

Three Annual Feasts in Israel

HN/SS 12/02/06 am

Reading: Deuteronomy 16, 2 Chronicles 30

Study Text: Deuteronomy 16:1-17

Sing Psalms: 98:1-4, 103:1-4, 103:5-10, 98:5-9

Rejoice in your feast, you and your son and daughter, your male servant and your female servant and the Levite, the stranger and the fatherless and the widow (16:11, 14). Could these words be used to describe anything in our community today? We sometimes hear of street parties where local people come together, but they are rare. For most people life, such as it is, goes on in their own backyard. They rejoice in the things they own, not in community, not in fellowship with other people. This lack of community is of great concern. Is life in the church any different? Life in Israel certainly was very different – and in the New Testament church also.

Life in Israel centred upon the Lord. His people were to live together as the people of God, sharing in the blessings of the Lord and rejoicing together before him. Rich and poor, slave and free, and even strangers were invited to feast together three times a year. They went up to the central place of worship chosen by the Lord in the good land the Lord gave the people.

Let us look briefly at the three feasts celebrated each year by the people of God. We read a lot about these in the New Testament so we should seek to understand them in their Old Testament setting. Jesus our Lord was crucified at Passover. What was the significance of this? The Holy Spirit was given at Pentecost. Is there any significance in this? Because all males were commanded to attend these feasts, Jerusalem was crowded during the feasts. Jews came from far and wide to attend. This was quite strategic for the spread of the gospel.

Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord your God, in the place which he chooses (16:16). Can you imagine such a command being given to God's people today! Not only have we become very individualistic, we have abandoned responsibility towards each other – not to mention a disregard for the commands of Christ (see Hebrews 10:25).

Israel was also disobedient to this command. They soon started to say 'it is such a bother having to go up to Jerusalem – I can worship the Lord here in my own house'. They had to go up at busy times of the year, at harvest time. They soon began to say 'we are too busy to go up to the house of Lord this year, we will go next year'. And so it was that when Hezekiah called for the Passover to be celebrated that it had not been celebrated since the time of Solomon, over 250 years previously (II Chronicles 30:26).

But there was great joy in Jerusalem when they did come together for this feast. If you lack joy in your life maybe you should think about these things. Think about your attendance to the house of the Lord and the means of grace.

Passover

The Passover feast was celebrated for the purpose of remembering the *day on which you came out of the land of Egypt (16:3)*, the day of their redemption. At this feast they remembered the

night over 40 years before when they ate the Passover lamb after sprinkling its blood on their doorposts. They were supposed to have kept this feast in the wilderness days and then on into the new land. It was to have been kept every year until its fulfilment in Jesus.

Jesus was eating the Passover when he was betrayed unto death. It was at this meal that he instituted a memorial to a greater redemption – redemption from sin and death in his own precious blood. *Indeed Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us* (I Corinthians 5:7). The Passover then has been fulfilled and we keep the Lord's Supper. Those who want to keep the Passover today are denying its fulfilment in Jesus Christ and the New Covenant inaugurated at his death and resurrection.

The date of the Passover was set in the first month called Abib or later on Nisan, and in our calendar March/April. The Passover lamb was sacrificed at twilight – a one year old sheep or goat. Here in Deuteronomy an animal from the herd is also allowed (16:2) – probably because some tribes kept mainly cows. And rather than eating the Passover in the home, now it was to be eaten at the central place of worship. Only there could animals be sacrificed.

Unleavened bread was to be eaten along with the roasted Passover. This was called the 'bread of affliction' (16:3). They had to eat the Passover quickly as they set out on their journey of deliverance that night. They had no time to wait for leaven or yeast to do its work. Leaven came to symbolise the working of evil (Matthew 16:6). It had to be completely removed from their homes during the seven days of this feast.

The Passover was a sacred and solemn occasion of remembrance. But still it was a time of celebration, of joy and thanksgiving. After all they were once slaves and still would be if the Lord had not heard their cry and come down to save them. They were to joy in the God of their salvation.

Likewise the Lord's Supper is a solemn occasion of remembering that Jesus died to take away our sin. Yet we also rejoice in his amazing grace, and the freedom we have as redeemed people of God. While it is important to be grieved over one's sins in God's presence, it is also important to rejoice in all his gracious benefits. The unworthiness spoken of by Paul in I Corinthians 11 refers to selfishness and bitterness in their hearts, not to an over abundance of joy as they came to partake of this memorial meal.

Pentecost – Feast of Weeks

This feast, like the others, went on for seven days so included a Sabbath day. During this week no work was to be done. Pentecost was seven weeks or 50 days after the first grain was harvested – in later times this came to be 50 days after Passover. This feast marked the end of the cereal harvest in the spring. It was a harvest feast of thanksgiving.

All males were compelled to go up to the sanctuary with their households taking free will offerings with them – *you shall give as the Lord your God blesses you* (16:10). This was of course tied in with the tithe. After this pilgrimage to the house of the Lord they were to eat together, sharing the bounty with their family. They were to rejoice before the Lord because of his goodness towards them.

The Levites who had no land and hence no food, and the stranger, widow and orphan were to share in this feast. They were to remember the poor as they remembered how they were once poor slaves in Egypt (16:12). There was to be rejoicing but no gloating, no despising of the

poor and needy in their community. This was the problem in at the Lord's Supper in Corinth (I Corinthians 11:21, 22). The whole community was to rejoice together in the blessings of the Lord.

Christians associate Pentecost with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. To what extent the Jews were keeping this feast in the manner commanded by Moses we cannot be sure. But we do see those who repented and believed in Jesus Christ greatly rejoicing in their redemption. They ate together and freely shared all they owned with fellow believers and the poor among them (Acts 2:44-47). Yet in the New Testament no holy day or feast is prescribed in fulfilment of Pentecost.

Feast of Tabernacles

This feast was much like the feast of weeks except it was in the autumn (September/October) when summer crop and fruits, including grapes, were harvested. Again all males were compelled to journey to the central sanctuary with offerings to the Lord. They were to rejoice before the Lord with their family and those who had no harvest to bring.

Although Moses does not mention it, they also built tents or tabernacles to live in for the seven days of the feast. This was to remind them of their wilderness days when they had to utterly depend upon the Lord. Now as then, all that they had was because of the Lord's blessing, even if they had to work for it (16:15). In recognition of this they were not to appear before the Lord empty-handed (16:16). Clearly this had nothing to do with their redemption – they were redeemed by grace. They were the people of God by grace alone.

Again we have no New Testament fulfilment of this feast, although the Day of Atonement was just five days before the Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:27f). This feast is the basis of Thanksgiving Day celebrated in some countries. Certainly we should remember the Lord who daily supplies all our needs. We must praise the Lord and forget not all his benefits.

Remember, rejoice and return – return to the Lord from the blessings he has given you. These are the three features we find in these three annual feasts in Israel, and they should be prominent features in our life and worship. The Passover is fulfilled in the Lord's Supper. At this we remember redemption not from Egypt but from sin and death.

We rejoice in the Lord Jesus Christ who gave his life that we might live, free from the bondage of sin and death. The Lord's Supper was associated with a fellowship meal in the New Testament; believers rejoiced as they shared a meal together. They ate with glad and sincere hearts, recognising the abundance of the Lord's provisions. They gave of their all to the Lord, a living sacrifice wholly and acceptable to the Lord (Romans 12:1).

Do you remember what the Lord has done for you? Do you rejoice in the Lord and his blessings? Do you return to the Lord portion of the material blessings you receive from his gracious hand?

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