

A Calendar of Grace

Kicking It Off

What day on the calendar do you look forward to all year, and what do you do to get ready for it?

Read

Leviticus 23:1-3, 39-43

Summary

Leviticus 23 is God's calendar for Israel. It starts with the Sabbath, one day every week to stop, and then walks through the year: Passover, the first sheaf of the harvest, the Feast of Weeks, a day of trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and a whole week of living in huts made of branches. It can read like a list of religious duties, but look at what most of these days actually are. They're celebrations. In a world without grocery stores or refrigerators, a feast was the day the good food came out, and God built several of them into every single year.

The reason is simple. People forget. God put the things He had done on fixed dates so His people would keep remembering them. Every fall, families slept outside in shelters made of branches so their kids would ask why and hear the story again, how God carried Israel out of Egypt and through the wilderness.

The Sabbath works the same way, and it's easy to get it a little wrong. We tend to think of rest as something we earn after a hard week, or as time to recover so we can keep going. Leviticus calls it "a Sabbath to the LORD." It belongs to Him first. That doesn't make it less restful. It makes it personal, a day off with God instead of just a day off. When Israel gathered manna in the desert, God sent a double portion the day before, so stopping was an act of trust that He would still provide.

For most of us the hard part isn't believing any of this. It's actually doing it in a week full of meetings and kids and errands. The invitation is small and real: make room on the calendar, get ready for it, and show up expecting to meet God and to celebrate what He has done.

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the sermon or the passage that stuck out to you?
2. Leviticus calls the weekly rest "a Sabbath to the LORD" (23:3), a day that belongs to Him before it is a day off. What would change about your day off if you treated it as time with God rather than only time to recover?
3. Israel gathered a double portion of manna on the sixth day so they could stop on the seventh, trusting God to provide (Exodus 16:29). What fear most often keeps you from stopping?
4. God set His saving acts on fixed days so that each new generation would remember what He had done (Leviticus 23:42-43). What is one thing God has done in your life that you are in danger of forgetting?
5. The feasts were celebrations, and the sermon said the church should throw more parties that say how good God is. How could you open your home this season to celebrate God's goodness with others?
6. Meeting with God takes preparation, even something as small as a quiet moment in the car before church or a good night's sleep on Saturday. What is one small thing you could do this week to come ready to meet with God on Sunday?

Significant Quotes from Sermon

"I'm trying to make it very explicit for you. Stop for the Lord. Stop because He wants to say something to you. Stop because He wants to refresh you. Stop because He wants to be with you. Stop because He just wants to sit on the couch and be there with you. Are you actually recognizing that it's not just a day off, it's a day off with Jesus?"

"God put His saving acts on fixed dates because we, His people, forget. We forget that God is in control. We forget that God is the One who provides. We forget that all of this belongs to Him. The idea is not that it's this specific day. It's a day of the week given to God, where we are saying, this day belongs to You, Lord, and we are remembering what You have done."

"There are times, even on Sunday, even when I'm at church, even when I'm preaching, that I think to myself, what do I need to do? What do I need to accomplish? What do I need to say? Who are the people I need to meet? What's my checklist? No. Sabbath is a day in which we are saying, the Lord has done, and the Lord will continue to do. Praise His name forever and ever. And that feeds the soul."

"These feasts are parties. In a culture where food was scarce, where they didn't have grocery stores and they didn't have refrigeration, a feast meant, yeah, we get to eat the good stuff today. And why? Because God is good. The point of the party isn't to say, look at my beautiful house, or look at how amazing the food is. The point of Christian parties is to say how good our God is."

Sermon Notes

Leviticus 23:1-3

23 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.

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.

Leviticus 23:39-43

39 “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.”

