

THE RHYTHM OF LIFE – PART 2

LEVITICUS 23:23-44

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The Rhythms Of Life – Part 2

Leviticus 23:23-44

Last time we were together, we discussed some of the Jewish holy days. We started with the weekly Sabbath, and then discussed the Passover Celebration, which moved into the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The next celebration time began with the Firstfruits Celebration, which anticipated the Feast of Pentecost.

This morning, we are going to look at three feasts that take place in the fall, to be more precise, the 7th month on the Hebrew calendar. They fall sometime around September/October according to our calendar. The holy days described in this morning's text are the Feast of Trumpets, the Day Of Atonement, and the Feast Of Tabernacles. As we will see, these festivals have a clear meaning for the Hebrews. However, they also contain great meaning for Christians.

The first holy day we will be looking at is known as the Feast of Trumpets. Later the festival became known as *Rosh Hashanah*. In modern day language, it becomes the Jewish New Year Celebration. New Year is a time for new beginnings and new resolutions. I don't know about you, but as I've looked over resolutions my friends and I have made over the years, I have kind of quit making resolutions. Let me give you some examples why.

The first example comes from a friend who I kept trying to get to come to church. Listen to his yearly resolutions:

2004 – He said, "I will go to church every Sunday.

2005 – I will go to church as often as possible.

2006 – I will set aside time each day for prayer and meditation.

2007 – I will try to catch a late night sermonette on TV." We also had a bald friend who was sensitive about it:

2004 – "I will not get upset when Charlie makes jokes about my baldness.

2005 – I will not get annoyed when Charlie kids me about my toupee.

2006 – I will not get angry when Charlie tells the guys I wear a girdle.

2007 – I will not speak to Charlie." And of course I'm not the only fat guy in our group. But I think I'm doing a little better with this than he is. Here have been his resolutions over the years:

2001 – "I will get my weight down below 200 lbs.

2002 – I will watch my calories until I get below 210.

2003 – I will follow my new diet religiously until I get below 220.

2004 – I will try to develop a realistic attitude about my weight.

2005 – I will work out 5 days per week.

2006 – I will work out 3 days per week.

2007 – I will try to drive past a gym at least once a week."

So you can see why I'm kind of skeptical when it comes to their New Year's resolutions this year.

This morning's passage is the continuation of last week's theme. And so the main idea will be very much alike. The main idea of this morning's text is this. **TAKING TIME TO BE HOLY WILL HELP US FIND GOD'S RHYTHM FOR LIFE.** In other words, God commands us to set times aside in our lives for the purpose of taking time to reflect on our relationship with Him. I'm going to take the passage just a little bit out of order.

I. TIME FOR REFLECTION AND PREPARATION (VS 37-38 & 44)

Finding Joy In Life Requires Spending Time With God.

In verses 37, 38, and 44, we are again reminded that these times are meant for us to be a time of reflection and preparation. One of the simple truths of this entire chapter is that **FINDING JOY IN LIFE REQUIRES SPENDING TIME WITH GOD**. I'm hoping that we are starting to get the idea that these festivals were meant for the Hebrews to get away from the everyday grind of work, duties, and daily routines. We have to take time away from the everyday grind to rest and to reflect on our relationship with God.

A. THANKFULNESS

First of all, in our rest and reflection, we should find ourselves exhibiting the attitude of Thankfulness. The festivals described in this morning's passage take place in the 7th month. When we were together last time, we talked about the significance of the number 7 throughout this passage. Seven is God's number. It signifies perfection and completion. During these festivals, the crops have all been harvested and now is a time for rest. Again, in these verses the festivals are referred to as appointed feasts, which we said literally were holy gatherings. The word holy means that these particular days were set apart by God. The word feasts have to do with celebration, gathering, feasting, and in reading holy texts. The Hebrews would have plenty to be thankful for. At the time the Hebrews received these commands, they had plenty to be thankful for. Just one year earlier, God set them free from their slavery in Egypt. God had the Egyptians send them away rich. In the day God set Israel free, He did so at the cost of one dead body in every Egyptian household.

They had to be thankful that even though they continued to grumble, complain, and rebel, God held back from destroying them right there on the spot.

In addition to freeing them and sparing them daily, God fed them with manna from heaven and miraculous water sources. Later when they settled the Promised Land about 50 years later, they would thank God for the bountiful harvest of fruit and grains. If only Israel had developed attitudes of thankfulness, they would ultimately have not been defeated and carried off as slaves later on in their history.

