

“Celebrate!!!”

Leviticus 23:1-8 ¹

As we continue to make our way through the Bible, book by book, I expect that I’ll just do one sermon per book so the journey doesn’t take forever. Remember that I’m not necessarily trying to do justice to each book as a whole, but rather to lift up something interesting in each book.

Leviticus is one place that Bible readers frequently run aground and become discouraged, because it’s not really so much a narrative as it is a lawyer’s reference book. It’s an important book, nonetheless, and the handout in your worship order may give a little more context than I’m going to do this morning.

Our focus this morning is on an aspect of Leviticus that is frequently overlooked. It’s easy to get bogged down in the Holiness Code and in the laws of sacrifice and forget that the whole purpose of the Bible is to take us deeper into God’s heart of love. And one aspect of God’s love that it’s easy for us to miss is the idea of celebration.

Now I must confess to you that I tend to celebrate rather cautiously. I don’t know where this inclination was birthed, but it goes back as far as I can remember.

I think celebration may be difficult for me because I frequently find myself projecting possible scenarios into the future in terms of what might go wrong with a given set of circumstances and trying to prevent the most likely mishaps. This practice can be as simple as paying attention to where and how I put something on a table, so as to avoid having it knocked off, or considering how I run an extension cord to prevent tripping or fire. Such contingency thinking causes me to generally keep a good grip on the steering wheel when I’m driving, knowing some of the multitudes of things that can suddenly go wrong, bringing death and destruction with them.

However this thought process originated, being an engineering officer on a Navy destroyer solidified it into habit. High pressure boilers and turbines and their associated equipment are fascinating to operate and a pleasure to watch as they hum along; but there are nearly endless ways in which that hum can turn into horror, and the best way to prevent such an outcome is to anticipate those possibilities. Such ponderings make it hard for me to relax into genuine celebration, having been taught over and over that relaxation means increased vulnerability to negative outcomes.

There are many other jobs that have similar requirements, of course. Whether you’re a principal trying to protect children, or a lifeguard watching over swimmers, or a surgeon trying to cure disease, or a merchant trying to prevent theft, or a new mother watching over your baby having had very little sleep, or any of a thousand other things, our daily habits of thinking things through and attempting to be in control of our environment affect our faith journeys, too. It’s difficult to shift from contingency thinking into an attitude of curiosity and vulnerability and openness that allows us to experience God’s Presence and the joy that God intends for us to know as a regular part of our lives.

Middle class churchgoers—as most of us are—tend to have particular difficulty here. We tend to be leaders and managers in other parts of our lives, and resting, relaxing, and celebrating don’t come very naturally to us.

We can console ourselves, perhaps, with thoughts about “productivity,” though many studies show that productivity actually declines after a certain point. We might tell ourselves

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on June 23, 2019.

that much worldly “celebrating” comes at a high price, such as heart disease, obesity, hangovers, debt, and sexually transmitted diseases, all of which is true, but such rationalization still has a rather hollow ring, does it not? So I thought it might be helpful to think about celebration and its presence or absence in our lives.

When I think about celebration, I frequently think about the Kentucky Derby Festival in Louisville, a two-week party leading up to a two-minute race. One of the highlights of the festival is *Thunder Over Louisville*, billed as the largest fireworks display in the nation. It really is something to see, and during our years in Louisville, Anna drove back from Birmingham, and Nathan drove back from Vail, just to see that show.

But do you know what? That fireworks display is eclipsed every single night by a display that our Creator hosts for our benefit in the sky. One of the first things I do every morning when I turn my computer on is to go to NASA’s *Astronomy Picture of the Day*,² just to marvel at what God has made for our pleasure, instruction, and wonder.

The words “joy,” “celebration,” “festival,” “feast,” “banquet,” and “laughter” occur more than 400 times in the Bible. The Very First Party started like this: *And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that it was good* (Genesis 1:3). God spoke the Word of Creation, the Big Bang followed, and the cosmos was hurled into reality. That party is still going on, and you can participate in it tonight, if you want to. It begins at dark.

