

March 9, 2005
Midweek Service 4
Leviticus 23:33-36, 39-43
Pastor Ott

We See Jesus Giving Us Eternal Life

The New Testament holidays or church holy days or church festivals, at least the way that we celebrate them, aren't nearly as much fun as the Old Testament festivals when God commanded that his people observe them. The biggest festival of the New Testament church is Easter. It is the central focus of the whole entire church year. Yes, we will do a lot of different things at Easter—secular things, eggs and chocolates—but we will do other things here in church that set apart that week. We will have extra services. In eight days, we will have seven services. We will focus on the three holy days, and on our Lord's resurrection. We will eat food together. We will rejoice and sing together. It's an enjoyable day. But it's not like the Old Testament festivals. Our celebrations pale when you compare them to the Old Testament festivals.

The festival that we are looking at today is the Festival of Tabernacles. There were other festivals where you had to bring a lamb into your house for awhile and treat it like a pet. There were other festivals that involved the whole community coming together and sending something off into the desert. But this one was an eight-day festival where everyone got together and celebrated what was called "sukkot"—the Hebrew word for booth or lean-to or hut. Everyone would build a lean-to, a hut, a tent, a tabernacle and then live in it for seven days. They didn't just set aside a day. It was eight days. Eight days of rejoicing—rejoicing before the Lord after the harvest had been gathered in and celebrating all these blessings that God had given to them.

This festival is unlike anything that we celebrate. A week-long campout with the family—wouldn't your kids just love that and then get to call that church? That's what they did. But it's much more than just a joyous feast. Like all these other Old Testament ceremonial laws that we have been looking at on Wednesdays. It was a shadow of something bigger that was to come. The whole time they were rejoicing, the whole time that they were celebrating, the whole time that they were eating the good fresh food, they were to also be focused on a greater truth. And that greater truth had a shadow of Christ. As you look into these shadows, what we see with these Old Testament regulations, we see Jesus bringing us eternal life. From our vantage point, it is crystal clear when you look at it. You can see what God was trying to teach the Israelites and what he is trying to teach us. We see Jesus bringing us eternal life. We see that is what Christian lives are all about, and we are reminded again this evening that that's what Jesus' life was all about.

This Festival of Tabernacles was one of three primary festivals—pilgrim festivals—where every adult male in Israel had to go to where God's sanctuary was. The temple in Jerusalem or wherever the tabernacle would have been before that before it was brought to Jerusalem. In addition to coming to the beginning, the opening assembly on the first day and the closing assembly on the eighth day—in between they were to live in these huts, live in these tabernacles. They were supposed to enjoy the fruits of the

harvest of the land that God had given to them as a gift. Observing Jews still practice this festival today. It is usually in mid-October. They build the lean-tos or the huts, but they don't go out and sleep in them anymore. But they still observe it about the time of the harvest being gathered in Israel.

Of all the great festivals in the Old Testament, it is probably the least known for us yet today. But to the Jews, it was one of the most important, because every seven years the entire book of the law—the entire five books of Moses—were to be read to the entire assembly. Can you picture that—me starting at Genesis, reading Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy? That had to take a little bit of time and a little bit of commitment. Also, this is the festival, the joyous occasion that Solomon chose to dedicate the temple after he had built the temple. So you see it was really important to the Israelites. But Moses gave them a reason why they were to celebrate it for generations to come. He said, *“Do this so your decedents will know that I had the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.”* The Lord gave these commands to Moses to give to the Israelites when they were at Mt. Sinai. They had just left Egypt. They had taken a few months and they had gotten to Mt. Sinai. They had spent a year and camped around Mt. Sinai. And now God was giving them these regulations for celebrating this festival of the fruits of the new land the Lord would give them, and they thought it was going to be coming pretty soon.

But you know the rest of the story, right? They got to the Promised Land. They focused on what their eyes could see. “These giants and we're just grasshoppers, this isn't going to happen, let's go back to Egypt. At least there we had something better than dying at the hands of giants.” And because they didn't trust God, God made them wander around and around and around for 40 years in the wilderness.

