

"They Shall Not Appear Before the LORD Empty-Handed"

Imagine a friend tells you to throw a huge party because you won the lottery, and so you do. But if they come and tell you the next day after the party that you really didn't win, how would you feel? Maybe it was some really bad, but well-intentioned, idea that the person had. Maybe they'd say something like, well I wanted you to have a night of celebration, because you have been working so hard. But in retrospect, I'm sure most people wouldn't see this as positive. They'd feel like it was a dirty trick. Instead of feeling refreshed from a joyous celebration, they'd feel deceived and foolish.

You see, our joy needs to be based on reality for it to be meaningful to us. Fiction and fabrication are not real foundations for meaningful joy. Our joy must be founded on truth and historical reality for it to be truly meaningful to us. This applies to all areas of our life, but most importantly in our relationship with God. We worship God out of a genuine joy based on what he's really done for us in Christ.

Well, in this passage we see Israel commanded to hold three major feasts each year. These are big national celebrations. But they are also religious celebrations. Each of these feasts was more than just a party. Each of these feasts was a part of how they worshipped God. They were an act of worship where Israel was called to worship God based on historical realities over how he's worked in their life. These historical realities were a reason to rejoice in the Lord as God invited them to feast together with him in his holy city. As we look at these three feasts today for Israel, we'll be thinking about how they inform our own worship of God. As so we'll be thinking today about our worship God, as we consider these three main feasts for Israel.

Let's begin with a quick survey of these three feasts. First let me note that this chapter in Deuteronomy is not the detailed description of these feasts. These feasts were already prescribed earlier in the Torah; in places such as Exodus 12, Leviticus 23, and Numbers 28. This passage, as we've already seen before in Deuteronomy is reminding the next generation about these feasts. And it's talking about how they'll be observed once the people spread out geographically in the Promised Land. When they are in the land, these three feasts will all become pilgrimages. Verse 16. Three times a year the people will make a pilgrimage to the central place of worship; to Jerusalem.

The first feast here is in verses 1-8. This is the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which begins with the Passover celebration. It began on the same date commemorating the original Passover and Exodus from Egypt. The second feast is in verses 9-12. This is the Feast of Weeks. This was a feast that happened during the annual harvest. They were to hold this feast the day after seven weeks had gone by after the start of the harvest. That's where they get the name Feast of Weeks. The Greek name for the Feast is probably better known to you. It's Pentecost. The word Pentecost is Greek for "fiftieth" and refers to the 50 days that had to be counted off until this feast. The third feast here is in verses 13-15. This is the Feast of Tabernacles; also called the Feast of Booths. The Jewish people would have this feast after the end of the annual harvest. They'd live in tabernacles or booths, basically tents, for a week during this time. They did this while at the same time celebrating God's provisions and blessings to them.

Well, I'd like to spend some time looking at some common characteristics of these three feasts here. Verses 16-17 get us to think about all three feasts together. These are the major holy pilgrimages the Jews were to do each year. They marked out the calendar for the year and were an important part of how they were worshipping God. And so I want to draw our attention to three components that each of these feasts share. First, each feast was an act of worship. Second, each feast was a memorial. Third, each feast involved rejoicing.

Let's think first about how each feast was an act of worship. One thing that's very clear in this passage is that these feasts weren't supposed to happen back at their homes. No, here's where Deuteronomy again emphasizes the central place of worship. The summary in verse 16 says that each feast is to happen at the place where God chooses. As each feast is described, this is explicitly stated. The feasts are to happen at the place in the Promised Land where God chooses to place his name. This should get you to think back to Deuteronomy chapter 12 where God promised to setup a central place of worship in the Promised Land. The place that would become Jerusalem, where the temple would be built. And so this chapter repeatedly says that this is where these feasts were to happen: Verses 2, 5, 6, 7, 11, 15, and 16 all state this. The implication is that these feasts are to happen at this holy place, because they are holy acts of worship.

