

Chapter Twenty-Four

God's Appointed Festivals

Who doesn't like a holiday? Time off from work! A family getaway! A road trip to Grandma's and Grandpa's! Celebrations with friends! Presents!

All of our major holidays¹ are so important to us that they are printed on our calendars and reminders pop up on our phones. It is good to have time set aside to pause and reflect and to be thankful for various people and events in our lives. We take time to celebrate our parents, our veterans, the founding of our nation, past U.S. Presidents, and the beginning of the New Year, at least according to the Gregorian calendar.

Among all the various holidays we celebrate, however, some have been forgotten. What about God's appointed times? In Leviticus 23:1,2 we learn about God's Appointment Calendar: "The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, and tell them, "The **set feasts**² **of the LORD**, which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations, even these are **my set feasts**." Imagine that? God has a calendar too!

Some people see this chapter in Leviticus and their reaction is immediate. They say, “That was then” and “this is now”. They say, “Those are for the Jews, not the Christians.”

Let's take another look at the actual text. God Himself, says that these appointed times, these feasts are “the set feasts of the Lord” and “My set feasts”. They are God's holidays. He meant them to be regular appointments where He would meet with His people in a special way. It is a promise He never rescinded.

Shabbat

The list of feasts in Leviticus 23 begins with the weekly Shabbat. Perhaps its placement at the beginning of the list and the fact that it is celebrated every week argues for its high importance to God. This day of rest and restoration is to be celebrated on the seventh day per God's Own design and purpose. He tells us that this special day is a **memorial of creation** in Exodus 20:11, “for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day, and made it holy.” He also informs us in Deuteronomy 5:15 that Shabbat is a **memorial of redemption**, “You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm.

Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.”

As believers in Messiah who have been granted “rest” in Him, can we not also embrace the weekly day that God set apart as holy, to recognize that “rest” that we have in Him and to celebrate the great deliverance He did in our lives? Is there a more appropriate day on which to do this than the day God set apart for this very purpose way back in Genesis 2? This is the special day included in the Ten Commandments. This day becomes especially important as we look to the future of His return and the establishment of His rule and reign on earth, which includes the weekly celebration of Shabbat as foreseen in Isaiah 56. Reason would argue that if we celebrated Shabbat “then” and we will celebrate Shabbat “later” as outlined in prophecy, then by what rationale do we suspend our celebration of Shabbat “now”?

Passover

Pesach or Passover is the next celebration on the list. It is a one-day festival that many people are familiar with. It is tied into the next festival called Chag HaMatzah or the feast of unleavened bread, which begins on the day of Passover and lasts a full week. This is where the term Passover week comes from. Passover is an annual festival in the spring of the year.³

It recounts God's gracious acts of mercy and strength in redeeming and rescuing the children of Israel from their bondage to Pharaoh in Egypt. Who said there is no "grace" in the Old Testament? Everything about God's actions on behalf of His people is predicated on His grace! How could an oppressed people, literally "stuck in the mud", rise up against the all-powerful army of Pharaoh and deliver themselves? No, it was God who declared in Exodus 6:6-8, "Therefore tell the children of Israel, 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will rid you out of their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm, and with great judgments. I will take you to myself for a people. I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who brings you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it to you for a heritage: I am the LORD.' "

Every year at the Passover seder⁴ we celebrate the historical acts of our gracious Redeemer and Deliverer. It is a wonderful time to enjoy with our family and friends. This celebration, however, is not restricted to the remembrance of the historical exodus from Egypt.

- In the eating of the bitter herbs, we are reminded of the bitterness of our own past bondage to "Pharaoh".

- In the types and shadows, we also see the picture of Messiah's great acts on our behalf.
- In the blood of the Passover lamb that was used to mark the homes of the Israelites thus saving them from death we see the blood of Messiah saving us from the death penalty prescribed for sin.
- In the “Last Supper,” we see the elements in their fullest Messianic meaning.
- As Israel experienced redemption and deliverance from enslavement to their harsh taskmasters, so have we as believers in Messiah, through His blood.
- As Israel was challenged in Exodus 7:16, “Let my people go, **that they may serve me**” we learn that God's purpose in the redemption and deliverance of Israel was that of being set apart or sanctified. God did not redeem and deliver them to then set them free to do “whatever” in terms of their future.
- Their calling “out of” darkness was “into” the light of His Kingdom and His purposes for them.

