**Regularly observe the Lord’s festivals**

Text: Deuteronomy 16:1-17

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**Scriptures:** Hebrews 10:19-25; Mark 14:12-25; Deuteronomy 16:1-17

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 100b, 360, 380, 378, 92

**Series:** Deuteronomy (#10)

**Theme:** Through His servant Moses, the Lord calls His people to gather together and observe three major celebrations each year which were structured around the agricultural seasons: the Passover followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Booths.

**Proposition:** Regular feasts enable God’s people to remember their deliverance by the Lord in the past, celebrate His generous gifts and be generous to those who have less.

**Introduction**

Have you ever woken up not knowing what day it is? Perhaps after a deep sleep, or on holiday, or maybe during a period of extreme pressure? It’s not really a big problem – just check your phone, go online, turn on the T.V. or consult an old-school paper calendar.

Finding today’s date on the calendar used in most of the world today – the Gregorian calendar is not difficult. The names of the months we use (January, February, March etc.) are derived from Roman gods, leaders, festivals and numbers. The Jewish calendar is based on the cycles of the moon. The first appearance of the new moon in Old Testament Israel was marked by the blowing of trumpets, sacrifices, celebrations, suspension of ordinary business (Num 10:10; 28:11-14; Ps 81:3-5; Amos 8:5-6).

Although this would certainly have helped people to know what day it was – useful in an age without paper calendars, cell phones or the internet – there was a more important reason for this loud heralding in the new month. To remind the people that the Lord was their God (Num 10:10).

God is eternal (e.g. Hab 1:12). He is the Creator of time and the Supreme Master over all events. He rules over this universe through the regular motion of the stars, planets and moons. The seasons of the year, the waxing and waning of the moon and the daily pattern of day and night testify to His good ordering of this world. Without this, we would have no calendars.

God has promised to sustain this regular pattern of days, months and seasons on this earth until the Day of Judgement (2 Pet 3:7,13), as He promised to Noah after the global flood: “*While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease*." (Gen 8:22).

In Deuteronomy 16, the Lord calls His people to remember three festivals every year, each of which was connected to the harvesting of crops in the Promised Land which they were are about to enter. These festivals all point forward to the work of Christ; they all reveal aspects of the gospel and also testify to the Lord’s glorious mastery of time.

We’ll look at the festivals in Deuteronomy 16 under three headings:

1. The pattern of Israel’s annual harvest
2. The meaning of the three main festivals
3. Our observance of the Lord’s festivals today
4. **The pattern of Israel’s annual harvest**

Two of the crops grown today on the Canterbury plains were also the main cereal crops produced in the land of Canaan by the Old Testament Israelites: barley and wheat. Do you know when the first of the Canterbury barley is harvested, when the last of the crop is brought in, or when the processing of the grains into storage is over for the season? I don’t!

However, if you asked any Israelite those questions about the barley harvest in the Promised Land, they would certainly have been able to give you an accurate answer. Living in the good land which the Lord had given to them, they were able to enjoy the blessings of the agricultural production of barley, wheat, grapes and olives. All of these crops relied on rainfall (Deut 11:11) which the Lord promised to provide through the growing season so that ‘*you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil*’ (11:14). There was only one condition - obedience to the command to “*love your God and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul*” (11:13). Willing, wholehearted obedience would lead to the blessing of a plentiful supply of food from the land.

Back then, if you had talked to any Old Testament Israelite living in the promised land about the barley harvest, they would have given you a very clear answer because the three major festivals of the Jewish calendar year **were all connected to the harvest**. You can see from the first verse of Deuteronomy chapter 16 that God called His people to ‘*observe the month of Abib and keep the Passover to the LORD your God, for in the month of Abib the LORD your God brought you out of Egypt by night*’.

