

God's People Celebrate God's Reign (Leviticus 23)

1 I. Introduction

A. This morning we're continuing on in our study of Leviticus

21. If we go back to our outline for Leviticus, we remember that the first half of Leviticus dealt with judicial holiness
12. This section answered the question: how does Israel become holy?
13. And now we're entering the second section of Leviticus, dealing with practical holiness
14. This section is meant to answer the question: how should Israel be holy?
15. We started this section by seeing how Leviticus 17 connects judicial holiness to practical holiness - holiness lived in us is based on and is a reflection of holiness worked for us
16. Then, we looked at Leviticus 18-20, which focused on what Israel was to be like - instead of reflecting the nations around her, she should reflect the holiness and the glory of God; and ultimately, this reflection would be centered on Leviticus 19:18 - you shall love your neighbor as yourself
17. And last time we were in Leviticus, we looked at Leviticus 21-22, which turned from looking at the community as a whole to look at the priesthood as members of the community and we saw that the priests were called to an even higher standard of holiness because they served in the very presence of God and therefore represented Him

1 B. This morning we're going to start one more topic in Leviticus, a topic that is going to carry us through the end of the book - what sort of things ought to characterize God's people who dwell in His land?

1. The second half of Leviticus to this point has focused on God's people reflecting God's holiness - as a community and specifically as the priesthood - Israel was God's chosen possession so they needed to reflect His character
2. As we continue on, though, we're going to see a slightly different topic - not completely different, but a slightly different nuance - what is going to mark God's people as they enter the land, what will their life be like?
3. And, as we go on for the next four weeks in Leviticus, we'll see four characterizations of God's people:
 - 1a. First, God's people celebrate God's rule (Leviticus 23)
 - 1b. Second, God's people serve in God's power (Leviticus 24:1-9)
 - 1c. Third, God's people honor God's name (Leviticus 24:10-23)
 - 1d. Fourth, God's people reflect God's mercy (Leviticus 25)
4. These things are going to make the 'flavor' of God's people - these are the attributes that God's people share with each other and these are the things that an outsider should see looking in
5. So, we'll start this morning with the first 'flavor' - God's People Celebrate God's Rule

1 C. And let's start by reading Leviticus 23 together

1 D. Proposition: The calendar and the feasts reminded Israel what God had done for them and called them to remember, to celebrate, and to dedicate themselves to God together as His people.

11. What did this teach the ancient Israelites about God?
12. How should this point us to Christ?
13. How can this be applied to us?

1 II. What did this teach the ancient Israelites about God?

1 A. Let's start by looking at the organization of our passage for just a moment

1. A quick glance at our passage shows us that there are two types of appointed festivals: first, the weekly festivals, that is the Sabbath; and second, the yearly festivals, which make up the bulk of the passage
2. And within the yearly festivals, there are seven festivals listed, but their listed as two sets:
 - 1 ✕ a. First, the spring festivals which start in the fourth month, that is the Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Firstfruits, and the Feast of Weeks - all of these festivals are measured from Passover
 - 1 3 b. And second, the fall festivals which start in the seventh month, that is the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Booths - all of these festivals are measured from the Feast of Trumpets
3. As we see this division of spring and fall festivals, we see that Israel's festivals closely matched the agricultural calendar - these were feasts celebrating the return of spring and growth and the start of the harvest, and then feasts in the fall celebrating the finish of the harvest
4. But these feasts were not merely agricultural feasts, but in the midst of the harvest Israel was called to remember that the harvest was only one small blessing from God and pointed them back to the great things that God had done for them
5. We shouldn't skip over that too quickly - harvest was really important, we have abundant food these days, but most generations of mankind have lived year to year depending on a good harvest, so a good harvest could mean the difference between life and death - but in the midst of harvest, the determination of life or death for a whole people, God says there are greater things to celebrate and greater things to remember

