



SUNDAY MORNING SERMON

August 8, 2021

What Does The Law Teach Us About Worship?

Worship is essential. The festivals described in Leviticus 23 inform us that worship is experiential, has a certain breadth of tone, is about remembering, and is about meeting with God. In this sermon, we will see how these basic, elementary truths about worship are still relevant for us today.

Dr Matthew Stanton
matt@cornerstoneorillia.org

Elementary

“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’.” (Leviticus 23:2 ESV)

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” (Romans 12:1 ESV)

What Does The Law Teach Us About Worship?

August 8th, 2021

Leviticus 23:1-25

Dr. Matthew Stanton

Introduction:

Good morning Cornerstone! I'll invite you to turn with me in your bibles to Leviticus chapter 23. This morning we are looking at what the law teaches us about worship. Leviticus chapter 23 outlines the appointed feasts of the Lord. These feasts constituted the gathered assembly of God's people taking place at set times, as holy convocations, celebrated at the tabernacle. In essence everything we've been talking about - all the sacrifices, all the purification rituals, all the moral and ethical requirements - all of that has been about preparing for and safeguarding our access to this glorious experience: the opportunity – the experience of meeting with God. That's why we care about atonement. That's why we care about holiness. Because without those things we CAN'T worship God! Worship is the goal towards which everything we've been talking about in Leviticus has been moving.

And this topic really excites me! I love looking at the history and transformation of Christian worship and this morning we are going all the way back to its roots.

R. K. Harrison helps explain what we need to know regarding these festivals.

“The order of sacrifices described in the ritual prescriptions constitutes an important guide for Christians with regard to the **principles of spirituality underlying divine worship**.... When proper atonement had been made, the worshipper was to surrender his life and labour to God, as indicated by the burnt and cereal offerings. Finally, he was to enjoy fellowship with God within the context of a communion meal, which the peace offering furnished.”¹

You see these ritual prescriptions constitute an IMPORTANT GUIDE for the Christian- the elementary principles. Atonement requires surrender and communion requires fellowship. It’s a pattern for worship. We are going to unpack how these 3400-year-old feasts and festivals help us understand the basic and rudimentary principles of Christian worship. We’ll begin with our text: Leviticus 23; beginning in verse 1 and I’ll provide some running commentary along the way.

Leviticus 23:1-25

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “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.

The Sabbath

“Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work. It is a Sabbath to the Lord in all your dwelling places.”

Notice here, that it is God who appointed these feasts. They weren’t Moses’ idea, but God’s plan for his people. The first feast, the foremost, is the Sabbath. Now, this convocation was observed weekly -unlike the others we’ll read about which occurred occasionally- the Sabbath followed the pattern of God’s rest from creative activity. You’ll remember from Genesis 2:3 that God blessed the 7th day and made it holy, then he rested. The 7th day was a sacred day of rest, and this rest was to be shared by man. So, Mom and dad would make sure they had finished all their weekly jobs and that everything was prepared for the Sabbath beforehand as part of their regular rhythm of worship. Just as God laid his eye on his creation, so too was man to rest by gazing on creation and its holy creator. In fact, St. Patrick is said to have said, “Whoever does any work on the Sabbath denies [God’s] work of creation.”² That’s a strong statement isn’t it? While today we

¹ R. K. Harrison, *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3 of Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 109.

² Andrew Bonar, *Leviticus: A Commentary*, A Geneva Series Commentary. (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2020), 397.

understand the observance of the Sabbath and work differently, the principles of rest and reflection are still relevant. God's people have always had a weekly worship rhythm.

The next appointed feast was the Passover. We continue in the text at verse 4.

The Passover

“These are the appointed feasts of the Lord, the holy convocations, which you shall proclaim at the time appointed for them. In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at twilight, is the Lord's Passover. And on the fifteenth day of the same month is the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the Lord; for seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall have a holy convocation; you shall not do any ordinary work. But you shall present a food offering to the Lord for seven days. On the seventh day is a holy convocation; you shall not do any ordinary work.”

For the Israelites, the Passover commemorated their escape from Egypt. It celebrated their delivery from death. The rites of the Passover were first described in Exodus 12 as a way of reminding them of their divine redemption and establishment as a nation. You'll notice that the day that followed began the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The bread was unleavened because they were in a hurry to get out of Egypt, so they didn't take the time to add leaven (yeast) to the bread and wait for it to rise. This weeklong feast took on the character of a pilgrimage. “The Passover was the *cause*, the feast of unleavened bread the *effects*, of their deliverance from the grasp of Egypt.”³ It carried implications for a covenant relationship with God.

