

What Makes For A Good Feast Of Tabernacles?

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Given 03-Oct-20; Sermon #FT20-01s-PM

We are going to begin this afternoon in the book of Nehemiah, if you would turn there with me. Nehemiah tells the story of a people recently allowed to go back to their land after 70 years in captivity. Chapter 8 contains the deeply moving record of the people as they are returning to God's way. The first two-thirds of Nehemiah 8 take place on the Feast of Trumpets, and I will summarize and draw your attention to a few things in this very inspiring example.

The account begins with Ezra bringing the book of the law before the assembly, and he reads it before everyone who could understand, from morning until noon. Verse 5 says that when Ezra opened the book, all the people stood up. Their response to the Scriptures may be hard for us to imagine. Today we are blessed in that the Bible is no longer rare, far from it. But with that ubiquity comes familiarity, such that the Bible is now just one viewpoint among many, and it is increasingly scorned because humanism believes that it has advanced beyond such primitive things. Very few cherish the words that came from God, but these returned exiles certainly did.

Their standing illustrates the solemn regard in which they held God's Word. They knew enough of their history to know that God is serious about His standards of conduct and worship found in His Word, and they respected God's Word so much that they all arose as though a great king held court before them, and they yearned to honor Him.

In verse 8, the priests read from the book and helped the assembly to understand it. And verses 9 and 11 show that the people were grieved by what they were hearing because they realized how far their ways of living had moved from what God intended. But the priests and leaders told the people that this was not the time for mourning, but for rejoicing. And the people responded not only by rejoicing, but also making sure that everyone shared in the abundance that God had given.

All this took place on the Day of Trumpets, and the people likely remained in this attentive attitude when they kept the Feast two weeks later.

We will pick up the story in Nehemiah 8, verse 13.

Nehemiah 8:13 Now on the second day the heads of the fathers' houses of all the people, with the priests and Levites, were gathered to Ezra the scribe, in order to understand the words of the Law.

So they did not care that the holy day was over, they still hungered for understanding.

Nehemiah 8:14-18 And they found written in the Law, which the Lord had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, and that they should announce and proclaim in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, "Go out to the mountain, and bring olive branches, branches of oil trees, myrtle branches, palm branches, and branches of leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written. Then the people went out and brought them and made themselves booths, each one on the roof of his house, or in their courtyards, or in the courts of the house of God, and in the open square of the Water Gate and in the open square of the Gate of Ephraim. So the whole assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and sat under the booths; for since the days of Joshua the son of Nun until that day the children of Israel had not done so. And there was very great gladness. Also day by day, from the first day until the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God, and they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day there was a sacred assembly, according to the prescribed manner.

This keeping of the Feast exemplified a focused devotion that had been missing in the nation since the time of Joshua, a millennium or so before. Now it is not that the Israelites had not kept the Feast at all since then, but this observance was noteworthy and understanding why it can help us to have a very good Feast as well. But before we get to that, let us remember some other mentions of the Feast of Tabernacles. King Solomon's dedication

of the newly finished Temple was at the Feast time. You can find that story in I Kings chapter 8. Solomon's celebration consisted of a week of Temple dedication, followed then by the week of the Feast of Tabernacles, so it was like a two week long feast.

And Solomon went all out. It says they sacrificed sheep and oxen that could not be counted or numbered for multitude. There had never been such a time of sacrificing to God, and yet in Nehemiah, God is silent regarding that Feast. He appears to have accepted all that was done by Solomon at that time, and yet there was something left undone. In comparison, the Feast under Nehemiah only lasted the prescribed time, and the priests only made the prescribed offerings. However, the Feast under Nehemiah is marked out as special.

After Solomon, the observance of the Feast deteriorated badly. The decline started with King Jeroboam the First, whom God inspired to lead the northern tribes away from the kingdom of Judah because of Solomon's idolatry in his later years. What Jeroboam did next though was not inspired by God. Jeroboam fretted that the northern tribes would still feel attached to Jerusalem as their place of worship, and that he might lose control of his tribes. So he improvised. He built his own nearby centers of worship, and he ordained his own priesthood consisting of non-Levites.

He also created a new one-day feast as a substitute for the Feast of Tabernacles. His feast was one month later than the true feast. And it may have been the origin of the Celtic agricultural festival of Samhain, which later developed into Halloween. And so the kingdom of Israel went completely off the rails in keeping the Feast and never returned. Now as far as we know, the kingdom of Judah continued to at least keep the Feast at the right time, but God was not pleased with Judah's observance either. In Isaiah 1, God indicts Judah, and even though the Jews were keeping the feasts and making sacrifices, they were not truly doing so to God.

God says His soul hated their appointed feasts, and those are strong words from the One they claimed to worship, and they blare that something was seriously wrong. The people probably believed everything was fine because they were making sacrifices and they had joyful music, but God judged things very differently. He says they were also doing unrighteousness, so that

He would not accept their sacrifices nor hear their prayers. The book of Lamentations then gives a sorrowful epilogue to Judah's apostasy and God's decisive response. In Lamentations 2, the writer says that God caused the appointed feasts and Sabbaths to be forgotten. His people drifted so far out of alignment with Him that there was no point in even having the appointed times, so God caused them to cease.

That is one sobering judgment, and it reminds us never to put God into a box in our own minds as to what He would not do. Our understanding, and even our memory, nationally and individually, are in His hands. And when conditions reach a tipping point, God responds in unexpected ways.

Following the book of Lamentations then was the 70 years of Judah's captivity in Babylon, after which some 42,000 Jews returned to Judea. The returning people were grieved by their national and individual failures, and their hearts were tender toward God and His Word. They sought out the precious Scriptures and followed them as closely as they could.

