

## INTRODUCTION TO LEVITICUS CHAPTER 23

Hitherto the levitical law had been chiefly conversant about holy persons, holy things, and holy places; in this chapter we have the institution of holy times, many of which had been mentioned occasionally before, but here they are all put together, only the new moons are not mentioned. All the rest of the feasts of the Lord are,

- I. The weekly feast of the sabbath, **#Le 23:3.**
- II. The yearly feasts,
  1. The passover, and the feast of unleavened bread (**#Le 23:4-8**), to which was annexed the offering of the sheaf of firstfruits, **#Le 23:9-14.**
  2. Pentecost, **#Le 23:15-22.**
  3. The solemnities of the seventh month. The feast of trumpets on the first day (**#Le 23:23-25**), the day of atonement on the tenth day (**#Le 23:26-32**), and the feast of tabernacles on the fifteenth, **#Le 23:33-44.**

Ver. 1. thru Ver. 3.

Here is,

I. A general account of the holy times which God appointed (**#Le 23:2**), and it is only his appointment that can make time holy; for he is the Lord of time, and as soon as ever he had set its wheels a-going it was he that sanctified and blessed one day above the rest, **#Ge 2:3**. Man may by his appointment make a good day (**#Es 9:19**), but it is God's prerogative to make a holy day; nor is any thing sanctified but by the stamp of his institution. As all inherent holiness comes from his special grace, so all adherent holiness from his special appointment. Now, concerning the holy times here ordained, observe,

1. They are called *feasts*. The day of atonement, which was one of them, was a fast; yet, because most of them were appointed for joy and rejoicing, they are in the general called feasts. Some read it, *These are my assemblies*, but that is co-incident with *convocations*. I would rather read it, *These are my solemnities*; so the word here used is translated (**#Isa 33:20**), where Zion is called the *city of our solemnities*: and, reading it so here, the day of atonement was as great a solemnity as any of them.
2. They are the feasts of the Lord (*my feasts*), observed to the honour of his name, and in obedience to his command.
3. They were proclaimed; for they were not to be observed by the priests only that attended the sanctuary, but by all the people. And this proclamation was the joyful sound concerning which we read, *Blessed are the people that know it*, **#Ps 89:15**.
4. They were to be sanctified and solemnized with holy convocations, that the services of these feasts might appear the more honourable and august, and the people the more unanimous in the performance of them; it was for the honour of God and his institutions, which sought not corners and the purity of which would be best preserved by the public administration of them; it was also for the edification of the people in love that the feasts were to be observed as holy convocations.

II. A repetition of the law of the sabbath in the first place. Though the annual feasts were

made more remarkable by the general attendance at the sanctuary, yet these must not eclipse the brightness of the sabbath, #Le 23:3. They are here told,

1. That on that day they must withdraw themselves from all the affairs and business of the world. It is a *sabbath of rest*, typifying our spiritual rest from sin, and in God: *You shall do no work therein*. On other holy days they were forbidden to do any servile work (#Le 23:7), but on the sabbath, and the day of atonement (which is also called a sabbath), they were to do no work at all, no, not the dressing of meat.
2. On that day they must employ themselves in the service of God.

(1.) It is a *holy convocation*; that is,

"If it lie within your reach, you shall sanctify it in a religious assembly: let as many as can come to the door of the tabernacle, and let others meet elsewhere for prayer, and praise, and the reading of the law,"

as in the schools of the prophets, while prophecy continued, and afterwards in the synagogues. Christ appointed the New Testament sabbath to be a holy convocation, by meeting his disciples once and again (and perhaps oftener) on the first day of the week.

(2.)

"Whether you have opportunity of sanctifying it in a holy convocation or not, yet let it be *the sabbath of the Lord in all your dwellings*. Put a difference between that day and other days in your families. It is the *sabbath of the Lord*, the day on which he rested from the work of creation, and on which he has appointed us to rest; let it be observed in all your dwellings, even now that you dwell in tents."

Note, God's sabbaths are to be religiously observed in every private house, by every family apart, as well as by many families together in holy convocations. The sabbath of the Lord in our dwellings will be their beauty, strength, and safety; it will sanctify, edify, and glorify them.

Ver. 4. thru Ver. 14.

