

## **Holy Days**

### **Leviticus 23:1-44**

So many people in our culture live for the weekend. It's not a secret – it's simply a fact of modern life. Listen to the conversations over morning tea on Mondays. What are they usually about?

- How was your weekend?
- What did you do on the weekend?
- Where did you go on the weekend?

It's the same on Monday afternoon and Tuesday morning – unless everyone had a really boring weekend. By about Wednesday morning, the focus shifts:

- What are you doing next weekend?
- Any exciting plans?
- You heading off somewhere for the weekend?

By Wednesday – humpday – we've exhausted last weekend and we're starting to get into next weekend – unless someone's in hospital having a major operation.

Now, I know it's not the only subject that's discussed in workplace lunch-rooms or school playgrounds. People talk about their latest relationships and complain about politicians and the price of petrol and how we pay too much in taxes. Movies and sports may get a good workout as well. Yet, the weekends seem to hold a special attraction for us. They offer a break from the drudgery of our workplaces. We've learnt to anticipate them through the tinted glasses of our imaginations. We've learnt to relive them through the tinted glasses of boredom at work.

It may come as some surprise that weekends and holidays are actually God's gift to His people. The way our culture celebrates these things seems to have nothing to do

with God whatsoever. Yet, the fact remains that these things are part of God's good law to His people.

## **The Holy Days**

Leviticus 23 lists for us the regular holy days God tells Israel to celebrate each year. Let me quickly run through them to give you a brief overview of what they're all about.

- First, there's the weekly day off – the Sabbath. Each week they were to have one day where the whole community stopped and didn't do any work.
- Secondly, there were a series of three feasts that ran together – Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread and Firstfruits. These happened in the first month of their year – which is around Easter time according to our calendars.
  - Two of these – Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread – were to remember the time God rescued them from slavery in Egypt.
  - The other one – Firstfruits – was the beginning of the grain harvest. It was to remind the people God was the One providing their daily bread.
- Thirdly, there was the Feast of Weeks in the third month. Somewhat ironically, this feast was a one day affair. It was called the Feast of Weeks because it was held seven weeks after Firstfruits. It was a feast of thanksgiving for the harvest God provided.
- Fourthly, there was a series of holy days held in their seventh month – around September/October in our calendars.
  - On the first day of the month was the Feast of Trumpets. It was a day of rest. They celebrated it with trumpet blasts. No one's exactly sure

what the purpose of this day was. Some suggest it began of a time of self-examination leading up to the Day of Atonement – but the text of Leviticus doesn't actually tell us.

- The tenth day of that month was the Day of Atonement. We looked at that in some detail a few of weeks ago. It was the day when the tabernacle and its contents were cleansed and where the people's accumulated uncleanness was removed through the scapegoat.
- On the fifteenth day of that month, the week-long Feast of Tabernacles began. During this feast, the people lived in temporary shelters – sort of like going camping. It was to remember the time of their journey from Egypt to Canaan – when they lived in tents in the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula. It was also a time when they celebrated the harvest.

That's a very quick sketch of the various feasts and holy days listed in this chapter. I'll leave you to check out the details for yourselves. You'll find more details in Exodus 12, Numbers 28-29 and Deuteronomy 16.

Now, if you were an Israelite, how do you think you'd view this list of days?

- Would you view them as a gracious gift of God? Here are some days God's given me to have a break from the normal routine of life. God's been good in giving me a one-day weekend and some week-long breaks.
- Or would you view them as a burden imposed by God? Here are some days where God's giving me a set of rules as to what I can and can't do on this day. God's cramping my style by not allowing me to

earn some extra cash on those days. God's boring my socks off by having me sit through a whole lot of religious mumbo-jumbo.

We're talking about the same days – but how a person approaches those days in their attitude can make a huge difference as to what they think of them.

