

Tabernacles

I love parties. I guess a lot of people would say that. But, all of my family is really into a good party. Here's a picture of Chase at his first birthday party just 4 months back. . . . His sister, Arwen, also loves a good party. She makes the birthday card, waits in eager anticipation and arrives with much happiness. The success though of a good party, for her, is all about the birthday cake. It can't be just any old thing. A good birthday depends on a really big cake that tastes good and looks good. She'll talk about the colour of the icing and the taste. When my sister turned 40 recently, Arwen was looking forward to the party but was disappointed because the cake was not nice – according to her.

It's good to let your hair down and celebrate. Birthday parties. Graduation parties. Going away parties. Home parties. Some of you have or are having special moments at the moment – 60th wedding anniversaries, 60th birthday parties...

Today, we're looking at a party God mandated for His people. Right there, in that thought alone, we have a lot of information about God – that He would encourage His people to party! Sometimes people have this stern picture of God in the Old Testament. Here he is, telling his people to tithe 10% of their income and use that money to feast and celebrations at these feasts throughout the year; a God who tells his people to take a week off to come away to a large party! So, if you're like me, and you like good parties, you're in good company with God.

Today, if you didn't already notice, the place is decorated a little differently. It might not look like a party as we know it, but that's because we're celebrating Jewish style today. The celebration we're looking at today goes by various names – Feast of Tabernacles, Feast of Booths, Feast of Shelters, or by the Hebrew name Sukkoth.

To be honest, before preparing for this message I knew very little about this feast. I've never heard anybody speak on it. But, this feast was the largest and most well attended out of all the Israelite feasts. This was a big occasion! In fact, many Israelites refer to it as 'the feast' because it is the largest one.

We read about it in a few places. Here's Scripture from Deuteronomy:

13 "You must observe the Festival of Shelters for seven days at the end of the harvest season, after the grain has been threshed and the grapes have been pressed."

The feast took place at the end of the Harvest year – towards the end of summer. Farm work was at a minimum. It was a quieter time for landowners as the harvest was in and wasn't quite time for planting. It was a good time to take stock spiritually and materially. It happened when the people would have had more comforts and stuff in

their house than at any other time. They packed into Jerusalem for a week of celebrations.

"This festival will be a happy time of celebrating with your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites, foreigners, orphans, and widows from your towns."

There were three feasts that every Israelite male, as a representative of the family, was instructed to attend. This was one of them. This was one that the family wanted to come too as well – and came if they could. This was a big occasion! Foreigners in Israel were included. Out of the tithe that people set aside for this feast (that we looked at last week), they ensured that foreigners and orphans and widows – the vulnerable in society, could come and celebrate as well. This was a party for everybody!

15 For seven days you must celebrate this festival to honor the LORD your God at the place he chooses, for it is he who blesses you with bountiful harvests and gives you success in all your work. This festival will be a time of great joy for all. - Deuteronomy 16:13-17

Right there, we see one of the purposes for the feast: **Look back and praise God for the harvest he has given.**

God has been good to them for another year. He has provided for their needs. What they have just harvested is evidence of that. It was time to come together and celebrate the goodness of God for his protection over them from their enemies and for bringing rain for the crops to grow. Yes, God had been good and it was time for the people to throw a praise party! It was a time of "great joy."

Their thanks to God was seen in a couple of ways. First, they brought with them an offering of their crops and vintage in thanksgiving of the Lord (cf. Harvest Table). God had provided it all for them anyway so they wanted to back to God a tangible expression of their praise.

Another way they praised was through the share number of animal sacrifices. Over in the book of Numbers, we're told all the animals that were to be sacrificed. Each day of the feast, several young bulls, two rams, fourteen lambs, and one goat were. Over the week, 70 bulls would be sacrificed! 189 animal sacrifices in total! That is several times more animals than at any other feast. Those animals were sacrificed and went towards the feast. Effectively, this became a huge barbeque for the people to join. God had been good to them and they were celebrating his goodness together over a great feast.

