

Leviticus 23

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[0 : 00] Well, let me add a word of welcome here to Christ Church Chicago this beautiful Palm Sunday morning.

! So glad that you are here. We continue this morning our series in Leviticus drawing near to God. Chapter 23. I can just lift as a simple title. These are God's sacred seasons of celebration. Simply sacred seasons of celebration. There are 11 federal holidays in the United States. Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Labor Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas are among some of the biggest of them. These are days when most federal offices are closed, banks shut down, schools are out, the mail doesn't run.

[1 : 10] Most companies give their employees the day off. There are numerous state holidays as well, some of which you may not be so familiar with, like the Battle of New Orleans Day in Louisiana, or Yorktown Victory Day in Virginia.

Five states, including Illinois, actually celebrate Abraham Lincoln's birthday as a state holiday. Beyond all this, there are days marked as observances.

Mother's Day, Father's Day, Valentine's Day, Cinco de Mayo, even groundhogs have a date. These days are marked in many different ways.

Some days have parades while others have protests. Some have speeches and rallies while others just quiet reflection. Some days are marked with family trips planned away, while others just time resting at home.

Some with backyard barbecues, and others with nice dinners out on the town. Some with backyard barbecues, and others with nice things. My favorite holiday growing up was Thanksgiving, because that was when it seemed that God would tell my dad the craziest things to do.

[2 : 46] Like he would disappear when my mother was cooking and come back home with a group of random strangers that he said God told him to invite to dinner.

Or one year, he said God told him after dinner was prepared, that we as a family were going to fast. We were going to push our plates back, and we were going to tell each other all the things we were grateful for.

I remember saying, well, I can't think of too much I'm grateful for right about now. But I sure would be grateful for a turkey leg if it's possible.

Whatever the holiday or the observance, and in whatever manner you may observe it, the goal is supposed to be to pull away, rest, set time aside, often as a family, a community, maybe a state, or even a nation, to think about, honor, celebrate, mark whatever and whoever that day is supposed to represent.

For many of us, holidays actually give us a rhythm to the year. We associate Memorial Day with summer, Labor Day with the fall, Thanksgiving and Christmas.

[4 : 12] We actually call the holiday season leading us to the end of the year. Here, in Leviticus chapter 23, God establishes a yearly rhythm of sorts.

It served as a yearly planner for the nation, Israel. You might say in our terms that Leviticus 23 prescribes the Christian calendar.

It highlights seven major feast festivals or holy days from which we get the word holiday that they were commanded to observe.

These holy days were prescribed by God to help his people not only to put their busy lives on pause in order to reflect, remember, and celebrate what God has done and their blessed privilege of being the people of God, but it also was to establish extended times where the Lord would linger with his people and his people with him.

Ultimately, here it is, church. This is the point. That's God's desire to sit down with us, to linger, to commune with us, not just for a special day or month or year, but for all eternity when we shall behold him face to face.

[5 : 49] Here in this chapter, perhaps even more important than the established rhythms of the year, these feasts rehearsed God's work of redemption in the past, and they pointed forward to the fulfillment in Christ of all these feasts in the future.

If you've been following our series here in Leviticus, or maybe you're new to it, hopefully you can start to see some of the puzzle pieces begin to come together and how this particular chapter, chapter 23, really serves as a crescendo to the second half of this entire book.

Let me step back for a moment and catch up and perhaps give you another way to think about all of this. In Leviticus, there are really four spheres of what is sacred.

Sacred meaning set apart, what is holy, as opposed to what is ordinary or common. There are sacred people.

You have the priests, which we've talked about quite a bit. Now, in a sense, the whole nation is a holy nation because they're set apart to God, but within that holy nation, there are certain holy people, the priests.

[7 : 11] There are also sacred acts. That's all the sacrifices we've talked about, all the instructions and the prescriptions. And then there's sacred space where all these sacred acts took place.

The tent of meeting, the tabernacle, the holy of holies. Now we see in Leviticus, chapter 23, the illumination of sacred time.

Here it is. God's holy people drawing near to him are ministered to by sacred people as they perform sacred acts and sacred spaces marked, commemorated throughout the year at sacred times.

These are sacred seasons for celebration. Verse 2 gives us an introduction to what these sacred times are all about.

Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, These are the appointed feasts of the Lord that you shall proclaim as holy convocations. They are my appointed feasts.

[8 : 22] These feasts were not perhaps what we think about when we hear the word, as some big spread of food with people sitting around eating, drinking, and laughing, though some of that was definitely involved.

No, more accurately, you could translate appointed feasts as really fixed or appointed times. Fixed or appointed times.

These are days on the weekly and annual calendar that you are to set apart as special gatherings. Before iCal, Google Calendar, or Outlook, God had his people keeping divine appointments.

I have all three of those. I still find myself walking around with a vague sense that I'm supposed to be somewhere, doing something that I'm not.

