

The Feast of Booths

THE TEXT

³³And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, ³⁴Speak to the children of Israel, saying, The fifteenth day of this seventh month shall be the feast of tabernacles for seven days unto the Lord. ³⁵On the first day shall be an holy convocation: ye shall do no servile work therein. ³⁶Seven days ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the Lord: on the eighth day shall be an holy convocation unto you; and ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the Lord: it is a solemn assembly; and ye shall do no servile work therein. ³⁷These are the feasts of the Lord, which ye shall proclaim to be holy convocations, to offer an offering made by fire unto the Lord, a burnt offering, and a meat offering, a sacrifice, and drink offerings, everything upon his day: ³⁸Beside the sabbaths of the Lord, and beside your gifts, and beside all your vows, and beside all your freewill offerings, which ye give unto the Lord. ³⁹Also in the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when ye have gathered in the fruit of the land, ye shall keep a feast unto the Lord seven days: on the first day shall be a sabbath, and on the eighth day shall be a sabbath. ⁴⁰And ye shall take you on the first day the boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and ye shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days. ⁴¹And ye shall keep it a feast unto the Lord seven days in the year. It shall be a statute forever in your generations: ye shall celebrate it in the seventh month. ⁴²Ye shall dwell in booths seven days; all that are Israelites born shall dwell in booths: ⁴³That your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. ⁴⁴And Moses declared unto the children of Israel the feasts of the Lord. (Leviticus 23:33-44)

INTRODUCTION

As the Christian church, we are called to meditate on and rejoice in our faithful covenant brothers and sisters and their lives as revealed to us in the Scriptures. Often we remain ignorant of the meaning of the New Testament in the same way that a man who picks up a novel and begins in the last chapter cannot know the significance of what is going on. It has been well said that the New Testament is simply the final pages of the God's story, and perhaps it's helpful to think of it as only one quarter of revelation. Size does not necessarily indicate importance and certainly no where in the Old Testament do we have reason to despise the New—the faithful always looked forward to the Messiah—but that is not our temptation. We tend to marginalize the Old Testament, and therefore miss the significance of thousands of years of preparation for the Messiah.

THE WITNESS OF THE OLD COVENANT

In Hebrews 11, the author plows through a roll of saints: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Sampson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and if he had more time, who knows how long he would have gone on. Time would fail (v. 32). This is the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us, and we join that crowd having the same instrument of pleasing and trusting God: Faith. It must be admitted that we have a form of imitation of these individuals, but what appears to be wholly lacking is an awareness of the national life, the corporate faithfulness graciously required of Israel. *Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ (Eph. 2:11-13).*

COVENANT CALENDAR

Leviticus 23 describes the calendar of the nation of Israel among which is the weekly sabbath and three hallmark feasts at which God required the men to represent their households at Jerusalem. "Three times thou shalt keep a feast unto me in the year.... Three times in the year all thy males shall appear before the Lord God" (Ex. 23:14, 17). The first holyday is Passover in the first month, Nisan (March-April), the second is Pentecost or Weeks (May-June), and the last, the culmination of the feasts, is Booths or Tabernacles also called the feast of Ingathering when harvest was finished (Sept-Oct). While women and children were welcome and not forbidden to attend the feasts (1 Sam. 1:4-5), men were required to go to Jerusalem three times a year. And since there were no high speed trains or jets in ancient Israel, you can imagine the way these obligations would structure life for the Jews. This is why calendar played such an important role in Jewish life. The religious life of Israel revolved around corporate worship, and the nation gathered unanimously at the three pilgrim feasts in Jerusalem, what was called the navel of the earth. "The Lord loveth the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob. Glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God. Selah" (Ps. 87:2-3).

SUCCOT

All the feasts of Israel were deep and rich occasions, but perhaps none was so charming and winsome as Succot. In no other feast were the Israelites commanded to rejoice and overflow like they were at Succot. Whereas on the 10th day of Ethanim, the seventh month, the people of God were to fast on the Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:32), on Succot the people were to rejoice and overflow in a celebration that would set them apart and seduce the goyim, the pagan nations, to envy the people chosen by the living God. “And thou shalt rejoice in thy feast, thou, and thy son, and thy daughter, and thy manservant, and thy maidservant, and the Levite, the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow, that are within thy gates” (Dt. 16:14). The Israelites were instructed to dwell in booths for seven days from the 15th to the 21st in remembrance of their dwellings in the wilderness where God provided for them. These booths were supposed to be ramshackle affairs made of branches cut from shrubs and fruit trees with the fruit still on them. The feast began and ended with a sabbath gathering, and the latter was regarded as a high sabbath, the last and “great” day of the feast which was to be one of the richest and most climactic celebrations in Israel.

Culmination of the Covenant The primary marks of the Jewish faith were monotheism and election, summed up respectively by the *Shema* and Yahweh’s declaration of covenant, “I will be your God and you will be my people.” But theology is not meant to stay in our heads. The object is always to know and encounter God, to live obedient and passionate lives with him. We see a progression in the sacrifices just as we see a progression in our own liturgy: first a bloody sin offering, then a burnt offering indicating sanctification and dedication, and then the fellowship or peace offering. There was also a progression in the calendar that foreshadowed the plan of redemption. The festal year began at Passover, moved to Weeks/Pentecost where tradition says the Jews received the law, and climaxed at Tabernacles where God dwelt with his people—the goal of the Scriptures. We see this at Creation as Adam and Eve dwell with God in the garden.

Fulfillment

Like all the feasts, Tabernacles had its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. In Jn. 7:2 we learn that Jesus attended the feast of Tabernacles. “In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the Scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.)” (John 7:37-39). What is the feast about? Jesus says he is the one with the water. And not only that, but if you drink of him, you’ll have living water flow out of you (cf. Ez. 47:1). We are his body, a holy temple, and have drunk from him, and so living water flows out of us just like it did out of Ezekiel’s temple.

What do we do?

Live together in community, indwelt with the Holy Spirit. The neighbors should envy our barbeques. Set your marriage on a hill. You are doing this; do it more and more. Covenant community reveals our God to the world.

Boast in the Lord. What other people has a God like you? Who else has his law, his promises, and the hope of eternal life?

Worship God the Father through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit on the Lord’s Day. Renewing covenant with God week to week strengthens the body and empowers us to live faithfully with God throughout the week.

Jerry Owen – May 23, 2004