

Session 8, Deuteronomy 16 - Feasts

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This is Dr. Cynthia Parker and her teaching on the book of Deuteronomy. This is session 8, Deuteronomy 16 Feasts.

Introduction: Significance of Food

We are starting chapter 16 in Deuteronomy, which means we get to talk about food, which is one of my favorite topics. I love this topic. I think food is amazing. I was a chef in a former career prior to studying Bible. I come from a family who loves to talk about food. So, sometimes we get up in the morning, we decide what we're going to have for dinner, and then we back our way up so that we know what to have for breakfast so that we're ready for dinner. So, food is a vibrant part of our conversation, and I bet it's probably the same with you. We all have no matter which nationality you are, we all have food that speaks to our soul. We have food that when we are the most homesick, we want to eat this bowl of noodles, or we want to eat mom's lasagna. Or we want to eat my brother's steak on the grill. There's something that it speaks to. It goes back to the basic nourishment of us. So, food can be very powerful. Food is like place. Food can hold memories for us.

So, I bet if I were to sit down around a table with you and ask you about the last feast that you had at your house. What were you celebrating? Who is there? Did your mom bring her special dish? Is your brother known for his cherry pie? Who brought what? And what story is contained within that? Because almost always, when I have people around my table, I can get them to talk about

their family history and memories they have associated with the food that they're eating.

All of this, we get to think about and think about the strategy behind it, even in the book of Deuteronomy. So, food is powerful, and food contains memories.

Now, I have a picture here. In fact, this was a meal I had just a few weeks ago. I can look at this picture. I know exactly where I was. I know exactly who was sitting across the table from me as we feasted. And I also know the residual effects of that feast. We talked about that meal for several days afterward. So, food is a container of memories, and we're going to make use of this as we start looking at Deuteronomy 16.

Feasts and Ancient Near Eastern Kings in Contrast to Israel's Feasts

So, Deuteronomy 16 gives us a list of feasts that the Israelites are to enjoy once they go into the land. Now we need to do a little context here because, in the ancient Near East, it was not uncommon to have feasts. But if you have a feast where a nation is gathering or a kind of national feast, the emphasis is always on the king. The king stood in for the gods, and the king was at his own table. He brought the wealthiest of people to sit at the king's table with him, and maybe other people can be feasting too, but they had to be far away from the king. So, he has chosen the people he wants to be around his table. And during that feast, and it may last for several days, but that feast becomes an opportunity to redistribute wealth, to make business deals, to love and adore the king. So, it's all focused on the power and the influence of the king.

This isn't going to be the case for the Israelites. For the Israelites, it becomes again more about the brotherhood, the whole entire nation, and remember that God is their God and the only God.

Feasts and Memory

So, for that, we're going to start looking at feasting as a way to remember God's deeds. And we're going to think about how Deuteronomy centralizes these festivals. So, Deuteronomy is going to use the chosen place as a place to gather all the people together to remember who their God is and who they are as God's people.

Feasts and the Agricultural Calendar

Deuteronomy is also going to connect the feast to the agricultural calendar. So, open with me to Deuteronomy chapter 16. And while we do that, I'm going to put the agricultural calendar that we already looked at in a previous lecture. I'm going to put it back up on the screen.

So, we talked about the rainy season, the dry season. We talked about the activities that the farmer goes through in the course of this agricultural calendar.

So, with this in mind, I'm going to start reading chapter 16. So, it says, "Observe the month of Aviv and celebrate the Passover to the Lord your God. For in the month of Aviv, the Lord your God brought you out of Egypt by night. You shall sacrifice the Passover to the Lord your God from the flock and of the herd in the place where the Lord chooses to establish his name. You shall not eat leavened bread with it. Seven days you shall eat with it unleavened bread, the bread of affliction, for you came out of the land of Egypt in haste so that you may remember all the days of your life, the day when you came out of the land of Egypt. For seven days, no leaven shall be seen with you in all of your territory, and none of the flesh which you sacrifice on the evening of the first day shall remain overnight until morning."

Passover and Unleavened Bread

It continues to go on, basically giving some of the rules of Passover and Unleavened Bread. Now the idea of Passover, we met up with this first in the book of Exodus. In fact, each of these three feasts that we're going to talk about here in Deuteronomy are mentioned in Exodus, in Numbers, in Leviticus, and in Deuteronomy. They all explain the feasts in slightly different ways. In other words, it's not a word-for-word quotation of each other, but they contain the same memory. So here in Deuteronomy, we have Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. They seem to go together. Although, quite distinctly, Passover is the meal that has had, and whatever animal has been sacrificed for that meal, and the meat is consumed in that night.

