

THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES

Selected Scriptures

Introduction:

Well, we have come to the last of God's prescribed feasts for His people. The feast of Tabernacles is arguably the greatest celebration on the Jewish calendar.

Sukkot (Hebrew for booths) begins five days after the Day of Atonement, on the fifteenth day of the month Tishri. It is known by several different names: The Feast of Tabernacles, the Feast of Booths, the Feast of Ingathering, or simply The Feast. The different names each reflect some unique aspect of this annual celebration.

The feast of Tabernacles or Booths is the third of the pilgrimage feasts of Israel. All adult males in ancient Israel were expected to travel to Jerusalem three times a year for the Feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost and again in the fall for the feast of Tabernacles.

This particular feast is referred to many places in the Bible. It and the feast of Passover, were the two most prominent celebrations of the Jewish holidays. The feast of tabernacles was, by far, the most colorful and vibrant of the annual festivals.

This morning we are going to be looking at a number of Scripture texts as we look at three aspects of the feast of Tabernacles.

- The different aspects of this festival
- The key elements in the celebration of the festival
- The Messianic implications and significance to us today

Let's begin by turning to Leviticus 23, where God outlined his prescribed feasts for the people. *Read Lev. 23:33-44.*

The Meaning of the Feast of Tabernacles

There are several aspects to this particular festival. It is both a reminder of the past and a hope for the future. We will look at 3 things...

1. This feast was, first of all, a time of joy and celebration. It was kind of like our Thanksgiving. Note v. 40 – *"...you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days."* This feast occurred at the end of the final harvest season of the year, hence the name Feast of Ingathering. It was a time to give thanks to the Lord for the rains, for the crops and for the harvest. It was a time of gladness. The entire week was to be a time filled with joy and celebration.
I think they had a good thing going. We tend to relegate Thanksgiving to one day, or maybe two. They had a whole week of festivities, filled with feasting and singing and dancing, as they offered their praise and their gifts to the Lord at the end of the harvest.
2. Second, the feast of Tabernacles was a reminder of the 40-year wilderness journey. Note vv. 42-43 – *read them.* Here we get the name, the "Feast of Booths." For forty years, after God brought them out of Egypt, the children of Israel lived in booths—tents or temporary shelters—as they wandered from place to place in the wilderness. For forty years they had no permanent homes, until they came into the land God promised them and gave them homes there. So for one week each year they were to build booths to dwell in as a reminder of that time and God's provision during that time. Again, we can take an example from this. As the RBC writer says in his booklet on the fall feasts, *"Believers in Jesus are inclined, especially in times of prosperity, to forget that everything we have comes to us from the hand of God. It is good to remember that God provides for us at every step on our way, just as he did for the children of Israel in the wilderness. In our wanderings through life, He has been the unseen Provider who has been faithful to us even when we have forgotten Him. He is the One who says, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' (Heb. 13:5)"*
3. The third aspect of this festival is Messianic in nature. The Jewish people looked forward with anticipation to the coming of their Messiah. There is a longing in the hearts of Jewish people for the coming of the Messianic kingdom, when God will again dwell or tabernacle in their midst as he did in the wilderness when they saw the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night resting over the tabernacle. We will look more at the kingdom aspect later.

The Celebration the Feast of Tabernacles

Now we need to look at the observance of the feast as it is and has been celebrated by the Jewish people. There are five things that I would like to draw to your attention. Two are things they are to make or construct, the other three are elements of the celebration itself...

