

## TABERNACLES: MEDITATIONS FOR THE FEAST

### I. TO THE LORD

In **Leviticus 23**, the Lord speaks to Moses about the “feasts of the Lord” which Israel is to observe “at their appointed times” as “holy convocations.” A convocation is a gathering or assembly that is called out, summoned for a specific purpose – in this case, gatherings set apart for paying attention to God. The Feast of Tabernacles is introduced in **vv. 33-43**. It is not a single day, but a whole week – actually, eight days – set aside “to the Lord.”

Starting on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, according to the lunar-based Jewish calendar, the children of Israel were to dwell in booths: tents or huts made with branches and leafy boughs from palms, willows, and fruit trees. In other words, they were to camp out for a week and a day!

It is significant the Lord does not call these “the feasts of Israel” or “the Jewish feasts” as we often do, but specifically says “*these are My feasts*” (v. 2). It is worth pondering the idea that the feasts are not simply “for Israel,” but are “the feasts of the Lord,” and how **Zechariah 14:16-19** prophesies a future day when the Feast of Tabernacles in particular will be celebrated by the whole world. (And not as an option, either!)

Some Christians today are revisiting the Jewish roots of the faith and seeking to observe the feasts of the Lord. Scripturally, the early church did not require Gentile believers to keep the Law (**Acts 15:1-29**). In regards to people’s specific convictions about things like foods and calendar days, Paul says there’s room for a variety of opinions and practices (**Romans 14:1-6**) – but don’t you dare say such things are required for salvation or to be a better/more righteous believer! (**Colossians 2:16-23**, **Galatians 2:1-11**) Jesus told the woman at the well that true worship is not a matter of place or time or ritual or ethnicity, but of “spirit and truth” (**John 4:19-24**).

The whole point of the holy convocation is that it is “to the Lord.” He’s the focus, He’s the One who has to be pleased. So whether we observe certain days on the calendar or treat all days alike, we should ponder how best to honor Him.

*When we assemble to worship, how does the Lord communicate His desires to us? Do His desires ever conflict with our feelings and preferences?*

*How do we know when true worship is happening in spirit and truth? Is there an objective criteria which determines whether or not we meet that standard, or is it a matter of subjective evaluation by each person?*

*What does it look like to put the Lord first? How does that manifest in our attitudes, what we do and say, how we conduct the service? If we put more emphasis on spirit and truth than on place, time, and ritual, would that look any different than what we currently do?*

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### II. EXTRA SABBATH DAYS

We have noted from Romans **14:1-6** we are allowed different opinions and practices regarding calendar days, while Colossians **2:16,17** reminds us such things are but shadows of the realities in Christ. Ask the Lord when studying the particulars of the Feasts: *what do these things represent about You and Your relationship to me?*

**Leviticus 23:35,36** says the first and the eighth days of the feast are to be Sabbath-rest days, similar to the seventh day of the week (**Lev. 23:3**): *“You shall do no customary work on it.”* What God meant by “customary work” would have different interpretations through the centuries; the Pharisees had very strict rules about what you could and could not do, but Jesus said they were hypocrites because a) they had lots of workarounds and loopholes to excuse themselves from following their own rules, and b) they totally missed God’s heart and intent to show mercy (**Matthew 12:1-14 & 23:1-33**). The original Sabbath-keeping rules God gave Moses involved staying home and not doing any field work or transacting any business, while spending time with family, meditating on the Lord and His word; also not doing any cooking (which meant eating cold meals – leftovers!) or housework or home improvement projects.

Due to how the Jewish calendar works, in most years the Feast has *three* Sabbath days, except for when the “fifteenth day of the seventh month” happens to fall on the regular seventh-day Sabbath. For instance, if the *first* day of the Feast is on the *second* day of the week, that Monday is a Sabbath; the sixth day of the Feast will fall on Saturday, which is a regular Sabbath day; and the eighth/final/ “great” day of the Feast will be the next Monday, thus the third Sabbath day in that stretch. Add in the regular Saturday Sabbath from right before the Feast started, you have *four* Sabbath days within a ten-day stretch... plus the special Sabbath on the Day of Trumpets, five days before the Feast of Tabernacles starts, makes *five* Sabbaths within thirteen days!

The Church has largely adopted Sunday, the *first* day of the week, as its “Sabbath” day, assembling and worshiping on the day that Jesus rose from the dead. Many Christians who grew up in the Church were taught to view Sunday as the Sabbath, even though that’s not Biblical. Historically, Christians were expected to observe Sunday as religiously as the Jews observed their Sabbath – doing no work or business, spending the day in worship services, etc. Western civilization structured its work week and economy around the idea of Sunday as the day of rest. Our generation has become much more relaxed and treats Sunday as little different than any other day.

