

God Wants Us to Celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles

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I have been celebrating the Festival of Tabernacles, as well as the other festivals of Leviticus 23 for over forty years. I know people who have been keeping them even longer than that. Keeping the festivals becomes a routine after a while. We live our lives around the yearly cycle of the holy days, with the festival year concluding with the Feast of Tabernacles.

When something becomes routine, even a positive routine, like observing the Festival of Tabernacles. We occasionally need to review why God wants us to keep His festivals. What we will be looking at here, are some of the reasons why God wants us to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles.

Commanded

The primary reason we gather with fellow believers to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles is God commands it, "The LORD said to Moses, 'Say to the Israelites: "On the fifteenth day of the seventh month the LORD'S Festival of Tabernacles begins, and it lasts for seven days. . . . So beginning with the fifteenth day of the seventh month, after you have gathered the crops of the land, celebrate the festival to the LORD for seven days; the first day is a day of sabbath rest, and the eighth day also is a day of sabbath rest¹. . . . Celebrate this as a festival to the LORD for seven days each year. This is to be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come; celebrate it in the seventh month'" (Leviticus 23:1-2,33,39,41, all scriptures quoted are from the *New International Version 2011* unless otherwise noted). In Deuteronomy 16, we find a list of the three pilgrimage festivals God commanded to be kept at the place he chose, "Three times a year all your men must appear before the LORD your God at the place he will choose: at the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the Festival of Weeks and the Festival of Tabernacles" (verses 16-17).

¹ The eighth day of the Festival of Tabernacles, the twenty-second day of the seventh month of the sacred calendar, is a separate festival (Leviticus 23:36, 39; Numbers 29:35; Nehemiah 8:18). The Festival of Tabernacles is seven days in length (Leviticus 23:34, Numbers 29:12, Deuteronomy 16:13, Nehemiah 8:18). Because the eighth day falls right after Tabernacles, it became considered a part of the Festival, but it is actually a separate festival.

In the Old Testament the location of the festivals were first held wherever the Tabernacle was located. After the construction of the Temple, Jerusalem became the location of the festivals. Following the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, there, has been no central location for the observance of any of the God's Holy Days. The physical temple was replaced by the spiritual temple of Jesus and the church (John 2:19-22; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:19-22).

Jesus gives us some guidance how to decide where and with whom to meet with for the biblical festivals. When traveling through Samaria on His way to Galilee, Jesus stopped at Jacob's well, near the Samaritan city of Sychar (John 4:3-6). Where He had a conversation with a Samaritan woman who said, "Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus responds to the women's comments by saying "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. . . Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth" (John 4:20-24).

Christians must worship God in Spirit and Truth. The physical location and setting are unimportant. What Christian's need is an environment where the Spirit of God is present, and the Truth of God taught. We need to gather with people who have the Spirit and Truth of God. Deciding who these people are is a personal decision each of us must make with the guidance of God. It's not a decision any man or organization can make for us. In this modern age, there are many festival sites organized and sponsored by church organizations, local congregations, personal ministries and scattered brethren coming together to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles.²

Strangers and Pilgrims

God wants us to Keep the Festival of Tabernacles as reminder that we are pilgrims and strangers in this present world. For the children of Israel, staying in temporary shelters during the Festival of Tabernacles was a reminder that God made their ancestors live in temporary shelters. "On the first day you are to take branches from luxuriant trees—from palms, willows and other leafy trees —and rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days. . . . Live in temporary shelters for seven

² For more information examining the Biblical evidence about assembling on the Sabbath and the Festivals, and by whose authority these assemblies take place, see my article Authority to Assemble, <http://www.calvinlashway.com/authority-to-assemble.html>.

days: All native-born Israelites are to live in such shelters so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in temporary shelters when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the LORD your God.' " (Leviticus 23:40, 42-43). The Feast was a continual reminder of Israel's forty years of wandering in the wilderness before entering the promised land (Numbers 32:13). During those years, the Israelites had no permanent home. They were strangers, and sojourners, in lands they traveled through (1 Chronicles 29:15; Psalm 39:12).

Like Israel, Christians are "sojourners and exiles" (1 Peter 2:11 *English Standard Version*) in the wilderness of this world. As Christians, we are heirs of God, not yet inheritors of our permanent dwelling place the promised Kingdom of God (Matthew 25:31, 34; 1 Corinthians 15:50-54; James 2:5). By staying in temporary dwellings during the Festival of Tabernacles, God teaches us that this physical life is temporary; and we are now sojourners in this world waiting to inherit the Kingdom of God.

Rejoicing

God wants us to joyfully celebrate this Festival with our family members, and those who might not be as well off as we are. In Old Testament Israel this would have included, servants, Levites, foreigners, widows, and orphans, "Celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles for seven days after you have gathered the produce of your threshing floor and your winepress. Be joyful at your festival—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites, the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns. For seven days celebrate the festival to the LORD your God at the place the LORD will choose. For the LORD your God will bless you in all your harvest and in all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete" (Deuteronomy 16:13-15).

For Israel, Tabernacles was a harvest festival of thanks. Something like Thanksgiving Day in the United States. The big difference is Thanksgiving is one day, not seven like Tabernacles. In our modern age, most of us are not farmers, like the Israelites. We work for wages. One way to rejoice and celebrate the blessings of God during the Festival is to spend time with our families and fellow brethren, thanking God for the physical and spiritual blessings given to us over the past year.

A Time to Learn

It's important to God that we use the Festival of Tabernacles as a time to learn more about Him by studying and being taught from the Bible. Old Testament Israel was instructed to read from the scriptures every seven years during the

Festival (Deuteronomy 31:9-13). During the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Law of God was publicly read daily during the Festival (Nehemiah 8:13-18). Jesus used the Festival of Tabernacles as an opportunity to teach the people who gathered in Jerusalem for the Festival (John 7:2, 14). Based on these examples many Christian groups that keep the biblical festivals, developed the tradition of having daily sermons preached during Tabernacles; as well public and private Bible study.

Encourage One Another

As we have seen, for seven days God wants us to gather together to celebrate and rejoice during the Festival of Tabernacles. There is another reason God wants us to "meeting together" with our brethren during the festival. It provides us with the opportunity to "encouraging one another" and "spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:23-25).

The Kingdom of God

The connection between the coming Kingdom age and the Feast of Tabernacles is found in Zechariah 14:16-19, "Then the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the LORD Almighty, and to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles. If any of the peoples of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the LORD Almighty, they will have no rain. If the Egyptian people do not go up and take part, they will have no rain. The LORD will bring on them the plague he inflicts on the nations that do not go up to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles. This will be the punishment of Egypt and the punishment of all the nations that do not go up to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles." During this time Jesus will dwell or tabernacle on earth with mankind (Zechariah 2:10-12, 8:3, Isaiah 2:1-4). Observing the Festival of Tabernacles is a way for God to help us look forward to His coming Kingdom.

Conclusion

- We celebrate the Festival because God commands it.
- Keeping the Festival helps us remember we are pilgrims and strangers in this world.
- We celebrate the Festival each year to thank God for His blessings.
- Observing the Festival is a time to learn more about God by studying and being taught from His word.
- Keeping the Festival gives us the opportunity to encourage one another towards love and good deeds.
- Observing the Festival is a yearly, reminder of the coming Kingdom of God.

These are some of the reasons God wants us to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles.