

## **KEEPING THE FESTIVALS OF TIME**

### **Leviticus 23**

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Leviticus 23 is one of my favorite chapters in the Old Testament. “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Speak to the Israelites and say to them, “These are my appointed feasts [holy days], the appointed feasts of the LORD, which you are to proclaim as sacred assemblies”’” (verse 1, NIV). We’ve taken the word “holy day” and made it “holiday.” Everybody likes holidays. I think every working person is supposed to get at least ten legal holidays a year. A holiday is a time of fun, getting away, rest. Often the difference between a holiday and a holy day is that a holiday is rest without worship and a holy day is rest with worship. What Leviticus 23 talks to us about are holy days. Rest with worship.

The reason why God appointed these is He wanted us to write in our calendar book when, in the Old Testament, we were to meet with Him. I think that’s valid for the New Testament as well. God knows if we don’t make a point to be there, we won’t be there.

The first thing He asks us to calendarize is the weekly time of worship, the Sabbath, Leviticus 23:3. He wanted Israel on a weekly basis to get locked into a calendar, the idea that they were to rest and worship on the seventh day of the week. The New Testament picks this theme up and says that we in the New Testament era ourselves are to have regularly appointed times to meet together, as Hebrews says, “Don’t neglect the meeting together as is the habit of some” (10:25). In the New Testament Paul to the Corinthians talks about meeting on the first day of the week. In addition to this weekly Sabbath the majority of Leviticus 23 really deals with the seven holy days or festivals that were held in Israel through the year. There was a strategy that God had in giving these festivals. Persons then didn’t have the Bible. How are they going to learn about

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God? They had to learn about God through customs, through rituals, through culture, and through the calendar.

There's something about time marching on. Not everybody's able to get to an altar. Not everybody's able to get to a priest. Not everybody is able to get to a worship center. But time gets to everybody. Whether you're well or sick, whether you're prosperous or not so prosperous, time will come to you. God knew that by having the seven calendarized feasts in Israel's history, each feast teaching a different aspect of the people's history with God and their relationship with God, that through these feasts people would come to learn of Him and therefore He mandated it for them to be at feasts.

Each of these feasts have a New Testament and personal significance for us today.

#### **I. The first feast is the Feast of Passover, Leviticus 23:5: “The LORD’s Passover begins at twilight on the fourteenth day of the first month” (NIV).**

This Feast of Passover is held in March or April depending on how the lunar cycle is going. It opens the New Year for Israel. It is really the July 4th of Israel's history. That marks Independence Day. That marks the time when they were slaves in Egypt and God said on the night when the death plague came upon the eldest in every household, “If you'll kill a lamb and put its blood on the doorpost when the death angel comes by I will pass over you.” That's how we get the term “Passover.” It is the passing over of death. Israel was spared and it was the mark of God's redemption and His grace that they were brought that night out of slavery and out of bondage.

“When I see the blood I will pass over you,” is the phrase that is used in Exodus 12:13. A very appropriate New Testament phrase because in the New Testament when we see Jesus introduced to us He is introduced as the Lamb of God. Paul describes Him in 1 Corinthians 5:7 as the

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Passover Lamb. It is His blood that is shed for us that when applied to our lives means that we are exempt from eternal separation from God. That's the real bottom line of death anyway. Real death is not something just physical. Real death is eternal separation from God. Christ is the Lamb, and the blood of the Lamb has been shed for us.

As you open the New Testament you find Christ being introduced as the Lamb of God. As Israel starts out of bondage you find the whole Exodus revolves around the figure of the Lamb. When John the revelator gets his first sight of heaven he sees the Lamb of God in heaven. The Lamb of God slain for us.

All of our personal history spiritually must start with Passover. Not the Passover out of Egypt but the Passover which marks our relief from the bondage that came when we belonged to the enemy, when we belonged to the devil, when we were in sins, before we had eternal life. Our whole birth started with Christ's Passover for us. So we too can keep the feast.

