**The Feast of tabernacles**

**Introduction**

The feast of tabernacles is one of the three great Biblical feasts, celebrated with great enthusiasm all over Israel. It’s also a time of year when many Jews and also many Christian believers go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem to fulfil the prophesy of Zech 14.

**1) What are the Biblical feasts?**

1a) There are 7 Biblical feasts that God commanded his people to celebrate every year without fail. The purpose was to focus the minds of God’s people on the 7 great highpoints in God’s redemptive history. God wanted his people to remember the great things that He had done every year and to think about the things that He had promised that He was going to do in the future.

1b) They are all listed together in Leviticus 23, though also mentioned in several other passages.

The 7 Biblical feasts are;

Passover

Feast of Unleavened bread

Offering the First Fruits

Feast of Weeks (Pentecost)

Feast of Trumpets

Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur)

Feast of Tabernacles

1c) 7 is the number of completeness in the Bible.

1d) The first 4 feasts are very close together in time – in the spring. Then there’s a long gap. The last 3 feasts are very close together and celebrated in the autumn.

1e) There are three pilgrim feasts where all male Jews are commanded to appear before the Lord in the temple (Exodus 23, 17); the feast of unleavened bread (the day after Passover), Pentecost and tabernacles

**2) The Feasts’ fulfilment. Those which have been fulfilled**

2a) The first 4 feasts have been perfectly fulfilled in the life of Jesus, all within a few weeks of each other.

2b) **Passover.** Jesus died as a sacrificial lamb exactly at the time that the Passover lambs were being slaughtered.

2c) **Unleavened bread.** Celebrated on the day after Passover by eating bread without yeast. This feast celebrates the removal of sin. The day after the cross was the first day since Adam that it was possible for God’s people to live free from sin.

2d) **The Feast of Firstfruits.** This was celebrated on the 3rd day after the Passover. On that day, Jesus rose from the dead, as the first fruits of those who have eternal life.

2e) **The feast of weeks (Pentecost)**. Fifty days after Passover they celebrated the feast of weeks. On that very day the Holy Spirit was poured out.

2f) The last 3 feasts have yet to be completely fulfilled. According to the New Testament, the fulfillment of them will happen within a short period of time from each other when Jesus returns.

**3) The Feasts’ fulfilment. Those yet to be fulfilled**

3a) **The** **Feast of trumpets –** The moment when Jesus will come back. “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.” (1 Thess. 4, 16-17). See also 1 Cor. 15, 52.

3b) **The day of atonement** - looking forward to the day on which all of Israel will be saved on one day (Zech. 12, 10 – 13, 1; Romans 11, 26, etc).

3c) **Sukkot - The feast of tabernacles** – the last of the great feasts.

Sukkot falls in the autumn, 5 days after the day of atonement and is the last of the 7 Biblical feasts. It is also known as “The feast of Ingathering” (Exod. 23, 16) to be celebrated after they have gathered all their crops from the fields.

3d) **Sukkot looks forward to 3 things;**

3di) The coming of the Light of the Messiah into the world

3dii) Great end time harvest festival, looking forward to the great ingathering of souls

3diii) The coming of the Shekinah Glory of God into the world. God Himself coming to dwell with man on the earth.

**4) What does the Bible say about Sukkot?**

4a) The main passages in the Bible about tabernacles are Lev. 23, 33-43; Num 29, 12-39, Deut. 31, 10-13 and Zech. 14, 16-19. In the new testament John’s gospel chapters 7-9 at set during the feast of tabernacles when Jesus went up to Jerusalem and taught in the temple about the festival’s themes.

4b) One of the most unique features of this feast was that the Jews were commanded to take the branches from 4 types of trees and to live in temporary shelters or booths for 7 days (Lev. 33, 40).

4c) The reason for this is “to remember how the Israelites lived in temporary shelters when they came out of Egypt” (Lev. 23, 43).

