

Introduction to the Seven Feasts of the LORD ... Leviticus 23

This morning we're turning to Leviticus 23 - the first in a series of studies on the Seven Feasts of the Lord. Now, mention the book of Leviticus and the average believer switches off; they see it as something dry and dusty – for many folks, it tends to be an unknown book and, sadly, an unopened book.

Well, I believe, it's actually one of the most exciting books in all of Scripture – its message is robust, it's one of holiness to the Lord. For example, we read: 'Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy' (19:1).

When we talk about holiness, it's important for us to realise it is something comprehensive – it impacts every area of our lives in the 21st century. We need to take it seriously for our God is an awesome God, a thrice-holy God, a God of whiter than white purity.

Easier said than done, I hear you say! And, yes, I agree! But God doesn't leave us to stumble along on the path of life, for we also read in 20:8, these words: 'I am the Lord, who makes you holy.' What a promise that is! That is what amazing grace does to a man – it enables him to be the kind of person God intends him to be! On my own, I could never achieve it - with God's help, I can be the man God wants me to be.

For a Jewish person, this is the third book in the Torah, it's the same in your Bible and mine. They are often called the 5 books of Moses: number one is Genesis, two is Exodus, four is Numbers, five is Deuteronomy.

Jesus turned here when he addressed the two dispirited, despondent souls dragging their feet on the road down to Emmaus. Dr Luke informs us that the risen Lord Jesus 'began at Moses' and spoke to them of 'things concerning himself' – the outcome, we read in verse 32, is that their hearts burned within!

I love that, don't you! That's what we need today – we long to see men and women ablaze for Jesus Christ; yes, boringly ordinary people like you and me whose hearts are aflame for the glory of God. My prayer is that God may set us on fire as we talk about Jesus and see more of him in our study this morning.

Listen to this: I was taken aback to discover that among Jewish folks this was the first book in the Torah to which they introduced their children at school. Yes, they didn't start with Genesis, or even Exodus, where every page is drenched in human drama and nail-biting scenes. They are full of compelling stories of such heroes as Abraham and Isaac, Jacob and Moses. Rather, they begin right here in the book of Leviticus!

You see, this book is all about treasured values, it's about principles for life and living, it's about doing the right thing in the right way at the right time; essentially, it's all about you and me putting God first!

We see it in the first five chapters of the book where the focus is on **the Levitical offerings** – one, the burnt offering; two, the meal offering; three, the peace offering; four, the sin offering; and, five, the trespass offering - they

remind us that the one and only way into the presence of God is by sacrifice.

The next major section is on **the seven feasts of Jehovah** – you find these festivals outlined in chapter 23. You can see how they are spoken of in verse 2, where they are described as 'my appointed festivals' - i.e. they are God's feasts, they belong to him, they are owned by him. He is the host, we are the guests.

And, because of that, they are permeated with his character: you get a glimpse of his justice, his generosity, his provision, his salvation, and his promise.

One phrase pops up over and over again, 'to the Lord.' That tells me the Lord is the centre of all this activity. These are not the feasts of man, they are the feasts of Jehovah. Sad to say, in John 5:1, we read: 'There was a feast of the Jews' - that's a warning to all of us, be sure Jesus is the focus of all that we do!

These were golden opportunities for Jewish people to meet with their God – they were appointments to keep. They were given to Israel as an abiding gift - he speaks of it as 'a lasting ordinance.' There's something timeless about it. This was God's bright idea in the first place – he's someone who passionately longs for fellowship with his people.

Here we are today, in the third millennium, why study these festivals? One, they tell us what we have in Jesus Christ. Leviticus 23 does not list a series of funerals, or a series of fights, it lists a series of feasts! When we follow the Lord, it means we enjoy sweet fellowship with God. In this chapter, the invitation is for you and me to be his guest, to sit at his table, to enjoy him!

Two, these seven feasts tell us what we ought to be doing in this world. Yes, there is much to

enjoy in the Christian life, but there's also so much for us to accomplish. We will discover as we explore the feasts what God wants us to do! It's interesting to note that before Moses fills us in on the details about the seven feasts, he has something else up his sleeve in verse 3. There, he talks about the weekly Sabbath - a reminder to them that God rests, and so should they! One day in seven to catch your breath, as it were - it's a margin on the page of your week. For you and me, it's a wise principle to apply to our busy schedule! We need time out! We all need space; space to refocus on what really matters in life, space to be refreshed, space to reconnect with God as well as with each other, space to renew our relationship with the Lord - that's what the Sabbath is all about!

