

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Studies in John's Gospel: Jesus at the Feast of Tabernacles - John 7

The family meal at Christmas is the nearest to a feast that I experience. A number of weeks beforehand, my wife will start preparations and place in the freezer those items of food which can be safely prepared in advance. A red cabbage dish, a variety of stuffings, duchesse potatoes and so on. Then there are the cakes and other tea time goodies which all help to reduce the workload for the day in question. This kind of feast is a time when the family are together and everyone seems to overeat!

The feast that is mentioned in John 7 is different to that described above. It was also different to what had originally been established by God. The Feast of Tabernacles was one of seven specific feasts, the detail of which is found in Leviticus 23. It was originally a Feast for Jehovah but had degenerated into a Feast of the Jews, see verse 2.

The Feast was intended to celebrate God's blessing on Israel at the end of harvest time. God wanted them to be an obedient people upon whom He would provide abundant harvests giving them peace and security from their enemies.

The feast now called the Jews' Feast of Tabernacles had lost its purpose. The Jews were no longer an obedient people for they had modified God's laws and commandments for their own benefit. The ruling priests and associated religious groups were intent on self-interest instead of helping the people. God had been sidelined and, as a result, they no longer enjoyed His blessing: they were a conquered people.

This is the background to the feast which should have been eight joyful days of rejoicing in God's blessing.

The chapter opens with the Lord in Galilee having left Judea where the Jews wanted to kill Him. Being in Galilee, He was near the family home and as the time for the Feast of Tabernacles drew near, his half brothers wanted Him to go with them to this feast. The Feast of Tabernacles and two other feasts were considered major feasts and attendance was mandatory.

At this feast the people were supposed to build temporary shelters and live in them for the duration of the feast. It was a reminder of their exit from Egypt and the temporary shelters of their wilderness journey. The feast also looked forward to the reign of the Messiah when the nation would dwell in safety enjoying the blessings of a fruitful world. Verse 4 would imply that His half brothers wanted a display of mighty works by the Lord although at this time they did not believe in Him, as verse 5 indicates.

The Lord would not respond to such unbelief, He was not some common showman wanting publicity and popularity. The Lord's response to them is very revealing in terms of the purpose of God. In verse 6 the Lord stated, "My time has not yet come, but your time is always ready." It was not the time of public manifestation for the Lord Jesus Christ. The public display will commence with the Lord's return to defeat Satan, rescue believing Israel and establish His thousand year reign. However, it was appropriate for His half brothers to be obedient to God's command and go to the feast.

In verse 7 the Lord states that they were safe from persecution; it was Himself that the world hated. The Lord knew what the world was like as He had exposed it as evil in its works. So the Lord gives them leave to go up to the feast, verse 8. But, it was not the right moment for Himself.

In verse 10 we see that the Lord wanted to go up to the feast in a less public way, not openly. It was right that the Lord also honoured God's commandments concerning this feast. The Lord was the true obedient One who in every aspect of His life glorified the Father.

The expression "The Jews" would refer to those who opposed the Lord Jesus. They expected the Lord to come because they knew He would honour His God, even though they rejected both God and Jesus in their hearts. Their lives were one of hypocrisy pretending to be God fearing, but in reality it was themselves they pleased. In verses 11 and 12, we find that the Jews and the people were looking for Him; would He come? The people were divided as to the Lord's intentions. Some said that Jesus was a good man but others thought of Him as a deceiver. This discussion went on secretly because the ordinary people feared the Jews.

From verse 14 the Lord makes Himself known, "Now about the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and taught." You might ask, "Why did the Lord not just go to the feast openly on day one?" I believe that it would have been inappropriate in the ways of God. As mentioned earlier there will be a time when the Lord will reign and Israel will celebrate all God's feasts. At the moment, Israel was not in a fit state and the Lord still had work to do.

The Lord's teaching then, as with God's word now, has divided people, verse 43. What the Lord taught was true and His words captivated the attention of those listening. It caused difficulty with some because He had not been through formal training in a "Rabbinical" school. The Jews had the same difficulty with Peter and John, see Acts 4:13. Verse 15 states, "The Jews marvelled, saying, 'How does this Man know letters, having never studied?'" The Lord answers their question by stating that He obtained His knowledge direct from God, His Father: "My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me", verse 16.