I'm not. These could be either a time of solemnity, joyfulness, or both. But regardless of the type of feast it was, these prescribed calendar events were to be corporate in nature.

[9 : 40] They were holy convocations. That is, they were to be celebrated as a gathering, as an assembly of God's people, much like us here today.

In many ways, these holy days served to strengthen their identity and their relationship. This verse further importantly tells us that these feasts belong to the Lord.

They are my appointed feast. And they were holy. Meaning, these appointed times were to be God-centered and God-focused.

This was to be God's people reverently assembled together to reflect, rejoice, remember, and rejuvenate together as they spent time with the Lord and he spent time with his people.

And Pastor Helm, Pastor Nii, and myself did something like this a couple of weeks ago when we just stepped away for a couple of days to reflect and connect with one another and the Lord, spending time in his word, remembering what he's already done for us and talking about what he'll yet do through his vision for Christ Church Chicago.

[11 : 02] Well, this is what the Lord wants to do with all of us. Now, this morning we don't have time for me to exegete each of the feasts individually, though I will try to summarize them later.

But suffice to say, the Lord's appointed times were celebrations of God's divine protection and provision. And each one recognized different aspects of God's work of salvation in the lives of his people.

This morning, if you would allow, I would like to draw your attention perhaps more thoroughly to the feast at the beginning and the end of the calendar, especially in light of where we are today with this being Palm Sunday and the beginning, Holy Week.

We continue in verse 3 with the Sabbath because really the sabbatical principle undergirds this entire chapter. Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day is the Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation.

You shall do no work. It is a Sabbath to the Lord in all your dwelling places. The Sabbath, literally meaning to cease or to rest, was not properly a feast like the other feasts that follow in this chapter, but it was, however, a holy convocation.

[12 : 36] It's a day set apart not only for solemn rest, but also for the sacred gathering of the people, God.

Much like we do here as we gather each week in worship as a church body to honor God, to strengthen our faith, and to receive spiritual renewal through his word.

We see here that all the rest of the feasts are on an annual schedule, but this, of course, is a weekly schedule. This is the oldest of the feasts.

It's pre-mosaic. It stretches all the way back to the beginning of creation. The Lord created the heavens and the earth in the span of six days and rested on the seventh day.

God blessed the Sabbath day and set it apart for rest and worship, Genesis chapter 2. The Sabbath reflected the work of God in creation, perfect in its character, and followed by the rest of accomplishment.

[13 : 41] Here, every seventh day was a constant reminder of God's relationship with his people. You'll see a lot of this in this chapter.

The word Sabbath is found 12 times in this chapter, and the number seven, the number of rest, completion, is referenced some 18 times in this chapter.

We read some seven times that labor was to cease. Three of the feasts occurred in the seventh month, and two of the feasts actually lasted seven days. Indeed, all of the other feasts that we'll come to and talk about have their roots in this first one, this ancient one, this one that's as old as time itself, the Sabbath.

Here's the great news, church, about the Sabbath. It's great news for us because Colossians chapter 2 says that the Sabbath commanded here and observed by Israel was a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.

In the new covenant, the idea isn't that there is no Sabbath, but that every day is a Sabbath of rest in the finished work of God.

[14 : 59] Jesus fulfilled the purpose and plan of the Sabbath for us and in us, Hebrews chapter 4. Jesus is our rest. We remember his finished work.

We remember the Sabbath and we remember the rest. The rest we enter to as Christians is something to experience every day, not just on one day of the week.

This rest is knowing we don't have to work to save ourselves, but our salvation is accomplished in Jesus Christ.

Are you perhaps looking for rest today? You can find it by running into the outstretched arms of Jesus Christ and giving your life to him.

I'd love to show you after service just how your salvation is accomplished in Jesus Christ. But part of that, part of that answer is found right here in verse 5.

[16 : 04] As we look at this first feast called Passover. Passover, this first feast is a picture of redemption and justification.

It comes from the account of the first Passover as told in Exodus chapter 12, while Israel was enslaved in Egypt.

God sent a series of plagues to convince Pharaoh to let his people go. When the plagues did not convince Pharaoh, God sent one final plague, the death of the firstborn in every household across the land of Egypt.

The households of the people of Israel were spared this terrible judgment if they followed God's command to sacrifice a lamb and apply its blood to the top and sides of the doorway to their home. When the angel of judgment came to take the life of the firstborns, the angel would pass over the homes that were under the blood of the lamb.

[17:08] This command to recognize the Lord's Passover would have come while the memory of the first Passover was still fresh in Israel's minds.

And God wanted it to remain that way. From that time, God commanded Israel to observe the feast of Passover to commemorate not only their deliverance from Egypt, but also the escape from God's judgment as they applied and trusted in the blood of the lamb.

Sound familiar? First Corinthians chapter 5 clearly identifies Jesus as the Passover lamb. God provided a covering for sin in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the perfect lamb.