Here again the feasts are called the *feasts of the Lord*, because he appointed them. Jeroboam's feast, which he *devised of his own heart* (#1Ki 12:33), was an affront to God, and a reproach upon the people. These feasts were to be proclaimed in their seasons (#Le 23:4), and the seasons God chose for them were in March, May and September (according to our present computation), not in winter, because travelling would then be uncomfortable, when the days were short, and the ways foul; not in the middle of summer, because then in those countries they were gathering in their harvest and vintage, and could be ill spared from their country business. Thus graciously does God consult our comfort in his appointments, obliging us thereby religiously to regard his glory in our observance of them, and not to complain of them as a burden. The solemnities appointed them were,

1. Many and returned frequently, which was intended to preserve in them a deep sense of God and religion, and to prevent their inclining to the superstitions of the heathen. God kept them fully employed in his service, that they might not have time to hearken to the temptations of the idolatrous neighbourhood they lived in.
2. They were most of them times of joy and rejoicing. The weekly sabbath is so, and all

their yearly solemnities, except the day of atonement. God would thus teach them that wisdom's ways are pleasantness, and engage them to his service by encouraging them to be cheerful in it and to sing at their work. Seven days were days of strict rest and holy convocations; the first day and the seventh of the feast of unleavened bread, the day of pentecost, the day of the feast of trumpets, the first day and the eighth of the feast of tabernacles, and the day of atonement: here were six for holy joy and one only for holy mourning. We are commanded to *rejoice evermore*, but not to be evermore weeping. Here is,

I. A repetition of the law of the passover, which was to be observed on the fourteenth day of the first month, in remembrance of their deliverance out of Egypt and the distinguishing preservation of their first-born, mercies never to be forgotten. This feast was to begin with the killing of the paschal lamb, [#Le 23:5](#). It was to continue seven days, during all which time they were to eat sad bread, that was unleavened ([#Le 23:6](#)), and the first and last day of the seven were to be days of *holy rest* and *holy convocations*, [#Le 23:7,8](#). They were not idle days spent in sport and recreation (as many that are called Christians spend their holy days), but offerings were *made by fire unto the Lord* at his altar; and we have reason to think that the people were taught to employ their time in prayer, and praise, and godly meditation.

II. An order for the offering of a sheaf of the first-fruits, upon the second day of the feast of unleavened bread; the first is called the *sabbath*, because it was observed as a sabbath ([#Le 23:11](#)), and, on the morrow after, they had this solemnity. A sheaf or handful of new corn was brought to the priest, who was to heave it up, in token of his presenting it to the God of Heaven, and to wave it to and fro before the Lord, as the Lord of the whole earth, and this should be accepted for them as a thankful acknowledgment of God's mercy to them in clothing their fields with corn, and of their dependence upon God, and desire towards him, for the preserving of it to their use. For it was the expression both of prayer and praise, [#Le 23:11](#). A lamb for a burnt-offering was to be offered with it, [#Le 23:12](#). As the sacrifice of animals was generally attended with meat-offerings, so this sacrifice of corn was attended with a burnt-offering, that bread and flesh might be set together on God's table. They are forbidden to eat of their new corn till this handful was offered to God; for it was fit, if God and Israel feast together, that he should be served first. And the offering of this sheaf of first-fruits in the name of the whole congregation did, as it were, sanctify to them their whole harvest, and give them a comfortable use of all the rest; for then we may *eat our bread with joy* when we have, in some measure, performed our duty to God, and God has accepted our works, for thus all our enjoyments become clean to us. Now,

1. This law was given now, though there was no occasion for putting it in execution till they came to Canaan: in the wilderness they sowed no corn; but God's feeding them there with *bread from heaven* obliged them hereafter not to grudge him his share of their bread out of the earth. We find that when they came into Canaan the manna ceased upon the very day that the sheaf of first-fruits was offered; they had eaten of the old corn the day before ([#Jos 5:11](#)), and then on this day they offered the first-fruits, by which they became entitled to the new corn too ([#Le 23:12](#)), so that there was no more occasion for manna.
2. This sheaf of first-fruits was typical of our Lord Jesus, who has risen from the dead as the *first-fruits of those that slept*, [#1Co 15:20](#). That *branch of the Lord* ([#Isa 4:2](#)) was then presented to him, in virtue of the sacrifice of himself, the Lamb of God, and it was accepted for us. It is very observable that our Lord Jesus rose from the dead on the very day that the first-fruits were offered, to show that he was the substance of this shadow.

