

Festive Holy-Days

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[0 : 00] Please have your Bibles turned back to Leviticus, chapter 23, where we will focus on festive holy days for today.

Well, as someone living in Australia, I'm pretty sure you would appreciate that many in our country live for weekends and holidays.

You might be one of them as well. Even better if the holiday coincides with the weekend. Because then we would have a long weekend.

And if it falls on a Thursday or a Tuesday, that's the holiday, like Melbourne Cup, and we chuck in a sickie, voila, we have a super long weekend.

And whether it's a getaway or a birthday or a wedding party, all good things happen on a weekend or at holidays. I do know that nowadays some of you are planning your weddings on a weekday to save some money.

[1 : 01] Perfectly understandable. But that's usually on a Friday, which means you have your own DIY long weekend. Well, would you be surprised then to know that God too places great importance on weekends and holidays.

He's no killjoy. And in fact, so important are these occasions that God commands them and makes them holy. Hence, what we find right here in Leviticus, which is a book after all on holiness.

What we have here in chapter 23 are festive holy days. And that's essentially where you get your word holiday from. They were initially holy days.

So beginning in verse 1, let us read. The Lord said to Moses, speak to the Israelites and say to them, these are my appointed festivals, the appointed festivals of the Lord, which you are to proclaim as sacred assemblies.

Here then are instructions of God's own festivals appointed by him. He calls them my festivals. And they're proclaimed by law, as it were, as sacred assemblies set apart as holy for his purpose.

[2 : 15] We'll get into the details of those festivals later in the chapter. But first, in verse 3, there are actually commands about the Sabbath. So it says in verse 3, there are six days when you may work, but the Sabbath day is a day of Sabbath rest, a day of sacred assembly.

You are not to do any work wherever you live. It is a Sabbath to the Lord. And so really, this is where we get our weekend from. God actually invented it.

Except nowadays, it's two days, not one. Still, it's a time of rest. Now, the festival itself, sorry, the Sabbath itself is not a festival as such.

But it's laid out here first at the start of this chapter because observing it forms the building block, the basic foundation for the other festivals.

It's a common ingredient, if you like, for all the other festivals. A bit like butter is always found in French cuisine, or chili peppers in Sichuan cooking, or garlic in just about everything else.

[3 : 20] Because the Sabbath is that basic, you know, cannot be missed ingredient that is in all the festivals. And so we need to understand God's design for the Sabbath in order to understand the other festivals.

And you see, the Sabbath isn't just a day for physical rest, even though that involves rest. It's not like God has just set aside this day for tired workers like us to recharge after six days of hard work. Because God himself observed the Sabbath. Not because he was tired after six days of creating. No, but he rested on the seventh day as a culmination of his work, where he could stand back to enjoy and rejoice over his creation.

And so this same applies to Israel. It's a time for them to reflect on what God has done for them. Now, most of you will know that keeping the Sabbath is actually one of the Ten Commandments.

And these commandments actually are listed twice in the Bible. Right? Once in Exodus, and the second time in Deuteronomy.

[4 : 33] But when you read the commands related to the Sabbath, you will notice actually that there are different reasons given for observing it between Exodus and Deuteronomy.

So, looking at Exodus, Israel is to observe the Sabbath because in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them. But he rested on the seventh day.

Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. So, here the reason given in Exodus is to remember God's creation on the Sabbath. But when you go to Deuteronomy, on the next slide, in chapter 5, verse 15, a different reason is given.

It says, Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.

And so, this time the Sabbath has been set aside for remembering God's redemption. And that's why, if you read in there, even slaves are to be given rest.

[5 : 36] So, clearly there's a bigger agenda here than just physical rest, isn't there? The Sabbath involves remembering and thanking God for all he's done for Israel, both in creation and in redemption.

And they're not to do it alone, but in community, gathering with their family or clan wherever they live, it says in verse 3.

So, this then becomes the foundation for observing the other festivals. And if you look at the outline, I've divided it into five festivals in the chapter, but some people have counted the first fruits separately, so you could consider that the sixth as well.

And all these festivals in the chapter are actually outlined or detailed in calendar order through the year. And each festival is given a different reason for observing it.

So, the Passover, the festival of the unleavened bread, verse 4 to 8, is to remember their deliverance from Egypt during the Exodus. The offering of the first fruits and the festival of the weeks, I tend to see that as being together, in verses 9 to 22, is a celebration of God's provision for their harvest in the land.

[6 : 55] Next, we have verses 23 to 25, which is the festival of the trumpets. Now, this is a one-day event that occurs on the first day of the seventh month.

And we're not actually given the reason for this festival in the chapter, except to say that they are to sound the trumpet, to herald what I believe is the start of this special month, that the seventh month is special in the year.

