

119

MINISTRIES

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Sukkot: You Shall Rejoice

During the Feast of Sukkot, or more commonly known as the Feast of Tabernacles, God gives us a strange commandment. He says that we are to dwell in a *sukkah*, which is a Hebrew word that means “temporary shelter.” The plural of *sukkah* is *sukkot*, hence the name, *Chag HaSukkot*, that is, the Feast of Sukkot. It’s the feast of temporary shelters.

The Torah says that we are to dwell in *sukkot* for seven days:

Leviticus 23:42

You shall dwell in booths [sukkot] for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths [sukkot].

In addition, we are specifically commanded to “rejoice before YHWH” (Leviticus 23:40) in connection to this festival. We are to be joyful while we dwell in these temporary shelters.

So what are these *sukkot*, or temporary shelters, like? Well, this word is used in a couple of other places in Scripture. Consider this passage in Genesis...

Genesis 33:17

But Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built himself a house and made booths [sukkot] for his livestock. Therefore the name of the place is called Succoth.

So during his journey, Jacob makes shelters for his animals to live in. All of us are familiar with the types of shelters that animals live in. And they certainly aren’t the types of shelters that *we* would want to live in. Nobody wants to live in the doghouse in their backyard.

Furthermore, Jacob is on a journey here. So these shelters clearly aren’t intended to be permanent. They serve a temporary purpose.

Another place this word is found is in the book of Jonah:

Jonah 4:5-8

Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a **booth** [sukkah] for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. Now the Lord [YHWH] God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, “It is better for me to die than to live.”

Reading this, one might think that Jonah wasn't a huge fan of camping! He says he'd rather die than live in this discomfort! Perhaps a lot of us can relate to Jonah here. Nobody likes being uncomfortable. Even those of us who absolutely love the outdoors don't want to live in a tent forever. At the end of the camping trip, most of us are looking forward to coming back to our permanent homes.

In either case, this passage gives us another picture of the kind of shelter that a *sukkah* provides. While it does provide some shelter, it's not really the best kind of shelter. It's nothing like a permanent house. Those who stay in a *sukkah*, such as a tent, are still subject to the elements—the heat, the wind, and the rain. Again, the *sukkah* is designed to be temporary, not permanent.

Many of us who celebrate Sukkot will actually go camping and stay in tents for seven days. For those of us who do that, we're very familiar with those times when it rains and the bottom of our tent floods with water. We've woken up in the morning and have felt almost unbearably hot because of the sun shining down on our tent. And those of us who have kids, know how unpleasant it is to be crammed into a tiny space with a bunch of people—it is uncomfortable, sticky, and wet.

Again, nobody wants to live in a tent for longer than seven days—and, for many of us, if we're honest, seven days is even way too long.

But even if we don't literally go camping for Sukkot, on some level we still experience this discomfort related to the *sukkah*. If we opt for a more traditional observance by building our own *sukkah* on the side of the house, and we simply spend time in it during the day, we're still subject to the elements. It still gets too cold or too hot. If there are a lot of people over, it still gets crammed and uncomfortable. Bugs can still get in, and so forth.

So this raises a question: Why do we do this to ourselves? Well, we do it because we love God and we want to honor His word. And this is something He tells us to do, so we do it.

But *why* does God command us to dwell in *sukkot* during Sukkot? What's the point of having us dwell in temporary, flimsy, uncomfortable shelters for seven days? Is God just making us jump through religious hoops for His amusement? Or is there something we're actually supposed to learn from this strange ritual?

Well, the Feast of Sukkot isn't the only feast where we're commanded to do uncomfortable things. For instance, during *Chag HaMatzot*, or the Feast of Unleavened Bread, we fast for seven days from foods that contain leavening. No other time do we crave a big burger or thick crust pizza more than during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. But we give up a basic pleasure for a week in order to connect deeper with God through our observance of His word.

We know these types of practices aren't arbitrary but meant to teach us something deeper. The rituals are related to the festival and what the festival is intended to memorialize. So maybe if we look at what these festivals memorialize, we can better understand why it is that God tells us to dwell in *sukkot* during Sukkot.