In some ways, this feast was like the Thanksgiving in the States. Several people think that the early puritans who started the Thanksgiving feast just took the idea from this feast of Tabernacles. On the 4th Thursday in November each year, Americans join together with family and friends. We got to enjoy that for 4 years when we lived there. The turkey, pecan pie, Pumpkin pie, Apple pie – a time with no presents. Just a time to celebrate. That's what was going on here.

But, it wasn't just looking back to God's goodness in providing crops. They looked back even further. This is where these shelters come into it.

SHELTER

In Leviticus, we read about the feast...

33 And the LORD said to Moses, 34 "Give the following instructions to the people of Israel. Begin celebrating the Festival of Shelters on the fifteenth day of the appointed month . . .

40 On the first day gather branches from magnificent trees—palm fronds, boughs from leafy trees, and willows that grow by the streams. Then celebrate with joy before the LORD your God for seven days. . . . 42 For seven days you must live outside in little shelters. All native-born Israelites must live in shelters.

The people built little booths, and dwelt in these for the week to remember Israel's earlier experience. (cf. pictures of desert hut and contemporary Jewish celebration style). They were made out of various branches and leaves and designed to be temporary make-shift huts. Those from out of town built makeshift structures of light branches and leaves to live in for a week; Townies put up similar structures on their flat roofs or in their own courtyards. I guess it would be similar to throwing a tent up on your lawn with the kids and living out there for the week.

Effectively, they're camping! They've got their sleeping bag out and made their tents out of branches and leaves.

All this had a purpose to it. It was designed for the people to look back to earlier times in their national history. It was to re-enact what life had been for their forefathers in earlier times.

43 This will remind each new generation of Israelites that I made their ancestors live in shelters when I rescued them from the land of Egypt. I am the LORD your God." - Leviticus 23:33-44 (NLT)

The people of God had at one time been in bondage, slaves in Egypt. But, God had delivered them through a series of plagues and parting of the red sea. He brought them into the wilderness where they lived for 40 years. During that time, God protected them from enemies who wanted their stuff.

As they pulled on their sleeping bag at night and lay on the hard surface; as they roughed it for the week – they were able to remind themselves that their ancestors lived this way in the desert. During that time, God had been good to them.

For one, God protected his people. There was no shortage of people groups around that knew they were there and were ready to pounce on them. But, God protected his people. He delivered his people from slavery in Egypt and they now experienced freedom.

There were a couple of special re-enactment activities that occurred as part of this feast. We don't find them mentioned in the original feast but they were added in quite early in the process so that Jews by the time of Jesus certainly had this as part of their celebrations.

WATER

The first was the water rite. On the seventh day of the feast, a golden jug was filled with water from the pool of Siloam and was carried in a procession led by the High Priest back to the temple. As he walked, the people would sing some of the Hallel Psalms – includes Psalms like 118.

1 Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good! His faithful love endures forever. . . .

13 My enemies did their best to kill me, but the LORD rescued me.

14 The LORD is my strength and my song; he has given me victory. 15 Songs of joy and victory are sung in the camp of the godly. The strong right arm of the LORD has done glorious things! 16 The strong right arm of the LORD is raised in triumph. The strong right arm of the LORD has done glorious things! - Psalm 118:1, 13-16

You can imagine the things on their mind as they sung these words. They reflected back over the ways God provided and protected them throughout their years as a nation.

Then every male pilgrim would take the Lulav – which was willow and poplar branches tied together with palms. Each of them would raise this Lulav with his right hand. Then, in his left hand, he raised citrus fruit, and they all cried out 'Give thanks to the Lord' three times. The water was offered to God at the time of the morning sacrifice.

That water was very symbolic. For one, it reminded the people of the rain that God brought on their crops. It also took their memory back to the wilderness days where God provided water from the rock. They were thirsty in the middle of the desert and God miraculously provided water for all the people and manna for them to eat. He provided for their physical needs. They did not go hungry or thirsty!

As they came to this feast, they celebrated the abundance of what they had knowing God had provided it for them to enjoy.