The timing of their thanksgiving month came about 1 or 2 months earlier than our Thanksgiving month. We already know that the beginning of their religious new year was the month in which they celebrated Passover, the first month. However, the first festival in this 7th month know as the Feast Of Trumpets later on becomes the Jewish New Year. The significance of that for us is that Advent starts our religious calendar. In other words, right after we celebrate Thanksgiving in the United States, our religious calendar starts the very next week.

Advent is the 4-week period that precedes Christmas. During that time it would do us well to take time and reflect on all the things we have to be thankful for. We really don't take time to thank God for our salvation, for our daily bread, and for the gift of life. In the grind of our everyday routines, we come to think of ourselves as good people who have somehow come to deserve God's love. We come to think that we provide for our own daily bread through our hard work and wise decisions. And we take the fact that we are living for granted.

B. REFLECTION

Secondly, these festivals were meant to be a time of reflection. Perhaps we are not so thankful because we don't take much time to reflect on Who God is, who we are, and what we really deserve. We will see later on in the text where God commands them to be truly repentant. We cannot be truly sorry if we don't take time to let God convict us of sin and show us how horrible it is. It is only when we come to see how horrible our sin is, that we can experience the genuine sorrow that leads to true repentance. I think we often reflect on what we want but don't have.

We ruminate on the supposed wrongs done to us. But my guess is that not many of us reflect on how evil and sinful we really are. If anyone thinks that they are pretty good, then they are probably not genuine Christians. A time of reflection is needed to allow God to give us a true vision of who we are.

C. PREPARATION

And thirdly, these festivals are a time for us to spiritually prepare ourselves for the future. We Christians ought to be living everyday waiting for the trumpet to sound from heaven and for Jesus to come and rapture us from the earth. We should be listening for the trumpet and looking for Jesus' return.

God designed these festivals for the Hebrews so they could take time away from the everyday lives to spend time resting, reflecting, thanking, and preparing. It was a time of being in restful relationship with God. God takes Sabbath seriously. Do we? The bottom line is this. **FINDING JOY IN LIFE REQUIRES SPENDING TIME WITH GOD.**

II. TIME TO GATHER (VS 23-25)

We Are To Live In A State Of Readiness.

Verses 23-25 illustrate that God has set a time to gather His people together. For Christians, **WE ARE TO LIVE IN A STATE OF READINESS.** Jews gather together each Sabbath at a synagogue. The word synagogue literally means gathered together. God gathered His people together around Him in the wilderness. God's worship tent called the Tabernacle was set up in the middle of the camp with three tribes set up on each side.

On the 1st day of the 7th month The Festival of Trumpets took place. The priests would blow long blasts on these horns called *shofars*. It announced two things. First of all, it announced the arrival of the holy month. Secondly, it announced a day of rest. Later on in Jewish history, the day became known as *Rosh Hashanah*. It is the Jewish Civil New Year. It is a time for new beginnings.

A. FOR WORSHIP

This is supposed to be a gathering together to worship. Notice, this festival takes place on the 1st day. Do you remember from last time that this is that concept I called the "Plus one" concept? The 8th day is the 1st day of the new week and symbolizes new beginnings. The book of Nehemiah describes the celebration of this holiday when the Jews returned to the land after their captivity in Babylon:

¹all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.

²So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. ³He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law. ...

⁵Ezra opened the book ... and as he opened it, the people all stood up. ⁶Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, 'Amen! Amen!' Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground" (Nehemiah 8:1-6 / NIV).

B. FOR CELEBRATION

And as we can see from the way the people responded to the reading and teaching of God's word, they ended up being gathered together for celebration. Nehemiah continues:

¹⁰Nehemiah said, 'Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.' ...

¹²Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them" (Nehemiah 8:10-12 / NIV).

We can all understand that time of celebration. The trumpet blast was a call to worship. In other words, when the Hebrews heard the trumpet blast, they knew it was a time to gather for worship.

C. FOR WAR

However, there was another reason for gathering at the trumpet blast. The sound of the trumpet blast also announced the need to gather for war. So the trumpet blast was a signal that the nation was to gather for either worship or for war.

We believers anxiously look forward to the second coming of Christ. Each day we wake up and ask if this is the day. I'm going to string a couple of passages together and see if you get the idea God gathering His people together with the sound of a trumpet:

¹And now, brothers and sisters, let us tell you about the coming again of our Lord Jesus Christ and how we will be gathered together to meet him" (II Thessalonians 2:1 / NLT).

¹⁶For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the call of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. First, all the Christians who have died will rise from their graves. ¹⁷Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air and remain with him forever" (I Thessalonians 4:16-17 / NLT).

¹⁵Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices shouting in heaven: "The whole world has now become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever."

