

The Jewish Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkot*)

Leviticus 23:33-43, John 7:37-43

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Introduction: The Feast of Sukkot is the third of the three great feasts requiring every Israelite's presence in Jerusalem: Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles. We've been focusing on these fall festivals in Israel because it's that time of year, and today marks that third one, starting five days after atonement. Its Hebrew name, *Sukkot*, means "booths," or huts made of branches. The Israelites were commanded to live in these for the whole week to **remind them of the time their ancestors spent in the wilderness**. According to the law (Ex. 34, Lev. 23), it was to be a time of jubilant celebration lasting eight days; sacred assemblies were to be held on the first and eighth days, and no work was allowed; every day they were commanded to present burnt offerings to the Lord. By the end of the week they would present **a total of 71 young bulls, 15 rams, 105 year-old lambs, and 8 male goats**, with their corresponding grain and drink offerings, plus free-will offerings. So this festival held both historical and agricultural significance: it expressed gratitude for God's guidance and care in their wilderness days, as well as thanksgiving for their harvests (another name for the feast was "ingathering"). This was the culmination of the fall feasts: Feast of Trumpets was about repentance, Day of Atonement was about redemption, Feast of Tabernacles was about rejoicing.

So what were all these feasts, sacrifices, and celebrations intended to accomplish? They were God's **parables** by which He intended to teach His people deep spiritual truths about Himself, about them, their relationships and responsibilities. God was seeking to educate Israel regarding their need and calling, and part of the learning process was getting them to participate actively in religious festivals so they would understand their **active role in His Kingdom**. Basically there were three points to the message:

1) First, the feasts and sacrifices spoke of the tremendous human **need for cleansing**: our sin and guilt aren't some surface abrasion or superficial cut; they're like a deadly wound that needs drastic, constant treatment (at the cross). The Jews' repeated participation in feasts and sacrifices was God's way of drilling into their heads and hearts the seriousness of our condition: unclean, guilty, short of His glory, in rebellion, incapable of communion with Him, deaf and blind, hearts that manufacture corruption and contamination, enslaved, spiritually dead in trespasses. Hence the need for times of repentance, fasting, and sacrifice.

2) A second truth the feasts and sacrifices taught was the **greatness of this God** who in His mercy took such **extreme measures to rescue us**, teach us and guide us in the way. He gave His people the leaders they needed; detailed laws to serve as signposts and parables; the promised land and the temple and the elaborate ceremonies, which all served as parables; prophets to call the leaders and people to account. We have the advantage, from the perspective of history, of being able to see how our loving God sent His own Son to be the ultimate fulfillment of all those feasts, celebrations and ceremonies (Ps. 51:16-17). All the details of the law were pointing to Him, the Lamb of God who would take away the world's sin: the God-man who revealed His Lordship by becoming a servant, imparted life by dying, provided full forgiveness as He let humanity pour out our maximum meanness and cruelty on Him, who became our Shepherd by being our sacrificial Lamb, healed our wounds and brokenness by being wounded Himself and broken unto death.

3) In the third place, the repeated celebrations were intended to promote a **sense of unity and community**, a sense of **belonging to one another**; we're all in this together, both in the failure and the rescue; we're to live out this experience in caring community. If we've come to know God's love, it's to be shared with others! Hence the pilgrimages, assemblies, eating together, giving thanks, and celebrating. An old African proverb says, "If you want to travel fast, go alone. If you want to travel far, go together."

So the feasts were intended to **sensitize the Israelites' hearts to these great spiritual truths**: their need for cleansing, God's great heart of grace, and the living community where this reality was meant to be fleshed out and shared. Yet the Israelites often fell into a routine and went to sleep; their worship turned to lip service; they only went through the motions of their offerings, but their hearts were far from God. So what about our situation in the church? Is it any different from theirs? We've also been given certain celebrations intended to remind us of what God has done for us, parables pointing to our enormous need, His gracious generosity, and the solidarity meant to characterize our relationships. But often the repetition of these good acts can dull our senses, even put us to sleep. We're creatures of habit, used to routines, so we disconnect our brain and heart; we stop paying attention, become absorbed in ourselves and our own problems. So the church often tends to domesticate Jesus and His message, "toning Him down," softening some of those strong words of His so that we can excuse our not being as radical as He was in His love and obedience. Our "tamed down version" of Jesus is no better than the Gnostic version popular today, or Dan Brown's version in *The Da Vinci Code*. They are false images because they miss the essential radical nature of this holy and loving Creator-Messiah, who gives us the only viable solution to our sin problem and calls us to follow Him! What will it take to sensitize our hearts to the depths of His truth and the impact it can have on our lives? Let's observe three brief portraits of the Israelites' celebration of **Tabernacles**, and see what we can glean:

1) First scenario: 1 Kings 8.