3. We are taught by this law to *honour the Lord with our substance, and with the first-fruits of all our increase*, #Pr 3:9. They were not to eat of their new corn till God's part was offered to him out of it (#Le 23:14), for we must always begin with God, begin our lives with him, begin every day with him, begin every meal with him, begin every affair and business with him; *seek first the kingdom of God*.

Ver. 15. thru Ver. 22.

Here is the institution of the feast of *pentecost*, or *weeks*, as it is called (#De 16:9), because it was observed fifty days, or seven weeks, after the passover. It is also called the *feast of harvest*, #Ex 23:16. For as the presenting of the sheaf of first-fruits was an introduction to the harvest, and gave them liberty to put in the sickle, so they solemnized the finishing of their corn-harvest at this feast.

1. Then they offered a handful of ears of barley, now they offered *two loaves of wheaten bread*, #Le 23:17. This was leavened. At the passover they ate unleavened bread, because it was in remembrance of the bread they ate when they came out of Egypt, which was unleavened; but now at pentecost it was leavened, because it was an acknowledgment of God's goodness to them in their ordinary food, which was leavened.
2. With that sheaf of first-fruits they offered only one lamb for a burnt-offering, but with these loaves of first-fruits they offered seven lambs, two rams, and one bullock, all for a burnt-offering, so giving glory to God, as the Lord of their land and the Lord of their harvest, by whose favour they lived and to whose praise they ought to live. They offered likewise a kid for a sin-offering, so taking shame to themselves as unworthy of the bread they ate, and imploring pardon for their sins, by which they had forfeited their harvest mercies, and which they had been guilty of in the receiving of them. And lastly, two lambs for a sacrifice of peace-offerings, to beg a blessing upon the corn they had gathered in, which would be neither sure nor sweet to them without that blessing, #Hag 1:9. These were the only peace-offerings that were offered on the behalf of the whole congregation, and they were reckoned *most holy* offerings, whereas other peace-offerings were but *holy*. All these offerings are here appointed, #Le 23:18-20.
3. That one day was to be kept with a holy convocation, #Le 23:21. It was one of the days on which all Israel was to meet God and one another, at the place which the Lord should choose. Some suggest that whereas seven days were to make up the feast of unleavened bread there was only one day appointed for the feast of pentecost, because this was a busy time of the year with them, and God allowed them speedily to return to their work in the country. This annual feast was instituted in remembrance of the giving of the law upon mount Sinai, the fiftieth day after they came out of Egypt. That was the feast which they were told in Egypt must be observed to God in the wilderness, as a memorial of which ever after they kept this feast. But the period and perfection of this feast was the pouring out of the Spirit upon the apostles on the day of this feast (#Ac 2:1), in which the law of faith was given, fifty days after Christ our passover was sacrificed for us. And on that day (as bishop Patrick well expresses it) the apostles, having themselves received the *first-fruits of the Spirit*, begat three thousand souls, through the word of truth, and presented them, as the first-fruits of the Christian church, to God and the Lamb.

To the institution of the feast of pentecost is annexed a repetition of that law which we had before (#Le 19:9), by which they were required to leave the gleanings of their fields,

and the corn that grew on the ends of the butts, for the poor, **#Le 23:22**. Probably it comes in here as a thing which the priests must take occasion to remind the people of, when they brought their first-fruits, intimating to them that to obey even in this small matter was better than sacrifice, and that, unless they were obedient, their offerings should not be accepted. It also taught them that the joy of harvest should express itself in charity to the poor, who must have their due out of what we have, as well as God his. Those that are truly sensible of the mercy they receive from God will without grudging show mercy to the poor.

Ver. 23. thru Ver. 32.

Here is,

I. The institution of the feast of trumpets, on the first day of the seventh month, **#Le 23:24,25**. That which was now the seventh month had been reckoned the first month, and the year of jubilee was still to begin with this month (**#Le 25:8**), so that this was their new year's day. It was to be as their other yearly sabbaths, a day of holy rest--*You shall do no servile work therein*; and a day of holy work--*You shall offer an offering to the Lord*; concerning these particular directions were afterwards given, **#Nu 29:1**. That which is here made peculiar to this festival is that it was a *memorial of blowing of trumpets*. They blew the trumpet every new moon (**#Ps 81:3**), but in the new moon of the seventh month it was to be done with more than ordinary solemnity; for they began to blow at sunrise and continued till sun-set. Now,

