

Holy Convocations

Leviticus 23

Sometimes I fear that we can make too much of a single verse. There are a few verses in the NT that sometimes seem to take on a life of their own, applied in all sorts of varied and multiplied ways. With no other close cross references. We simply hang our hats on a single verse.

Now, that is a danger, especially if we are misusing the verse or reading things into it that aren't there at all. But at the same time, if one verse teaches something that is found nowhere else in Scripture, it is still true! One verse is all it takes.

I want to look at one such verse this afternoon from the New Testament which might, sometimes, give the appearance that we are relying upon it too much. It might seem that there is too much emphasis given to it. It is a verse that has to do with our Christian obligation and duty to come to church for public worship. The verse is Hebrews 10:25, and I will read it along with verse 24.

Heb. 10:24 "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, 25 not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching."

So you can't stay away from church! And if there was no other place in the Bible that laid upon us that obligation, that one verse would be enough. There are, of course, exceptions brought about within God's providence. Those who are housebound or shut-in by their own health and strength are not the focus of this rebuke. Rather, the focus is upon those whose manner of life has been to forsake the assembly intentionally.

If there is anything to be learned from our text this afternoon in Leviticus 23, it is that we have a whole chapter commentary on this one verse from the book of Hebrews. It is no wonder, therefore, that there isn't a specific, positive command in the New Testament to regularly attend services of public worship. That command was given in the Old Testament and has never been repealed!

The ceremonial aspects have passed away, to be sure, but not the abiding principles so clearly referred to in Hebrews 10:25. So as I have done in previous sermons from Leviticus, I am approaching this study of Leviticus 23 as simply an extended exposition of Hebrews 10:25 defining our obligation of "not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together."

In Leviticus 23 we are obviously and immediately confronted with the importance of,

I. PUBLIC GATHERINGS FOR GOD'S PEOPLE.

The word is translated in our Bibles as holy convocations. v.1-2

A. The principle of a holy convocation

It is repeated 11 times in this chapter, in verses 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 21, 24, 27, 35, 36, and 37. Actually, the word is used another 6 times in Exodus 28 and 29, once in Exodus 12, and nowhere else in all of Scripture. So this chapter is the place to look for the doctrine of holy convocations.

A holy convocation is a public gathering, a convention, which means that we are invited with a specific call or summons. This is not a voluntary meeting, but one to which we have subpoenaed! We have our summons, and are commissioned as delegates under obligation to attend.

We read of that call to worship with the blowing of a trumpet in,

Numbers 10:1 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 2 “Make two silver trumpets for yourself; you shall make them of hammered work; you shall use them for calling the congregation and for directing the movement of the camps. 3 “When they blow both of them, all the congregation shall gather before you at the door of the tabernacle of meeting.”

This gathering is holy because it is a convention called for a holy purpose, to offer sacrifices of worship to God, and that is why it comes at this point in the book of Leviticus. All of the laws and regulations of the specific sacrifices point us to this chapter. All of the stipulations for the priests lead us here--to the public assembly of God’s covenant people.

For the nation of Israel, these were national assemblies, and they had reference to the various feasts and festivals held throughout the whole calendar year. But notice that phrase in verse 2, “the feasts of the Lord.” The word for “feasts” actually has reference to an appointed time, a time fixed and determined by one in authority. Thus the clear principle for us to grasp is,

B. The principle of God’s appointed times.

The importance of that is realizing that WE don’t set the time. We don’t determine when we want to go to the courts of God’s temple in order to offer our worship. God does! We can’t simply approach God at any time or any place of our choosing. God has determined them, for they are God’s feasts, God’s appointed times. These are God’s holy convocations.

v.2

That idea is repeated in,

v.4

Also in verses 37 and 44. “Moses declared to the children of Israel the feasts of the LORD.”