Because what happens is that closely following it, ten days later, in this very same month, is arguably the most important day of the year, the Day of Atonement, which we already looked at in chapter 16.

Here we have a brief description, verses 26 to 32, and it's described as a day when, as you see on the slide, atonement is made for the sins of God's people.

And then the seventh month concludes with another festival, the festival of the tabernacles, described in verses 33 to 43. This seven-day festival commemorates God's preservation of Israel while they were in the wilderness.

[8 : 01] And essentially, you know, it's really a seven-day camp, all right? Because for seven days, they are told to live in tents. And I think it's somewhat of a glamping experience, because there's a lot of food and eating.

But it's a camp, because that is what they did in the wilderness. Now, if you keep going down my outline, what I next do then is to set out a couple of common features to the festival.

That is, these are the things that are common across all the festivals. First, as I've said, in each of the festivals, there is without fail a command to observe the Sabbath, at least one day during the festival.

Now, even if the word Sabbath is not used, and it's not always used, there is a command to hold a sacred assembly and do no regular work. So essentially, it's observing the Sabbath.

And what goes with the Sabbath, also, is this recurring occurrence of the number seven. So the festival of the unleavened bread is observed over seven days, beginning with the Passover.

[9 : 10] Likewise, at the very end, the festival of the tabernacles is also observed over seven days. As for the festival of weeks, the seven relates to the number of weeks, not days.

The offering of the first fruit occurs on day one, and then seven weeks after, 49 days, that is, the festival of weeks is observed. Most likely, it was to coincide that during this 49 days was the harvest period.

It was to coincide with the end of the harvest. And as many of you may know, this day becomes known in Greek as Pentecost. That's right, because pente means 50.

And we know what happened on the day of Pentecost in Acts, don't we? That was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the early church. Now, as for the festival of trumpets, I think we've already seen that what occurs is that it occurs on the first day of the seventh month.

So what's significant? The seven is for the month. Because it's in that same month that the other festival, the Day of Atonement and the Festival of Tabernacles also occurs. So seven relates to the month, which is that special month of the year.

[10:24] Later on, we will see in chapter 25 that the year of Jubilee, there is also a year of Jubilee where it is the 50th year, which is seven times seventh, and then the first year after that.

But we'll get into that when we get to that in chapter 25. So there's a lot of sevens, and it should not be surprising because seven is tied closely to creation, and with it, the Sabbath.

But what is also interesting, I think, as we look at this, is the way the Sabbath is observed. You see, even though the Sabbath is the seventh day, and we already read in verse 3 of working six days and resting on the seventh, the Sabbath is actually observed on the first day of each festival.

Not the seventh day, but the first. So, again, looking in verse 7, with the Passover on the slide, on the first day of the Passover, or on the first day, hold a sacred assembly and do no regular work.

And then for seven days, present a food offering to the Lord. And on the seventh day, hold another sacred assembly and do no regular work. Likewise, if you look at the first fruits, they are offered the day after the first, or the day after the Sabbath.

[11:41] Verse 10, when you enter the land I'm going to give you and reap its harvest, bring to a priest a sheave of the first grain you harvest. He is to wave the sheave before the Lord, so it will be accepted on your behalf.

The priest is to wave it on the day after the Sabbath. And then in verse 15, from the day after the Sabbath, the day you brought the sheave of the wave offering, count off seven full weeks, count off 50 days after the day after the seventh Sabbath, and then present an offering of new grain to the Lord.

Here, as we saw, that's the 50th day, although it's not the Sabbath because the 49th day was the Sabbath, that too is a day of rest. Verse 21, on that same day, that is the 50th day, you are to proclaim a sacred assembly and do no regular work.

This is to be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come wherever you live. So, for the Jews, this is their long weekend.

Day 49 and day 50, two days of rest. Otherwise, they only have one day. Right. I'll skip the Feast of Tabernacles, but the same pattern, you'll see the same pattern there as well.

[12:51] And so, what we have here is that at the start and end of each festival, both days are marked by Sabbath rest. And of course, the seventh month itself begins with a day of rest, with the festival of trumpets.

Now, what is the significance with all of this? Well, I believe that what God is trying to impress on them is this very important principle, that actually, God's blessing and provision for them is not a result of their hard work.

By starting with a day of rest, Israel isn't coming away and thinking that, you know, if I work hard enough, then I get a day of rest. That after having worked six days, they've earned their day of rest. Instead, God is saying, I'm the one that first created, that first saved, that first provided. And Israel get to enjoy what God has first done for them.

And so, their first and foremost response is to observe a day of Sabbath to be thankful and joyful for that blessing. And then it's from this place of blessing that they then go out to work and serve Him.

[14:08] And by observing the Sabbath at the end as well, it was yet another reminder that from start to finish, everything that they have is God's provision. then everything they do in work and life flows out from this blessing of rest that God has already given to them.

