

The Feast of Tabernacles

Exodus 23:14–19; Revelation 21:1–8

As we have seen the last two weeks, Israel was to keep three annual feasts to the LORD. All physically fit adult heads of households were to leave their families and homesteads and make the journey to the central tabernacle three times a year to worship before the LORD. This rhythm was intentionally built into the annual calendar.

The first of the feasts was the Passover (Heb. פסח *pesach*). The LORD commanded that on the tenth day of the month Nisan in early spring the head of each household in Israel was to select an unblemished young male lamb to be offered as a sacrifice to the LORD. On the afternoon of Nisan 14 a family member was to slaughter the lamb and smear some of its blood on all three sides of the doorframe, top, right and left. The lamb was then to be roasted and eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. It was to be eaten “in haste,” since the Israelites would begin their exodus from Egypt the following morning.

At midnight, as Nisan 15 began, the Angel of death killed all the firstborn male children in homes all throughout Egypt that failed to smear the blood of the Passover lamb on their doorposts. The Jews who obeyed the LORD were “*passed over*”—spared—by the angel of death. Pharaoh and the Egyptians got up in the middle of the night, bewailing the loss of their children, and begged the Israelites to get out of their land. After 430 years in Egypt, over 600,000 adult males, along with their wives and children, walked away that day. A fiery pillar of cloud appeared before them, leading them out into the desert.

The Passover Lamb is a picture of Christ. As the blood of the Passover Lamb was shed in order to save the lives of the believing Israelites, so the blood of Christ was shed on Calvary in order to save all guilty sinners everywhere who look to him in faith. Paul declares that “Christ our *passover* is sacrificed for us” (1 Cor. 5:7). The many thousands of lambs that were slaughtered during the first Passover prefigured the Christ who would shed his blood for his people once for all. Without the blood of Christ to wash away our sins, our destiny is hellfire. The believing heart says, “Lord, I have no other hope besides you. Wash me from my sins in your own blood. Take away my guilt and make me your child eternally. Amen.” My dear hearer, make this prayer yours!

Immediately after Passover came Firstfruits. In Leviticus 23:10ff. God said, “When you come into the land which I give to you, and reap its harvest, then you shall bring a sheaf of the *firstfruits* of your harvest to the priest. He shall wave the sheaf before the LORD, to be accepted on your behalf; on the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it.” In the New Testament the apostle Paul clearly links the feast of Firstfruits to Jesus. He writes: “But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the *firstfruits* of those who have fallen asleep [that is, who have died]”

(1 Cor. 15:20). As Jesus died and rose again, so those who “sleep in Jesus” will God bring with him when Jesus returns at his Second Coming.¹ “Blessed”—yes, *blessed!*—“are the dead who die in the Lord” (Rev. 14:13). For those who are trusting in Christ for their salvation, to be “absent from the body” at death is to be “present with the Lord” in glory (2 Cor. 5:8)! For this reason, when a loved one who professes Christ as Savior dies, we who believe in Christ do not sorrow as do others, who have no hope.² We *do* sorrow, but our sorrow is restrained by the knowledge that our departed loved one is in the very presence of the Lord himself in blissful happiness.

The second annual feast is the Feast of Weeks (חַג הַשָּׁבֻעֹת *hag shavuōt*). Exodus 34:22 says, “you shall observe the Feast of Weeks, of the firstfruits of wheat harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering at the year’s end.” Here’s where it can get a little confusing, for the Feast of Weeks is also called a “firstfruits,” as we just heard (“the firstfruits of wheat harvest”). The farmers in Israel were to take the very first sheaf of the new harvest with them as they left for the central sanctuary (whether the tabernacle in Shiloh or, at a later time, the temple in Jerusalem). They were to present this sheaf to the LORD as an act of faith that God was going to provide for them and their families, and as a token that the whole harvest belonged to the LORD.

Now, why is it called the Feast of *Weeks*? Leviticus 23 explains: “And you shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering: *seven Sabbaths* [seven weeks] shall be completed. Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath; then you shall offer a new grain offering to the LORD” (23:15). Fifty days (Jewish inclusive time, counting both the first and the fiftieth day) is what we would call 49 days, that is, seven weeks. Its Greek name is πεντηκοστή (*pentēkostē*, meaning *fifty [days]*)—Pentecost. The word is used in the New Testament. The book of Acts records that “when the day of *Pentecost* was fully come” (2:1); it also speaks of Paul’s desire “to be at Jerusalem the day of *Pentecost* (20:16). The fact that a Greek term was in use by the Jews shows that many Jews at the time of Christ were fluent in Greek. The references to “Pentecost” in Acts show that the Feast of Weeks (the Feast of Pentecost) was still being celebrated at the time of the New Testament. The Feast of Weeks took place in late spring (May–June, according to our calendar).

Shavuot (Pentecost) is also a remembrance of the giving of the law (the Torah) at Mount Sinai, exactly seven weeks after the Exodus. To say that the Torah is important is an understatement. The Lord Jehovah gave his Torah—his law—to the covenant people, and to no one else. Paul writes of this when he speaks of “my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom

¹ 1 Thess. 4:14

² 1 Thess. 4:13

pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, *the giving of the law*, the service of God, and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen” (Rom. 9:3ff.). The Bible is the inheritance of the covenant people. If you are trusting in Christ as your Lord and Savior, and have been received into the fellowship of the visible church, you too have been incorporated into the covenant people. The story of the Jews encamped around the base of Mount Sinai—“the church in the wilderness”³—is *your* story. No matter your fortune at the present time, you are blessed to be part of the people of God.

The third annual feast to which devout Jewish men would make a pilgrimage is the Feast of Tabernacles (חג הסוכות *hag hasukōt*). This feast took place in the seventh month, which corresponds to our September–October. (Interestingly, the word *September* means *seven*. The ancient Romans originally used a calendar which began the year with the month of March.⁴) Leviticus 23, the chapter which gives the fullest account of the annual feasts of the Jews, shows that the seventh month (called Tishri) began with the Feast of Trumpets on Tishri 1, followed by the Day of Atonement (Tishri 10) and finally the Feast of Tabernacles (beginning on Tishri 15 and lasting for seven days).

On Tishri 15 devout Jews all over the land of Palestine would cut off the branches of trees and build makeshift huts, in which they would live for seven days. Leviticus 23 explains: “you shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of beautiful trees, branches of palm trees, the boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall *rejoice* before the LORD your God for seven days. You shall keep it as a feast to the LORD for seven days in the year. It shall be a statute forever in your generations” (23:40–41). This text speaks of “beautiful trees,” “palm trees,” “leafy trees” and “willows.” Apparently such trees were more plentiful in the Holy Land in earlier times. The Israelites were to “rejoice before the LORD . . . for seven days”—party time!—but a wholesome atmosphere of cheer and thanksgiving for all God’s good gifts. Many people have the idea that it is the people of this world who really know how to party, but in actuality it is to the saints that the Bible says, “rejoice evermore—rejoice always.” The fruit of the Spirit is *joy*—joy that can never be taken away. Knowing God gives us a reason for living. For the believing Israelite the greatest gift of all was *God himself*—God, the giver of every good and perfect gift, the God who had promised to send his Son, the “unspeakable gift” (2 Cor. 9:15), the gift apart from which all of us, unworthy sinners, would perish eternally in the Lake of Fire.

So here again are the three annual feasts which God expected the men of Israel to attend (women and children could attend too if they were able, but the men at

³ Acts 7:38 KJV (ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ *in the church [ekklesiā] in the wilderness*)

⁴ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/September> accessed 9-6-25

least were expected to be present). The men of Israel would leave their homes and homesteads and travel to Shiloh to worship the LORD, who was present above the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle—later, the temple at Jerusalem. This teaches us that true worship takes place only in the presence of God. When Christians attend worship, it is not just to be seen, or to enjoy the company and fellowship of the other worshippers. The church meets in the spiritual presence of the living God. If he is not present with us, then our worship is in vain. Remember Moses' reaction when God sternly warned, "I will not go up in the midst of thee; for thou art a stiffnecked people: lest I consume thee in the way." Moses had said, "LORD, see, thou sayest unto me, Bring up this people: and thou hast not let me know whom thou wilt send with me. Yet thou hast said, I know thee by name, and thou hast also found grace in my sight. . . . If thy presence go not with me, carry us not up hence. For wherein shall it be known here that I and thy people have found grace in thy sight? is it not in that thou goest with us? so shall we be separated, I and thy people, from all the people that are upon the face of the earth" (Ex. 33). As Israel traveled to the Promised Land, what set Israel apart from all the other nations that are on earth was that the LORD Jehovah, the one only true God, was *present* among them. Other nations might have their deities that were devised and crafted by the hands of men. The Psalms tell us, "The idols of the heathen are silver and gold, the work of men's hands." "All the gods of the nations are idols: but the LORD made the heavens."⁵

Here is the beautiful truth. There is one only living and true God. He is the Creator and maker of all things. He made man in order to have fellowship with him, but man sinned and was excluded from God's holy presence—banned from the Garden of Eden. As Augustine prayed, "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in thee." Man tries to find fulfillment in *things*, in ambition, in distractions, in pleasures, but nothing truly satisfies. There is a reason for this. Man is hardwired for fellowship with God. Nothing else can truly satisfy. God is not far from any one of us. But man cannot have a relationship with him because of sin. God is holy, and cannot allow sin into his holy presence. It is only through Christ—who took our sin upon himself, who washes us from our sins with his own precious blood, and who gives us his perfect righteousness as a free gift—that we can have a relationship with God, and once we experience that, nothing else can truly satisfy. God's people experience fellowship with God as we gather for worship. There is no more Holy of Holies here on earth. With the death of Christ the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The temple itself was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. The church comes into the very presence of God as we gather for worship. God meets

⁵ Ps. 135:15, 96:5

with us and invites us into his presence. The Lord Jesus Christ is presently enthroned at the right hand of the Father in heaven. Through his Spirit we are caught up into heavenly places where by faith we join the heavenly worship described in the book of Revelation, where we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses—the angelic hosts and the saints who have gone before us. Writing to the *church*, not to any private individual, the apostle Paul wrote: “If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.” We do this as we worship. We eat and drink in the presence of Christ. We find rest for our souls and are truly satisfied.

