

Preparing For The Feast

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All of us look upon the Feast of Tabernacles as a very special time of the year. It is an exhilarating climax to one year that generates a "high" to prepare us for the next, enabling us to get through many a rough spot. Very few of us take the Feast for granted. In the Feast, spiritual and physical fulfillment combine, and we anticipate it with hopeful expectation of joy exceeding that of any other time. Yet hardly anybody in the world around us—even those who profess that the Bible is the instruction book for their religion—has even heard of it, let alone knows anything about it.

Interestingly, "rejoice" appears for the first time in the Scriptures within the instructions for the Feast of Tabernacles:

Speak to the children of Israel, saying: "The fifteenth day of this seventh month shall be the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days to the LORD. . . . These are the feasts of the LORD which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations, to offer an offering made by fire to the LORD. . . . And you shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of beautiful trees, branches of palm trees, the boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and ***you shall rejoice*** before the LORD your God for seven days. You shall keep it as a feast to the LORD for seven days in the year. It shall be a statute forever in your generations. You shall celebrate it in the seventh month. You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All who are native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God." (Leviticus 23:34, 37, 40-43)

Deuteronomy 16:15 uses an even stronger phrase in relation to rejoicing and the feasts: "so that ***you [shall, KJV] surely rejoice*** ." The wording is so strong we might be misled into thinking it is to be one big blast! Make no mistake, He desires us to rejoice, but *He wants us to rejoice with purpose*. If we are not rejoicing with His purpose in mind, we will have merely titillated our senses.

Isaiah 5:11-12 gives a vivid picture of the wrong kind of "rejoicing":

Woe to those who rise early in the morning, that they may follow intoxicating drink; who continue until night, till wine inflames them! The harp and the strings, the tambourine and flute, and wine are in their feasts; but they do not regard the work of the LORD, nor consider the operation of His hands.

In this context, "feast" does not necessarily imply a holy day. However, it shows that we can have the good things of life as a blessing from God, yet misuse them by removing God and His purpose from their proper enjoyment.

In Leviticus 23, rejoicing is seen in context with, and is subordinate to, dwelling in booths. The Feast is kept not merely to rejoice, but also because the Lord made the Israelites live in booths when He brought them out of Egypt. The booths served as the focal point to remind the Israelites of something God did so that they could rejoice with understanding. Thus, this festival is also called the Feast of Booths.

The serious purpose of the Feast is further illustrated in Numbers 29, where God lists the sacrifices He commanded to be offered to Him at each festival. He required 189 animal sacrifices be made at the Feast of Tabernacles alone—more than all the other holy days combined! Remember, a sacrifice is a freely given offering and represents the giving of the self (Romans 12:1-2). So God seems to expect more sacrifice from His people at the Feast of Tabernacles than at any other time of the year.

More Than a Vacation

The Feast also has overtones of a vacation. God wants us to leave behind our normal residences and activities, and travel to the place where He has set His name. But it has a far higher and greater purpose than just a vacation! *Vacate* means "to surrender possession, to set aside." A vacation is "an interlude from one's customary routine; freedom from duty and responsibility." The Feast is an interlude from one's customary routine, but freedom from duty and responsibility it certainly is not!

In Jesus' day, many leading Jews observed the festival in a way God never intended. In Mark 7:6-9, Jesus accused the Pharisees of rejecting the commandments of God that they might keep their own traditions. They had not stopped observing such things as the Feast of Tabernacles; their problem was in a different area. Paul shows in Romans 10:1-3 that the Jews' zeal for God was "not according to knowledge." They were guilty of gross misinterpretation of the Scriptures.

Their worship was merely outward. To this day, many Jews observe the rituals and customs as ceremonial necessities, obscuring their God-intended purpose. It is a warning to us because we, too, can turn the Feast into little more than a perfunctory observance. We can say, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness," while in our hearts we seek our own dominant position and advancement. We can say, "A day in His courts is better than a thousand," yet spend time with Him only when commanded. What kind of close and loving relationship is that?

When we ritualize an event, it becomes trivialized. It deceives us into believing we are okay because we carry out our duties despite what our hearts are like. We need to view the Feast as an opportunity to grow closer to God and our fellow Christians, as we immerse ourselves in eight days of intensive learning and fellowship. Otherwise, it is just an exercise, a mere ritual.

The Deceitfulness of Riches

Mark 4:18-19 brings another principle to bear on the proper observance of the Feast. Verse 19 names a destructive, unholy trinity: "the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things." Wealth is deceitful because it can impart a false sense of security to its possessors. When a certain amount of anxiety and desire is added to money's power, the three together can keep up a constant drumming on the mind to do something with it. This, in turn, distracts one from giving himself in true service to God. Yet, for most of us, if we have saved our second tithe faithfully, we have more wealth available to us at the Feast than at any other time of the year. God has given us the responsibility to control its use over a week or so.