First, Sukkot is one of three major harvest festivals mentioned in the Torah. The other two are Unleavened Bread and Shavuot. All three of these harvest festivals are mentioned in the book of Exodus:

Exodus 23:14-17

Three times in the year you shall keep a feast to me. You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread. As I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. None shall appear before me empty-handed. You shall keep the Feast of Harvest [Shavuot], of the firstfruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall keep the Feast of Ingathering [Sukkot] at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor. Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the Lord [YHWH] God.

So the very basic purpose of these festivals is to celebrate the various harvests throughout the year. Unleavened Bread is the beginning of the barley harvest in the spring. Shavuot is the beginning of the wheat harvest. And Sukkot celebrates the harvests of fruit like grapes, figs, along with olives and everything else that comes in around that time.

However, we know that these festivals have a symbolism beyond merely celebrating the harvest. They memorialize past events—specifically the events relevant to Israel's journey from Egypt to the Promised Land.

Passover and Unleavened Bread, for example, are all about remembering that God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt:

Exodus 13:7-8

Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days; no leavened bread shall be seen with you, and no leaven shall be seen with you in all your territory. You shall tell your son on that day, 'It is because of what the Lord [YHWH] did for me when I came out of Egypt.'

Now, Israel's deliverance from Egypt is a pretty significant event, right? This was a defining moment in their history and ours! The Scriptures say that Israel left Egypt in a hurry and therefore didn't have time to wait for their bread to rise. So, that's one of the reasons we eat unleavened bread—to connect us back to this monumental event when God delivered His people.

So what about Shavuot?

Leviticus 23:16-17

You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath. Then you shall present a grain offering of new grain to the Lord [YHWH]. You shall bring from your dwelling places two loaves of bread to be waved, made of two tenths of an ephah. They shall be of fine flour, and they shall be baked with leaven, as firstfruits to the Lord [YHWH].'

While Scripture doesn't explicitly say, tradition has long held that Shavuot was when God gave the

Torah to Israel. It was around the time of Shavuot when Israel had reached Mount Sinai. It has also been said that the two loaves of bread that are waved are symbolic of the Ten Commandments, which were originally given on two tablets of stone. In either case, Shavuot memorializes this event, which again, is another monumental and defining moment in Israel's history.

Okay, so then what does Sukkot memorialize?

Leviticus 23:42-43

You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord [YHWH] your God."

So Sukkot memorializes living in the wilderness. Literally. That's what the Torah says. Isn't that a little anti-climactic, especially considering what the first two harvest festivals memorialize?

You have Passover, which memorializes a national deliverance from slavery in Egypt. You have Shavuot, which memorializes the giving of the Torah—the marriage contract between God and His people, which set them apart as a special people with the monumental calling of representing God to the nations! These are both miraculous and powerful events worth celebrating!

So, why does Sukkot memorialize something so mundane and even kind of depressing when compared to the other feast days? Moreover, why are we specifically commanded to "rejoice" as part of this festival?

Think about it. What is there to rejoice about Israel's horrible time journeying through the wilderness—a story just filled with death, suffering, failure, and difficult trials? It seems like more of an event to mourn than rejoice.

Aside from the fact that Israel dwelled in temporary shelters during their wilderness journey, the Torah doesn't really give us any more insight into why we are told to dwell in temporary shelters during the festival. But maybe something in the New Testament will give us a clue.

We do see that to be the case with the other two harvest festivals. In light of Yeshua the Messiah's work of redemption, these festivals have taken on an additional layer of depth and meaning. Consider Unleavened Bread:

1 Corinthians 5:7-8

Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Here we see Paul drawing a spiritual lesson from Unleavened Bread. The festival is not just about removing physical leaven from our homes, but also about removing malice and evil from our lives. And eating unleavened bread symbolizes pursuing a life of sincerity and truth.

So, what about Shavuot?

