

GOD'S CALENDAR

by Ray C. Stedman

The chapter of Leviticus to which we come this morning is to me one of the most remarkable in the Scriptures because in it is a list of the appointed feasts of Israel. These feasts were observed by the nation each year, year after year. There were seven of them, plus the weekly Sabbath. They were precisely spaced and dated because they represent God's calendar, the program on which he operates, the timetable of events by which he is moving through history. I don't know how you use a calendar but these last few weeks I have been working on one which covers a year in advance. I've been setting up engagements -- a conference here, a vacation there, a trip here, and various other events. I use it to plan with, to program, to try to lay out my desire and my intent. I can't always fulfill it, but it outlines what I hope to do. And God has a calendar, a program of events, and he is precisely moving along its time-line. It is so encouraging to read a passage like this in the Scriptures and to understand that God's program is right on schedule. It hasn't deviated one hour. Things are not out of control -- as they may seem if you read only the newspapers and the magazines.

The feasts of Israel were not mere holidays to be observed on the nearest Monday in order to provide a long weekend. Each was a symbolic occasion or season designed to teach a truth which God wants to impart to his people, to drive home a basic truth which is fundamental to human happiness. That is why they were spaced and timed and regulated, their observance specially appointed and carefully predicted. As we go through them you will be able to see where we are in history right now, where the nation of Israel is in God's program for it, what has been fulfilled in the past, and what lies yet unfulfilled in the future. And, as we have seen all through this book, things which were literally and historically true of the nation of Israel are also pictures of God's spiritual program with each one of us today. Every believer in Jesus Christ proceeds through this same order of spiritual development. That is what makes this a most fascinating chapter.

It begins with a reference to the institution of the weekly Sabbath, Verses 1-3:

The Lord said to Moses, "Say to the people of Israel, The appointed feasts of the Lord which you shall proclaim as holy convocations, my appointed feasts, are these. Six days shall work be done; but on the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation; you shall do no work; it is a sabbath to the Lord in all your dwellings."
{Lev 23:1-3 RSV}

The weekly sabbath had begun, you remember, at Creation. God worked six days and then he rested on the seventh day. God did no work on the sabbath. This was reinstated and renewed in the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai when God reminded his people that the sabbath was at the heart of all his work.

I often hear Sunday referred to as "the Sabbath." And perhaps you think that is just an old-fashioned word for Sunday. But that is completely wrong. Sunday is never the sabbath, and never was the sabbath! A transference is made of these ideas which is totally unbiblical. The seventh day was Saturday. The first day was Sunday. And Saturday was to be observed as the sabbath, as it still is in Israel today.

Now, our friends the Seventh Day Adventists, and most of them probably are brothers in Christ, feel that Christians still ought to observe the seventh day as God's day of appointed rest. They tell us that we should be worshipping on Saturday, not on Sunday. In their contention that God has never diminished the importance of the sabbath they are absolutely right. For the point of it was that it was a day of rest, and there was to be no labor done on that day. But, as we have already seen in this book, this was but a shadow, a symbol, and the symbol is never all-important. This observance of a day of rest is a picture of something else that God wants, which is of great significance to him, and when the reality came the shadow was done away with.

In the book of Colossians the Apostle Paul specifically tells us that the observance of a day is one of those shadows which, for the believer, ended at the coming of Christ {Col 2:16-17}. But then what is it that God is

after? It does no good to do away with an observance if you don't find what it is pointing toward and begin to fulfill that. For the reality of the sabbath has always continued. It is given to us, among many other places in Scripture, in Hebrews chapter 4{ :11 }, where the apostle reminds us that sabbath means rest and that this is a reference to the secret of life. Humans were made to operate out of rest, not out of tension, not out of anxiety, out of pressure, not in a rat race where we are always hounded and harassed and driven and hassled. These are exactly the opposite of what God intended when he made man. We were to operate in activity which proceeds out of rest.

What is that rest? Again Hebrews 4 tells us. In Verse 10 it says, "He who has entered into rest has ceased from his own labors, as God did from his," {cf, Heb 4:10 KJV}. That is, on the seventh day of creation, God ceased from all work. He who enters into rest has stopped his own work and is resting on the work of another. So if you learn the principle of operating out of dependence upon God at work in you, and if you don't try to do it all yourself -- don't feel as if everything depends upon you, don't stew and fret and aren't anxious and troubled because you have got to get it done -- but instead learn to rest on what God is ready to do in you and through you and around you, and expect him to do it, then you are observing the sabbath as God intended it to be observed.