Have you ever noticed how Hollywood portrays the stereotypical religious person? Invariably he is drab in dress and dull of personality—generally timid, fumbling and insecure. Rarely, if ever, is he shown in a position of leadership. The screenwriters and directors seem to operate on the theory that if one has God, he will have nothing else. Life will be boring. They depict it like this because our society's religions generally project it this way.

Perhaps a Christian's most persistent trial springs from this. All too often, the real Christian has the same, "Hollywood" attitudes in his mind because he came out of this world. This idea is entirely and absolutely wrong!

Was the apostle Paul's life depressingly boring? His writings ring with enthusiasm, zeal and excitement! Has anyone ever had as many adventures in the performance of his job as Paul? Were Noah, Abraham, Moses and David's lives dull and boring? Were their relationships with God the driving force in their lives? Were they leaders? Were their lives filled to the brim and running over with adventure? They were certainly not dull of personality!

Our most persistent, day-to-day trial is to keep this world from deflecting us from God's great purpose. These men of the Bible achieved that—but not without a struggle. Just like them, the world is in us. We carry it everywhere we go—its concepts are in our minds. We cannot forget that! We must deal with it and overcome it! Booths, the Feast of Tabernacles and rejoicing have very much to do with helping us fight this problem.

"Seek First the Kingdom of God"

Paul writes, "But indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:8). Paul was committed! He certainly did not seem to think His Christian life was boring, or he would not have suffered the loss of all his worldly wealth (and he lost more than just money). The only solution we have is to do what Paul did: take up Jesus' challenge. We must truly seek God's Kingdom first, and let Him add all these other things, as Jesus promised.

One of this world's evangelists said, "It takes five percent effort to win a person to Christ and ninety-five percent effort to keep him in Christ and growing to maturity." There are two closely related reasons for this. First, one fails initially to count the cost so that he truly understands commitment to Christ (Luke 14:26-33). Second, once committed, one fails to think about events and attitudes in his life in relation to the Kingdom of God. Without this, a Christian never gets past the surface of the teachings.

This results in a person with so many interests in life that the most important one is crowded out. Or, conversely, he is consumed with a single interest other than seeking the Kingdom of God, and it is crowded out. If a Christian fails to prioritize properly, he neglects the most important one. That is a choice. Most of us tend to fall into the first category where everything is the same size and importance. We have no single great priority.

Confusion results when things are poorly defined. A schoolboy once scanned a list of the chief causes of death. He could not pronounce one disease unknown to him, so he spelled it out to his parents: "M-i-s-c-e-l-l-a-n-e-o-u-s."

A young woman attended a lecture given by Arnold Bennett, author of *How To Live On 24 Hours a Day*. After the lecture she told him, "I am going to concentrate." "On what?" he said. "On lots of things," she replied!

How many Christians have failed to grow as they should—how many will die the second death—because their commitment wanes, buried under an avalanche of miscellaneous activities. When we concentrate on many things, we concentrate on nothing.

Deuteronomy 14:22-23, 26 clarifies a portion of the Feast's purpose.

You shall truly tithe all the increase of your grain that the field produces year by year. And you shall eat before the LORD your God, in the place where He chooses to make His name abide, the tithe of your grain and your new wine and your oil, of the firstborn of your herds and your flocks, *that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always*. . . . And you shall spend the money for whatever your heart desires; for oxen or sheep, for wine or similar drink, for whatever your heart desires; you shall eat there before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your household.

God commands us to keep the Feast 1) to enjoy the fruits of our labor and His blessing and 2) to learn. This emphasis on learning is why the Feast is not a vacation, though it is a pleasant interlude in our annual calendar. Learning takes effort, and depending on our intensity, it can be wearying. At the same time, it can also be fulfilling and rewarding because accomplishment produces a sense of well-being.

Learning to Fear God

We are to learn to fear God. This fear covers all the ground from a mere bothersome concern that plays around the edges of the mind; through a deep, abiding and reverential respect of which we have a constant, comfortable awareness; to occasional sheer terror. It arises from the knowledge of being in God's presence or knowing that He is personally aware of us and what we are doing.

This fear has the power either to attract us to God or repel us from Him. Moses was attracted when he saw the burning bush, as was Jacob at Bethel when he dreamed of the ladder. They must have had a sense of what was happening within the context of God's purpose. Yet because of his sin, Adam was repelled when he hid from God in the garden.

Learning to fear God fits into a greater theme and purpose than just the Feast of Tabernacles. But perhaps the importance of learning to fear Him through the Feast can be understood by an illustration involving money.

