

Whatever Your Heart Desires

by Staff

Forerunner, "Ready Answer," September-October 2003

"And you shall spend that money on whatever your heart desires ."
— *Deuteronomy 14:26*

Every fall, the average church of God member looks forward to God's fall holy days, especially the Feast of Tabernacles and Last Great Day. In recent times, God's people have celebrated the Feast by traveling to places near and far, staying in comfortable hotels, eating and drinking sumptuously, and spending a year's worth of second tithe (ten percent of their annual income) on family and friends over about two weeks' time. Much of this activity has been based on a general understanding of Deuteronomy 14:23-26:

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.

Most who read this have been to the Feast and thus look forward to eight days of experiencing many enjoyable things: food, drink, activities, spending time with friends, and of course, the spiritual meals of eating and drinking in of God's instructions. Many sermons over the years have been preached about prioritizing our time and activities throughout the Feast, keeping God first over the physical abundance and events that can often relegate Him to second place. Some may have justified a physical approach to the Feast from an immature understanding of God's command in Deuteronomy 14:26, "You shall spend that money for whatever your heart desires . . . and you shall rejoice"—using the time and money God provides for the Feast as a vacation with friends and family, rather than an eight-day, spiritual-information-packed, learning experience.

God wants us to experience *both* the spiritual and the physical abundance that foreshadows the time when we will live and reign with God during His Millennial rest and on into His eternal Kingdom. However, we need to prioritize and balance our wants and needs with God's expectations—especially so during this short period of plenty when it *seems* we do not need God as much as we normally do.

God notices how we treat this eight-day period and assesses our actions to see if we really feel we do not need Him as much during this time of plenty versus the rest of the year when our daily struggles require His involvement in our lives. We may see the Feast as a time of fun activities, which is partially true, but it may expose how we would live if God were to bless us financially or how we would govern if He were to give us exalted positions in His Family.

As is often the case, to understand something better we need to examine more than just the obvious. Deuteronomy 14:23-26 does point to a time of plenty and gives us reasons to rejoice and enjoy what God has blessed us with. We will see, though, it is only a part of the total equation, one that is detailed throughout Deuteronomy 14, encompassing our entire lives.

Deuteronomy 14

We realize that man has divided the biblical books into chapters, but with a little study we can still determine the flow that God intended. At first, the chapter seems to have a disjointed message, but further analysis shows that it contains a clear theme. The chapter breaks down like this:

- » Verse 1: Israelites are children of God. Do not cut oneself or shave one's head for the dead.
- » Verse 2: Israelites are God's chosen people, a special treasure to Him.
- » Verses 3-21: Clean and unclean meats.
- » Verse 22: First tithe.
- » Verse 23-26: Second tithe. Going to where God places His name and enjoying whatever the heart desires.
- » Verses 27-29: Third tithe. Caring for the needy.

In verse 1, we see how God regarded Israel. Moses wrote Deuteronomy at the end of Israel's wandering in the wilderness, forty years after their release from Egypt. After spending many generations under Egyptian rule, the Israelites had absorbed certain aspects of Egyptian culture as their own, and many of these were wrong.

Idol worship, which the Israelites quickly returned to with the Golden Calf (Exodus 32:4), was just one of the wrongs that God needed to fix. He speaks here of not mutilating the body or shaving the head for the dead. The Bible does not clearly explain if the Egyptians practiced cutting themselves or shaving their heads for the dead, but many pagan peoples have done so as a sign of mourning or piety or to attract the attention of their god. God addresses it in a number of places (Leviticus 19:28; 21:5; I Kings 18:28).

Verse 2, though similar, goes in a slightly different direction, revealing Israel's status with God. He called them a special people, set apart as God's chosen. In similar fashion, God regards His people today, the church, as His own special people (I Peter 2:9). These two verses show that God had a special purpose for Israel, one of being an example to all the peoples around them, and thus their appearance and behavior were important. In modern terms, God does not want His people to follow worldly practices such as radical hairdos, cult fashions (Goth, grunge, gang-banger styles, etc.), tattoos, body piercing, and the like. God wants His chosen people, set apart for a special purpose, to know who they are and that what they do to the *outside* of their bodies is important to God.

God then changes gears rather drastically. In verses 3-21, He gives instructions about what should be taken internally, what kinds of meats are suitable for intake from God's perspective. The eating habits

of the Egyptians were certainly not up to God's standards, and He thus illuminated Israel on what was good as food for human consumption and what was not. In essence, God is concerned about what goes *inside* our bodies. Junk foods, of course, are not addressed, but God's intent is the same: Do not misuse the inside of the body.

Verses 1-21 show, then, that God's people are to be cognizant of their status with God as a people. In addition, they need to recognize the effects of their external appearance as well as their internal health and well-being. In sum, this passage reveals God to be interested in man's entire being, especially those who have made a covenant with Him.

