

# LIVING WITH A HOLY GOD PRODUCES A RESTING AND WORSHIPPING PEOPLE

## Leviticus 22:17-24:9

### INTRODUCTION

The fear and worry quotient is at a very high level in our nation and in our city right now. Nationally we are faced with two ongoing wars, the ongoing threat of terrorism, an increasingly intrusive governmental response to it, steep increases in fuel and food costs, and most distressing to most people--a very shaky economy. This last week a major bank failed and the world's largest mortgage companies are on the verge of bankruptcy due to large numbers of people unable to pay their mortgages. Locally, we have been flooded and GM, the historically largest employer in Janesville with the highest wages and benefits, is closing its doors in the not too distant future. Over 2000 people who were working here in Janesville less than a year ago will be out of jobs within the next 2 years. Obviously those whose houses have been flooded or who are losing their jobs are the most worried but the entire community is beset with anxiety over these major losses. More than is usual for people who live in these United States, we feel the instability and insecurity of life in this fallen world.

I would like to suggest that the threats we face and the resulting sense of insecurity cannot compare to the threats and insecurity experienced by the people to whom the instructions in this book of Leviticus were first given. These people had been living in Egypt, a highly developed urban civilization, only a year ago. After witnessing God destroy Egypt by 10 plagues and having escaped Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea they are now living in tents, in the desert, at the foot of Mt. Sinai, with the tabernacle in the midst of their camp where God continues to instruct them through Moses. They know that this is only a temporary pause as they will soon march up to the land of Canaan where they are to wage war against those who live in it in order to take it over as their own land. These slaves are supposed to become a conquering army in less than a year! From a purely human point of view they are living in a very precarious, uncertain and insecure situation.

It is to people living in an insecure and uncertain world that God gives these instructions about animal sacrifices, the conduct of priests, what foods can be eaten, what to do about skin diseases and bodily emissions and now about the various festivals they are to celebrate after they take over the land. If you were to have polled the people of Israel asking them what they wanted God to tell them, I do not think these instructions would have been on the list. It is the same for us. If you ask people who are losing their job what they want God to tell them it would probably have to do with how to get another job, not how to safely live with a holy God. If you ask people going through foreclosure what they want God to tell them it probably is not how the Feast of Unleavened Bread reveals the saving work of Jesus.

The central concern of this morning's passage is the occasions during the course of each year when Israel is to come together to remember and rejoice in God's work on their behalf; both as the one who supplies them with food and the one who has saved them from their slavery and made them his very own people. The central message is that the people of Israel are to regularly gather together to rest in and rejoice in God's provision and promises. The idea of resting in God and enjoying God's rest is central to these festivals. First, notice that after telling Moses to instruct the people regarding the national, annual holy feasts he reminds them about the weekly Sabbath (v. 3). Every week, from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday every Israelite was to rest from their work and enjoy God's rest. When God first introduced the Sabbath he told Israel that this day of rest was the sign of his covenant with them. In other words, every week Israel by not working and resting in God's promise to provide shows that God has become their God and Savior by grace. Keeping the Sabbath is the sign that salvation does not depend on our work but on God's work. It is a sign that humans do not earn God's favor but receive his salvation as a gift. They rest from their work and rest in God's work as they anticipate that final day when they will enjoy God's eternal rest. The reason the weekly Sabbath is mentioned at the beginning of this list of feasts is because each of these celebrations is related to this same basic principal: All those God has chosen as his own people rest from their work and rest in his work as they look forward to his eternal rest. The

centrality of God's rest in these feasts can also be seen in these four things: First, there are seven annual celebrations commanded: 1)The day of the Passover, 2)the week of the feast of Unleavened Bread, 3)the day for offering the firstfruits of the harvest, 4)the day for offering the last of the grain harvested fifty days after the firstfruits, 5)the first day of the seventh month when the ram's horn is blown, 6)the Day of Atonement and 7)the week long feast of Booths. Second, there are ten days of celebration in the seventh month of the year. The numbers 10 and 7 throughout the OT are connected to God's holy salvation, his eternal rest. Third, the first and last feast of the Jewish year each lasted seven days. Finally, during these corporate, annual feast days/weeks there are seven additional Sabbath days. These are days when there is no work to be done that are not Saturdays sprinkled through the year.