We continue again in verse 9.

The Feast of Firstfruits

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land that I give you and reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest, and he shall wave the sheaf before the Lord, so that you may be accepted. On the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it. And on the day when you wave the sheaf, you shall offer a male lamb a year old without blemish as a burnt offering to the Lord. And the grain offering with it shall be two tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil, a food offering to the Lord with a pleasing aroma, and the drink offering with it shall be of wine, a fourth of a hin. And you shall eat neither bread nor

³ Bonar, 399.

grain parched or fresh until this same day, until you have brought the offering of your God: it is a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings.

The Feast of Firstfruits might be the easiest feast for us to understand because here they simply gave of what they had. At the beginning of the barley harvest, a sheaf -or portion- was taken as representative of the whole harvest and given to the priest. You'll notice though that the firstfruits of their harvest was accompanied by the blood of a lamb. There had to be a consecration element whenever they acknowledged God as the final author of their land's yield. Then followed the grain and drink offering. These elements constituted their diet; all of which was a part of their firstfruit giving. And so, this festival celebrated God's gift of the coming harvest.

Again, turn with me back to the text to verse 15.

The Feast of Weeks

“You shall count seven full weeks from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering. You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath. Then you shall present a grain offering of new grain to the Lord. You shall bring from your dwelling places two loaves of bread to be waved, made of two tenths of an ephah. They shall be of fine flour, and they shall be baked with leaven, as firstfruits to the Lord. And you shall present with the bread seven lambs a year old without blemish, and one bull from the herd and two rams. They shall be a burnt offering to the Lord, with their grain offering and their drink offerings, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord. And you shall offer one male goat for a sin offering, and two male lambs a year old as a sacrifice of peace offerings. And the priest shall wave them with the bread of the firstfruits as a wave offering before the Lord, with the two lambs. They shall be holy to the Lord for the priest. And you shall make a proclamation on the same day. You shall hold a holy convocation. You shall not do any ordinary work. It is a statute forever in all your dwelling places throughout your generations.

“And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God.”

At the end of the harvest season, the people came together to worship God. This festival celebrated God's gift of the harvest. The daylong celebration commemorated God's goodness to

them in the harvest. He gave them abundantly, so they worshipped him abundantly. Notice here that the bread in this instance was leavened. Up till this point, the bread offered to the Lord was unleavened. But after the harvest, when they came to celebrate their plenty, the bread was leavened as they were filled by a holy God. The Feast of Weeks is also known as the Feast of Pentecost because it took place 7 weeks after the Sabbath marking the beginning of the barley harvest. 7 weeks, 7 days a week – this is easy math- that’s 49, which makes the following day, day 50- ‘Penta’. So, 50 days after the Sabbath, the people were filled.

Finally, we’ll return to the text at verse 23.

The Feast of Trumpets

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the people of Israel, saying, In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a day of solemn rest, a memorial proclaimed with blast of trumpets, a holy convocation. You shall not do any ordinary work, and you shall present a food offering to the Lord.” (Leviticus 23:1-25 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord; thanks be to God!

As we get to the feast of trumpets, we notice that it took place on the seventh month, known as Tishri, which was a holy month. These Jewish feasts were clustered on the seventh month – again reflecting the Sabbath cycle. The seventh month was marked with feasts and fasting days which signaled the coming New Year. We bring in the new year on January 1st, so this may seem a little strange. But I think it is wonderful that the people of God brought in their new year together in worship. Trumpets were blown to assemble the congregation and they came to worship God and thank him for his faithfulness.

That is the overwhelming tone of worship: rest and rejoicing.

A Hermeneutical Challenge

Before we go any further, we need to deal with an important hermeneutical question. As Pastor Paul said last week, hermeneutics is about how we interpret the bible – and that is a particularly urgent question when reading books of the bible such as Leviticus. We know that some things

cross over from Leviticus into the New Testament – and some things don't. We can't commit adultery – but we can eat bacon and wear polyester pants – why is that? Why don't we celebrate these festivals today? They sound pretty great! God's people coming together to worship him and celebrate what he's done sounds like something we might still do.

