

The Feast Of Tabernacles And Unleavened Bread

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Given 14-Oct-19; Sermon #FT19-01s-PM

The human brain may be the pinnacle of the physical creation, continually challenging the best scientists to understand its intricacies, its complexity, and its beautiful operation. God has furnished our brain with astounding abilities, yet the brain also has features that could be considered limitations, particularly when it comes to memory. The brain stores a fantastic amount of information, but not all the information is always available. In our memory, there is a hierarchy of priority. Some things are always at the forefront of our minds, while others fade away with time.

Our memory works best with what is continually practiced. We remember what we use most often, and our neural pathways become optimized to recall those bits of information that are frequently called to mind. In other words, we enhance our memory through practice. It is a simple principle, and it is at work constantly in our lives, and yet if we do not apply it, we can shoot ourselves in the feet, spiritually speaking.

This principle of remembering through practice is part of the reason that God instituted the Sabbaths. The emphasis God puts on His Sabbaths shows how foundational they are, and that they should never be far from our thoughts. When God's people stop remembering the Sabbaths, all those crucial memories and guiding principles from God are lost, as the neural pathways are re-optimized for whatever has become the new practice.

With this in mind, please turn to the Feast of Tabernacles instructions in Leviticus 23:

Leviticus 23:39-43 'Also on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the fruit of the land, you shall keep the feast of the LORD for seven days; on the first day there shall be a sabbath-rest, and on the eighth day a sabbath-rest. 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.’ ”

The Feast days are memorials. They help to establish the right memories, and those memories help to keep us pointed in the right direction. Here we are told to stay in temporary dwellings to remember—to mentally prioritize—that God made Israel dwell in booths when He brought them out of Egypt. The Feast is a memorial of transitoriness, of impermanence, of complete dependence on God to supply the need during times of unsettledness. Our keeping of the Feast today is not complete without remembering the exodus and the wilderness journey.

There is a humorous backstory to the name of this Feast. The Jews call this Feast *Sukkot*, which is the Hebrew word for tabernacle, tent, or booth. However, it is also the name of the first place the Israelites camped after leaving Ramses in Egypt. They camped in *Succoth*, which is the same word as *sukkot*, except that it is plural. So, the Israelites stayed in booths in the place that was *already* named “booths.” Now, *why* was there an area already named Succoth, or “booths”? The answer is found in Genesis 33:17:

Genesis 33:17 And Jacob journeyed to Succoth, built himself a house, and made booths for his livestock. Therefore the name of the place is called Succoth.

So, the place the Israelites camped was named after the dwellings Jacob made for his animals. It is a humbling memorial that, in many ways, the Israelites were like a herd of sheep. Like sheep, their every need had to be supplied, and someone had to take care of them. That is not very flattering, but it is a reality in the background of the Feast. I fervently hope that Martin can continue to find temporary dwellings for us that do not involve livestock. But this history can help us to approach the Feast with the right mindset.

As the years went by, Israel lost sight of God. They still practiced some of God's instructions, but without the right mindset, the practice by itself was not enough to make memories that were spiritually profitable. By the time God sent prophets to warn His people, the feast days were so unrecognizable to God that He called them "your feasts."

If you would turn to Amos 5, you can see this. In verse 21, God says, "I hate, I despise your feast days, and I do not savor your sacred assemblies." Those are strong words from Israel's Creator. In verses 22-23, He says that even though they were making sacrifices and playing music, which were ostensibly done to honor Him, He would not accept them.

In verse 24, God gives His perspective, which was that the nation was badly lacking in justice and righteousness. This was not limited to feast-time. The problem was that during the rest of the year, they did not have godly and upright dealings with other people, so their attempts to honor God at the Feast did not fit with who they were at home. It was not enough for Israel to just show up. For the Feast to be profitable, Israel needed to practice God's way throughout the year. The Feast is a harvest, and the Israelites showed up with the fruit of the land and the increase of their flocks. But the harvest that God was interested in was spiritual, embodied by right living, and this harvest consistently failed in Israel.

The Israelites' approach missed the elements that were important because they forgot the reasons for the Feast. They forgot their humble start as a nation that needed to be rescued; a nation that owed its Creator everything, but which overlooked Him in its business and even its worship. They paid Him lip-service, sang songs that invoked His name, and made offerings, but they left the Feast unchanged. When people encounter God in some way, they come away changed. Yet the Israelites' lack of change was evidence they were not encountering God at the Feast, largely because they were not really seeking Him there.

Now, we are going to bring something else into this. Maybe it seems unusual that the instructions for this Feast contain the exodus, something that we associate with the spring feasts. That is not an accident. The 8 feasts—that is, Passover plus the 7 holy days—are arranged in an intriguing way. In the

spring, the first feast day—Passover—is attached to, and followed by, a week-long observance: Unleavened Bread. In the fall, the final feast day is also a single day—the 8th Day—and it is attached to and preceded by a week-long observance, which we are keeping now. Just in that configuration, we see that what we observe later in the year is a mirror of what we observe at the beginning of the year. This is part of a deliberate structure that is found throughout God's instructions.

