



The Law given through Moses*

19. The Feast of Tabernacles

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AFTER THE DAY of Atonement came the Feast of Tabernacles. This was the most joyous of all the festivals. On the fifteenth day of the seventh month there was to be a sabbath as the beginning of a seven days' feast in which the people would dwell in booths and "rejoice before the Lord". The festival came at the appropriate time, whether we think of it merely as a holiday in ancient Israel or as a type of greater things to come. It came at the end of harvest when the fruits of the earth had been gathered in and the people were ready for a well-earned rest. The national atonement had been effected, God had accepted their offering, and now, at a time of the year when little protection was needed from the weather, there was a relaxation from ordinary work, a holiday in the open country and opportunity for a joyful recognition of God as the Giver of all good.

WE may sometimes enjoy a feeble reflection of this festival when men and women, united by a common faith, have an outing into the country; when town dwellers are able for a little while to escape from the sight of walls and chimneys and to delight in the beauties of nature, listening to the song of birds and breathing the undefiled air; and when, on the basis of a belief in the Divine purpose, it is possible to unite the primitive pleasures of a country outing with the higher and holier joy of worship.

We read of the Feast of Tabernacles in the book of Nehemiah in the eighth chapter. From this record it is evident the whole Law had been much neglected in the days of captivity. The appointed teachers under Ezra the scribe "read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading" (v. 8)—a terse description of good teaching as fully applicable now as then. The first effect was to make the people weep, for

they perceived that they had fallen far below the standard set up. It was the seventh month, however; the time drew near for the Feast of Tabernacles, and that was not a time for mourning. Nehemiah and Ezra stilled the people, declaring that the day was holy and they were not to mourn but to rejoice before the Lord. When the people understood this, they "went their way to eat, and to drink, and to send portions, and to make great mirth" (v. 12).

IT may be remarked in passing that the word 'mirth' has in recent times assumed a meaning not quite in harmony with the spirit of this passage, although it probably was quite an appropriate rendering of the Hebrew when the translation was made. The festivals under the Law are described as "solemn feasts", and the Feast of Tabernacles was assuredly no exception, beginning as it did with a sabbath and ending with another on the eighth day. But although solemn, it was joyful, with a true and enduring delight unknown to the forced gaiety of worldly feasts.

The Jews have sometimes followed traditions requiring some observances not specified by Moses, but the basis is clearly stated in the Law. They were required at the beginning of the feast to cut down branches of the most beautiful trees, some of them with the fruit. They carried some of the branches in ceremony to the synagogue and performed a rite called *Lulah*. In the right hand they would hold "a branch of palm tree, three branches of myrtle and two of willow, tied together. In the left hand a branch of citron with its fruit".

It seems that some importance was attached to the matter of citrus fruit; for, in later days, when scattered in lands where oranges and citrons would not grow, they contrived to buy such fruit for the Feast of Tabernacles. Proces-

sions with singing constituted a feature of the old observances, and when it was impossible to go into the country the Jews would march round the synagogue with their branches and fruit, performing the traditional rite before they would break their fast for the day. At one time every man was required to bring his quota of branches or he would not be allowed to have any food, an application of the apostolic dictum regarding work.

IT does not appear that any such strict instructions were given through Moses. The people were ordered to dwell in booths made of goodly branches of palm and willow, as a commemoration of the simple life they led when they came out of Egypt. They were told to rejoice before God for seven days, and they were commanded to have two sabbaths, one at the beginning of the feast and the other at the end on the eighth day. Beyond this, it does not appear that there were any instructions as to rites and ceremonies.

Naturally there was plenty of singing, for this was an exercise always associated with true worship. Singing languished in the evil days of bad kings and false religion. It came to the front again when there was a measure of genuine reform as in the days of Nehemiah. If the waving of palms before the Lord and the processional songs were not commanded through Moses, we cannot suppose that these exercises were in any way contrary to the Divine will. The Apostle James says that if a man is merry, he should sing psalms.

The word 'hosanna' was associated with the Feast of Tabernacles, and we remember that this shout was raised by the people when the Lord Jesus entered Jerusalem. We remember, too, that on that special occasion of popular acclamation some of the people cut down branches from the trees and strewed them in the way. This seems to suggest a connection with the Feast of Tabernacles in the minds of the people. It would not be easy to establish such an idea, for the triumphal ride into Jerusalem was only six days before the Passover, seven months before the Feast of Tabernacles. It is certain, however, that the word 'hosanna' was definitely associated in the Jewish mind with the ingathering at the end of harvest. It is interesting to note that this shout was raised by the multitude when the Lord Jesus, nearing the end of his ministry, came to the city where his redemptive work was consummated and where he is yet to reign as King.

The future observance of the Feast of Tabernacles is mentioned in the last chapter of Zechariah in circumstances which admit of no escape from the literal meaning. In that day, when "the LORD shall be king over all the earth" (v. 9), after the deliverance of Jerusalem from all enemies, those who are left of the nations will be required to go up to Jerusalem from year to year to worship the Lord of hosts and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles. If any of the families of the earth refuse to go for this worship, upon them there shall be no rain. If the people of Egypt are rebellious in this matter, as they live in a land that is not dependent on rain, another punishment will be imposed.

This reference to the well-known fact that Egypt has no rain has often been cited as a complete refutation of the 'spiritualising' method of interpreting prophecy which was at one time so often attempted. In these days there is a much more reasonable readiness to admit the obvious meaning of prophecy, although there is less disposition to recognise its authority. It is probable that no one would now attempt to explain away this prophecy or deny that it indicates a real kingdom, a real restoration and a real revival of the Feast of Tabernacles.

THERE is an interesting appropriateness in all the provisions mentioned in this prophecy. The Feast of Tabernacles was a harvest thanksgiving in which God was recognised as the Giver of all good. Surely it is most reasonable that when there is a realisation of the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth", Gentile nations which have survived will be required to recognise the Lord of the Harvest. Of all the gifts of heaven which combine to give us fruitful seasons, rain is the most obviously important. It is appropriate, then, that people who are unwilling to render thanks for the blessings of the field shall be deprived of the most obvious of the elements which produce those blessings.

On making a careful survey of hidden meanings in the Law we may have to conclude that there was an element of ritual prophecy in this matter. It will be appropriate for the feast to be observed in the day of rest and of harvest thanksgiving to which it pointed.

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