



Leviticus - Chapter Twenty Three

Summary of Chapter Twenty Three

This chapter is a systematic presentation of the festal calendar in Israel, as confirmed by Exodus 23:10-19 and 34:18-26, Numbers Chapters 28-29 and Deuteronomy 16:1-17. It is based on three national pilgrim festivals: the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the Festival of Weeks, and the Festival of Booths. The foundation of these three festivals is the Sabbath. Keeping this calendar sets Israel apart from all the surrounding nations.

VIII Leviticus 23:1-25:55 - Holy Times

Following Chapters 18-22, which addressed the theme of human behavioural holiness, these chapters address holiness in relation to time.

VIII.a Leviticus 23:1-44 - Holy feasts

Refer to the chapter summary above.

VIII.a.i Leviticus 23:1-2 - Appointed Festivals

On the Lord's appointed festivals, people are to meet with the Lord.

¹ The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ² Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: These are the appointed festivals of the Lord that you shall proclaim as holy convocations, my appointed festivals.

Leviticus 23:1-2

These are the appointed festivals of the Lord. This chapter introduces the seven annual festivals Israel celebrated. These festivals are rich with symbolic and prophetic significance.

VIII.a.ii Leviticus 23:3-8 - The Sabbath, Passover, and Unleavened Bread

The Sabbath is a day of solemn rest. Therefore, no work is to be done on that day. This idea of rest is the basis for all the following festivals. The day is also one of holy convocation, i.e. of public assembly for worship.

³ For six days shall work be done; but the seventh day is a sabbath of complete rest, a holy convocation; you shall do no work: it is a sabbath to the Lord throughout your settlements.

Leviticus 23:3

The seventh day is a sabbath of complete rest, a holy convocation. The Sabbath was not properly a festival, but like the festival days, it was a day set apart unto the Lord, and so a reminder regarding the Sabbath is here.

The Sabbath marks the day when God rested: <<Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation>> (Genesis 2:1-3). Therefore, by resting on the seventh day not only allowed his creation time to recover from their work, it also marked their acknowledgement of what God had done at creation.

⁴ These are the appointed festivals of the Lord, the holy convocations, which you shall celebrate at the time appointed for them. ⁵ In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight, there shall be a passover-offering to the Lord, ⁶ and on the fifteenth day of the same month is the festival of unleavened bread to the Lord; for seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. ⁷ On the first day you shall have a holy convocation; you shall not work at your occupations. ⁸ For seven days you shall present the Lord's offerings by fire; on the seventh day there shall be a holy convocation: you shall not work at your occupations.

Leviticus 23:4-8

On the fourteenth day of the month. On the Jewish ceremonial calendar, the first month was known as Abib before the exile and Nisan after their return; Passover was held on the fourteenth of Abib each year. The festival begins at twilight, which marks the start of the new day as opposed to midnight or sunrise.

There shall be a passover-offering to the Lord. Passover was meant to commemorate Israel's deliverance from Egypt, and with the sacrifice of the lamb

for each family, show how the blood of the lamb averted the judgement of God for each Israelite family.

On the fifteenth day of the same month is the festival of unleavened bread to the Lord. The festival of unleavened bread was a week-long celebration the week immediately following Passover (from Nisan 15 to Nisan 21). This festival showed the purity Israel was to walk in (illustrated by eating only bread without leaven, a type of sin) after the blood-deliverance of Passover.

The Passover is also called the Festival of Unleavened Bread in Luke 22:1, indicating that the two were celebrated as a single eight-day event. The basic rule is set out in Exodus 12:16-19. In addition to eating unleavened bread and doing no ordinary work, this rule adds another element, namely, presenting a food offering to the Lord.

The Christian church sees the stipulation for eating only unleavened bread as significant as it is indicative of the absence of sin and the only one to live a sin free life was Jesus, who became the Passover sacrifice as prophesied by John the Baptist: <<*The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'*>> (John 1:29). This is confirmed by the apostle Paul: <<*Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed*>> (1 Corinthians 5:7).

VIII.a.iii Leviticus 23:9-14 - The Offering of First Fruits

The rule of First Fruits applies to the life of the people in the Promised Land. For the relevant laws, refer to Exodus 23:15 and 34:18-20. The festival consists of two stages. It begins with the waving of the sheaves before the Lord. Then comes a series of sacrifices that include a whole burnt-offering, a grain-offering, and a drink-offering, reflecting the grape harvest. These two acts are to dedicate and celebrate the entire harvest as a blessing from God given to his people.