But there's more. The passage shows in other ways too that these feasts are an act of worship. In the first feast, it's made very clear that there are sacrifices to be offered during the feast. The end of our passage makes it clear that every feast is to have sacrifices and offerings. It says that no one is to come to these feasts empty-handed. They're to come bringing sacrifices and offerings as God has blessed them. Of course the earlier instructions in the Torah specify in greater detail the specific sacrifices to be given in each of these feasts. Clearly sacrifices and offerings are acts of worship. These are inherent parts of these feasts. That's because these feasts are each a part of how they were worshipping God.

This is also why in verse 8 they should do no work and instead have a sacred assembly. Just like on the weekly Sabbath when they took time out to worship God, so in these holy festivals there'd be special days of rest where they gather together in a holy assembly. Again, an act of worship. When verse 11 talks about rejoicing in the feast, it says that they rejoice "before the Lord." Literally, in the face of the Lord. It's talking about being in his special presence, by the fact that they had come to this feast at his holy place. Again, this is worship language. Even the word for "feast" appearing in this passage has a worship connotation. It's a word referring to a pilgrim feast; a feast where you make a pilgrimage to the place of your God. It's a word that inherently implies an act of worship. And of course along those lines, verse 16 is essentially a summons to the people. These feasts aren't optional. At a bare minimum, all the males had to make these three pilgrimages each year. Of course, this passage also shows that ideally that whole communities would make these trips. But at a bare minimum, heads of households were being called to come and worship. We issue a call to worship each Sunday at the beginning of the service. Here's a similar call to worship for them to make these pilgrimages.

So these feasts were an act of worship. Second, they were also a memorial. Reading over this passage, you see there are several historical notes. As the people feasted in these feasts, they were to remember what God had done for them. These feasts weren't rooted in legend or fables. They were rooted in actual history. This is clearly the case in the first feast. The Passover with the Feast of Unleavened Bread celebrated how God brought them out of Egypt in the first Passover. Look at all the historical notes here in this first feast. Verse 1 says

that the time of the feast was chosen because that's the same month when God had brought them out of Egypt. Verse 3 says that this feast involves unleavened bread because that was to remind them of Egypt and the Exodus. The unleavened bread is called the bread of affliction here to remind them of the affliction they had in Egypt. But then the eating of it also reminds them how they had fled Egypt in haste at that first Passover; there was no time for bread to rise; so they had ate unleavened bread in haste. This feast it says in verse 3 was given so they could remember all this. That's a key word. It's a feast to "remember." They do this in remembrance of the Egyptian exodus. Again, in verse 6, another historical note is given. The time of the Passover sacrifice was to be at twilight, because that coincided with the time when the first Passover lambs were slaughtered, giving protection to Israel's sons, and leading to their immediate exodus.

The second feast also has a brief historical note added to it. Verse 12. "And you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt." In Egypt they didn't farm to make themselves rich and full. They worked as slaves to do whatever made the Egyptians rich and full. This second feast, so closely connected with the harvest, was a symbol of the fact that they no longer were slaves in Egypt. Instead they were literally reaping the benefits of the Promised Land. And so verse 12 again uses that word "remember." This second feast they would also do in remembrance of God's salvation that he had brought them. Salvation from Egypt.

Now interestingly, this third feast does not contain a reference here to a memorial. Unlike the first two feasts, there is not a mention here about what they are to remember as they participate in that feast. And yet, though it's not directly mentioned here, it is certainly implied. Leviticus 23:43 actually tells us the historical foundation for this feast. During this feast they were to live in essentially a tent for a week, because it represented how the people had to live after the Exodus. When God brought them out of Egypt it was 40 years until they actually settled down in the Promised Land. In the mean time they lived basically in tents, wandering in the wilderness. The feast of Tabernacles, i.e. the Feast of Tents, was to remind the people how they had been brought from being wanderers with nothing, to be settled down into a bountiful land. Yet interestingly, this passage chooses to not explicitly tell us this.

And so each of these feasts has a memorial attached to it. The third component that each of these feasts share is that each feast involved rejoicing. This is clear just from the word "feast" itself. These weren't called pilgrim *fasts*, they were pilgrim *feasts*. They were celebrating these historical blessings with current blessings. They were not to come empty-handed to these feasts because God was blessings them so fully. Instead they came with the bounty of God to celebrate bountifully. These feasts were inherently celebrations to rejoice over all God's blessings to them. They would rejoice over what God had done in the past in giving them freedom from Egyptian slavery. They would rejoice over what God was currently doing for them by prospering them in the Promised Land.