*Without being legalistic, is it still wise and beneficial to have a regular day of rest? How do you incorporate rest into your schedule?*

*How does the world view “rest” and how is that different from the Biblical view?*

*What has the Spirit shown you about how to manage your time and honor the Lord in both your work and your rest?*

### **III. BOOTHS IN THE WILDERNESS**

*“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.”*  
**Leviticus 23:42,43** (NKJV)

In some ways, our best modern analogy for the Feast of Tabernacles is a camping trip. The Israelites were commanded as a nation to hold an annual weeklong camp-out! Who says you can't have fun when you're following the Lord?!

One purpose of the Feast was to remind future generations in Israel of what it was like to go through the 40-year journey in the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt. It was to be a sort of re-enactment, a symbolic way to identify with the experience of their ancestors, and to know that it was God who led them in that experience. An annual reminder that it was God who delivered the nation from bondage in Egypt, God who brought them through the Red Sea, God who led them here and there through the wilderness while supernaturally sustaining and providing for them. These were real historical experiences, attributable to a real supernatural God! To remember these things in an experiential way was to acknowledge again that God is the One who is responsible for your existence as a nation, both in the past and the present.

Imagine what it took to sustain an entire nation through 40 years of circular wandering in the rugged scrub lands of the Sinai peninsula! There were some 600,000 men of fighting age (20-yrs & older) (**Exodus 12:37, Numbers 1:45,46**), plus all the elders and youngers, women and children, servants and slaves who comprised the households of Israel: easily several *million* people! Along with all of their herds and flocks, to be fed or grazed and watered daily. There must have been supernatural provision involved! As indeed the scripture confirms with the familiar story of the daily manna and water flowing from the rock (**Exodus 16:1-17:7**).

Camping for eight days is nowhere near as rigorous as forty years in the wilderness, but it served as a physical, tactile, hands-on ritual to remind Israelites that *“I am the LORD your God.”* In other words, “If I did *this* for your ancestors, you can certainly trust Me to help you in whatever you're facing now. The same God who was with your fathers in the wilderness is here for you now. My Name is not ‘I was,’ but ‘I AM!’”

*What are ways that we commemorate the experiences of our forerunners in the faith? What significant events in Church history might merit this kind of celebration?*

*Consider **2 Corinthians 5:1-5** and **2 Peter 1:13,14** – how does our earthly life resemble a nomadic journey in tents? How much care should we invest in the upkeep of our earthly tents?*

*How has God shaped your life through supernatural experiences or provisions?*

### IV. MANNA IN THE WILDERNESS

**Exodus 16** recounts how the nation of Israel encountered a major problem not long after escaping Egypt and crossing the Red Sea: the need to eat! The Exodus took place in great haste; there wasn't time to pack up large amounts of provisions; and even if there had been time to think about it, how would they bring enough food to sustain millions of people and animals for such a journey through a wilderness?

When the people complained, the Lord instructed Moses concerning the provision He would make: a mysterious substance called Manna that would appear on the ground six mornings of each week, which the people could gather and make cakes or wafers to eat. There was a further supernatural element to this substance, in that *“he who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack.”*

The people were specifically told not to save the manna overnight, as it would rot and get wormy. Except for the *sixth* day of the week, Friday, they should gather twice as much as usual, and that batch would stay good through the seventh day, Saturday, since no manna would appear on the Sabbath morning. (Try explaining these kinds of phenomenon by purely scientific principles!)

In **Deuteronomy 8:2,3**, Moses tells the next generation of Israelites how God led them through the wilderness for forty years *“to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart...”* and *“allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna...that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD.”* Jesus quotes this last verse when the devil tempts Him to make bread for Himself during His own forty days of testing in the wilderness (**Matthew 4:4, Luke 4:4**).

**John 6:1-14** details how Jesus fed five thousand men (and probably thousands more women and children) using five barley loaves and two fish obtained from a boy. The people who experienced this miracle interpreted it to mean that He was *“the Prophet who is to come into the world.”* (**Deuteronomy 18:15-18**) The rest of John 6 tells how the people wanted to make him king; then they followed him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee because they wanted more of that supernatural bread; Jesus explains they need true spiritual bread that comes from Heaven, meaning they need to believe in Him for eternal life; the people don't like what Jesus says and many quit following Him.