Rest is at the heart of everything that God does. All these feasts are a form of the sabbath and consist of one sabbath or of several. All this is to indicate that this is the greatest secret of humanity. The indispensable but largely unlearned secret of our humanity is to learn how to operate out of rest. That is what the sabbath is all about. Notice, by the way, how Jesus stresses this idea in the Sermon on the Mount.

A man said to me last week, "You know, I'm always finding that I've got a 12-foot ditch to cross and a 10-foot plank. And no matter how I polish that plank it is never long enough! I'm always trying to stretch it to make it work." Well, the secret of the sabbath is for that very purpose. There is Someone who has a 12-foot plank and who is available to you all the time to cross the chasms which come into your life. That is why God highlights the sabbath at the beginning of this list of feasts.

The first feast was the Passover. It came in the spring of the year, at just about this time. In fact this year the Passover falls on March 30. This was the beginning of the year as far as God's program for his people was concerned. In Verses 4-5 we are told:

"These are the appointed feasts of the Lord, the holy convocations, which you shall proclaim at the time appointed for them. In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month in the evening, is the Lord's passover." {Lev 23:4-5 RSV}

The details of this feast are given in other parts of Scripture. It was a reminder of that dramatic moment in Egypt when, because of Pharaoh's intransigence, the angel of death was commanded to pass throughout the land of Egypt and kill the first-born son in every household. But God had made provision for his own people. If they would kill a lamb and put its blood over the doorposts the angel would see the blood and would pass over that house. So it was called the "passover." It was God's graphic way of teaching humanity, through Israel, that the basis of his work with human beings always must rest upon the death of another on our behalf. The basis of salvation is rest in the labor of someone else to solve the problem of our inherent evil. That is what the New Testament calls "justification." It occurs when you trust that the work of Jesus Christ, our passover, is sufficient for you.

You remember how this was historically fulfilled. On the very evening of the Passover, Jesus ate the last Passover feast with his disciples. And on the day when the rest of Israel was offering a lamb on the doorposts the Lamb of God died upon a cross. He was crucified there in obedience to the command of the Roman governor and at the request of the Jewish officials who had cried out on behalf of the people, "Crucify him, crucify him!" {Luke 23:21, John 19:6 KJV}. And that is the fundamental teaching of the gospel -- that we are safe from the wrath of God under the blood of Christ.

Linked with the passover was the feast of unleavened bread. It followed immediately, Verses 6-8:

"And on the fifteenth day of the same month [the next day] is the feast of unleavened

bread to the Lord; seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall have a holy convocation; you shall do no laborious work [it is a sabbath]. But you shall present an offering by fire to the Lord seven days; on the seventh day is a holy convocation; you shall do no laborious work." {Lev 23:6-8 RSV}

Two Sabbaths were always involved, plus the weekly sabbath. It didn't make any difference which days of the week they fell on; it was the day of the month which counted. It began on the fifteenth day, lasted seven days, then ended. This feast again looked back to Egypt, to the command God gave then that the Israelites clear all leaven from their houses. To this day orthodox Jews meticulously do this in preparation for the passover season. (In fact this is the origin of the custom of Spring cleaning.)

Leaven is yeast. It is a very apt symbol of that which in human lives tends to puff us up. That is what yeast does in bread -- it makes it swell. And there is something at work in us, God says, which makes us swell up, puff up.

A doctor once told me, "The strangest thing about the human anatomy is that when you pat it on the back, the head swells up."

Why is that? Well, there is a principle at work in us which drives us to be self-sufficient. You know how universal that tendency is. "Please, mother, I'd rather do it myself!" We don't want any help. We don't even want to tell people our problems, to let them know that we are not sufficient in ourselves. We all have this tendency within us to want to protect our images and to look as if we've got it made and don't need help. And if someone makes us mad by offering aid we tell them so: "Get lost!" "Drop dead!" "I don't need you!" That is leaven.