The Lord then challenges the people who listened and especially those who were critical of Himself. "If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority", verse 17. If there was a true desire to seek to understand God and to be obedient, then that person would recognise that what the Lord was saying came from God. The Lord was not seeking glory, prominence, power or whatever for Himself; He lived to glorify the Father. The Lord challenged each person with what He said; were His words true or not? We will see as we go through this chapter that His words were indeed true and only hard heartedness rejected what He said. In verse 18 the Lord plainly said, "He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but He who seeks the glory of the One who sent Him is true, and no unrighteousness is in Him."

In verses 19 and 20, the Lord brings into the open the intention of the religious leaders. "'Did not Moses give you the law, yet none of you keeps the law? Why do you seek to kill Me?' The people answered and said, 'You have a demon. Who is seeking to kill You?'"

The reaction of the people is either one of ignorance as to the intention of the Jewish leaders or they were denying what they knew. Either way, the Lord brought home to them the opposition to Himself and that it was contrary to the scriptures. In verse 21 the Lord refers to an act of kindness and healing which resulted in the Jews wanting to kill Him. Verse 21 may well be referring to 5:2-16. The Lord healed a man at the pool of Bethesda and as a result in verse 16 the Jews plotted to kill Him. The Lord was not imagining this threat and He was certainly not possessed by a demon. It was the Spirit of God who lived in the man Jesus and to say it was a demon was a very serious sin. See Matthew 12:31-32.

The Lord goes on to show that the Jews were inconsistent with their own practices by referring to circumcision, "Moses therefore gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath, so that the law of Moses should not be broken, are you angry with Me because I made a man completely well on the Sabbath? Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment", verses 22-24. If it was right to maintain the instruction given to Abraham by God and to perform the ceremony on the Sabbath, then surely it was equally right to bring healing on the Sabbath. Was not the Lord of the Sabbath with them? Do not judge according to appearance but judge righteously. How easy it is to judge on appearance because it does not fit with our own preconceived ideas. What a challenge to all believers, to judge righteously! This is right up to date Christian teaching. How much heartache would have been avoided if this scripture was a guiding standard for life!

Verses 25-27 refer to people who lived in Jerusalem. They were well aware of the intention of the Jews to apprehend and kill the Lord Jesus. What surprised them was the fact that Jesus was openly teaching. The people began to wonder if the rulers now thought that Jesus was the Christ. From verse 27 we see that those from Jerusalem did not believe He could be the Christ because He was from Nazareth. The Lord had fully represented God the Father and taught the people that His real origin was heaven. This, of course, only infuriated the Jews, moving them to seek a way by which they could arrest Him, verse 30. But, the Lord could not be apprehended until the right moment came.

As a result of the Lord's teaching some of the people believed in Him. This stirs the Pharisees and the chief priests into action and they send soldiers to arrest Him. At this point the Lord speaks about going away. The Lord is referring to His arrest, crucifixion and eventual ascension. But the people misunderstand, thinking that He intends to leave the country!

As we reach the last day of the feast the Lord Jesus makes a final appeal to the people, "On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified", verses 37-39. This appeal is reminiscent of the Lord's conversation with the Samaritan woman in chapter 4. The Lord directs people to Himself as the only one who can give living water. The Lord was referring to what would

happen on the day of Pentecost. Pentecost is now past; believers now receive the Spirit of God immediately they accept the Lord Jesus as Saviour and Lord, see Ephesians 1:13.

Verses 40-43 show the impact that the words of Jesus had on the people. "Therefore many from the crowd, when they heard this saying, said, 'Truly this is the Prophet.'" Others said, "This is the Christ," but some said, "Will the Christ come out of Galilee? Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the seed of David and from the town of Bethlehem, where David was?" So there was a division among the people because of Him."

