

“Deuteronomy: The Gospel according to Moses”

Sermon 20 – “Holy Days”

Introduction

We all love holidays, don't we? I mean, if nothing else, a holiday at the very least means we get a day off from school or from work, or even if we do have to work it means holiday pay. But I've always found it fascinating that we still call them holidays, still call them “holy days,” even when the day commemorates nothing of any religious or spiritual significance whatsoever. Like today: today is a day our nation has decided to set aside every year to try to make sure that we don't forget our mothers, to honor our mothers. It's a worthy goal, don't get me wrong, and I encourage all of you to call your mothers this afternoon and tell them you love them; but is such a day really deserving of the title “holy day”?

Well, our passage for this morning describes what could very truly be called holy days: it describes the three great feasts of the Israelite religious calendar, three feasts that God commanded them to observe and that therefore really were holy. As we've been studying Deuteronomy, we've had many occasions to notice parallels between this book and those ancient treaty-covenants that were current in its day, and here we find another one. Often in those treaty-covenants, one of the demands made by the great king was that his vassal king appear before him annually, that he travel to the great king's capital city in person in order to demonstrate his loyalty and obedience, and that he do this year by year, in some cases even three times every year. Well, that's exactly what we see God requiring of the Israelites here: read v. 16 again (read). This is just another of many indications that Deuteronomy is a covenant document, and one of the requirements of this covenant was the observance of these holy days.

But as we begin to take a look at these Israelite festivals, it might be worthwhile right here up front to say a word about what they have to do with us because, last I checked, we as a church don't celebrate either Passover or the Feast of Weeks or the Feast of Booths. In fact, our having been freed from the requirement to keep these festivals is part of our glorious Christian liberty which we are to guard at all costs. Just as on proof-text of this truth, turn to Colossians 2:16. If you're familiar with the book of Colossians, you'll know that here in chapter 2 Paul is arguing for the sufficiency of Christ and the illegitimacy of adding any human philosophy or regulations to Christ. But in 2:16, Paul writes (read). IN this verse, Paul has in mind Jewish regulations that have passed away with the coming of Christ: no longer must Christians observe the Jewish dietary laws or the Jewish calendar with its festivals, new moon sacrifices, or Sabbaths. By “Sabbaths” here, Paul means the particularly Jewish holy days: all of the Jewish holy days are called Sabbaths in the Bible, not just the weekly Saturday day of rest.

So what, then, can these laws about the Jewish holy days teach us who no longer have any obligation to observe them? Quite a bit, in fact, for remember: we are in that section of the laws of Deuteronomy where Moses is expounding upon the Fourth Commandment, the requirement in God's

eternal Moral Law to remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. The laws here concerning Israel's observance of these holy days are really just an extension of the law concerning her observance of the Sabbath day. Well, we too still have a Sabbath day: it happens now to be on Sundays, and it no longer also includes any other special holy days, but it is still a Sabbath which we are to remember and to keep holy in the same basic ways as Israel was to do with her Sabbaths. But that is the subject of the rest of our message this morning. According to this passage and to many other similar passages in the Bible, proper observance of these Sabbaths involved at least three things, all of which conveniently begin with the letter "R": so I guess what we have here are the three R's of Sabbath observance, which unlike the famous three R's of traditional education actually all do begin with the letter R, not with one R, one W, and one A. First, we have . . .

I. Resting

This is perhaps the aspect that receives the least attention here in our passage, but it is definitely present. Read v. 8 again (read). This is probably the element that we most often think of when we think about Sabbath observance because it is the one most emphasized in the original Fourth Commandment: turn back to and read with me Deut. 5:12-15. Back in chapter 16, this command to rest is extended to include at least one other day of the feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread. If you read other places in which laws are given about these annual feasts like Num. 28 and 29, you'll find that each one of them also included special days of rest in which no ordinary work was to be done, even if those days didn't happen to fall on Saturdays. The feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread, for instance, always was to begin on the fourteenth day of the month, and the first and last days were days of rest, which means they would not always coincide with Saturday Sabbaths. The same is true of the other two feasts: the first day of the Feast of Weeks was a day of rest; the first and last days of the Feast of Booths were days of rest. These were days that were set apart to God, that were holy, and part of the way in which God commanded them to be kept holy was for His people to rest on them, not to do any ordinary work.

This principle of resting on God's holy day is a principle that actually goes far back past even Moses to the very beginning of creation: on the seventh day, God finished and rested from His work and therefore blessed that day and made it holy, we are told in Gen. 2:3. This idea of rest is, of course, a very theologically rich concept within Scripture, too rich for us to handle sufficiently in a sermon like this; but it speaks to us of that eternal rest that awaits God's people in glory, and now also of the rest that Christ has already won for His people as they rest in Him and in His work on their behalf. But this physical rest, this cessation from ordinary work, was and still is a very important, non-negotiable, divinely-commanded part of Sabbath observance. As we are told in Hebrews 4, a passage all about this glorious concept of rest, "there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God."

