

The Gospel of John
Session Six – The Festival of Booths
(John 7 - 9)



The Festival of Booths
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The Festival of Booths

The Temple of God had been completed. More than 150,000 men had labored for seven years in the building of what became known as Solomon's Temple. The finest wood, the purest gold and silver, and the best materials had gone into the construction of this house of worship.

At the dedication of the structure, the place where the *shekinah* glory of God would reside, 'all the men of Israel assembled themselves before King Solomon at the feast' (1 Kings 8:21). How significant that when God came to dwell with man in His Temple, it was inaugurated at the Feast of Sukkot (Booths or Tabernacles), the festival that speaks of dwelling.

This festival is known by many names: the Feast of Ingathering (Leviticus 23:39), the Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:34) and the Feast of Sukkot. It was celebrated in the Hebrew month of Tishri (September/October). So preeminent was this festival in biblical times that when the people mentioned 'the feast,' it was understood to be the Feast of Tabernacles, or the Feast of Booths.

It was incumbent upon all the males of Israel to appear before the Lord three times each year—at the Feast of Passover, the Feast of Weeks (Shavuot or Pentecost), and the Feast of Tabernacles (Deuteronomy 16:16) and everyone was required to bring an offering before the Lord.

During Passover and Weeks, it was often difficult for Jewish farmers from distant lands to leave their homes and journey to Jerusalem. Their crops still needed to be tended, and the cutting and threshing of grain were still in progress. The Feast of Tabernacles, however, took place after the fall harvest was gathered. The families who could not make the trip during the spring festivals traveled to Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles to present their offerings before the Lord at the Temple.

To celebrate this festival, God commanded the Israelites to dwell in booths for seven days. In this way, they would remember through the ages that God made their ancestors dwell in booths after the exodus from Egypt (Leviticus 23:21 – 43).

The command to dwell in booths during this festival also had other purposes. It has been suggested by some rabbis that the booths are a reminder of the heavenly clouds that surrounded Israel in the desert, protecting them during their journey. The dwelling in booths is also understood to be a reminder to the people that they must look to God for their sustenance. The temporary nature of the structures, not completely closed to the elements, reminds the inhabitants that God is the only true source of security and peace.

Jesus again used the background of the Feast of Tabernacles to drive home another truth. The city of Jerusalem had been lit by the four huge *menorot* for the entire feast. The brightness in the city must have been overwhelming at times. The *menorot* were darkened as Jesus taught in the Temple (John 8:20), but they stood as a vivid object lesson when Jesus proclaimed, “I am the light of the world; he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life (John 8:12).

Two of the most prominent aspects of the Feast of Tabernacles during the time of the Temple were light and water. Jesus used them to teach foundational truths: He alone is the one who can illuminate man’s spirit, and He alone can bring us from darkness into light. He is the only one who can quench man’s thirst. Power, sex, money, religion, and myriad other things can never quench the eternal thirst of the soul.

The Feast of Tabernacles stands as a reminder of God’s provision. Jesus used this feast to speak to man’s greatest need—forgiveness of sin—and the provision of God for that need—Himself, the Messiah of Israel.

by Rev. Mark Robinson Jewish Awareness Ministries

“The Jews” and the Messianists

Many who are comfortable with the Synoptic tradition and even with Paul feel that here at the threshold of John’s Gospel they must part company with the New Testament. They may be believers or half-believers, Jews, humanitarians, agnostics – all of whom may cheer the insights and advances of Paul and the Synoptic evangelists but find themselves abashed and compassless once they come into the field of John’s unearthly glow. Nor is it only the exaggerated God-Man that renders them uneasy. For it is in John that we can locate not only the sure source of the exalted doctrines of later Christianity (not all of which even every Christian can assent to) but also a spirit of touchy exclusivity that will surface repeatedly and with increasingly devastating results throughout the course of Western history.