These festivals are meant to be a tutelage for us not rituals to maintain. To be clear, that's the goal of our entire series: the goal is to be led by the Spirit and not by the Law. The law is helpful in giving us boundaries, but the goal of maturity is living at the center. The Law reveals the character of worship but not the center- which is Jesus.

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. (Colossians 2:16-17 ESV)

So, we don't get overwhelmed by the periphery because the substance is Christ. Now, I would argue that even these festivals foreshadow Christ and his life and ministry. God timed the most important events in Jesus' earthly ministry to coincide with these festivals.⁴ Let me explain.

We refer to Jesus as our Passover Lamb. Quite consequentially, Jesus' crucifixion happened on the Friday afternoon when the lambs were killed in preparation for the Festival of Passover. Just as God delivered the Israelites out of Egypt when they put the blood of the lamb on the doorpost, with the crucifixion God declared, "Now, I deliver you from eternal death." The timing alone of the death of Jesus is nothing short of a divine miracle. The Festival of Unleavened Bread reveals that Jesus delivered us from slavery and the Festival of Firstfruits reveals that Jesus IS the firstfruits of our resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20). Remember that Sunday, 2,000 years ago - the day Jesus was resurrected – that was the beginning of the Festival of Firstfruits. He is our Passover Lamb, he delivers us from slavery, and he rose as the firstfruits. But we can't stop there! What happened 50 days after the Festival of Firstfruits? The Festival of Pentecost occurred. Pentecost was a harvest festival. Now, how did Jesus fulfill that harvest? In Acts 2 it says that on the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came upon the church. Acts 2:41 says,

⁴ A. Moseley, *Exalting Jesus in Leviticus*. (D. Platt, D. L. Akin, & T. Merida, Eds.) Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2015.

“That day about 3,000 people were added to them.” (Acts 2:41 ESV)

Those new believers WERE the promised harvest. THAT Pentecost was a harvest of souls not crops. And that harvest is still happening today as the church continues to do the work of God. And then we shouldn't forget about that Festival of Trumpets. Here again, we see the signaling of the return of Jesus. In the New Testament, it says that one day Jesus will return at the sound of the trumpet. 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 says,

“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.” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 ESV)

This Old Testament festival became a New Testament reality – our reality, our future. The Israelites knew that each year when the trumpets sounded, they were one year closer to the arrival of the Messiah, and we know that with each passing year, we are one year closer to his return.⁵ This hermeneutical challenge is only understood through the lens of the cross. The goal of these rhythms of worship is to get to Christ. So now, we are better situated to answer the question:

What Does The Law Teach Us About Worship?

Now that we've see what these festivals looked like, what do they teach us about our worship today?

- i. Worship is experiential

Worship is action. It is what you do. It is truly an incredible experience. Think of our corporate worship. We take the bread and the cup; we taste it and smell it. We sing and raise our hands enthusiastically. We pray out loud together. We rebuke, encourage, and receive each other. You don't just come to sit and observe. (Pause) The church cannot become passive and consumeristic in its worship. This chapter rebukes that. As individuals, we are responsible for our worship- it's what we bring to God and that is costly and even dangerous. You'll know this if you've been

⁵ A. Moseley, *Exalting Jesus in Leviticus*. (D. Platt, D. L. Akin, & T. Merida, Eds.) Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2015.

tracking with us through this series. Right, there are lots of sacrifices, priests being killed for improper worship protocol, worshippers leaving the tabernacle with blood on them. I like how Gordon Wenham describes the Israelites' worship experience:

“The worshipper brings the animal, kills it, skins it or guts it and chops it up. The priest sprinkles the blood on the altar and places the dismembered carcass on the fire.”⁶

They experienced their worship in ways which were so tangible. And yet, our worship is no less experiential. In fact, it's the tenor of New Testament worship. *Worship is the outward expression of a radically transformed life!* Worship is life. It is the point. It's the why and response to God's holiness. It's supposed to overflow into all life. We don't come to 'experience worship' here on Sunday and then forget about it Monday to Saturday. Your kids, neighbors, and co-workers should know that that guy or gal worships a holy God because they see you experiencing Him each day. This may take some retraining in our thinking because we've internalized and individualized everything, including faith. Which isn't bad -it is relationship- but it's also public and lived out in community. The percentage of North American Christians right now doing their own thing is far too high. Worship is experiential, and a critical part of that experience happens communally. Secondly,