We see the language of rejoicing explicitly in this passage. Interestingly, it's not directly mentioned in the first feast. Certainly it can be implied; the Exodus was freedom from affliction as it mentions. But it is specially mentioned in the second and third feasts. The reference is brief in the second feast, but it's there. Verse 11. It speaks of rejoicing as a community that's gone up together in pilgrimage and is now sharing together in this holy feast. The idea of rejoicing is very clearly brought out in the last feast. The Feast of Tabernacles mentions this rejoicing twice. The first reference is in verse 14. It's very similar there to the rejoicing described in the second feast; again the idea is that whole communities will go up to Jerusalem and rejoice together. But then in verse 15 this idea of rejoicing is emphatic. It says you shall "*surely rejoice.*" There the

adjective "surely" is added. In light of all the ways God had blessed their produce and work that year, they were *especially* to rejoice.

And so here we have the three feasts. They were each an act of worship. They were each a memorial. They were each to produce rejoicing. Together they made up the three major feasts that marked the Jewish calendar. Each year they'd be called to worship God by remembering and rejoicing. They really summed up Israel's history as a people. Together these feasts remembered God's past saving actions for them and called them to rejoice in his current blessings to them. And yet at this point in Deuteronomy there's an interesting already, not yet, dynamic here for Israel. Already they were freed from Egyptian slavery. Already God could speak so positively about the Promised Land being theirs. In fact, they had already taken ownership of the land east of the Jordan River. But they had not yet taken hold of the Promised Land proper. They were still wanderers living in tents when they received these instructions about these feasts.

I think this hinted at in this passage. There's a movement from remembering to rejoicing in the descriptions of these feasts. This movement of remembering to rejoicing hints at their already/not yet status. I mentioned how here the first two feasts explicitly mention a memorial and third feast only implies it. In reverse I mentioned how the first feast only implies rejoicing while the second two feasts explicitly state it. The memorial aspect is clearly spoken about the most here in the first feast. The rejoicing aspect is clearly spoken the most about here in the third feast. There's a movement here from remembering to rejoicing. And that's how it gets all summarized at the end here. They remember back to when they had nothing but were slaves. Now they rejoice at the fullness of God's blessings to them in the Promised Land.

But again, the rejoicing here of Israel's blessings is not something they had fully received yet. This is anticipatory. These are instructions for the feasts once they get into the land. I think that's why the memorial nature of the Feast of Tabernacles isn't even mentioned here. There's no need to specifically remind them how the feast remembers back to the days when they lived in tents. They were living in tents right then! Its historical foundation was obvious. But they had to trust in faith that one day they'd experience the bounty of the Promised Land in its fullness. They had tasted of the "already" and looked forward to the "not yet." That's how this movement of remembering to rejoicing in this passage points to their already/not yet status. The remembering is the "already." Some of the rejoicing was part of the "already." But the full measure of rejoicing lies in the "not yet" for them. The movement from the remembering to the rejoicing is representing their very movement in history. They are moving from the historical salvation to begin to take hold of the future blessings more and more.

Brothers and sisters, these feasts paint a picture of the already/not yet dimension of Israel at that time. And in turn, they look forward to the very same sort of place that we are in. As Christians at this point in redemptive history, we are living in the "already" and the "not yet." We too find a movement in our lives and in the history of the church from the remembering to the rejoicing. We remember back to how we've been already freed from slavery. We rejoice over that. But we look forward to the final place of blessing that is in store for us. Eternal life. A heavenly inheritance. That's where our rejoicing will come in its fullness. For now, we are wandering. We are strangers and aliens, wandering in this land. We are headed to heaven. It's already ours, Christ tells us. Yet we're not there yet.

Israel's history is captured in these three feasts. A history that at the time of Deuteronomy hadn't been fully realized yet. But we know that Israel's history was

typological of the greater history of redemption. It showed forth in earthly ways a better redemption to come. That God would redeem both Jews and Gentiles from slavery to sin and bring us to a heavenly inheritance. Our place in this journey is very similar to the place the people who first received Deuteronomy 16 were in. They were right on the edge of receiving the fullness of the promised inheritance. That inheritance looked forward to the heavenly inheritance that we await. All of this comes from Jesus, and through faith in Jesus.

