

Amos 5 and the Feast of Tabernacles

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Deuteronomy 14:23 states regarding the Feast of Tabernacles, "And you shall eat before the Lord your God, in the place where He chooses to make His name abide, the tithe of your grain and your new wine and your oil, of the firstborn of your herds and your flocks, that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always." Deuteronomy 16:15 adds, "Seven days you shall keep a sacred feast to the Lord your God in the place which the Lord chooses, because the Lord your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you surely rejoice."

The feasts of God are events that we look forward to with a great deal of positive anticipation. And well we should because they are enjoyable physically and can be tremendously spiritually rewarding. However, experience has shown that, due to spiritual immaturity, there can be a kind of enjoyable dark side to Tabernacles, since it can easily be perceived as a vacation or a "godly" substitute for Christmas.

On the other side of the emotional ledger, there is also a share of trouble preparing for and traveling to them. Tabernacles, especially, can be wearying, and people have sometimes even become quite sick from the stress and consequently had a miserable time. On occasion, the Feast can even be a matrix for motivating family problems.

Overall, though, most of the time we enjoy God's feasts immensely, cherishing the memories we have of the activities, the fine meals, the nice locations, and the time we spent with our spiritual and physical families—things we do not always have either the time or money to do at home.

Yet, we have to be somewhat cautious of this because we can enjoy doing similar kinds of things apart from the Feast—in fact, such experiences apart from the Feast happen frequently. The inherent danger is that, though God wants us to rejoice in keeping His Feast, it is easy to think that, because the Feast is indeed enjoyable, we had a "good" Feast.

Judgment of things like this is highly variable from one person to the next. People can attend the same site, hear the same messages, take part in the same activities, and all have a quite different evaluation of the quality of the Feast. We have all experienced this.

I can look back on one particularly bad Feast—it was not disastrous because no particular "bad" thing occurred—but in my evaluation, the 1974 festival I attended in St. Petersburg, Florida, was an all-time low. The site was not the problem, nor did anybody I attended with give any trouble. It was bad because I did little or nothing positive to make it a great Feast. I was just there soaking up the good times.

These two verses in Deuteronomy seem to be the ones we turn to most frequently when we refer to the Feast of Tabernacles. However, they primarily emphasize the potential for the enjoyable physical aspects. True, it does say we are to go to learn to fear God, but other scriptures focus more strongly on the spiritual aspects of the Feast, and they are considerable. Though little specific detail is given, there is enough to know that God expects the Feast of Tabernacles to be the year's *spiritual* high-water-mark.

A Spiritual Bonanza

Leviticus 23:35-37 instructs regarding the Feast of Tabernacles:

On the first day there shall be a holy convocation. You shall do no customary work on it. For seven days you shall offer an offering made by fire to the Lord. On the eighth day you shall have a holy convocation, and you shall offer an offering made by fire to the Lord. It is a sacred assembly, and you shall do no customary work on it. These are the feasts of the Lord which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations, to offer an offering made by fire to the Lord, a burnt offering and a grain offering, a sacrifice and drink offerings, everything on its day. . . .

The holy days and their offerings are shadows of good things to come (Hebrews 10:1). The offerings especially are indicative of many aspects of Christ's conduct and attitudes while serving God. We are to imitate Him (I John 2:6). Understood correctly, they represent the spiritual manner in which we are to observe these days.

Numbers 28:16—29:40 lists all the offerings to be made at the feasts. One can quickly see that more offerings were required for the Feast of Tabernacles than all other festivals combined. This ought to indicate what God expects regarding our conduct during the Feast of Tabernacles. He requires that we offer ourselves as living sacrifices so that it be most fruitful spiritually. It should be both a spiritual and physical feast whose fruit is rejoicing and learning to fear God as a result of the sacrifices done with understanding and a good attitude. This cannot be forced. It is the fruit of a right approach and use.

Nehemiah 8 records a significant festival period in Judah's history. This occasion begins on the Feast of Trumpets during the rebuilding of Jerusalem's wall following the reestablishment of those Jews who chose to return from their Babylonian captivity. They had good cause for their emotional response to keeping this Feast of Trumpets in this particular location and time under the stresses they had already endured, all the while knowing that those stresses were not yet over. This was in all likelihood the first Feast of Trumpets observed in seventy years, and who knows how long the Jews had not observed it before they went into captivity?