1. The most obvious requirement of this festival is the building of a booth or temporary shelter called a sukkah. Bruce Scott tells us, *"Booths are built at homes and often at synagogues. In Israel, it is common to find booths located on rooftops, balconies, and in courtyards. According to rabbinical teaching, the booth must meet a certain 'building code' to be acceptable. It must be at least four feet long, four feet wide, no more than 30 feet high, and have at least three sides. Its roof is often covered with enough leaves and straw to provide shade without blocking out the view of the stars at night. The booth is decorated as attractively as possible. To fulfill the scriptural requirement of dwelling in their booths, holiday observers must spend more time in their booths during the week of the feast than in their homes. They are encouraged to have all of their meals during the feast inside the booths. On the first night of the feast, eating in the booth is required."*
2. A second important step in preparation is the four species of foliage, which are referred to in Lev. 23:40 – *"And you shall take on the first day the fruit of splendid (beautiful) trees, branches of palm trees and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook..."* Bruce Scott tells us that the four species of foliage would include *"the etrog (citrus fruit), the myrtle branch, the willow branch, and the palm branch called the lulav. The term lulav is also applied collectively to all three leafy branches. The myrtle, willow, and palm branches are bound together and held in the right hand, while the etrog is held in the left hand to be waved at the appropriate time."* These are the two main elements that needed to be done in preparation for the week-long festival. Now we come to the rituals and ceremonies themselves. Many of the elements of the celebration were not ordered or prescribed by God but were man-made. However, they became part of the customs the feast of Tabernacles.

3. So after the two preparatory items, the third element of the celebration that I would like to look at is a ceremony that began during the second temple period. The Temple priests attached willow branches to the sides of the bronze altar, bending them over the top. They then marched around the altar once as the shofar was blown, all the while reciting Psalm 118. As this is done, the people shook the lulavs they held in their hands at the beginning and end of the recitation of Psalm 118 and also at the beginning of verse 25, which says, "Save us, we pray, O LORD! O LORD, we pray, give us success!". This ritual was repeated for the first six days of the feast. On the seventh day the priests marched around the altar seven times.
4. There are two more important rituals that were part of the tabernacles celebration during the second temple period. They are closely connected, so we will look at them together. The first is the rite of water libation, a ceremony that is no longer practiced today, but was one of the most popular aspects of the feast during the time of the Second Temple. Every day for seven days, a priest would walk up the ramp leading to the bronze altar located in the Temple Court and pour a jug full of water into a bowl that drained into the altar. The water was taken from the Pool of Siloam, which was fed by a spring just to the east of Jerusalem called the Spring of Gihon, by way of a tunnel or conduit built by King Hezekiah. What made the water libation ritual was so popular was the accompanying ceremony of the water drawing, which took place at night when water was drawn from Siloam for the next morning's water libation. The ceremony of the water drawing was a jubilant occasion. As the ceremony took place, Levites played lyres, trumpets, harps, cymbals, and other instruments, while other Levites sang. As this took place, in the Temple area, another event was happening. Three golden candlesticks nearly 75 feet high were lit by young boys climbing tall ladders, and the light from these candlesticks could be seen throughout all Jerusalem. Respected men of faith danced and sang in front of these candlesticks while carrying burning torches. As the ceremony progressed through the night, the priests blew the shofar three times. The evening was characterized by exuberant joy as people were reminded of the text of Isaiah 12:3, "Therefore, with

joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation (Yeshua)." It was a wonderful occasion that no one wanted to miss.

The Messianic Import of the Feast of Tabernacles

There is a strong link in the Biblical account between the Feast of Tabernacles and the Messianic kingdom. Even in OT times, the Jewish people recognized the connection. As the Feast of Tabernacles drew them back in history to the wilderness wandering, they were also drawn forward to the time when the Messiah would come and the glory of the Lord would again dwell in their midst as it had in the desert.

The people were waiting for their Messiah, and they were certain that when he came he would establish a kingdom of righteousness right there in Jerusalem. They wanted nothing more than to see the long-awaited king, and see the power and glory of God displayed in his kingdom rule. When we look at the NT and the life of Jesus we see two times where the context of the Feast of Tabernacles was misapplied.

The first was at the Transfiguration. When Jesus was transfigured, Peter suggested that he be allowed to build three tabernacles: one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus (Mat. 17:4). Peter saw the glory that the Messiah will have in the Kingdom and assumed that the Kingdom was about to be set up. Peter knew that the Kingdom was the fulfillment of the Feast of Tabernacles, and the fact that he wanted to build three tabernacles shows that he thought that the Kingdom was going to be set up immediately. But what he didn't realize was that the Feast of Passover had to be fulfilled by the death of Messiah before the Feast of Tabernacles could be fulfilled.