Are we any different? The way some Evangelicals distort the gospel message into a quick fix, fire insurance,

get-out-of-jail-free proposal ignores the purpose for which He saves us. The freedom for which we are saved exists only within the parameters God has designed for us to live within.

First Fruits

The next festival in Leviticus 23 is called “First Fruits”. It is the annual celebration of the beginning of the barley harvest. The idea is to offer to God the “first” of our harvest to recognize His hand in the blessing of the fields. In so doing, we are thanking God for His provisions for us. What is more important to sustaining life than food?

Since most of us are not farmers and even those who are do not grow a lot of barley, does this festival have any meaning for us today? Does this have anything to do with Messiah? Absolutely!

In 1 Corinthians 15:20-22, it states, “But now Messiah has been raised from the dead. He became the **first fruit** of those who are asleep. For since death came by man, the resurrection of the dead also came by man. For as in Adam all die, so also in Messiah all will be made alive.” Messiah rose from the dead on the day of the celebration of “First Fruits” picturing this meaning, that He would be the first of a much greater crop. What a reason to celebrate the feast of First Fruits as we see the intended picture of Messiah and the future ingathering of His people.

The Counting of the Omer⁵

After the festival of First Fruits, the Israelites are told to do a curious thing in Leviticus 23:15,16, “You shall count from the next day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering: **seven Sabbaths** shall be completed. The next day after the seventh Sabbath you shall count **fifty days**; and you shall offer a new meal offering to the LORD.” Seven Sabbaths refers to seven weeks so seven times seven is forty nine with the next day being the fiftieth. This was the annual celebration of the harvest of wheat which is always a later crop than the barley. Once again, the idea is to present an offering from this crop to thank God for His provisions.

This festival is known as Shavuot, which is a Hebrew word meaning “weeks” and is based on the counting of the seven weeks. In Christian circles, it is more commonly known as Pentecost from the Greek for fifty, “pentekostos”. The interesting question I often ask believers is this, “If Pentecost refers to fifty and the counting of fifty days, then what is the start date of the counting?” The answer I most often hear, other than “I don’t know”, is, “We count fifty days from Easter!” That answer could not be more incorrect.

I will address the origins of the word Easter and its celebrations in the next chapter. The main point right now is to

recognize how this “tradition of men” regarding counting has deviated from what the text in Leviticus 23 actually states. The text is clear that the counting is to begin after the festival Shabbat on the feast of the First Fruits of the barley harvest. By changing the counting date to the idea of Easter, theologians have again revealed their bias. Church leaders did not want to establish a link between past festivals associated with Israel, so they renamed and redefined them. Indeed, the King James version of the Bible knowingly and intentionally inserts the word Easter in the text of Acts 12:4 in purposeful disregard of the Greek word “paschal” which should be translated as Passover. Modern translations have reversed this error. Instead of using the term Feast of Weeks, referring to this counting period from First Fruits, they use the term Pentecost. Instead of counting from the Shabbat of First Fruits, they decided to count from Easter. In doing all this, the impression is given that this Pentecost, as it is called, is something new and detached from Israel. This is true to such an extent that Pentecost is frequently and erroneously referred to as “the birthday of the Church” as a new entity. This concept is birthed directly from the previously addressed Replacement Theology and Dispensational models and represents two major errors infecting the body of Messiah today.

As God pours out His Spirit on the Jewish believers in Acts 2, they are divinely empowered to fulfill the missionary activity Yeshua had previously told them about in Luke 24:44-49, “He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you, that all things which are written in the Torah of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms concerning me must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds, that they might understand the Scriptures. He said to them, “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. Behold, I send out **the promise of my Father** on you. **But wait in the city of Jerusalem until you are clothed with power from on high.**”

Yom Teruah – the Feast of Trumpets

The next festival on the list of Leviticus 23 is the Feast of Trumpets. It is described as “a memorial of blowing of shofars⁶”. It is also called Yom Teruah, the day of the blowing. If you have ever heard a shofar blown, you will never forget it. It is very loud and distinct. In most traditional Jewish and Messianic congregations, the day is marked by hearing the shofar blown over 100 times. There are various sounds that are made, done in a specific sequence, that add to the uniqueness of the day. So,

what is all this blowing of the shofars supposed to accomplish? Historically, the shofar was heard at the giving of the Torah to Moshe. Since the sounds are loud and carried a long distance it is also easy to see how it was used to communicate during times of war, thus the different types of sounds used such as short, long, short then long, etc., had different meanings to better communicate tactical commands on a noisy battlefield.