Setting the Stage

The tone seems to change in verse 22. He instructs Israel to tithe of their increase to God as the Provider of all things, and verse 23 gives the reason: "that you may learn to fear [reverence] the Lord your God always." He also mentions "eat[ing] before the Lord . . . in the place where He chooses to make His name abide." We know from Leviticus 23:34-43 that He is addressing the period of the Feast of Tabernacles. At first, it seems this has little to do with the previous verses.

Using the tithe for attending and enjoying the Feast is only a part of the entire tithing process, which also involves giving back to God (first tithe) and taking care of the less fortunate (third tithe). Taken as a whole, however, these tithing instructions are an integral part of the total equation of this chapter: taking care of God's chosen people. These verses have expanded the principle outside the personal to include others of God's people and even God Himself.

Verses 23-26 contains the admonitions to go to the place God chooses, turn the increase into money if needed, and to spend it on whatever the heart desires, rejoicing with each other before God. However, the chapter's theme remains as a vital component of the instruction. God wants us to enjoy the fruit of our labors, as He also does when we obey Him. He also wants our relationship to be many-layered. Our focus, of course, should be off the self, centered on God, and extending outward toward others.

The rest of the chapter addresses this outward orientation with teaching to share with those who are less fortunate. It tells us to make sure that the needy are also able to rejoice and enjoy this time of fellowship and prosperity. The chapter ends by telling us that when we do these things, we give God good reason to bless us in whatever we set out to do.

Throughout these verses, we see God, very active in the lives of His people, admonishing His people to follow His lead. God is quite concerned about His people and His spiritual body. He cares what we do to ourselves both inwardly and outwardly, physically and spiritually (I Corinthians 3:16-17; Ephesians 2:18-22), and He cares how we treat each other as members of "the body of Christ" (I Corinthians 12:27).

While He allows us to partake of things we desire, Deuteronomy 14 shows that God does impose limits; He wants us to exercise self-control. He expects us to be givers and not just takers. This applies to sharing our money, food, drink, activities, and fellowship with others, and we should make special effort to share ourselves with Him in prayer, study, meditation, and church services during this time of plenty. After all, one of the purposes of going to the Feast is to learn how to fear God, and we do this by spending time with Him.

Lessons Today

Jesus admonishes us in Matthew 6:19-21:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

From the perspective of Deuteronomy 14, having a right or wrong priority at the Feast can reveal where our treasure is. If it is on the self only, then our heart is obviously in the wrong place. If we have the entire body of Christ in mind, then our treasure will be on a more godly plane.

In a unique way, God is laying up treasure on this earth in our very lives with the intention of bringing the entire body together spiritually. Conversely, we live physical lives, but our hearts and minds must strive toward a spiritual realm. Because of this, we have the ability to share experiences on both spiritual and physical levels, with God and each other. If the physical enjoyment of life becomes too important, the body of Christ suffers spiritually. If we never saw the physical side described in Deuteronomy 14, we might not see the awesome potential of God's spiritual promises. They should work hand in hand.

God thinks of us as special and chosen. Do we see Him in the same way? Are God and His people special to us? Do we make them a priority? Do we desire to take care of Christ's body, the church made up of many members, as we are instructed in Deuteronomy 14?

God expected the Israelites to obey Him physically. Even then, however, He indicated that they had a "spiritual" responsibility to God and each other. As we know, Christ came to magnify the physical to reveal the spiritual intent—from physical, bodily applications to spiritual, eternal principles of holy, righteous character. Ezekiel prophesies of a time when man's stony heart will be replaced with a fleshly one, and he will be given a new spirit (Ezekiel 36:24-28).

How does this apply to us? Each of us is special to God. He cares what we look like in terms of hygiene, dress, and appearance. He is most certainly concerned with what and how much we put into ourselves, food and drink as well as knowledge, experience, and attitude. He wants us to share with Him and each other our blessings and fellowship.

The Feast of Tabernacles is the last place God wants selfish attitudes and a "me only" way of thinking. It is a time of looking ahead to the wonders of God's Kingdom, but also taking others along for the ride. It is a time of giving of ourselves—and not just our money. We should be quick to say, "Hello!" or to bend an open ear to someone who is having a bad day or who left a mountain of problems behind at home. We should include others in our "group" and go outside of our normal "comfort zones" to fellowship.

When we use our time and blessings this way at the Feast, it gives God glory. We should determine that this Feast, we will be a one-person committee to make this the most profitable Feast ever—for someone else!

What exactly does your heart desire this year at this Feast? Is it wrong to enjoy the blessings and good times that we will certainly have this year? Absolutely not!

Yet, we must remember that all the money in the world, spent anyway we desire, cannot replace how God looks at us, the treasure of who we are, and what we have been given the instruction and power to do. God wants us to grow beyond having mere physical desires to desiring spiritual things, not just for ourselves, but also for our brethren. This is exactly how we can fulfill God's decree to obtain "whatever your heart desires."