And I should point out one other small factor. When we answered that question about whether the days were a gift or a burden, most of us did it from the point of view of an employee. We like getting holidays because we get paid for not working – or, if we do work, we get paid penalty rates. The average Israelite wasn't an employee. Rather, the average Israelite was a self-employed subsistence farmer. They didn't get paid for holidays. They couldn't produce during holidays. It was very tempting to see holidays as simply being dead time – time when they couldn't work and thus couldn't make any more money.

### **The Purpose of the Holy Days**

Why did God give them these days? Each day had its own particular purpose – and I've indicated those very briefly already. We could spend more time looking at those purposes in detail – but, this morning, I want to look at the bigger package as a whole. What's behind this whole system of special days? Overall, I think four words summarise God's purposes:

- to remember
- to cleanse
- to rest
- to celebrate

They're not in any particular order. There's some overlap between these words. Yet, I think these words will help us get to the heart of this system of special days – and

they may also point us to the heart of what's missing from our culture's concept of weekends and holidays – and maybe even what's missing from our own concept of those things.

### To Remember

First, then, they were days to remember. They were days to remember God. The busy-ness of life can often lead us to forget God. God can get squeezed out by all the other things going on in our lives. If we're not careful, we can go for hours, days, even weeks without thinking about God. Other things grab our attention – some big project at work or school; a significant problem that requires our undivided concentration; the build-up to a special event.

- Sometimes it's the sheer fullness of the daily routine – meals to prepare, clothes to be washed, houses to be cleaned, shopping to be done, families to be organised, people to be caught up with.
- Sometimes it's our self-centred approach to life – where I get busy doing what I want to do and don't get around to thinking what God wants me to do.

The same sort of thing happened back then as well. If we're not careful, we simply get on with the tasks in life as if that's all there is to life – as if God's not involved and as if God doesn't matter.

God gave them a weekly appointment to stop all those things. Yes, those things are part of life – but they're not where life's actually at. They don't provide the meaning of life. They don't provide purpose to life. They need to be kept in proper perspective. As Moses taught them:

*Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.*

It remains the same today. If I don't see all the things

happening within my life from the perspective of my ongoing relationship with God, then I'm in trouble. I've missed the plot. I'm not treating God as my God.

They were days to remember God – they were also days to remember what God had done for them in the past.

- To remember that God miraculously rescued them from the misery of their slavery in Egypt.
- To remember that God spared their firstborn sons when the angel of death passed through the land.
- To remember that God graciously gave them His instructions on how they were to live as His people.
- To remember that God brought them safely through the wilderness despite their moaning and grumbling
- To remember that God provided the harvest.

These holy days were times for them to remember how God was faithful to His promises to Abraham. They'd often failed. They hadn't lived the way they should. Yet, God stuck by them anyway. Yes, He'd disciplined them from time to time – but not as much as they deserved. And He hadn't abandoned them. He'd done so much for them. It was important they not forget.

And it's the same today. We're a fickle bunch. We still allow our lives to be filled up with a myriad of other things that distract us from thinking about God. We still get on with our self-centred lifestyles and squeeze God to the edges and live as if He's not important to us and doesn't have any say in what we do. Or when some difficulty comes into our lives, we're quick to listen to the whisper of the evil one: "God doesn't care about you". We're hit by some sickness or some financial crisis or some unfair treatment or some tragedy and we think to ourselves: "God's forgotten me. God's deserted me. I

guess I don't matter after all".

God's given us times to remember Him and His goodness to us. Still He calls us to set aside time to stop our normal activities and remember His place in our lives. Could it be we're worse than the Israelites? Our culture actually gives us two days off – and still we struggle to fit God into our busy schedules. We become busy filling that time with things we want to do.

And God's given us the communion service to remind us of what He's done for us in the past.

- I deserved judgment and death and hell. That's what should happen to me. My sin deserves that.
- But, God judged Jesus instead of me. He died in my place. He took my punishment.
- Because of that, God forgives me. He wipes my slate clean. He cancels the absolutely huge debt I owe Him.
- More than that, God adopts me into His family. He treats me as a son. He says that's how it'll be forever. He gives me life in His eternal kingdom.

