

Exodus Sermon Series
Rest & Rejoice
Exodus 23:10-19

God is eternal, the Lord of time: “You crown the year with Your goodness, and Your paths drip with abundance” (Ps. 65:11). He gave mankind a weekly Sabbath in creation (cf. Ex. 20:8-11), and here includes rest for fields and festivals in the Promise Land. While we’re not bound by the letter of these laws because they’ve been fulfilled in Jesus (1 Cor. 9:21), we still fill our time with work and food. So God blesses our hands with rest, and our lives with feasting and fellowship.

Three Sabbaths

There are three rests here, and first is about the land. For six years they would sow and reap, but the seventh year the crops are to grow and not be harvested for profit. Instead the poor have first chance to eat, and then animals of the field. It’s to be the same with the vineyard and olive grove (v10-11). The fields and vineyard correspond to the “herb that yields seed, and the fruit tree that yields fruit according to its kind” which God made in the beginning (Gen. 1:11), represented by bread and wine. And olive oil is sacramental in the Old Testament. Farmers know about wise ways to rotate fields and crops in order to preserve nutrients in the soil and sustain production for the long term. God’s law cuts with the grain of creation, but it also highlights His mercy—to everyone including the poor and animals. After this Sabbath of years, He reiterates the seventh day rest, “that your ox and your donkey may rest, and the son of your female servant and the stranger may be refreshed” (v12). This reiterates the 4th Commandment, emphasizing giving rest to others. If you give rest and refreshment even to strangers who may not know God, what are the chances that you will continue to be your own personal slave-driver? The third rest doesn’t appear as one or really seem to fit at all: “And in all that I have said to you, be circumspect and make no mention of the name of other gods, nor let it be heard from your mouth” (v13). God is the Lord of the harvest, the true fertility God. He makes it rain or not. We are insulated in the city, in our wealthy country, and in the global economy from the devastating effects of weather and pestilence on crops. Ancient and primitive civilizations worshipped fertility idols because their lives depended on the harvest. This does not mean that not saying the names of Molech, Zeus, or the S&P 500 is a problem, but praying to or relying on them for comfort is forbidden. We don’t name any lesser gods or saints, as if they can hear or answer us. Take a permanent Sabbath from your anxiety about the harvest—your money, investments, and future. This rest is no more inconsistent with prudence and hard work than resting in Christ for salvation is inconsistent with working that salvation out with fear and trembling. Instead, plan to rest in the good things God will give just as you ought right now in what He has provided today. Sabbath weekly, but also think in terms of years, which comes first in this passage. We learn how to Sabbath weekly with rest, worship, and fellowship, but we don’t stop there. Perhaps we should give all of our profit away every seventh year. A clear application is not to squeeze your business—soil, employees, animals—for every last cent. Your productivity is not your physical or financial security, so don’t let it

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be your emotional or spiritual security either. Speak of the Lord and to Him alone as your provider and protector.

Three Festivals

As if weekly renewals and sabbaticals every seven years were not enough, God gives three annual festivals: The Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering (vv14-16). These are pilgrim feasts where males 20 years and older go to Jerusalem (v17; cf. Num. 1:3). Everyone wants to go, but women and children are not required because God is kind and understands the burden. These feasts build on one another, telling the story of God's kingdom and look forward to Jesus who fulfilled them. The Feast of Unleavened Bread is connected to Passover. Each household kill a lamb, put its blood on the doorposts, gets all the leaven out of the house, and eats unleavened bread for seven days (Ex. 12:15ff.). Paul refers to the leaven of malice and wickedness (1 Cor. 5:8), and the point is to leave the sin of Egypt behind and start with new leaven in the Promise Land. All three descriptions of the feasts in this chapter refer to food: Unleavened Bread, Harvest, and Ingathering rather than Passover, Pentecost/Weeks, and Booths, because the emphasis is on giving and feasting. Unleavened Bread was not a harvest time when it's obvious to tithe, so they're reminded not to show up empty-handed (v15). Verse 18 refers to this feast, making sure there's no leaven—they're a new lump of dough—and the fat or best part of the sacrifice shouldn't be left until morning (cf. Ex. 34:25). Christ is our Passover lamb, sacrificed once and for all; His death is the foundation of our life, and we rest and feast completely in Him. The next feast followed a couple months later when the Israelites would offer the first sheaf of the wheat harvest, and then seven weeks later on the fiftieth day (Pentecost) they celebrate the Harvest Festival, offering leavened bread (Lev. 23:17-21). God establishes and blesses them, new leaven is active, so "the firstfruits of your land you shall bring into the house of Yahweh your God" (v19). Last, the Feast of Ingathering occurs in the seventh month after the full and final harvest. This is also called Tabernacles or Booths because for a week Israel camps to remember God's providence in the wilderness years (Lev. 23:41-43). Plants and animals are symbolic in the law, and the ingathering pictures the harvest of the nations: "And it shall come to pass that everyone who is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles" (Zech. 14:16). This was a major party, no sadness allowed: "And you shall rejoice in your feast, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant and the Levite, the stranger and the fatherless and the widow, who are within your gates" (Deut. 16:14; cf. Deut. 14:22-27). God gives us these gifts because He loves us, which is how we ought to receive them. Do not boil a young goat in its mother's milk. Do not take what He gave for life, and turn it into a means of death.