ii. Worship has a certain breadth of tone

Worship is reverent. Worship is genuine. It is joyful, it is celebratory. It requires us to be honest about who we are and who our God is. That kind of reflection requires humility. But when done as the Lord directs, it is truly acceptable worship. Just reading through the Psalms you get a sense of that breadth of tone. There are praise psalms full of joy; lament psalms full of sorrow; wisdom psalms reminding us of God's promises; and even imprecatory psalms filled with a deep yearning for justice for those who are oppressed. New Testament Christians are called to worship God THROUGH every season of life. There is no pause for believers. During the storms there's just more honesty, more heartache and more reflection. That is the richness of the breadth of tone of Christian worship. In these festivals we see that they worshipped through affliction – think of the atonement- and they worshipped through the celebratory feasts.

⁶ Gordon Wenham, 49.

There's balance between joyful and substantial, heart-felt and celebratory and it's all honest and genuine worship. Now you may be drawn to one tone more naturally which is ok, but work through the others. If you are more joyful by nature, contemplate worshipping in a solemn manner. If you are prone to a solemn tone in worship, remember to rejoice.

There is a proper manner – a proper approach- by which we come before God. We come on his terms. He gave the Israelites these festivals and he's given us principles to worship by. Worship is experiential and wide in tone, and:

iii. Worship is about remembering

After reading through Leviticus 23 it's easy to see this point. In each of these feasts they were remembering what God had done for them. And when you look at their history, it's clear that they needed all these reminders. So do we. We need help remembering. What's your earliest memory? Think all the way back to your childhood. What memory comes to mind? (Pause) We remember things that are meaningful, whether painful or joyful. We have memorials for those we've lost, trophies for championships we've won, and photos for remembering our past. It was my grandparents 64th wedding anniversary this past week. Grama is in a home now with dementia and so Grandpa goes in to see her. When she didn't know who he was he pulled out a picture from their wedding day and she immediately started crying and said, "That's us." She remembered because of that reminder. God gave us the gift of memory. In worship we remember him.

It's part of the reason why we still do the Lord's Supper. As often as we partake, we do so in remembrance of him. Gordon Wenham notes,

"The Lord's Supper should therefore be, like the peace offering, at once a solemn and joyful occasion. Solemn because no human being can lightheartedly enter God's presence and pledge to keep his laws, joyful because God's grace and his promise exceed all that we can ask or think in this life and the next."⁷

⁷ Wenham, 83.

The Table is solemn because it reminds us of Christ's sacrifice, and it is joyful because it reminds us of our new identity in him. Remember what God has done for you through worship. Let your prayers and songs guide you into his presence by remembering his promises and what he's brought you through. We were created to worship. Failing to worship God brings conflict to our identity resulting in discontentment. Remembering what a Holy God has done in the past, changes the way we think and act in the future. Who we are should reflect who he is. Worship is experiencing God, it's about expressing all of life's emotions, it's about remembering what he has done, and:

iv. Worship is about meeting with God

At the heart of the heart of worship we meet God. They met him in the tabernacle, and we meet him through the Holy Spirit in us; both through worship!

Right, for them it was the tabernacle as Michael Morales writes,

“Inasmuch as Leviticus 23-25 describes festive pilgrimages to God's house...these chapters form a fitting celebratory resolution, signalling what the tabernacle has become for Israel: a tent of meeting-with-God.”⁸

The tabernacle WAS their tent for meeting God but on this side of the cross, the tent is gone. Because on this side of the cross, we have the promised Spirit's indwelling. So, meeting with God IS worshipping Jesus. Dick Lucas writes:

“*In him* is to be found all the treasures of spiritual reality and fulfilment foreshadowed in the Old Testament. To discover all that God has for his people in these last days one must be in Christ. And that is all.”⁹

It's all about Jesus. In Jesus, our worship is fulfilled, and we meet with the God of the universe! That should shock us. It should help us see the gravity of what we are doing here together. Don't show up late and walk in on the first song, get settled, finish your coffee, realise you forgot your bible, and then fall asleep somewhere between points 2 and 3. Come on! This is the God of the

⁸ L. Michael Morales, 200.

⁹ R. C. Lucas, *The Message of Colossians & Philemon*, ed. John R. W. Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today*. Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove.: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 114.

universe we're here to worship! So, arrive early, sit and pray, have some fellowship, engage in worship, and write everything down to review it, test it, and then share it. Remember the proper approach by which we come before God. R. K. Harrison has a great line:

“Hurried, casual or disorderly worship had no place in ancient Hebrew religious life...”