#### **II. The second feast of Israel's year was the Feast of Unleavened Bread, Leviticus 23:6-8.**

This feast began on the fifteenth day of the first month. Or the day immediately following Passover. It was the custom in Jewish homes and still is that some days before the Feast of Unleavened Bread is to begin that a search symbolically is made through the house to find any leaven and to remove it from the house so that during those seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread only the unleavened bread may be eaten.

**A.** There were two reasons for the feast. One was the historical reason, to remember that it was in haste that the Children of Israel had to leave Israel and they didn't have the chance to take preparations with them. They had to learn in that exodus experience to totally rely upon God and the manna that He provided.

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So the unleavened bread was the reminder of the haste with which we get up out of the land of bondage. You never leave your sins if you just want to meander away from them. The Scripture calls us to a clear act of repentance. An act of decisiveness. To make a decision and to leave Egypt and to get on the way.

**B.** A second reason for the unleavened bread was that leaven was a type of sin and evil influence. Paul understands that Christians keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread in this way. He says, “Let us therefore celebrate the festival not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Corinthians 5:8). Don’t celebrate your Christian life with the leaven of malice.

Malice, if I we are to try to define what Paul means, is a person who acts with an angry edge. Whose life is on the argumentative side. Who tends to be judgmental, critical, more on the dark side, more on the down side than the side that is moving in the Spirit. One of the things that happens when you have malice and that kind of evil in your life is it poisons, it prejudices life. We keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread as we’re conscious of this in our life and ask Christ’s indwelling presence to flood us with the fruits of the Lord, with love and joy and peace and patience and gentleness and kindness and goodness and self control. We want our life to be continually flushed with these sorts of elements that we may keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Notice the divine order. First of all, Christ the Passover Lamb is given and then our redemption is secured. But then when our redemption is secure there is the ongoing work of the holy life.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread represents the holy life.

**III. The third feast in this chapter is the Feast of Firstfruits, Leviticus 23:9–14.**

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Actually what this feast is, is a feast of first grain. It was the grain that was offered, not the fruit.

The Feast of Firstfruits occurred in the same cycle of time of the Passover and Unleavened Bread. Passover would be one day, Unleavened Bread the next day and a day or two after that on the first day of the week after Passover Sabbath would come the Feast of Firstfruits.

This feast was celebrated in Christ's day as well as now. At the rising of the sun on the first day of the Christian era when Christ rose from the grave that very same hour there was a field outside of Jerusalem to which the high priest, the representative of the people had gone with his associates as had been their custom for centuries. They had gone to a preselected field and in that field the previous night there had been a bundle of sheaves from the barley harvest that were tied together marking them out as the special sheaves that were to be harvested the next day. The high priest came on that early morning. As the sun rose he took his scythe to the sheaves and they were cut and they were brought ceremonially back to the temple for dedication to God. It was the teaching of God that you cannot eat of the fruit of the harvest until you had offered the firstfruit to God. You can't take grain and make bread of it and have bread on the table unless God has first been given His grain. This is symbolic of the idea if we give first to God that God can work with that kind of a spirit.

That's why, by the way, the strong emphasis for mission in this church that we give our firstfruits to God. We send it away where we don't get the personal benefit from it. It's given as an offering to the Lord. Other tithes and offerings come back to bless us. Buildings, staff, literature. But there's the principle of firstfruit.

That very same moment that the high priest was cutting down that sheath, Jesus Christ was rising from the dead. Paul knows this when he writes 1 Corinthians 15 that Christ is the firstfruits of those that sleep or those that are dead. What he's saying is that nobody could eat of the harvest

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until the firstfruit had been offered to God. So none of us get the benefit of the Resurrection until Christ Himself is resurrected as our firstfruit. Once the firstfruit is offered then the rest of the harvest is guaranteed; it will all come in. The certainty of our resurrection is guaranteed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, our firstfruit.

