

# The Sanctity of Time

Leviticus 23:1-44

## I. Introduction

- A. The annual feasts of Israel commemorated the nation’s redemptive history.
- B. They reminded Israel that Yahweh had full authority over their time and their calendar.
- C. The feasts were national celebrations—the entire nation joined together to commemorate God’s redemptive work, worship together, and thank him for his bountiful grace and blessings.
- D. The feasts were also an annual way for the nation to renew and reaffirm their allegiance to Yahweh as their covenant God and king.
- E. The feasts coincided with the agricultural year

Season	Harvest	Feast
Spring	Barley Harvest	Passover/Unleavened Bread Firstfruits
	Wheat Harvest	Weeks
Fall	Grape/Fig/Olive Harvest	Trumpets Day of Atonement Booths

## F. Key terms and phrases throughout chapter 23:

- 1. “appointed feasts” – a sacred time set aside by God for a special purpose
- 2. “holy convocation” – an assembly of the congregation. Each one was to be a day of rest in which no normal work could be done.
- 3. “in all your dwelling places” – not all feasts were celebrated in one place. Certain aspects of the celebrations occurred throughout the land in individual homes and communities.

## II. Exposition

### A. The Sabbath: The Foundation for the Festivals (23:1-3)

- 1. The Sabbath was a weekly observance rather than an annual feast.
- 2. Yet it initiates this section on Israel’s sacred calendar because it establishes the paradigm for understanding the expectations for the remaining festivals to come.

“The religious year is dominated by the sacred number seven (symbolizing the perfect work of God). Hence (a) every seventh day is a holy sabbath; (b) every seventh year is a Sabbath year of rest for the crop-bearing land; (c) every seven sevens of years the fiftieth year is to be hallowed as a jubilee, in which all mortgaged lands are to be returned to the original family; (d) Passover is held at the end of the second haptad of Abib, on the evening of the fourteenth; (e) the Feast of Unleavened Bread is

celebrated for the next seven days; (f) the Feast of Pentecost is celebrated after seven sevens of days following the offering of the wave-sheaf (hence on the “fiftieth” day); (g) the seventh month, Tishri, is especially sanctified by three holy observances: the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles; (h) the Feast of Tabernacles is celebrated seven days (fifteenth to twenty-second of Tishri), plus an eighth day for the final convocation” (Archer, 259-60).

3. All feast days which did not fall on the seventh day were to be observed as full Sabbaths (Lev 23:27-32, 39). This reminded them of God’s creation and his provision and gathered the community together to worship God corporately.
4. The Sabbath is the oldest “holy time,” founded on the seventh day of creation week (Gen 2:1-3).

- a) The term שַׁבָּת (*sabbat*) does not speak of resting from exhaustion, but of ceasing work. The seventh day was set apart to commemorate God’s cessation from his creative work and celebrate that his creation was “very good” (Gen 1:31).

“This Sabbath rest was possible because the people that God had made rested in perfect and unbroken fellowship with the Creator” (Ross, 397).

- b) The introduction of sin and its resultant toilsome labor that followed ruined the perfect creation rest established by God and the fellowship his people enjoyed with him. This meant it was impossible to impose a Sabbath rest on fallen humanity because the rest it memorialized had been destroyed by sin.
- c) Thus, after man’s fall in Eden, the Sabbath is not referenced until Israel is given the law at Mt. Sinai.

“God began the work of redemption toward a new creation that once again was at rest (Gen 3:15, 21; John 5:17); he worked to restore the divine rest destroyed by sin (Rom 8:18-22). The idea of the Sabbath, therefore, disappeared from Scripture until it was reinstated at Mount Sinai for the people of whom God redeemed” (Ross, 398).

5. The fourth commandment is unique among God’s commandments

- a) The Sabbath command was never imposed on any other people but Israel.
- b) It could be given to them because they had been redeemed—they were now set apart from fallen humanity as a people that enjoyed fellowship with God.

“It was at Sinai that the observance of Sabbath could be instituted, because there God made a covenant with his redeemed people. The meaning of this law, like all the moral laws expressed in the Ten Commandments, had been revealed from the beginning. But the difference was that the enjoyment of the Sabbath had been possible only for unfallen humans, whereas the other nine commandments were binding upon all people from the beginning. It was only after God formed a nation of redeemed people that he could impose Sabbath observance consonant with the meaning of the day” (Ross, 398).