1 B. So, what exactly did God want His people to remember?

- 1 1. The first feast on the calendar was Passover, which would have been celebrated on the fourteenth day of the fourth month around the time that the first barley was ripening
 - a. We all know the story of Passover and we've studied it before in Exodus - Passover reminded the people that God had delivered them from death, a lamb had been offered in their place and the destroying angel had turned aside - when God's wrath fell on His enemies, it passed-over them
 - b. The Passover called God's people to remember that God has redeemed my life, blood was shed that I might live
- 1 2. The second feast was the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which started the day after Passover
 - a. The Feast of Unleavened Bread remembered the events that happened the day after Passover - God delivered the people from slavery in Egypt and they left with such haste that they didn't have time to leaven their bread
 - b. The Feast of Unleavened Bread called the people to remember that God had not only redeemed them from death but had delivered them from slavery, God's mighty hand and outstretched arm had brought them out into freedom
- 1 3. The third feast was the Feast of Firstfruits, which happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread on the day after the Sabbath - that is on the second day of the festival because the first was a Sabbath, unless the second day was also a regularly scheduled Sabbath, in which case it could happen on the third day of the festival
 - a. The Feast of Firstfruits that is specifically tied to the harvest - again we ought to meditate on the fact that before the Israelites could celebrate that God was providing for them again another year they needed to remember these great acts of salvation
 - b. In the Feast of Firstfruits, God's people celebrated the upcoming harvest and recognized that it came from God and thanked Him for it by taking the very earliest ripe grain of the harvest, the first ripeness that signaled that the harvest would be coming - it was not quite yet, but it would be coming, and waving it before God
 - c. The Feast of Firstfruits called the people to remember that the upcoming harvest belonged to God and that the upcoming harvest would only happen by God's supply
- 1 4. The fourth feast was Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost (which means 50 days) which was celebrated 7 weeks and 1 day (that is 50 days) after the Feast of Firstfruits
 - a. The Feasts of Weeks is counted from the Feast of Firstfruits and is closely associated with it as a harvest festival - seven weeks was a special number, seven sevens, which marked a completeness or maturity or perfection based on the number seven
 - b. The Feasts of Weeks marked the true start of harvest season and celebrated God's bounty, the maturation of the crop and the opportunity to start gathering it in
 - c. The Feast of Weeks again called the people to remember that the harvest belonged to God and had only happened through His supply and they celebrated before Him

15. The fifth feast was the Feast of Trumpets, or better called the Day of Trumpets which occurred in the fall near the end of harvest on the first day of the seventh month
 - a. During the Feast of Trumpets trumpets were sounded throughout Israel and trumpets were meant as announcements, heralds, calls to pay attention and trumpets often preceded God's meeting with His people - in fact, the day of the Ten Commandments was preceded by a blast of trumpets from the mountain of God
 - 1b. Exodus 19:16-20 - *On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.*
 - c. This feast day was very closely tied to the next, the Day of Atonement - like the trumpets at Mount Sinai, the trumpets announced that God was soon to meet with His people, that redemption was soon to be finished, that sin would soon be put to an end, and the people needed to be ready
 - d. The Feast of Trumpets called the people to prepare themselves to meet with God and see the great redemption that would be finished on the Day of Atonement
 16. The sixth feast - although again not really a feast, per say - was the Day of Atonement that happened nine days after the Feast of Trumpets
 - a. We've already studied the Day of Atonement in detail in Leviticus 16, but here in Leviticus 23 it is set in its place on the calendar with the other Festivals
 - b. During the Day of Atonement and only on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would enter into the Holy Place, into God's presence and would offer the blood of the sacrifice so that God could dwell among His people and then sin would be cast out into the wilderness on the back of the scapegoat
 - c. The Day of Atonement called the people to remember that their sin separated them from God and before God could truly dwell with His people, sin must be destroyed and called the people to long for the day when sin would truly be at an end
 17. And the seventh feast was the Feast of Booths, which happened five days after the Day of Atonement and marked the end of the harvest
 - a. The Feast of Booths celebrated the end of the harvest - all of the produce had been gathered in - and like the other harvest festivals once again rejoiced that God had provided the harvest
 - b. But there was something special about this festival - the people were to dwell in booths - this called the people to remember that they had been wanderers in the desert and that God had provided for them when they had nothing and had brought them to His land
 - c. The Feast of Booths called the people to remember that God had provided bountifully in the past, that God was providing bountifully now and God would always provide bountifully for His people
- 1 C. So remembering what God had done was at the center of the festival calendar, but before we move on, I want to take a look at a couple other things in our passage this morning - because remembering wasn't the only purpose of these festivals, in fact, as I look at Leviticus 23, I see four purposes listed
1. First, these festivals were meant to **remind** the people what God had done - that's what we just looked at, so I won't spend long dwelling on this - all of the festivals either centered on a great event that God had done for Israel or celebrated the harvest that God brought every year and called the people to remember what God had done
 - a. I will just say one thing about this - remembering was closely related to the repeated command to rest, to perform no labor, to observe the festivals as Sabbaths to the Lord
 - b. The Festivals were not meant for the people to accomplish something for God but to rest in what God had accomplished - they were to remember that God saved them and they could cease their efforts
 - c. So every festival was a Sabbath - one day festivals were simply a Sabbath and week-long festivals had one or more Sabbaths within them - the people remembered and the people rested
 2. But, second, these festivals were meant to **celebrate** what God had done
 - a. That makes sense in many of these festivals, especially the harvest festivals, but our text points to it specifically as well
 - b. Each of the feasts that is specifically called a feast - that is the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Booths - that word feast is actually the word 'celebration' and, less we try to make it too solemn of a word, it's derived from the word for dancing
 - c. The feasts were to be joyous occasions, dancing before God and rejoicing in what He had done - the feasts were not only meant for remembrance as though that was merely a solemn duty, but for rejoicing