Acts 2:1-4

When the day of Pentecost [Shavuot] arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly

there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Here we see that Shavuot not only memorializes the giving of the Torah but also the giving of the Holy Spirit. Just as God gave us His Torah to show us how to live, He gave us His Spirit to empower us to live according to His Torah. And we who have His Spirit and His Torah are called, once again, to be His witnesses to the nations.

Well, is there anything in the New Testament that might shed some light on the spiritual significance of the sukkah? Consider what the apostle Peter says in his second epistle:

2 Peter 1:12-15, NKJV

For this reason I will not be negligent to remind you always of these things, though you know and are established in the present truth. Yes, I think it is right, as long as I am in this **tent**, to stir you up by reminding you, knowing that shortly I must put off my **tent**, just as our Lord Jesus Christ [Messiah Yeshua] showed me. Moreover I will be careful to ensure that you always have a reminder of these things after my decease.

So, Peter is talking about being in a tent and then putting it off, equating that to his “decease”—that is, his death. Obviously he’s not talking about staying in a literal tent here. The word “tent” is a metaphor. We get an even clearer picture when we turn to the apostle Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians:

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

For we know that if the **tent** that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this **tent** we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this **tent**, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the **body** we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the **body** and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

So both Peter and Paul compare our present bodies to a tent—a temporary shelter. Perhaps we could say that a sukkah represents one’s physical body. Just as a sukkah is a temporary dwelling, our physical bodies are likewise temporary dwellings.

Just as the Israelites journeyed in the wilderness in temporary shelters, awaiting their permanent home in the Promised land, we journey through this life in mortal bodies—our *sukkot*, if you will—awaiting our permanent home in the Promised Kingdom to come.

When Messiah’s Kingdom comes to earth in fullness, we will trade our temporary home for a permanent home. That is to say, we’ll trade our temporary, mortal bodies for eternal, immortal bodies. This is what Scripture teaches about the future resurrection:

1 Corinthians 15:50-53

I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. **For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.**

So we've established that the sukkah represents our bodies, specifically our mortality—that is, the fact that we're dying.

If you ever build a traditional sukkah as part of your Sukkot celebration, with actual branches and leaves on top, you'll notice that at the beginning of the festival, it's fresh and green and full of "life." But at the end of the week, it's withered and gray. It decays and dies, just like we do, reminding us that this life is temporary and passing away.

It's become a tradition in Judaism to read through the book of Ecclesiastes during Sukkot, which again, upholds this same theme. It's all about how this life is temporary. It's passing away. You are going to die.

So now that we understand the symbolism of the sukkah, another question is raised: why? Why is the symbolism so dreary, so depressing—especially in light of God's very clear commandment to rejoice during this festival? Why is the fact that we're going to die something to celebrate?

Well, there are two answers...

First, we do have a permanent home—an immortal body—to look forward to after this temporary one passes away. So we rejoice in that hope we have! In fact, that is what the eighth day symbolizes. According to the commandment, we dwell in temporary shelters for seven days, but then there is a mysterious eighth day that is part of the festival of Sukkot and yet distinct from it. On this eighth day we do not dwell in a temporary shelter. This last day represents the future resurrection, as well as the new heavens and new earth, when death is abolished and all is made right.

The second answer to why we rejoice during Sukkot, is that our rejoicing is to be *in spite of* the symbolism. What does mean? Well, James talks about counting it all joy when we face trials of many kinds (James 1:2-4). This is not a natural joy in response to a happy situation; it's a joy that we *choose* in spite of our circumstances.

The Feast of Sukkot, therefore, trains us to rejoice even when we are in unhappy circumstances. And one of the ways this is accomplished is through the command to dwell in uncomfortable, flimsy, hot, temporary shelters...and yet be rejoicing the whole time.

We are to rejoice even while we're in these dying bodies. We rejoice even though life is difficult and confusing and it seems like "all is vanity," as Ecclesiastes says. We choose to rejoice, in spite of our present circumstances, looking forward to our future, permanent home.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus [Messiah Yeshua] for you.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

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