

God's Holy Holidays

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Preacher: Ricky Njoto

- [0:00] And please turn your Bibles back to Leviticus 23. Well, I remember the first time my parents came to Australia to visit from Indonesia. And they got so surprised when they found out that we in Victoria have a holiday called the Grand Final Day.
- Where people stop working so that they can watch football. It's amazing, my parents thought. Because you see, in Indonesia, people only stop working for religious reasons. Even their Independence Day is not a public holiday. They still have to go to work. Their public holidays are all related to religion. So my parents thought, it's amazing that here most of the public holidays are secular.
- The Grand Final Day, Melbourne Cup Day, Anzac Day, Boxing Day. Now, perhaps how we celebrate our holidays both reveals and shapes what a society values.
- After all, holy days or holy days just mean set-apart days. The days that we set apart reflect what we value.
- [1:17] In the secular Victoria, and don't get me wrong, it's good, I think, that our society is democratic and secular. And people of different religions can live together.
- But what we value then is secularism. That is, we value hard work, achievements, greatness, pleasure for some people.
- And so we like to celebrate sport tournaments by hanging out and drinking beer together. But even in the religious Indonesia, even though their holidays are religious, how they celebrate their holidays also shows that what they value is not their gods per se, but their community.
- Because they stop working, not so that they could stop and worship their gods, but so that they could go back to their hometowns and hang out with their families.
- And so, because holidays are ritualistic by nature, we do them every year, they become cultural liturgies.
- [2:27] And they shape our values even further. So, for example, in Indonesia, they value community and families. So what they do during their holidays reinforces their communal culture.
- Whereas here, again, not a bad thing, we value individualism and achievements. And so our cultural liturgies also reinforce those things.
- But as Christians, what values should we, as the people of God, reinforce in our cultural liturgies or in our liturgies?
- Well, we will see in our passage that God has appointed for Israel their holy days, their holy days.
- Or at least God has appointed how they celebrate them. And that is in completely different ways. Here we see that God gave the Israelites their holidays and taught them how they should spend their holidays.
- [3:33] And so we'll see what kind of values that God wants His people to immerse themselves in. So we'll look at it in verse 1 to 2.

God appointed the festivals for Israel. And at the end of verse 2 there, these festivals were to be proclaimed as sacred assemblies.

Literally, that expression, sacred assemblies, means holy summons. That is, these days are holy, they are set apart.

And on those days, the people are summoned to gather around the tabernacle, where God is, for worship. Now, even very early in the passage, we can see a core value of these holidays or these festivals.

There's a difference between these appointed holidays and modern holidays. Because on modern holidays, both in Indonesia and Australia, the people do what they like, right?

[4:37] We are free to do what we like. Gathering with families and friends, or going shopping, or having a barbecue, or going to the MCG, or just sleeping at home. But the holidays that God has appointed, ask the Israelites to draw near to God and worship.

And if, as we have said before, holidays are like annual rituals that shape our values, as we do them over and over again, here, the value that the people of God are supposed to have, is clear, that nothing is more important than God.

The first thing that they need to do on all these holidays is, come and worship together, as the people of God. Then, in verse 3, in verse 3, before saying anything about the festivals, God talks about the Sabbath.

This is a bit weird. Why would God mention the Sabbath here? It's a bit out of place. Because, you see, in verse 2, He says, these are my appointed festivals.

And then, in verse 3, He talks about the Sabbath, and then, in verse 4, it is almost as if He has to repeat what He was saying. As I was saying, these are the Lord's appointed festivals.

[6:12] Why is that? Why is the Sabbath, in verse 3, put there, in the middle? Well, I think the Sabbath is mentioned here as a model for the annual festivals to follow.

That is, just like on the Sabbath, on all these annual holidays, the people are called to rest from their work and gather to worship God.

Again, the Sabbath reminds the Israelites that nothing is more important than God, not even their work, not even their responsibility of producing food for their families.