So when Jesus rose from the dead the ordinances and the customs and many of the regulations of the Old Testament ceased to exist for us because we were brought in under a new covenant, the covenant of grace; here the law of God was written on our hearts rather than on tablets of stone.

#### **IV. The fourth feast of Leviticus 23 is the Feast of Pentecost, also called the Feast of Weeks.**

Pentecost, the Greek word for “fifty” or “week,” because seven weeks went by from the Feast of Firstfruits until the Feast of Pentecost, Leviticus 23:15–21.

Time won't permit us to get into all the significance of the Day of Pentecost but we need to understand the setting from the Old Testament. It was two things from the Old Testament period. First, it represented a turn of the agricultural year. Secondly, many Jews felt it represented the giving of the Law of Sinai. Although that is not taught in the Bible, it's a strong Jewish tradition to this day that Pentecost represents the giving of the Law.

In regard to the harvest, though, you'll find in Leviticus 23 that two kinds of grain products were to be given to God. One was two baked loaves with leaven, symbolic of the presentation of our lives to God when God realizes there's some leaven in them. The two baked loaves, the two finished products are given to God and those two baked loaves represent the completion of the barley harvest. Seven weeks earlier the firstfruit of the barley harvest had been offered. Now that harvest is over and the baked product is represented at the altar.

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The second thing that's given at Pentecost is first grain, an offering of fresh grain. This would be from the wheat harvest which was just beginning and would represent the firstfruit of the wheat harvest.

So two crops were represented at Pentecost—the finished crop and a crop just begun. Interesting enough, on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 1 and 2, both leading up and away from the Day of Pentecost, two groups were at stake. One, the one hundred and twenty, the baked loaves, so to speak. The people who had been with Jesus for three years whom He had worked on and trained are now in the Day of Pentecost infused with the Spirit of God. Not the law of God but infused with the Spirit of God. Pentecost marks a turning for them as the Spirit of God comes upon them. But there was another crop that day—three thousand added to the church. They weren't the ones He had worked with for three years. There was still a whole lot of work to be done in them. They were a pledge of all the harvest that was yet to come through the ages.

Pentecost in the New Testament represented the giving of God's Spirit to people and we still have that going on. There are persons who unfortunately think that the Day of Pentecost was a twenty-four-hour thing and that was it. You have the twenty-four hours and the church never needs to repeat it again. Kind of the big bang. It kicked off the church and the church has been rolling ever since.

I've never gone with the big bang view of the origin of the church. That's not the way the church started—with a big bang and everything coasts after then. We don't just look at the Day of Pentecost as something that just happened long ago any more than at Passover or Unleavened Bread or Firstfruits as something that is relegated to history. We keep Passover every time we remember the Lord's death. We keep Passover when Christ has come as the Passover Lamb into our lives. We keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread when we purge the malice and evil in our life.

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We keep Firstfruits as we go to the hour of death we remember Christ has been risen for us. We keep Pentecost as well. We keep all the other feasts. We keep it also and we remember that Christ is interested in the harvest and Pentecost has to do with the harvest. He wants to complete a harvest and gather a harvest. He wants to fill us with His Spirit so we can be partakers of the harvest. Pentecost is all about giving us power to witness for the Lord and being involved in His harvest of the world.

These first four feasts are spring feasts. There are clusters. The feasts described in Leviticus 23 actually come in two clusters. The four harvests in the spring from Passover through Pentecost. Then a period of four months where there is no feast. Then on the seventh month the fifth, sixth, and seventh feasts occur: The Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths.

Note again how merciful and concerned God is for people. In those four months between Pentecost and the Feast of Trumpets a whole lot of work is taking place—the wheat harvest, the working in the fields, the hot summer months of July and August. As August came to a close the grain harvest is all in. September rolls around, the seventh month in the Jewish year.

God provided four extra days off in that month through these three feasts. Four extra days in addition to the weekly Sabbath. That means that eight days out of that thirty-day month they had off. Not bad.