In all these ways these feasts show that God's people are those who rest from their work and rest in his work. As I have often said before, this Sabbath principle is fulfilled in Christ in that all those who are going to enter into God's final day of rest in the new heavens and the new earth stop working to gain God's favor and rest in the finished work of Christ. This is exactly what Jesus is talking about in his great promise recorded in Matthew 11: "Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest." All who are weary of their sins and burdened by the inability to obtain God's forgiveness are to stop working and to rest only in Christ's work. So these feasts show the various ways that Jesus has worked on our behalf so that we can stop working and rest in him. But also, these feasts show that salvation is not merely an individual experience but a corporate experience as well. God's people are to gather together on a regular basis to rest in God's work and also to rejoice in it. The whole people of God, no matter what personal or national threats might exist, gathered together to rest in and rejoice in God's work. This is exactly what we are to also do as God's people. This morning I want us to see in these feasts why it is that we gather together to rest and rejoice in God's promises fulfilled for us in Jesus.

#### MAIN POINT

**God's people regularly gather to rest and rejoice in Jesus because...**

#### **I. He only is our unblemished sacrifice (Lev 21:17, 22:18-20 with 1 Peter 1:18-19 & Heb 9:14)**

The second half of chapter 22 describes the necessity of offering animals that have no physical defects, that is, that are unblemished. In Israel the only sacrifices that God would accept into his presence and count as effectual substitutes for the people had to be physically unblemished. In the NT, the exact same word that is used to describe the unblemished animals is also applied to Jesus. In 1 Peter 1:18-19 Peter says, "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver and gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life that you inherited from your forefathers but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect." Obviously the unblemished nature of Jesus is not referring to his physically perfect body but rather to his morally perfect character. There was nothing in Jesus that would cause God to reject him as he would reject imperfect animals. To say it positively, Jesus is attractive to God the Father. He pleases his Father and is accepted as our substitutionary sacrifice because he has no blemishes, no defects in his person. He is the unblemished, without defect Lamb of God.

Every teenager knows how it feels to have a pimple in the wrong place. I had serious outbreaks of acne in my teen years that made me very reluctant to even go out into public. Physical blemishes, in our image obsessed culture are shameful things. Millions of dollars a year are made by companies who sell products to teenagers to cover up or eradicate the blemish of acne. You and I, due to sin, have far more shameful blemishes and defects than that caused by acne. Our moral blemishes due to our rebellion against God make us unsightly and unacceptable to God. However, we can praise our Lord Jesus who as the only unblemished human being, by his life and death and resurrection has not only covered up our blemishes but has eradicated them. Listen to how this is stated in Colossians 1:21-22, "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation..." The unblemished Lamb of God, by

his death has placed us in God's presence without blemish. He took our blemishes upon himself and gave to us his unblemished righteousness so that God will accept us, not reject us.

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## **II. He only is the lamb whose blood protects us from God's wrath and cleanses us from sin (Lev 23:4-8 with Romans 3:21-26 & 1 Corinthians 5:7-8)**

The first mandatory, corporate celebration in the Jewish year took place at twilight on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the first month. It was the celebration of the Passover. If you will remember on the evening of this day all the families of Israel would kill a year old male lamb without blemish and then cook it and eat it along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. In sharing together in this meal the people are remembering their last night in Egypt when the angel of death went throughout the land of Egypt and killed the firstborn son in every home that did not have the blood of this lamb smeared over it and on its sides. It was on this night that God's wrath "passed over" the homes of those marked by the blood of the lamb. It was as a result of this final act of vengeance upon Egypt that Pharaoh let the people go out of their slavery in order to go to worship the Lord in the desert. Then associated with the Passover celebration is the Feast of Unleavened Bread. For seven days there was to be no yeast in any home and therefore no bread eaten with yeast. Again, this was a reminder of the Exodus journey, out of Egypt to Mt. Sinai. It symbolized the haste with which they left their homes in Egypt. They did not have enough time to let their bread rise but had to cook it without yeast in order to have food to eat on the journey.

The Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread are referred to in the NT in several ways. I want to just mention two. First, John in his account of the death of Jesus highlights the fact that the death of Jesus happened on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the first month at the time when the Passover lambs were beginning to be slaughtered throughout the Jewish community and the people were gathering to eat the meal together. In John 19:38, after recounting how Jesus' legs were not broken, as were the legs of the two thieves in order to hasten their death, because he was already dead, John quotes Exodus 12:46 and says that Jesus' legs remaining unbroken fulfilled this OT verse. Exodus 12:46 is part of the instructions for how to treat the Passover lamb when the people ate it. They were commanded to not break any of the bones of that slaughtered lamb. Do you see what John is saying? Jesus is the Lamb of God whose death rescues the people who eat him from God's wrath against sin. This is an incredible symbol for us. The angel of death has been let loose in the world to destroy all who are not under the blood of the lamb whose body is shared in a meal. If you are a person who feeds upon Christ by faith, who has come under the protection of his shed blood by faith, then you can be sure that God's anger against your sin will never touch you. He will pass over you. We symbolize this corporately in the communion meal. When we celebrate communion we are remembering that Jesus is our Passover lamb and we symbolically, by faith join together in eating his body.