## The Sanctity of Time

6. The Sabbath day was the sign of the Mosaic Covenant (Gen 31:13-18; Isa 56:6). This way, it served several purposes:
  - a) It reminded Israel of their physical limitations and afforded them an opportunity to rest and gain physical refreshment.
  - b) It provided special opportunity for Israel to focus on spiritual service and worship as a community without the distraction or worries of common daily life.
  - c) It reminded them of the first Sabbath and the rest first established by God (Exod 20:8-11).
  - d) It reminded them of their redemption from slavery in Egypt (Deut 5:12-15).
  - e) It anticipated the rest they would enjoy in the land (Deut 6:23; 12:9)
  - f) It commemorated God's work of redemption which would remain incomplete until all promises were fulfilled in the land of promise.

“As the people of God, Israelites were identified with their Creator and Redeemer by sharing that Sabbath. This was no mere token; the Sabbath was the sign of the entire covenant. Those who wished to show that they were faithful ‘kept Sabbath’; those who lived in the promise of a restored rest for the whole earth observed its sign” (Ross, 399).

“The extent to which Israel keeps the Sabbath is a sign to which Israel wishes to acknowledge God as sanctifier and creator” (Siker-Gieseler, 13).

7. The Sabbath carried a prophetic function. Not only did it signify the promise of the covenant and the hope to enter God's rest in the land, but it anticipated a greater spiritual rest to be enjoyed.

“The biblical concept of rest is used throughout Scripture to portray the promised rest that would in the end restore what was lost by the fall. In anticipation of that time the promise of rest was repeatedly connected with the promised land, as if that good land was a replica of the garden of Eden from whence the first sinners were expelled and the foretaste of things to come” (Ross, 400).

- a) The first generation of Israel was barred from entering God's rest because of their unbelief (Ps 95:11).
- b) Even though Israel enjoyed rest periodically throughout their history (Josh 21:44-45; 2 Sam 7:1, 11; 1 Kgs 8:56), it was never the full rest that was promised.
- c) More than that, God ultimately intended for his people to enjoy spiritual rest into which they must enter by means of faith and obedience (Ps 95).

“To live in obedience the LORD, keeping his Sabbath as a witness to the faith (as instructed in Isa. 58), was to live in hope of the fulfillment of the promises, including the restored Sabbath rest of God (66:1). The promise of that rest was included in the prophecy of the new covenant (Jer 31) when the nation was removed from the land because of unbelief. Jeremiah records the promise of the

LORD to give rest and refreshment to the weak and the weary (31:25)” (Ross, 400).

8. The Sabbath and the NT

- a) To an OT Israelite, Sabbath observance was a tangible expression of his covenant relationship with God. It gave him a way to enjoy and serve God regularly. Yet it also anticipated something greater to come—a rest that God was working toward when all would be made perfect once again.
- b) The coming of Jesus brought the beginning of the fulfillment of the promises of rest.
  - (1) He announced that he came to bring “rest” to the weary and heavy-laden (Matt 11:28)
  - (2) He challenged the Jewish leaders by asserting that he was the Lord of the Sabbath (Matt 12:8). He had authority over it, and so he could do work commensurate with the work his Father had been doing throughout redemptive history (John 5:17).
- c) Jesus’ redemptive work has fulfilled what was anticipated by the Sabbath day.
  - (1) Salvation in Christ provides the rest foreshadowed by Israel’s cessation from normal activity.
  - (2) God has provided spiritual rest which one may enter into through faith in Christ.
- d) Hebrews 3-4 warns that the promised rest comes only through faith. Thus, we are to make sure that we are not found with a rebellious, unbelieving heart and thus not enter God’s rest as the first generation of Israel failed to enter his rest.
- e) Sabbath observance, for a Christian, is a backwards movement which fails to recognize what the day foreshadowed—spiritual rest in Christ and eternal fellowship with God.

“So for Christians the fulfillment of Sabbath rest began with this long-expected salvation. It is a spiritual rest for the soul; it is characterized by cessation from doing works (in an effort to earn salvation) and by faith entering the rest that God had provided in his Son Jesus Christ” (Ross, 404).

“Jesus claimed that ‘the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath’ (Mk 2:28); he could therefore abolish the Sabbath, and he did in fact do so, for the New Covenant which he brought abrogated the Old Covenant, of which the Sabbath was a sign. The Christian Sunday is not in any sense a continuation of the Jewish Sabbath. The latter closed the week, but the Christian Sunday opens the week in the new era by commemorating the Resurrection of our Lord, and the appearance of the risen Christ, and by directing our attention to the future, when he will come again. And yet Sunday does symbolize the fulfillment of those promises which the Sabbath foreshadowed. Like all the other promises of the Old Testament, these promises too are realized not in an institution, but in the person of Christ: it

## The Sanctity of Time

is he who fulfills the entire Law. Sunday is the 'Lord's Day,' the day of him who lightens our burdens (Matt 11:28), through whom, with whom and in whom we enter into God's own rest (He 4:1-11)" (De Vaux, 2:483).

### B. Spring Festivals (23:4-22)

#### 1. The Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread (23:4-8)

- a) These two observances, along with the feast of firstfruits, always accompanied each other.
- b) Passover began at twilight on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> month of the year.
- c) The Passover feast commemorated God's distinguishing of Israel from the Egyptians when he protected them from the death angel. It marked them as a people belonging to God and was the initiating part of their redemption from Egypt.
- d) The Feast of Unleavened bread began the following morning, on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> month lasted 7 days.
- e) It commemorated the speed with which they departed Egypt during the exodus event and the commencement of their national existence.
- f) During the feast, no leaven could be consumed. This not only reminded them of their haste exodus, but symbolized the need to purge sin from their lives in order to be holy and pure before God.
- g) A holy convocation was held on the first and last days, and each day offerings were presented to Yahweh.

#### 2. The Feast of Firstfruits (23:9-14)

- a) The day after the Sabbath (Sunday) during the week of the Feast of Unleavened bread, Israel would offer the first sheaf of barley harvested.
- b) This offering of the firstfruits was actually representative of the entire harvest, and served to acknowledge God's bountiful provision and blessing.
- c) It also signified that the worshipper recognized that the land and its produce belonged to God.
- d) Additionally, other offerings were presented along with the grain.

#### 3. The Feast of Weeks (23:15-22)

- a) This feast occurred 50 days after the firstfruits of the barley harvest were offered, and for this reason it is also known as "Pentecost".
- b) It always occurred on the first day of the week, and coincided with the wheat harvest.
- c) On this day, the people presented grain offerings along with animal sacrifices and held a holy convocation during which no work could be done.

- d) This was the only feast where Israel presented leavened bread as grain offerings.
- e) It was also the only pilgrimage which was confined to a single day.
- f) The feast celebrated God's gracious provision and commemorated the identification of Israel as God's people at Mount Sinai (cf. Num 10:11).
- g) Because of this, the feast is also closely associated with the care and provision for the poor and vulnerable (23:22). Since God has cared for them, they are to extend that same kind of compassion to those in need.

C. Fall Feasts (23:23-44)

All three feasts fall on the 7<sup>th</sup> month of the year, which was a sabbatical month commencing the civil year and celebrating God as the creator and the one who brings rest and refreshment. It also coincided with the fruit harvest.

1. The Feast of Trumpets (23:23-25)

- a) The sabbatical month (7<sup>th</sup> month) is initiated by the feast of trumpets, which occurred on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the month.
- b) Trumpet blasts marked the initiation of this feast and the 7<sup>th</sup> month, and called the people to cease from normal activity and gather together as a holy convocation to present food offerings.
- c) This feast really marked the beginning of entire month during which Israel committed themselves to a month of worship and commemoration of God's gracious provision and redemption.

2. The Day of Atonement (23:26-32)

- a) The Day of Atonement occurred on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month
- b) It was the most solemn of all the feasts, in which Israel's fellowship with God was renewed through the removal of their uncleanness through the sin offerings (see ch. 16).
- c) It was the only required fast in Israel's calendar.
- d) This section is intricately arranged in a chiasmic structure that focuses particular attention on warning the people against doing two things: doing work, and not fasting.

A day of event (23:27a)

B "afflict" (23:27b)

C "no work" (23:28)

**D warning against not fasting (23:29)**

**D' warning against working (23:30)**

C' "no work" (23:31a)

B' "afflict" (23:31b)

A' day of event (23:32)

## The Sanctity of Time

- e) The warnings against working and observing the required fast would serve to reinforce the sobriety of the occasion and the grace displayed through the atonement accomplished by the high priest.
3. The Feast of Booths (23:33-44)
- a) The Feast of Booths occurred 5 days after the Day of Atonement, on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the sabbatical month.
  - b) It was a 7-day celebration, during which offerings were presented each day and holy convocation beginning and a final convocation the day after the feast.
  - c) The feast occurred during the fruit harvest, and the wood from these harvests was perhaps used to construct the booths in which the people lived during the feast.
  - d) The feast commemorates Israel's wilderness experience after their exodus from Egypt (Neh 9:15).
  - e) "Israel's true identity was as a pilgrim people who traveled light by this world's standards" (Ross, 437).
  - f) It is the only feast where rejoicing is commanded (Deut 12:7, 12, 18; 14:26; 16:11, 14; 26:11; 27:7).
  - g) It was the preeminent celebration in Israel's calendar, and the final day signaled the close of the annual cycle of feasts.
  - h) Deut 31:10-13 could add a mandatory reading of the law during the final day of this feast every 7 years.

### III. Chapter 23 and the NT

#### A. Principles of Application to Consider:

- 1. All time belongs to God, and is a gift from him.
- 2. We should be intentional with our time and use it wisely.
- 3. We are to honor God as the creator, sustainer, provider, and redeemer of life.
- 4. We must see the greater spiritual promises and realities which God graciously foreshadowed in the OT feasts.

#### B. The continuity of the OT and NT is especially apparent in the annual feast cycle of Israel.

#### C. For Israel, these feasts commemorated their redemptive history and called them to remember God's gracious redemption, creation, provision, and blessing.

#### D. The NT transformed many of these feasts into essential Christian observances:

- 1. Passover (Good Friday)
  - a) Christ was killed on Passover (Matt 26:2)
  - b) Christ is identified as our Passover lamb (1 Cor 5:7)

- c) Just like the Passover lamb, none of Jesus' bones were broken (John 19:32, 33, 36; cf. Exod 12:46; Num 9:12).
  - d) Through the death of Christ, God has shown us compassionate protection from his wrath as we are covered by the blood of the Lamb of God.
2. Unleavened Bread
- a) Paul uses this feast as a means of exhorting believers to purity in conduct.
  - b) Since Christ the lamb has been sacrificed, Christians are to "cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened" (1 Cor 5:7).
  - c) Paul indicates that believers celebrate this feast through holy conduct of their living: "celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Cor 5:8).
3. Firstfruits (Easter)
- a) Christ's resurrection is described as the "firstfruits" of all who will one day rise in him (1 Cor 15:20). Thus, just as the first sheaf of barley represented the whole harvest, so Christ's resurrection represents all who will rise to eternal life, guaranteeing that the rest will rise in time (1 Cor 15:23).
  - b) Because of this connection between the resurrection of Christ on a Sunday and the Feast of Firstfruits, which always occurred on Sunday, the Jewish holiday was subsumed by the Christian holiday of Easter.
  - c) Additionally, this also influenced the shift from Saturday to Sunday as the day when God's people met to worship him corporately:  
  
"The frequent references to Sunday in Leviticus 23 (23:7, 11, 16, 35, 36, 39) mark it as a special holy day. The celebration of the Feast of Firstfruits on this day anticipates not only the resurrection of Christ in the new creation but the change of worship from Saturday to Sunday as well" (Rooker, 292).
4. Weeks (Pentecost)
- a) The Feast of Weeks coincided with the wheat harvest, and it was on this day that the promised Holy Spirit descended upon the people, inaugurating the church age (Acts 2).
  - b) Thus Pentecost signaled the first harvest of the new age inaugurated by Christ.  
  
"Because the feasts have great typological significance and thus shed light on the understanding of the New Testament, Wiersbe argues that the four-month gap between Pentecost and the Feast of Trumpets represents the church age wherein believers are engaged in spiritual harvest (Matt 9:36-38) and await the sound of the trumpet (1 Cor 15:51-58; 1 Thess 4:13-18)" (Rooker, 288).

## The Sanctity of Time

### 5. Booths

- a) The OT connects the Feast of Booths with the kingly reign of God (Isa 52:7-13; Zech 12-14).
- b) When Jesus displayed his glory on the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter, suggested that they make booths for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah to live in (Luke 9:33), indicating his desire to celebrate the Feast of Booths right there. This suggests he recognized the eschatological connection between what the feast signified and the transfiguration of Jesus depicted.
- c) Likewise, both Rev 14:18 and 19:15 connect the coming judgment of Christ at his second coming with the gathering of the grapes at the end of the fruit harvest and the wine pressing that would occur at that time.