

Understanding God in the Old Testament

A God of Celebration

Leviticus 21-23

Turn with me if you would to the book of Leviticus 21. This morning we find ourselves towards the end of this book and how in it we find keys to understanding the God that we love and serve. Last week, we looked at how God is a God of holiness, a God who calls us to separate ourselves from the evil things of this world and to pursue a life that is focused on him.

Holiness calls us to live differently from the norm. It calls us to pursue a new way of life, it calls us to do preventative maintenance on our faith, it calls us to treat people with respect and value, and it calls us to do all that we can to avoid the influences of pagan ideas or teachings thus compromising the great connection we have because of nothing else but the work of Jesus Christ. Living a Christian life is an opportunity to become new. **2 Corinthians 5:16-17** tells us:

At one time we thought of Christ merely from a human point of view. How differently we know him now! 17 This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

In fact, when you look at this verse the term old life here means “all was in chaotic disorder; now, there is a new creation, which God himself owns as his workmanship, and which he can look on and pronounce very good.” In other words, **without Jesus Christ, life does not make sense.** Now that we have Jesus our lives have order, have purpose and meaning. Holiness changes the way we live.

This morning I want to springboard off of this idea that God changes the way we live and pick up our study in Leviticus in chapter 21. In this chapter we find that God gives further instructions for the priests and how their life was to be radically different from those around them. Laws about who to marry, to what they couldn't touch, to how they handled food – rules that kept them mindful of their great calling. Laws that showed people that God meant business and that He wasn't some “fly-by-night” God. Thus we find the words of God in **Leviticus 22:31-33**:

31 "You must keep all of my commandments, for I am the Lord. 32 You must not treat me as common and ordinary. Revere me and hallow me, for I, the Lord, made you holy to myself and rescued you from Egypt to be my own people! I am Jehovah!" (TLB)

In our world today, you can basically pick up any religion and find the two extremes – true faith or cultural identity. You can find people who claim that they are Jewish but the question can be posed to them, “Are you a practicing Jew or Jewish by nationality.” The same can be said of the Muslim faith. “Are you a practicing Muslim or do you simply

follow Muslim culture?” When it comes to Christianity (do I dare say it) the same is true as well. How many actually consider themselves Christian by faith rather than cultural affiliation. I call it Cultural Christianity. **Many people in our culture know the story of Jesus Christ, yet how many know the purpose of Jesus Christ?** Instead of pressing into this great gift of grace that allows us to live new lives, they keep Christ at a distance and eventually as common or ordinary. The writer of Hebrews even said it himself in **Hebrews 10:29**:

29 Just think how much worse the punishment will be for those who have trampled on the Son of God, and have treated the blood of the covenant, which made us holy, as if it were common and unholy, and have insulted and disdained the Holy Spirit who brings God's mercy to us.

The truth about Jesus Christ is not just a story, he is not just another man, the Bible is not just another book, the truths revealed in it is not just another truth, the relationship that is offered to us is not just another relationship, it is not common or unholy it is precious and valuable and impacting and life-transforming and liberating.

When we talk about our Christianity, we are not talking about just another religion but a relationship that is offered to us through the work of Jesus Christ - the privilege of connecting with our creator, with our sustainer, with our savior, with our healer, with our source, with our great friend and father.

When we come to worship on Sunday Mornings it isn't about going through religious motions, but it is about celebrating the great gift of our faith. **Unlike anything else in our lives, our relationship with God is precious, is valuable, is worth anything we can give. And it is time for us to start showing how valuable it is by our daily walk, our celebrations and the way we reach out to our world.**

Yet how many of us know that there are things that stop us from being all that we can be. The first is obvious, it is our sinful nature. We fall, but the grace of God allows us to get right back up and keep going. Second, the perception of others – we are afraid of what people might think if we get too excited about our walk with God. And third, fear – we are afraid of what God might want us to do next and our fear of letting go.

Is God's grace more important than all of these? Then let us live our lives in celebration of God. That is exactly where the book of Leviticus lead us to next. We find in Leviticus 23 seven festivals which the Israelites were to observe - seven celebrations that called the people of Israel together to celebrate God. Some of these we have already looked at in past teachings but I will go over each one of them.

1. The Passover (A Celebration of Deliverance)

This was the celebration of how God spared the first born of Israel during the final plague that eventually led to the deliverance of Israel out of Egypt.

