

SESSION FIFTEEN

LAWS OF HOLINESS AND ISRAEL'S CALENDAR

Leviticus 17:1–27:34

I. INTRODUCTION

The first ten chapters of Leviticus introduced the conditions by which Israel might approach YHWH. Chapters 11–25 introduce the conditions by which Israel must live for YHWH to dwell among them. Defilement must be removed by purification and the observance of the annual Day of Atonement (11–16); holiness in life and ritual (through obedience to the Law) must be maintained in contrast to how their pagan neighbors would have lived (17–25). Chapter 26 introduces the conditions by which Israel might prosper or in contrast fail (in typical suzerainty treaty form). Finally, provision is made for redemption from vows (ch 27). In these notes, primary attention will be given to the annual feasts of Israel given in Leviticus 23.

II. LAWS OF HOLINESS (Lev 17–22)

A. Blood (Lev 17)

Great stress is placed on the regard for blood with the prohibition of the eating of the blood. Blood is significant: "*For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement*" (17:11). Ross observes:

God has assigned the blood for expiation--it is the life of the animal and belongs either to the animal, or if slaughtered, to God. For a man to take the blood and eat/drink it would be to rob God, to desecrate that which was holy--set apart to God. Throughout the Bible, the blood is the symbol of life. It appears to be what ties together body and soul. Without the blood, there is no life. It formed a graphic picture to the worshipper, that life-blood running out of the animal in his place. God so designated the blood for this purpose so that every individual would be confronted with and reminded of expiation every time he shed blood from animals.¹

The sacrificial blood of the expiation must be held sacred, for without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin. God wanted this unique object lesson to be reserved for His purposes, lest the impact of the high price of sin should be lost.

B. Unlawful Sexual Relations (Lev 18)

Chapter 18 gives specific legislation regarding sexual practices. The elaborate attention given to this subject is due to the situation the Israelites would soon find themselves, for the Canaanites were a very debased society. If the Israelites were careless, they would be dragged into the mire with them. How can they be God's "mediators of blessing" if they follow the way of Canaan? God tells them,

¹Allen Ross, "Leviticus" (unpublished class notes in Old Testament 117, Dallas Seminary, Fall 1981), 107.

"You shall not do what is done in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you; you shall not walk in their statutes" (18:3). Carelessness in regard to ungodly society can lead to the destruction of God's people. The nation should have learned this lesson from the patriarch Jacob and his children. The legislation regarding sexual behavior included a condemnation of homosexuality (18:22; 20:13), which was to be punished by death. Sometimes I think those of us in the Christian community are a bit unbalanced in our assessment of sexual sin: we are very condemning of homosexuality (and rightly so), but we at times view adultery as a "lesser sin." Both acts are noted and condemned in the same paragraph (Lev 20:19-23), and adultery was also to be punished by death.

III. THE FEASTS OF LEVITICUS 23

For the Israelite, several religious festivals served to highlight the calendar year. Aside from the Sabbath, which was celebrated weekly, the Jewish calendar was interspersed with seven feasts that were to be observed by every faithful Israelite. These feasts were connected to the agricultural seasons, with four being held in the spring (March-May) and three in autumn (Sept-Oct).

<u>Spring</u>	<u>Autumn</u>
Passover*	Trumpets
Unleavened bread	Day of Atonement
Firstfruits	Tabernacles*
Weeks*	

On three of these occasions, every male Israelite was required to be present in Jerusalem to participate in the ceremonies (note the asterisks above). This explains the appearance of Jesus on numerous occasions at Jerusalem. The Jewish calendar was based on two schemes: the civil calendar began with Tishri (Sept/Oct), while the sacred calendar began with Nisan (Mar/Apr) and the celebration of Passover. As each feast is discussed, the significance for each Israelite and the prophetic significance will be mentioned.² As a whole, the feasts form a prophetic expectation of God's dealings with Israel.

A. Sabbath³

The Sabbath was not a yearly feast but did form the basis of Israel's religious life. It was the oldest of all holy days, being patterned after the creation account. At Sinai, the Sabbath was made a sign of the Mosaic covenant, by which the Israelites could testify that they were "covenanters" with the true God of creation.

²See Timothy K. Hui, "The Purpose of Israel's Annual Feasts," *BibSac* 147:586 (Apr-Jun 1990):143-54; and Terry C. Hulbert, "The Eschatological Significance of Israel's Annual Feasts" (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1965).