¹⁶And the twenty-four elders sitting on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped him. ¹⁷And they said,

*"We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty,
the one who is and who always was,
for now you have assumed your great power
and have begun to reign.*

*¹⁸ The nations were angry with you,
but now the time of your wrath has come.
It is time to judge the dead and reward your servants.
You will reward your prophets and your holy people,
all who fear your name, from the least to the greatest.*

And you will destroy all who have caused destruction on the earth."

¹⁹Then, in heaven, the Temple of God was opened and the Ark of his covenant could be seen inside the Temple. Lightning flashed, thunder crashed and roared; there was a great hailstorm, and the world was shaken by a mighty earthquake" (Revelation 11:15-19).

The Feast Of Trumpets was a festival in which the trumpet blasts announced a time for God's people to gather in worship and celebration. When Jews celebrate Passover today, they end the ceremony by saying, "Next year in Jerusalem." Perhaps as we celebrate New Year, instead of making resolutions, we should first say to each other, "Next year, in the Kingdom of God." Jesus said that He would return like a thief in the night. He warned us to be ready at all times. It would be sad for us to miss His return because we are so caught up in our daily routines. These holy days were given to the Hebrews for the purpose of recalibrating their priorities and correcting their false values. We would do well to work our way through the Christian religious calendars as a time to recalibrate our lives so they are in tune with God's rhythms for life. Indeed Jesus warned us that **WE ARE TO LIVE IN A STATE OF READINESS.**

III. TIME TO REFLECT AND REPENT (VS 26-32)

Times Of Reflection Should Lead To Genuine Repentance.

One of the interesting things about the holy days in this 7th month is this. The first holiday and the third holiday were festive holidays with a lot of joyous celebrations. However, this middle holiday described in verses 26-32 is a time to reflect and repent. **TIMES OF REFLECTION SHOULD LEAD TO GENUINE REPENTANCE.** When we studied through chapter 16, we examined this holy day known as The Day Of Atonement in depth. We talked about every aspect of the ceremonies. This morning's text deals with the heart issue how individuals were to approach the day.

A. TRUE REPENTANCE (26-28)

Verses 26-28 illustrate true repentance. If you remember, the High Priest laid his hands on two goats. That symbolized the sin of every person in the community. The first goat was sacrificed and his blood poured out. The second goat was led out to the wilderness, left to wander. Further we said this was a graphic illustration of what Jesus did for us on the cross. Jesus experienced the full extent of the penalty each of us deserved for our sin. He experienced the suffering and death we deserve. He also experienced the alienation we deserve.

Here in these verses, God commands the Israelites to deny themselves and present offerings to God. The command to deny themselves in Hebrew means they are to afflict their souls. The word afflict means to stoop, to humble, and to deny. They are to deny their souls. The word to present an offering is to draw near. In other words, during this time, they are to deny themselves and draw near to God.

We Christians set the time of Lent, the 6 weeks before Easter to fast, reflect, and repent for our sins. Fasting is a way in which we deny ourselves physical food in order to feast on spiritual food. We, like the Hebrews should take this time to deny ourselves and draw near to God. We in the United States are not very good at denying ourselves. And since we are not good at denying ourselves, we rarely take the time to deny ourselves in meaningful ways that will cause us to reflect on what it cost Jesus to redeem us.

The fasting on the Day Of Atonement helped the Hebrews to connect their heart with the ceremony. Christianity is not about doing religious stuff and talking religiously. Christianity is all about what Jesus did for us on the cross. In order to worship effectively, in order to come to true sorrow that leads to genuine repentance, we need to spend time denying ourselves so that our spiritual souls can come to life and grasp the extent of our sin and the damage we have done. Then when we reflect on the work of Jesus on the cross, we will experience genuine repentance. Christians in the West think these are Old Testament concepts. Listen to what Jesus says:

"²³Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. ²⁵What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?" (Luke 9:23-25 / NIV).

B. TRUE BELIEVERS REVEALED (29-30)

I think it's as important for us to take Jesus' words seriously as it was for the Hebrews to take God's words seriously because verses 29-30 indicate that true believers will be revealed. God was serious about the Hebrews denying themselves. The text says that if someone was caught not denying him or herself, they were to be cut off from the people. We said in earlier studies that cut off could either mean they were executed or banned from the camp. In addition, their sin would not be forgiven during the Atonement Ceremonies. They would still be in their sin, alienated from the other Hebrews, and alienated from God.