*In what ways is the daily provision of manna comparable to the provision of God's word to feed our souls? In what ways are they different?*

*Are there times in your life that you felt like you were “in the wilderness,” and that God was testing you to see what was in your heart? What did He find?*

*What are some of the reasons that people profess to follow Christ today? Do you have the same reasons that Peter did in **John 6:68,69**?*

**V. HARVEST OF BLESSING**

In **Deuteronomy 16:13-17**, the Lord reiterates His instruction on keeping the Feasts. The Leviticus instructions were given early in the Exodus/wilderness years; here the Lord speaks to the next generation almost 40 years later, as they are about to enter the Promised Land at last. The years of eating manna are soon to end, and the nation will re-enter the agricultural cycle of sowing and reaping, the revolving seasons of summer and winter, seedtime and harvest. The Feast of Tabernacles comes in the fall, and God directly connects it to the harvest:

*“You shall observe the Feast of Tabernacles seven days, when you have gathered from your threshing floor and from your winepress. And you shall rejoice in your feast, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant and the Levite, the stranger and the fatherless and the widow, who are within your gates. Seven days you shall keep a sacred feast to the LORD your God in the place which the LORD chooses, because the LORD your God will bless you in all your produce and all the work of your hands, so that you surely rejoice.*

*“Three times a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses... and they shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed. Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the LORD your God which He has given you.”*

The Feast is to be a time of rejoicing, celebrating the Lord’s provision and blessing – not only His past, historic blessings, but His current blessings in today’s circumstances.

The Lord will bless you! – that’s the promise of the Promised Land – so bless Him in return! Be faithful to acknowledge Him, and do so joyfully. Rejoice! He brought your ancestors through the wilderness, and He brings you through each year’s challenges with His current provision and blessings. It brings to mind the old hymn, *Count your blessings, count them one by one, count your blessings, see what the Lord has done...*

Sadly, the human condition is such that we all too easily forget the Lord’s blessings. Moses was obviously aware of this when he admonished the new generation about to enter the promised land, *“beware, lest you forget the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage,” Deuteronomy 6:12*, and *“When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you. Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God...” Deut. 8:10,11.*

*What are some of the blessings of the Lord in your own life you are thankful for?*

*Should we as a church spend more time intentionally identifying and celebrating God’s blessings to us? What are some ways to do that?*

*Reflecting on your life, have there been recognizable spiritual seasons you could liken to plowing, sowing, reaping, and celebrating the harvest?*

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### VI. YOU AND EVERYONE ELSE

**Deuteronomy 16:13-17** implies that the Feast is for everyone in Israel to participate. Even if verse 16 requires only the males to go to the place the Lord has chosen, verse 14 indicates everyone else in the nation is expected to take part in the celebration.

In **Leviticus 23:42**, the command was for the “native Israelites” to dwell in booths for seven days. Now forty years later, God includes the male and female servants, who in many cases would not be native Israelites, along with “the stranger within your gates” – the aliens, sojourners, immigrants, foreign workers, merchants, and travelers who might live within the community at any given time. Include them all! Who is qualified to participate? Everyone! Male, female, rich, poor, free, slave, native, stranger – God provides for all, so let all join in the Feast to recognize and rejoice in His provision.

Of special note, do not forget the orphan and the widow who are “within your gates.” One might infer the handicapped, though not specified, are to be included as well. Everyone in the community is commanded to participate, don’t leave anyone out.

One reason the Good News is so good: no one is excluded from the offer of salvation! “God so loved the world... whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life,” **John 3:16**. God truly “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth,” **1 Timothy 2:4**, and therefore He is “longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance,” **2 Peter 3:9**. God invites everyone from all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues to join the ultimate festal gathering in Heaven, so profoundly pictured in **Revelations 5:9 & 7:9**.

**Zechariah 14:16-19** prophesies of a future time when the whole world will be mandated to come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast, not just everyone in Israel. The mention of a punishment for those who don’t, indicates there may be those who choose not to obey. Instead of anti-maskers and anti-vaxxers, will there be anti-Tabernaclers in the future Kingdom of God?! What does that say about the human condition?

Paul’s teachings on the body of Christ in **1 Corinthians 12-14**, **Ephesians 4:7-16**, and **Romans 12:3-8** emphasize that each person has something to contribute, and the participation of all the members is required in order for the Body of Christ to reach full stature and maturity. Ministry is not reserved for a few individuals, but God’s grace and giftings make every member accountable to serve the welfare of the whole.

*How should the church view its role in reaching out to the community and inviting everyone to participate in the blessings and worship of God?*

*From the familiar stories of the ministry of Jesus in the gospels, how many times can you think of when Jesus went out of His way to include people who were being excluded by the community or even by His own disciples?*

*In what ways have you benefited from the participation of others in the church? In what ways are you an active participant in the ministry of the church?*

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### VII. REJOICE!

