

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 16

John – Part Six Feast of Tabernacles

I. BACKGROUND

In John 7 and 8, we have Jesus going up to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles, also called *Sukkot*.¹ At this feast, Jesus makes several poignant statements about himself and his role in human history. Before we probe these statements, it is useful to background the Feast of Tabernacles itself.

II. FEAST OF TABERNACLES

A. *Institution*

Moses instituted the Feast of Tabernacles at Yahweh's instruction as detailed in Leviticus 23:33-44. The feast was to be observed for seven days beginning on the 15th of Tishri. That made the festival an autumn festival, usually falling between September and October in our Western calendar. Leviticus records the instruction:

*You shall live in booths seven days in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt.
(Lev. 23:42-43)*

B. *Meaning*

Because the festival occurred in the autumn each year, it quickly took on an emphasis as a festival of thanksgiving for the completed harvest and the provision of God in that harvest. The Bible sometimes refers to the festival as the Feast of Ingathering (Ex. 23:16b; 39:22) showing the usage of the holiday as a time for

¹ *Sukkot* comes from the Hebrew word *sukkah* which means "tent," "Tabernacle," or "Temporary booth." The plural form of the word is *sukkot*. This holiday is referred to by a number of different names, including Feast of Tabernacles, *Sukkot*, Feast of Booths.

celebrating harvest. It lasted one week² and formed the chief holiday season in the Jewish year.

As Jewish history unfolded, the festival took on special significance as a foreshadowing of the Messianic Age to come. This understanding of the festival stemmed from the idea that while one year's harvest was being celebrated, there would come a year when the harvest would not only be the year's crops, but also a harvest of the nations. This thought was that the nations would gather in a final onslaught against the Jews, that Yahweh would intervene on the Jews behalf, and that while the wicked were punished, the holy remnant would see the perfect age of the Messiah ushered in with celebration at Jerusalem.

C. Practice

The practice of the Feast of the Tabernacles included reading from Zechariah 14, which prophesied the coming day of the Lord.³ This passage set forth two characteristics of the Messianic Age:

1. Continuous daylight with an absence of winter (Zech. 14:6), and
2. An unfailing source of water ("on that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem..." Zech. 14:8).

We lose touch with the significance of these two issues in 21st century America. Our electric lights and safety keeps the night and darkness from being too threatening and beyond control. Similarly, we face neither the anxiety nor the possible health results from a lack of good pure water. To 1st century people, however, these were major life issues and concerns. That these concerns would disappear in the Messianic Age was an incredible hope and dream.

We have Rabbinic evidence indicating how the Jews celebrated these two promises at the festival. Before dawn each day, a golden pitcher was filled with water from the pool of Siloam. While Isaiah 12:3 was sung ("With joy shall you draw water out of the wells of salvation..."), a procession brought the pitcher of water to the

² Today, the festival is celebrated for 8 to 9 days with additional add-on days depending upon whether the celebration is in Israel or outside Israel.

³ Zechariah 14 speaks of the coming Day of the Lord with the coming Messiah. In verse 16, it references that the survivors from the nations will "go up year after year to worship the king, Yahweh Almighty, and to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles."

temple. At the temple, the water was poured out into two pipes which channeled the water underground and into the Kidron Valley.

The significance of this ceremony was its prophesy that a time would come where the water scarcity would be no more and a never ending stream would issue forth from under the temple, making glad Jerusalem, the city of God.

The second promise was celebrated by a brilliant lighting of a temple court all night long. The lights were not extinguished until just before the sun dawned. At this point, a blare of trumpets was followed by a vow of fidelity to Yahweh, and Yahweh alone.

D. Enter Jesus

Now we consider the story of the Festival of Tabernacles as our Messiah, Jesus, celebrated and explained as recorded in John 7 and 8.

Jesus did not go up to the feast in a showy fashion. Instead, he sent others first and came himself in secret. The Jews at the festival were searching for Jesus, the miracle worker. We know that a good many of Jews were discussing whether or not Jesus could be the Messiah. That being the case, no doubt many were especially abuzz about that year's festival and what might happen with Jesus.

In the middle of the week-long feast, Jesus went up into the temple and began to teach. There was considerable interest in how this carpenter with no substantial formal education was able to teach in such a way. Jesus explained to those who wondered that Jesus' teaching was from God, not from school!

