

Seeing Christ in the Jewish Feasts



Class 5

Sukkot

The Feast of Tabernacles

- Reading: Leviticus 23:33-43
- The Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot) is the last of the three pilgrimage festivals, the holidays on which the Jews were commanded to go up to Jerusalem.
- The other two are Passover (Pesach) and Pentecost (Shavu'ot).
- Like the Passover and Pentecost celebrations, the Feast of Tabernacles has historical, religious, and agricultural significance.
- Passover commemorates the deliverance of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt and marks the barley harvest.
- Pentecost is said to commemorate the giving of the Law (Torah) on Mt. Sinai and marks the harvest of the firstfruits.
- Sukkot (The Feast of Tabernacles) commemorates the 40 years of wandering in the desert and marks the final harvest of the agricultural year.

PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

- Like Passover, Sukkot is observed for an entire week, beginning with a sacred assembly followed by a holiday feast.
- Unlike Passover, Sukkot is observed as a purely joyous time, without any focus on harsh memories such as slavery or the deaths of the firstborn.
- In fact, God specifically commands the people of Israel to rejoice - that is, to be joyous and happy - in his sight.
- As a direct biblical command, the admonition to be happy during Sukkot actually carries more weight than the admonition to fast on Yom Kippur.
- Not to be joyous during Sukkot is to commit the sin of rebelliousness.
- Sukkot begins on the 15th day of Tishrei, the seventh month in the Jewish calendar.
- Coming on the heels of the solemnity and reverence of Yom Kippur (which is observed on the 10th of Tishrei), Sukkot may seem like a rather abrupt about-face.
- One week all of Israel is fasting and repenting, afflicting their souls in fear and trembling, and the next they are laughing and feasting.
- At first glance this seems somewhat incongruous, but in fact the celebration is closely linked with the Yom Kippur fast.
- Sins have been forgiven, God had been gracious, and the harvest has been gathered in as proof of God's faithful provision.
- Clearly a celebration is in order.
- This celebration takes a specific form: the people of Israel are commanded to observe a number of rituals during the week of Sukkot.
- First and foremost, they are to dwell in booths (tabernacles) for the full seven days.

NOTE: These should not be confused with the Tent of Meeting, also described as a tabernacle, where sacrifices were made to the Lord. The tabernacles in question are simple, temporary dwellings for

people. There are a number of rabbinic traditions concerning the building of these booths; in brief, they are to be temporary, somewhat flimsy structures, and the roofs are to be made of branches or reeds laid loosely enough that one may see the stars through them at night.

- In addition to dwelling in booths, the people are commanded to “take choice fruit from the trees, and palm fronds, leafy branches and poplars, and rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days” (Lev 23:40b).
- Again, rabbinic tradition fills in this rather vague statute with numerous details: the fruit in question must include a citrus, and the fronds and branches are specifically one palm branch, two willow branches, and three myrtle branches.
- Together with the citron, these are known as the Four Species.
- There are detailed instructions for holding and waving these species during the Sukkot prayer services.
- Just as the confessional prayers said on Yom Kippur are communal in nature (we have sinned rather than I have sinned), so the praises, thanksgiving, and rejoicing of the Sukkot holiday are communal in nature.
- Celebrants are commanded to invite strangers into their sukkah booth to share meals and rejoice together.
- The holiday is a weeklong festival of shared meals, as friends and relatives issue reciprocal invitations to come share in their respective sukkah booths.
- The services for Sukkot are also communal in nature, with the community gathering together to share in reciting the Hallelu (“everyone praise”) prayers.
- In fact, the well-known Hebrew word hallelujah is itself a community-oriented word, meaning “everybody praise the Lord (together).”
- This idea that praise, rejoicing, and thanksgiving are by their nature community activities is a key to understanding the meaning of the Feast of Tabernacles.
- If I rejoice by myself, I experience a measure of joy.
- But if you rejoice with me, my joy is increased.

- And when an entire faithful community rejoices as one, the increase is exponential.
- A key component of the Sukkot celebration is the temporary nature of the booths.
- Intended to evoke the nomadic dwellings of the 40-year journey en route to the Promised Land, the sukkah booths also serve to remind us of the transitory nature of our sojourn here on Earth.
- Just as the sukkah booths are fragile and temporary, so too are our bodies made of nearly ephemeral stuff.
- As the Hebrews in the desert were “just passing through” on their way to a better home, so we, too, are not really natives of this world.
- We’re on our way home, and our temporary dwellings of flesh should serve to remind us of that fact.
- This unsettled, fragile component of the Sukkot dwelling lends an even more poignant note to the feasts and celebrations held inside.
- Enjoy this fleeting moment while it lasts, rejoice while we are together in this hut, because soon it will all come apart again.
- Ecclesiastes is traditionally read during Sukkot, for it carries this same theme of the transient nature of our life.
- Now is the time to praise the Lord; today is the day of your salvation.