Of course, thinking further through these feasts, we can speak more specifically to their New Testament fulfillment. There's a sense in which all of the feasts find a greater feast in the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is not just the new covenant equivalent of the Passover feast. It really is the new covenant equivalent of all the holy feasts of the Old Testament. Because all these old covenant feasts remember back to God's past saving works and look forward in rejoicing to God's new blessings. They all essentially point forward to a promise where God's people will one day feast before God and with God in heaven. The Lord's Supper brings this out in greater clarity and light. It remembers the Lord's sacrifice on the cross to bring the greatest freedom from slavery; slavery from sin. It is done in remembrance of Christ; a memorial to Christ's saving work. But it looks forward to that day when we will eat together with God in the great marriage supper of the Lamb. It looks forward to heavenly eternal feasting with God. What's pictured in all the Old Testament feasts are pictured all the more clearly in the Lord's Supper.

But think with me further about some more specific aspects of fulfillment in Christ for each of these feasts. Clearly Passover finds its fulfillment in Christ. John the Baptist calls Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Jesus is called the Passover Lamb according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:7. He brings us out of the affliction of sin into new life. Paul in that same passage calls us the church to cleanse out the old leaven from our midst, speaking spiritually to do away with ungodliness and replace it with sincerity and truth.

Think of the Feast of Weeks. That's the feast being celebrated when the Holy Spirit is poured out on the New Testament church. That's 50 days after the firstfruits of the harvest. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:20 that Christ was the firstfruits, and that we in Christ will follow suit in his resurrection. And so when the Holy Spirit is being poured out on Pentecost, it's celebrating the harvest. Not a physical harvest. But a spiritual harvest. In light of Christ's death and resurrection, the church is called to go out and harvest disciples for the Lord. And so it's fitting that the church is equipped for the harvest (i.e. the Holy Spirit) at this feast that celebrated the harvest.

Lastly think of the Feast of the Tabernacles. I've already mentioned this, but let me make it abundantly clear. We are currently wandering, living spiritually in tents. This world is not our final home. We are in, but not of, this world. Our citizenship is in heaven. John 1:14 literally describes Christ pitching a tent among us; sometimes translated as he tabernacled among us. Christ tabernacled among us for a time, to call us to follow after him. He has gone away right now, up to heaven, to prepare a place for us. To prepare a room in his father's house for us. But in the mean time, we live in earthly frail bodies, but jars of clay. We live following spiritually after him, looking forward to the day when we will enter into that heavenly inheritance reserved for us. That day we'll be wanderers no more.

Trinity Presbyterian Church, these three feasts in the old covenant looked forward the Lord's Supper; they looked forward to Christ; and they looked forward to our eternal heavenly reward. These feasts in turn should encourage our worship of God

again today. They've reminded us today of the significance of our worship. That the things we do on Sundays, and how we worship God all week long, are not without significance. They are rooted in a historical reality. They cause us to look backward, remembering what Christ has done for us. They cause us to look forward in expectant joy at what is still in store for us.

Today you often hear that people are searching for something real. Well, this is why we worship our God. Our Christian history and our Christian hope is not a fiction or a fabrication. It's truth. It's reality. By faith, this is history becomes our own personal history. By faith, this is our hope. By faith, every act of worship remembers and rejoices. By faith, every act of worship realizes how full God has made us; filling us with himself, and with every spiritual blessing.

And so in all our worship, be reminded of what Christ has done, and be reminded of the joy set before us. When we take of the Lord's Supper, remember and rejoice. We proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. When we give our tithes and offerings, it's saying to God that we don't come empty-handed. No, we give out of the fullness of our God-given blessings. Yes, we give of earthly things; but we do it out of a fullness of spiritual blessings.

And when we worship in this way, we worship always looking forward. Always looking heavenward. That's the ultimate source of our joy. Joy that breaks forth even now in our worship. Our worship is genuine. Our joy is real. Because Christ is real and genuine and true. Amen.

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