There were seven feasts in all: Passover / Unleavened Bread / Firstfruits / Pentecost / Trumpets / Day of Atonement / Tabernacles. All of these point to the Lord Jesus - we read in Colossians 2:17 that 'these are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.' We know also from Galatians 3:24 that these feasts were like a tutor to lead people to the Saviour. That is, they shine the spotlight on Jesus; that said, each one also highlights in a unique way something of his relationship with his people and especially his dealings with Israel.

Let me give you a quick overview – three of them were pilgrim feasts ... all Jewish men were required to go up to Jerusalem for them (we know that from Deuteronomy 16:16, where we read: 'Three times a year all your men must appear before the Lord your God at the place he will choose.'). You can read about them in the

Gospel narrative and in the book of Acts – the big 3 are Passover/Unleavened Bread, Pentecost and Tabernacles.

There are three main lessons – one, God watches over his children – he protects them; two, God looks after his children – he provides for them; three, God can be trusted in relation to his children – if he said he'd do it, he will do it – his promises are sure and certain.

It's fascinating to see something else here – because this can be seen as God's calendar of redemption. A roadmap to redemption. If you look at each of the feasts, you'll see what I mean: **Passover** pictures the death of Jesus – here is God redeeming his people - this God delivers; **Unleavened Bread** speaks of the impeccable life of Jesus - here is a God who nourishes us with the finest of the wheat; **Firstfruits** foretold the resurrection of Jesus on the third day – here is God gaining his people - he claims his own and he wants first say in our lives; **Pentecost** portrays the coming of the Holy Spirit – here is God sanctifying his people with the gift of his Spirit.

The last three feasts are held in the autumn and will be fulfilled at the second coming of Jesus. So, in that sense, it's a case of us looking back to look forward. Because Israel is a **scattered** people, they have to be gathered at the **Feast of Trumpets** - the message is that God remembers; because Israel is a **sinful** people, they need to be cleansed at the **Day of Atonement** - the message is that God forgives; because Israel is a **suffering** people, they will be comforted in the millennial kingdom and that's reflected in the **Feast of**

Tabernacles - the message is that God reminds us that we can't do without him.

Something else worth noting, the 3 Rs ... the feast of Trumpets teaches us repentance; the day of Atonement teaches us redemption; the feast of Tabernacles teaches us rejoicing.

On the feast of Trumpets, the sound of the ram's horn calls upon each Jewish person to repent and confess his sins before his Maker. The Day of Atonement is that ominous day in the Jewish calendar when peace is made with God. On the feast of Tabernacles, Israel obeys God's command to rejoice over the harvest and the goodness of God.

The underlying message is summed up: you have to repent, and be redeemed, in order to experience his joy!

Let me just highlight one more great truth in closing: between the Feast of Pentecost and the Feast of Trumpets is an interval. It was harvest time. In the big picture, that's where we are living right now! During these days, the people were busy in the fields, it was the wheat harvest; that was followed by the grape harvest, then the olive harvest, then the harvest of dates and figs. We are living in the same era and, by implication, we should be involved in the harvest ...! Today ... it's about bringing in the sheaves! Men and women from among the nations of the world - today, he is building his church, one living stone at a time. We read in Psalm 89:15 these words: 'Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence, Lord.' The first part of that verse can read like this: 'Blessed are the people who know the joyful sound ...' - that's the sound of the shofar, the sound of the trumpet, calling people to engage

in worship. That's my prayer, as we study the feasts together, that we might catch a vision of who Jesus really is ... and also rejoice in all that he has done for us.

When you study the seven feasts of Jehovah, four profound things happen when these truths seep into your soul - one, you hunger for God's holiness more frequently; two, you fear God more greatly; three, you reach out to your neighbour more fully - that's the heartbeat of verse 22 (cf. 19:18, 33); four, because 'the reality is Christ' you love Jesus more deeply!

These feasts were not a hardship, they were not a burden or a chore - they were a joy and a delight. For me, their combined message is summed up in the words of the short hymn:

How good is the God we adore, Our faithful, unchangeable Friend! His love is as great as his power, and knows neither measure nor end! 'Tis Jesus the first and the last, whose Spirit shall guide us safe home; we'll praise him for all that is past, and trust him for all that's to come.