These verses can be applied to every generation since that day in Jerusalem. Is Jesus just a good man? "Truly this is the Prophet." In this phrase, the people had recognised that Jesus is different and may be special, even "The Prophet" who was foretold in Scripture. "The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear", Deuteronomy 18:15, and "I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him", Deuteronomy 18:18. How fully the scriptures are fulfilled by the Lord Jesus. Look back at verse 16, "My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me." Yes, there are many in the world who say He was a good man, someone distinct but they get no nearer to the Son who can give eternal life.

There were others who saw in the Lord Jesus much more than just a special person. They saw the promised Messiah, the Christ of God. If there is to be an impact on, and in, our lives then we must get to the real Jesus. He must change us to become followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving our lives completely to Him. We must respond like Saul of Tarsus at his conversion, "What shall I do, Lord?" Acts 22:10.

The third group of people had not been affected at all and said that He did not come in accordance with the words of the prophets. The Christ would be a descendant of king David and He would be born in Bethlehem. So we look at the Gospels by Matthew and Luke and see how these particular requirements were fulfilled. Both Joseph and Mary were descendants from David. Jesus was born in Bethlehem because of the demands of a Roman Emperor. This group of people were very much mistaken.

Verse 43 states, "So there was a division among the people because of Him." Are you, dear listener, unsure about Jesus? Look at the early followers of Jesus: Peter, a fisherman, an ordinary working man; Matthew, a tax man or civil servant; Simon the Zealot, a nationalist or possibly a terrorist? These are just a few of the people who followed Jesus. It is just the same today, people from all walks of life have come to see in Jesus that He is what the Bible states: the Saviour, the Son of God. Jesus, who raised no army and yet has the greatest following of all. Never wrote a book and yet it was said in the first century, "There are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written", John 21:25. Also in John's Gospel 20:31, "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name."

In verse 32 we are told that soldiers were sent to arrest the Lord Jesus. In verse 45 they return empty handed and the Pharisees and chief priests demand an explanation. There had been no fight or popular uprising to protect Jesus. When the soldiers arrived at where He was speaking, they became captivated by His words. They stopped and they listened. They heard things which changed them. They left Jesus alone and returned. This was the impact of the words of Jesus the Son of God. The rage of the Pharisees comes out, "Are you also deceived? Have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed in Him? But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed", verses 47-49.

It never entered the minds of the Pharisees that they could possibly be wrong. The soldiers are accused of being deceived. Is it not amazing how some people are able to read the minds of others? The Pharisees are really saying that the soldiers had not the capacity to listen, understand and make up their own minds. Soldiers, after all, are not real thinking people; they just do as they are told. Sadly many people are still treated in the same way.

The Pharisees then made a bold statement on behalf of all Pharisees in the Jewish council. None of us have believed and therefore, by implication, what we say must be right. Finally, the Pharisees who should have cared for the ordinary people poured hatred and scorn on them. The people are described as being ignorant of the law and that they are accursed, fit only for destruction and banishment from God. The Pharisees were only interested in themselves.

Unknown to the Pharisees, there was at least one in their company who had believed in the Lord Jesus. Verses 50-51 state, "Nicodemus (he who came to Jesus by night, being one of them) said to them, 'Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is doing?'" Nicodemus raises a point of order: that no one should be condemned before they have opportunity to give their defence. This does not defuse the situation.

The Pharisees raise the issue of Galilee with Nicodemus, verses 52-53, "They answered and said to him, 'Are you also from Galilee? Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee.'" And everyone went to his own house".

First they ask Nicodemus if he was from Galilee, as that part of the country was despised and no self respecting Jew would want to admit to coming from there. And then they state, "You don't get prophets coming from there". These very knowledgeable men had forgotten that Jonah came from Gath Hepher (2 Kings 14:25), a town north of Nazareth, well into Galilee! But Jonah was not a popular prophet as he had saved the inhabitants of Nineveh, enemies of Israel. With these parting accusations they leave and go home.

The Pharisees had turned this Feast into a farce. Instead of attempting to be right with their God, they were plotting murder. Everyone was wrong except themselves. Yet in the middle of the intrigue, the Lord Jesus continues His appeal to the people as to where He was from, not despised Galilee but the Son of God from heaven.

The message of the Son of God still goes out today and the question is still being asked, "Who do you say that I am?" What is your response?

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