⁹ The Lord spoke to Moses: ¹⁰ Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest. ¹¹ He shall raise the sheaf before the Lord, so that you may find acceptance; on the day after the sabbath the priest shall raise it. ¹² On the day when you raise the sheaf, you shall offer a lamb a year old, without blemish, as a burnt-offering to the Lord. ¹³ And the grain-offering with it shall be two-tenths of an ephah of choice flour mixed with oil, an offering by fire of pleasing odour to the Lord; and the drink-offering with it shall be of wine, one-fourth of a hin. ¹⁴ You shall eat no bread or parched grain or fresh ears until that very day, until

you have brought the offering of your God: it is a statute for ever throughout your generations in all your settlements.

Leviticus 23:9-14

You shall bring the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest. The day following Passover's Sabbath was a time to give the first fruits of the harvest to God. The idea was to dedicate the first ripened stalks of grain to God in anticipation of a greater harvest to come. The first fruits at Passover would be barley, which ripens in the warmer areas as early as March.

VIII.a.iv Leviticus 23:15-22 - The Festival of Weeks

The Festival of Weeks begins fifty days after the sheaf of the wave-offering is brought to the priest (vv.15-16). This festival is also called 'the festival of harvest' (Exodus 23:16) and 'the day of the first fruits' (Numbers 28:26); in the NT it is called Pentecost (Acts 2:1), from the Greek word for 'fiftieth'. The purpose of this celebration is to recognise the Lord as the provider of all crops and as the one who deserves the first fruits of all produce. The added rule concerning the harvest is also in tune with the generosity that is expected of the people on this occasion. In v.22 God commands Israel not to forget the less fortunate during a time of national celebration of abundance.

¹⁵ And from the day after the sabbath, from the day on which you bring the sheaf of the elevation-offering, you shall count off seven weeks; they shall be complete. ¹⁶ You shall count until the day after the seventh sabbath, fifty days; then you shall present an offering of new grain to the Lord. ¹⁷ You shall bring from your settlements two loaves of bread as an elevation-offering, each made of two-tenths of an ephah; they shall be of choice flour, baked with leaven, as first fruits to the Lord. ¹⁸ You shall present with the bread seven lambs a year old without blemish, one young bull, and two rams; they shall be a burnt-offering to the Lord, along with their grain-offering and their drink-offerings, an offering by fire of pleasing odour to the Lord. ¹⁹ You shall also offer one male goat for a sin-offering, and two male lambs a year old as a sacrifice of well-being. ²⁰ The priest shall raise them with the bread of the first fruits as an elevation-offering before the Lord, together with the two lambs; they shall be holy to the Lord for the priest. ²¹ On that same day you shall make proclamation; you shall hold a holy convocation; you shall not work at your occupations. This is a statute for ever in all your settlements throughout your generations.

Leviticus 23:15-21

You shall count until the day after the seventh sabbath, fifty days; then you shall present an offering of new grain to the Lord. Fifty days after the festival of first fruits, at the completion of the wheat harvest, Israel was to celebrate the Festival of Weeks or Pentecost by bringing a new grain-offering to the Lord; and by waving two loaves of leavened bread unto the Lord.

The requirement here for loaves made with leaven or yeast provides a contrast with the unleavened bread stipulated for the Passover meal and the subsequent festival. The unleavened bread is an indication of the sin-free nature of Christ, whereas the leaven here is representative of the sin of Israel and, according to some Christian commentators, to the sin that is found in the church. Humankind, even among those who have Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, will always have a battle with their sinful nature and Christians are to look to Jesus and not the church in order to free themselves from the burden of sin, remembering that: *<<There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit>>* (Romans 8:1-4).

²² When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God.

Leviticus 23:22

You shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. This repeats the command of Leviticus 19:9-10; this was a law to provide a means for the poor and the stranger to eat by working for themselves and gleaning what was left behind. This was an appropriate reminder right after the law concerning the harvest Festival of Weeks.

VIII.a.v Leviticus 23:23-25 - The Festival of Trumpets

The trumpet blasts and a solemn assembly on the first day of the seventh month call the people to prepare for the most sacred month of the Hebrew calendar. In addition, the day marks the end of one agricultural year and the beginning of the next. Postexilic Judaism celebrates this day as Rosh Hashanah, i.e. their New Year's Day.

