

SM033 The Feast of Tabernacles

It was autumn in the land of Israel and God had been good to his people who were busy harvesting the abundance of the vine and the tree. Grapes, dates, olives, figs, and pomegranates were brought in and the people rejoiced. It was also time for the Feast of Tabernacles.

Every year, God's people gathered in Jerusalem for three great festivals. The first was Pesach or what we call Passover. This happened in the springtime and would begin on the first full moon after the spring equinox. This celebrated the birth of new animals, the beginning of the barley and wheat harvest and above all the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. It was a time of feasting and celebration. No work would be done. Sacrifices in the temple would abound as families would bring their sacrificial lambs to the priests.

Fifty days later, Israel celebrated its second festival, Shavuot or the Feast of Pentecost. Families would bring the first fruits of their harvest and offer them in gratitude for God's goodness. The stores of grain back home would be ready for sifting and milling that would take place during the dry summer months that would follow. In their worship in the Temple the people would remember how God gave the Law on Mt. Sinai and entered into a covenant with Israel.

In the Fall, some months later, five days after Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Tabernacles would begin. What a sight it must have been throughout the land of ancient Israel as the countryside would fill with people harvesting of the fruit of vine and tree and the countryside would be dotted with shelters that farmers would build and live in temporarily to protect their Fall harvest from thieves. And as the Feast itself drew near people would ready their temporary shelters and prepare their branches to wave in celebration of the harvest and in gratefulness to God for his goodness.. They would bind branches from the willow, palm, olive, and other leafy trees and would attach a citrus-y fruit called an etrog.

As the festival drew near, Jesus was in Galilee with his disciples. One day his brothers came to him and said, "Jesus. We think you should go to Jerusalem to the Feast. Many people have seen your works and are impressed with you. You should go to the capital during the festival and show what you can do."

Many weeks before Jesus' brothers had visited him. But they had not come to see his miracles or to hear him teach. They had come to take him home because they thought he had lost his senses. Of course, they were in for a big surprise for when they arrived they could not even get to him, the home was crowded with so many people. They were astonished as men and women crowded to hear him speak and they heard reports of the amazing works of power that he was performing.

The brothers had gone home that day – without Jesus – but with many questions in their mind. They did not believe he was the Messiah but as time passed the reports kept coming of the amazing works he was performing. Maybe there was something to this after all.

And so as the Feast of Tabernacles drew near, and as the brothers prepared for their journey to Jerusalem, they decided to ask Jesus to join them at the festival just as he had when they were all children growing up. They said, “Jesus, no one who has power such as you have keeps it a secret. It’s natural that a person with ability like yours should go to Jerusalem and show everyone what he can do.”

Jesus had heard this before, many times – “Show yourself. Perform a sign. Prove yourself. Proclaim your kingship.” And this is what Jesus continually resisted. He knew that if he did this – the people would miss the point of his mission. The people wanted him to drive the Romans from the land and establish peace in Israel, but Jesus came for something far bigger than that – yes, it included peace in the land, but peace could not come until people’s hearts were right with God, and Jesus had come not just for his own countrymen, Jesus had come for the whole world – including the hated Romans with their power and the Greeks with their culture.

And so he said to his brothers – “It is not my time for such glory. It’s always your time to glorify yourself, but it is not my time. You want me to go to Jerusalem and do mighty works. The last time I went the leaders wanted to kill me because I healed a man on the Sabbath. They hate me because I tell them what they are doing wrong and how they need to turn to God. No, I am not going up with you. You go ahead. The time for my glory has not yet fully come.”

And so his brothers left – again, without Jesus, and again, not fully understanding who he was and what he had come to do.

But some days later Jesus went up to the Feast, not like his brothers wanted, with great ceremony and praise and claims for himself and doing mighty works, but he went up secretly to observe the Feast that God had told all the men in Israel to observe.

Thousands had come to the city of Jerusalem to observe this great festival of the Fall harvest. Houses in the city had branches laid on top of them. Small shelters were built outside the city in which many people slept as they remembered that the entire nation had once lived in temporary shelters when they passed through the great wilderness between Egypt and the land of promise. Jesus thought back on the years when he and Joseph and his mother Mary and his brothers and sisters had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast. It was always a joyous occasion.

On the first day of the Festival the priests offered thirteen oxen, fourteen lambs, two rams, and a male goat for the sins of the people and as an act of worship to the God of Israel for his faithfulness to them in providing their needs. Each day the priests would offer sacrifices and they would also lead the people in the great ceremony of the waters which was a prayer for God to send the Fall rains after the harvest to replenish the land after the long, dry summer months.