Now, I am still being very general, intentionally, wanting you to understand that New Testament injunction I referred to earlier. And realize, that where you to be receiving the book of Hebrews as a faithful Jew, this pattern of holy convocations at God’s appointed times would be deeply imbedded in your heart and soul. Your whole life would be patterned around those annual feasts.

And so it is absolutely contrary to the whole teaching of Scripture to consider worship merely as an individual or even family event. The whole being of a Christian has to be shaped by this fundamental identity, that as Christians, we are a member that belongs to a larger body. And “the Christian life” is not a private matter at all. It is a corporate matter. So above all else in the Christian life, we must not forsake this public assembly.

Let me give you a New Testament example. Not an explicit command, but the obvious demonstration that the early church understand this Old Testament, Jewish sense of holy convocations. Turn with me please to,

Acts 2:42 “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. 43 Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. 44 Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, 45 and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. 46 So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”

They continued daily...and from house to house. So there is no such thing as an isolated, individual Christian. There is no such thing as an isolated, individualistic Christian life. Rather, we belong together, meeting together in public gatherings.

Let me move on to briefly examine each of the annual feasts mentioned in this chapter, with the realization that there is much of the Old Covenant ceremonial law involved here. Which is to say, we aren't obligated to keep these feasts, but each one does teach us about what our worship is to be all about. So we have,

II. THE PRINCIPLES OF OLD COVENANT FEASTS.

Let's go through them one by one, beginning with the

A. Passover and unleavened bread.

Actually, these were two separate festivals, but joined together in immediate succession.

v.5

You know what that is all about. The deliverance of the people of God out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

The first month of the Jewish calendar was called Nisan, and passover was begun at twilight on the 14th day, according to Exodus 12:6. We don't have to guess at all what this feast represents,

Ex. 12:24 "And you shall observe this thing as an ordinance for you and your sons forever. 25 "It will come to pass when you come to the land which the LORD will give you, just as He promised, that you shall keep this service. 26 "And it shall be, when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?' 27 "that you shall say, 'It is the Passover sacrifice of the LORD, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians and delivered our households.'" So the people bowed their heads and worshiped."

Every year they were to celebrate their redemption, their salvation, from the bondage of Egypt. God delivered them. So they sacrificed the passover lamb.

The seven-day feast of unleavened bread followed immediately, and we are told,

Ex. 13:7 "Unleavened bread shall be eaten seven days. And no leavened bread shall be seen among you, nor shall leaven be seen among you in all your quarters. 8 "And you shall tell your son in that day, saying, 'This is done because of what the LORD did for me when I came up from Egypt.' 9 "It shall be as a sign to you on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the LORD'S law may be in your mouth; for with a strong hand the LORD has brought you out of Egypt. 10 "You shall therefore keep this ordinance in its season from year to year."

So their worship was centered upon the great act of God's redeeming his people. It was a sacrifice of thanksgiving!

Next was the feast of,

B. Firstfruits.

v.9-14

This would take place on the first day after the passover sabbath. The priest would take a sheaf of grain as a representative of the whole harvest. And wave it before the Lord, along with the burnt offering of a lamb. Until they offered this wave offering, it was unlawful to reap any of the rest of the crop. It is a grain offering of both consecration and thanksgiving, something very similar to what we do when we present our tithes and offerings before the Lord.

The worshiper would be testifying of a complete and total dependence upon the Lord, and this was first done when they

actually entered the promised land under the leadership of Joshua. So when the Israelites tasted the harvest of their new land, the promised land, they also tasted of the Lord's goodness in providing it for them. It was a testimony of their faith not only that God would provide the fullness of their harvest of food, but also that God would fulfill all his covenant promises since he had given them the firstfruits of the promised land.

The third feast was the festival of,

C. Weeks.

This took place 50 days after the first sheaf had been offered, a feast which marked the end of the grain harvest season. Seven full weeks passed, plus another day. It is sometimes called the feast of the harvest.

v.15-16

You will be interested to realize that the Greek word for this festival is the word for fifty, pentecost. So it was on the occasion of this feast that the Holy Spirit was poured out in abundance upon the New Testament church, in Acts 2.