Disorderly worship is improper worship because it takes lightly our union with God. Think about it: Old Testament and New, God has provided a way for his people to know and commune with Him. He's provided a way for his people to meet him. We don't get to walk with him in the garden as Adam and Eve did, we don't get to meet him in the tabernacle as they did here, better than that, we get to know the name of Jesus and have the Holy Spirit! It is a privilege and the Christian's birth right to worship him! Which brings us to our application.

Application

How should we worship?

I have to say, I've enjoyed seeing how God's people worshipped him 3400 years ago, and it's been helpful to see these principles of worship, but now what? HOW are we supposed to worship? Pastor Paul, in helping me prep this sermon, said something very helpful. He said, “make sure this isn't a sermon ABOUT worship, but a sermon on HOW TO worship”. It must be practical. And then he said, “It's the difference between being a teacher teaching and a preacher preaching”. Academics will come at you with a bunch of quotes and sources, but the preacher will show you how to live out God's Word. He uses the Scriptures to help you live to the glory of God. And there is a great Scripture that I'm sure most of you have already been thinking about. You want to live a worship-filled life? Romans 12:1-2:

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a **living sacrifice**, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the **will of God**, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:1-2 ESV)

Today, you need to decide if you're going to live as a sacrifice of worship and follow hard after the will of God each and every day. No pauses, no half-attempts, no “it wasn't convenient today”;

that's not the mark of the Christian. Spiritual worship is transformational, sacrificial, and good. Atonement is the ticket into worship and holiness is how we get close to Jesus – living at the centre. So, I want to close with two practical take-a-ways. I generally like to close my sermons with a word of encouragement and then issue a challenge so the encouragement first:

1. Worship together

Worship Him joyfully. Speaking to a room full of people who came to worship God this morning, I feel like I'm preaching to the choir. You get it. Or at least you know that you need to be with the gathered assembly. So, I want to encourage you to keep coming, keep worshipping with all that you are, join one or two of our small groups starting next month, and keep showing the world that we are different because we worship this Holy God together. You do know that the world takes notice of this? In a post-COVID world, they notice a room full of people. My neighbour sure was shocked when I had the audacity to invite him to a gathering. They're thinking that for us to gather we must be doing something important- and we are! The gathering of the whole local body is a priority in worship. So, come! Come back to worship Him with your church family. And if this isn't your church family yet, then maybe today you've been reminded of the importance of doing this together. Worship breaths. It goes in and out. Come, taste and see, and then go and witness. So, if you are out there right now, then you need to come back in. Come and go. Receive and be sent.

And then together we need to:

2. Recommit to right worship

Secondly, my challenge for us today is to recommit ourselves to right worship. Do you know that we can worship God the wrong way? Nadab and Abihu found that out the hard way! Have you ever done something and then immediately found out you did it the wrong way? Erin and I lived in Ireland for three years and over there they drive on the opposite side of the road. People always ask us how that was, but truthfully, we learnt how to drive over there really quick. When vehicles keep coming directly at you, you know you're going the wrong way. In worship, we can selfishly and shamefully put us before him. Our time, our gifts, our money, our talents, our kids, our

sexual identity - we can prioritize all of it before God. How scary is that? God doesn't call us to worship him with some of who we are, but with all of it. When you worship God the wrong way, you make an idol out of something else.

Right worship is intentional, costly, and collective. It's intentional particularly through hardship and trials! We've lost a lot over the past year. Friends have become estranged, we haven't seen some family members in years now, and we haven't been able to properly mourn our losses. Did you notice that in each of the songs we sang this morning there's been a note of worshipping God through it all! So, how have you been doing as a worshiper? Have you struggled to worship through those hard times? Have you settled or become disconnected? Worship that is costly means following the Word and will of God even when your family and friends -even when culture - says don't. It means worshipping when it requires the most sacrifice. We need to recommit ourselves to the worship of God and the fellowship of each other. Recommitting ourselves means laying down our idols, turning from all distractions, and letting the Spirit guide us. More storms are coming: this dress rehearsal maybe over, so we need to be ready for what is to come next.

And so, after I close, and before the worship team leads us again, we are going to set aside some time for personal confession, reflection, and recommitment to right worship. And then the worship team will lead us.

Let's get better at worshipping a Holy God as a Holy people.