We might think that this Festival of Tabernacles wouldn't be that joyous because it's a reminder of how they had to wander in the wilderness. But that's not the emphasis that God is teaching in this festival. He is not leading them to mourn and wale over the sins of their forefathers who doubted God. He is having them focus on the truth that they had lived in a land of slavery and idolatry. But the Lord had promised and then brought them to a land of freedom and worship of the one true God. That was the point of this Festival of Tabernacles.

Remember how they lived in booths. That's to remind you that you are on a journey. Just like that journey was from Egypt to the Promised Land. Even those children of Israel that were now in the Promised Land were still on a journey—the journey that ends up in God's greater deliverances—his greater deliverance from this world. This pure gospel is the emphasis. I am the Lord your God—the Lord, the covenant God, the God who promised a Messiah who would take away sins, the God who promised to bring people safely into a heavenly home. We can see this clearly. Look at what God is telling them to focus on.

On the first day of that festival, they were to *take the choice fruit from the trees, and palm fronds, leafy branches and poplars, and rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days*. Those plants he is describing are not desert scrub bushes. These are beautiful, leafy foliage and fruit and other things. The focus is on the destination of the

journey, not the journey itself. Those plants needed water to grow. That water was found when God brought them into the Promised Land. That water is also a shadow of things to come.

In John Chapter 7, when Jesus was celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles, he came to the people and stood up on the day of the Great Feast and said, *“If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.”* The Scripture that he is talking about is Isaiah. He talked about streams of living water flowing from people. The Holy Spirit living in people that makes people spiritually alive—makes dry bones come alive. Jesus used that image because a tradition had grown up during the Feast of Tabernacles. Moses commanded the High Priest to go to the Pool of Siloam in Jerusalem, take out some of that water, and then take it and pour it out as a drink offering—the water, that living water that believing in God then would bring life from—pour it out on the altar in front of the temple.

Jesus takes that custom that they had developed and used it to apply the real meaning of this festival. That “living under the power of the Holy Spirit” living water is in us and comes out through us because we have God’s promise of salvation.

A seven-day reminder that you are only travelers—that you aren’t at your destination—the Israelites, I’m sure, needed that. But I’m just as convinced that you and I need that, because you and I are often tempted by the devil and by our own sinful nature to focus on what we can see. We see this world around us and too often we are wrapped up in the things of this world as though this is our final destination. We get so wrapped up in paying bills and planning for retirements and providing educations, taking care of sicknesses or fixing the things that are broken, that at times we forget that we are all just walking through this world. We are just travelers. We are aliens and strangers living in this world on the journey that takes us to heaven. That’s what the Feast of Tabernacles was all about.

As we look into its shadows, we see this reminder that the Christian life is all about eternal life, it’s not just about this world. Too often we trip and fall and forget that. We need this reminder. We need to be reminded by God again and again and again that heaven is our home—that we are just on a journey here. We are on a journey that brings an incredible joy—a journey where the living water is poured out on us so that we can rejoice and enjoy the things along the way.

Joy in the journey—you’ve seen people on television commercials for many years look into the camera after a sporting event and say with a smile on their face that they are going to Disney World. But you know they are saying it because someone is going to give them a check, right? Talk to a 4, 5, 6, or 7 year old who is on their way to Disney World and when they say they are going to Disney World, no one had to slip them a check to have that smile come across their face, did they? That joy is there to be seen, it’s obvious, it’s beaming from them, it’s contagious to see a smile like that. That’s the kind of joy that God has for you and I as we continue on the journey that takes us to heaven. And if we can’t see that joy, then maybe we are looking at the wrong things.

The Feast of Tabernacles—a celebration of God’s love—most of it was exciting and engaging and fun. Can you imagine the family getting together and setting up a tent that they were going to live in for seven days? That had to be at least as fun as setting up a Christmas tree as a family, wouldn’t it be? It had to be a lot of fun. But there is one other thing in the midst of this joy, in the midst of this rejoicing and in the midst of this feasting. Did you notice when I read the text there is still that sentence in there that has the blood and the gore? Each of the seven days offer burnt sacrifices to the Lord.