So, God's law asks each one of us very directly this morning, "Are you keeping the Sabbath Day holy by resting?" Or do we give into the temptation just to sneak a little bit of ordinary work into it. I know that temptation: I think we all do. That laundry pile is getting just a bit too high, and it would be so nice to get a little head start on it. The lawn is looking pretty shaggy, and my week is already looking so busy. That paper or that project is due in class on Tuesday, and I just don't think I'll have enough time to

finish it on Monday alone. Now, I'm not here to list off for you precisely what is and what is not ordinary work: like the amount of your giving, that is something that ultimately you have to determine in your own conscience before God. But it is something that you need to settle in your own conscience before God, because rest on the Sabbath is part of nothing less than God's eternal Moral Law. So, are we keeping the Sabbath Day holy by resting? So resting is the first aspect of Sabbath observance that we see here; but secondly, we have . . .

II. Remembering

Even our secular, national "holy days" often have the purpose of helping us remember things, don't they? Today, we're supposed to remember our mothers. Memorial Day is coming up, and it's a day to remember . . . all members of the U.S. Armed Forces who have ever died in war. The Fourth of July, of course, is to remind us of the birth of our nation and the principles on which it was founded, and so forth. Well, that is also one of the primary purposes of Israel's holy days, and of the Sabbath in general. But what were these days supposed to remind the children of Israel of? Well, two things in particular: God's provision for them and God's deliverance of them.

First, God's provision for them. It's not necessarily as clear to us as it would have been to the ancient Israelites, but these three feasts all corresponded to specific key times within the agricultural year. Again, the Israelites were farmers: their lives were dominated by and depended entirely upon agriculture. Read v. 1 again (read). The month of Abib, literally means "the month of new ears of grain": it was the month when the very earliest grain could begin to be harvested. You get this sense also in v. 9 (read). In earlier passages, the time of the Feast of Weeks is said to be seven weeks from the first Sabbath during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. So, in other words, the Feast of Unleavened Bread occurred around the time when the very first grain was beginning to be harvested (spring), and then the Feasts of Weeks took place seven weeks later when the entire grain harvest would have been brought in (summer). Then we read in v. 13 (read). The Feast of Booths would take place after the entire harvest not just of grain but also of grapes and olives would have been brought in, processed on the threshing floor and in the presses, and stored away for the winter (late summer, early fall). But the point is that each of these main feasts occurred at significant times in the agricultural year, marking the beginnings and ends of harvests. So one of the things these festivals would have caused the Israelites to remember was God's provision for them. This is one of those themes that we see popping up again and again in Deuteronomy, isn't it? The Israelites needed to recognize, to be reminded frequently, that the fertility of their fields, the success of their harvests, was God's doing, not their own and not that of some Canaanite deity. That's also why there is this emphasis here on the location of these feasts in the one place of God's choosing: to ensure that the Israelites would not celebrate their harvests at some pagan shrine, but in God's presence in His holy city.

But there was more to remember than just God's provision for them: there was also a reminder of God's deliverance of them. Each of these three festivals celebrated more than just the prospect or the completion of a successful harvest: they each also celebrated the Exodus from Egypt. This is especially clear during Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread: read vv. 1-3 again (read). This feast was very closely connected to the Exodus, as the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb reminded them of how God had

spared their firstborn when he killed the firstborn of Egypt, and the unleavened bread reminded them of how the left Egypt in such a hurry that they didn't have even time to let their bread rise. But the other two festivals were also closely connected to this act of God's deliverance. During the Feast of Weeks, v. 12, they were to remember that they had been slaves in Egypt, and that's why they were to share their feast with the poor and needy. During the Feast of Booths, they were to go camping, they were to live in tents, we are told elsewhere, precisely to remind them of how they had lived in tents in the wilderness after God had brought them out of Egypt. Each one of these feasts was to be a reminder not only of God's provision but especially of God's deliverance.

Well, the same is still true of our Sabbaths, of our holy days: they are to help us remember. We've had occasion in this study of Deuteronomy to remark on how forgetful we human beings can be especially when it comes to spiritual things. We need frequent reminders: and that's part of what our Sabbaths are for. Yes, of course, we learn new things in Sunday school and in the sermons; but the most important thing we do, the most necessary things we do, is remind ourselves of the things we already know, especially of the gospel, especially of Jesus Christ and what He has done to accomplish our salvation. That's why we focus so much on Christ in our prayers and singing and Scripture reading and preaching, and that's why we observe the Lord's Table regularly: all these things are different ways of reminding us of God's spiritual provision for us and especially of God's spiritual deliverance of us. We need to be remembering these things, especially on Sundays. We need to remind ourselves of these things on this first day of the week so that we remember them throughout the rest of the week. How many of our sins, how many of our fears, how many of our worries and doubts and failures occur precisely because we do not remember these things: God's abundant spiritual provision for us and God's glorious deliverance of us? So remember: remember above all else Jesus Christ. Remember Him here at church, but remember him, remind yourself of Him throughout this holy day, for that is one of the ways in which God has commanded us to keep this day holy. So, we observe the Sabbath day by resting, by remembering, and thirdly and finally, by . . .