In John, “the Jews” are enemies, often (though not always) designated with contempt, the lost people who “have no king but Caesar.” This attitude cannot have stemmed from the time of Jesus, when he and all his followers were Jewish. Nor can it be located in the mid-century controversies of the early Jesus Movement, when all the leaders – men like James, Peter, and Paul (that self-described “Jew of Jews”) – were deeply aware of their Jewish roots and thought of themselves only as preachers of a fulfilled Judaism. The anti-Judaism of John is traceable rather to the last decades of the first century, when the tug-of-war between rabbis and Messianists had heated to the boiling point, and Messianists were being forcibly ejected from Eurasian synagogues and formally cursed in Jewish liturgies. The sense of loss that resulted from this hateful ostracism should not be minimized – though we cannot but be mindful of it, for it still throbs in the hurt feelings of the Fourth Gospel retrojected into its account of the life of Jesus by a mixed community of Jews and gentiles of the 90s, probably now removed from Palestine to Ephesus but still smarting over the wounds of their final rejection. Unlike, for instance, Paul’s gentile churches, the Johannine community had retained – through the presence of the Beloved Disciple and after his death, through its reverence for his very Palestinian, very Jewish memories – a keen appreciation of its Jewish identity, so the final breakdown of *koinonia* between Jews and Christians may have been far more painful for the Johannine than for many other Christian churches.

But if it may be said that the rabbinical Jews won this first-century tug-of-war and continued to hold the upper hand for the next two centuries, the tide will turn in the early fourth century with the emperor Constantine’s induction as a Christian catechumen, after which Christians will spend the next sixteen and a half centuries rounding up Jews, hunting them down depriving them of civil rights, torturing, massacring, and ridiculing to their heart’s content. If John, writing in the heat of controversy, can no more be blamed for the subsequent history of European anti-Semitism than can the *Birkat ha-mimim*, the Jewish ritual curse on the heretical Christians, his gospel is still capable of leaving Jewish readers, purple with rage and Christians red with embarrassment.

It may even be the rejection by Judaism that lit the furnace of the Johannine community's high Christology. As has so often been the case in religious history, the very thing that one is rejected for becomes the treasure one must never give up – a treasure that is emphasized, exaggerated, and made into one's badge of honor. It is just such a psychological process that creates obsessive positions that can bear no compromise – and that finally makes dialogue (between Jews and Christians, as well as among varieties of Christians) impossible.

– Thomas Cahill (from *Desire of the Everlasting Hills: The World Before and After Jesus*, Anchor Books, New York, 1999)

Light

Chapter eight begins with Jesus' announcement that he is the light of the world, who offers the alternative to walking in darkness (verse 12). Thus the typical Johannine dualism is invoked. If the Booths setting is to be presumed, Jesus' statement fits that festival well, for the first day of the feast was marked by the lighting of four enormous candlesticks that were said to illumine the entire city as men with touches in their hands danced before them. That Jesus speaks "again" appears to make connection with the preceding Booths episode (Chapter 7), although ("again") occurs rather frequently as a connective in John.

The background of light symbolism is otherwise deep and extensive in Scripture and in Judaism. In the Bible light symbolizes God and divine truth: "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? (Ps 27:1); "in your light we see light" (Ps 36:9). Not surprisingly, light symbolism plays a large role in the Dead Sea Scrolls, so that the very phrase "the light of life" is found in the Community Rule (1QS3:7). Barrett, probably correctly, suggest that it there refers to the Law. "Light" appears as symbolic of God also in contemporary non-Jewish sources: "That light' said he, "am I, Mind, thy God". (Corpus *Hermeticum* 1.6). In Plato's Allegory of the Cave (The Republic 7.1 – 11) the light is the divine reality that projects shadow images on the wall of the cave.

Elsewhere in the New Testament "light" appears as a symbol of the salvation Jesus brings, for example, in Matt 4:16 (quoting Isa 9:2). In John, after speaking of himself as light, Jesus invites his followers to become sons of light (12:36), a phrase he also uses in Luke 16:8. Such language is reminiscent of the War Rule of Qumran, which describes the eschatological war between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness. In 2 Cor. 4:4 Paul speaks of "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ," and then plays variations on this theme (4:6). Finally, in the book of Revelation we read that the Lamb's servants will have the Lord God as their light (22:5), so that they will need neither lamp nor sun.