This festival was an occasion to look back upon what God had done, and to express thanksgiving with a full and generous offering, remembering God's goodness. The needs of the poor were also remembered.

v.22

Those were the spring festivals, which were followed by three more fall festivals, all in the seventh month. which marked the end of the agricultural year and the beginning of a new one. Farm work would be at a minimum and there was time to take stock spiritually and materially. There would be four extra sabbath days in this month, days of no labor, the first with the feast of,

D. Trumpets.

v.23-25

Trumpets are typically instruments fanfare and announcements, and this festival was one which brought forth such a joyful sound which would resound all day long, from morning until evening.

We read of the blessedness of that trumpet call in,

Ps. 89:15 "Blessed are the people who know the joyful sound! They walk, O LORD, in the light of Your countenance."

That is the joyful sound of the trumpet blast, which verse 24 calls a memorial of blowing of trumpets. Perhaps that could better be translated a reminding, a reminding of something present rather than a mere remembrance of something long gone. It is the presence of the Lord himself being announced. And so we read in,

Joel 2:1 "Blow the trumpet in Zion, And sound an alarm in My holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble; For the day of the LORD is coming, For it is at hand."

Blow the trumpet in Zion. It is a call to make a joyful noise unto the Lord! For example,

Ps. 81:1 "Sing aloud to God our strength; Make a joyful shout to the God of Jacob. 2 Raise a song and strike the timbrel, The pleasant harp with the lute. 3 Blow the trumpet at the time of the New Moon, At the full moon, on our solemn feast day. 4 For this is a statute for Israel, A law of the God of Jacob."

So it is of our worship today, that we sound this note of great joy, this trumpet call announcing the presence of the Lord in our midst. With that trumpet blast of our worship, using the imagery of the Old Covenant, we announce the greatest day of all, the,

E. Day of atonement.

This was the one day each year when the high priest entered that most holy place behind the curtain, when the sins of the people were placed upon the scapegoat, and atonement was made!

This was a sober and serious day, a day to afflict your souls. Which is to say, consider deeply your sins that you might turn from them in repentance, trusting in the forgiveness accomplished at such a terrible price.

v.26-28

The one great day of atonement is, of course, already passed, for atonement for our sins was accomplished by Jesus once and for all, as we understand from,

Heb. 9:24 "For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; 25 not that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood of another-- 26 He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. 27 And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, 28 so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation."

Then, as a result of our salvation, after the day of atonement, comes the festival of greatest joy, the feast of,

F. Tabernacles.

v.33-34

It was a celebration of joy!

v.40

And joyful remembrance of what God had done, for for this seven day festival, the people were to live in temporary booths, or tabernacles. It was to remind them of God's sustenance for the people while they dwelt in tabernacles for the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.

v.42-43

And that is what worship is! The offering of sacrifices to God with joyful delight in his goodness and mercy that has been shown to us, with an expression of faithful trust that he will continue to provide for us and direct our paths.

And all of what I just described, in all these sacrifices, is part of our heart as we worship God today in spirit and in truth. We don't wave sheaves of grain in the air, nor do we live in tents. Surely we don't kill animals or blow trumpets all day long. But my friends, we continue to do everything that all those sacrifices represent. The essence of corporate worship hasn't changed from the Old Covenant to the New. We "ascribe to the LORD the glory due His name; [we] bring an offering, and come into His courts."

So when we come into this sanctuary to worship, we are making our pilgrimage to the holy temple, and as I read earlier from,

Ps. 84:1 "How lovely is Your tabernacle, O LORD of hosts!"

And our song of joy, shouted before the Lord is that, "a day in Your courts is better than a thousand. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God Than dwell in the tents of wickedness."