Their joy continued, as verses 13-18 relate the first keeping of the Feast of Tabernacles in the land in a long time:

Now on the second day the heads of the fathers' houses of all the people, with the priests and Levites, were gathered to Ezra the scribe, in order to understand the words of the Law. And they found written in the Law, which the Lord had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, and that they should announce and proclaim in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, "Go out to the mountain, and bring olive branches, branches of oil trees, myrtle branches, palm branches, and branches of leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written." Then the people went out and brought them and made themselves booths, each one on the roof of his house, or in their courtyards, or the courts of the house of God, and in the open square of the Water Gate and in the open square of the Gate of Ephraim. So the whole congregation of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and sat under the booths; for since the days of Joshua the son of Nun until that day the children of Israel had not done so. And there was very great gladness. Also day by day, from the first day until the last day,

he read from the Book of the Law of God. And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day there was a sacred assembly, according to the prescribed manner.

"Not since the days of Joshua the son of Nun had the children of Israel done so" probably means the Feast of Tabernacles had not been kept with the combination of all the elements in their right proportion to constitute a great Feast. They were obedient, in the right place, in the right attitude, with the right emphasis. The books of Kings and Chronicles provide records of the feasts being kept by Israelites during the period between Joshua and Ezra, but they did not always keep them consistently or correctly, especially in attitude and purpose.

However, we can see that Ezra understood the Feast of Tabernacles to be a spiritual bonanza whose fruit was rejoicing.

"Your Feast Days"

Isaiah 1:10-17 chronicles the time before Ezra and Nehemiah when Judah observed the feasts, yet in a wrong spirit and with reprehensible conduct. Isaiah preached this to the Jews about one hundred years before they went into captivity to Babylon:

Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom; give ear to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah: "To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?" says the Lord. "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed cattle. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs or goats. When you come to appear before Me, who has required this from your hand, to trample My courts? Bring no more futile sacrifices; incense is an abomination to Me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting. Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; they are a trouble to Me. I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow."

This is a clear indictment of their spirit and attitude, advancing strong proof of why God later said through Ezekiel that Israel and Judah went into captivity because of idolatry and Sabbath-breaking (Ezekiel 20:12-21).

There is no reason to believe that, just because God says "your" new moons and "your" feasts, they were not the ones He appointed, at least in name. He could rightly call them "your feasts" because their keeping of them was so abominable that they bore no resemblance to His intent in commanding them to be observed. They were completely discordant with His character, as the listing of their sins shows.

He calls their giving of offerings, which were part of the spiritual aspects of keeping the feasts, vain and trampling His courts. He designates their prayers as an abomination, and their keeping of the feasts wearying to Him. Clearly, He had "had it up to here" with their Sabbath and festival observances. Have we examined our conduct recently in relation to our attitudes, approaches, and expectations for the Feast?

Until his calling by God, Amos lived and worked in Judah. However, God elected him—apparently a Jew and thus from the rival Southern Kingdom—to bear His challenging indictment against the Northern Kingdom's sins, as well as His call for Israel's repentance. Amos prophesied several decades before Isaiah against a nation that was much farther "down the tubes" than was Judah. Israel was very prosperous but already in the moral gutter, wallowing in the filth of her sins. It could easily have been an intimidating assignment, but Amos resolutely fulfilled his responsibilities in denouncing, among other things, Israelite attitudes and the ways they observed God's festivals.

God says in Amos 5:21-23:

I hate, I despise your feast days, and I do not savor your sacred assemblies. Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them, nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings. Take away from Me the noise of your songs, for I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments.

This sounds similar to Isaiah 1, but it is addressed to Israel. It is not certain if this involved God's feast days since Jeroboam, Israel's first king, changed a number of things in Israel's worship after Solomon died. However, the context indicates that God may have accepted the days they kept and their offerings if everything else in their conduct had been righteous. They may well have been God's feasts because, as in Isaiah, God is not against the days per se, but the attitude, character, and conduct of those keeping them. Whether they were actually God's festivals is less important

than the principles contained in the context. The entire chapter revolves around keeping the festivals in a way acceptable to God so that He might bless.

This is an interesting and instructive chapter regarding what God expects the keeping of feast days to do to and for His people. We will search it out in great detail in the hope that it will help us keep the feasts better.

Hear this word which I take up against you, this lamentation, O house of Israel: The virgin of Israel has fallen; she will rise no more. She lies forsaken on her land; there is no one to raise her up. For thus says the Lord God: "The city that goes out by a thousand shall have a hundred left, and that which goes out by a hundred shall have ten left to the house of Israel." (Amos 5:1-3)

The chapter begins as a funeral dirge, a lament, for Israel that is in reality a prophecy of what would soon happen to her. It is sung as though it had already happened even though its fulfillment—Israel's fall and captivity to Assyria—was still about forty years off. Clearly, Israel's conduct falls far short of God's requirements.