And that is such a beautiful picture, isn't it? And very different to the nations around them because the nations will be coming and bringing their sacrifices and pleading to their God, oh, please, please, please, grant us a good harvest or, you know, be kind and give us good fortune at war.

But for Israel, that's not the case. God has already blessed them. The first sheaf of grain that they bring at the start of the harvest is the first fruits of an entire harvest that is really actually before them.

Before they even harvest, they're bringing this one thing and saying, thank you, God, for all that has been given to us in the field before they even go out to essentially reap the blessing.

Right? Yes, they have to work, but this is a reaping of what God has already provided to them.

That's why then God also commands them in verse 22 to be generous. And so it says on the slide, when you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings.

[15:29] That's the stuff that's dropped as they were sort of harvesting. Leave them. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you. I am the Lord your God. In other words, God has given to you generously more than you need, so don't be greedy.

Leave the edges and the gleaning for others. Be for them what God has done for you. And that's a principle that we see over and over again in the Bible, isn't it?

Take the principle of forgiveness. God has forgiven us every wrong that we've done against Him and more. And so He commands us to forgive others. That's why Jesus was so harsh in the parable to the unforgiving servant who refused to forgive a small debt to a fellow servant when His master had forgiven him His large debt.

That's what God is saying to them when He asked them not to glean, pick up the gleanings and the edges, to be generous because He has given and provided to them richly already.

Now the other thing that's common with the festivals is that on each occasion people are to bring to God a food offering which is to be burnt. This has a number of implications.

[16:49] First, aside from this offering being an act of worship, you see that it's a pleasing aroma to God. The requirement to actually bring the offering to God meant that people had to travel from where they lived to the tabernacle or in later times the temple.

And so it meant that once they were settled in the land and you know Israel is quite a big piece of land, three times a year there was this mass gathering in Jerusalem. Now granted, not everyone in the house could afford to go each time but certainly the head of the house was meant to go.

And we see that, don't we, in the Gospels when we read that Jesus and His family had to go up to Jerusalem from time to time. So the entire nation therefore was regularly united in communal worship coming together as an expression of their faith and thanksgiving to God.

And of course as a food offering the second aspect of this was that food and eating and feasting, that's why sometimes it's called the feast or the festival, was a key part of these festivals.

The only one exception I think is the day of atonement where they are told to deny themselves. And then in itself it's significant because it is meant to help them to think and remember why it is that it's on that day that they were to deny themselves.

[18:06] It was because of their sin. But otherwise this was a picture of the physical feasting mirroring God's spiritual provision for them.

Spiritual and you know total provision for them of everything that they need in life. So those two are the common things. I've also listed down some unique aspects of each festival but I'm going to skip over them because of time.

You can go and read and see if you can find more. But the point I do want to make with these different aspects of each festival is I think God is providing for them across the year a comprehensive reminder of all his blessings to Israel.

They could see and you look down the list and you can see can't you that God isn't just feeding them physically is he? But he's providing for them spiritually as well for atonement for sin for to secure which they already have secure freedom from bondage from Egypt and giving them protection and shelter as they were in the wilderness.

In other words God's salvation and care even while they were in the land is comprehensive and that's I guess similar to the way we as churches observe different occasions through the year don't we?

[19:23] To mark different aspects of God's gift of his son to us his great gift. So over Christmas we remember his incarnation God being made flesh God with us over Easter we remember Jesus' death and resurrection and therefore the atonement that we enjoy because of Jesus' death and of course as Anglicans we also have a bit more extra as well added to it so for example we will sort of observe Pentecost Sunday next week please come in red if you like that's the tradition and that's to

remember the gift of God's spirit poured down on the day of Pentecost and then we have seasons of preparation like Advent and Lent again to remind ourselves of what God has done for us and this is all good and helpful because we are forgetful aren't we as humans and we need these reminders practically to help us remember

God's comprehensive work of salvation for us in our lives likewise when we come regularly to celebrate the Lord's Supper or when we baptize new Christians those things all reinforce in our own lives what God has done how he saved us how Jesus is the greatest gift of all to us but as with the festivals in the Old Testament the basic building block the fundamental thing with all these observances is still the idea of Sabbath rest just as it was for Israel God offers us this rest and commands us together each Sunday to express this rest just as Israel did but whereas we share the same creation story with Israel as Christians this rest that we now have we actually appreciate more because we have been revealed the full extent of God's redemption not just that we are rescued from Egypt not that we were but

Israel were not that our atonement is partial and incomplete as it was with the temple but in Christ we have full redemption we have full atonement in the blood of Jesus and so ultimately Sabbath rest can only be found in Christ God provides it to us in his son and that's why we had the other reading in the gospel of Matthew chapter 11 where Jesus is able to offer by saying come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest and this is not physical rest that Jesus is offering is it but deep and lasting Sabbath rest that Jesus offers when we come to him by faith you see when Jesus finished his work of redemption he offers our Sabbath rest in him just as the father did when he finished his work of creation you know when we believe in