And that is what we are to do on every occasion of every great day of holy convocation. And beloved, there is yet one feast of the Lord that abides in the New Covenant. One of these appointed times of corporate worship did not pass away with the Old Covenant nation of Israel. And on this great feast day, all these other feasts are joined together in the fullness of our New Covenant knowledge of Jesus Christ. Passover. Firstfruits. Weeks. Trumpets. Day of Atonement. Tabernacles. We have those feasts all in one, EVERY SINGLE WEEK!

Notice how this great chapter of feasts is structured. We are given an overall summary first, then the specific feasts. We are given the overarching theme first, then the particular examples. The overarching theme remains. There remains a sabbath rest for the people of God! There is, from Leviticus 23,

III. THE ABIDING PRINCIPLE OF THE WEEKLY SABBATH.

So with the background of all these Old Covenant feasts that have passed away with the coming of Christ, the weekly sabbath continues as,

A. A day of refreshing rest from labor.

v.3

Notice that the sabbath is not described as a day in which you can't do all the fun things that you want to do. It is not described as a day of restrictions and regulations, but a day of refreshment.

And that is what the word sabbath means. To take a breath. To rest from the weary labors of this world in order to be refreshed! As I mentioned this morning, it is a good thing. And we live in an age in which we have declared this good thing to be something horrible and onerous. People in our day reject sabbath keeping as harsh and legalistic, and they miss the whole

point. That is like a new employee negotiating his contract and rejecting the vacation weeks offered by his employer, giving the reason that those vacation weeks were a burdensome and oppressive obligation to take some time off work!

That's nonsense! This world is tough. Labor is toilsome. Difficulties abound. Everyone of you knows that. And everyone of you experiences it. And here, on this day, we have a temporary reprieve from it all. The point is not a list of things that we can't do on the sabbath. Rather, the point is the delightful freedom we have to put those aside one day every seven.

As for myself, I have a lot of working waiting for me next week. A lot of things I didn't get done this week. A lot of things on the schedule for next week. They relate to my labors as your pastor. They relate to the upkeep of my home. And those labors can become burdensome.

Let me tell you how I am able to bear up under that load. I rest once a week in order to be refreshed. And do you want to know something I always find amazing. God himself speaks of the sabbath for himself in the same way.

Ex. 23:16 "Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. 17 'It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever; for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed."

God was refreshed, and he wasn't even tired! I can get very tired, so I need that refreshment all the more.

No one says it better than Isaiah.

Is. 58:13 "If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, From doing your pleasure on My holy day, And call the Sabbath a

delight, The holy day of the LORD honorable, And shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, Nor finding your own pleasure, Nor speaking your own words, 14 Then you shall delight yourself in the LORD; And I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, And feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

And dear friends, back to the context of Leviticus 23, and Hebrews 10:25, what is it, more than anything else, that God has designed for our spiritual refreshment? What activity is there that should occupy this day of sabbath rest?

We’re back to the holy convocation, aren’t we? The weekly sabbath is to be,

B. A day of public worship to the Lord.

“The seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work on it.”

There remains a sabbath rest for the people of God! There remains a day of holy convocation. And it is not “our day,” to do as we please. Rather, it is the Lord’s Day, to do as he pleases. It is, according to verse 3, “the Sabbath of the LORD.”

Read through this chapter yourselves, and take note of the intimate connection between these two ideas, that of the sabbath rest and that of the holy convocation. And then make it your lifelong commitment that you will never forsake “the assembling of ourselves together.”

And never think of that as burdensome, for we sing our praise to God with these words,

Ps. 84:1 “How lovely is Your tabernacle, O LORD of hosts! 2 My soul longs, yes, even faints For the courts of the LORD; My

heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.

You should be singing that all week, in eager and joyful anticipation of this great day that has finally arrived, when we can enter his courts together.

Ps. 84:10 “For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God Than dwell in the tents of wickedness. 11 For the LORD God is a sun and shield; The LORD will give grace and glory; No good thing will He withhold From those who walk uprightly. 12 O LORD of hosts, Blessed is the man who trusts in You!”