²³ The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ²⁴ Speak to the people of Israel, saying: In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a day of complete rest, a holy convocation commemorated with trumpet blasts. ²⁵ You shall not work at your occupations; and you shall present the Lord's offering by fire.

Leviticus 23:23-25

A holy convocation commemorated with trumpet blasts. On the first day of the month Tishri on the Jewish ceremonial calendar, the Festival of Trumpets was held; trumpets were blown to gather together God's people together for a holy convocation.

VIII.a.vi Leviticus 23:26-32 - The Day of Atonement

The Day of Atonement is on the tenth day of the seventh month. Although Chapter 16 already prescribed the ritual and explained what the people were to do on that day, the emphasis here is on the people's afflicting themselves, (refer to the comment made on 16:29-34), not doing any work, and the possibility of punishment if they do not observe the regulations of this day.

²⁶ The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ²⁷ Now, the tenth day of this seventh month is the day of atonement; it shall be a holy convocation for you: you shall deny yourselves and present the Lord's offering by fire; ²⁸ and you shall do no work during that entire day; for it is a day of atonement, to make atonement on your behalf before the Lord your God. ²⁹ For anyone who does not practise self-denial during that entire day shall be cut off from the people. ³⁰ And anyone who does any work during that entire day, such a one I will destroy from the midst of the people. ³¹ You shall do no work: it is a statute for ever throughout your generations in all your settlements. ³² It shall be to you a sabbath of complete rest, and you shall deny yourselves; on the ninth day of the month at evening, from evening to evening you shall keep your sabbath.

Leviticus 23:26-32

Now, the tenth day of this seventh month is the day of atonement. On the tenth of Tishri, the people gathered again for a holy convocation; but this was not a celebration festival, but a day to afflict their souls in humble recognition of their sin and the need for atonement.

You shall deny yourselves. The specific priestly procedures for the Day of Atonement were described in Leviticus Chapter 16. This passage records the command for the people of Israel to set that day aside as a solemn day of reflection. It is the only day on which fasting is mandatory for the people.

VIII.a.vii Leviticus 23:33-44 - The Festival of Booths

The Festival of Booths was a weeklong festival that began on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. Since it celebrates the people's salvation from Egypt, it was fitting for them to cease from work and to worship before the Lord.

The chapter concludes with a summary of the annual festivals. Judging from v.38, the appointed festivals in v.37 refers to the six festivals over and above the weekly Sabbath. The purpose of these festivals is to help the people remember the Lord and his work on their behalf, and to worship him appropriately. Verses 37-38 summarise the festal calendar, but vv.39-44 return to a discussion of the Festival of Booths. These verses may simply be a further elaboration because of the lack of detail in the earlier explanation of the festival.

³³ The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ³⁴ Speak to the people of Israel, saying: On the fifteenth day of this seventh month, and lasting seven days, there shall be the festival of booths to the Lord. ³⁵ The first day shall be a holy convocation; you shall not work at your occupations. ³⁶ For seven days you shall present the Lord's offerings by fire; on the eighth day you shall observe a holy convocation and present the Lord's offerings by fire; it is a solemn assembly; you shall not work at your occupations. ³⁷ These are the appointed festivals of the Lord, which you shall celebrate as times of holy convocation, for presenting to the Lord offerings by fire – burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, sacrifices and drink-offerings, each on its proper day – ³⁸ apart from the sabbaths of the Lord, and apart from your gifts, and apart from all your votive offerings, and apart from all your freewill-offerings, which you give to the Lord. ³⁹ Now, the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall keep the festival of the Lord, lasting seven days; a complete rest on the first day, and a complete rest on the eighth day. ⁴⁰ On the first day you shall take the fruit of majestic trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days. ⁴¹ You shall keep it as a festival to the Lord seven days in the year; you shall keep it in the seventh month as a statute for ever throughout your generations. ⁴² You shall live in

booths for seven days; all that are citizens in Israel shall live in booths,⁴³ so that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.⁴⁴ Thus Moses declared to the people of Israel the appointed festivals of the Lord.