It can take all kinds of forms. Jesus often spoke of leaven. He said, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy," i.e., pretending. We Christians do so much of that, don't we? Pretending we don't have any problems when we do. Pretending we're spiritual when we're not. Pretending we're joyful when we're unhappy and filled with misery inside. Pretending we tell the truth when we don't. That is hypocrisy, leaven which comes from this damnable aversion to admitting that we need some help.

Jesus spoke of the leaven of the Sadducees, which was rationalism, the denial of the supernatural, the feeling that everything can be explained in terms of what you can see, taste, touch, smell, and feel, that there is no power beyond man and that man is sufficient to himself {Matt 16:512}.

Our Lord spoke of the leaven of the Herodians {Mark 8:14-21}, who were materialists. They lived for pleasure, for comfort and luxury, and for status and prestige and the favor of people. They had their ear to the ground so as to be able to manipulate and maneuver politically and thus to advance themselves.

Paul speaks of the leaven of sexual immorality in First Corinthians 5:

"Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened [It is not really your true nature as a Christian to act that way]. For Christ, our paschal lamb [our passover] has been sacrificed. Let us, therefore, celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." {1 Cor 5:6-8 RSV}

That is what this feast is all about. And, preceding it, that is the purpose of the passover. God begins his work with the blood of the Lamb to protect us from his just wrath in order that we might learn to be freed from leaven.

The third feast soon followed, the feast of the first fruits, Verses 9-14:

And the Lord said to Moses, "Say to the people of Israel, When you come into the land which I give you and reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest; and he shall wave the sheaf before the Lord, that you may find

acceptance; on the morrow after the sabbath the priest shall wave it. And on the day when you wave the sheaf, you shall offer a male lamb a year old without blemish as a burnt offering to the Lord. And the cereal offering with it shall be two tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil, to be offered by fire to the Lord, a pleasing odor; and the drink offering with it shall be of wine, a fourth of a hin. And you shall eat neither bread nor grain parched or fresh until this same day, until you have brought the offering of your God. it is a statute for ever throughout your generations in all your dwellings."
{Lev 23:9-14 RSV}

In the land of Israel, which climatically is very much like this part of California, the barley was planted in the fall and came to harvest in the springtime. You can read about that in the book of Ruth. The harvest was preceded by the feast of first fruits in which they took a sheaf of grain, cut it, and waved it before the Lord, offering the harvest to the Lord. With it came certain sacrifices, speaking again of rest in the blood and the work of Another. They were specifically warned not to eat of this grain in any form whatsoever until they had made this offering.

What was this a picture of? We don't have to guess. In First Corinthians 15, Paul tells us that, on the third day, when our Lord rose from the dead, he was the first fruits of God's harvest {cf, 1 Cor 15:20-23}. In other words, when God begins his work with men he does it with the death of another on our behalf, announces that the purpose of it is that he might free us from all kinds of leaven in our lives, and then declares that the outcome of it will be life out of death, a risen life. And our Lord was the first one to rise from the dead when he came out of the grave on that beautiful Easter morning.

You notice that the first fruits were to be offered on the morrow after the sabbath. The sabbath is Saturday. That makes the morrow after it Sunday. So this is the Lord's day -- the day of resurrection. On the day of resurrection the feast of first fruits, the reminder of a new creation, a new life with new kinds of food, was given to us. And historically, you recall. the gospels say, "As it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, the disciples came to the tomb and found it empty," {cf, Matt 28:1}. Christ was risen from the dead, a risen Lord, imparting to us a new kind of life, a new creation. That is the feast of first fruits and that is the day for believers to celebrate.

The next feast is found in Verses 15-21:

"And you shall count from the morrow after the sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering; seven full weeks shall they be, counting fifty days to the morrow after the seventh sabbath; then you shall present a cereal offering of new grain to the Lord. You shall bring from your dwellings two loaves of bread to be waved, made of two tenths of an ephah; they shall be of fine flour, they shall be baked with leaven, as first fruits to the Lord. [Then there follow animal and cereal offerings similar to those we have already examined earlier in Leviticus]" {Lev 23:15-17 RSV}

This feast, because it came fifty days after the feast of first fruits, was called Pentecost. Pentecost means fiftieth.

Notice that this too fell on the day after a sabbath, Sunday, further evidence that God has shifted the day of celebration for believers to the first day of the week. How was this fulfilled historically in the carrying out of God's work with his people? You remember what happened on Pentecost. On that day as the disciples were gathered in the upper room the Holy Spirit suddenly came upon them in a new way. A new body was formed, the body of the church, made up no longer simply of Jews alone but, as Peter announced, of Jews and Gentiles -- two loaves baked with leaven.