³ For an in-depth study of the Sabbath and its significance, see Richard J. Griffith, "The Eschatological Significance of the Sabbath" (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1990).

The main point of the Sabbath was to recall God's "rest" following creation.⁴ Thus, the Sabbath also reminded the people of their redemption from Egypt. This does not mean that He was exhausted, but gave opportunity for heavenly celebration of the fulfillment of creation. So the Sabbath is connected in thought with "rest," and this fact must not be overlooked. God established a pattern: every week was concluded with a sabbath "rest" day; following every six years, the land was to have a Sabbath "rest" year; and every 49 years (7x7) was to be followed by a special "rest," the Jubilee year (Lev 25). When the Israelites went into the Babylonian exile, God removed them from "the land" for 70 years because they had failed to observe the sabbath year for 490 years. Since they had skipped the sabbath year 70 times, God gave the land its rest for 70 years while the Israelites were in captivity (cf. 2 Chr 36:19-21).

Each type of sabbath was an anticipation of a period of "rest." As we observe Israel's history, we discover that they never obtained the "rest" in the land. The wilderness generation failed to enter God's rest (Ps 95:11). The generation of the conquest did not obtain "rest" (although they entered the land), because they failed through lack of faith to destroy the Canaanites. This becomes a dominant theme in Hebrews 4—getting God's "rest." There is a promise of entering His "rest," and we must be diligent to enter in (Heb 4:9-11). Disobedience will result in forfeiting God's "rest," as it did for the Israelites of old (the issue is one of inheritance and rewards).

Thus the Sabbath looks forward to God's future "rest", which is to be equated with the kingdom . . . the time when we cease from our labors. The promised future rest will be initiated by the millennial kingdom under Jesus Christ. Our participation in that rest will be contingent upon our endurance with Christ in this life. This is the theme of Hebrews: "You have need of endurance so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what was promised" (Heb 10:36). Our endurance shall be rewarded by receiving the promises and reigning with Christ in His kingdom.

B. The Passover (Lev 23:4-8; Ex 12)

The details concerning Passover can be found in the notes on Exodus, but essentially the festival celebrated the deliverance from the bondage of Egypt and the judgment of the death angel, by trusting in the blood of the lamb. This was the beginning of months for the Israelites, as their participation in the Passover event created them a "redeemed people." The fulfillment obviously comes with Christ (see 1 Cor 5:7), the lamb of God who delivers us from the bondage of sin by His blood.

C. Feast of Unleavened Bread

This feast ran for a period of seven days beginning with Passover. During this period, every Israelite was to scour his house for leaven. The removal of leaven looked at the removal of malice, sin, and wickedness (I Cor 5:7). Immediately following Passover, all leaven is removed from the home. Likewise, the believer who has faith in Christ's blood should purge out "leaven" (i.e., sin) from his life. There must be a break from the old life.

⁴According to Hui (150), the Sabbath did more than recall God's creative work and rest: "The significance of the sabbatical rest went beyond the general commemorative of the Lord's repose from His completed work of creating the world to the specific commemoration of His completed work of redeeming the nation Israel."

D. First Fruits (Lev 23:9-14)

The feast of First fruits was also observed during the seven-day period of Unleavened Bread following Passover. First fruits was limited to one day, namely the day after the Sabbath following Passover. Since this was the time of the barley harvest, a sheaf of barley was presented to the LORD as a first of the fruits of the harvest. This was a thank offering to the LORD for the benefits received, and anticipated the blessings to come through the other harvests (wheat at the time of Pentecost and fruit/olives in the fall at the great feast of ingathering, i.e., Tabernacles).

The fulfillment of this feast is reflected in I Cor 15:20 where Paul says that Christ is the firstfruits from the dead. This feast obviously finds its highest meaning with the resurrection of Christ, who likewise rose on the day following the Sabbath after Passover, i.e., the first day of the week. The women who ran to the tomb did so on the day that the Jews were celebrating Firstfruits. Appropriately, Christ arose as a sort of firstfruits to God, a guarantee and anticipation of the greater harvest to come (for we too shall be resurrected).