In Deuteronomy 5, when Moses repeats the Sabbath commandment, he says, observe the Sabbath day.

And then, in verse 15, 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.

[7:15] Therefore, because of that, the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day. In other words, God has been gracious by freeing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt where they had to work without rest.

So now, they don't have to do that anymore. They can just rest. They can work six days and then rest on the seventh day because they're not slaves anymore.

And instead, they can just come near to God, the God who freed them and admire this gracious and liberating king who has freed them from slavery.

Now, as we will see, the other festivals follow that pattern. Live, work, worship. Live, work, worship.

And so, in this passage, we see two kinds of festivals. Spring festivals and autumn or fall festivals.

[8:22] But we don't have time to cover everything, so we'll focus on the spring festivals. And so, the first one is the Passover. There's not much said in this passage regarding the Passover except in verse 5, the time of the Passover.

But if we go to Exodus 12, we see what happens during the Passover. We remember this event in Exodus, don't we?

The tenth plague, the most horrible one. God killed all the firstborn in Egypt, but he passed over the Israelites.

So, the Israelites needed to kill lambs and put their blood on their doorposts and eat the lamb together. There was some sort of exchange here.

Instead of their newborns, instead of their firstborns being slaughtered, lambs were being slaughtered instead. So, the blood of the lamb on the doorposts would be seen as a sign and God passed them over.

[9:38] So, because God has been gracious to them, they ought to commemorate that as the Passover on the 14th day of the first month.

And then, on the next day, on the 15th day of the month, they ought to begin the festival of the unleavened bread in verse 6 to 8.

So, here, for seven days after the Passover, they must eat bread made without yeast. And then, on the seventh day after that, they must leave their work and gather around the tabernacle again to worship.

So, there, we see it again, leave work and gather around the tabernacle. Now, again, this festival allows the Israelites to remember God's gracious work in freeing them from slavery in Egypt.

Because when they were getting ready to leave Egypt, they did not have time to prepare a bread with yeast. Yeast takes time to set. So, by eating unleavened bread during this festival, every year, throughout all generations, every generation is reminded of God's mighty and quick deliverance.

[10:54] there's no time to prepare bread with yeast. And so, in both the Passover and the festival of unleavened bread, the Israelites get reminded of something that they need to value deeply.

That is, the gracious God who freed them from slavery and his worth leaving work for, his worth sacrificing animals for, is worth worshipping.

I'm sure you have something that you value so much that you're willing to leave work for and even sacrifice your salary for and achievement for that thing or that person.

well, for the Israelites, this is it. This is the most gracious, most wonderful God who freed them from lifetimes of slavery.

He is most worthy. But God did not just free the people from slavery, he also delivered them to the land of milk and honey in Canaan.

[12:15] And so the next two festivals reflect that. The next festival is the offering of the first fruits, which happens during the festival of the unleavened bread.

So in verse 10 there, the Israelites are called to bring the first sheaf of harvest to be offered to God, along with some other food offerings.

only after this offering is made that they can use the harvest for themselves to eat, to consume the harvest. So here, the first sheaf was representative of the entire harvest.

By offering this to God, the people acknowledged that the harvest comes from God. As God was the one who brought them out of slavery in Egypt and delivered them to the land of milk and honey, he's the one who continues to sustain them.

He's the one who continues to make sure that the land will bring forth abundant blessings. So again, by doing this every year, the Israelites are shaped in their values.

[13:24] They must value God above the fruit of their work because the fruit of their work comes from God's graciousness in the first place.

A similar idea is reflected in the festival of weeks, the next one in verse 15 to 20. This festival is also called in Greek Pentecost, Penta 5, because it happens 50 days after the first fruit offering.

So after all the harvest has been gathered, it's right to express their gratitude again in worship through bringing sacrifices and offering some of these harvests as a sign of thanksgiving.

And then in verse 21, during this time again, the Israelites must leave their work and gather in worship, which is fitting, because if God is the king who freed them from Egypt and delivered them to the land of milk and honey, and if he's the one who is in control of the harvests, then there is no space for the Israelites to think that the harvest of the land is a result of their work.