Priests would take a golden pitcher and lead a procession to the south of the city to the Gihon Spring which supplied water for the Pool of Siloam. The priest would fill the pitcher from the spring as a choir chanted from Isa 12:3, “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.” He would carry the water back up the hill to the “Water Gate” followed by crowds waving the tree branches with their right hand and carrying an etrog fruit in the left and they would sing the great Hallel songs from Psa 122-135.

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When the priests re-entered the Temple they would climb the altar steps and pour the water into a large bowl on the altar while the crowd circled and sang. Another priest would pour wine into another large bowl on the altar and both would drain simultaneously from a hole in its base onto the altar of sacrifice.

The water and wine on the altar was a prayer for God to send rain for the growing of crops and a reminder of God giving water from the rock in the wilderness. It also reminded people of the great prophecy of Ezekiel of the water coming from the temple and giving life to the world.

For three or four days Jesus had been observing the feast quietly and had escaped notice. But he had heard conversations of the people. Even though people did not know he was there, he was the topic of conversation.

“Where is Jesus? Why hasn’t he come up? I’ve seen his brothers but I haven’t seen him.”

Someone else said, “I hope he doesn’t come. He’s nothing but a troublemaker. He is bringing confusion to the people and turning them away from the Laws of God, the way he heals on the Sabbath and all those cures he performs on people.”

“No, he is a good man.” And on and on it went and the crowd was divided over Jesus.

Finally, in the middle of the feast, Jesus went into the Temple and started teaching. Word spread fast. The temple authorities sent a delegation to listen while others stayed back and convened a council on how to get rid of him. They knew trouble was at hand if Jesus was teaching the people openly in the temple.

As Jesus spoke the people were astonished at his words of wisdom and power. Finally, a man in the crowd who was sent from the leaders shouted out, “How can you teach like this? Where did you get these words? You have never been to the academies of learning in Jerusalem and received proper instruction.”

And Jesus said to him, “My teaching is not Mine, but I speak to you the words of the One who has sent Me and if you, or anyone, is willing to do God’s will, you will know where my teaching is from, if it is from God or if I am just making it up. But if a person is just making it up, then he is seeking his own glory. I am seeking the glory of the One who sent me. And the One who sent me is the true covenant God, and he is completely faithful to his promises.”

“Listen, I know you are concerned about my keeping the Law of Moses. Yet, you should take a good look at yourselves for you are the ones not keeping the Laws of Moses because you are trying to kill me.”

Then someone said, “Who is trying to kill you. I think you are hearing voices from an evil spirit. You have a demon.”

And Jesus said, "I did one great work here in Jerusalem. I healed a man who was paralyzed for 38 years and you all tried to kill me for releasing a man on the Sabbath. Your own priests work on the Sabbath. They circumcise babies on the Sabbath and bring them into the covenant. I made a whole man well and restored him to the covenant family of God and you are trying to kill me."

Many in the crowd loved what Jesus was saying and one of them said, "Our rulers can't do anything against Jesus. Look this is the man they want to arrest and here he is talking publicly and they aren't doing a thing." The whole crowd laughed at the weakness of the rulers.

But the rulers were not going to be intimidated by the crowd that easily and so one of them started a new line of argument with Jesus and said, "When the Messiah comes, we will not know where he is from. It will be a mystery. But we know where you are from. You are from Galilee and from that little town in Nazareth."

Then Jesus stood up and said in a loud voice so that all could hear, "You know who I am. You know where I have come from. You know in your heart of hearts that I have not come from myself and that God has sent me. He is the true God. But you must not know him. If you knew him, you would receive me. But I am from him. He sent me."

The authorities did not know what to do. They were supposed to arrest Jesus on the spot but they knew many in the crowd were for Jesus and were saying, "When the Messiah comes, he will not do greater works than what this man has done." That was a good point and the rulers in the crowd began to be afraid.

The Pharisees were watching from a distance and they saw that the delegation they had sent was not doing their job so they called together the Temple officers and said, "You go right now and arrest that man."

And as they went their way, Jesus said, "For a little while longer I am with you, then I go to Him who sent Me. ³⁴ You will seek Me, and will not find Me; and where I am, you cannot come." And then Jesus walked out of the temple.

Interlude

Jesus and the leaders argued about three things. First, they argued about Jesus' authority. It was obvious that Jesus did not have the credentials the leaders at that time thought was necessary to be a teacher of the people. Jesus had only a rudimentary education, attending synagogue until he was 12 or 13 and then learning a trade from his father.

Jerusalem had the academies of learning but Jesus never attended and because he did not have the right certification, he was looked down upon by the authorities. Yet there was an authority with which he taught that was unmistakable. He did not teach like the scribes of his day who were constantly wrangling over the minor details of the Law and what the people could do or could not do. He taught the kingdom of God and lives were changed. People who had fallen deeply into sin found forgiveness.