13. Third, these festivals were meant to help Israel **dedicate** themselves to God again
 - 11a. This is emphasized at the very start, Leviticus 23:2 - *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.*
 - b. These feasts belonged first to God, by celebrating these feasts the Israelites were declaring that they belonged to God, that they were His people, His treasured possession
 - c. And so, in celebrating these feasts every year, the Israelites rededicated themselves to God - and we see that throughout the Old Testament, when the people fell away from God they neglected the feasts and when they came back, they celebrated the feasts again
 - d. The feasts were a symbol of the people belonging to God
14. Fourth, these feasts were meant for the people to remember, to celebrate, and to dedicate but not as individuals, but as a congregation - these feasts were meant for remembering **together**, for celebrating together, for dedicating together
 - a. There are two phrases throughout Leviticus 23 which describe the festival calendar - 'these are my appointed times (or feasts)', and 'holy convocations'
 - 11b. We see these two descriptions in Leviticus 23:2 - *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.*
 - c. The feasts were to be holy convocations - literally they were to be times when Israel set aside the tasks of life and gathered together to remember, to celebrate and to dedicate
 - 11d. So in other places it specifically states that all Israel must appear before God at the feasts, for example, Exodus 34:22-23 - *You shall observe the Feast of Weeks, the firstfruits of wheat harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering at the year's end. Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the LORD God, the God of Israel.*
 - e. Israel wasn't made up of a bunch of individuals who experienced God's deliverance - they were a people that had been delivered together and remembered together and celebrated together

★ III. How should this point us to Christ?

A. As many commentators have noted, there is nowhere that Jesus shines forth as clearly as in the Festival Calendar

- ★21. All of the Old Testament was a picture pointing to Christ, but this picture reaches its zenith in the festival calendar
- 1 B. Jesus was sacrificed as our Passover Lamb
 1. I'm not going to turn this into seven sermons on the seven feasts, so we'll just touch briefly on each one
 2. But Jesus has come to be our Passover lamb, the blood that turned God's wrath aside and redeemed us from death
 13. So Paul can say in I Corinthians 5:7 - *Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.*
 4. But, more than merely symbolism, Jesus gave Himself up to die at the Passover so that all things would be fulfilled
 15. Matthew 26:1-2 - *When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified."*
 - 1 C. Jesus has delivered us from slavery
 1. The Feast of Unleavened Bread celebrated the result of Passover - that the people had not only been redeemed from death and God's wrath but that redemption and judgment led to their freedom
 12. And this was the result of Jesus' work as well, John 8:34-36 - *Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*
 3. Jesus came to give His people freedom, a freedom that was won at the cross
 - 1 D. Jesus was the Firstfruits of God's harvest
 1. Passover celebrated Jesus' death in our place, and Firstfruits celebrates that He did not stay dead - He was brought back to life as a Firstfruits, the first of a new humanity redeemed from death and raised from the dead
 12. I Corinthians 15:20 - *But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*
 3. But, again, more than merely symbolism, Jesus rose from the dead on the Day of Firstfruits - remember that Firstfruits was celebrated the day after the Sabbath of the Feast of Unleavened Bread
 14. And we see in Matthew 28:1 - *Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.*

1 E. Jesus has begun God's harvest

1. Fifty days after Firstfruits, the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost celebrated the start of harvest season
- 1**2. And we see in Acts 2:1-4 - *When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.*
3. And then Acts 2 tells the story of how the gospel went forth powerfully for the first time to men from every nation under heaven and thousands came and embraced Christ - Jesus had been the Firstfruits, but now the harvest would begin in earnest and the storehouses of heaven would be filled with those gathered from the earth

1 F. Jesus will return with the sound of trumpets

1. As we turn to the fall festivals, we can start to see that there is a difference between the spring festivals and the fall festivals - the spring festivals celebrate primarily what Jesus did at His first coming, the beginning of the harvest, and the fall festivals celebrate what Jesus will do at His second coming, the end of the harvest
- 1**2. The end of the harvest was first heralded by the sound of trumpets, and we see that the end of Jesus' harvest will begin in the same way, I Thessalonians 4:16-18 - *For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.*
3. The harvest continued until the sounding of the trumpets and the trumpets said, prepare yourself, the end is very near - Jesus will descend from heaven

