

"In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice" (Romans 11:5)

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SUKKOT— THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES AND THE HOPE FOR THE NATIONS

by Galen Peterson

The Feast of Tabernacles has its origin in the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites. After they were delivered from bondage in Egypt and were given the Torah on Mt. Sinai, it would be 40 years before they would settle in the Promised Land of Canaan.

God led them on their journey in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. And the people lived as nomads, dwelling in temporary structures in the midst of God's presence.

In order to commemorate the wilderness wanderings of their ancestors, God instructed the descendants of Israel to observe *Sukkot*—the annual Feast of Tabernacles as “a perpetual statute” (Lev. 23:41).

In Temple times, five days after *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, the people were to begin dwelling in *sukkot* (singular is *sukkah*) meaning “tabernacles” or “booths” for a period of one week (Lev. 23:42). These were temporary, informal structures.

The people were also instructed to take palm branches, and boughs of myrtle and willows



(Lev. 23:40). The Sadducees interpreted this verse to mean that the tree branches were to be used on the *sukkah*. But the Pharisees said that the branches were to be carried by the people. The solution was a compromise—branches would be placed as roofs on the booths and the various types of tree branches would be placed together in what is called a *lulav* and waved by the people in the Temple courtyard.

Today, observant Jewish families erect *sukkot* outside their homes. There has to be a minimum of three walls. At least half of the roof must be covered by branches. It should provide

mostly shade, but some light is supposed to come through, including the ability to see the stars by night.

The most common custom is to eat meals in the *sukkah*, unless heavy rain chases the family indoors. Some people will also sleep in them during the seven days.

Regarding the *lulav*, they are traditionally bound together with a palm frond surrounded by three myrtle and two willow branches. The fourth species is stated in Scripture as “fruit of a beautiful tree” (Lev. 23:40). This phrase is considered to be a reference to citrus fruit. Jewish tradition teaches that specifically it is a variety called the citron, also called the *etrog*.

In Second Temple times, this holiday was the third and final pilgrimage festival (Ex. 23:14-17). Upon their arrival in Jerusalem, the people would set up their *sukkot* with leafy roofs and live in them for seven days. With booths set up in every open courtyard and on the roofs of houses, the entire city was adorned in greenery.

Each day in the Temple, special ceremonies took place, including the pouring of water ritual. The High Priest and an assistant priest exited the city through the Water Gate and went to the Pool of Siloam where they collected water from the spring. They and returned to the Temple and filled a golden vessel with “living water.” Other priests approached carrying large willow branches, circling the altar seven times and used their branches to form a *sukkah* over the altar. As the High Priest ascended the steps to the altar he then poured out the water. This would be done in the presence of the people, each person holding a *lulav* and an *etrog*, to the accompaniment of priests blowing silver trumpets and others singing God’s praises.

In the evening came ceremonies involving brilliant lights in the Temple’s vast Court of Women. In each of the four corners of this court were golden columns 50 cubits high (about 75 feet, the equivalent of a seven-story building). Four basins were placed on the top of each column creating massive lampstands. Young priests would climb ladders to fill the cups and to light the wicks made from the worn-out garments of the priests. A great light was cast by 16 large bowls of flaming oil positioned high in the air. It is said that the light was so bright that all of Jerusalem was lit up by them.

In the courtyard below, men appeared with torches, waving and juggling them. Dancers assembled, standing tiptoe and bending and leaping and somersaulting to the music of harps and cymbals, lyres, flutes and trumpets. Long into the night the celebration continued, until the dawn of the next day. It is not surprising that the ancient rabbis commented, “Whoever has

not witnessed this celebration has not seen true rejoicing.”

Each day the people would bring their own *lulav* and *etrog* to the daily ceremonies at the Temple. Then, on the seventh and final day of this festival, the people would shake their branches to the pavement and the children would eat the citron fruit.