It's absolutely amazing stuff. God's commitment to me and His love for me is so great that He sent His Son to die for me. What more could I ask for?

Yet, still I forget. I see some guy with more than myself and I think God's let me down. I see someone enjoying a sinful lifestyle and I think God's stopping my fun. I see someone who's physically more attractive and I ask why God didn't use that mould with me. I get diagnosed with glandular fever and I think God doesn't love me anymore. Far too easily I forget who God is and what He's done to show His love for me and how He's continuing to work

for His good purposes in my life. I need times to remember – to consciously set aside times to do that.

### To Cleanse

Secondly, these holy days provided opportunities to cleanse. Once you've stopped to remember God, there's a good chance you'll also remember something of God's instructions to you. As you remember God's instructions, there's a very good chance you'll also remember your failure to keep those instructions. At that point, you may get around to thinking about bringing a sacrifice to make atonement for your uncleanness.

It's not that these were the only days you could bring sacrifices. God didn't say to them:

You can only bring sacrifices on the Sabbath. Too bad if you sin on Monday – you'll have to wait all week till you can fix that up. Hope you don't get struck by a lightning bolt in the meantime!

That's not how it was. They could bring sacrifices any-time. However, if you're tied up doing your own thing during the rest of the week, your uncleanness may not register too clearly in your consciousness. That may not happen until you pause from what you're doing and think about God and what God requires of you and how you measure up. That's when you'd arrange to do something about it.

The Day of Atonement particularly focused on this aspect. Its whole purpose was to rid the nation of the built-up pollution of their uncleanness. It was a day for them to concentrate on that as a nation:

- to think about the cleansing of the tabernacle;
- to think about the scapegoat taken into the desert;

- to examine their own lives and what they'd been doing and how they'd offended God.

Yet, there were additional sacrifices on most of the holy days. There were continual reminders of their uncleanness and of their need to be cleansed in order to approach their holy God.

How conscious are you of your personal sin on a day-to-day basis? I find there are some sins I recognise fairly quickly when I do them.

- If I deliberately avoid telling the truth, I'm usually conscious of that at the time.
- If I get angry about something, I can usually work out whether that's right anger or selfish anger.
- If I get impatient with people, I can usually recognise that bubbling feeling in the pit of my stomach.

And there are plenty of other sins where that sort of thing happens. In this way, God prompts me to deal with those things straightaway. It may sometimes take me a while to respond properly to God's prompting, but that's part of my ongoing battle with my sinful nature.

However, there's a whole stack of areas where I don't even recognise my personal sin at the time.

- I'm sure there are whole layers of pride within me that I haven't got round to exploring.
- There are whole layers of greed within me that I accept because they're part of our culture and I just go along with the flow instead of being different for God.
- There are whole layers of being less than honest with the truth that I accept because they're part of our culture and I just go along with the flow instead of being different for God.

And so it goes on. Under normal circumstances, I won't get around to dealing with those things because I won't even recognise them. It's the way my culture taught me to live. I think those sins are just a normal part of my everyday life. It's only as I take time to examine my life against God's word that I'm going to recognise that those things offend God. It's only as I believe God's word instead of our culture that I'll do anything about them. Yet, it doesn't happen automatically in the busy-ness of my schedule. There needs to be the gift of time set aside.

### To Rest

Thirdly, these holy days were gifts of rest for the people. On most of these holy days – these different days – the people were told not to work. They were told to stop their normal manual labour and treat the day differently. Exodus 20:8-11 says:

*Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but He rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*

In resting, they're to imitate God. God created in six days and then rested on the seventh day. It's not that He stops working for one day so he can start again on the eighth day – rather He stops the work of creation. It's complete. He now enjoys the finished creation He made. The people of Israel, who are made in the image of God, are to labour for six days and then rest on the seventh. Life

isn't simply about labour and work as if that were the sum-total of their existence. Nor is life about striving against God all the time. The goal of creation is rest – to enter God's rest – to remember God.