Outline

1. A Sabbath to the LORD - Leviticus 23:1-3; Exodus 16:29
    a. The blessing of Leviticus is dwelling with God, not performing for Him. A holy day is a day set apart for the Lord, and the calendar begins with a weekly Sabbath "to the LORD in all your dwelling places" (23:3).
    b. Coming to church does not by itself mean meeting with God. Dwelling with Him takes preparation, the way we would clear a whole day for dinner with someone famous.
    c. Sabbath means stop. It is not a reward for your exhaustion. Stop for the Lord because He wants to be with you, so that it is not just a day off but a day off with Jesus.
    d. Jesus kept the Sabbath by doing good and healing among the people, the work of His Father.
    e. God gave a double portion of manna on the sixth day and none on the seventh (Exodus 16:29). The fear that rest will leave you behind is answered by His provision.
    f. Keeping the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments. We keep it because He is our Lord, and not only for what we gain.
2. Put It on the Calendar -Leviticus 23:4-22, 42-43
    a. God put His saving acts on fixed dates because His people forget. Booths taught every generation that God brought Israel out of Egypt (23:42-43).
    b. Passover, Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits, and Trumpets all point to what God has done rather than what we have done, and each points to Christ.
    c. Jesus is our firstfruits, and we keep our day on Sunday because that is the day He rose from the dead.
    d. The edges of the field were left "for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God" (23:22). The margin is for the Lord before it is for generosity.
    e. Our own holidays can be given to God: Trunk or Treat as a day to pray for and bless our neighbors, and Thanksgiving as thanks to God and not only to one another.
3. Rejoice Before the LORD - Leviticus 23:26-44
    a. The point of these days is to rejoice. The feasts were parties in a world where food was scarce, the day the good food came out because God is good.
    b. The fast of the Day of Atonement came before the feast of Booths (23:27, 39-40), affliction as preparation, the way fasting on Good Friday prepares for Easter.
    c. "You shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days" (23:40). Israel was brought out of Egypt, and we are brought out of sin, cleansed by the blood of Jesus, and led into eternal life.
    d. These are days we get to give to God. Have parties in your homes that say how good our God is.

e. Look at your calendar, earmark days for the Lord, and prepare for them, even with a good night's sleep or five seconds in the car, so you come ready to hear the Spirit.

Notes

After all these weeks in Leviticus, I see the work of Christ completed in it more than ever, and I see a God who does not change, whose laws were given to benefit His people and to show them a way to dwell with Him forever. I think the regularity of church can make us lose that. We come every week and call ourselves Christians, and slowly the rules and the burden of being a Christian crowd out the reason any of it matters. If you feel that burden, the pressure to be busy, to do everything right, to keep a clean lifestyle and perform your faith, here is the reminder. It is all about dwelling with God. Being in His presence, in His midst, is itself the blessing and the prize. The Creator of the universe, who holds all things in His hands, has called us into a relationship to be with Him.

That is the message of Leviticus. The sacrifices taught Israel how to come near, and the purification laws dealt with the uncleanness that comes from living in an unclean world, not only with the bad things we do. In the wilderness the camp was arranged around the tabernacle, so that every tent surrounded the tent of meeting and every life was centered on Him.

Leviticus 23 lays out eight holy days, eight times God commands rest and observance and claims a day as His. All of them are fulfilled in Christ, and that does not make them irrelevant. Each one points to Christ and reminds me to think about what God has done. A holy day is simply a day set apart for the Lord, which is hard for us, because to modern minds no day is holier than another. The calendar begins with the Sabbath: "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" (23:3).

So I want to ask you whether you have any days specifically reserved for the Lord. I know I'm talking to people who come every Sunday and work hard to get their families here on time. I still want to be a layer of resistance, because coming to church does not by itself mean meeting with God. You can sit in a seat, listen to some music and some guy talk for forty five minutes, enjoy that the kids are in child care, and physically rest. That is resting, but it is not resting in the Lord. Coming to church isn't bad. Meeting with God is the point, and meeting with God takes preparation.

When I approach the King of kings, I need to come with a modicum of respect, ready to give my attention and my obedience to the One whose presence I am entering. If Jaxon Smith-Njigba called and invited you to dinner and front row seats, most of us would say yes on the spot and arrange the whole day so nothing could interrupt it, and everyone would understand. It's a weak example, because our God is so much greater than any celebrity, but that is what making something holy looks like: no other priority is

as important as this. I'm not putting a guilt trip on you about church. That is how we should feel about dwelling with the Lord every week.

Jesus showed what the day is for. The Pharisees accused Him of breaking the Sabbath because He healed people on it, and He answered that He was doing good, the work of His Father. He was among the people, doing ministry. Six days we work heartily unto the Lord, and on the seventh God Himself rested from His work of creation. The Hebrew word Sabbath means stop. It means pause.

We all know we're busy. Our work ethic is a good thing, and it leaves us constantly working, frantic, and anxious, grinding our gears until we burn out and say, thank God for the weekend. Even a secular world knows we need a day of rest. Rest is not the key, though. The Sabbath is a day of stopping for the Lord. So stop for Him. Stop because He wants to say something to you. Stop because He wants to refresh you. Stop because He wants to be with you, because He just wants to sit on the couch and be there with you. It is not just a day off. It is a day off with Jesus. He is not only here at ERCC on Sundays. He dwells in you, and He wants to join you wherever you go.

The Sabbath is not a reward for your exhaustion. Many of us need it because we are tired, overworked, and afraid, and that is one reason we need it. The main reason is that it is a day to God. It is good for us, and Israel did get rest from it, but we can be a little less focused on what we get out of it. We hate the word obligation in the land of the free, and yet being under God means doing what He says while being free in Him. Keeping the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments, next to not murdering, not coveting, and not blaspheming, and I can't find a way to tell you it isn't a requirement for believers. We keep it because He is our Lord.