It is his blood that makes the judgment of God pass over each and every one of us. I thought you would be shouting at this point in time.

Let me try it this way. The beginning of Passover actually coincides with the first day of Holy Week. Today, Palm Sunday, marking Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

[18:33] Get this. Get this. The people made their pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. And then, coming down the middle of the street, riding on a donkey, is the Passover lamb himself, Jesus Christ.

That set off one of the most consequential set of events in human history. The death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ that we will mark this weekend.

What a sacred season for a celebration. I told you that we would focus on the feast at the beginning and the end of the calendar.

This final feast of the Christian calendar was called the Feast of Booths or sometimes the Feast of Tabernacles. It starts here in verse 33.

It was another pilgrimage feast just like Passover. And it was the most joyful of all the feasts.

[19:44] Why? Well, because in verse 40, God commanded the people to rejoice. And it's the only feast that he does that. Verse 40.

Rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days. This feast, like other week-long feasts, was bracketed by special appointed Sabbath days.

The people were to corporately convene and were forbidden to do any customary work. The purpose of this particular feast was to celebrate what God had done by bringing them through the wilderness and eventually into the promised land.

God commanded them, as it were, to reenact their journey from Egypt to the promised land.

Families were to take leaves from trees, branches from palm trees.

Hello, Palm Sunday. And willows to construct tents, booths, shelters, and camp out for seven days of rejoicing.

[20:53] Yes, the Lord actually commanded camping. I went camping once.

Didn't go very well. Because I found out that the only thing more frustrating than finding a good campsite was finding your way back to it.

When you... When you... When you... When you... But here, during the years of the Exodus, they lived this way all the time because they had to.

When they eventually came into the promised land, they now live this way for a week every year to remind themselves of their hardships in those years and God's goodness and provision in the wilderness.

Some of us have short memories. Some of us suffer with amnesia and perhaps need a little camping trip to remember what God has done for us and what he has brought us through.

[22:10] It reminded Israel that God was with them in trying times. The Lord not only brought them out, brought them through, brought them over, but he also brought them in to a prosperous land.

It reminded Israel of where they came from and how far they had come since their days in Egypt.

From humble origins as pilgrims, they were raised to a station that they would have never reached had the Lord not sustained them.

What a sacred season for a celebration. It would then further seem that another reason for this feast was to focus the people of God on the future fulfillment of his promises in light of his past faithfulness.

He's proven, Brother Doug, that his past performance is totally indicative of his future results. What he did before, surely he can do again.

No wonder this was to be a time of great rejoicing. They came home after camping out with a greater appreciation of home.

[23 : 27] So it is with us as we ourselves as pilgrims in a world to which we really do not belong. We anticipate the promise of one day being truly home when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven and we can be with him for all eternity.

What an occasion it must have been these seven days during the Feast of Booths. But we saints, we church, really have so much more to celebrate.

Yes, there are many griefs, many sorrows, many fears, many sadnesses, many challenges. But we of all people on earth should be happy people.

For we know the point of all these feasts in Leviticus 23. Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread point us to Christ, our sacrificial lamb.

The lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. You see the Feast of Firstfruits which points us to Christ as the firstfruits from the dead, our risen Savior.

[24 : 44] The Feast of Weeks or Pentecost points us to Christ, the Lord of the harvest and the hope of glory. The Feast of Trumpets points us to Christ as the one who unites us together, gathers us together and remembers his covenant with his people.

The Day of Atonement points us to Christ, the high priest. Beyond the veil, the sacrifice and the scapegoat. And here this Feast of Booths points us to Christ, the one who has faithfully led us this far and will continue to provide for us, lead us, and gather in his people until that day.

We indeed have more reason to celebrate. We have more reason to feast. We have more reason to have holidays than any other people because we know Christ.

We know that Sabbath rest awaits us. We know the Lamb of God died to deliver us. We know Christ has been raised for us.

We know the harvest of souls has begun among us. We know the angels have announced Emmanuel. God is with us. We know the scapegoat bore the penalty to save us.

[26 : 13] And we can have, by the Holy Spirit, eternal life and living water that will flow out of us.

What good news. What great news. What a sacred time and sacred season for a celebration.

I don't know about you, but I love a good party. How about you? We have the one to celebrate.

And all he wants to do is linger with us. Spend some time with us. And he promises not just for today or tomorrow, but I intend to spend time with you for all eternity.

Now that's a party worth attending. Let's pray together. Father, thank you for this day. Thank you for reminding us of who you are and what you've done.

[27 : 21] Let us never forget every day, each and every day, throughout the weeks and months and years of who you are and what you've done. Let us never get so busy with life, busy doing life, that we forget the one who gave us life.

We pray, God, that you would continue to keep us and cover us and provide for us. And we will keep these sacred seasons of celebration alive in our hearts, in our everyday lives, as we look forward to that day when you will linger with us forever.

Your son's name we do pray. Amen.