We don't need to go looking for people who come to church and feign Christianity. I don't even worry anymore about people fooling me. The point is that God knows the heart. Again permit me to string a few passages together:

Jesus said, ²¹"Not all people who sound religious are really godly. They may refer to me as 'Lord,' but they still won't enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The decisive issue is whether they obey my Father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21 / NLT).

¹⁰When you obey me, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father and remain in his love (John 15:10 / NLT). The author of Hebrews knows what happens to people who pretend to be Christian:

⁴For it is impossible to restore to repentance those who were once enlightened—those who have experienced the good things of heaven and shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the power of the age to come—⁶and who then turn away from God. It is impossible to bring such people to repentance again because they are nailing the Son of God to the cross again by rejecting him, holding him up to public shame" (Hebrews 6:4-6 / NLT).

C. TRUE HOLINESS (31-32)

God wants our heart in addition to our religious service and duties. It's possible to do all sorts of religious service and duties without really being Christian. In fact just as God rejected Cain's religious offerings, God will reject our religious service and duties if our heart is not truly in it. God is after true holiness as described in verses 31-32. God commanded the Israelites that this was not a one-time deal. This time of reflection, self-denial, and repentance was to be a permanent part of their lives. Every year they were to take this special time out to remember their sins, their deliverance, and the holy God they serve. The Christian calendar sets aside the season of Lent for this kind of reflection and attitude adjustment. Even though we are not commanded to keep specific holy days, we should never forget that God wants our genuine repentance. **TIMES OF REFLECTION SHOULD LEAD TO GENUINE REPENTANCE.** God expects no less from us than He did from the Hebrews.

The month ends with another celebration. Verses 33-36 and 39-43 describe a holiday that is meant to be a time to anticipate our future. In other words **SPENDING TIME WITH GOD WILL CAUSE US TO LONG FOR OUR HEAVENLY HOME.**

IV. TIME TO ANTICIPATE OUR FUTURE (VS 33-36 & 39-43)

Spending God With God Will Cause Us To Long For Our Heavenly Home.

This last festival of the year is a real celebration. It lasts for 7 days and it is called the Feast Of Tabernacles. It starts on the 15th day of the 7th month. The 15th again is 7X2+1. That "plus one" concept again points to a new beginning and a new start. After the solemn day of repentance and after the assurance of forgiveness, the month ends with this extraordinary celebration. The meaning of this festival is as exciting for Christians as it was for the Hebrews.

A. RECOGNIZING OUR SOURCE OF LIFE (33-36)

Verses 33-36 describe a time for recognizing our source of life. In the book of Numbers chapter 29, the festival is described in detail. However, let me just note one thing from that chapter. During the first 7 days of the festival, a total of 70 bulls were offered up to God as sacrifices. Rabbis used to say that these 70 bulls were offered up for each nation in the world. On the 8th day of the celebration only one bull was offered up. This was a special offering for Israel. This was a reminder to Israel that they were to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth. That was part of their destiny. This holiday evolved during the history of Israel. By the time of Jesus, the worship ceremony included other meaningful rituals in addition to the sacrifices.

First of all, priests would wave palm branches in 4 directions. It symbolized their recognition that God was the source of the rain needed to grow healthy crops. And so they waved the branches in the four directions asking God to blow rain into the land.

Secondly, they added a ceremony where the priest would carry water from the Pool of Siloam. There would be a procession all the way to the temple that included singing and shouting. When the priest reached the temple, he poured the water out on the ground. This was a reminder that God provided them water in the wilderness on their journey to the Promised Land.

Lastly there were 4 huge candles that were lit to remind them that God led them from Egypt to the Promised Land personally by the pillar of fire by night and the pillar of cloud by day. Clearly this festival was meant to recall God being the source of life. God gave them life through creation. God brought them to life as He freed them from their deathly bondage of slavery to the Egyptians. God gave them life as He provided them with manna and water through the wilderness. God gave them life as He led them by the pillar of cloud and fire.

While the Israelites were celebrating this festival during the time of Jesus, Jesus got up and said this:

"³⁷On the last day, the climax of the festival, Jesus stood and shouted to the crowds, 'If you are thirsty, come to me! ³⁸If you believe in me, come and drink! For the Scriptures declare that rivers of living water will flow out from within.'¹²... I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't be stumbling through the darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life'" (John 7:37-38 & 8:12 / NLT).

Jesus claimed to be the Promised Messiah. Not only that, He was equating Himself with God in that He is the source of life. He is the One Who gives us eternal life. The New Testament really comes alive if you understand the Old Testament.