1. This is here said to be a *memorial*, perhaps of the sound of the trumpet upon mount Sinai when the law was given, which must never be forgotten. Some think that it was a memorial of the creation of the world, which is supposed to have been in autumn; for which reason this was, till now, the first month. The mighty word by which God made the world is called *the voice of his thunder* (**#Ps 104:7**); fitly therefore was it commemorated by blowing of trumpets, or a memorial of *shouting*, as the Chaldee renders it; for, when the *foundations of the earth were fastened, all the sons of God shouted for joy*, **#Job 38:6,7**.
2. The Jewish writers suppose it to have a spiritual signification. Now at the beginning of the year they were called by this sound of trumpet to shake off their spiritual drowsiness, to search and try their ways, and to amend them: the day of atonement was the ninth day after this; and thus they were awakened to prepare for that day, by sincere and serious repentance, that it might be indeed to them a day of atonement. And they say,

"The devout Jews exercised themselves more in good works between the feast of trumpets and the day of expiation than at any other time of the year."

3. It was typical of the preaching of the gospel, by which joyful sound souls were to be called in to serve God and keep a spiritual feast to him. The conversion of the nations to the faith of Christ is said to be by the *blowing of a great trumpet*, **#Isa 27:13**.

II. A repetition of the law of the day of atonement, that is, so much of it as concerned the people.

1. They must on this day rest from all manner of work, and not only from servile works as on other annual festivals; it must be as strict a rest as that of the weekly sabbath, **#Le 23:28,30,31**. The reason is: *For it is a day of atonement*. Note, The humbling of

our souls for sin, and the making of our peace with God, is work that requires the whole man, and the closest application of mind imaginable, and all little enough. He that would do the work of a day of atonement in its day, as it should be done, had need lay aside the thoughts of every thing else. On that day God *spoke peace unto his people, and unto his saints*; and therefore they must lay aside all their worldly business, that they might the more clearly and the more reverently hear that voice of joy and gladness. Fasting days should be days of rest.

2. They must afflict their souls, and this upon pain of being cut off by the hand of God, **#Le 23:27,29,32**. They must mortify the body, and deny the appetites of it, in token of their sorrow for the sins they had committed, and the mortifying of their indwelling corruptions. Every soul must be afflicted, because every soul was polluted, and guilty before God; while none have fulfilled the law of innocency none are exempt from the law of repentance, besides that every man must sigh and cry for the *abominations of the land*.

3. The entire day must be observed: *From even to even you shall afflict your souls* (**#Le 23:32**), that is,

"You shall begin your fast, and the expressions of your humiliation, in the *ninth day of the month at even*."

They were to leave off all their worldly labour, and compose themselves to the work of the day approaching, some time before sunset on the ninth day, and not to take any food (except children and sick people) till after sun-set on the tenth day. Note, The eves of solemn days ought to be employed in solemn preparation. When work for God and our souls is to be done, we should not straiten ourselves in time for the doing of it; for how can we spend our time better? Of this sabbath the rule here given is to be understood: *From even unto even shall you celebrate your sabbath*.

Ver. 33. thru Ver. 44.

We have here,

I. The institution of the feast of tabernacles, which was one of the three great feasts at which all the males were bound to attend, and celebrated with more expressions of joy than any of them.

1. As to the directions for regulating this feast, observe,

(1.) It was to be observed *on the fifteenth day of the seventh month* (**#Le 23:34**), but five days after the day of atonement. We may suppose, though they were not all bound to attend on the day of atonement, as on the three great festivals, yet that many of the devout Jews came up so many days before the feast of tabernacles as to enjoy the opportunity of attending on the day of atonement. Now,

[1.] The afflicting of their souls on the day of atonement prepared them for the joy of the feast of tabernacles. The more we are grieved and humbled for sin, the better qualified we are for the comforts of the Holy Ghost.

[2.] The joy of this feast recompensed them for the sorrow of that fast; for those that *sow in tears shall reap in joy*.

(2.) It was to continue eight days, the first and last of which were to be observed as

sabbaths, days of holy rest and holy convocations, **#Le 23:35,36,39**. The sacrifices to be offered on these eight days we have a very large appointment of, **#Nu 29:12**, &c.