Leaven, as we have seen, is a picture of the working of evil in our lives. And when the Holy Spirit came, he came upon people just like you and me, people still struggling with leaven, this principle of self-sufficiency. And we can be filled with the Holy Spirit as they were filled on that day. He can live in us and work in us. So the church as it exists today is beautifully symbolized by these two loaves -- Jews and Gentiles together -- filled with the Spirit, and still possessing leaven within us. This was the beginning of the new work that God was going to do with his people.

The heart of this feast was these two loaves, baked with leaven. Baking is accomplished by heat, by fire. And in the Scriptures fire always symbolizes judgment. As the Holy Spirit took up residence in men and women still capable of sin, the leaven still there, this nevertheless was testimony that God would work in his people, would judge their leaven and bring it under control. They themselves would never in this life be an example of what Christianity is in its perfection -- you can see that only in Christ. But nevertheless they would be the expression of God's fellowship with humanity.

Those two loaves have been at work all through the history of the world since then. In fact, do you see how these feasts actually have anticipated history? And now the interesting thing is that this feast of Pentecost occurred around the middle of May and that from mid-May until the first of the seventh month, which would be about mid-September, there were no more feasts in Israel. A long period of time would go by before another feast -- a long hot summer. During that time only one provision was made and that is given to us in Verse 22:

"And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger: I am the Lord your God." {Lev 23:22 RSV}

The "stranger" is the non-Jew, the non-Israelite -- in other words, the Gentile. That is, after the day of Pentecost there was to be for a long, indeterminate period of time an open door for the Gentiles to come in and feed in the richness of the fields of Israel. This is what has been happening in human history up to this point.

The next feast is the feast of trumpets which, as we will see, is yet to be fulfilled, Verses 23-25:

And the Lord said to Moses, "Say to the people of Israel, In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a day of solemn rest, a memorial proclaimed with blasts of trumpets, a holy convocation. You shall do no laborious work; and you shall present an offering by fire to the Lord." {Lev 23:23-25 RSV}

The central manifestation of this feast was blasts of trumpets. What does that mean? Once again we are not left to guess. If you turn to Matthew 24, Jesus is describing how this age will end. There will be the rise of the antichrist, the division of the nations into warring camps, and great tribulation will spread abroad on earth, a time of terrible trouble. In Verses 29-31 he says,

"Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken; then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth [the tribes of Israel] will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory; and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." {Matt 24:29-31 RSV}

That is the next event in God's program with his people Israel. The Son of man will come, and the trumpet of God will herald the final gathering of Israel to the land. Much as we are interested in what is happening in Palestine now, the return of the Jews to their land, nevertheless this is not the final gathering. There is going to be another Dispersion, strangely enough. It will not last long, but Zechariah describes in detail how the city of Jerusalem shall again be taken captive and the people driven from it. It is only after they see returning the One whom they once rejected that they will be called back by the angels of God in the feast of trumpets, never to leave again, and God will take up his work with Israel once again.

This is to be followed by the great day of atonement, described in Verses 26-32 of Leviticus 23:

And the Lord said to Moses, "On the tenth day of this seventh month is the day of atonement; it shall be for you a time of holy convocation, and you shall afflict yourselves and present an offering by fire to the Lord. And you shall do no work on this same day, for it is a day of atonement, to make atonement for you before the Lord your God. For whoever is not afflicted on this same day shall be cut off from his people."

{Lev 23:26-29} [And he goes on to declare it a solemn sabbath.]

Certain offerings were to be given in connection with this which are described in detail in Chapter 16. But the distinctive thing about this day is that it is to be a time of self judgment, of affliction of spirit, a time of looking at yourself and seeing the wasted years of your life, and of mourning, regretting those wasted opportunities. For Israel this is described in detail in Zechariah 12:

"And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that, when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a first-born. On that day the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning for Hadadrimmon on the plain of Megiddo." {Zech 12:10-11 RSV}

That is when Israel shall regret their long centuries of unbelief. For the Christian this time of mourning, this review of the wasted eras of life, comes at the judgment seat of Christ, when we "receive the things done in the body, whether they be good or bad" {cf, 2 Cor 5:10}, and we learn how much of our life was spent in the flesh, following after the leaven, and how much of it was spent in the Spirit, rejoicing in the work of Another on our behalf, depending upon him to produce gold, silver, and precious stones in our life.