Abib is the first month of the Jewish Calendar marking the time of the year when the Lord rescued His people from slavery. Abib roughly corresponds to April on our Gregorian calendar. Passover was celebrated on the 14th day of the month at twilight (Lev 23:5) and was followed the next day by the week-long Feast of Unleavened Bread. So closely connected were Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread that they were really two parts of the same single major festival. Also connected to the Passover was the Feast of Firstfruits (Lev 23:4-8). At this festival (which is not mentioned in Deuteronomy 16) thanksgiving was given to the Lord for the firstfruits of the barley harvest of which the Israelites were not to eat until they had given the first portion to the Lord (Lev 23:14). This was both an acknowledgement of the Lord’s blessing in providing food but also an act of faith and trust in their Lord that the remainder of the harvest would come in.

Fifty days after the firstfruits were harvested (measured from the day after Sabbath – Lev 23:15), the Feast of Weeks was celebrated. This was a one-day festival. We know this as ‘the day of Pentecost’ in the New Testament because it was fifty days after the Passover. The Feast of Weeks is also called the ‘Feast of Harvest’ (Ex 23:16).

The last of the three major festivals in the Jewish calendar was the ‘Feast of Booths’ which is also referred to in Scripture as ‘Tabernacles or Ingathering’ (Ex 23:16; Lev 23:33). This celebration in the autumn time (Sept-Oct) marked the end of the agricultural year when the grain crops had been threshed to separate the grain from the stalks. It was also when grapes and olives were harvested.

All the male Israelites were required to travel to the central place of worship three times a year (16:16) for the Feasts of Unleavened Bread (Passover), Weeks, and Booths. They were to bring offerings to the Lord ‘*according to the blessing of the Lord your God that he has given you*’ (16:17). Their offerings were to be in proportion to what they had received. The more bountiful the harvest, the greater the offering. In addition to celebrating the Lord’s provision in the harvest, the people were to remember their past time of slavery in Egypt and also to express their generosity towards others in need; servants, Levities (who had no land of their own to cultivate), sojourners, fatherless and widows. These were vulnerable groups in society who had less than they had been blessed with (v11).

Can you see how the Jewish calendar was structured around feasts during which thanksgiving was given to the Lord for His gracious provision – anticipated at the Feast of Passover/Firstfruits and realized at the Feasts of Weeks and Booths? Let’s look now at the meaning of the three major festivals.

1. **The meaning of the three main festivals**

The Israelites, gathered on the Eastern border of the Promised Land listening to the last sermon which Moses preached, were definitely **not** cropping farmers. The previous generations had been shepherds with flocks and herds living in the land of Goshen in Egypt. Later they were forced to become brick-makers as slaves under the hard yoke of Pharaoh (Ex 5). Then for 40 years they had travelled as nomads through the desert with their livestock, directly dependent for their daily food on the Lord’s gracious gift of the heavenly bread of manna. They would not have had any experience of ploughing, sowing, reaping, threshing or storing agricultural produce. These would have been completely new skills for them to learn.

They were about to enter a fertile land inhabited by the people groups who had a complex structure of religious rituals surrounding the growing of crops. The Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusite had their own ‘harvest festivals’, as have almost all people groups down through history. The Canaanites believed that the fertility of the land was due to the blessing of Baal, the fertility god whom the worshipped along with the goddess Asherah.

For the Israelites, food production in the Promised Land would not only involve the cultivation of ground but also a battle for their hearts and minds. Would they trust their covenant Lord to provide, or adopt the approach of the experienced farmers of the land who relied (they believed) on the favour of Baal and Asherah to provide them food to eat?

We’ve seen how the three major Jewish festivals were all closely connected to the harvesting of crops, in this respect they were not so different from most other nations and cultures. **What is radically unique is the relationship between these festivals, trusting in the Lord God and the gospel of salvation.**

As we’ve seen, The Passover was celebrated at the time of the year when God had delivered His people from slavery in Egypt – the month of Abib – which coincided with the firstfruits of the grain harvest. The Passover commemorated the occasion of the tenth plague in which the Lord struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt (Ex 12:29) with the result that Pharaoh finally let the people of Israel go from his land where they had been captive slaves. The Passover re-enacted the sacrificing of an unblemished lamb whose blood was put on the entranceways of the houses of the Israelites so that they were spared from the plague of death as the Lord passed over them (Ex 12:13).