Second, in 1 Corinthians 5 the apostle Paul describes how the church in Corinth is supposed to put out of the church and hand over to Satan a man who says he is a Christian but is having intimate relations with his step mother. One of the reasons he gives for "getting rid of this wicked man" is this, "Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth." He uses the feast of unleavened bread to say two things. First, through the sacrifice of Christ we have already been cleansed of our sins personally and corporately. We are a batch of dough made without yeast; yeast representing sin in this case. This is our objective condition. Second, because that is what we are, then we ought to be a church that is visibly without yeast, that is, without sin. We should exercise church discipline in order to remove the visible yeast from our midst. We keep the feast of unleavened bread by seeking to be a morally pure church. We live with each other in such a way that we help each other to flee from sin and when a brother or sister refuses to fight their sin, that is, to repent of it then we

exercise church discipline so that we can be what we are: a batch of bread dough that does not contain any yeast.

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### **III. He only is the first resurrected human who secures our resurrection (Lev 23:9-21 with 1 Corinthians 15:20-23)**

The day when the first sheaf of the harvest is brought to the priest is called the day of firstfruits. The high priest is to take this first sheaf of grain and wave it before the Lord, after which the people may begin to eat the harvested grain as it is brought in from the fields. This waving of the first sheaf of grain to be harvested is called the firstfruits not only because it is first but because it is an anticipation of the full harvest. Then notice in vv. 15-16 that fifty days after that day there is another offering of grain made into loaves of bread together with a whole host of animal sacrifices to celebrate the conclusion of the grain harvest. So these two day long celebrations begin and end the harvest. The first one anticipates the full harvest and the second one celebrates the conclusion of the harvest.

In the NT these two feasts are fulfilled by Jesus in this way. First, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 Jesus is the firstfruits of all those who will be raised from the dead. By this he means that Jesus' resurrection anticipates and secures our resurrection. Jesus is the firstfruits and then at the end of the age, when he returns all those who belong to him will also be raised from the dead. The really cool thing to see here is this: Notice in Lev. 23:11 that the priest is to take the first sheaf of grain into the tabernacle and wave it before the Lord on the day after the Sabbath. The Sabbath being referred to here is the Saturday during the week of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. We've already seen that Jesus died on the afternoon of the Passover which was a Friday afternoon. The next day was Saturday, the Sabbath. The day after the Sabbath was Sunday, the day that Christ rose from the dead. So the resurrection of Jesus who is the firstfruits of those who will rise happened on the day when the priest was waving the first sheaf of grain in the temple as the firstfruits of the harvest. What happened 50 days after Easter? Well, in the temple in Jerusalem the priests were receiving the loaves of bread made of the final grain to be harvested. They were celebrating the "Feast of Weeks", which is also called Pentecost. But what else was happening in Jerusalem? The Holy Spirit, on that day was poured upon the 120 disciples in the upper room and the apostles went out into the streets and preached the gospel to people from a myriad of nations who were in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost. After Peter preached the first Christian sermon, 3000 people from dozens of different races and languages and cultures and nations received eternal, resurrection life by the Holy Spirit's power. This first great multi-national harvest stands as the sign of the last day's harvest of all God's people from all the nations of the world. The resurrection of Jesus was the beginning of the ingathering, the harvest of all God's people from every tribe and tongue and nation who at the end of the ages will be raised from the dead, signaling the end of the harvest.

So we today rest in and rejoice in the resurrection of Jesus which obtained the work of the Holy Spirit who has given us eternal life and sealed us until the day of redemption when we will be raised from the dead and enter into God's eternal rest in the new heaven's and the new earth. His resurrection not only anticipates the conclusion of the harvest but guarantees it. We know that our efforts to preach the gospel in the nations of the world will be effective because Christ rose from the dead to secure a complete harvest of resurrected people from all the nations of the world.

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#### **IV. He only has entered into heaven itself on our behalf (Lev 23:26-32 with Heb 9:6-11 & 23-25)**

In the seventh month of the Jewish year which begins with a day of Sabbath rest announced with the blowing of the ram's horn, on the tenth day, is the most solemn and important day in the Jewish year. It is the Day of Atonement which we fully discussed when we looked at Leviticus 16. It is on this day and only on this day that the high priest enters into the Most Holy Place behind the curtain in the tabernacle, into the very presence of the Ark of the Covenant where God has said he lives among the Israelites. When he enters into this inner sanctuary he takes the blood of a bull first and sprinkles it on the mercy seat for his own sins and then he enters a second time with the blood of a year old, unblemished male lamb and sprinkles it on the mercy seat for the sins of the people.