Those who were afflicted with evil spirits were released. And the sick were healed. It was clear, this man did not learn these things from other men. But from where? Where did he get this knowledge? And this is a question that you and I must answer for if Jesus received this wisdom from God in heaven, then we must listen to his words and obey what he says.

Second, the leaders in this story argued with Jesus over his origin. Some believed that the Messiah would just appear – out of the sky. Suddenly he would come into his temple and declare his presence and lead his people to victory and freedom. Others were aware of the prophecies that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, the city of David. But this Jesus, he was from Nazareth. Many people knew his mother Mary, his brothers, and the one they thought was his father, Joseph. And no scripture said that the Messiah or even a great prophet would come from Nazareth. But what many failed to realize or remember, is that Jesus was not born in Nazareth in Galilee but he was born in Bethlehem and spent his first months in the city of David. And, though born, his conception, was not a typical conception. He was born of a virgin. The Holy Spirit had empowered the virgin Mary to conceive while yet a virgin. Jesus came from God, and even beyond this, he lived before he was born. He lived as the eternal Word of God. In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God and this eternal Word became human and lived among us.

And what every person must come to know is that Jesus, while a great teacher, is more than a great teacher. Every person must realize that Jesus, while a great prophet is more than a great prophet. Jesus comes from God and is the embodiment of God in human form. And if he is the eternal Word of God come to us, then we must listen to him.

Third, they argued with Jesus on where he was going. Jesus said he would be with them only for a little longer. Then he would go away and they would not see him again and where he was going they could not come. Some thought that he was saying that he was leaving the land of promise and going to another community of Jewish people somewhere in the Roman world. But Jesus wasn't talking about that. He was talking about his death, his resurrection, and his enthronement at the right hand of God where he would reign as Lord. That's where he had come from. That is where he was going.

And friends, if Jesus did indeed die for our sins, rise again, and if he was enthroned as the King at the right hand of God, then he is Lord and we must all bow to him, proclaim him as Lord, confess our sins, and receive his mercy.

Have you done this? Have you bowed to Jesus? Do you understand that he did go to Jerusalem to die and when he died it was for our sins. Do you understand that he rose again and conquered the grave. Do you understand that he is the Lord? Do you understand that he is the eternal word of God. Do you understand that he speaks the truth of God to the world?

This is the argument that was taking place in the midst of the Feast of Tabernacles. His brothers wanted him to go up to the Feast, perform miracles, rally the people, dispose of the wicked priests, take the crown of kingship, and get rid of the Romans. But what good would that have done if the people did not understand who he was, why he had come, and what their real problem was – sin? And so Jesus went

up secretly to the Feast and then finally tried to help the people understand his true identity and his true mission, but few understood. How about you? Do you understand? Do you know who he is and that he has come to be your Savior and the Savior and Lord of the world?

Finally, it was the last day of the Feast. The sacrifices were offered and the priests had gone down to the Gihon River for the final ceremony of the waters. They dipped their golden pitcher in the springs and brought it back to Jerusalem in the midst of much singing and rejoicing as the people thanked God for his abundant harvest. They proceeded back into the courts. The Levites played cymbals, harps, and lyres, while the priests led the people around the altar seven times. On the previous days of the feast they circled the altar only once but on this last great feast day, they did it seven times. Finally, after the seventh circling of the altar, the priests poured the wine and the spring water into the great bowls on the altar and the holes at the base of the bowls streamed the liquid onto the altar symbolizing their prayer to God for the rain they would need in the coming months for the wheat and the barley crops and the vines and the fruit trees.

But as everyone watched in silence, a voice rose over the crowd. It was not the voice of a man in song. It was not the voice of a priest reminding the people that God had given water from a rock in the wilderness so many years before to quench their thirst. It was the voice of Jesus and he said loudly and clearly for all to hear,

“If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. ³⁸ He who believes in Me, as the Scriptures say, ‘From his innermost heart will flow rivers of living water.’”

The crowd was stunned. Finally someone said, “He is the One. He is the one the prophets spoke about. He has the words of God for us. This is the Messiah.”

But others said, “But he comes from Nazareth in Galilee. The Messiah is supposed to come from Bethlehem.” And a great division arose in the crowd. The officers were helpless. They went back to the leaders, without Jesus and the leaders said with great frustration and anger, “Where is Jesus? Why didn’t you arrest him?”

And they said, “No one has ever spoken like this.”

And what they said was true. No one ever spoke like this. Jesus said, “if anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. What about you? Are you thirsty today? Come to Jesus and drink deeply and you will find his water filling your innermost heart and overflowing through you to bless the world.