Deuteronomy 16:16 commands all males to appear before God at His feasts. Chapter 14 verse 22 tells us to tithe truly, completely, in full understanding, to ensure we have the money to attend them. Now, consider that this tithe should equal the first tithe. Our former church organization told us that about 80 percent of its income came from members. If the annual income was about \$160 million, then \$128 million of tithes and offerings came from members. If, say, \$48 million of that \$128 million was from offerings, then around \$80 million came from members' tithes. The amount of festival tithe should have been an equal amount. Since we spent most of our festival tithe at the Feast of Tabernacles, church members worldwide spent approximately **\$80 million dollars** in about two weeks while keeping the Feast of Tabernacles!

These figures are not intended to be exact, but they do illustrate the importance God places on the Feast of Tabernacles. Consider this staggering amount God has us set aside to help us rejoice and learn to fear Him at the same time.

Strangers and Pilgrims

When in their history did Israel dwell in booths? Israel kept the Feast in booths because their forefathers dwelt in them while in the wilderness *before* God brought them into the Promised Land (Leviticus 23:42-43). We can extract two related, vivid, purposeful and spiritual lessons for us.

To some, living in booths may suggest privation or a lack of amenities. But privation is not associated with rejoicing. Notice the wording in Leviticus 23:40: "fruit of beautiful trees, branches of palm trees, the boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook." This implies, not a ramshackle hovel, but the best and most beautiful shelter that could be constructed under the circumstances. Think of this in terms of hotels: We can hardly say hotels are austere and we are in great privation. No, the first purpose of booths is to teach temporariness, impermanence and vanity.

I Peter 2:11 confirms that under the New Covenant we, too, should consider ourselves aliens and pilgrims in relation to this world. We live here as co-heirs of the earth with Christ, but we are to live our lives as if we are just passing through on the way to our inheritance. A pilgrim is a person out of his own country, in a foreign land. He does not intend to put down roots there but is heading elsewhere toward a definite goal. Thus, his life is always in transition. He should not view himself as permanently anchored to the society in which he lives.

Hebrews 11:13-16 confirms this quite strongly:

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.

Was Abraham a pilgrim? God promised him Canaan as his home, but as far as he could physically see, it belonged to others. He never owned any of it except for a small portion in which to bury his loved ones. He could not settle down and take root within the community because of the life to which God called him. Abraham, despite receiving great material prosperity from God, lived a nomadic existence as "the Father of the Faithful."

James writes, "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world" (James 1:27). Since we are not literally wandering, this verse is a simple statement of faith's responsibility. We are to keep this world's system and ways at arm's length by not letting it squeeze us into its mold (Romans 12:2), demonstrating a simple and sincere devotion to God through compassionate relationships with others, especially those who are weaker.

God's Providence

A second spiritual lesson of booths is that despite the Israelites' weak position while wandering the wilderness, God supplied all their needs. The booths are a memorial of God's grace, care and protection on our pilgrimage.

A stiff wind could flatten a booth or at the very least blow the leaves away, exposing the interior to the elements and leaving the inhabitants at their mercy. Even as the booth *appears* to be a symbol of privation, it also *seems* to be a symbol of weakness and vulnerability. However, the opposite is true because of what God did.

"And there will be a tabernacle [booth] for shade in the daytime from the heat, for a place of refuge, and for a shelter from storm and rain" (Isaiah 4:6). The context is a prophecy that shows Zion becoming a place of refuge, a secure retreat in time of trouble. A booth's use depends on the situation. In the wilderness, the booth provided adequate shelter because God was always overseeing the protection and care of His people. The booth thus symbolizes the plenteous fullness of God's providence.

Deuteronomy 8 reveals to us the meaning of what we experience as a pilgrim.

And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you **ALL THE WAY** these forty years in the wilderness, to **humble** you and **test** you, to **know what was in your heart**, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, **that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD.** (Deuteronomy 8:2-3)

By means of trials, God seeks to help us see our need and our dependence on Him. We absolutely must learn that life—both physical and spiritual—depends on what God supplies. Our reaction to the trials reveals what is in our heart, that is, what really motivates us. Humiliation proves what is really there. He puts us into distress to make us become aware of our needs. He wants to see whether we will live by faith, depending upon Him to supply those needs. He needs to see whether we will keep His commands, even when a need might be supplied by disobeying them.

Brethren, things happen to those of faith so that we might possess qualities of mind, character and heart that would otherwise not be available to us. We can take these qualities through the grave and into the Kingdom of God. Jesus says in John 15:5, "Without Me you can do nothing." The fruits of God's Spirit can be produced through faith only in cooperation with God in His purpose as we proceed on our pilgrimage.

Learning Discipline

At the Feast, God commands us to show Him at least a small part of what is in our hearts. He wants us to go to services every day to confront Him on a personal basis. We are to keep the Feast "to the Lord *for seven days*" (Leviticus 23:41), not just on the holy days. He wants to see our reaction to that. At home we could easily avoid it.