The main way that Jesus is said to fulfill this Day of Atonement is explained in the letter to the Hebrews. There we are told that the high priest entering into the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle was a physical symbol of the fact that Jesus has now entered into God's very presence, not in a copy but into the real presence of God. He has entered into God's very presence, not with the blood of animals but with his own blood in order to prepare the way for us to join him in God's presence forever. Right now he is present with the Father praying for us. His thoughts are always upon us in all of the struggles and difficulties we face, asking his Father to accept us for his sake and to give us all we need to live by faith to the end of our lives. As Dr. Larsen reminded us several weeks ago, though you often don't remember him, he never forgets you. He is always thinking of those whom he died to save and he is always asking the Father to send forth his divine resources to strengthen us in our faith and love so that we live faithfully to the end of our days, no matter what happens.

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#### **V. He only brings us safely through this wilderness to the Promised Land (Lev 23:33-43 with John 14:1-4, 18-20 & 2 Timothy 4:18)**

The last feast in the Jewish year was the most joyful of all. All of Israel would come to Jerusalem and have a week long party. During this week they were to live in "booths" or temporary shelters built from the branches and limbs of trees. 23:42-43 tells us why God wants them to live in these booths. He says it is so that their descendants will know that God had the Israelites live in booths when he brought them out of Egypt. This week long campout is to remind Israel that when God brought them out of Egypt they lived like nomads in tents for forty years.

What is being symbolized here? First, while Israel lived in tents for forty years in the wilderness God supplied all of their needs. He fed them with manna every day and gave them water from the rock. He protected them from their enemies. They remember and rejoice in God's provision and protection in the wilderness. Second, they are now living in the Promised Land. Thus God not only kept them safe through the wilderness but he brought them into the land and gave it to them. During Passover, the first week long feast of the Jewish year, they remember how God delivered them from their slavery in Egypt through the blood of the lamb and during the Feast of Booths they remember how God brought them safely into the Promised Land, through the wilderness. This festival reminds them that they are God's people, living in God's land entirely by God's work. It is not their work that has mattered. In fact, as they remember God's provision in the wilderness they also

remember that they were in the wilderness for forty years due to their own sin. They remember that all those who refused to trust God to bring them into the land died in the wilderness, cut off from God's land.

God is the Savior from beginning to end. His saving them from slavery and bringing them through the wilderness is for the purpose of giving them this Holy Land where they live in his prosperity and presence. Now listen, the celebration of this feast takes place in the midst of sickness and death and fractured relationships and failed crops and enemy nations who surround them. The people, as they celebrate living in the land also are confronted with the fact that things are really not the way they are supposed to be. Living in the land of Israel is not the end. The OT prophets continually use the Land of Promise as a symbol for the final salvation of God when he makes all things new. The NT picks up this use of the Promised Land as it points God's people ahead to the eternal kingdom that cannot be shaken. Continually we are told that we are a people who, while having been made God's people and given the Holy Spirit and thus we are already part of God's kingdom, yet we are not in that kingdom in its fullness. We still live in anticipation of it, just like Israel celebrating the Feast of Booths.

The apostle Paul in the last letter he wrote prior to his death reflects this reality. He is in prison in Rome and does not expect to get out alive. He tells Timothy that when he went to trial before the emperor nobody came with him. They all deserted him. But he says, the Lord stood by him and strengthened him so that he might fully proclaim the gospel to those who were unjustly trying him. At the moment he says, he has been rescued from the lion's mouth, a reference to the Coliseum where enemies of the Roman Empire are fed to lions in front of the crowds. Paul, when he writes this final letter to Timothy is in the wilderness, in the midst of enemies but the Lord is protecting him. Then he tells his beloved Timothy, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever." Just as God brought Israel safely through the wilderness and gave them the land of Canaan, so our Lord Jesus Christ will keep every one of his children safe as we pass through the wilderness of this world and will bring us safely into his heavenly kingdom. This is what we gather together to rest and rejoice in each week. No matter what happens to you, if you belong to Christ, you can be sure that you will be brought safely into that new heavens and new earth. However, you must also remember as Israel did, that those who failed to believe God's promises perished in the wilderness and did not enter the Promised Land. The promise of safe entry is given only to those who trust or rest in God's work in Christ and to no others. Do not let the threat of earthly loss keep you from resting and rejoicing in Christ. He will keep you safe and bring you safely to his heavenly kingdom.

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- *He only has entered into heaven itself on our behalf*
- *He only brings us safely through this wilderness to the Promised Land*

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