4d) The tree branches. “You shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of beautiful trees, branches of palm trees, the boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days” (Lev. 23, 40).

The 4 trees mentioned in scripture are interpreted to be; “Beautiful trees” – the “*etrog*”, a tree which produces small lemon like fruit; “*Palm Trees”* the long branch of the date palm. “Leafly trees” is the myrtle tree with its tiny leaves. “Willow of the brook”

4e) A controversy arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees as to whether this passage meant the branches to be used to built their booths or to be held in their hands as they celebrated in the temple, in the end they agreed to do both.

**5) The Celebration of Sukkot**

5a) Today, Jewish people still build a hut called a “sukkah”, in their garden or outside their home. The sukkah must consist of at least two and a half walls and a roof made of branches and leaves. It is important that one can still see the sky when inside the sukkah. Jewish families have their meals and some even sleep in their sukkahs.

Today at the feast of tabernacles you can see booths all over Israel, in people’s gardens, on their balconies, on the roofs of their flat roofed houses and even in the streets.

5b) In Bible days, a lot of the special features of Sukkot took place in the temple. As there is no temple today, some of the special things that the Jews used to do don’t happen anymore, whilst some have been transferred into the synagogue.

**6) Water**

6a) Each morning during the 7 day festival, the high priest would go with a joyous procession of music and worshippers down to the pool of Siloam. The high priest carried a golden pitcher which he dipped into the pool and then brought back up to the temple mount. The water would then be poured out on the altar as an offering and as a visual prayer for rain.

6b) In Israel their rainy season starts around the time of the feast of tabernacles and continues until early May. If it didn’t rain, their crops wouldn’t grow and they wouldn’t have food for the following year. So this prayer for rain was very important for their society which was heavily based around agriculture.

6c) Whilst that was going on, the choir would sing the Praise psalm 118, which was the main psalm used at the feast of tabernacles. Psalm 118 is a Messianic psalm, in other words it’s a psalm which looks forward to the coming of the Messiah.

6d) Whilst singing this psalm, the priests would march around the altar once waving palm branches in their hands, and on the last and greatest day of the feast, they would march around the altar 7 times.

6e) “Hosanna. Lord, grant us prosperity! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord..…. The Lord is God, and he has made his light shine on us. With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar.” (Psalm 118, 25-27).

6f) The people must have had this Messianic psalm in mind on Palm Sunday when Jesus was coming into Jerusalem, as they took palm branches in their hands and cried out Hosanna – Lord come and save us.” They were thinking that this was the fulfilment of the Psalm. The Messiah is coming to set us free from the Romans and to be the King of Jerusalem.

6g) Imagine the scene in the temple the year before Palm Sunday. The temple is packed full of worshipers. The high priest has just processed up from the pool of Siloam back to the temple with the golden pitcher of water and is pouring out over the altar whilst the priests process around the altar waving palm branches singing to the Messiah “Hosanna. Lord come and save us” and the loud voice of a young Galilean cuts through the voices of the choirs, interrupting the solemn temple ceremony. “On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, **“If anyone is thirsty let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them”**. (John 7, 37-38).

6h) What Jesus was saying was very clear to all those Jews in the temple. “I am the answer to your prayers. I am the Messiah. Follow me and I will save you”. No wonder the Jewish authorities wanted to kill him!

**7) Light**

7a) Another feature of tabernacles was called “The Illumination of the temple Ceremony”. From the 2nd to the 7th day of the festival, each evening was a great ceremony called the "Illumination of the Temple," which involved the lighting of four golden oil-fed lamps in the Court of Women.

7b) These lamps were huge menorahs/candelabras which stood seventy-five feet high (23 metres high), the wicks were made from strips of the worn clothes of the priests that were platted together, and it burned Olive Oil which was poured into the lamps by young priests climbing up ladders. The huge flames from the Menorahs illuminated not just the temple but the whole city, as the temple was on the top of a hill in the middle of Jerusalem. The flames were meant to remind the people of the pillar of fire that had guided Israel in their wilderness journey, and also the Shekinah glory which filled the temple when Solomon first dedicated it.