This day was called



Hoshanah Rabbah, meaning “the great hosana.” The name is derived from Psalm 118 in which the people would chant, “O Lord, save us” (v. 25). There is a prophetic aspect to this plea. For this same Psalm proclaims that the Lord Himself would become our salvation (v. 14).

Sacrifices also took place during the week of *Sukkot*. According to Numbers 29, thirteen bulls were sacrificed on the first day, twelve bulls were sacrificed on the second day, descending to seven bulls on the seventh day.

The ancient Jewish sages looked for symbolic meaning in the details of the sacrifices on *Sukkot*. If you add up the number of bulls offered on each of the seven days, you come up with a total of 70 bulls.

They counted up the number of nations known to be in existence at the time of the writing of the Torah and determined that there were 70 in all. Thus the sacrifice of these 70 bulls was said to be on behalf of all nations, not just Israel.

The message from this practice is that in order to be part of God’s kingdom, there must be a sacrifice made for the people from every nation. And that would apply to every generation as well. No one is exempt.

So the question becomes, why was God commanding a sacrifice for the nations of the world? His primary message at that time was centered around the righteousness of the people of Israel and His condemnation of the ungodly practices of the Canaanite and other nations. Why bother?

The answer lies imbedded within the covenant God made much earlier with Abraham. Genesis 12 is one of the bedrock passages in the Bible. In the first three verses there are the assurances of:

- A miracle-working God because He declared that a great nation would arise from Abram, who was at that time incapable of fathering a child.
- A promise-making God who takes a stand and backs up His Words.
- A protecting God who warns of curses to those who bring harm to the set-apart descendents of Abraham.
- A blessing-giving God who demonstrates His love for people.

The key to this understanding lies in Gen. 12:3 where God affirms to Abram: “In you all the families of the earth will be

blessed.” In this declaration God does not say in so many words *how* the families of the earth would be blessed. But we know from the greater context of Scripture, in particular Acts 3:25, that one great aspect of that blessing was the coming of the Messiah. For we can affirm that salvation and atonement for our sins was made possible by Yeshua (Jesus) who gave His life in our place. And that surely cannot be trivialized and is worthy of our appreciation.

But there is another aspect of that blessing. It is found in the meaning of the word translated as “blessed.”

בָּרַךְ *barak* is a verb, meaning “to bend or kneel, to bless.” It is derived from the noun *berek*, meaning “the knee.” Linguistically, נִבְרַחַּו *niv-rechu*—the particular form of this verb used in Gen. 12:3 means the subject participates in mutual action. So, keeping in mind the root meaning of “bending,” a more literal translation would be—“all the families of the earth will bend back and forth.”

Hebrew scholars have shown that the reciprocal nature of this word has the sense of “blessing by combining” and thus it can be characterized as a form of grafting, like combining two different varieties of plants into one living vegetation that shares a common existence.

As a result, the full impact of the Abrahamic Covenant means that the redemption brought by Messiah would not just be a blessing for Israel, but it would be a shared blessing—one that extends to all the nations on earth. Like a grafted tree, all those who receive His redemption, whether Jew or Gentile, will be combined together into one community of

faith.

This promise to Abraham was fulfilled exactly as it was foretold. And its realization is described using this same imagery in Romans 11. In this chapter, Paul writes about the way that salvation had come to the Gentiles.

Bear in mind that this was not our postmodern world of tolerance. This was a radical concept in that day. Prior to Yeshua, it was believed that redemption and a place in the World to Come was limited to Jews and those few Gentiles who converted to Judaism.

We see this flawed belief illustrated in the way that Paul’s declaration to the Jewish communities of Asia Minor that God had brought salvation to the Gentiles resulted in him being run out of town (Acts 13:46-50). There is also the story in Acts 10 where God gave Peter a vision in which he was astonished before realizing that God’s compassion was for people of every nation.