And then, for seven days, we have unleavened bread so that we remember Egypt and leave Egypt. Now the month of Aviv, what does that mean? Well, the month of Aviv, I mean, the Israelite months, are not exactly the same as the months as our modern-day calendar designates them. It is a moon calendar instead of a sun calendar. So, the dates kind of shift around just a little bit. We find other rules about the Passover, and if you read the Exodus story, in Egypt, the people were just getting ready to harvest barley. And in some of the other designations for when Aviv is, it is when you are harvesting the barley. So, if we look at our agricultural calendar, when barley is harvested, it is the first product out of the ground. Barley is harvested in March or April. So, at the end of the barley harvest, sometime around here in March and April, this is our first festival. So, our first festival is partnered with the very first produce that comes out of the ground.

Feast of Weeks

So, the second festival, in verse 9, it says, "You shall count seven weeks for yourself, and you shall begin to count seven weeks from the time you begin to put the sickle to the standing grain." Then you shall celebrate the Feast of Weeks to the Lord your God, with a tribute of a free-will offering of your hand, which you shall give just as the Lord your God blesses you. And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you, your son, your daughter, your male and female servants, the Levite who is in your town, and the stranger (the ger), and the orphan and the widow in your midst, in the place where the Lord your God chooses to establish his name. You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and you shall be careful to observe these statutes."

So, after you celebrate Passover and the Feast of Weeks, you have seven weeks to count, and that gets you roughly to the area of the time period of May, which means right towards the end of the wheat harvest, you are celebrating the Feast of Weeks. And in Deuteronomy, this is a purely agricultural festival. You have now harvested all of your standing grains, all your cereal crops. You will now have other activities in the field to tend to the summer fruits. But all of the grain has been harvested.

Notice in the Feast of Weeks it talks about who is invited to come-- everyone. And everyone goes to the chosen place, the place where God has chosen to put his name. That is where they gather together as a community to remember God redeemed them out of the house of slavery so that they can now be harvesting from their own land.

Feast of Booths

There's a third festival. So, in verse 13, it says, "You shall celebrate the Feast of Booths seven days after you have gathered in from your threshing floor

and your wine vat. And you shall rejoice in your feasts, you, your son, your daughter, your male and female servants, and the Levite, the stranger, and the orphan and the widow who are in your towns. Seven days, you shall celebrate a feast to the Lord your God in the place which the Lord chooses because the Lord your God will bless you and all of your produce and all the work of your hands so that you'll be altogether joyful."

So, this third festival is when you are done harvesting everything. So, the threshing floor has been cleared, the wine vats have been cleared. This is when you celebrate the Feast of Booths. So, this would be right towards the end of the olive harvest. This is the final product, the final produce that is taken out of the land. And at this time, when you have harvested everything that the earth has to give you, now, you celebrate the Feast of Booths.

Now, Deuteronomy calls it Booths, which is a memory trigger. It calls your mind and your attention back to the wilderness wandering. We talked about this also back in chapter 6, when they were wandering through the wilderness, God provided everything that they needed for them. Their sandals didn't wear out, and they had the water and they had the food that they needed. So, at the end of their agricultural calendar, they have another festival where they remember, just like God provided for their forefathers in the wilderness, God has provided for them here in the land.

So, the very last part of Deuteronomy and again, Feast of Booths, did you recognize, did you hear? Everyone is invited to participate.

What do the Poor Give?

So, in verse 16, it says, "Three times in a year all of 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 the Feast of Booths. And they

shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed. Every man shall give as he is able according to the blessing of the Lord your God, which he has given to you.

That closes out the feast section. Now my question would be, what about because we've had repeated throughout the section that everyone gets to participate, even the ger, even the orphan, even the widow? What do they bring before the Lord? But if everyone gets to participate in this, what if you're not a landowner? What do you have to give? It sounds a little bit like God sitting at the table, as a king inviting the people that he wants. You could start to say it could start to have that image, except that's not what Deuteronomy is saying. Deuteronomy says God is your king, yes. God is the one providing for you, yes. In other words, this feast happens at God's table. God is inviting people, but everyone is welcome to come, not just the landowners.

Recounting the Story

So, let's think just for a moment about how this agricultural year, or should I say this actually, before we jump into another part of Deuteronomy if you notice what the people are celebrating as they go through the year, every agricultural year, they are celebrating that God and Pharaoh went head-to-head and God won. God pulled his people out of an oppressive society. God has given them a land that is producing food for them, and they are receiving the benefit of that. God has provided through the course of the year out of the land everything they need to survive for the year. Just as God provided for the forefathers, so he has provided for them this year.