At the Passover festival, the flesh of the sacrificed lamb was eaten in commemoration of their supernatural deliverance by the Lord’s miraculous power so that they could become ‘*a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*’ (Ex 19:6). Following the eating of the Passover Lamb, the consumption of unleavened bread for seven days may symbolize the hurry with which the people left from Egypt because unlike bread made with yeast it could be made quickly. Or it could simply be that unleavened bread was the stable diet of the Hebrews in Egypt and its use in the festival would be a reminder of the past days of bondage. Leaven (yeast), as well as meat would begin to decay in the heat of the day following preparation. Such decay would be a sign of impurity and was therefore forbidden (v4).

This Passover festival taught the people that God had provided a substitute for them in the place of their firstborn sons (who were representative of them all) so that they did not die but instead could live in freedom. No lamb (or any other animal) could actually take the place of a human being made in God’s image (Heb 10:4). The Passover Lamb pointed forward to the sacrifice which would be made once and for all God’s people by Jesus, the Son of God. As God reveals through the Apostle Paul “*For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed*” (1 Cor 5:7). We celebrate Lord’s Supper in remembrance of His death and also in joyful anticipation of His return. Christ has fulfilled the Passover feast.

**The Feast of Weeks** celebrated the faithfulness of the Lord to Old Testament Israel in the Promised Land with the blessing of the full barley harvest gathered in. This one-day festival also pointed forward to Christ. He was crucified as the ‘Passover Lamb’ and rose from the grave during the Feast of Firstfruits. He is the ‘firstfruits’ of those who have died in Him and are yet to be raised to life in new bodies at the coming general resurrection (1 Cor 15:20), anticipated in the Old Testament (Job 19:25-27). Christ has fulfilled the Feast of Firstfruits.

Fifty days after Christ’s ‘firstfruits’ resurrection from the dead, on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came, empowering and indwelling His disciples as He had promised (Acts 2). On that first Feast of Weeks day following His resurrection, a great harvest of souls began, with the ingathering of about 3,000 who received the Word of the gospel and were baptized (Acts 2:41). That saving of souls has continued to this day and will not cease until Christ returns to this earth at the end of this age.

**The Feast of Booths** reminded the Israelites of their wilderness journey from Egypt to Canaan when they lived in temporary shelters as they camped around the centrally located Tabernacle. This festival points forward to the reality of the Christian life which is a pilgrim journey on this earth in preparation for entry into the New Earth. Just as the Israelites gave up the comforts of a solid house to travel to the Promised Land living in tents, so we are called to be willing to surrender our self-reliance, selfishness and the temporary ‘comforts’ of our sin. In this way the Feast of Booths ultimately points forward to the permanent, eternal home of God’s people with their Lord in paradise where people from every tribe, language, people and nation (Rev 5:9) will live in imperishable resurrection bodies. Christ has fulfilled the Feast of Booths.

Can you see that the Feasts of Passover, Weeks and Booths had deep significance for Old Testament Israel far beyond the annual cycle of their agricultural harvest?

Just as it makes no sense to think that complex devices like cell phones just come together by chance, so to think that the detailed interconnections and precise timings of historical events in Scripture come together without the work of God who controls time makes no sense. The only reasonable conclusion is that the Bible is true and that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (Rom 10:13).

Do you believe this gospel?

Do you trust in Christ the Passover Lamb, the firstfruits of the resurrection to come?

Do you believe that He is the Lord of His church which He is gathering together as a harvest of souls and which He shepherds as they walk by faith ‘*desiring a better country, that is a heavenly one*’ (Heb 11:16)?

In Christ, the Old Testament festivals have profound significance for us, even though our observance of the Lord’s festivals today is not the same, which brings us to our third point:

1. **Our observance of the Lord’s festivals today**

The physical assembling together of the whole people of God, at regular festivals in the place He chose, expressed their solidarity and identity as a covenant community. Likewise, our physical assembling together each week on the Lord’s Day expresses our solidarity and identity as God’s people in this place. Just as it was important that Old Testament Israel to gather together regularly so it is for us.