E. Feast of Weeks (Lev 23:15-22)

This feast is known as "shavuot" to the Jews, and took place fifty days after Firstfruits (hence, the name Pentecost, meaning 50). Weeks (or Pentecost) should be seen as part of a unit with the three previously mentioned feasts; even rabbinic literature considered weeks as a concluding phase of Passover (*Pesikta* 30:163). This is substantiated by the fact that weeks had no fixed date of its own (as an independent festival would), but was chronologically linked to the preceding feasts. The Feast of Weeks is closely connected to the agricultural aspect of the land. At Firstfruits, the barley harvest was ready and by the Feast of Weeks, i.e., Pentecost, the last of the grain harvests was ready, namely the wheat harvest. So the Feast of Weeks focused on the climax of the grain harvest. All of this is related to God's covenant blessings, that the people would enjoy a bountiful harvest. So, the people are rejoicing and thanking God that the blessing begun at Firstfruits is being concluded at the Feast of Weeks. Indeed, it was a time of rejoicing over this blessing (cf. Deut 16:9-12). The barley harvest (at Firstfruits) was an anticipation of the fuller blessing of the grain harvest to be brought in at the Feast of Weeks. That God chose this occasion to send the Spirit (cf. Acts 2) was no coincidence, for the giving of the Spirit was the fuller blessing flowing from Christ's resurrection (pictured in Firstfruits).

On this occasion, the Israelites were to bring the two wave-loaves of bread which had been baked from the new crop of wheat. Unger suggests that this was an anticipation in God's mind that Jew and Gentile would be brought together to enjoy the ministry of the Spirit:

The two wave loaves (a loaf, not a sheaf of separate grains) baked with leaven, anticipate the Holy Spirit's ministry of baptizing the Jew (Acts 2) and Gentile (Acts 10) into union with one another in the risen, glorified Christ (I Cor. 12:12-13). This was made possible by the Spirit's advent of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4; John 14:20; 16:12-13). The loaf was baked with leaven because evil crops out in the church, because it is not yet glorified.⁵

⁵Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 1:174.

F. Trumpets (Lev 23:23-25; Num 21:1-16)

Following the four feasts of spring, there was a long season of silence before the three final feasts. Whereas the first set of feasts in the spring find their highest significance in connection with the first advent of Christ, the latter set of feasts are ultimately connected with the second coming of Christ. Of course, all the feasts had significance for the average Israelite apart from this. The season of silence between the two sets of feasts in some way parallels the present church age, which otherwise was a mystery and not foretold in the Old Testament. The fact that the final three feasts all take place in the seventh month is not without significance either, for they look at the completion of God's divine program for the present earth.

The first of the feasts of the fall season was Trumpets, occurring on the first day of the seventh month. This was the second most sacred day in the Jewish religious calendar and is referred to by the Jews as Rosh Hashanah (following the return of the Babylonian *diaspora* to Palestine). The distinct ritual of this day was the blowing of the *shofar*, in response to which the people gathered to hear God's Word . . . the reading of the Law (Neh 8:8). The trumpets served to awaken the people to the season of repentance, pardon and restoration. Abraham Bloch, a Jewish scholar, comments:

The rabbinic tradition which declared Rosh Hashanah a day of judgment has its origin in scriptural texts and in the admonition and proclamations of the prophets and psalmists. The rite of the shofar was another revealing indication of the judgement aspect of the holiday Rosh Hashanah offered an opportunity to set one's religious life in order by liberating him from sin and transgressions.⁶

The essential character of the day, for an Israelite, was to summon the people to harken to the LORD, and in light of the judgment aspect to prepare one's heart in repentance. The higher significance of this day must be seen in its connection to the Day of Atonement which shortly followed. Trumpets was a day to especially prepare for the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) when the sins of the nation would be atoned for. Both have an eschatological fulfillment (note the fact that these feasts appear at the end of the agricultural year, thus providing an imagery of harvest for judgment). From the eschatological aspect, Trumpets seems to be a call to the nation of Israel to prepare for the final Day of Atonement. Ross has noted that the trumpet call has been used by prophets and apostles alike for the announcement of the end times when Messiah will come to judge the wicked and establish his reign (cf. Isa 58:1 and 27:13).⁷ In the celebration of the original feasts, there were then ten days of repentance between Trumpets and the Day of Atonement. In a similar manner, there will be a period preceding the return of Christ for the Jewish people to repent and turn to Christ in faith. This seems to look at the period of tribulation described in Revelation and elsewhere. We know from other Scripture that there will be many Jewish people (but not all) that turn in faith to Christ at this time (cf. Zech 12:10; Rom 11:25-27).

⁶Abraham Bloch, *The Biblical and Historical Background of the Jewish Holy Days* (New York: KTAV Pub. House, Inc., 1978), 21.

⁷ Ross, 129.