Jesus our Christian life essentially begins does it not with rest when we believe we rest in the work of Jesus secured for us on the cross and then it's from that rest that we continue to live for him and serve him and do our work for him and trust in him isn't it and we do it in God's provision knowing that God provides us everything we need and we're simply in one sense even as we work reaping the blessings of what God is pouring out into our lives as we work and then when our journey ends what awaits us at the end it's another rest isn't it rest Sabbath's rest for eternity when we get into the new creation and so really like each of the festivals in chapter 23 our entire life is bookended and underpinned by God's

Sabbath rest rest and that's why Jesus is able to say in verse 29 of chapter 11 take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls for my yoke is easy and my burden is light can you see what Jesus is saying that he's already given us rest when we come to him and then the yoke that he gives us that is things that we need to do to obey him that's not an unbearable burden it's light and easy and even when the work that we do do is hard and sometimes life is hard Jesus says there is still rest for our souls we can still work knowing Jesus' rest so dear friends I want to ask is this how your life and work is like where you are able to live and work with a deep and enduring sense of rest of joy and peace in God even in the midst of trials now you may ask how is that possible well you know when you know that your sins are fully forgiven that everything wrong you've done in the past is no longer counted against you we can serve God without the burden of shame and guilt isn't it when we restfully in God's sovereignty then we can sleep in peace even when there are troubles in our life because we know that [25 : 10] God is in control that every day of our lives he's holding for us in his loving hands when our eternal hope is secure for eternity then all the ups and downs in life all the uncertainty they shouldn't scare us right because no matter what happens we know we have this hope secure right and when God asks us to step out in faith and do something we're not comfortable with we can have confidence in that because we know that he's poured out his spirit to enable us and empower us to do that and so really this rest that I'm talking about is not just head knowledge of the gospel believing superficially that Jesus is Lord and Savior but rather allowing that gospel to so transform us that as we see the work laid out for us you know it may be for you mothers on Mother's Day or the mountain that is your VCE exams or maybe starting that first full time job whatever it is that's being laid out for you we can do it resting securely in the knowledge that God has provided all that we need to serve him and one more last thing even as we know that spiritually and by faith we need to express that trust practically as well how by physically resting that is do no regular work as

Israel was commanded each Sabbath and I know that for many of us doing no regular work is actually an active step of faith and obedience particularly for us who are workaholics and you know God already taught Israel this lesson way back in the desert because if you remember God

provided for them right the manna that was coming down from heaven and then what did he say to them he said you are together for six days but not on the seventh they had to have the discipline not to go out on the seventh day to go and gather manna some of them did and what happened the manna spoiled right but then he also said God said that you can pick a bit more on a Saturday for your Sunday and what happened the extra they picked did not rot but lasted into the first day of the next week that's the principle God is saying to us and you know I know some of you do casual work so you understand this you understand that when you don't work you don't get paid right many of us you know we have the pleasure of not working and still getting paid but if you're a casual worker it takes discipline does it not to actually not keep working even when there's an opportunity it takes faith to actually turn down a shift so that you can come and rest and gather with

God's people to thank him because when you do that you're actually acknowledging that it's not your hard work but God who is the real provider the same goes for you who study I know the pressure to keep studying is great but when you actively stop to rest come to church go to TYA go to HTY it shows that you are trusting in God that the success that you have in your studies is not a result of you studying really hard but really it's a result of God blessing you can you see that if you don't stop to rest then you're actually really saying you're trusting in your work rather than trusting in God and that's why the Sabbath requires them to come together in sacred assembly because it was actually costly for them three times a year think about it three times a year there is a mass gathering of the head of the house in Jerusalem for seven days you know there's the cost of travel put that aside how many productive hours are being lost you economists can go and calculate that and yet even when they did that God still blessed them didn't they didn't he and it shows therefore that actually it's not how hard they work but

God that still blessed them now I want to say a bit more of this but I will save it for next week because we're going to take a break next week and consider the second part of our vision statement together in Christ on the next slide so I'm going to say a bit more about the whole idea of gathering as a means of resting but more than that so with that I would just say remember together next Sunday but for now I think it's appropriate that we need to close by giving thanks to God for this deep and eternal rest that we have because we have the Lord Jesus and what he's done let's pray Father thank you that your son offers our Sabbath rest in him thank you that we have forgiveness of sin eternal life and the gift of your spirit our deposit or our first fruit guaranteeing our glorious inheritance in the new creation help us to rest deeply in this and help us to then serve you to work in peace and joy knowing that you have provided for all that we need to do so in Jesus name we pray

Amen