King Solomon is leading the people in the dedication of his temple, which took place during the Feast of Tabernacles, and one of his first acts was to bring the ark of the covenant into the inner sanctuary of the temple, as well as the Tent of Meeting and all its furnishings. The Lord Yahweh had been dwelling in a temporary shelter since the days of Moses, and now His presence would be associated with this magnificent temple Solomon had built: **"a place for Him to dwell forever"** (v. 13). It was a grand celebration, and the king and all Israel with

him offered a multitude of sacrifices before the LORD: 22,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep and goats (v. 63); it must have seemed like an enormous week-long barbecue!

In the middle of the Israelites' rejoicing, the Lord's glory filled the temple with a cloud, such that the priests could no longer minister. So in Solomon's prayer he acknowledged that God was too great to be contained in that beautiful temple they were dedicating to Him: ***"Will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built! Yet give attention to your servant's prayer and his plea for mercy, O LORD my God."*** What we should take note of here is not only how that magnificent temple wasn't able to contain God, but also the contrast with those temporary shelters the Israelites lived in for that week! Those booths deteriorated quickly and lost their original beauty, just like our human bodies do! And yet God is so humble and eager to rescue us that He really prefers to come and dwell in the temporary shelter of our lowly bodies! Paul's metaphor in 2 Corinthians 5:1 may well have come from meditating on that visible contrast at Feast of Tabernacles!

2) Second scenario: after the exile.

When Zerubbabel and 42,000 Jews returned to Jerusalem, in the seventh month they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles (Ezra 3), even though the temple had not yet been reconstructed! All they needed was an altar. And that celebration marked the launching of the rebuilding of the temple. So in the days of Nehemiah, when the second temple was standing (smaller and less glorious than the first), another Feast of Tabernacles is recorded. Ezra reads from the law to the people from dawn till noon; the Levites translate from the Hebrew to Aramaic (Neh. 8); and as the Word is read, the people begin to weep from deep conviction! Can we see ourselves in this mirror? Do we allow the Word of God to have that kind of power over us? The result of that celebration was a revival of God's people that helped see them through those difficult days! Don't you suspect we need that as well?! What if we allowed God's Word to so overshadow us that it dominated our thoughts, actions, and relationships? And the fire of God's truth and grace burned so brightly in our lives that it caught on among those around us. Nehemiah reports that afterward the people went and feasted and shared their food with those who were lacking (which is what we're doing this month too through our World Hunger offering!). The other OT mentions of this Feast have to do with end times and the restoration of all things (Ez. 45, Zech. 14), symbols of the abundance and rejoicing that will come from the unity of all nations under the kingship of Christ.

3) Third scenario: when this feast was celebrated in the NT (Jn. 7).

On the last day of the feast, Jesus took advantage of a special ceremony the Jews celebrated during that week: the water libation ceremony, reminiscent of Moses' calling water out of the Rock. They would draw water from the Pool of Siloam, which was associated with the ***"wells of salvation"*** (Is. 12:3). Then they would pour it out on the altar in the temple, which to them was symbolic of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit in the coming days of the Messiah. John's gospel tells us that on the last day of that feast, Jesus stood up and cried out with a loud voice: ***"If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'"*** Everyone there heard that message and knew He was claiming to

be the Messiah; they heard Him promise the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit to those who trusted in Him, and that Spirit would flow like living streams, not like the little trickling spring of Gihon that fed the Pool of Siloam, but the true fulfillment of our thirst, even in the deserts of our lives! Jesus was saying in effect, “I am the reality that the water in this ceremony symbolizes, the true life-giver, the One who imparts the Spirit of life to all those who will put their faith in me.” That means He’s the one who’s really worth rejoicing over – the real fulfillment of this Feast! The One who personalizes for us those deep lessons: our neediness, the greatness of God’s response, and our belonging to one another in Him!