Or how about this? *The LORD said to Moses, “Give the following instructions to the people of Israel. These are the LORD’s appointed festivals, which you are to proclaim as official days for holy assembly. You have six days each week for your ordinary work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath day of complete rest, an official day for holy assembly. It is the LORD’s Sabbath day, and it must be observed wherever you live. In addition to the Sabbath, these are the LORD’s appointed festivals, the official days for holy assembly that are to be celebrated at their proper times each year”* (Leviticus 23:1-4).

If the Israelites kept all the Sabbaths and festivals as God prescribed them, they would have had *seventy-one holidays* each and every year. The insert in your worship order lists these festival celebrations. Indeed, Proverbs 15:15 tells us that *for the happy heart, life is a continual feast* [or celebration]! And in addition to festival celebrations, this passage also speaks about the Sabbath day.

Can you imagine what it would be like to have one full twenty-four hour period in each week in which you gave yourself permission to do no work of any kind? That means no employment-related activity, no housekeeping or yard work, no projects, no bill paying, maybe even no cooking or washing dishes? Can you imagine a weekly opportunity to stay in bed as long as you want to, to go on long walks or drives, to linger over coffee and lunch, to play board games and actually enjoy the company of your family and friends?

I suspect that most of us try to experience such days when we’re out of town on vacation, but try to imagine what such a day would be like once in every week! Does that seem too good to be true? For many of us, myself included, I suspect that it does. I also suspect that such days sound pretty good even for those of us who are “retired”!

I remember standing beside a thatched-roof mud hut with Pastor Age Bota in Malawi and saying something like this to him: “Age, I know it seems to you that we Americans are incredibly wealthy, and in some ways, we certainly are. But there are other ways—probably more important ways—in which you’re more wealthy than we are.

² <https://apod.nasa.gov/apod/astropix.html>

“Since you don’t have electricity, you don’t have electric lights, or televisions, or the Internet, and you therefore go to bed with and rise with the sun. That means you get plenty of sleep. We don’t. Since there’s not much to do in the house in the evening, and it’s not air conditioned, anyway, you sit out here and visit with your neighbors every night. In my country, this isn’t so. I know my neighbors’ names, but I don’t know them. We’re acquaintances, but we’re not friends. There are many ways in which I actually envy you.” I don’t think Age believed me, but I meant what I said.

You and I aren’t the first to get confused about Sabbath and celebration keeping. Jesus told the Pharisees, “[You’re] *Blind guides! You strain your water so you won’t accidentally swallow a gnat, but [instead] you swallow a camel!*” (Matthew 23:24). *Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made to benefit people, and not people to benefit the Sabbath. And I, the Son of Man, am master even of the Sabbath!”* (Mark 2:27-28).

It’s true that most of us now live in a world divorced from any real exposure to agriculture and the natural rhythm of the seasons. Electricity, air conditioning, and the Internet make possible a 24/7/365 stream of activity that is deadly for human joy and celebration. Our greed has consumed God’s grace.

Perhaps we don’t need to focus on “the Sabbath” in the way our Jewish friends do—though it might do us good. We do need to focus on “the Sabbath principle,” such that we observe a “Sabbath Day” at some time each week.

It’s sad that we humans seem to look everywhere but to God for excitement, meaning and joy. For some reason, we expect God to be dull, even though God is the Creator of all that laughs and sings, all that dances and celebrates. When God lived among us, He did care for the poor, the downtrodden, and the sick. He did engage the civil powers in “hand-to-hand combat.” But He also did a lot of celebrating.

Jesus frequently went to parties and banquets. He often went fishing, and camping, and hiking. And as our election cycle begins to ramp up once again, we do well to remember that Jesus spent most of His time with people who appeared to offer little to a campaign to change the world.

“To what can I compare this generation?” Jesus asked. *“It is like children playing a game in the public square. They complain to their friends, ‘We played wedding songs, and you didn’t dance, so we played funeral songs, and you didn’t mourn.’ For John [the Baptist] didn’t spend his time eating and drinking, and you say, ‘He’s possessed by a demon.’ The Son of Man, on the other hand, feasts and drinks, and you say, ‘He’s a glutton and a drunkard, and a friend of tax collectors and other sinners!’”* (Matthew 11:16-19).