This structure is called a chiasm. It describes a configuration where the first item in a list corresponds to the last item in the list. Then the second item relates to the second-to-last item, and so forth. Well, the 8 feasts have such an arrangement. Passover relates to the 8th Day. The 1st Day of Unleavened Bread relates to the first day of Tabernacles, and so on through all the feast days. When we identify the commonalities between the spring and fall feasts, it helps us to understand what God wants us to remember and learn from these special days.

So, this 1st day of the Feast relates to the 1st Day of Unleavened Bread. We've already seen one commonality. The Israelites camped at Succoth, or the place of booths, as they journeyed from Ramses on the first day of unleavened bread. If you think about it, what happened on that day forms the foundation for keeping this Feast. The reason we stay in temporary dwellings is to practice what God made the Israelites do on the 1st Day of Unleavened Bread.

A second commonality is that both feasts involve dwellings. Exodus 12 says that by the 1st Day of Unleavened Bread, all the leaven was to be removed from their houses, and no leaven was to be found in their houses for the entire week. Houses are dwellings that are made to last. They represent being settled. But booths are temporary. They are adequate for shelter, but they also remind us that there is a goal, a destination, the requires that we set aside some of the niceties and comforts of home for the sake of an endeavor that is far more significant. We sacrifice some comfort and stability for the sake of being led by God Himself.

A third commonality is that both feasts focus on eating. The Feast of Unleavened Bread has food right in its name. The Israelites left Egypt with a

very short amount of time to prepare, so they could not make their bread like they normally would. God calls it “the bread of affliction,” because it is simply not as satisfying as bread that has time to rise.

So, the Feast of Unleavened Bread intends that we be in our own homes, which gives us comfort and stability, but our physical bread is lackluster, and usually we are relieved to return to normal bread. That Feast keeps us somewhat off-balance, because a restricted diet affects a major part of our lives. Nothing touches us like food does. When our diet is missing something we normally enjoy, it is impossible to ignore, and that experience reinforces the lessons, if we approach that Feast in the right way.

If you would turn to Deuteronomy 14, we will see the food aspect of Tabernacles:

Deuteronomy 14:22-26 “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. But if the journey is too long for you, so that you are not able to carry the tithe, or if the place where the LORD your God chooses to put His name is too far from you, when the LORD your God has blessed you, then you shall exchange it for money, take the money in your hand, and go to the place which the LORD your God chooses. And you shall spend that 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

This Feast also keeps us a little off balance. During this Feast, our food is normal and even abundant, but we don’t have the comfort of our homes. We rejoice in the abundance of what God has provided this year, but we do so in dwellings that are lacking things that our own dwellings have. During Unleavened Bread, our food is missing something. During Tabernacles, our dwellings are missing something.

In looking at these two Feasts together, we see that God often does not give us everything we might like. He provides abundantly, but where He holds back a little, it prompts us to think on what is missing, and to reason through why we might not have that thing that we are convinced would make our lives complete. God's providence is perfect, and it falls short only in our preferences or expectations. Those things that are lacking in our estimation are often deliberately placed before us to help us remember that God's will is what matters, and that having it all is not good for us. Sometimes, that can be hard to accept.

If it is any consolation, God allowed one man to have absolutely everything physical that he could want, and he observed that it was all vanity and grasping for the wind. It did not truly satisfy him, and it would be the same for us. Solomon concluded that what really mattered was exactly what this Feast teaches us: to fear God and keep His commandments. But Solomon still had all his prosperity, and just knowing that right conclusion intellectually did not keep him from turning away from God, because he did not practice what he learned.

This lesson also relates to Unleavened Bread, because it teaches that true satisfaction cannot come from anything physical, but only from the Bread of Life—through feeding on the life of Jesus Christ. To the world, that Bread seems lackluster, and even revolting, but those who know Him experience the sense of well-being that comes from a growing relationship. It delivers the contentment, joy, and satisfaction that eluded Solomon.

Coming back to the eating aspect of the Feast of Tabernacles, in Deuteronomy 14:23, God says the reason we save our tithes and eat before Him is to learn to fear Him always. When we practice this memorial correctly, it instills the proper reverential awe of God, as we experience Him acting and providing and working things out.

And so, God wants us to rejoice in the abundance that He has given, which is why He calls it a feast. But God also places some hedges. As it says, the reason for enjoying the abundance is learning to fear God, but not all rejoicing or feasting instills the correct fear of God. The Israelites ate and

they rejoiced, but it was not truly “before the Lord,” because He was not at the forefront of their minds. Their keeping of the Feast did not increase their respect or awe of Him, because they didn’t really seek Him at the Feast.

They didn’t approach the Feast from the perspective of a nation that had been weak and unable to provide for itself, and in need of God’s providence at every turn. They forgot the reasons for the temporary dwellings, forgot the lessons of the wilderness journey, and forgot that being God’s people means that often our lives do not go in a straight line, nor include all we might want or expect.

The lessons of gratitude, contentment, and trust in God may seem basic, but the fact that God requires us to practice them means they are foundational. God has had His people reinforce them, year after year, for thousands of years, so the lessons become ingrained as we keep the Feast with God deliberately at the forefront of our minds.

God has given us the opportunity to succeed where Israel failed—to keep the Feast as a memorial, to remember Israel’s experience, but also to remember our own beginnings with God, when we endured privations and inconveniences joyfully, eager to understand God and His way, looking to Him to supply every need since He tabernacles within us.