There is a promise attached to it. "See! The LORD has given you the Sabbath; therefore on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days" (Exodus 16:29). The enemy says that if you stop you will fall behind, that seven days of work would earn more and lose less. God sent manna six days a week, a double portion on the sixth and none on the seventh, so that Israel would say, God must be serious about this. Even then they grumbled about eating manna again. Not working never meant doing nothing. It meant being free to revel in the Lord.

The days of Leviticus 23 are days of remembrance, so stopping is a two part motion. I stop to dwell with God, and I stop to remember what He has done. That is why our Sunday service is a service at all. We pause our lives to read Scripture and sing songs that keep us thinking about the Lord. God put His saving acts on fixed dates because we, His people, forget. We forget that God is in control, that He provides, that all of this belongs to Him. Israel dwelt in booths every year "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" (23:43). Passover remembered the blood of the lamb on the doorposts, again pointing to Christ. Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits, and Trumpets all point to the same thing, what God has done and not what we have done. When I see Passover, I see Jesus. Jesus is our firstfruits. We keep our day on Sunday because that is the day He rose from the dead.

I have to confess that church can lose this even for me. There are Sundays, even while I'm preaching, when what fills my mind is a checklist: what I need to accomplish, what I need to say, who I need to meet. The Sabbath answers that with a different sentence. The Lord has done, and the Lord will continue to do, so praise His name forever. That is what feeds the soul. The Sabbath was made for us, but it is not primarily about us. It proclaims how good God is, and that turns out to be good for us.

We can give our other days to God too. Trunk or Treat has become a day when our church prays for our neighbors and buys more candy to give away, so that people we don't see every day know we are thinking of them. Thanksgiving is coming, and it can be a day of thanks to one another or a holy day of thanks to God. Even the harvest laws turned the mind toward Him. Israel left the edges of the field "for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God" (23:22). We should keep margins in our lives that are generous to the poor and the immigrant, and we keep them because the Lord commanded it. They are for the poor, and first they are for Him.

The point of all these days is to rejoice, because these feasts were parties. In a world without grocery stores or refrigeration, a feast meant the good food came out, because God is good. The fast of the Day of Atonement came before the joy of Booths. I try to fast on Good Friday, and some years through Saturday, not to make myself more spiritual but to be brought low and weak as Jesus was, so I can say, Lord, I need You. Then Easter comes, and what gets me excited to preach is not sugar or a full stomach. It is that God sent His Son to die for us and He is risen, and we have a High Priest seated at the right hand of God forever. On the fifteenth day of the seventh month Israel took branches of palm and willow, "and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days" (23:40). God brought them out of Egypt and led them toward the promised land. He has brought us out of the bondage of sin and death, cleansed us by the blood of Jesus, and is leading us into eternal life with Him.

So we remember, because we forget that we are saved, loved, chosen, wanted, and known by name. When my employer gives me a holiday, I get to give that day to God. That is freedom, and it is far more fun than we usually admit. Have parties in your homes. As a church we should have more of them, not to show off the house or the food but to say how good our God is.

Look at your calendar. Many of us live by full Google calendars, and without mine I would leave people stood up at coffee shops. How many days on it have you earmarked for the Lord? It is not about church, and I want Sunday to be easy to come to. Meeting with God takes preparation, even something as simple as a good night's sleep on Saturday or five seconds in the car to prepare your heart. Come humble, ready for the Holy Spirit to call you to repent, because an unprepared heart can quench Him. Give Him ten hours, twelve hours, twenty minutes, and He begins to speak and change us, and we wonder why we didn't do this earlier. So I implore you to keep the Sabbath and to set days in your year that belong to the Lord. You are with Him the other six days too. On these days you stop, you remember what He has done, and because of what He has done, you rejoice.

Blog

Most of us don't need anyone to tell us we're busy. We feel it. Work runs into the evening, the kids' schedules run into the weekend, and the calendar on our phones fills up weeks ahead. Somewhere in the middle of it, life starts to feel like a rat wheel. You run hard, you never get anywhere, and you're afraid that if you step off, everything will break.

This Sunday we come to Leviticus 23, and Leviticus 23 is a calendar. God walks Israel through their year. There is a weekly Sabbath, then Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread in the spring, the first sheaf of the barley harvest, and the Feast of Weeks fifty days later. Then come three holy times in the seventh month: a day of trumpet blasts, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Booths. If your attention drifted the last time you read it, you're not alone. Part of the problem is distance. We are so far from these days of remembrance in our culture that it's hard to picture what they meant to the people who first heard them.

