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## A STUDY OF THE WHOLE BIBLE

### THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS

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#### OBSERVING THE SACRIFICE FESTIVALS (23:1–25:55)

##### The Big Picture

God gives his people a cadence of worship to keep their lives and labors anchored in the blessings of redemption.

##### The Place of the Passage

Electricity, food preservation technologies, and climate control have enabled modern societies to operate almost unrestrained by the natural seasons. But in the ancient world, far more than in our own day, the seasons set the cadence for life and labor.

Calendars were used in biblical times to track the changing seasons of the year and manage one's farm in cooperation with seasonal cycles. Because each nation sought blessing on their labors from their god(s), worship festivals were attached to key points in their agricultural calendars. Each nation's worship calendar revealed what they believed about the relationship between their yearly labors and the heavens. In Israel, the agricultural calendar was attached to festivals commemorating the events of the exodus from Egypt, because Israel understood their labors as service to the true God of redemption.

Mirroring the section explaining the sacrifices and sacrifice meals (Leviticus 1–7), the present passage (Leviticus 23–25) describes the calendar of Israel's sacrifice festivals.

##### Gospel Connections

**SABBATH.** The Levitical calendar is designed around the Sabbath principle and its promise of rest. The weekly Sabbath was the foundational holy day of the whole calendar (Leviticus 23:3). From there, the Sabbath principle was extrapolated throughout the calendar by repeated patterns of seven. There were seven festivals in Israel's yearly calendar, all within the first seven months of the year. There were seven weeks between the festivals of Firstfruits and Weeks. The festivals of Unleavened Bread and Booths were each seven days in length. The Sabbath Year occurred every seven years, and Jubilee occurred after seven sevens of years. Through these and other patterns of sevens, the entire calendar is rooted in the Sabbath principle, spreading the promise of divine rest through the entire system.

##### Whole-Bible Connections

**NATURE'S WITNESS.** In the New Testament, the apostle Paul wrote that God's "invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made". The calendar of Old Testament

Israel drew numerous connections between the nature of God and the demonstrations of his goodness in the seasons. Paul's proclamation might have had in view those "clearly perceived" demonstrations of God's goodness in the changing seasons of the year, as captured in the calendar of Israel.

**ISRAEL'S FESTIVALS.** In both the Old and the New Testaments, numerous events take place against the backdrop of the festivals of Israel's calendar. For example, the Gospel of John describes many events in the life of Jesus during the Old Testament festivals of Leviticus (John 2:23; 5:1; 6:4, 22; 7:2, 23, 37–39; 10:22; 13:1; 19:14, 31, 42; 20:1).

### **Theological Connections**

**SUNDAY WORSHIP.** The practice of gathering together in local communities for worship every week is rooted in the Sabbath principle stated in Leviticus 23:3. In Old Testament times, weekly assemblies were held on the seventh day of each week. Most Christians have historically viewed the resurrection of Jesus from the dead on the first day of the week as indicating a change in the day for worship to the first day of the week. This understanding is based on Jesus' command, after his resurrection, for the disciples to regather to meet with him in worship on the first day of the week (Luke 24:13–49), a pattern repeated by the New Testament church.

### **Glossary of Terms**

**EXODUS:** The departure of the people of Israel from Egypt and their journey to Mount Sinai under Moses' leadership (Exodus 1–19; Numbers 33). The exodus demonstrated God's power and providence for his people, who had been enslaved by the Egyptians. The annual festival of Passover commemorates God's final plague upon the Egyptians, resulting in the people's release from Egypt.

**REDEMPTION:** In the context of the Bible, the act of buying back someone who had become enslaved or something that had been lost to someone else. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus purchased redemption for all believers (Colossians 1:13–14).

**BLASPHEMY:** Any speech, writing, or action that slanders God. In the OT, the penalty for blasphemy was death (Leviticus 24:16); in the NT, Jesus states that the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven (Luke 12:10).

**SABBATH:** Saturday, the seventh day of the week, the Jewish day of worship and rest (Genesis 2:2–3; Exodus 31:13–17). Christians meet for worship on Sunday, the day of Christ's resurrection (Acts 20:7), and regard Sunday, rather than Saturday, as their weekly day of rest. And yet, believers look forward to an eternal Sabbath rest (Heb. 4:1–13).

## Passage Background

1. Israel's weekly calendar (23:3)
  2. Israel's annual calendar (23:4–44)
  3. Addenda to the weekly and annual calendars (24:1–23)
  4. Israel's generational calendar (25:1–55)
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## Discussion Questions

### Weekly Calendar (23:1–3)

What instructions were given for how this weekly Sabbath was to be observed (v. 3)?

### Annual Calendar (23:4–44)

Why do you suppose the festival year ended with a reminder of God's care on the people's journey to the land, rather than ending with a celebration of arrival in the land?

### Calendar Addenda (24:1–23)

The 12 loaves represented the people's presence before God. What would be the significance of including these maintenance routines in this calendar?

### Generational Calendars (25:1–55)

Many scholars think the Sabbath Year, like the annual festivals, was tied to agricultural reality: the need for a regular time of letting the land remain fallow to avoid depleting soil nutrients. Fields were not to be farmed and harvested during the Sabbath Year (vv. 4–5); nevertheless, subsistence food production was permitted (v. 6). What does this provision suggest about God's care for the land?

The final layer of Israel's calendar was the Year of Jubilee, observed every seventh Sabbath Year. The Jubilee was a once-a-generation economic reset. Even if one generation fell so deeply into debt that the next was raised in debt slavery and the family property was lost, the Jubilee Year ensured the emerging generation would receive it back. What do you think was the significance of this proclamation of liberty taking place on the Day of Atonement during the Jubilee Year (v. 9)?