Being at the Feast is a spiritual equivalent of being in the land enjoying the fruits of His blessing. God occasionally provides even a measure of hardship at the Feast, but it is not given in wrath. He is trying to teach us discipline. He wants us to consider if we have forgotten Him or put Him in a secondary position at the Feast. Has He not supplied our need to enable us to be there? He has given us not just the money, but all the experiences of the past year that helped to shape us into what we are now. Has He been involved in our lives in this way?

What gets the emphasis at the Feast? The daily confrontation with God at services and prayer? Or the sightseeing, shopping, entertainment or other distractions from the spiritual purpose of the Feast? These activities are not evil, but we must learn to prioritize and discipline ourselves to emphasize the spiritual.

With prosperity comes the ever-present danger of pride that begets forgetfulness. This form of pride is especially insidious because without realizing it, pride moves us to deify the self. It makes us pay an inordinate amount of attention to "Number One." So God gives us prosperity at the Feast to see how we handle it.

We have to learn what is real and true. It may seem paradoxical, but reality lies in the realm of spiritual faith. Where are we looking for our sustenance? What is the goal of our lives? The physical is "real," but it is transitory, illusory and vain. The spiritual is eternal and truly satisfying.

Psalms 78 gives a clear and concise history of Israel's relationship with God. The psalmist illustrates four steps that led to their rebellion:

1. They forgot God's goodness (verse 11).
2. They tested God by insisting that He satisfy their lusts (verses 18-19).
3. They played moral hide-and-seek with God, which is hypocrisy; they served Him only when they discovered for the moment they could not escape Him (verses 35-37).
4. Finally, they substituted idols for God at the center of their lives (verses 57-58).

Israel never got the true picture. Because they were walking by sight, and not by faith, they were so impressed with what they saw that they limited God's ability to create His heart and mind in them (verse 41).

Grasping Reality

In a succinct form, Ephesians 3:14-21 contains God's spiritual purpose. He is working toward sharing the riches of His glory with His entire Family. His primary purpose is to prepare His people for living in the inheritance—eternally. To this end, Paul prays that we might utilize our spiritual privileges to the full and be strengthened in the inner man. He asks that "Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith" and that we be "rooted and grounded in love."

God is concerned about the inner man. That is the part in us by which we are able to recognize and grasp spiritual realities. By it, we make the choices that will lead to the fulfillment of God's purpose for us. It is this part of us that walks by faith. God will "exceedingly abundantly" provide for us within the context of His purpose (verse 20), even as He did for Israel in the wilderness. They appeared so vulnerable, weak and exposed while living in the open in booths, but they had everything they needed. He promises to "provide all [our] need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19).

We generally expound II Corinthians 13:5 during the spring festival season, but it always applies. "Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Prove yourselves." Here, "faith" is used in the sense of **the** truth. Those who are in the truth live by faith. They live according to their beliefs in

God. The truth is the center of their lives, and by it they direct and choose the course of their lives. The Feast of Tabernacles involves seeing if we are living by faith or sight. It shows whether we are led by God's Spirit or carnality. It reveals whether we can separate temporal vanity from spiritual reality.

God is very concerned not only with *what* we do, but also *why* we do it. This makes fearing God vitally important. Doing everything in relation to Him and His purpose converts ordinary, mundane acts to ones of spiritual significance. If we have a deep and abiding respect for Him and His Word—arising from an awareness that He personally is a part of our lives and has great, awe-inspiring plans for us—we have a powerful motivation to make choices based on faith in Him.

We can easily make the acceptance of Christian faith a substitute for living it. Jesus says, "But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do the things which I say?" (Luke 6:46). Each person must do his own examination. One may hear a sermon that affects him, and be shown where he is wrong, but true conviction of wrong is not reached until one sees his sin and condemns himself. The fear of God works this in us.

In II Corinthians 13:11 Paul admonishes us to strive for completion. He urges a positive, steady advance in right living and attitudes. The Feast of Tabernacles is a means God created to help us be prepared and completed for His Kingdom.

Booths help us to reflect back on God's provision which Israel forgot. Despite our unsettled position in this world, we can recognize that God has supplied all our needs. At the same time, booths remind us of our present position as a pilgrim without roots in this world. If we are walking by faith, tabernacles help us to orient ourselves toward the Kingdom of God. Anyone who walks with a destination in mind looks to where he is headed.

All these things work to strengthen our faith to go on by focusing our attention on things important to God's purpose. Our attention is focused by a concentrated dose of God's Word. As He has done in the past, He will faithfully continue to do those things in the present and future as long as we remain faithful to Him.

Keep the Feast and rejoice! But do it with purpose. Examine yourself and apply yourself this year to learning to fear God.