

Three of Israel's Annual Feasts

Deuteronomy 16

Deuteronomy 16:1-17 - *"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. ² Therefore you shall sacrifice the Passover to the Lord your God, from the flock and the herd, in the place where the Lord chooses to put His name. ³ You shall eat no leavened bread with it; seven days you shall eat unleavened bread with it, that is, the bread of affliction (for you came out of the land of Egypt in haste), that you may remember the day in which you came out of the land of Egypt all the days of your life. ⁴ And no leaven shall be seen among you in all your territory for seven days, nor shall any of the meat which you sacrifice the first day at twilight remain overnight until morning.*

⁵ "You may not sacrifice the Passover within any of your gates which the Lord your God gives you; ⁶ but at the place where the Lord your God chooses to make His name abide, there you shall sacrifice the Passover at twilight, at the going down of the sun, at the time you came out of Egypt. ⁷ And you shall roast and eat it in the place which the Lord your God chooses, and in the morning you shall turn and go to your tents. ⁸ Six days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a sacred assembly to the Lord your God. You shall do no work on it.

⁹ "You shall count seven weeks for yourself; begin to count the seven weeks from the time you begin to put the sickle to the grain. ¹⁰ Then you shall keep the Feast of Weeks to the Lord your God with the tribute of a freewill offering from your hand, which you shall give as the Lord your God blesses you. ¹¹ You shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite who is within your gates, the stranger and the fatherless and the widow who are among you, at the place where the Lord your God chooses to make His name abide. ¹² And you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and you shall be careful to observe these statutes.

¹³ "You shall observe the Feast of Tabernacles seven days, when you have gathered from your threshing floor and from your winepress. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ Seven days you shall keep a sacred feast to the Lord your God in the place which the Lord chooses, because the Lord your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you surely rejoice.

¹⁶ "Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord your God in the place which He chooses: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, at the Feast of Weeks, and at the Feast of Tabernacles; and they shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed. ¹⁷ Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the Lord your God which He has given you."

Background Notes

Seven feasts were celebrated annually in Israel. All seven of these festivals were listed in Leviticus 23 and Numbers 28-29. Some of these festivals were not mentioned in Deuteronomy 16, because in this chapter the emphasis was on the command for Israel to come up to Jerusalem to celebrate three specific feasts. *“Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord your God in the place which He chooses: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, at the Feast of Weeks, and at the Feast of Tabernacles; and they shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed” (v16).*

The phrase *“in the place which He chooses”* was used six times in this chapter (v2, 6, 7, 11, 15 & 16). Remember – when this message was given, the children of Israel were still on the plains of Moab, on the east side of the Jordan River. They had been celebrating the annual feasts in the wilderness for forty years. However, after they crossed the Jordan and came into the Promised Land, the Lord said He would choose a specific location for the central sanctuary where the feasts would be celebrated. The place that the Lord designated was Jerusalem.

Only the males would be required to go up to the central sanctuary in Jerusalem three times a year (v16). Women were not forbidden to go - in fact, entire families were encouraged to go. Verse 11: *“You shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite who is within your gates, the stranger and the fatherless and the widow who are among you, at the place where the Lord your God chooses to make His name abide.”* And verse 14: *“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.”* So while the males were **required** to go three times, it's clear that the women, children and servants were **encouraged** to go to Jerusalem for the festivals if they were able.

As a boy, the Lord Jesus went up to Jerusalem, with His entire family, for Passover (Luke 2). And Jerusalem was always crowded at the time of the feasts. In New Testament times, Jewish people came to Jerusalem from all over the Roman Empire. And not just men - all the people of the congregation and all the covenant community would come to Jerusalem to celebrate the festivals.

So everyone was allowed to go to Jerusalem at the time of the feasts, and they were encouraged to do so, but all the males were commanded to go up to Jerusalem three times a year.

