

REJOICING IN THE WORD

Selected Scripture

Introduction:

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. We did a short advent celebration earlier in the service as a reminder of the coming of the Savior and our need to prepare for his coming. In the passage of Scripture that we just read we heard about his coming this way, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us...” (John 1:14)

This morning I am not going to be speaking on a Christmas theme, although the truth of Christmas does enter into the message a bit later. I have decided to continue our study of the Jewish festivals for a couple more weeks. You see, besides the seven feasts prescribed by God, there are several other days and festival times that are celebrated by devout Jews. These are celebrations that have been added by tradition either to commemorate some event in Jewish history or to celebrate some aspect of their religious life. However, it is interesting how most of these celebrations also have some kind of Messianic implication as well.

There are two further Jewish holiday celebrations that I would like to look at this week and next week. Both of these have some significance to the Christmas theme as well, as they draw our attention to the Messiah and his provision for his people. Next week we are going to look at the feast of Hanukkah. But this week we look at a lesser known holiday, which is called Simchat Torah.

What is Simchat Torah?

The term, Simchat Torah, means “Rejoicing in the Torah.” This is a holiday which is focused on the importance of the Law as written in the scrolls. It occurs on the 23rd day of Tishri, the day following the celebration of Sukkot or the Feast of Tabernacles.

The Torah, in its basic meaning, refers to the first five books of the Bible—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Sometimes the word is used to refer more broadly to the entire body of Jew-

ish teaching, but strictly speaking it is the Law, the five books of Moses. The Hebrew Scriptures consist of three parts, the Torah (Law), the Nevi'im (Prophets), and the Ketuvim (Writings). The whole body of Hebrew Scripture is often called the Tanakh, an acronym of the three parts. To the devout Jew the Torah is the most important, as it is in the Torah that God has given the Jews his law and his promises.

Each week, in synagogues all around the world, a portion of the Torah is read or recited during the synagogue service. The entire Torah is divided into 54 readings, roughly one reading per week, so that in the course of a year the entire Torah has been recited during the services. The final reading of that year-long cycle occurs on Simchat Torah. It is a Rabbinical festival celebrating the completion of the readings and the beginning of a new cycle. On Simchat Torah, the people read the last Torah portion, then proceed immediately to the first chapter of Genesis, as a reminder that the Torah is a circle, and never ends.

The holiday itself is a day of great joy throughout the entire Jewish community. It is a day that is characterized by singing, dancing and great celebration—and rightly so. Bruce Scott says, “*Simchat Torah ... has a noble purpose for such a jovial holiday—to celebrate the Bible, to be jubilant over the Word of God, to rejoice over the Torah.*”

Simchat Torah is not a Biblical holiday or feast day. In fact, it was not until about the ninth or tenth century, just over a thousand years ago, that it became established as a distinct Jewish holiday. However, the public reading of the Torah among the Jews has been a tradition from the beginning. By New Testament times the custom of reading the law of Moses every Sabbath was widely practiced. In Acts 15:21, during the discussions of the Jerusalem council we read that “...from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

How is Simchat Torah Observed?

So, what about the observance itself? How is this holiday celebrated? The celebration involves an evening and a morning service in the synagogue. Remember that for the Jewish people the day begins at sundown and continues until sundown the following evening.

The Evening Service – During the evening service in the synagogue, all the Torah scrolls are removed from the Holy Ark (a cabinet containing the scrolls) and various people are given the honor of carrying a scroll during a festive processional called a *hakafah*. There are seven of these *hakafot*, or "circling processions," that occur, and it is customary dance about and "kiss" the scrolls as they pass by touching a prayerbook to the scroll and then kissing the book. The children sing and carry flags decorated with apples and pictures of Torah scrolls.

After the seventh circling, the scrolls are returned to the Ark, though one is left on the *bema* (Torah reading stand) to read the last Torah portion of the cycle. This is the only time of the year that the Torah is recited or read during an evening service.