The second misapplication was at the Triumphal Entry on what we call Palm Sunday. The words and actions of the people showed that they also expected the Kingdom to be established right then and there in fulfillment of the Feast of Tabernacles. We read that they took palm branches and waved them as Jesus entered the city, crying out, *Hosanna in the highest (Save us)* (Psalm 118:25), just like the celebrants of the Feast of Tabernacles. Like Peter, they did not yet understand that Passover had to be fulfilled by the death of the Messiah before the Feast of Tabernacles could be fulfilled.

So what is the application. Well, certainly, the Feast of Tabernacles is fulfilled in the Millennial Kingdom of the Messiah. But even when Jesus was here the first time, he pointed out again and again how he was the fulfillment of the feast and all it represented.

John is clear about this in so many ways. We read in John 1: 14, *"And the Word [Jesus] became flesh and dwelt [lit. tabernacled] among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."* Jesus was the embodiment of the glory of God and he came to dwell among his people.

Then, in John 7-8 we have two chapters centered around the Feast of Tabernacles. There are two claims made by Jesus in those chapters, clearly related to the very festival they were celebrating.

The first is related to the water ceremony. *Read John 7:37-39.* To those listening, pouring out the water on the altar at the feast symbolized the pouring out of the Holy spirit in the last days, the time of the Messiah. Applying that symbolism to himself, Jesus was declaring that He was the Messiah, and anyone who would believe in Him would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The second claim comes in the next chapter. In the context of the Feast of Tabernacles, and the lighting of the giant candlesticks that happened each night, Jesus made the statement, *"I am the light of the world..."* (John 8:12). His claim was that, as the Messiah, he came to bring light in the darkness, to open the eyes of the blind.

There is one more important note to make before we wrap this up. There is an amazing prophecy in the book of Zechariah. Chapter 14 is all about the coming Day of the Lord and the kingdom of Messiah. Key phrase – *"On that day..."* *Read vv. 16-21, with comments.*

So, why would the Gentile nations celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem? David Levy, Israel My Glory, Jan/Feb, 2007. He says, *"First, the Lord commands them to do so. Second, it will be a joyful time of worship and praise to the Lord for the fruitful harvest that He provides. Third, it will also be a time when the world recognizes and worships Jehovah as King of the earth. In celebrating this festival, the na-*

tions will express their submission to Jehovah as the only true God of the universe.”

The Feast of Tabernacles is the only Jewish festival that the Bible state will be celebrated in the Millennium. But that time will be the culmination of all that is represented in the Jewish feast calendar.

Conclusion

Well, we need to wrap this up. The feasts of Israel, the holidays of God present a marvelous picture of the Messiah. Yeshua—Jesus—and his ministry, are seen in each of these seven prescribed feast celebrations. Mark Hitchcock gives us a good summary, referring to a couple of other writers. *(Put up chart on screen)* He says,

The Feast of Tabernacles looks to the millennial reign of Christ and to the rest of his people in their Promised land. Warren Wiersbe, in his Bible Commentary, writes, “The nation of Israel is not only a scattered people and a sinful people, but they’re also a suffering people. No nation in history has suffered as the Jews have suffered, but one day their suffering will be turned into joy... For Israel, the best is yet to come! The scattered people will be gathered; the sinful people will be cleansed; the suffering people will rejoice.”

William McDonald summarizes the feasts of the Lord and their relation to Israel’s past, present and future:

A definite chronological progression can be traced in the Feasts of Jehovah. The Sabbath takes us back to God’s rest after creation. The Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread speak to us of Calvary. Next comes the Feast of Firstfruits, pointing to the resurrection of Christ. The Feast of Pentecost typifies the coming of the Holy Spirit. Then looking to the future, The Feast of Trumpets pictures the regathering of Israel. The Day of Atonement foreshadows the time when a remnant of Israel will repent and acknowledge Jesus as Messiah. Finally the Feast of Tabernacles sees Israel enjoying the millennial reign of Christ.

The glorious part is that we can be there too. The invitation has been extended to the Gentiles and we can worship and celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles with Israel in the Millennium.