You’ll remember that the very first miracle Jesus did to display His glory was at a week-long wedding celebration, where His sailor friends helped to cause the wine to run out before the party did (John 2:1-12). And you remember that Jesus then turned 120 or so gallons of ordinary water into wine so delicious that the master of ceremonies was astonished.

Just for a moment, try to imagine the mystery and delight of not just hearing, but seeing the story of Jesus for the very first time, almost as an eyewitness. That’s what happened to a tribe in the jungles of East Asia when missionaries showed them the *Jesus* film, as we showed it every night in Malawi. Not only had these people never heard of Jesus, they had never seen a motion picture. Then, on one unforgettable evening, they saw it all—the gospel in their own language, visible and real.

Imagine how it felt to see this good man, Jesus, who healed the sick and was adored by children, held without trial and beaten by jeering soldiers. As they watched this, the Asian

people came unglued. They stood up and began to shout at the cruel men on the screen, demanding that this outrage stop.

When it didn't stop, they attacked the missionary running the projector. Maybe he was the one responsible for this injustice! The missionary was forced to stop the film and explain that the story wasn't over yet; there was more. So the people settled back onto the ground, trying to hold their emotions in check.

Then came the crucifixion; and again, the people couldn't hold back. They began to weep and wail with such loud grief that the film had to be stopped again. The missionary tried to calm them, explaining that the story still wasn't over; there was more. So the people composed themselves and sat down to see what happened next.

Then came the resurrection. Pandemonium broke out a third time, but for a different reason now. The gathering had spontaneously erupted into a party. The sound now was of deafening jubilation, as the people danced and slapped each other on the back. "Christ is risen!" they shouted. "He is risen indeed!"

As the missionary shut off the projector for the last time, he didn't ask the people to calm down and wait for what was next. All that was supposed to happen—in the story and in their lives—was already happening!³

Like those happy folk, when you and I truly understand and experience the Good News, or when we later remember it, celebration is the only appropriate response. As Philip Yancey put it, "Like a victorious locker room, church is a place to exult, to give thanks, to celebrate the great news that all is forgiven, that God is love, that victory is certain."⁴

Sometimes we just need to get over our reticence and reserve and let worship happen. The Bible says that *David danced before the LORD with all his might* (2 Samuel 6:14). When you and I are at ball games, we stand up, throw our arms into the air, and shout until we can hardly talk. And we know that we're doing something important for our team when we do.

Worship is like that. Worship isn't something we receive. Worship isn't ever something we receive. Worship isn't for us. Worship is something we give—to God. Biblical worship was a lively and a noisy enterprise. Psalm 150 tells us to . . .

*Praise the LORD! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heaven!
Praise him for his mighty works; praise his unequalled greatness!
Praise him with a blast of the ram's horn; praise him with the lyre and harp!
Praise him with the tambourine and dancing; praise him with strings and flutes!
Praise him with a clash of cymbals; praise him with loud clanging cymbals.
Let everything that breathes sing praises to the LORD! Praise the LORD!*

When we lived in Louisville, I attended a Promise Keepers event with a good friend who is a lawyer. Lawyers are not known for ebullience. But as Jack and I stood and sang with 20,000 other men, surrounded by no one we knew, we decided to risk doing what many of them were doing: lifting their hands in worship as we sang. As we did, I was surprised to soon have tears running down my face.

I love formal, contemplative worship—I always have, and I still do—yet I also find that tambourines and cymbals and drums take me to new places with the Lord. I find that being on

³ Ben Patterson, "Resurrection and Pandemonium," www.LeadershipJournal.net, 4.13.04.