7c) Just like people light candles in churches today as a prayer for a loved one, the lighting of these Menorah was a prayer to God to send back the light of his Shekinah glory to overshadow them again as was prophesied in Ezekiel 43, 1-6 which sees the glory of God come back to the temple; of Zechariah 2, 5 where God promises; “I myself will be a wall of fire around Jerusalem”and Isaiah 60, 1-3 “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”

7d) The leading religious men like the sadduccees and the priests would sing psalms of joy and praise and would dance before the Lord throughout the evening. and sang psalms of joy and praise, before the Lord.

7e) This festival was a reminder that God had promised to send His Light to a sin-darkened world. God promised to send the Messiah to renew Israel's glory, release them from bondage, and restore their joy.

7f) Imagine that you are in ancient Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles. Visualize seeing these massive menorahs giving a tremendous amount of light.

Again, Jesus comes into the Jesus in the Temple courtyard when he announced, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8, 12).

**8) The partial fulfilment of the feast of tabernacles.**

8a) the Bible actually tells us that Jesus was born around the time of the feast of tabernacles (Sept or Oct). “In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah” (Luke 1, 5).

1 Chron 24, 10 tells us that the descendants of Abijah were on the rota to serve in the temple in the 4th month of the Jewish year.

“When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant” (Luke 1, 23-24). Jesus was conceived in the 6th month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy (Luke 1, 26), and born 9 months later. So Jesus was conceived roughly in the 10th month of the Jewish year. Add 9 months to that and you come to the 7th month of the year, which was when the feast of tabernacles was celebrated.

8b) Maybe John was thinking of that when he wrote in his gospel; “The word became flesh and tabernacled amongst us” (John 1, 14 message translation).

8c) The Greek word that he used which is translated as “He dwelt among us” or “He tabernacled among us” is from the Greek root Skenoo, which means to pitch a tent or live in a tent.

**9) Our Temporary dwelling**

9a) Just like the children of Israel lived in tents as they passed through the wilderness, God passed through the wilderness of this world for a few years living in a temporary tent of flesh.

9b) One of the things that the feast of tabernacles is meant to help the Jews understand as they spend the week living in their booths is the temporary nature of this world. They put up their booths and instead of living and eating in their comfortable houses, they live in a ramshackle booth for a few days, then take the booth down again. It’s a picture of the transience of this material world.

9c) Our lives are so dominated by material possessions; money, cars, houses computers etc. Yet all these things are temporary. We are just pilgrims passing through and we can take none of those things with us. Like the booths, they will come into our lives and they will go out from them again.

9d) Yet whilst you are in your booth, you should seek to focus on the things that are eternal. You can look up through the branches and see the stars; you can be inspired to believe in a great God, and pray to him. You can grow in faith and also in love and relationships with others as you eat together in your tabernacle.

9e) Paul writes; “We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands” (2 Cor 4, 18-5, 1).

**10) God will dwell with us forever**

10a) As Christians we remember how God came and tabernacled among us for a few years in the life of Jesus, maybe even being born at the feast of tabernacles. But we also look forward to the complete fulfillment of the festival in the days after Jesus comes back.

10b) Just like the pillar of cloud and fire used to cover the Israelites in the wilderness, Rev 7, 15 says; “He who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them” (Greek “Skenoo” ). Rev. 21, 3 uses the same Greek word for tabernacle; “God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will tabernacle with them.”

10c) Both Isaiah and Habakkuk tell us; “The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” (Isaiah 11, 9 & Hab. 2, 14).

10d) And Zechariah prophesies; “Then the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord Almighty, and **to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles**. If any of the peoples of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the Lord Almighty, they will have no rain.” (Zech. 14, 16-17).