Psalm 47:5 tells us of the joy of being in the presence of the King as it states, “God has gone up with a shout, the LORD with the sound of a **shofar**.”

In Matthew 24:30,31 we see the shofar announcing the return of Messiah, “And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky. Then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. He will send out his angels with a **great sound of a shofar**, and they will gather together his chosen ones from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.”

Also, 1 Thessalonians 4:16 states, “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with God’s **shofar**.” I long to hear THAT shofar!

It is stated in the text of Leviticus 23 that the next festival Yom Kippur is ten days after the blowing of the shofar. These intervening days between the two festivals are known in Judaism as the “days of awe”. It is during this time that observant Jews

are called to repentance, to turn to or return to Adonai and His Torah.

It is as if blowing the shofar is God's "wake-up call" to repentance. Does this have any relevance to people today? In a general sense, do you think people have gone off course and away from God and His Word? Do you think people "need" some kind of "wake-up call" to get their attention? You be the judge.

Yom Kippur

The next festival is Yom Kippur, which translates as the day of atonement. It is the annual day of repentance and renewal for all Israel. Prayer, fasting, and intercession play a large role with the most significant role played by the High Priest who offers prayers and sacrifices and enters the actual Holy of Holies only once a year. It is impossible to review all the teachings of Yom Kippur in this book but it is important to see how it is related to believers in Yeshua. All of the details of Yom Kippur point to Messiah's once-for-all sacrifice and His blood being the atonement for our souls. The crucified Messiah fulfills the picture of the mercy seat. It was His blood that He brought to the altar in Heaven. Each year we celebrate this festival, we can focus on Yeshua being God's only atonement and the great cost involved in securing our redemption. We learn that freedom is not free, it cost Yeshua His life. It cost the Father the pain of seeing His Son

pay that price. We can also rejoice in the accomplished finished work of Messiah on our behalf. We can know with certainty that our names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. What better way to focus on the primacy and centrality of Yeshua?

Sukkot or the Feast of Tabernacles

The last festival listed in Leviticus 23 is Sukkot, from the Hebrew meaning “booths” or “shelters”. The Israelites were to construct these temporary structures and actually live in them for a week as a time of rejoicing. In Messianic congregations I have attended and been a part of it is indeed a time of rejoicing! It is designed by God to cause people to reflect and remember God as their provider during tough times. When Israel was in the desert, all they had was God. They had to depend on Him. Do we need a specific time to reflect on our own wilderness history and to remember God's covenant faithfulness to us as well? I believe we do. If we can recall His times of provision during the lean times, if we can recall His many blessings and guidance given, even when we were disobedient, how much more can we walk forward in faith believing what Yeshua said in Hebrews 13:5,6, “I will in no way leave you, neither will I in any way forsake you.” So that with good courage we say, “The Lord is my helper. I will not fear. What can man do to me?” Yeshua also

said in Matthew 28:20, “Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

1. The popular holidays known as Christmas and Easter will be commented on in the next chapter of the book.
2. The Hebrew word behind the translation of the word feasts is “moedim”. In the singular form it is “moed”.
3. Understanding and reconciling the Hebrew calendar system with our modern Gregorian system is no easy task. It is a complicated study. I recommend a book titled Judaism in a Nutshell: The Jewish Calendar by See-El Flores available at Amazon.
4. The Hebrew word “seder” means “order”. There is a set order to the celebration which involves specific teachings and ceremonies.
5. The Hebrew word “omer” is a unit of measure of dry capacity used for counting.
6. A shofar is not technically a trumpet but a ram’s horn.