

Structuring Our Time

Leviticus 23

We come to an interesting chapter in Leviticus this week that lays out the holidays or feasts that God wanted the Israelites to observe throughout the year. There's really only one of them that we continue to observe today, so this chapter may seem irrelevant at first, but as we see what God was doing with his people through these feasts I think it will cause us to really see the importance of what we do with our time – how we structure it, and how much that has an impact on our identity, thinking, and the way we approach life.

Each of us has some kind of schedule that we follow – there are daily, weekly, monthly, and annual schedules by which we arrange our time. This is shaped by what's known as the Gregorian calendar, (Picture) which is the calendar we're used to and possibly the only calendar we've ever heard of. It was actually established in 1582 by Pope Gregory XIII and has become widely used throughout the world, even though there are still several nations and religions that operate according to unique calendars of their own.

Our calendar is arranged in different segments that we all are familiar with. There are 12 months, 52 weeks and 365 days. Each of these makes up one year and each are divided in further ways. Months are divided into about 30 days, weeks into 7 days, and each day is divided into 24 hours, and this provides a framework by which we structure our time and activities. And how we do that has a huge influence on our lives. It creates a unique story that we live in, it gives us a sense of identity, and it shapes the way we look at and think about our lives and world.

This morning I want us to consider if we are structuring our schedules and time in a way that our identity and approach to life is centered on God, or if it's centered on other things. In the calendar that God set up for his people we're going to see an intentional pattern by which they would spend a considerable amount of time to meet with him. It was a pattern established by God for the good of his people and I want to use it to compare to our schedules and lifestyles to see if we might need to make some changes to connect with God and take better care of our souls.

When God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt he was re-creating them as a people and one of the first things he did was to give them a new calendar to live by. The first day of that calendar began on the day they left Egypt. That was the first day of the first month, similar to what we think of as New Year's Day. Up to that point they would have been following the Egyptian calendar and that didn't have anything to do with Yahweh. This new calendar would be centered on him and prioritize time with him through a series of 7 feasts. Leviticus 23 describes those feasts. So I want us to see what they were and what their role was in the lives of the Israelites and then I want us to consider our own schedules and how we structure our time and if we need to realign our priorities.

I found a lot of helpful information by listening to a podcast on the Bible Project website called: "What Israel's Feasts Teach Us." It was done by a Jewish scholar who's an expert in Hebrew, so he is able to see things in the text that I can't see. So a lot of what I'm sharing came from that podcast.

Read Leviticus 23:1-2.

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ² "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.

So Yahweh is about to tell Moses about sacred times on the Jewish calendar. These are their "appointed feasts," kind of like we understand holidays. I learned that the Hebrew word behind this means these were certain times that Yahweh set aside where he would intentionally meet with his people in a unique way. They were to be "holy convocations," which means they were to be set apart times when the people would assemble to meet with Yahweh. The first of these was a weekly time known as "Sabbath."

Read Leviticus 23:3.

"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.

A 7-day week is normal to us, but this was different than what the Israelites would have been used to, having spent the last 400 years in Egypt. First, the

Egyptians were practicing a 10-day week at that time, not 7. Second, the work-rest pattern in Egypt was 8 days of work and a 2-day weekend for some of the workers, but probably not for Israelite slaves. It was likely that they worked every day, without any time off.

So as Yahweh implemented a new calendar for them to live by, he instituted a 7-day week, including 6 days of work and 1 mandatory day of rest, and this applied to everyone from the servants to the tribal leaders. This was to be their regular rhythm of work-rest and this 7-day pattern was the basic building block for their new calendar.

The Sabbath was to be a holy convocation, a weekly appointed time in which Yahweh would intentionally meet with his people in a unique way. It was a day set apart from the rest of the days of the week to meet with Yahweh and be refreshed in him. People would gather in their homes and later in synagogues to observe the Sabbath rest, and that's what they were supposed to do – rest. Rest from work, and rest to Yahweh. So, cease striving and be refreshed in Yahweh. Even when it's planting or harvest season.

Yahweh had already taught them about the Sabbath in earlier months and connected it with the 7 days of creation. Exodus 31:16-17 says *“Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. ¹⁷It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.”*

So the 7-day week, and the Sabbath, reflected the story of creation and put Yahweh in the center of their culture, attention, and weekly rhythms as a community. One entire day out of 7 was to be dedicated to resting in Yahweh. That would shape their identity as a people and set them apart from the other nations.

This was a huge part of the new calendar, but there were other appointed feasts as well. These were all annual feasts that kind of came in two waves – there were 3 spring feasts and 3 fall feasts and they included several extra days of Sabbath rest throughout the year. Each one was a time set apart by Yahweh for his people to meet with him in a unique way.

Read Leviticus 23:5-8.

⁵In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at twilight, is the Lord's Passover. ⁶And 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. ⁷On the first day you shall have a holy convocation; you shall not do any ordinary work. ⁸But 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."

This first spring feast was a 7-day observance that started on the 15th day of the first month with the Passover meal in the evening, followed by a Sabbath rest the next day. It concluded 6 days later with another day of Sabbath rest on the 21st day of the month. During these 7 days the people were not to eat any bread with leaven in it and they were to offer a food offering to Yahweh. Similar to some of our holidays, this feast landed on different days of the week each year, so sometimes the Sabbath days of the feast landed on the weekly Sabbath, but other times they didn't.

This feast was intended to retell the story and remind people of their re-creation as a nation. It brought them back to their last night in Egypt as slaves when the angel of death passed over their homes because of the blood of the Passover lambs around their doors. On that night, the firstborn of every Egyptian family died and Pharaoh sent the Israelites away in such haste that the leaven/yeast in their bread didn't have time to rise. So they had to eat unleavened bread.