Right? It's all because of God's graciousness, and therefore leaving work to worship God during this festival is the right thing to do.

[14:54] It's a sign that they are saying, no, it's not because of us, Lord, it's because of you. Also, in verse 22, the people are reminded again during this festival that they must leave some harvest for the poor and the foreigner, which is again fitting.

God's graciousness in delivering them to the promised land results in their graciousness towards others. As I said, we don't have time to cover the autumn festivals, but just quickly on the screen, in the autumn, next slide please, in the autumn, there are the festival of trumpets, the day of atonement, and the festival of booths, or the festival of tabernacles, all of which involve that same pattern, living work and gathering in worship, and thus enabling the Israelites to resist the poor of going back to slavery, going back to slavery, to productivity, so they can draw near in the worship of the gracious and liberating

God. So here in this passage, we see that holidays, set-apart days, do reflect and shape society's values.

And the holidays and festivals that God gives the Israelites shape them to be the people of God, the people who value God and His graciousness to them above all else, above work, above food, above pleasure, Israel, all year long, the Israelites are reminded that God has been gracious to them by freeing them from slavery and delivering them to the land of milk and honey.

people are forgetful creatures. We are forgetful creatures. So being reminded weekly, like the Sabbaths, and every couple of months is a good thing.

[17:18] But here's the thing. What God did for Israel in Egypt was great, but it was only a shadow of the greater salvation that He did through Jesus, who freed us from slavery under sin and death, which are the enemies of not only Israel, but the whole world.

And so knowing the shadow in this passage gives us a greater appreciation of the brightness of the real thing, the gospel of Jesus Christ, who died to liberate us from sin and death.

And so when we read about the Passover, we should not just see the liberation of Israel from Egypt, but we also must see Good Friday, Christ's death right before the Passover, showing that He is the real Passover Lamb who died on the cross for us.

And because of that, our souls are passed over. We don't need to die for our sins. His blood is like the Lamb's blood on the doorposts.

God's judgment passes over us. And we celebrate that every year. We get reminded of that. In fact, we get reminded of that fortnightly in the Holy Communion.

[18:49] Just like our second reading in the New Testament says, the Holy Communion is a symbol of Christ's death for us. We get reminded of that when we do it as a liturgy over and over and over again.

when we read about the offering of the first fruits, we ought not just see Israel offering the first fruits as a sign of the whole harvest.

But we must also see Easter, Christ's resurrection, and see it as a sign of our resurrection. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11, but Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

And then in verse 23, but each in turn, Christ the first fruits, and then when he comes, those who belong to him. And then when we read about the festival of weeks or the Old Testament Pentecost, we should not just see Israel being thankful for their material blessings.

We also need to see the day of Pentecost in the New Testament where God gave us all of his spiritual blessings in the presence of himself through the Holy Spirit.

[20:23] On that day, God started to dwell with us and continues to dwell with us in the Holy Spirit. No blessings of harvest can be more valuable than that.

So in Jesus, we've received so much more graciousness. And so even though we don't need to follow these festivals, because we were not saved from Egypt, I think we still need to be reminded over and over again about the gospel because we have been saved from the slavery of sin and death.

We need to be reminded of Jesus and what he has done for us and the liberation that we get, forgiveness, reconciliation, acceptance, God's presence in the Holy Spirit in us.

So how do we remind ourselves of the gospel? In this passage, we see that what we do with our days and weeks and months matters because those daily, weekly, and annual liturgies shape our values.

But here comes the challenge. God constantly reminds the Israelites that wherever they live, they need to do those God centered festivals wherever they live.

[22:03] I imagine that this would have created a tension when they lived in Babylon or Persia, which had their own holidays and festivals. how would the Israelites still be different in how they did their holidays in those places?