Deuteronomy 5:15 adds a further reason:

*Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.*

As slaves, they didn't have the opportunity to rest. Their owners pushed them to the limits. They did what they were told. Their working hours were set for them. Every day was the same. God set them free from their slavery. The fact they could now take off one day in seven was a pleasant reminder of that – a reminder of the freedom God gave them.

Still today, life isn't all about work. It's easy to forget that. It's so easy to get caught up in the rat-race – to work harder and longer so as to get more money and thus to get further ahead in life. And as people have mastered that lesson, there's been a subtle shift – now we have to work more to get more money so that we can afford all the leisure activities that are such an essential part of our lives: the plasma TVs and fancy home entertainment systems, the overseas holidays, the home improvements, the visits to the theme parks. Could it be we've so transformed our leisure it's no longer rest in a Biblical sense – that the *holy* aspect's removed from holidays? Have we turned our rest into leisure so there's no longer appropriate time for remembering God – that God's good gift's transformed into an idol that prevents us honouring God?

Even more importantly, life isn't about striving against God. Rather, it's to enter God's rest in Jesus. The holy days pointed to Him. Jesus offers rest to His people. We don't earn God's rest by our own efforts. Rather, we receive God's rest as a gift because Jesus died for us.

### To Celebrate

Fourthly, many of these holy days were joyful occasions. Some (like the Day of Atonement) were more sombre occasions – times for serious reflection on their own uncleanness. Yet, most of these days were celebrations of God's goodness to them.

- Some were celebrations of His goodness in their past history – how God rescued them from slavery in Egypt and brought them safely to the land He promised them.
- Some were celebrations of His goodness in the present – how God continued to supply their crops year by year.

These holy days weren't intended as burdens on the people – as days where they had to endure endless monotony and tedious boredom. They could choose to spend them that way – to spend the time daydreaming of how they could make more money if only God didn't keep interfering and stop them working. But that wasn't God's purpose in providing these days. Rather, they were days to celebrate their existence as God's people – days to remember what God had done for them and continued to do for them.

### **Holy Days Today**

So, that was their feasts. What about today? We don't

celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles or the Feast of Weeks. These feasts were important to the Israelites, but they don't mean anything to us. Yet, should they? Are these things something that should be included each year in our Christian calendars? Have a look at Colossians 2:16-17

*Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.*

Once again, these feasts find their fulfilment in Jesus. They pointed forward to what He would do. Thus, now He's come, we no longer keep them.

Yet, the four principles remain relevant for us.

- It's important for us to remember what God's done for us – not in rescuing us from slavery to a bunch of Egyptians, but in rescuing us from slavery to sin and rebellion against God.
- It's important for us to be cleansed – not through the blood of goats and sheep, but through the death of Jesus on our behalf.
- It's important for us to rest – to acknowledge that God's purpose in creation was that we should enter His rest in Jesus.
- It's important for us to celebrate what God's done for us – that He's forgiven us and adopted us into His family through Jesus' death for us.

We get a stack of holidays each year – given to us by our government for a whole range of reasons.

- Some of them have Christian associations – like Christmas and Easter.
- Some of them have no Christian associations – like

Australia Day and Anzac Day and the Queen's Birthday.

On top of that, we get our four weeks annual leave. We do pretty well compared with ancient Israel.

How should we use such days?

- Should we use our freedom in Jesus to pursue our own agendas?
- Should we, for example, use them self-centredly or God-centredly?
- Should we use them to ignore God or are they part of our worship of Him?
- Should we follow the lead of our culture and do the sorts of leisure activities they do on such days or should we be different?
- Are we in danger of turning our leisure into a form of idolatry?

I can't tell you what your holidays should look like? I wouldn't presume to set up some new form of legalism in relation to holidays. However, we do need to think about these things from a Christian perspective. It's easy for us simply to adopt the values of our culture in relation to holidays and leisure. We can do that quite comfortably – because they're very comfortable values. The challenge is to work out what our Christian faith says about those values – and to bring our holidays in line with that. It's to think about them from a God-centred perspective, rather than a self-centred one.