(3.) During the first seven days of this feast all the people were to leave their houses, and the women and children in them, and to dwell in booths made of the boughs of thick trees, particularly palm trees, **#Le 23:40,42**. The Jews make the taking of the branches to be a distinct ceremony from the making of the booths. It is said, indeed (**#Ne 8:15**), that they *made their booths of the branches of trees*, which they might do, and yet use that further expression of joy, the carrying of palm-branches in their hands, which appears to have been a token of triumph upon other occasions (**#Joh 12:13**), and is alluded to, **#Re 7:9**. The eighth day some make a distinct feast of itself, but it is called (**#Joh 7:37**) *that great day of the feast*; it was the day on which they returned from their booths, to settle again in their own houses.

(4.) They were to *rejoice before the Lord God* during all the time of this feast, **#Le 23:40**. The tradition of the Jews is that they were to express their joy by dancing, and singing hymns of praise to God, with musical instruments: and not the common people only, but the wise men of Israel, and their elders, were to do it in the court of the sanctuary: for (say they) the joy with which a man rejoices in doing a commandment is really a great service.

## 2. As to the design of this feast,

(1.) It was to be kept in remembrance of their dwelling in tents in the wilderness. Thus it is expounded here (**#Le 23:43**): *That your generations may know*, not only by the written history, but by this ocular tradition, *that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths*. Thus it kept in perpetual remembrance,

[1.] The meanness of their beginning, and the low and desolate state out of which God advanced that people. Note, Those that are comfortably fixed ought often to call to mind their former unsettled state, when they were but little in their own eyes.

[2.] The mercy of God to them, that, when they dwelt in tabernacles, God not only set up a tabernacle for himself among them, but, with the utmost care and tenderness imaginable, hung a canopy over them, even the cloud that sheltered them from the heat of the sun. God's former mercies to us and our fathers ought to be kept in everlasting remembrance. The eighth day was the great day of this feast, because then they returned to their own houses again, and remembered how, after they had long dwelt in tents in the wilderness, at length they came to a happy settlement in the land of promise, where they dwelt in goodly houses. And they would the more sensibly value and be thankful for the comforts and conveniences of their houses when they had been seven days dwelling in booths. It is good for those that have ease and plenty sometimes to learn what it is to endure hardness.

(2.) It was a feast of in-gathering, so it is called, **#Ex 23:16**. When they had gathered in the *fruit of their land* (**#Le 23:39**), the vintage as well as the harvest, then they were to keep this feast in thankfulness to God for all the increase of the year; and some think that the eighth day of the feast had special reference to this ground of the institution. Note, The joy of harvest ought to be improved for the furtherance of our joy in God. *The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof*, and therefore whatever we have the comfort of he must have the glory of, especially when any mercy is perfected.

(3.) It was a typical feast. It is supposed by many that our blessed Saviour was born much about the time of this feast; then he left his mansions of light above to *tabernacle among us* (**#Joh 1:14**), and he dwelt in booths. And the worship of God under the New

Testament is prophesied of under the notion of keeping the *feast of tabernacles*, #Zec 14:16. For,

[1.] The gospel of Christ teaches us to dwell in tabernacles, to sit loose to this world, as those that have here no continuing city, but by faith, and hope and holy contempt of present things, to *go out to Christ without the camp*, #Heb 13:13,14.

[2.] It teaches us to rejoice before the Lord our God. Those are the circumcision, Israelites indeed, that always *rejoice in Christ Jesus*, #Php 3:3. And the more we are taken off from this world the less liable we are to the interruption of our joys.

## II. The summary and conclusion of these institutions.

1. God appointed these feasts (#Le 23:37,38), *besides the sabbaths and your free-will offerings*. This teaches us,

(1.) That calls to extraordinary services will not excuse us from our constant stated performances. Within the days of the feast of tabernacles there must fall at least one sabbath, which must be as strictly observed as any other.

(2.) That God's institutions leave room for freewill offerings. Not that we may invent what he never instituted, but we may repeat what he has instituted, ordinarily, the oftener the better. God is well pleased with a willing people.

2. Moses declared them to the children of Israel, #Le 23:44. He let them know what God appointed, and neither more nor less. Thus Paul delivered to the churches what he had *received from the Lord*. We have reason to be thankful that the feasts of the Lord, declared unto us, are not so numerous, nor the observance of them so burdensome and costly, as theirs then were, but more spiritual and significant, and surer sweeter earnest of the everlasting feast, at the last in gathering, which we hope to be celebrating to eternity.