

The Beginning of All Things – Genesis through Deuteronomy Fall, 2015

The Beginning of All Things – Genesis through Deuteronomy Have you ever wondered what the scriptures teach about the origin of the universe? What about the patriarchs, who were they, and why are they important? What relevance does the account of the exodus of the Hebrews from the land of Egypt have for Christian growth? What can the seemingly tedious ceremonial laws of Leviticus as well as the long list of names in Numbers teach us about godly living? How should a believer read and reflect on the five books of Moses collectively called the Pentateuch (or Torah)? How do these five books “fit in” to the over-arching story of scripture? These questions and more will be explored as we seek to understand this section of God’s Word.

The objective of this class is: to gain an overview of the first five books of the Bible (otherwise known as the Pentateuch), and understand the relation between these foundational books to Christ and Christian living.

Holiness Celebrated: Last week we explored the concept of holiness as it is defined in the book of Leviticus and concluded that holiness is not adherence to rules and regulations, but is more accurately defined as one’s standing in relation to God. Holiness is part of the essence of God, he is independently holy. On the other hand, man is dependently holy or holy to the extent that we are set apart for him. This week we will see how holiness as here defined was to be celebrated. We have already mentioned that God’s repeated command to his people is, “...*be holy, for I am holy...*” (11:44). The way this holiness is portrayed throughout the book of Leviticus is through the ritual state. The ritual states were outward expressions of internal truths. Through the ritual states, God’s people were holy in place and person. There is another way, however, in which God’s holiness is celebrated in Leviticus and throughout the Pentateuch: through the holiness of time. This holiness begins with creation when God, “...*blessed the seventh day, and made it holy*” (Genesis 2:3). From creation until the time of the Exodus, the Sabbath remained the crowning mark of God, the Holy One, revealing himself in time. The act of redemption marked another sanctification of time – the Passover. With the giving of the Mosaic Covenant and the Law of God to the OT people, other dates and times took on meaning and significance. Each is set apart as “holy”. We will explore these special occasions as their meaning for the people of God below. The book of Leviticus is brought to a close by referencing the curses and blessings of the covenant, natural consequences of a holy God dwelling among his people.

Holiness in Time – Abraham Joshua Heschel, the renowned Jewish theologian of the 20th century stated, “The Bible is more concerned with time than with space. It sees the world in the dimension of time. It pays more attention to generations, to events, than to countries, to things; it is more concerned with history than with geography. To understand the teaching of the Bible, one must accept its premise that time has a meaning for life which is at least equal to that of space; that time has a significance and sovereignty of its own.”¹ Scripture concurs with Heschel’s assessment. One of the key characteristics of the incarnation is that redemptive events did happen in both space and time. Christ was physically born in the fullness of time, at a certain point in history. He lived, suffered, died and rose again in the same space and time inhabited by other members of the human race. This makes redemptive acts redemptive history – belonging to the world of time. The last part of the book of Leviticus addresses how God’s people are to draw near to him through the observance of holiness in *time*. For many of the feast days we witness a coming together of both space and time, since properly observing the feast requires one to

¹ Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Sabbath*. Pg. 7

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appear before the Lord at the place where he chooses to put his name. God instructs Moses to proclaim “holy convocations” at these set times.

- 1) The Sabbath (Lev. 23:3) – God reminds his covenant people that, “...*six days shall work be done, but on the seventh is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation.*” The Sabbath is a creation ordinance, and as indicated above, is the first thing in scripture he is said to have made holy (Genesis 2:3). The Sabbath is the one day that is made holy independent of the actions of man. The day is a day of solemn rest. Not rest in the modern, western understanding of the word, i.e. ceasing from labor, but rest in the Hebraic sense of the word: shalom. Shalom is a comprehensive rest that envelopes the full man – physically, emotionally and spiritually.
- 2) The Passover (Lev. 23:4-8) – The Passover or *Pesach* is a feast that includes the actual night in which the redemption of God’s people from bondage is commemorated as well as what is otherwise known as the feast of unleavened bread commencing the day after Passover and lasting for a period of seven days. For this length of time, Israel is to remember that they were slaves in Egypt and God redeemed his people from slavery and oppression. They are not to eat any leaven (*chametz*) throughout the entire feast. Leaven or *chametz* is the result of adding water to flour made from wheat, barley, rye, oats, spelt or any of their derivatives. Once water is added to flour, the dough must be baked within eighteen minutes (excluding processing time) to prevent fermentation or leavening. This feast is meaningful for NT believers, because it was on this day that Christ, the true paschal lamb was slain for the redemption of his people.
- 3) The Feast of First Fruits (Lev. 23:9-14) – The day following the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (the second day following Passover) is the Feast of First Fruits. On this day (*reshit katzir*) the OT people of God were instructed to wave a sheaf before the Lord. This day began the start of counting the omer (*Sefirat Ha Omer*). It purportedly took Israel seven weeks to journey from Egypt to Mt. Sinai where the Torah (Law of God) was given and the Mosaic covenant cut between God and his people. This journey is commemorated with the counting of the omer from the second day after Passover until forty-nine days. The Feast of First Fruits is significant for NT believers because it marks the day on which Christ rose again from the dead.²
- 4) The Feast of Weeks (Shavuot) (Lev. 23:15-21) – The above mentioned counting of the omer is celebrated as Shavuot or the Feast of Weeks. The feast is to be celebrated by the offering of bunt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord. The feast ends on the day which is believed to be the day in which God gave the Torah to his people. Christians know this day as Pentecost; its significance to the NT church is explicit in the event that occurred in Acts 2 with the arrival of the Holy Spirit.
- 5) The Feast of Trumpets (Rosh Hashanah or Yom Teruah) (Lev. 23:23-25) – The first day of the seventh month was designated as holy, a day on which trumpets would be blown and a burnt offering made unto the Lord. This day was the first day of Israel’s religious calendar

² Easter is often mistakenly celebrated as Passover in the minds of many contemporary Christians, but is actually Feast of First Fruits. This is referenced by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:20.