#### **V. The Feast of Trumpets.**

What was the significance of it? You find it described in Leviticus 23:23–25. The first day of the feast the priest would blow a trumpet or ram's horn. A trumpet is a kind of sound of warning, a sign of alarm. It tips people off to the idea of something happening. The real purpose for trumpets was to ready people for end days down the road, the Day of Atonement—the most

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solemn day of the year when the priest entered into the Holy of Holies. The whole function of the Feast of Trumpets was to begin to get people to prepare their hearts. To look and see if there were wrong things in their lives. To begin to confess those and deal with those as they came to the most solemn day of the Jewish year, the day of prayer and fasting, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The Feast of Trumpets therefore was a summons to readiness.

The Feast of Trumpets has excellent applications prophetically. In fact when you look these seven feasts you can see some prophetic application. The first four have occurred in Christian history. Christ is our Passover. We are to offer God the unleavened bread of our lives. He is the firstfruit. Pentecost has happened.

But the Feast of Trumpets has not yet happened in Christian history. The tabernacles, the dwelling with God for ever and ever has not yet happened. There will be a special future for the Day of Atonement as it relates to Israel although Christ is already our atonement.

The first four feasts have happened but the last three are kind of prophetic. There are things yet to go on, yet to be fulfilled. The Feasts of Trumpets has two kinds of ideas in respect to prophecy. One is that prophets looked forward to the time when a trumpet would be blown and Israel which had been scattered among the nations would be gathered back. That would be a tip off as to the beginning of end times. Isaiah writes in Isaiah 27:12–13, “In that day from the river Euphrates to the brook of Egypt the Lord will thresh out the grain and you will be gathered one by one O people of Israel. In that day a great trumpet will be blown and those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were exiled in Egypt will come and worship the LORD on the holy mountain at Jerusalem.” Jeremiah 32:37 says, “I will surely gather them from all the lands where I banish them in my furious anger and great wrath; I will bring them back to this place and

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let them dwell in safety.” The Feast of Trumpets from a prophetic significance for the Jewish nation would stand for the beginning of the gathering of God’s ancient people.

For the Christian the Feast of Trumpets has this kind of significance. In the words of our Lord, Matthew 24:31: “He will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.” Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4, “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God.” A sound of trumpet blast will girdle the earth and summon us in one moment into the Lord’s presence.

That is the feast that we can look forward to, the return of the Lord.

### **VI. The sixth feast is really not a feast. It’s a solemn day. It’s the Day of Atonement.**

We’ve looked at it in Leviticus 16, which is now restated in Leviticus 23:26–32. It’s a solemn assembly for repentance and forgiveness.

Zachariah, the Old Testament prophet, looked forward to the time when Israel would recognize the Messiah. The minute Israel as a nation recognizes the Messiah then there would truly be a Day of Atonement for Israel. As you all know, now within the Jewish faith there are no blood sacrifices. There is no ability to fulfill Leviticus 17:11: “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.” Religion is, by and large, looked upon as an ethical and moral matter rather than seeing it as a matter in which an innocent victim is substituted to experience the wrath of God and to allow the guilty to go free.

Zachariah sees this time happening within the history of the nation of Israel: “I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son... On that day a fountain will be

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opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and impurity” (Zechariah 12:10; 13:1, NIV). Paul writes in Romans 11:26, “So all Israel will be saved.” Here will be an ingathering of the Jewish people into accepting and confirming Jesus as the Messiah.

For us now, living in this moment of time, Christ has already served as our atonement, for He has entered into the Holy of Holies on our behalf and has made it possible for us to have access to God. “Christ was sacrificed once to bear our sins,” Hebrews 9:28.