G. The Day of Atonement (Lev 23:26-32; Lev 16; Num 27:7-11)

A fuller discussion of this day can be found in the preceding session covering Lev. 16. In summary, the Day of Atonement (or Yom Kippur) was a day of humility when Israel's sins were atoned for and the nation was cleansed to begin another year. Eschatologically, there will be a future Yom Kippur when "all Israel shall be saved" at the time of Christ's return (Rom 11:26). [This does not mean the salvation of every single Jewish person, but rather the nation *as a whole* in contrast to the salvation *of a remnant* in the present age]. This "future Day of Atonement" is the national repentance of Israel that results in the cleansing and purging of the nation preceding the establishment of the millennial kingdom (cf. Zech 13).⁸

H. Tabernacles (Lev 23:33-36, 39-43; Num 21:12-38)

Tabernacles was the final feast occurring five days after the Day of Atonement and also in the seventh month (Tishri). This feast recalls the time the people lived in booths in Egypt, although the feast focuses on a time of rejoicing and celebration. The Jews called this feast Sukkot, and it was observed for 7 days (one of the three required feasts). This was a joyous time, marked by the construction of small booths to dwell in during this period, a commemoration of the time when the Jews were in the wilderness without permanent homes. The feast was also closely related to the agricultural season, for this was a time when all the fruits were ripe. Thus, the people came to the feast with a palm branch in one hand (a *lulav*) and a citrus fruit in the other (an *ethrog*). Victor Buksbazen elaborates:

The Feast is primarily agricultural in its character. It is a joyous occasion. The harvest has been brought in from the fields, the groves and the orchards. Barns and sheds are full. Hearts, too, are full of praise and thanksgiving for God's bounties. It is "The Feast of Ingathering," or Israel's Thanksgiving Festival—"The Feast," as the Gospel of John 7:37 calls it.⁹

The Jewish author Abraham Bloch makes several interesting comments: "One of the missions of the Messiah will be to bring the nations of the world the mitzvah of Sukkah (*Shochar Tov*, Ps. 21)."¹⁰ The Jews also considered Tabernacles to be a festival of national independence (connected with the thought of freedom from Egypt). Zechariah 14 envisions this, concerning which Bloch comments, "To go to Jerusalem to keep the feast of Sukkot was Zechariah's way of prophesying the recognition of the independence of Israel by the nations of the world."¹¹ The Messiah was also thought of in connection to Tabernacles. Bloch mentions an opinion held by some:

The Messiah will teach six mitzvot to the nations of the world, among these the sukkah and lulav (*Shochar Tov*, Ps. 21).¹²

⁸For further discussion concerning Israel's cleansing in connection with the Second Coming, see J. Paul Tanner, "The Function of Zechariah 13 in the Prophet's Final Oracle" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Seminary, 1981).

⁹Victor Buksbazen, *The Gospel in The Feasts of Israel* (Collingswood, N.J.: The Friends of Israel, 1954), 46.

¹⁰Abraham Bloch, 39.

¹¹Ibid., 43.

¹²Bloch, 45-46.

These lines of thought surrounding the matter of Tabernacles being a joyous feast when all the bounties of God's blessing were rejoiced over and the hope of Israel's independence by Messiah's aid, must find their eschatological fulfillment with the millennial kingdom that Jesus Christ will establish on the earth following His return. Then, the believing Jews will truly be established in their land under Messiah Jesus who will rule over the earth for a thousand years. Indeed this will be a joyous celebration! Interestingly, in Matthew 17, when the three disciples were allowed to see Jesus as He will be in His Kingdom glory, Peter's response was to build three tabernacles in keeping with Zechariah 14 which calls for the celebration of Tabernacles upon Christ's return. His theology was correct, though his timing was wrong.

IV. BLESSINGS AND CURSES (LEV 26)

This chapter outlines the cycles of discipline that God will exercise against His covenant people when they reject YHWH's kingship. The culmination will be removal from the land, i.e., exile. This anticipates the Babylonian exile in which Israel had to run the course of God's discipline as a disobedient nation that rejected YHWH. Nevertheless, Lev 26:40-45 clearly establishes that God will never utterly cast off Israel. Even now, they still have a future (cf. Rom 9–11), and this is all based on the covenant God made with Abraham (26:42).

"Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, nor will I so abhor them as to destroy them, breaking My covenant with them; for I am the LORD their God. But I will remember for them the covenant with their ancestors, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God. I am the LORD" (Lev 26:44-45).