2. The Festival of Unleavened Bread (A Celebration of Purpose)

Just as we have seen recently that no yeast was offered to God in the bread that were sacrificed to him because yeast was considered a fungus or impurity, the idea of the festival of unleavened bread is that God called the Israelites out of Egypt to a new life with God in a promised land. **It was to serve as a reminder that they left the old life behind and were entering into a new way of living.**

3&4. The Festival of First Fruits And Harvest (A Celebration of Provision)

This was a time when the Israelites presented the first fruits of their harvest. It was the best they had. No one was allowed to eat any of the food until they made this offering to God. They acknowledged that everything they had was given by God. In this celebration though it is interesting to note **Leviticus 23:22**:

22 “When you harvest the crops of your land, do not harvest the grain along the edges of your fields, and do not pick up what the harvesters drop. Leave it for the poor and the foreigners living among you. I am the Lord your God.”

The provision of God wasn't just for the farmers but the poor and foreigners as well. Not only are we asked to give our best to God, but we are also asked to provide for people around us. That way all of us can celebrate God's provision.

It is also interesting to note that in the New Testament, this celebration was called the day of Pentecost. The term Pentecost literally means “The fiftieth day” signifying 50 days from the day of Passover.

All too often we think of Pentecost as the day of the coming of the Holy Spirit, but this day was marked as a day to celebrate God's provision. **Not only does God provide for us physically, but he also has sent us spiritual provision through the indwelling and empowering of the Holy Spirit.**

5. The Festival of Trumpets (A Celebration of Thanksgiving)

This festival marked the end of the civil year for the Jewish people. It was a time when the blowing of trumpets announced the ending of the civil year with 30 horn blasts followed by a day of rest. We already do this in our culture although we forget about the past year and mostly celebrate the coming of the new year.

6. The Day of Atonement (A Celebration of Restored Relationship With God)

Remember, we have looked at this word atonement before which means “covering, or to cover.” It is interesting to note in this celebration that it was to be done with great humility and fasting. **Leviticus 23:27** tells us:

You must observe it as an official day for holy assembly, a day to deny yourselves and present special gifts to the Lord.*

Unlike all the other celebrations, this was to be done with the focus of humility. The restoration of God is not something we can take credit for - it is the good news of Jesus Christ. Maybe this position of humility and fasting was a way by which a person would focus on the work of God as opposed to their own. Paul wrote in **Galatians 6:14**:

14 As for me, may I never boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of that cross, my interest in this world has been crucified, and the world's interest in me has also died.*

God covered our sin through the blood of Jesus Christ and so today we have a new life and journey with God at the forefront leading us as we take each step. Finally, we come to the last festival.

7. The Festival of Shelters (A Celebration of God's Commitment)

This is also known as the Festival of Tabernacle (meaning booths). **Leviticus 23:42-43** tells us:

42 For seven days you must live outside in little shelters. All native-born Israelites must live in shelters. 43 This will remind each new generation of Israelites that I made their ancestors live in shelters when I rescued them from the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God."

We read even more about this celebration in **Deuteronomy 16:13-15**:

13 "You must observe the Festival of Shelters for seven days at the end of the harvest season, after the grain has been threshed and the grapes have been pressed. 14 This festival will be a happy time of celebrating with your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites, foreigners, orphans, and widows from your towns. 15 For seven days you must celebrate this festival to honor the Lord your God at the place he chooses, for it is he who blesses you with bountiful harvests and gives you success in all your work. This festival will be a time of great joy for all.*

After all the work was done, this was basically what we would consider a campout with tents. They celebrated the fact that God would continue to be with them and bless them and be their God, just as today we serve a God of commitment who promises to be with us and never leave us.

The question I pose to us today, is how often do we take time out to celebrate God's deliverance, God's purpose for us, God's provision, Giving thanks to him for what he has done, thanking him that he has made a way for us to be with him, and celebrating his continued commitment to us? I am not talking about thinking about it

and saying a little prayer, but I am talking about a group of people who will come together and will celebrate these things. I think one of the great travesties in our culture is that we are a people who are looking to celebrate anything (Perfect example of today being the Super Bowl where people will get together) but we fail to celebrate the things that really count. In an effort to remove ourselves from the law I think we have missed out on celebrating our faith and father.

We serve a God worth celebrating. Let us not simply be cultural Christians, but Christians who walk with God and celebrate who he is together with our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Let's pray!