### **VII. The seventh feast and the one that closed the year, the agricultural year, and the happiest feast, the most joyous feast is the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths.**

Tabernacles for me always stood for a wood-frame, white-ceiling building. I couldn't imagine people building tabernacles. But here was the Feast of Tabernacles and it was to last seven days. What a tabernacle really was, was an overnight shelter. People would go out in the fields and chop down branches and limbs and construct a lean-to shelter. As Jewish tradition developed there became some very specific regulations on this. Like it had to be three-sided. One side had to be open. The leaves and branches you put overhead had to have enough sky light coming through so that when you lay on your cot at night and look up through the roof you saw the stars. You had to let the elements in. You had to let the rain in, you had to let the sun in, you had to let the air in. You had to really live outdoors for a week. A camp out.

I don't know if in Israel's history they did this. It was inconvenient to do this. The reason why the Lord wanted them to do it, according to Deuteronomy 8 and Leviticus 23, when they got in the land they would start dwelling securely. Walled cities, homes that were secure, they'd increase. God said when you get in that position you might begin to think that your own strength has gotten you all this prosperity, and you forget the Lord. So what the Lord wanted to do is

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every year get all the Israelites out for a campout to remember that their ancestors were once in the wilderness. Once they had the open skies above them and the elements beating against them and they were to remember that God cared for His people and God still cares for His people.

Even though the surroundings now were strong and the homes they lived in were pleasant it was still the same care of God that He had shown toward His people when they were in the wilderness. What the Scriptures were allowing to happen is we learn through experience. Every generation was to memorialize what God had done in the past for His people.

That's not bad theology. There out to be ways that we think of that we can instill tradition, family experiences into our children that give them a taste of the heritage we have.

The Feast of Tabernacles—a glorious time. A godly campout to help us remember how God is our source and God is our supply.

The New Testament looks forward to the time when God will dwell with us and we shall dwell with God. That's the whole meaning of tabernacles—to dwell. Tabernacles represent an eternal dwelling with God when all the busy fever and bustle of life is over. Then the end will be celebrated by an eternal festival with God in His presence. An eternal campout with God.

How does God feel when we miss one of His appointed feasts? When we miss the appointment of Passover where Christ is the Lamb of God substituted for us? Or if we miss the Feast of Trumpets, the return of the Lord? If we missed out being with Him forever how would God feel? If we miss Passover we don't get to keep any other of the feasts. Passover is inviting Christ into your life. The Lord wants us to be His people and to meet Him at the times and places He has appointed. He has an eternal appointment that He's got for us. He wants us to keep it. He wants us to keep our appointments with Him now.

### **Closing Prayer**

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Our Father, we thank You for these moments of meeting with You and Your Word. We thank You, Lord, that there are certain things that are set in your calendar and there are certain people You really want to spend eternity with. And we're among them. That's a privilege we can scarcely take in. It completely knocks us over with wonder and astonishment that You have the desire to be with us and Your heart would be hurt if we don't show up, if we're not faithful to meet with You. Lord, we pray from the depths of our being that every part of us would be ready to meet with You at any and every time. Let us keep the Passover, Lord. That feast which recognizes that You died for us. Let us keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the feast that recognizes that You through the Holy Spirit seek to put away the evil and sin in our lives. Let us keep the Feast of Firstfruits. Some here, Lord, are either facing themselves or have people close to them that are facing death. Let us remember that You are the firstfruit. You give a solid ground on which to stand. Let us keep the Feast of Pentecost, the availability of the Spirit for us, that we might keep all the other feasts which are yet coming. We think, Lord, how on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, the great day of the feast in John 7, the priest had gone to the Pool of Siloam to get the golden pitcher full of water that he might pour it out upon the altar as a prayer that You would give them rain in the new year that was coming. You at that moment said, "If anyone thirst let him come to Me and I'll give him innermost rivers of living water." And you thereby promised to be with us on our life when we think the resources are going to run thin. We may be conscious that You led us this far but we become afraid of some of the things we're facing. You've assured us that there is water. The water of Your presence in the days ahead of us. And bring us successfully through. Let Your Spirit be upon us as Your people. Let us be close to You and love You with all our heart and all our might. Through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.