The calendar belongs to God, and He says so first. "These are the appointed feasts of the LORD that you shall proclaim as holy convocations; they are my appointed feasts" (23:2). These were not Israel's holidays, to be fit in wherever the schedule allowed. They belonged to Him. And the first holy time on the list isn't a festival at all. It's a weekly stop: "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" (23:3).

The first half of that verse commands work too. God isn't against your job or your family's full week, and He gave six days to work. But He drew a line around the seventh and made it holy, not because it is convenient, but because it belongs to Him.

The Hebrew verb behind "Sabbath" doesn't describe resting because you're worn out. It means to stop, to cease. When God rested on the seventh day of creation, He wasn't tired. Isaiah says of Him, "He does not faint or grow weary" (Isaiah 40:28). He stopped because the work was finished and good, and He blessed the day (Genesis 2:2-3). So the Sabbath was never mainly a day to catch up on sleep. It was a day to stop what we're doing long enough to take in what God has done.

Israel would have felt that more than we do. They had just come out of Egypt, where Pharaoh's answer to tired slaves was more bricks. When Moses asked for time to go and worship, Pharaoh raised the quota and gave his reason: "they are idle. Therefore they cry, 'Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God'" (Exodus 5:8). In Egypt, stopping to worship was called laziness. Deuteronomy ties the Sabbath to that memory: "You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt... Therefore the LORD your God

commanded you to keep the Sabbath day" (Deuteronomy 5:15). The voice that tells you that you can't afford to stop is an old one, and it isn't God's.

What does rest even look like? If I stop, how can I be sure things won't fall apart? God answered the second question before Israel ever reached Sinai. The first time He gave them a Sabbath, in the wilderness, He was feeding them manna, and on the sixth day He sent twice as much. "See! The LORD has given you the Sabbath; therefore on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days" (Exodus 16:29). The thing they were afraid would fall apart was never resting on them.

This isn't a message about legalistic Sabbath keeping. Jesus healed on the Sabbath and said plainly, "it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:12). He also said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). No one earns God's love by keeping a day. But the God who made the Sabbath for us still means for us to stop.

For me, that day is usually Saturday. Sunday is my heaviest workday, so I rarely work on my sermon on Saturdays. I let what I've prepared seep even deeper into my mind and my heart, and the day is set aside for my family. Sometimes it still gets busy. And Sunday, even though I'm working, is my day of going to church too, a day to remember with my heart and mind what the Lord has done and to sing His praise for who He is.

The rest of the chapter turns the stop into remembering. "In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at twilight, is the LORD's Passover" (23:5). God didn't leave the memory of the exodus to Israel's feelings. He gave it a date and an hour. When their children asked, "What do you mean by this service?" the parents were to tell them about the night the Lord "passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt" (Exodus 12:26-27). At the barley harvest, nobody ate bread from the new crop until the first sheaf had been brought to the Lord (23:14). Jay Sklar, a commentator on Leviticus, says it simply: "Thankfulness is one of the first emotions to evaporate." So God put thanks first, before anyone tasted the harvest.

Most of us only think about the Sabbath and Passover, but every day on this calendar ends up pointing to Jesus. Paul writes, "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7). He calls the risen Christ "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20). And the Holy Spirit came on the church "when the day of Pentecost arrived" (Acts 2:1), which is the Feast of Weeks by its Greek name. Israel's calendar was rehearsing the story of Jesus for centuries before He came.

In the seventh month, on the tenth day, is the Day of Atonement, the one day in the year Israel is told to "afflict yourselves" (23:27), the day the people were cleansed. Five days later the Feast of Booths begins, and with it the only command in the chapter

to rejoice: "you shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days" (23:40). God asks for the joy of people He has just forgiven.

A command to rejoice sounds strange at first. I think it's always appropriate to rejoice. What these commands show is that rejoicing has to be built into the rhythms and customs of a people. A full life doesn't stop to celebrate by accident. That's why we have Thanksgiving tables and Christmas mornings, and why God gave Israel a week of feasting at harvest, "before the LORD your God."

And He tells them why. For seven days every Israelite was to live in a booth made of branches, "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" (23:43). The calendar was built for children. God wanted the next generation to grow up inside the memory of what He had done. What I want my own kids to know, and the generations after them, is the joy of following the Lord. It is a good thing, though a difficult one, and it leads to an abundant life, an abundance that is more than the riches of this world.

Before Sunday, read Leviticus 23, the whole chapter, and look at your own calendar beside it. Where does your week actually stop? What on it reminds you, and the people you love, of what God has done?

Our reading in the service covers 23:1-8, 23-25, and 33-36, so read 23:39-43 on your own, where the command to rejoice and the word about the generations are found. And if you've been carrying the other question, the one that asks what happens if things really do fall apart, bring it with you.