1 G. Jesus will finish the work of redemption

1. The Passover celebrated the start of redemption - blood was shed to turn away God's wrath - but the Day of Atonement celebrates the day when redemption will be finished, when sin will be washed away forever and God's dwelling will be among His people
2. Because we exist after the Passover, we get a taste and a glimpse of these things now, but in reality, redemption isn't finished yet - we have been sealed for redemption, but we still await a final redemption, a final redemption that Jesus will accomplish when sin is made an end of
- 1**3. So Paul looks forward to a final redemption in Romans 8:22-25 - *For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*
- 1**4. And Revelation looks toward the Day when redemption has been finished and God will dwell, visibly and eternally, in the midst of His people, Revelation 22:3-5 - *No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.*

1 H. Jesus will provide for us forever

1. The Feast of Booths celebrated that God had brought them into His land and that He had provided for them all the way and would provide for them forever
2. Right now, we are more like the Israelites dwelling in booths in the wilderness looking to enter God's land than those celebrating the feast of booths in God's land - but one day, not very far away, we will celebrate that Jesus provided for us all the way and He will provide for us forever
- 1**3. So right now, we are those who are being supplied by Jesus, Philippians 4:19 - *And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.*
- 1**4. And that provision will last until we enter His land, Jude 24-25 - *Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.*
- 1**5. And our song through endless ages will be a celebration of the fact that Jesus provided, Revelation 5:9-10 - *And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."*
6. Jesus is our provider and He will always be our provider and that will be our joy throughout all eternity

★IV. How can this be applied to us?

A. Obviously, we don't celebrate the festival calendar anymore, and there is good reason for this

- ★ 1. Paul told us that we weren't bound to the festival calendar anymore, it had been a shadow, a picture that was fulfilled in Jesus, Colossians 2:16-17 - *Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.*
2. But, if we aren't called to celebrate the festival calendar anymore, do these passages about the festival calendar mean anything for us?
3. I'm going to answer 'yes' and say that the purpose of the festival calendar ought to be our goal as well; that is, we ought to remember God's acts of redemption for us, we ought to celebrate what God has done for us, we ought to dedicate ourselves to God's service, and we ought to do these things together

1 B. We need to remember God's acts of redemption

1. Remember is one of the watchwords of Scripture - throughout the Old Testament the people were called to remember what God had done for them, at that pattern doesn't cease in the New Testament
2. In fact, we are called to constantly bring ourselves back to the core truths of salvation, to look at them in wonder and marvel and to remember what has been done for us

- 1 2 3. And so, we come to passages like I Corinthians 11:23-26 where Paul reminds them what Christ had done for them and calls them to continue remembering - *For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*

1 C. We need to celebrate what God has done for us

1. Remembering is a good first step, but we shouldn't stop by remembering what God has done for us, but continue to rejoicing in what God has done for us, celebrating God's work on our behalf
- 1 2. This theme of celebration ought to permeate the Christian's life, so Paul can say in Philippians 4:4 - *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.*
3. God has done great things for us, when we remember them we ought to celebrate

1 D. We need to dedicate ourselves to God's service

1. Remembering and rejoicing is the air the Christian breathes, but remembering and rejoicing and then turning away and living as though these things weren't true is a contradiction, a blasphemy
2. Remembering and rejoicing ought to effect all of our life, as we remember and rejoice in what God has done for us, it ought to drive us to pursue living for Him - to cast out that which is contrary to His rule and to embrace that which reflects Him
- 1 3. In fact, Paul uses the feasts to call us to this specific thing, I Corinthians 5:7-8 - *Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. 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.*
4. Remembering and rejoicing is only profitable inasmuch as we dedicate ourselves to God's service in remembering and rejoicing - we remember what God did, celebrate it and then go live in light of what He has done for us

1 E. We need to do these things together

1. Just as the Israelites were called to regularly gather together to remember what God has done, we also are called to remember, celebrate and dedicate not merely personally, but corporately - we do these things together
2. It is together that we remember Christ and we are spurred to remember and remember rightly by each other, it is together that we celebrate and we are encouraged to rejoice by each other, and it is together that we dedicate ourselves to God and we encourage each other to live out our professions of faith
- 1 3. And so Hebrews commands us, Hebrews 10:24-25 - *And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*

F. And we do have a feast that we celebrate together, but it is a better feast, a feast that subsumes the rest

1. I started by saying we aren't called to celebrate the festivals in Leviticus 23, and we aren't - but that doesn't mean we aren't called to celebrate a feast - in fact, we celebrate one every week
2. And that's what we're going to do in a few minutes - we're going to celebrate a feast that calls us to remember what Christ has done for us, that calls us to celebrate what Christ has done for us, and calls us to dedicate ourselves to His service
3. And this isn't a private feast, a private moment of meditation - it is supposed to be a communal remembering, a communal rejoicing, a communal dedication - we partake together at one table
4. So, as we turn to communion now, let us together remember and rejoice!