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(though the seventh month of their civil calendar), which is why it is known as Rosh Hashanah or New Year in Hebrew. Collectively, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (the Feast of Trumpets and Day of Atonement) are known as the High Holy Days in the Jewish calendar and are separated by a ten day period known as the Days of Awe.

- 6) The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) (Lev. 23:26-32) – The Day of Atonement has already been referenced in this class so we will not spend significant time recounting the actions required to make this day holy. One point that will be made is that God commanded Israel, “...*you shall afflict yourselves...*” The Hebrew word for the word here translated “afflict” has the root word *anah* meaning, to humble oneself. God’s people are here required to spend the entire day in prayer and repentance making an atonement for their souls before God.
- 7) The Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot) (Lev. 23:33-36) – This feast, occurs five days after the Day of Atonement and lasts for a full week or seven days. All of Israel is expected to dwell in booths or tents during the seven days to remember how they dwelt in tents while wandering in the wilderness prior to entering the land of promise. On each day of the holiday four different kinds (*arba minim*) consisting of a palm branch, two willows, three myrtles and one citron (lemon) are to be waved as a wave offering before the Lord (23:40). The express purpose of this feast is so that, “...*your generations might know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt...*” (23:43). The Hebrew word for booth (*sukka*) literally means tabernacle and references the temporary dwelling in which farmers would live during harvesting. When one considers the context of the Pentateuch, in which God is conveying the covenantal benefits to his people while accommodating them in a manner they can understand, we are given momentary insight into God’s purpose for Israel’s wandering in the wilderness. The Feast of Tabernacles is a reminder to the OT people of God that as the life of the farmer is structured around the ebbs and flows of an agrarian occupation, so too the life of God’s covenant community is structured around the worship of a holy God.

Although the above seven feasts are the annual feasts given by God to his people, there is a celebration known as the Year of Jubilee that is also related to sacred time that is mentioned in the last section of our text. Every seven years was a mandated jubilee declared as such by the high priest and announced through the sounding of the trumpet on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). This year was special because the land had to be allowed to lie dormant, a significant requirement for an agrarian society. Likewise, the *Shemittah*, was a reckoning of seven sevens – a jubilee of jubilees announced in the same manner as a standard jubilee, by the blowing of trumpets on the Day of Yom Kippur. The Shemittah was very important for the ancient people of God because of the central role it played in their economy.

In light of the definition of holiness as offered in the book of Leviticus, i.e. the relationship of a person or thing in worship to God whose very essence is holiness, how were the OT people of God to understand the role of the calendar identified above in proclaiming holiness in time? In order to better answer this question, let’s consider the fountain head, the point in the week from which all time is hallowed or made sacred. This point is none other than the Sabbath. Abraham Heschel referenced earlier stated, “The meaning of the Sabbath it to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on

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which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world.”³

What exactly is the holiness of the Sabbath, and what relevance does the Sabbath have on the meaning of other holy days? When God made the Sabbath holy (Genesis 2:3), he did so by completing creation. However, this does not mean that he ceased to create, indeed his creative power continues to this very hour. His voice which stated once, “let there be light” continues to sustain the light that exists else it would cease its luminous glory immediately. So, to what extent was God’s creation ended on the seventh day? It was ended to the extent that the creation of the Sabbath made real in the realm of time, what his creative acts made possible in the realm of space: his abiding presence among his people. Later the writer of the book of Hebrews makes this point clearer when he states, “*So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his*” (Hebrews 4:9-10). How did God rest from his works? Was he seeking refreshment because the act of creating the universe *ex nihilo* was exhausting? No. Instead we should understand resting (or ceasing or abstaining from labor) as being an intentional *stopping* on the part of the Creator thereby demonstrating to man that all of creation is not an end in itself, but rather a means to one solitary end: the glory of God.

What role does this play in the other holy days mentioned above? From the Sabbath we gain an understanding that only when the sacredness of time (God’s glory above creation) and the sacredness of place (God’s glory in creation) meet can God truly be worshipped in the way he commands. This foreshadows the statement of Christ to the Samaritan woman in John 4 when he stated, “*But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the father is seeking such people to worship him*” (John 4:23). True holiness is a consecration of every aspect of life (time and space) to God.

Conclusion: Much like the overall worship of God, holiness could only be celebrated in the manner God commands. The seven feasts given to the OT people of God demonstrate God’s control over time as well as all of creation. We should humbly consider that God’s requirement of ancient Israel did not exceed their ability. As members of an agrarian society, God communicated his timeless desire to enter into relationship with his people through means they could understand. Since these feasts pertained to the ceremonial laws of Israel, they have by and large been abrogated under the new covenant. The exception is the Sabbath which is now known as the Lord’s Day and occurs on the first day of the week instead of the seventh (Sunday instead of Saturday). However, it is interesting to note that the events of Christ’s life and the birth of the NT church transpired surrounding many of these sacred holidays.

³ Heschel, Abraham Joshua. The Sabbath. Pg. 10