Verses 14 through 17 here say that all the people stayed in temporary dwellings, which had been neglected since the time of Joshua. And yet the dominant theme of this Feast is the temporary dwellings. The theme is right in the name. To skip the temporary dwellings would be like keeping Unleavened Bread without eating unleavened bread, or keeping the Feast of Weeks without counting out the weeks, or keeping Atonement while overlooking God's removal of sin. If God's people were missing the main points of the holy days and just having a good time, we can understand why God would cause them to be forgotten. Please turn with me to Leviticus chapter 23, and we will read the instructions for this Feast.

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 [that is today], and on the eighth day a sabbath-rest. And you shall take for yourselves on the first day [or by 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

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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."

So a significant part of this Feast is to remember the Israelites' experience with God when He brought them out of Egypt. The Feast is a memorial of transitoriness and impermanence. It is also an observance of complete dependence on God to supply the need during times of unsettledness, which we can especially relate to this year. Our keeping of the Feast is not complete without remembering the Exodus journey and remembering that we too are on a pilgrimage. Unlike the Israelites' journey, our journey requires that we give up some material stability for the sake of following God to a far superior destination.

The Hebrew word for tabernacle, tent, or booth is *sukkah*. It is also the name of the first place the Israelites camped after leaving Rameses in Egypt. They camped in a place named Succoth, which is the same word as *sukkot* except that it is plural. The Israelites stayed in booths in a place that had been previously named booths. The name of Succoth comes from Genesis 33:17, which says that Jacob made booths, that is, he made multiple succoth for his livestock. In other words, the place the Israelites camped after being delivered from Egypt was named after the dwellings Jacob made for his animals. It is a somewhat unflattering reminder that in many ways, God's people are like sheep, and yet, as the Good Shepherd, He is faithful to provide for our every need.

However, He rarely gives us our every wish. If all our circumstances were exactly to our liking, there is a very good chance because of human nature that we would forget God. There is also a good chance that we would tire of our perfect circumstances and want something else because human nature is fickle. But this reminder of what God made the Israelites do as part of following Him helps us to approach this feast with the right mindset. Our temporary dwellings today are different from theirs, so we may have to work a little bit harder to remember these things. God does not demand asceticism, but He does require that we remember this basic lesson.

The temporary dwellings keep us a little off balance—and that is good. They help us not to think so highly of ourselves as we would tend to if we were living in a king's palace. They remind us that nothing on earth is permanent and that our focus and trust must be on what God is doing. They teach us to trust in God's providence, to loosen our grip on the reins, and to temper our innate and surging drive to have everything just the way we like it. The tabernacles are not an image of privation or austerity, but of *temporariness*. When you consider the variety of materials used, it is evident that God wanted these structures to be attractive and sufficient dwellings.

They started out green and lush, but as each day passed, the people were reminded of the relentless march of time and the intrinsic weakness of all things physical, as well as the people's dependence on God not to let their roofs blow away. Now back home, when I trim branches or take down small trees in our yard, our kids have often gathered the cuttings to make lean-tos or other kinds of shelters. But those cuttings do not stay fresh or green for very long. Within a few days, the leaves start drying out, and what began as a verdant, if airy abode, seemingly full of life, starts looking worn out. And this is part of what God wants us to reflect on. We should rejoice in the abundance that God gives, yet also remember that life is temporary.

We eventually wear out. But with God involved, that is okay. Our Creator has more and better in store for us than life under the sun. Paul and Peter both refer to our physical bodies as tents or tabernacles. They are dwellings that are quite adequate for our pilgrimage with God, but they are limited. The Israelites kept the feast for seven days in their temporary dwellings, and then they could return to their homes on the Eighth Day if their houses were near. And similarly, we are generally allotted 70 years or perhaps 80, maybe more if you are strong.

If we are concerned mainly with what is under the sun, Solomon concluded that it is all vanity and grasping for the wind. But if we are focused above the sun, we can rejoice in the life God gives us, knowing that it is preparation for something far better if we keep following Him. Solomon teaches the relative value of the material compared to the spiritual, and he concludes that fearing God and keeping His commandments is what matters, regardless of the times that God creates for us. Along with that, Solomon greatly emphasizes wisdom, because we must live for the seven or eight days, the 70 or 80 years,

with the materials that we use in constructing our lives. But not all materials are good, and not all construction methods will hold up. Time will declare whether we have constructed with wisdom.

And yet even wisdom cannot forestall every adversity. Please turn with me to John chapter 1. It says,

John 1:14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

As with the other appointed times, the Feast points to Jesus Christ. Incidentally, Christ's birthplace was a manger, which is a dwelling place for animals. It was a *sukkah* like what Jacob built. But even more than that, the Creator God, for whom all things were made, became flesh and tabernacled with the people that He created. The Creator put on a tent of flesh as a temporary dwelling to experience life just like we do. He was cut off in the middle of His week, and yet He still lived enough to know us.

And now He fully sympathizes with His creation, having been thoroughly subject to the same physical laws and pulls and sorrows. *What an incredible act of meekness* to voluntarily assume the same state as feeble man, to put on temporary, weak, human flesh when it was entirely befitting for Him always to be radiantly clothed with honor and glory and power and majesty. But He did not consider that something to be grasped at, and instead, He let go of that superior plane of living to fulfill a higher purpose for you and for me.

And when this One stooped so low as to become a temporary human being, He definitively demonstrated His willingness to supply what is needed in our temporary circumstances, as we learn to take on His life, a life that is befitting of glory. A life that is no longer temporary, but eternal.