



SUITABLE LEADERS . . . SPECIAL FESTIVALS

Leviticus 21-23

Israel's worship was tightly regulated so that the people were led by godly leaders and constantly reminded of God's blessings. We have greater freedom in how and when we worship today, but we too must be concerned with properly honoring God and setting an example for others.

If you hear the word *holiness* today, you probably think of some odd person who goes through life without smiling. Holiness, however, is synonymous with satisfaction in life and sweet communion with God. And it happens to be a central theme of the book of Leviticus.

We arrive today at chapter 21, where God emphasizes the need for leaders to be holy men. The Lord tells Moses in verse 6, to speak to the priests and tell them, "They shall be holy to their God and not profane the name of their God." Because of their unique position as representatives of God, these Old Testament priests needed to be examples of holy living.

At its root, the word *holiness* means separation. Israel's priests were to be separated *to* God and *from* sin. They were also to marry women who followed after God (verse 7).

It's important to note here that a priest could not have a physical disability. Verses 18-19 read:

"For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long



The priest Remi with his wife and child. Remi is depicted with a shorter and thinner right leg, while priests with physical defects could not serve in Israel

. . . an injured foot or an injured hand."

Now you might think this is somewhat ungracious. But these Old Testament priests were not only bringing animal sacrifices to God that were without phys-



ical disabilities or injuries, which signified the unblemished sacrifice of the coming Savior; they were themselves representing the Lord, who was without any spiritual blemish, or sin.

God isn't making a blanket statement that physically disabled people cannot serve Him. For one thing, we

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are no longer in the Old Testament era. We are in the New Testament, where, as Peter wrote (1 Peter 2:9), we *all* now serve as priests, representing God to our world. And not one of us is without aches and pains of some kind.

Someone wrote that a beautiful soul often lives in a suffering body, and people like that can be greatly used today by the Lord. Think of Fanny Crosby, the blind hymnwriter; or Amy Carmichael, who served in India for years with a crippling disability; or even Charles Spurgeon, who spent weeks at a time away from his church in London recovering from persistent ailments.

Now in chapter 22, the priests are told in verse 2 to “abstain from the holy things of the people of Israel.” That means that everything is to be treated with respect and great care. They're to be careful not to turn their sacred ministry into a “shallow routine.” That's a danger for anybody serving the Lord in vocational ministry today—getting so accustomed to sacred duty that it becomes a program instead of a privilege.

Six times in these chapters, in various ways God says

to the priests, “I am the LORD who sanctifies you.” God has set them apart to represent Him before the nation and the world; so, they are to live clean, unblemished lives.

Frankly, there's a higher standard for those who represent the Lord in a public role. Even over in the New Testament, you will find twenty-four qualifications for the pastors and elders who lead the church today.

Now in chapter 23, God not only requires special qualifications for the priests; He also establishes special days for the people. In verse 2 the Lord tells Moses to inform the nation, “These are the appointed feasts of the LORD that you shall proclaim as holy convocations; they are my appointed feasts.”

Notice that God calls them “*my* appointed feasts.” They are *for* the people, but they are *about* the Lord. In fact, they point to wonderful truths about God's plan of redemption throughout history.

For instance, as chapter 23 opens, it refers to Israel's special day, the Sabbath. The word *Sabbath* comes from the Hebrew word that means “rest.” Nehemiah 9:14 reveals that Israel was not given this Sabbath law until they arrived at Mount Sinai, where it became a special sign between God and His covenant people. And like all these other special days and festivals and ordinances, it points to its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Through faith in Him, Hebrews chapter 4 tells us, we now find our Sabbath rest, not in a day of the week, but in the person of Jesus Christ.

Now here in verse 5, “the LORD'S Passover” is highlighted. God wants Israel to remember their freedom from Egyptian bondage through this annual feast. Then in verse 6, Passover is combined with the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which commemorates Israel leaving Egypt so quickly that their bread didn't have time to rise. So, they act this out annually, in the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Then in verse 10 we find the Feast of Firstfruits, when Israel offered the Lord the first portion of their harvest. Their wheat and barley seed had been buried in the ground—in death, so to speak—but then it had come to life and risen from the grave, as it were, in a great harvest of fruit.



Again, this pointed to Jesus Christ, who is the “first-fruits” of those who have died (1 Corinthians 15:20). The resurrection of Jesus on Sunday marks the beginning of a great resurrection harvest. And to this day, we worship Him on Sunday. In fact, the apostle John called Sunday, “the Lord’s Day” (Revelation 1:10).

Now the next Jewish feast, here in chapter 23 and verse 15, is the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, which was a day of rejoicing over the harvest. Pentecost is also celebrated on Sunday, and in the New Testament, this was the very day the Holy Spirit descended and the harvest began to arrive, as the New Testament church was born (Acts 2).

Then there are three more festivals here, all celebrated during the months of September and October. First is the Feast of Trumpets, mentioned in verses 23-25, when the priest would blow the trumpet and call the people together for prayer and sacrifices. This trumpet call began the new year for the Jewish people.

Again, while this is related to Israel, it finds fulfillment in the coming sound of the trumpet when God calls His followers together, rapturing the church to the Father’s house and beginning a new era in redemptive history (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17; 2 Thessalonians 2:1). Beloved, God embedded in these feasts wonderful features of His ongoing redemptive plan.

Next on Israel’s calendar is the Day of Atonement, mentioned here in verse 27. This ultimately pointed to the final sacrifice of Jesus Christ, our once-for-all, atoning sacrifice for sins.

And then five days after the Day of Atonement is the Feast of Booths, the final festival of the year. The people would make temporary shelters—little lean-tos—out of branches. The Lord says here in verse 42-43:

“You shall dwell in booths for seven days. . . . that your genera-

tions may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt.”

Camping outdoors once a year would be a reminder of the Lord’s provision as the nation of Israel journeyed through the wilderness toward the promised land.

All these festivals are wonderful illustrations of God’s plan through the ages. And that plan makes you want to stop and thank Him for the precision and beauty and timing of His redemption. Let’s live with gratitude for our salvation, our spiritual rest in Christ, His grace, and His faithful Word.

Since all true believers are Priests today (1 Peter 2:5–9), what principles for your own life can you draw from the requirements for Israel’s priests? Why would Satan work to blind you to the realities and blessings of this priesthood truth?

How might the New Testament principles found in Israel’s feasts make your worship more meaningful today? Israel’s worship feasts were drawn from their history with God, how is your own worship influenced by your history with God?

¹ See Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Holy* (Victor Books, 1994), 95.

² *Ibid.*, 96.

³ 21:8, 15, 23; 22:9, 16, 33.

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