This was the first feast on the Jewish calendar. The second was the Feast of the Firstfruits and the third was the Feast of Weeks and those two are related to each other – both have to do with bringing a portion of the harvest to the tabernacle to dedicate to Yahweh. The Feast of Firstfruits was connected with the early spring harvest and the Feast of Weeks was connected with the summer harvest.

Read Leviticus 23:9-11, 15-16, 21.

⁹And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ¹⁰"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, ¹¹ 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.... (That's the Feast of Firstfruits, then comes the Feast of Weeks...)

¹⁵ "You shall count seven full weeks from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering. ¹⁶ 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..."

²¹ 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.

So the people were to offer the firstfruits of both the spring and summer harvests to the Lord on specific days set aside by Yahweh to meet with his people. The second was 50 days after the first which is why it was also called "Pentecost." These feasts both told the story of God blessing them with abundance in the harvest, so they gave back to God what he gave to them.

These were the 3 spring feasts, now we move on to the 3 fall feasts. These all took place in the 7th month, which was the same time of year as October.

Read Leviticus 23:23-25.

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ²⁴ "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. ²⁵ You shall not do any ordinary work, and you shall present a food offering to the Lord."

This was the feast of Trumpets and was an extra Sabbath on the Jewish calendar. This was on the first day of the month as a way to set apart that month for the next two feasts.

The next feast happened on the 10th day of the month and was a big one, I preached about it on Palm Sunday, and it was the Day of Atonement. It was the one day out of the year when the High Priest went into the Holy of Holies carrying the blood of the bull and goat to sprinkle on the mercy seat to make atonement for the people of Israel. It was a spiritual reset for the Israelite

community. All the sins of the past year – intentional and unintentional – were covered by the blood of the sacrifices and placed on the head of the scapegoat who was then sent into the wilderness, never to return. On that day, the people were to fast and observe another Sabbath rest in their homes.

That feast would actually foretell a story of what the Messiah would do, so it was meant to prepare the people for his first coming.

The final feast was the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths and that began on the 15th of the month.

Read Leviticus 23:39-43.

“On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall celebrate the feast of the Lord seven days. On the first day shall be a solemn rest, and on the eighth day shall be a solemn rest. ⁴⁰ And you shall take on the first day the fruit of splendid trees, branches of palm trees and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days. ⁴¹ You shall celebrate it as a feast to the Lord for seven days in the year. It is a statute forever throughout your generations; you shall celebrate it in the seventh month. ⁴² You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, ⁴³ that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”

The podcast I listened to pointed out that the people were to make these little tents with beautiful, lush branches and live in them and have joy in Yahweh for 7 days. It was to remind people of the many good gifts that God gave his people while he was bringing them through the wilderness, but also, that the best was yet to come – He was taking them to the Promised Land.

All of these feasts were part of the story of God’s people and because they were fit into the structure of Yahweh’s new calendar for them, they shaped the identity, lifestyle, and mindset of the people of Israel with Yahweh at the center. Huge portions of time were set aside for them to meet with Yahweh.

I have to believe that Yahweh knew they needed that kind of structure to their schedules in order to keep their lives and identity centered on him. Even with

that calendar they strayed away from him – possibly because they didn't really follow it.

This makes me think about our lives and calendars today. We don't have a calendar set up by God to keep him at the center of our lives. We have a calendar set up by a Pope 500 years ago that has been taken over by an always busy, always advancing, consumeristic, and competitive culture of Western Civilization. And I would propose that we're all suffering because of it. We're suffering because it doesn't keep God at the center and doesn't allow enough time to meet with him to refresh our souls.

Now, to some extent, we have some control of how we structure our time. There are many factors that dictate our schedules, including work and school, but most of us still have some time left over to decide how we're going to spend it. If God is speaking to us today through his Word, I think he's telling us we need to spend more time meeting with him.

This passage is really convicting and challenging to me. I don't do well setting aside time to rest in God. I have a lot of things I want and need to do – things related to my work, my responsibilities as a husband and father, the upkeep of my house and material possessions, recreational activities, community engagement, social activities. I never reach a point where I don't have something on my to-do list. And I like to work – I find a lot of satisfaction in accomplishing different things. But the problem is, my identity, and mindset, and lifestyle revolves around the things I'm doing, so if I'm not spending enough time meeting with God, my life doesn't revolve around him, it revolves around something else. And when that happens, things start to fall apart. It's like I'm choking my soul from the life-giving fruit of the Spirit that I so desperately need.

So this is something that I need to pay attention to, and you probably do as well. It seems to me that we need a weekly Sabbath. Even though we aren't under the old covenant or required to obey the Mosaic laws, and even though we now have the abiding presence of Christ dwelling within us, who is our Sabbath rest, I can see the wisdom, benefit, and need of the weekly Sabbath. If I am going to have a life and mindset and identity that's truly centered on God, I need to rest from my work and busyness for more than a couple of

hours at church on Sunday. I probably need to break away for a whole day so I can be refreshed in God.

Even more than that, I think we need to seriously consider a daily time to meet with God to connect with and focus on him. 15 minutes, 30 minutes, an hour... Is there something you can work into your schedule on a regular basis to center your identity and life on him?

And then, it might be good to pay more attention to some of the Christian holidays we already observe – not to make much of the holiday, but to connect with God. It might be good to participate in Advent, which leads up to Christmas, or Lent, which leads up to Good Friday and Easter. You could read a devotional during each of those seasons to take extra time to be with God.

Because the Spirit of Jesus dwells within us, I believe any day can be a day when God meets with us in a unique way. But we do have to set aside the time to meet with him. What is God calling you to do?