III. Rejoicing

If we are truly keeping the Sabbath in those first two ways, this final one will come naturally and easily. If we are resting and remembering Christ, how could we help but rejoice? This was what the Israelites were to do on their holy days as well. During the Feast of Weeks, they were commanded, v. 11, to "rejoice before the Lord your God." During the Feast of Booths, especially, they were to rejoice: vv. 14-15 (read). That last clause is emphatic: "you will be altogether joyful, you shall rejoice indeed." These holy days were to be times of joy, and why wouldn't they be? They were resting from their back-breaking daily labor, they were remembering God's provision in their completed harvest, and they were remembering God's deliverance from slavery in Egypt: how could they not rejoice?

How often can we truly say that our holy days, our Sabbaths, are days of rejoicing? Do we truly rejoice on these days? Here we are, getting a rest from the weary labor of the week and being reminded of all that God has done for us in His Son: how can we not find that a joy? And yet, I think for many of us, we have to admit that sometimes we just don't find the Sabbath that much of a delight. Sometimes, we have to force ourselves to go to church, or we just go out of blind habit: we sing the songs mindlessly,

we hear but don't really listen to the prayers and the sermons, we gulp down the bread and wine automatically, and then we go home and return to the normal routine as though nothing really significant or joyful has happened. You might feel as though I'm picking on you in particular in saying these things, but we all do this, probably far more often than we would care to admit even to ourselves. We don't really rejoice in what should be the most joyful part of our weeks: we don't find the Sabbath to be what God commands us to find it to be in Isaiah 58: a delight. And why don't we find the Sabbath a delight: why do we instead sometimes even feel it is a burden rather than a joy? Well, John Piper, in a sermon on the Fourth Commandment, I think, gives a thought-provoking and convicting analysis. He said,

The reason that so many people feel it as a burden is partly that we have so much leisure, we don't feel the need for the sabbath rest; but more important, I think, is the fact that not many people really enjoy what God intended us to enjoy on the sabbath, namely, himself. Many professing Christians enjoy sports and television and secular books and magazines and recreation and hobbies and games far more than they enjoy direct interaction with God in his Word or in worship or in reading Christian books or in meditative strolls. ¶ Therefore, inevitably people whose hearts are set more on the pleasures of the world than on the enjoyment of God will feel the sabbath command as a burden not a blessing. This is what John says in 1 John 5:3, 'For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.' The measure of your love for God is the measure of the joy you get in focusing on him on the day of rest. For most people the sabbath command is really a demand to repent. It invites us to enjoy what we don't enjoy and therefore shows us the evil of hearts, and our need to repent and be changed."

Those are convicting words: if we don't delight very much in the Sabbath, that's probably a sign that we don't delight very much in God, that we don't delight very much in Christ. And that's really what God says in Isaiah 58:13-14 (read). Our delight in the Sabbath is really just an offshoot of our delight in God Himself. Do we rejoice on the Sabbath? If not, perhaps, as Piper suggests, this command comes to us as a call to repent and reevaluate our priorities, what we truly find joy in.

Conclusion

Resting, remembering and rejoicing: that is how we are to keep God's holy days holy. If you're anything like me, this is a call to repentance and change, because we often fail to do those three things every Sabbath, don't we? But let's end with some good news, shall we? Even this law which we have so often broken, Christ has kept for us. I flipped through the gospel of John earlier this week and just noted all of the times in which we are told explicitly that Christ went up to Jerusalem to keep the Jewish feasts. You know what's interesting? He kept them all. Just in John alone we are told of Christ going to Jerusalem for the Passover, for the Feast of Weeks, and for the Feast of Booths. And what's especially interesting to note is that He did so often and ultimately at the risk of His own life. At least twice in John, the Jews are wondering whether Christ will in fact come to the feast in obedience to God's Law because they know that the Jewish leaders are looking for Him to kill Him. And yet, Christ came. And I promise you, at these feasts, He not only attended, but He rested, He remembered, and He rejoiced. He obeyed

and kept even this law, even this Fourth Commandment, for us. Yes, we have broken it, yes, we probably will still break it: but if you are trusting in Christ today, you are forgiven and you are declared righteous. So trust in Him, for as Paul wrote in Col. 2:16 and 17, which we read at the beginning of this message (read). Christ is our true Passover Lamb; in Him we have experienced the true Exodus, the true deliverance from spiritual slavery. In Him we find true rest, and in remembrance of Him true joy.