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

- There are three spiritual lessons that we would like to get from Sukkot:

- 1. Forgiveness and provision merit thanksgiving.**
- 2. Together we can worship in spirit and in truth.**
- 3. We are just passing through.**

1. Forgiveness and provision merit thanksgiving.

- Exodus 16:9-35
- The Exodus generation were a grumbling, thankless lot for the most part.
- Yet God not only forgave their sins time and time again, he also provided for their every need.
- In fact, even though their lack of faith kept the Exodus generation (except for Joshua and Caleb) from entering the Promised Land, God nevertheless provided them with manna and kept their clothes sturdy and their feet healthy (Deuteronomy 8:4) for their whole lives as they wandered in the wilderness, living in sukkah booths.
- Exodus 16:23-26 tells us that God not only provided for the needs of the people, he made a special provision so that they could celebrate the Sabbath as he had commanded.
- God's attitude toward the people is one that, although not willing to countenance willful sin, nonetheless makes allowances for their weakness.
- In fact, the Bible often refers to them as "the children of Israel," emphasizing perhaps not only their lineage but also their lack of maturity.
- Imagine how much different things would have been had the children of Israel reacted to God's provision with praise!

- If God forgave their stiff-necked rebellion and blessed them in spite of their sin, how much more would he have blessed their obedience and thanksgiving?
- How often we are guilty of the sin of the Israelites! Rescued from slavery, brought along a difficult yet rewarding path toward the Promised Land, we grumble against God, accusing him of unfairness and of planning our destruction.
- When we don't hear from God for what feels to us like a long time, we start to credit idols with our salvation: it is our 401(k) savings plan that will provide for us; our college degree that has rescued us; our diligence and perseverance rather than the grace of God that we place on a pedestal and worship.
- Let us remember to give thanks to God.
- Thank him for providing the very air we breathe.
- Thank him for tolerating our childish rebellion and blessing us in spite of ourselves.
- Thank him for this incredible, beautiful world we live in.
- Give him praise for the very ability to praise him.
- God is a patient, loving, forgiving Father.
- Praise him!

2. Together we can worship in spirit and in truth.

- Acts 2:29-47
- The apostle Peter's astonishing sermon on the Day of Pentecost amazed and convicted many people, and marked the start of the early church.
- The response was noteworthy: not only did three thousand people gladly receive baptism in the name of Jesus the Messiah, but they then went and sold their possessions, divided what they had among themselves, and began to live in the true spirit of brotherly love prophesied by Jesus: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).

- Many of the apostle Paul's letters deal with arguments and divisions among the early church, admonishing them to settle their differences in the love of Christ.
- Paul himself had conflicts within the church, both with Peter and with Barnabas.
- Yet nowhere do we read that the apostles walked away from fellowship or gave up on each other because of personality conflicts.
- In fact, the opposite is the case: always and everywhere we find the message of reconciliation and fellowship.
- Tradition holds that the apostle John, in the last years of his life, would say over and over to those who came to hear his teaching, "Little children, love one another."
- In our Ecclesial world today, there are several divisions, even beyond the most famous ones.
- Most of these divisions reflect political or personal disagreements rather than theological ones.
- And even within the same fellowship, it has become common to move from one Ecclesia to another based on such ephemeral things as the nature of the youth group or the style of the songs introduced by a new pianist.
- Rather than focus on fellowship, we tend to look to the church for what we are getting out of it.
- There are legitimate reasons why fellowship with a certain group of people might be extremely difficult.
- If their theological outlook is such that you simply do not agree on core issues, then your fellowship will be limited.
- But an openhearted attempt at honest discussion of the issues can bring both sides closer to God than simply walking away ever will.
- "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18).
- Fellowship and brotherly love are not optional.

- Christ commands them, just as God commanded the children of Israel to invite strangers to celebrate Sukkot with them.
- This principle of reaching out to the “other” is a thread woven throughout the entire Bible.
- God wants us to love not only our friends, but our neighbors and even our enemies.
- Worship is all the sweeter when we agree together.

3. We are just passing through.

- Matthew 18:1-20
- Jesus’ most central teaching is on the Kingdom.
- Over and over he makes clear to us that this world is not our home; our goal and destination is God’s kingdom.
- He tells us to become like little children that we might enter the kingdom, and that it is better to enter life maimed than to be thrown into eternal fire.
- The implication is that we are not yet truly living - yet the kingdom of God is “at hand” and “among you.”
- It is there for the taking, if only we will grasp the gift.
- Jesus tells the rich young ruler in Matthew 19 to “go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven” (v. 21).
- In Luke 14:26-27, he tells the crowd to reject their family and even their own lives in order to follow him.
- And in the passage we read in Matthew 18 he makes the shocking statement that we should be willing to cut off our hands and feet or pluck out our eyes in order to enter the kingdom of God.
- The kingdom is of inestimable value.
- Nothing in this world - possessions, family, even life and limb - is worth as much as the kingdom of God.

- God's command to the children of Israel to live in sukkah booths for one week each year is a reminder of the transience of life.
- The Exodus generation truly were "just passing through" the wilderness.
- The Feast of Tabernacles points clearly at something beyond this life.

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

- By sleeping and eating in a fragile, temporary sukkah booth for a week, the point is driven home: this is not our final destination.
- We're only passing through, heading for the Promised Land.
- We're exchanging our lives, our fortunes, and our families for God's kingdom, choosing instead to be a part of the family of Christ.
- And who are Jesus' family members?
- Those who do the will of his Father (Matt 12:48-50).
- And what is that will?
- Loving God and loving our neighbor (Matt 22:37-40).
- The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of giving thanks, of fellowship, of giving up all we have, all we covet, all we are, in order to gain that which is truly permanent.
- It is the exchange of this ephemeral life for life eternal.