We no longer have to make the journey to Jerusalem to celebrate the three annual feasts. With the resurrection of Christ the church is decentralized. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7). That Helper is the Holy Spirit. There is no longer a central sanctuary on earth; rather, the exalted Christ meets with his obedient people as we gather for worship. Under the new covenant our meeting with God is not restricted to three times per year. The Lord told his people, “This cup is the new testament (new covenant) in my blood: this do ye, as *oft* as ye drink it, in remembrance of me.”⁶ The church meets weekly on the Christian Sabbath, but we are free to meet even more often than that. How blessed we are!

At the Feast of Tabernacles the people of Israel would dwell in crude huts in the out-of-doors. The weather was cooperative, as temperatures had begun to moderate, and the rainy season had not yet begun. As they slept in their leafy huts the people of Israel were reminded that they had no permanent home apart from God—and it is the same for us. As we learn in Hebrews, “For *here have we no continuing city*, but we seek one to come” (13:14). The Patriarchs “all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were *strangers* and *pilgrims* on the earth” (11:13)—and so are we, if we walk with God by faith. We look for a city “whose builder and maker is God,” the place where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Such is our privilege, by faith. Hallelujah!

Here, then are the three annual feasts:

Passover: The death angel would have surely destroyed us, but Christ intervened with the shedding of his precious blood, delivering us from death and hell, giving us spiritual life and bringing us into a relationship with himself, enabling us to bring forth fruit unto God.

Pentecost: At this time the farmers of Israel would make their pilgrimage to the central tabernacle (at Shiloh or Jerusalem), taking along their first ripe grains to be

⁶ 1 Cor. 11:25

waved before the LORD. This taught the people that the fruitfulness and plenty of the land was not a *given*—something automatic—but a divine gift from the God of heaven to his obedient people. The firstfruits were given back to the LORD as an expression of the people's faith that the *whole*—everything they labored for, everything they enjoyed—came from the Father's hand, belonged to him, and was to be used for his glory.

Tabernacles teaches us that this world is not our home, and we should not get too comfortable here on earth. We are strangers and pilgrims looking for our permanent home with God in heaven.

When the people of God returned to Jerusalem after the seventy-year captivity in Babylon, they began to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles once again. It was a time of joy. Nehemiah 8 informs us that “they found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths (סֻכּוֹת) during the feast of the seventh month, and that they should announce and proclaim in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, ‘Go out to the mountain, and bring olive branches, branches of oil trees, myrtle branches, palm branches, and branches of leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written.’ Then the people went out and brought them and made themselves booths, each one on the roof of his house, or in their courtyards or the courts of the house of God, and in the open square of the Water Gate and in the open square of the Gate of Ephraim. So the whole assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and sat under the booths; for since the days of Joshua the son of Nun until that day the children of Israel had not done so. And there was very great gladness. Also day by day, from the first day until the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God. And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day there was a sacred assembly, according to the prescribed manner” (Neh. 8:14–18).

The people who returned from captivity found joy and gladness in fellowshiping with the living God in the presence of the congregation.

So the three annual feasts, though the ceremonial aspects have passed away with the coming of Christ, teach us (1) that God *saves* us (Passover). He delivers us from the death angel by the precious blood of Christ and brings us into a relationship with himself by faith. (2) He enables us to be *fruitful* (Pentecost). He provides for us, body and soul. Like the fields watered by the LORD that provide our daily bread, that bring forth that first sheaf of grain, and all the rest, so he enables us to be fruitful—to live lives of fruitfulness for the glory of God. As Jesus said, “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and *bring forth fruit*, and *that your fruit should remain*” (John 15:16)—fruitful agriculture and fruitful witness. (3) At last he gathers us into his heavenly tabernacle, to dwell there forever (Tabernacles). As we saw in our New Testament text today, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell

[tabernacle] with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.”

At the three annual feasts Israel was reminded of these truths every year. It was instilled into them, year after year. This shows that it is an important lesson—a lesson that all of us need to learn, a lesson that we ought to instill in our children. It is part of our heritage as the people of God.

As Psalm 43 puts it (read this morning for our call to worship): “Oh, send out Your light and Your truth! Let them lead me; let them bring me to Your holy hill and to Your *tabernacle*. Then I will go to the altar of God, *to God my exceeding joy*; and on the harp I will praise You, O God, *my God*.”

O church of God, to dwell with God eternally is your heavenly inheritance.
Amen.