The Morning Service – The service in the synagogue the following morning also includes the processional of the Torah scrolls, but the focus is more on the actual reading of the Torah itself. After the processional, all of the scrolls are returned to the ark, except three, which are used for the holiday's Torah readings. All of the adult males in the synagogue are called up to the *bema* (the platform where the Torah scroll is read) to share in this reading. At one point, all of the children are also summoned to the *bema*. An adult reads from the Torah as a large prayer shawl is held above the children like a canopy.

The last reader of the first scroll receives the highly respected title of *Chatan Torah* (Bridegroom of the Torah). He is privileged to conclude the year's Torah reading cycle. Simchat Torah not only designates the completion of one Torah reading cycle, it also signals the beginning of another cycle, for on this day the reading of the second Torah scroll introduces the new cycle for the coming year. The honored reader of this portion is called *Chatan Bereshit* (Bridegroom of the Beginning). The final reader at the Simchat Torah service reads from the third scroll a section of the day's portion from the Prophets.

After the morning service has ended the day is devoted to feasting and merriment as the entire congregation celebrates together. With the conclusion of Simchat Torah, there are no holidays on the Jewish calendar until the winter festival of *Hanukkah*, which occurs about two months later.

The Messianic Significance of Simchat Torah

Even though this is not a festival prescribed by God, and therefore does not have the same picture of the Messiah that we see in the prescribed feasts, there are some important lessons for us that come out of this celebration.

Rejoicing in the Written Word – It is amazing to see the devotion of the Jewish people to the Torah. Unfortunately, it often moves beyond devotion to the words of God to veneration of the Torah scrolls themselves. However, we can be thankful to the Jewish nation for the Word of God that we have today. In the opening chapters of Romans, Paul points out the sinfulness of all people, including the Jews. Then in Rom. 3 he says,

"Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God." (Ro 3:1-2 ESV)

The entire Bible, Old and New Testaments, was written down and kept for us by Jews, except for the books of Luke and Acts, which were written by Luke, a Gentile physician. The Jews have been diligent in copying and preserving the words of Scripture. In their devotion to the Torah we are reminded that the Bible we have today is the true and lasting Word of God.

As Bruce Scott writes,

In a world full of spiritual darkness, the Word of God shines brightly as a beacon of hope for those who have lost their way. In an age when nothing is absolute and everything is relative, the Holy Bible stands firm. At a time when right and wrong fluctuate as swiftly as the shifting sand, the Word of God abides immovable. As the Prophet Isaiah wrote, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever" (Isa. 40:8). For these reasons, biblical Christians rejoice with their Jewish friends over God's written Word.

Yeshua (Jesus) the Living Word – Jesus is the living Torah, the living, walking Word, written upon our hearts. The Old Testament says regarding the New Covenant:

"Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not

like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law (Torah) within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (Jeremiah 31:31-34 ESV)

We know that the final fulfillment of that promise is yet to come for the nation of Israel. But for us as believing Christians, there is another important truth related to that. It is the reality of the incarnate Word of God. For us, Jesus of Nazareth was the tangible expression of God's communication to mankind. We read in John's gospel, *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us..."* (John 1:1,14).

Ron Sallee, in his Bibliology course, says it this way. First there was the spoken Word – in creation – "And God said..." Then there was the written Word – the Law (Torah) and the prophets. Then came the walking Word, when the Word took on flesh and made his tabernacle among us. That is what the celebration of Christmas is all about—the Word becoming flesh, that we might see his glory.

And so there is great cause to rejoice in the Word of God, for both the written Word and the walking, living Word, Jesus Christ. As Bruce Scott says in his Holiday Series booklet:

"Because the Word of God became flesh in the person of Jesus the Messiah, and because of what He accomplished through His atoning death and authenticating resurrection, the world has great cause for rejoicing. But, as with the written Word, the incarnate Word of God will not profit us if we do not appropriate Him by faith. Those who do so, however, will discover that there is reason for Simchat Torah in their hearts every day."