LIGHTS

There was another re-enactment activity that occurred at the feast. There were four huge lamps in the temple court of the woman, accessible to all the people. These were lit. Eyewitnesses said that when the wicks were lit at evening, the huge flames illuminated all of Jerusalem. Under them, people danced through the night, holding burning torches in their hands and singing songs of praises. There was glow everywhere and many stayed up much of the night revelling in praise and remembering back to God guiding the people by fire.

While the Levites played worship songs on their harps, and with clashing cymbals, and a range of musical instruments, people danced around them. This included

distinguished male leaders in the community. They danced with burning torches in their hands, singing. Can you imagine the smell of the oil, the heat of the smoking torches, and the shadows of the perspiring, bearded priests as they whirled about? The reason they did this was to remember that God had guided his people in the wilderness by a pillar of cloud by day and by fire at night. That fire was the shekinah glory of God. God Himself had led them through the wilderness right into the Promised Land. As they dwelt in these booths, as they saw the water rite, as they felt the heat of the flames, they danced with joy because God had guided and protected and provided His people in the wilderness so that they were not in the Promised Land. What's more, they saw themselves in the shoes of the forefathers, so God had done this for them. He was still providing rain and crops and protection and guidance for them today. This was great cause for celebration.

CELEBRATING THE PRESENT

There's another purpose to this feast.: ***It helped the people look to the present and re-appreciate what they had.***

You can imagine it, can't you? The final day of the feast came, what was known as 'the great day,' day 8. On that day, there were massive celebrations. Then the people pulled down their makeshift temporary shelters of branches and travelled back to their comfortable homes.

One of the reasons they rejoiced because they didn't have to live like this anymore! It might be fun to do this for a few days but after a week, it's time to go back to your home, have a shower and enjoy the comforts of home. Yes, God provided for them in the desert but, thankfully, God had brought them into the Promised Land and they now had homes and comforts. After camping out for the week, they re-appreciated what they had as they reflected on a time where the people had only what they could carry.

It's easy to take comforts for granted isn't it?

¹⁰ "The LORD your God will soon bring you into the land he swore to give you when he made a vow to your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is a land with large, prosperous cities that you did not build. ¹¹ The houses will be richly stocked with goods you did not produce. You will draw water from cisterns you did not dig, and you will eat from vineyards and olive trees you did not plant. When you have eaten your fill in this land, ¹² be careful not to forget the LORD, who rescued you from slavery in the land of Egypt – Deut 6:10-12

It's easy to forget. This feast helped them look to their present situation and appreciate the goodness of God – in the past, and in the present.

CONFIDENCE IN THE FUTURE

It also helped them look forward and have confidence in the future goodness of God. The time of the feast helped with this. It was the last harvest of the calendar year and marked the beginning of a new year. God had been good the previous year and it helped them look ahead to a new year with confidence.

Now, my guess is that some of the people at the feast were happy with their lot and didn't think much about the year to come. They were caught up with joy in the moment. But no doubt some were wired to worry. Maybe things were happening in their life or the life of their family and it filled them with fear of what might happen in the future. They were tense about what tomorrow might bring. Would there be enough rain? Would their crops grow? Would their family survive another year?

Remember, this is an Agrarian society so their whole living depended on the right rainfall and crops growing. It was easy to get tense about what tomorrow might bring. The feast helped them look forward and realize that it is God who brings rain. It's God who provides materially and physically.

Not only did it look forward to the future year – but future season. It looked ahead to what the people called 'the great ingathering' of the people that would be a time of great rejoicing because the LORD would fulfil all his promises. This was the time when Messiah would be present among the world and gather people together from all nations of the world to a huge Tabernacle feast. It would even include those who had been enemies of God! We read about that in a small book in the Bible called Zechariah, a text was later read the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles.

¹⁶ In the end, the enemies of Jerusalem who survive the plague will go up to Jerusalem each year to worship the King, the LORD of Heaven's Armies, and to celebrate the Festival of Shelters. - Zech 14:16.

It reminded the people of what God would do in a day to come – when all God's promises would be fulfilled. God's goodness in the past gave them much confidence to face the future.

Whether they were happy with their lot or tense about tomorrow, God invited his people to feast at his party!