Doctrinal Points

1. Under the Law, Israel celebrated yearly feasts.

Why were the men of Israel required to go up to Jerusalem only three times a year? Why not seven times, for all seven feasts? Several answers to this question could be given:

1. **God is gracious.** Going up to Jerusalem took time and money. It was a long trip from Galilee to Jerusalem! If they had the means, the whole family could come up to Jerusalem for all the feasts, but our gracious God only required the men to come, and only three times in a year.
2. **These three feasts included sacrificial meals.** The people would participate in the sacrifices and the meals at the Tabernacle, and later the Temple.
3. **They could actually be in Jerusalem for six feasts** during two of the trips. The festivals of Passover and Unleavened Bread were almost simultaneous, and the Feast of First Fruits came two days after Passover during the weeklong Festival of Unleavened Bread. And if the people came to Jerusalem two weeks early for the Feast of Tabernacles, they could be in Jerusalem for the Feast of Trumpets (Rosh HaShanah) and the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) as well as the feast of Tabernacles, because these three feasts were celebrated in the same month. So it was possible to be in Jerusalem for all seven feasts with only three required visits.

During Passover (v1-2) the people of Israel remembered their redemption out of Egypt. The Feast of Unleavened Bread (v3-8) emphasized Israel's separation to the Lord, and separation from evil. Leaven symbolized evil, and no leaven was to be in their food or in their homes during this week-long feast. The Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost (v9-12) was a joyous time when the people celebrated the end of harvest. The Feast of Tabernacles, or Booths, (v13-17) was a weeklong festival that commemorated how God cared for Israel during their forty years in the wilderness. Under the Law, Israel celebrated six yearly feasts.

2. Under the Law, Israel appointed godly leaders.

Deuteronomy 16:18-20 - *"You shall appoint judges and officers in all your gates, which the Lord your God gives you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with just judgment. ¹⁹ You shall not pervert justice; you shall not show partiality, nor take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous. ²⁰ You shall follow what is altogether just, that you may live and inherit the land which the Lord your God is giving you."*

The principle of justice was stressed in these verses. Israel was to appoint judges and officers in all their towns. They would essentially be police officers who would carry out the judge's decisions. Notice that all three branches of government were mentioned here: legislative, executive, and judicial. God was the perfect legislating authority because He made the laws. The people were to appoint judges to execute the laws and officers to enforce the laws, thus ensuring that justice was maintained.

Justice was not to be distorted by partiality being shown to special people, like the rich and famous. And no bribes were to be taken. *"You shall not pervert justice; you shall not show partiality, nor take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous"* (v19). We might think that the command about bribes would be so obvious

that God didn't even need to mention it, but remember - this was before the development of the Judeo-Christian tradition that's intrinsic to our culture. Even now, in many countries and cultures, bribes are actually the expected norm, and they're not considered unjust or immoral. But **as God's people, Israel was to be different**. Under the Law, Israel appointed godly leaders.

Practical Application

Remember that there are limits to religious freedom.

Deuteronomy 16:21-22 - *"You shall not plant for yourself any tree as a wooden image near the altar which you build for yourself to the Lord your God. ²² You shall not set up a sacred pillar, which the Lord your God hates."*

There was no "freedom of religion" in Israel! Absolutely no pagan religious cultic objects were to be tolerated in Israel, including the "Asherah trees," or poles dedicated to the worship of the pagan goddess Asherah. The appointed judges and officers (v18) were to treat any departure from God's Law as illegal and immoral. So there was no "freedom of religion" in Israel.

What about in our country today? Our country is not a theocracy, as Israel was. Under our government, we cannot force people to become Christians – and no one can force us to denounce Christianity. So we can be very thankful for the freedom of religion that we enjoy.

But remember - there are limits to religious freedom. For example, the law cannot allow religious cults to practice abuse of children or human sacrifice in the name of "freedom of religion." Those examples are extremes, of course. Usually the lines are not so clearly drawn.

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