In observing the Feast, **Deuteronomy 16:14,15** gives the particular instruction that “*you shall rejoice in your feast...*” because the Lord will bless you “*so that you surely rejoice.*”

Scripture is full of commands, reminders, and encouragements to rejoice in the Lord, give thanks for His blessings, remember His goodness, sing songs and hymns of praise to Him. A quick survey of the Psalms shows examples of worship that is musical, poetic, emotional, sung aloud, sometimes with call-and-response or choral direction, sometimes with dramatic pauses and meditative interludes, and accompanied by stringed instruments, flutes, trumpets, cymbals, raised hands, shouts, dancing, and “joyful noise.” The story of David bringing the ark into Jerusalem, and how he danced before the Lord with all his might, illustrates how exuberant worship can be. We should worry less about excessive behavior – it is more likely our inhibitions that get in the way.

**Nehemiah 8** recounts how Israel kept the Feast of Tabernacles for the first time since the days of Joshua (**v. 17**) – a hiatus of over 800 years! When the leaders were reading from the Law and the people heard God’s word, they began to weep, but Ezra told them not to sorrow but to rejoice and celebrate with eating and drinking, “*for the joy of the Lord is your strength,*” **v. 10**.

*The Kingdom of God does not consist of food and drink, but righteousness, peace, and JOY in the Holy Spirit – Romans 14:17.* How many church services are dour and joyless. How many churches have focused on “food and drink” while missing the presence and power of the Spirit! Joy in the Spirit is a primary trait of the Kingdom, so a lack thereof indicates a serious deficiency in a church or individual believer.

In **Deuteronomy 28**, where God sternly warns Israel not to choose the way of unbelief and disobedience, or serious penalties will result, verses **47 & 48** say, “*Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joy and gladness of heart, for the abundance of everything, therefore you shall serve your enemies...*”

How much better to be like those described in **Psalms 89:15-17**, *Blessed are the people who know the joyful sound! They walk, O LORD, in the light of Your countenance. In Your name they rejoice all day long, and in Your righteousness they are exalted. For You are the glory of their strength, and in Your favor our horn is exalted.*

*How attractive is a joyless Christianity to a hurting and desperate world? How well do we represent the hope and goodness of the gospel if we exhibit no joy?*

*What is joy, how do we express it, and how is it different from feelings of happiness?*

*What are the proper motivations for rejoicing? Is it the job of the group to inspire the individual to rejoice, or the job of the individual to stir up the group?*

*Is rejoicing always loud, dramatic, and obvious, or are there quiet, subtle, casual ways of rejoicing?*

### VIII. NOT EMPTY-HANDED!

Deuteronomy 16:16,17 gives a general instruction that applies to all three of the major Feasts of the Lord, when all the men of Israel were required to gather at the place of His choosing: *“they shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed. Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the LORD your God which He has given you.”*

All the feasts had specific instructions concerning ritual sacrifices to be performed and offerings to be made, which are detailed in various passages throughout Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, along with the many, many other sacrifices, offerings, and rituals of the Law. All of these requirements had symbolic and prophetic significance relating to the mystery of Christ and what He would do for us through His death on the Cross, His resurrection, and His ongoing High Priestly ministry for us in Heaven. It is noteworthy that provision is made in these requirements for some flexibility depending on the relative wealth or poverty of individuals. For instance, in this passage concerning sin offerings:

*“If he is not able to bring a lamb, then he shall bring to the LORD, for his trespass which he has committed, two turtledoves or two young pigeons: one as a sin offering and the other as a burnt offering. ... But if he is not able to bring two turtledoves or two young pigeons, then he who sinned shall bring for his offering one-tenth of an ephah of fine flour as a sin offering...”* **Leviticus 5:7-11**

So we see with the Feast offerings, it is not one set, prescribed amount for everyone, but each is to give to the Lord “as he is able.” No one is totally excused from giving, no one gets to show up empty-handed before the Lord, because each is expected to give back to the Lord a token of what He has graciously provided through the year. So take stock of your blessings from the Lord, and give accordingly.

When Paul was instructing the Corinthians about taking up a collection for the saints in Jerusalem, he wrote, *“On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper...”* **1 Cor. 16:2**. As with the Feasts, the instruction is for “each one” to give, but not necessarily the same amount from each person – rather, “as he may prosper.” Paul follows up in his second letter, urging the Corinthians not to do less than they had promised, saying, *“For if there is first a willing mind, it [the offering] is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have,”* and, *“let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver,”* **2 Cor. 8:12 & 9:7**.

*Jesus said, “Freely you have received, freely give,”* **Matthew 10:8**. *What blessings has God given you that are meant to be shared, given away, or offered back to Him?*

*Given what Jesus said in the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30), and what 1 Cor. 12-14, Ephesians 4:7-16, and Romans 12:3-8 tell us about the body of Christ, how should we feel about our own participation in the activities, ministries, and missions of the Church? What can we improve or do differently?*