God invited his people to party and remember the goodness of God in the past, the present and the future.

This is where, in my mind, it gets even better! 2000 years after Moses first gave these instructions, Jesus arrived. Jesus was a Jew who went to the feast of Tabernacles. He would lived in one of these makeshift booths during the days he was there. But, what's fascinating is what he does there and what he says while he is there has some major implications for you and me. We read about the feast in John 7 and 8. We're told that whatever happens here is placed in the context of this feast -

After this, Jesus went around in Galilee. He did not want to go about in Judea because the Jewish leaders there were looking for a way to kill him. ² But when the Jewish Festival of Tabernacles was near

The final day of the feast came. This is the day when the water rite would be re-enacted where the priest would collect the water and pour it around the altar to celebrate the time God provided water to his people in the wilderness and rain for their crops for the previous year. On that same day, with that image etched on their brains, listen to what Jesus says,

37 On the last day, the climax of the festival, Jesus stood and shouted to the crowds, "Anyone who is thirsty may come to me!"

Do you hear what Jesus is saying? Just as God provided water to His people in the Old Testament; just as they have remembered through the re-enactment of this water rite, so Jesus is inviting people to come to him to drink.

Jesus is saying that He is the One who provides water that quenches our thirst. He's able to provide us with the sustenance we need in life.

If you're thirsty today, Jesus is inviting you to feast on him. To come thirsty to him and find that he will satisfy your quench.

Anyone who believes in me may come and drink!

Maybe your soul has been famished and craving and malnourished. Jesus says, 'anyone who believes in me, who places their trust in me, who does not rely on themselves but on me... come and drink. Come and be satisfied.'

For the Scriptures declare, 'Rivers of living water will flow from his heart.'" 39 (When he said "living water," he was speaking of the Spirit, who would be given to everyone believing in him. ...)- John 7:37-39 (NLT)

The water that Jesus brings is the very presence of the Spirit of God. God, at work in our lives, nourishing our souls, providing us with all we need. We read here that Jesus did not just satisfy our thirst but helps us become thirst quenchers. Water will flow from us, through us, to others so that others who are malnourished can receive all they need.

If you're thirsty, come to Jesus and drink!

There's more. As I mentioned earlier, there was also the festival of lights where the lamps would be lit causing light throughout the temple area. All this took place in the temple area in the court of the woman.

On the final day of the feast, Jesus stood up and said,

"I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life." – John 8:12 (NLT)

Guess where Jesus is standing when he says this?

"Jesus made these statements while he was teaching in the section of the Temple known as the Treasury." (v. 20). The Treasury, or these offering receptacles were placed in the Court of the Woman, a place where everybody could come to worship; the place where the four lamps were lit.

In the same place, with the smells of last night's celebration still lingering in the breeze, Jesus proclaimed, "I am the light of the world." The Jews knew exactly what he meant. It was as if he were saying, "I am the glory of the pillar of cloud that guided your ancestors and lit up the night for them. I am the *Shekinah* that descended on Solomon's Temple. I am the light of the world, and if you follow me, you will never ever be in the dark again!"

Jesus extends an invitation to us to follow the light he provides.

There's some irony here. Twice in chapter 7 people accuse Jesus of "leading the people astray." Astray from the religious leaders at the time. In reality, Jesus is able to lead us out of the legalism that weights its heavy loads on us. He's able to lead us out of the wilderness of sin and death. He is able to lead us into the life that is truly life.

If you're feeling lost in the middle of our wilderness. Jesus says to you today, 'I am the light of the world. I will lead you out of the wilderness into the ultimate Promised Land.

Jesus is inviting you to a party to feast on his goodness. To look back and recall the ways God has protected and provided – materially, physically and spiritually

... to look to the present and appreciate anew all that God has for you right now.

... to look to the future and express your confidence in God who will continue to nourish and protect and provide.

Like any party invitation, there is a RSVP. You need to respond:

RSVP

- 1. I am unable to party at this time*
- 2. I will party – for the first time*
- 3. I will party – again!*

Whether you're happy with your lot or tense about tomorrow . . . feast on God's past goodness