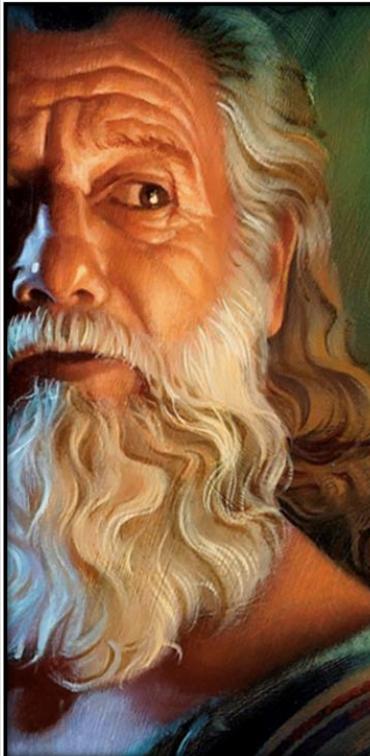
⁴ Philip Yancey, *Leadership*, vol. 8, no. 3.

my knees and lifting my hands in prayer and praise releases something in me that needs to be released. These physical actions somehow unlock places in my spirit that need to be unlocked.⁵

Oh, my friends, there are so many ways in which we unwittingly try to turn Jesus' wine back into water. We're more comfortable that way, thinking that worship is about us, and not about Him. Remember that the Bible says that "*for the happy heart, life is a continual feast*" (Proverbs 15:15). My friend, is your heart happy this morning? Would you say that your life is "a continual feast"? Is there laughter and singing and dancing and celebration in your life?

If not, why not? Let the celebration begin!

⁵ See Job 11:13; Psalm 28:2, 88:9, 134:2, 143:6; Lamentations 2:19, 3:41; 1 Timothy 2:8



| LEVITICUS | |
|------------|--|
| AUTHOR | MOSES |
| WHAT | Holiness: Law & Sacrifice |
| WHERE | Mount Sinai |
| WHEN | 1445-1444 B.C. |
| WHY | A handbook for the priests and Levites outlining their duties in worship, and a guidebook of holy living for the Hebrews |
| KEY PEOPLE | Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, Ithamar |



| LEVITICUS | |
|---|--|
| FIVE OFFERINGS | SEVEN FESTIVALS |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Burnt Offering 2. The Grain Offering 3. The Peace Offering 4. The Sin Offering 5. The Guilt Offering | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Passover 2. Unleavened Bread 3. Firstfruits 4. Pentecost 5. Trumpets 6. Tabernacles 7. The Day of Atonement |

The Festivals

Besides enjoying one Sabbath day of rest each week, the Israelites also enjoyed 19 days when national holidays were celebrated.

| Festival | What It Celebrated | Its Importance |
|--|--|--|
| Passover One day (Leviticus 23:5) | When God spared the lives of Israel's firstborn children in Egypt and freed the Hebrews from slavery | Reminded the people of God's deliverance |
| Unleavened Bread Seven days (Leviticus 23:6-8) | The exodus from Egypt | Reminded the people they were leaving the old life behind and entering a new way of living |
| First Harvest One day (Leviticus 23:9-14) | The first crops of the barley harvest | Reminded the people how God provided for them |
| Harvest (Pentecost) One day (Leviticus 23:15-22) | The end of the barley harvest and beginning of the wheat harvest | Showed joy and thanksgiving over the bountiful harvest |
| Trumpets One day (Leviticus 23:23-25) | The beginning of the seventh month (civil new year) | Expressed joy and thanksgiving to God |
| Day of Atonement One day (Leviticus 23:26-32) | The removal of sin from the people and the nation | Restored fellowship with God |
| Shelters Seven days (Leviticus 23:33-43) | God's protection and guidance in the wilderness | Renewed Israel's commitment to God and trust in his guidance and protection |

Leviticus 19:18

¹⁸ “ *Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.*

Leviticus 20:26

²⁶ *You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.*

Leviticus 26:40-42

⁴⁰ “ *But if they will confess their sins and the sins of their ancestors—their unfaithfulness and their hostility toward me, ⁴¹ which made me hostile toward them so that I sent them into the land of their enemies—then when their uncircumcised hearts are humbled and they pay for their sin, ⁴² I will remember my covenant with Jacob and my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land.*

Leviticus 27:30

³⁰ “ *A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD.*