Even in the middle of the joy, God confronts his people and drenches them in blood to show them that in this world, our joy is looking ahead. It’s not in this world, because in this world we are just infected and corrupted by sin.

If you look at Numbers 29, you will find it’s spelled out what they were to sacrifice each and every day of the festival. During those eight days they were to sacrifice 71 bulls, 15 rams, 105 lambs and 8 goats. Each time one of those animals would be sacrificed, someone’s hands would be placed on its head to symbolize the transferring of sin to that animal. The blood would be drained and kept separate. Then blood would be splashed time after time after time at the corners of the altar.

In the midst of joy, in the midst of rejoicing, in the midst of celebration, there is smoke from these animals being consumed entirely. Some of them were the whole burnt offerings that we are talking about. At times in the middle of the joy, your eyes would have watered with smoke. The blood would have been all around you. When you woke up, when you ate, when you slept, you would have smelled all of this that was going on—a reminder, an in-your-face reminder, of sin.

God was in the face of his people reminding them that blood had to be shed to pay for sin. For us to get home to heaven, for the Israelites to get home to heaven, it required blood—the blood of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Some of this had to be just unpleasant to see. But isn’t that what sin is? Isn’t it unpleasant to see our own sin—to be confronted with our own sin? None of us like it. I bet there are times that we think we talk too much about sin. These nondenominational mega-churches that you see around, they talk about feel-good stuff. They aren’t always talking about sin. Maybe that’s what we should do instead of always talking about our sin. But don’t you think it’s somewhat insightful that God, in the middle of this most festive celebration, was confronting his people with buckets and buckets of blood? Sin matters to God. That’s why he left heaven. That’s why he became man. That’s why he walked for those years perfectly in our place. That’s why he died on the cross, because our sins are an offense to our God.

To get rid of him, are we going to go some place where we are just going to hear warm fuzzies and feel good and not talk about our sin? Or are we going to throw them at the cross of Christ and then rejoice in the knowledge that we are forgiven. One works. One washes clean. The other way denies the truth.

You think of what God asks from us and it is so easy to see our sin. God asks of you and I that we be first in his life every moment of every day. Do we always do that? Do

we always put him first? Do we always love him with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind? Do we always give him our full, unwrapped attention? Or do we find ourselves distracted even when we come to his house? Then we are feeling pretty good about ourselves that we are here and those other people aren't, so God must love us more.

God doesn't want just our half-hearted efforts. He wants the entirety of our lives—our thoughts, our words, our actions. Even our half-hearted efforts are an affront to him and are worthy of hell. This is the amazing thing about our God. Our efforts are worthy of hell. We have nothing to pat ourselves on the back about, but our God still says to us, "I love you. I have washed away your sins in baptism, in my body and blood in the Lord's Supper. I take your sin away." God has covered us in the blood of Christ and made us pure and holy in his sight. The Feast of Tabernacles also reminds us of that.

At the end of the Old Testament, God sent the prophet Zechariah. Zechariah had a vision of heaven. In that vision of heaven, do you know what the people were doing? They were celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles. They were there in booths. I don't think in heaven we are literally going to be living in tents. But it really tells us that this is what the festival was all about. You are on a journey now. Look ahead to the destination. Don't get caught up in all the details of the journey—so busy looking at what's in front of your feet that you walk into the branch that is hanging low. Keep your eyes focused on Christ and what he has done for us. That's what the festival was about. That's what our lives are all about, because Jesus' life was all about taking away our sins.

Holidays are supposed to be memorable. They are family time. They are family traditions and all of these other things. But as memorable as they are, as memorable as the looks in children's eyes are and the smile that beams off their faces, what's truly memorable in the church holidays is Jesus. Not our efforts to praise, but his perfection that forgives.