Jesus' interchange included some seeking to kill him, some questioning whether he was possessed, and some wondering if Jesus might be the Messiah because no one arrested him.

John then takes us to the last day of the feast. On this day, Jesus stood up and declared in a loud voice:

If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. He that believes in me, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.

John clarifies that Jesus was referencing the Holy Spirit that would come to the people after Jesus was glorified.

In light of the practice of the day, we can see in this statement of Jesus a deeply profound message to us, but an equally disturbing message to those present. If the pitcher of water from Siloam was to indicate the promise of unending water in the day of Messiah, then Jesus was boldly making a proclamation that the day was upon the people.

Although the people did not understand that Jesus was speaking of the Spirit, they were very aware of the implications of what Jesus was saying. John tells us that upon hearing this statement, a number of the people proclaimed that Jesus was indeed the coming prophet, the Messiah. Others argued that Jesus could not be Messiah because these folks mistakenly thought Jesus came from Galilee while the Messiah was to come from Bethlehem.

The priests and Pharisees put forward an effort to have Jesus brought before them, but those sent to retrieve Jesus were too amazed at his teaching to bring him in. Nicodemus tried to stand up for Jesus in their midst but those in power mockingly shut him up.

Jesus was never a partial Messiah, which is no less true on the occasion of this festival. John begins chapter 8 telling us that Jesus did more than make the promise of unending water. Jesus also spoke to the people and addressed the second aspect of the festival – unending day:

Again Jesus spoke to them saying, “I am the light of the world: he that follows me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.” (8:12)

While Jesus’ statement takes on a special significance because it was made at the festival where light was a significant promise of the Messiah to come, we should not limit its significance to that meaning. Throughout the Old Testament, light is used as a metaphor for God’s direction and effect upon man.⁴ John himself has used the metaphor as early as the first chapter explaining that Jesus was the light of the world who bestows the “light of life.” John then develops this theme more fully in chapter 9.

⁴ Psalm 27:1: “Yahweh is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear?;” 119:105: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path;” Isaiah 42:6 “I will make you...a light for the Gentiles.”

Before chapter 9's treatment of Jesus as the light, however, John gives us the finale to the Feast of Tabernacles. After Jesus makes the claim of being the light, those in power question Jesus' authority for making such a bold and near blasphemous proclamation. In Jewish courts, it took two witnesses for evidence to be considered credible. Jesus tells the folks that there is a witness of two, Jesus and God the Father. Many of the masses believed Jesus was in fact Messiah.

Jesus said to those who were persuaded that he was the Promised One, that if they would abide in the words and teaching of Jesus, then they would not be temporary followers but true disciples. Then, Jesus said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." This was troublesome to the people. They explained that they were Abraham's seed (how could anything be more true?) and that they were not enslaved to anyone (what need to be set free?)

Jesus upset the people explaining that they were in fact enslaved to sin. The freedom from sin that would come from Jesus would set the people "free indeed." Jesus then further upsets the people by telling them that if they were truly Abraham's children, then they would do the works of Abraham. Rather than accept the words of Jesus (and with them truth and freedom!), the people persist in arguing with Jesus in disbelief.

Jesus tells the people that they are refusing to hear and believe what he is saying. Jesus then tells them that rather than Abraham as a father, the devil is in fact the father of those arguing. The Jews respond that Jesus is the one with a devil. They challenge Jesus on whether Jesus thinks of himself as greater than Abraham. Jesus answered that Abraham rejoiced to see the day of Jesus and the people mock that Abraham could never have anticipated the day of Jesus.

Jesus responds to the people that "Before Abraham was, I am." At this response, the people pick up stones to kill Jesus.

"I am" is the best interpretation that scholars can give to the Hebrew name for God, *Yahweh*. To pronounce *Yahweh* was itself considered blasphemy by Jews. The name of God was too holy to be uttered. In fact, it was rarely even written.

That Jesus would pronounce the name of God was sufficient grounds for stoning Jesus. That Jesus would do so in a context where Jesus claimed the title for himself was utterly blasphemous – unless, of course, it was true. That thought did not enter the people's mind. Although if that thought had entered their minds, if they had known the truth, then the truth would have indeed set them free.

III. POINTS FOR HOME

1. Jesus is Full Messiah
2. On Jesus' terms.
3. Jesus is worth knowing!
4. Jesus meets your needs.
5. Jesus sets you free.
6. Sin is NO LONGER your master.