Well, we today live with that tension, don't we? We are the people of God who live in a secular society, in a secular world. Again, it's not a bad thing that people of different religions can gather and worship in freedom, but as a result, we have this tension.

The world is full of conflicting liturgies with contradictory values. We live among worldly liturgies that train us to value achievement and pleasure and productivity more than Jesus.

They're not bad things per se, but when we value them above Jesus, then that becomes contradictory to the gospel. So, how do we shape our habits, our life liturgies, so that these contradicting worldly liturgies don't consume our souls?

I think this question is worth thinking about both for ourselves and for our kids, because our kids' values are also shaped by either gospel-centered liturgies or worldly liturgies.

[23:38] And the answer might be different for different people and different seasons of life. But I think we all need to constantly struggle with that tension.

But I can share a little bit of what's been helpful for me and my family. So, first, there's the daily liturgies, like reading the Bible and praying.

if we do them every day, it shapes our habits and it shapes our values. In our family, we try to end our breakfast and dinner times by reading the Bible and praying together as a family.

Well, mostly as a couple, because Kai would just play and do whatever he likes and then say amen at the end. both Hannah and I feel that this is a good way to start and end the day with God in mind.

Of course, that's been harder with a new baby, so we struggle with that tension all over again, which is a good thing that we struggle with tension. But even with the recent changes in life, the habit of daily praying has been so immensely helpful.

[24:59] Lately, I've been feeling a bit overwhelmed by parental duties with a newborn and with the terrible two. I've been feeling mentally depleted and often I lose patience when it comes to Kai.

But then I take the time to stop and pray for a few seconds. Father, help me to be a good father. But then I get reminded when I say that, and then I say, but also thank you.

Thank you so much that when I fail at being a good father, which I do a lot, I can be reminded that you are the perfect father for me, for Hannah, for Kai, and for Esa.

God. So I find daily Bible reading and prayers helpful in shaping my life to be more gospel centered.

Instead of focusing on me and my failures, I look on him and his goodness, even though it takes some struggles when life season changes. second, there's the weekly liturgies.

[26:18] Weekly church attendance is always, always helpful to shape our values and the values of our kids. by leaving whatever we're doing to go to church, we are teaching ourselves and our kids that productivity is not our God and we are not defined by what we do or what we achieve at sports.

Rather, we are defined by what Jesus has done for us and that is liberating. And so we go to church and gather with other people with the same spiritual identity, sinners, failures, who fail miserably, whose work and productivity cannot save them, but who have been forgiven and adopted by God through Jesus.

And at church, we are reminded of the gospel through sermons, through songs, through sacraments, baptism, and the Lord's supper. It's good to be reminded.

And then lastly, there's the annual liturgies that are helpful, like Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension Sunday, Pentecost, most of which are taken from the shadows here on this passage.

But as the passage shows, how we celebrate these holidays is also important. Again, going to church on these days is a good start.

[27:59] But I find that there are other annual liturgies that are helpful. One habit that my mom likes to do on Christmas is she likes to cook lots of food, not for herself, not even for her family, which has made me sad multiple times, but to be given away.

So my parents rarely celebrate Christmas at home. My mom likes to drive around and give food to the beggars on the streets. I think that's a nice way of reflecting the gospel of Christ on Christmas.

And by doing that every single year, her values are shaped. like what the Israelites did when they left some of the harvest for the poor, because God has been gracious to them.

So, friends, God has been very gracious to us. In Jesus, he has freed us from sin and from death, and he has given us all spiritual blessings in Jesus through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

how do we shape our life liturgies to both reflect and shape our values so that we can be more and more gospel centered and Christ-like every day, every week, every year.

[29:33] Let's pray. Father, we thank you that just as you have freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, you have also freed us from slavery, not only under sin and death, but also under all the slaving, the enslaving things of the world.

Lord, so we pray, Lord, through the Holy Spirit, help us, remind us over and over again through whatever we do, whatever we say, whatever we think in our daily lives, so that we can be more and more shaped to be like Christ.

In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.