was returned to the original family in the Year of Jubilee (25:14-16).

- b. Inserted into this discussion of the sale of land in the Year of Jubilee are other regulations that protected families long-term from poverty. For instance, when a person needed to sell their land, it could always be bought back for them by a close relative (25:25) or the original owner could buy it back (25:28) before the Year of Jubilee, if he was able. Even if neither of these things happened, the land was to be returned to its original owner in the Year of Jubilee. An exception was when a house was sold within a walled city. In that case, the original owner had one year to buy it back or it became the permanent property of the new owner. “The reason for this distinction apparently lies in the fact that houses within walled cities fell outside the jurisdiction of family property inheritance and were not critical for the economic survival of the family.”^{xxvii} Only Levites permanently retained the right to buy back a house within a walled city.
3. *A Reminder to Assist Those in Need* – 25:35-38: Befitting the subject of protecting families from poverty, several verses in this passage remind the Israelites not to take advantage of others. Throughout the Old Testament, the Lord speaks of His concern for the poor (Exodus 2:22-27; 23:6) and repeatedly encouraged them to loan money to them (Deuteronomy 15:1-2; Psalm 37:21; 112:5). The specific admonition here was against charging unreasonable interest or trying to take advantage of the poor by charging them interest at all. The objective of all these laws was to prevent any Israelite from becoming completely destitute.
- ii. Enslavement and the Year of Jubilee – 25:39-55: Israelites who had, for one reason or another, come into a situation in which they, presumably, had already sold their land and retained debts which had forced them to sell *themselves* were to be freed in the Year of Jubilee. Considering the Israelites’ history of enslavement in Egypt (25:42), God was ensuring “that His people never [saw] perpetual slavery again.”^{xxviii} The same rules applied to redemption from slavery as redemption of land. The value of an Israelite who sold himself was to be based on the length of time remaining until the Year of Jubilee. When the person who was enslaved was a fellow Israelite, they were to be treated as a hired worker, not as a slave, and they were not to be treated “ruthlessly” (25:46). This does not mean to indicate that those foreigners who were slaves could be mistreated (see notes on Exodus 21 in Lesson 4).

Summary Statement: God ordained regular periods of rest for Israel.

The Year of Jubilee was a year of emancipation and redemption. Regular observance of the rules connected to this special year would benefit the Israelites by curbing greed, providing long-term stability for the family unit, requiring the Israelites to trust the Lord to provide for them, and reminding them that the Lord was the rightful owner of their persons and of the land.

Hebrews 4 reveals that Sabbath rest has a spiritual significance: We mustn't strive to earn salvation, for it is only a gift of God (Ephesians 2:8, 9). Similarly, our efforts to live the Christian life in our own strength are futile, for only Christ can live the Christian life (Colossians 2:6). Salvation and successful Christian living ultimately come by resting in Christ's adequacy.

Principle: *God offers us rest in Him.*

Resting in Him does not mean we sit around all day and do nothing for the remainder of our lives. Christians are to be hard workers (2 Thessalonians 3:6-10; Revelation 2:2). It does imply cessation from reliance on our own adequacy and trust in Christ's adequacy instead.

- This is, first, a theological matter. We are mistaken if we believe we can earn our own salvation and accomplish our own sanctification. Only Christ can do these things. We must trust Him for salvation and trust Him to live through us each and every day.
- However, doctrine must always move from our heads to our hearts so that it becomes practical for us, as well. The implication is that in daily practice our lives should be filled with God's peace, a calm assurance that He is in control and we are in His favor. One of the biggest problems in the world today is that Christians, the people who claim to know, represent, and trust God, do not really know very much about the God they claim to be trusting or experience His presence and power in their daily lives. If we claim to know Him but live anxious lives, what does that tell others about our God?

Application: Is your view of God large enough that you trust Him with the major things as well as everyday details? An old adage says, "When our problems are big, our God is small; when our God is big, our problems are small." There is nothing quite like the feeling of relief, and that is exactly what God offers us in Christ. It is what Sabbath rest is ultimately about: rest from our worries, rest from our self-designed efforts, and relief from the pressure of being on our own. Why would we reject such a daily benefit of belonging to Christ?

Conclusion

God ordained the special feasts and observances in the Law of Moses for Israel's benefit, but they were still obligations. Celebrating the forgiveness that is ours today, God's work in our past, and the rest He offers should be the glad response of our hearts. Do others see that our hearts rejoice in what Jesus has done for us? Are you celebrating?

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