Leviticus 23:33-44

On the fifteenth day of this seventh month, and lasting seven days, there shall be the festival of booths to the Lord. On the fifteenth day of the Jewish month Tishri on the Jewish ceremonial calendar; the Festival of Booths or Tabernacles was a time to rejoice in God's deliverance and provision for Israel during the time of wilderness wandering; a time when having come into the Promised Land, looking back with gratitude on all God had done to deliver and provide in the tough times of the wilderness.

A complete rest on the first day, and a complete rest on the eighth day. The Festival of Booths began and ended in rest; it was all about celebration and rest and refreshment.

The prophetic significance of the festivals of Leviticus Chapter 23.

1. Structurally, the first four festivals are linked together, and the last three festivals are also linked, and there is a separation of time between these two groups of festivals.
2. The group of the first four festivals relate to the work of Jesus in his first coming, of his earthly ministry.
 - a. The festival of Passover clearly presents Jesus as the Christian Passover: *<<Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed>>* (1 Corinthians 5:7), the Lamb of God who was sacrificed, and whose blood was received and applied, so the wrath of God would pass over those who accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour.
 - b. The Festival of Unleavened Bread relates to the time of Jesus' burial, after his perfect, sinless sacrifice on the Cross, during which he was received by God the Father as holy and complete, as the Holy One who would not see corruption (Acts 2:27), perfectly accomplishing salvation for all who believe in him.
 - i. The burial or entombment of Jesus may be regarded as a small thing in God's redemptive plan; but it was an essential part of Paul's Gospel: *<<For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures>>* (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).
 - c. The Festival of First Fruits relates to the resurrection of Jesus, who was the first human to receive resurrection; he is the firstborn from the dead (Colossians 1:18) and has become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep, Christ the first fruits, afterwards those who are Christ's at his coming (1 Corinthians 15:20-23).
 - d. The Festival of Weeks or Pentecost obviously is connected with the birth of the Church and the harvest that resulted from the giving of the Holy Spirit (Acts Chapter 2); significantly, in the ceremony at the Festival of Weeks, two unleavened loaves of bread are waved as a holy offering to God, speaking of the bringing of 'unleavened' Gentiles into the church.

3. Between the first set of four festivals and the second set of three festivals, there is a significant time gap, almost four months, which, significantly, was a time of harvest in Israel; even as the current age is a time of harvest for the church, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in (Romans 11:25).
4. The second group of the last three festivals relates to events connected with the Second Coming of Jesus.
 - a. The Festival of Trumpets speaks of the ultimate assembly of God's people at the sound of a trumpet, i.e. the rapture of the Church: *<<For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever>>* (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17), and of the gathering of Israel for the special purpose God has for them in the last days.
 - b. The Day of Atonement not only speaks of the ultimate, perfect atonement Jesus offered on behalf of humankind, but also of the affliction and salvation Israel will see during the Great Tribulation.
 - i. It will truly be a time when the soul of Israel is afflicted, but for their ultimate salvation; as Jeremiah 30:7 says regarding that period: *<<Alas! that day is so great there is none like it; it is a time of distress for Jacob; yet he shall be rescued from it>>*.
 - c. The Festival of Booths or Tabernacles speaks of the millennial rest of comfort of God for Israel and all of God's people; it is all about peace and rest, from beginning to end.
 - i. Booths is specifically said to be celebrated during the millennium: *<<Then all who survive of the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year by year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the festival of booths. If any of the families of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, there will be no rain upon them. And if the family of Egypt do not go up and present themselves, then on them shall come the plague that the Lord inflicts on the nations that do not go up to keep the festival of booths. Such shall be the punishment of Egypt and the punishment of all the nations that do not go up to keep the festival of booths>>* (Zechariah 14:16-19).

5. Significantly, there is good evidence that each of the four festivals relevant to the First Coming of Jesus saw their prophetic fulfilment on the exact day of the festival.

- a. Jesus was actually crucified at Passover: <<*Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, 'Here is your King!'*>> (John 19:14). His body would have been buried, and his holy and pure sacrifice acknowledged by God the Father during the Festival of Unleavened Bread that followed, and he would have risen from the dead on First Fruits, the day after Passover's Sabbath. Additionally, the church was founded on the actual day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out.
- b. For this reason, many speculate it would be consistent for God to gather his people to himself at the rapture on the day of the Festival of Trumpets, on the Jewish holiday of Rosh Hashanah. This can certainly be regarded as a possibility.