B. RECOGNIZING OUR SOURCE OF JOY (39-40)

In verses 39-40 we are invited to recognize our source of joy. The Hebrew name for the festival is *Sukkoth*. The people built booths of branches, twigs, and leaves. They decorated them with fruit. Modern day Jews still build these Sukkoths in their back yards. Again it was a reminder that while they were slaves in Egypt, God remembered the promise He made to Abraham. For no other reason than that, God decided to free them from their slavery, make them into a great nation, and they would be His very special chosen people. It truly is a time to celebrate and be joyful.

It really is something for us to think about. When Jesus sent 72 disciples out on a mission, they came back all excited. But Jesus reminds them what is to be the real source of joy in our lives:

"¹⁷When the seventy-two disciples returned, they joyfully reported to him, 'Lord, even the demons obey us when we use your name!'

¹⁸ 'Yes,' he told them, 'I saw Satan falling from heaven as a flash of lightning! ¹⁹And I have given you authority over all the power of the enemy, and you can walk among snakes and scorpions and crush them. Nothing will injure you. ²⁰But don't rejoice just because evil spirits obey you; rejoice because your names are registered as citizens of heaven'" (Luke 10:17-20 / NLT).

I know that we get all excited about all sorts of things in life. But Jesus, the source of life itself says that we are to rejoice in the fact that our names have been written in the book of life. Why is that so important? The Apostle John writes this in the book of Revelation:

"¹⁴And death and the grave were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death—the lake of fire. ¹⁵And anyone whose name was not found recorded in the Book of Life was thrown into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:14-15 / NLT).

It seems to me that if we are really Christians, our names have been written in God's book of life. That means our eternal destinies are in heaven. That is something to rejoice about.

C. RECOGNIZING OUR TRUE HOME (41-43)

And that brings me to verses 41-43 where this is a time for recognizing our true home. God commanded this festival to be celebrated by the Jews every year. And if Moses lived about 1500 B.C., then the Jews have been celebrating all these festivals, including this one for over 3,500 years. What should the Jew be thinking about as he or she sits in their *Sukkoth*? What should Christians periodically be thinking about? What lies ahead for us in eternity is fantastic. This world is not our home. We are just like the Hebrews as they passed through the Red Sea, as they crossed the wilderness, and ultimately reaching the Promised Land.

God has sent His Holy Spirit to guide us as surely and safely as the pillar of cloud and fire led the Hebrews. We should live every day anticipating the day when we can be in our permanent, eternal heavenly homes. We will spend eternity with God and other believers. For the Hebrews, the extravagant decorations of fruit and branches were meant also to remind them of the Garden of Eden. Our heavenly homes will be a return to the Garden of Eden multiplied by the physical presence of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It will truly be a time and place of eternal joy, shouting, singing, and dancing. **SPENDING TIME WITH GOD WILL CAUSE US TO LONG FOR OUR HEAVENLY HOME.**

V. EPILOGUE

God really does love us and He wants us to love Him. He gave the Hebrews specific times to leave their everyday lives behind to take time out to be with Him, to reflect, to repent, and to rejoice. God took these commands very seriously. We Christians no longer have these particular commands but we are still expected to take time out of our everyday lives and set times aside in which we can be with God, reflect, repent, and rejoice. In our crazy day, this is important. **TAKING TIME TO BE HOLY WILL HELP US FIND GOD'S RHYTHM FOR LIFE.**

I really like the way Derek Tidball summarizes this section:

"It is always true that God desires His people to know the restfulness of trusting in Him, but once a week the frantic round of busy lives is brought to a standstill to recall His resting on the seventh day and His desire that no-one should be exploited in the labour market. It is always true that God saves, that He nourishes His people, claims their commitment, provides for their needs, recalls His covenant with them, forgives their sin and reminds them of their identity. But it is helpful to have particular days spread through the calendar, which mark these truths in a special way and stave off the presumption that takes them as read. Some Christians still find the observance of a special calendar helpful to their spiritual lives, though none are obliged to observe one. Since the coming of Christ it is important that we do not judge one another on the basis of external religious observance. In this area we must do what our consciences dictate before God. Above all, we must not hold on to these shadow days too tightly, since they merely point forward to a future reality. Rather, we must hold firmly to the reality of Christ Himself: our redeemer, protector, and provider, and the Lord Who claims the freshest and best of our lives. Keeping the feasts was no hardship. It gave people space and led them to

reconnect with God as well as with each other. It led them to reflect on the goodness of their God, to refocus their lives and to renew their trust in Him for the future. Rather than a chore, these feasts testified to the joy Israel experienced in knowing God."

If we find ourselves lacking joy in life, then perhaps it's time to recalibrate our priorities by finding God's rhythm for life.