So, in the course of every single year, the Israelites have recounted the story of who they are and of their Exodus out of oppression into a land where God has given them his Torah, his laws so that they can flourish in the land.

Not only that, but the land itself becomes a memory trigger because as soon as you have barley that is ready for harvest, the barley and the act of harvesting the barley, in and of itself, reminds the people. Alright, every year at this time, when the weather feels like this, when I am participating in this particular activity, I remember who God is. Every year when I finish wheat, this is what I remember. Every year, there's a huge party at the end of the olive harvest because we celebrate the fact we are in our own land and it is God who gave us all of this produce. So, the land itself helps to remind the people.

What do the Poor Do? Provisions for the Poor (Deut. 24)

So, again, it creates a problem for people who don't own land. What do the poor do? Are they left out of these festivals? Do they not get to participate? Does the land not help them remember? This is when it's interesting if we start to partner this idea, festivals connected to the calendar, and the memories associated with the festivals. And if we look at what might seem to be random agricultural laws.

So, if we were to read Deuteronomy 24, turn with me to Deuteronomy chapter 24, verses 19 through 21. So, in verse 19, it says, "When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back and get it. It shall be for the alien, the orphan, the widow in order that the Lord your God may bless you and the work of your hands. When you beat your olive tree, you shall not go over the bows again. It shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not go over it again. It shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. You should remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt. Therefore, I am commanding you to do this thing."

So, now this is interesting if we pull out these laws and we say there are agricultural laws that are there not only to supply dignity for people who are poor, so that the orphan, the widow, and the foreigner can come through and work and sustain themselves. So, there is dignity in the work, and there's generosity on behalf of the landowner. And there is a required self-editing. In other words, the owner of the field cannot pillage everything that he can harvest to the depths of what the field can give him. He takes what he can, and then that little extra bit of margin is left over for the poor, for the orphan, and for the widow.

This says another thing, though, because you will have noticed, as I read those verses, those were laws related to the standing grain, the summer fruit, and the final olive harvest.

So, let the poor harvest from the edges of the field. And now, when everyone gathers at the chosen place to celebrate Passover, everyone has something to bring.

Let them come to the Feast of Weeks. They now also have wheat they can bring. It might be very small, and a landowner's offering might be very large, but they have something. In other words, the land, every barley harvest, and every wheat harvest is now also triggering the memory of even the people on the margins of society. It is the same thing with the olive harvest. So leave olives in the trees, let them go through, and harvest the olives. And now, as the entire community is getting ready to enter into this great big huge feast to celebrate all God has given. Even the poor have an opportunity to contribute to that as well.

Concluding Thoughts on the Feasts

Now, a few concluding thoughts, as we look at Deuteronomy 16 and we think about feasting and identity and storytelling that Deuteronomy is telling the

people to do. The people get to benefit from the harvest only because God is the one who redeemed them out of Egypt. We saw it again. Everyone gets to participate, male, female, slave, landowner, the Levites who didn't have land, a land inheritance for themselves. So, everyone gets to come.

And we see that God is the one who sits at the head of the table, providing in abundance for everyone. God calls his people to act in such a way that everyone gets together with him at the same table.

This is also quite interesting when we think of the fact that Deuteronomy centralizes all of these festivals. So, everyone goes to the chosen place to have these festivals. Because one more thing it does is in that idea that there are cities scattered all over, that there are people in the coastal plain, that there are people farmers up in the hill country, that there are people down in the south. Everyone is receiving different amounts of rain. They all have different types of contexts for daily life, and yet everyone leaves their cities and villages behind in order to go. Remember, they are one people group who share the same story of who their God is.

It also forces people out of the context that gives them their identity. Oftentimes, the places where we live give us an identity with other people who are around us. We are known by our community. So, the wealthy landowners, the not-so-successful landowners, the orphan who is growing up, and yet, when everyone leaves their cities and their villages and goes to the chosen place, they are all equal before God. And so, again, they're leaving behind stereotypes of how other people have judged them to have an opportunity to say, I belong to the story. This God is also my God. And my God has provided a way for me to come and feast and celebrate with him.

And then, every single year, the people rehearse their story before God. They come to his table, and they eat from his table, recognizing that it is his provision from him for them.

We will next, in the next lecture, go into the rest of chapter 16, chapters 17, and 18 to talk about the leadership for the Israelites.

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