– D. Moody Smith (from *John: Abingdon New Testament Commentaries*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1999)

Sight and Insight

“As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth.” Unlike the man in chapter 5, this man is born with an impairment. Immediately, Jesus disciples make the mistake of connecting suffering or disability with sin or wrongdoing (or at least questionable choices) when they ask, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” But Jesus, in no uncertain terms, promptly and emphatically corrects them: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned.” In other words, we should not assume a connection between sin and suffering. Their question is a bad question – useless at best and harmful at worst.

Too many people have been told their suffering or that of someone close to them is their fault. Once when I was teaching this passage, there was a woman present whose daughter has Down syndrome. She came up to me after the session and said, “So you’re saying that it’s not my fault that my daughter has Down syndrome?” I said to her, “I’m not saying it – Jesus is; but I agree with Jesus,” Many people had made her feel guilty because she had her child later in life. I want to make two points here. First, we need to stop repeating stupid stuff about sin and suffering. Not all suffering has the same source, quality, quantity, degree, or “solution.” Second, by sharing this story I do not mean to imply that Down syndrome is a “problem” or that suffering is even a part of the equation when it comes to Down syndrome. The suffering in this instance came from stigmatization and a theology that blames and shames.

After Jesus attacks the blame game, he makes another startling statement that is lost in most English translations. The NRSV says this: “He was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day. Night is coming when no one can work.” This translation raises serious questions about God. Did God cause the man to be born with an impairment for the sole purpose of using him as a prop in a divine magic show? Does the God who sent Jesus into the world that he loved so much in order to give people abundant life cause congenital blindness, so that he might show off by curing the problem God caused? If so, why does God choose to cure some congenital impairments and not others? There is never an indication in this story that faith is a prerequisite for a cure. In fact, there is no indication at all that the man was seeking a cure.

The idea the God *causes* tragic situations raises serious questions about God’s ethical character. I once had a person in a class who shared that twins were born to him. One twin died. Christian friends tried to comfort him with various reasons that God did this, from the idea that the death would drive him to God more, to an opportunity to show valiant faith and testify in the midst of tragedy. He did not find help in any of these scenarios in which God killed his child, and I can see why. To say that God can *redeem* a tragic situation is quite different from saying that God *causes* tragic situations.

Two comments about the ancient Greek text are in order here. First, the ancient manuscripts with which translators work are composed in *scriptio continua*, continuous script. There are no spaces between words, no punctuation marks, not distinctions between capital and lower-case letters. (Chapter and verse numbers were introduced in the sixteenth century). The other features are judgments made by modern translators of different English versions. So, if you were to read the ancient text and it were in English, the beginning of John might look like this:

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Second, the phrase that the NRSV translates “he was born blind” does not actually appear in the Greek text at all. The Greek text says this (I will leave out the capitals and punctuation to be truer to the text): “neither this one sinned nor his parents but in order that the works of God might be revealed in him we must work the works of the one who sent me while it is day night is coming when no one can work.” Notice the differences in the following two translations of verses 3 – 4, first NRSV and then my own.

Jesus answered,
“Neither this man nor his parents sinned.
he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.
We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day;
night is coming when no one can work.”

Jesus answered,
“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,
[He was born blind]. (The brackets indicate that this sentence is not in the Greek text at all. If you choose to include it, you should do so only as a matter of fact statement. He was born blind. Stuff happens. Or, even better, just leave it out as it’s not in the Greek text at all.)
In order that God’s works might be revealed in him, we must work the works of him who sent me while it is day.
Night is coming when no one can work.” (my trans.)

These are two very different construals of the text. Reading the text the way I present it, we see Jesus moving away from an obsession with determining whose fault the man’s impairment was, whether of the man, the parents, or God. It is

simply a fact: the man was born blind. The reality is, he continues to be blind at that moment. While the disciples busy themselves with an academic exercise in theological hairsplitting, here sits a person (a person, not a “case”) with an impairment. Even if they were able to determine whose fault it is, it does not change the fact that the man cannot see. Jesus turns their (stiff?) necks away from speculating about the past, focuses their gaze on the person in front of them, and asks them to consider whether or not they are going to work for and with God or – as we see later in the story in the case of the Pharisees - they are going to work for themselves and against God.

– Jamie Clark-Soles (*Reading John for Dear Life: A Spiritual Walk with the Fourth Gospel*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2016)

Primary Sources:

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