But here in the book of Romans, which describes in great detail the way that God had demonstrated His love for fallen human beings, not just Jews, it culminates in chapter 11 with a figurative way of showing what God had completed through Yeshua.

Paul uses the metaphor of an olive tree with natural branches representing the Jewish people, and wild branches representing Gentiles that are “grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree” (v. 17).

So you have here a picture of two different people groups being united together into one “tree.” The branches might look slightly different, just as you have different varieties of olive trees. They produce similar fruit. They share a

common root, which nourishes the branches.

So it is with us. There is no distinction in the fact that we are all sinners. And we are all saved by God’s grace through faith, not because of any particular heritage or certain religious rituals that we have done.

Trusting in God for redemption for our sins is something we all can and need to do. We all share in the same promise of dwelling with God in Paradise. And in the meantime, like different varieties of branches and leaves, we might look slightly differently in terms of the way that we worship. But we share a common root of the heritage of Israel.

The key point here is that God has indeed fulfilled His promise to Abraham to be a blessing to “all the families of the earth.” That is the culmination of the Abrahamic Covenant. And it is also the culmination of this *Sukkot* holiday.

Sukkot is overflowing with heavenly imagery for all of humanity:

- According to the Prophet Zechariah, in the Kingdom Age yet to come, all the nations of the world who survive a time of tribulation will be called to go to Jerusalem to observe *Sukkot* (Zech. 14:16). So you have a Jewish prophet foretelling not just a call for other Jews to observe the Feast, but Gentiles as well.
- Just as *Sukkot* looks back to the days when the Israelites were redeemed by God and then dwelled with Him in the wilderness, it also looks forward the coming day when redeemed people of faith will dwell with Him in Heaven.

- Just as it is called the Feast of Ingathering because it occurs at the end of the harvest season and after the annual judgment day on *Yom Kippur*, there will be a final day of judgment when we stand before God and there will be a great harvest of faithful men and women from every nation, tribe and tongue.
- The flimsy nature of the *Sukkah* is a reminder to us that even though we live now in bodies that will inevitably fail us, we have the promise of glorified bodies in Paradise.
- The *lulav* that is waved in every direction represents God's sovereignty over all the earth.

Even the *etrog* relates to this collective aspect of God's plan. The citron tree is one of the most difficult varieties of citrus plants to raise. It takes about five years before it bears fruit. But its

lifespan is only 10-15 years because it is vulnerable to disease. So growers have learned that if they graft branches of a citron to a hardy citrus tree like a lemon, the tree will live over 30 years.

Orthodox Jews are meticulous in their consideration of the *etrog*. Many of them are adamant in their opposition to grafted trees. In fact, in the 19th century Jewish newspapers told the story of a group of rabbis from Jerusalem who traveled about on donkeys to various *etrog* orchards in search of trees that had not been grafted. This fixation on minutia that is not necessarily biblical is, in a way, representative of this thinking that salvation is limited to one group of people only, just as it was in the days of Yeshua.

But the reality of the matter is that not long after the grafting takes place, the tree covers the spot so that you can't even tell

where the graft is. It just looks like it all belongs together.

That's what *Sukkot* is all about. As depicted in these symbols of the feast, believing Jews and believing Gentiles are welcome in God's everlasting kingdom. It starts with the seed of Abraham, continuing on to Isaac and Jacob, then twelve tribes that arose from His sons, and then through the tribe of Judah came King David of Israel, and many generations later was born the promised descendant of David—Yeshua the Messiah.

Just as God revealed to Abraham, and wove into the Feast of Tabernacles, God is King over *everyone* who believes—Jew and Gentile alike. And just as God's Word promises, we who believe in Him are His heirs of the kingdom and have a secure place in eternity. That is truly the greatest blessing of all.



Jews and Gentiles, young and old, waving the *lulav* during the Feast of Tabernacles service at our Brit Hadasha (New Covenant) Fellowship. This custom, dating back to the Second Temple period, represents God's sovereignty over the universe, including all people.

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