We celebrate the harvest which Christ has enabled as we commemorate the day of His resurrection every week. The Word of God calls us not to neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (Heb 10:25). The Elders of this church do not call us to worship together to celebrate the feasts of Passover, Weeks and Booths because these have all been fulfilled in Christ. However, the Elders do call us to worship here twice each Lord’s Day. They keep watch over our souls as those who will give an account to the Lord (Heb 13:17). The Scriptures call us to obey our leaders and submit to them (Heb 13:17). In calling us to worship twice each Lord’s Day the elders are not acting unbiblically, but rather are seeking to care for us according to the regular patterns of worship in Scripture.

Whilst there is no explicit command in the New Testament to gather twice for congregational worship on the Lord’s Day, we see this schedule in Psalm 92 – a song for the sabbath “*It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night*” (Ps 92:1-2). The resurrection appearances of Christ occurred both in the morning and evening (John 20:1,19). The fourth commandment says ‘"*Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy*” (Ex 20:8). The whole day is to be set apart for the Lord. The morning and evening worship services help us to do this as a congregation providing us with discipline, encouragement, fellowship and the means of grace.

We know the encouragement of being together in worship and the corresponding discouragement of empty pews and seeing a small fraction of us here. Certainly, there are those who through ill health and personal circumstances cannot come here twice on the Lord’s Day. But most of could if we chose to do so. If you don’t regularly come at 5p.m. Why don’t you choose to?

Just as the Old Testament people of God eat the sacrifices (1 Cor 10:18) so at Lord’s Supper we eat and drink the bread and wine which are symbolic of the body and blood of Christ. At this stage, in this local church we ordinarily celebrate Lord’s Supper in the morning and evening services every other month on the third Sunday of the even numbered months (February, April, June, August, October and December). There is liberty for the Elders to call us to celebrate Lord’s Supper more or less frequently.

In closing I would like to encourage you to mark these events in your Gregorian calendar (on your phone, paper schedule, diary or whatever else you use to keep track of time):

* Our morning and evening worship services at 10:30a.m. and 5:00p.m. on the first day of each week.
* Lord’s Supper on the 3rd Sunday of each even month, morning and evening.
* In addition to this, soup and buns after the evening service once a month on the 3rd Sunday of every month.
* Also mark our congregational lunches on the first Sunday of every even month.

For Old Testament Israel about to enter the Promised Land, the question was: would they trust their covenant Lord to provide, or would they adopt the approach of the farmers of the land who relied on the favour of Baal and Asherah to provide them food to eat?

For us, do we rely upon the leisure and recreation opportunities which the world offers on a Sunday, or on our Lord to provide the spiritual nourishment and encouraging fellowship which we need to thrive as pilgrims in a land which is not our home? Regular celebrations together in the Lord are as important for the health of the church now as they were for the Israelites as they celebrated the feasts of Passover, Weeks and Booths.

AMEN.

**Old Testament Israel’s annual feasts connected to Deuteronomy 16:**

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| **Feast** | **Month and day (Jewish calendar)** | **Month**  **(our calendar)** | **Scripture references** |
| Passover | 1 (Abib) 14th | March - April | Exo 12:1-14; Lev 23:5; Num 9-14; 28:16; Deut 16:1-7 |
| Unleavened Bread | 1 (Abib) 15th-21st | March - April | Exo 12:15-20; 13:3-10; Lev 23:6-8; Num 28:17-25; Deut 16:3,4,8 |
| Firstfruits (barley) | 1 (Abib) 16th | March – April | Lev 23:9-14; Num 28:26 |
| Weeks (incl. firstfruits wheat) | 3 (Silvan) 6th | May-June | Exo 23:16; 34:22; Lev 23:15-21; Num 28:26-31; Deut 16:9-12 |
| Booths | 7 (Tishri) 15th-22nd | Sept - October | Exo 23:16; 34:22; Lev 23:33-36; 39-43; Num 29:12-38; Deut 16:13-15 |