And then finally comes the last of the feasts, the feast of tabernacles, or booths, Verses 33-36:

And the Lord said to Moses, "Say to the people of Israel, On the fifteenth day of this seventh month and for seven days is the feast of booths to the Lord. On the first day shall be a holy convocation, you shall do no laborious work. Seven days you shall present offerings by fire to the Lord; on the eighth day you shall hold a holy convocation and present an offering by fire to the Lord. it is a solemn assembly; you shall do no laborious work." {Lev 23:33-36}

Then a little later on in the chapter, Verses 40-43:

"And you shall take on the first day the fruit of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days. You shall keep it as a feast to the Lord seven days in the year; it is a statute for ever throughout your generations, you shall keep it in the seventh month. You shall dwell in booths for seven days, all that are native in Israel shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God." {Lev 23:40-43 RSV}

That is a beautiful picture of what is frequently called *the millennium* , the time which follows Israel's restoration to their Lord and God, when they return to a relationship to nature with the curse removed and God beautifully blesses the earth and the desert shall blossom like the rose. The secret of peace will be found and nations shall not make war any more, and rejoicing will be the whole experience of men on the earth. The secret of all that, as Paul tells us in Romans 11, is the nation Israel. They are still in the long hot summer right now, before the feast of trumpets restores them.

But, as we have seen all along in this book of Leviticus, all of this is now being fulfilled in the spiritual program of each believer in Jesus Christ. God is at work in your life to bring you along this pathway, just as he outlines it here, so that you shall discover and come at last to the place of joy. C.S. Lewis says, "The ultimate purpose of God in all his work is to increase joy." And this feast of tabernacles is a beautiful picture of the radiant joy which is always the final product of God at work in a human life.

God's process with each of us leads from wrath and judgment and fear to the place where we rest at last in the blood of the passover lamb, Jesus Christ, shed on our behalf. It goes on through gradual separation from evil, with much tears and fainting, and yet in the power of a new life imparted by the Holy Spirit. It progresses to the healing of broken relationships and the gathering of believers together into one body, the breaking down of middle walls of partition between us. It moves on through the restoration of the wasted years of our life unto,

finally, the experience of radiant, unrestrained joy in what God himself is.

That is God's program.

Last week I met with a young pastor who for years had been teaching the Scriptures and seeking to serve God. There was much of blessing in his ministry, but every time he seemed to be just on the verge of breaking loose in really tremendous effectiveness something would happen and he'd go off on a tangent. The work would fall apart and he'd have to start over again, and the whole process would repeat itself. Finally we sat down together and he told me his story. "Something is wrong in my life," he said, "but I don't know what it is and I don't know how to find it."

We talked about this at considerable length and finally it came out. Here was a man who had dedicated his life to God with great earnestness, and all through his ministry he had prided himself on the faithfulness of his dedicated spirit. He told me, "I've always looked down on people who were not as dedicated as I was. And I've always felt there were certain things I would never do." Then he went on to tell me, with much heartbreak, how God had allowed him to fall on his face, terribly, in an area where he had thought he could never fall. But, at the end, he said, "I've learned something. I've learned that I don't have any standing before God except that of forgiveness. Anything at all that I have thought that I could be faithful to, and could depend upon myself for, is not acceptable in God's sight. At last God has made me realize that I have no ground to stand on except his forgiving grace." Then with radiant joy in his face, just beaming through his tears, he looked at me and said, "What a relief! What a relief! God has at last reduced me to the place where now he can begin to use me!"

That is what God is at work to do. The worst form of evil is self-righteousness. If we think we have something that God needs, and that we can serve him by our dedicated spirit, he will find some way to pull the rug out from under us and to bring us at last to the place where we stand before him without any merit of our own. And with joy filling our hearts we know that this is the way God intended men to live -- to rest in the work of Another.

Well, that is Israel's ecclesiastical year, as it has been called, "God's program for his people" -- whether his earthly people or those with the heavenly calling. This is the way God works. Where are you in God's calendar? We can see where we are in history, but where are you?

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