Central to understanding verses 4-15 is the word "seek," which appears four times: three times in relation to seeking God Himself and once to seeking good. The charge to seek God is not in the sense of searching to find Him—because He had already revealed Himself to them to some degree—but of seeking to be like Him.

A second important element is the listing of a number of their sins, all of which are what we would call "social sins." Amos mentions the "poor" twice, but he does not necessarily imply a person with little money. The term includes them, but here the meaning is "weak." The poor are those whom we would say have little or no economic, political, or judicial "clout" or "pull." The sins Amos addresses are matters of the strong taking advantage of the weak.

He also mentions other sins that afflict the poor, such as bribery, unjust judgments in the courts, truth being ridiculed, and righteous testimony being thrown out. Amos especially indicts Israel's corrupt court system.

Undoubtedly, the most important element in this passage, due to its impact on most of the instruction in the chapter, is the mention of Bethel, Beersheba, and Gilgal in verse 5. Amos notes these places because the Israelites were holding their festivals

there. His overall warning to the Israelites is, "Don't go there because God is not there. Seek God instead." The rest of the chapter tells why God is not there, why what they were doing is unacceptable to Him, and what He will do about it.

Bethel

Why does Amos specifically mention Bethel other than that it was where the Israelites were holding feasts? Why did they choose Bethel as a feast site? Bethel played an important role in Israel's history. Twice Jacob, one of the fathers of Israel, has important events happen to him there.

Genesis 28:11-22 records the first occasion Jacob has an encounter with God at Bethel, though it was not called Bethel then. It received its name—"House of God"—from God revealing Himself to Jacob there, and Jacob believing that He lived there. On this occasion, the patriarch arrives as a homeless wanderer, a man on the run from the murderous intents of his brother Esau. He is a man with a past, having just deceived his father and brother out of the blessing. Nevertheless, God reveals Himself to him there, and the transformation of Jacob begins. He leaves Bethel as a man with a future.

The second time he encounters God at Bethel (Genesis 35:1-4, 7, 9-15), he arrives after departing from his father-in-law, Laban, and having reconciled with Esau. He is a far better man than the first time, but he is not yet complete. However, he arrives as "Jacob" and departs as "Israel." The new name is assurance of the reality that he is a new man, that a transformation is taking place. In the Israelite mind, Bethel thus became associated as a place of renewal, of reorientation, of transformation by God.

Even as verses 1-3 of Amos 5 are a dirge, verses 8-9 are in the form of a hymn praising the true God, the transforming God. When God is at work, things change for the better; He is the God who makes a difference.

With this background, we can understand why Amos 5 calls attention to Bethel. God is asking, "Why aren't you Israelites being transformed in the conduct of your life when you keep the feasts?" He is saying, "You indeed go to Bethel for the feast, but no transformation of your conduct and attitude occurs. Are you going there to seek Me?"

One of the primary proofs that God is making a difference in a person's life occurs when one who was formerly hostile to God and His law begins to love God and His law. He shows his new love by obeying God and His law in his life in areas like those mentioned in verses 10-12.

Yet, the Israelites attended the feasts in Bethel and returned home with their lives still ungoverned by God's truth. When Jacob met God, his life began changing immediately, as his vow to tithe in Genesis 28:22 shows. Faith immediately became part of the conduct of his life. The lives of those in Amos' day should also have changed according to the dictates, principles, and examples of God's Word. They should have left Bethel singing and exemplifying, "Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day" (Psalms 119:97).

It seems that these people turned the feast in Bethel into nothing more than a vacation. Thus, Amos admonishes, "Do not seek Bethel! Seek the Lord and live!" Ultimately, the Bethel approach signifies death, not life.

Beersheba

What about Beersheba? It played a role in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Though the event for each was a little different, something was said to each that is significant to our lives, especially in light of the Holy Spirit.

Abraham's incident at Beersheba is written in Genesis 21:22-24:

And it came to pass at that time that Abimelech and Phichol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham, saying, "God is with you in all that you do. Now therefore swear to me by God that you will not deal falsely with me, with my offspring, or with my posterity; but that according to the kindness that I have done to you, you will do to me and to the land in which you have sojourned." And Abraham said, "I will swear."

In this event, Abimelech utters the words that become central to what Beersheba came to represent to the Israelites: "God is with you in all that you do." A pagan king observed Abraham's life as one that reflected godliness.

In Isaac's incident at Beersheba, recorded in Genesis 26:23-24, God Himself utters the assurance necessary for Isaac to trust Him: "Then He went up from there to Beersheba. And the Lord appeared to him the same night and said, 'I am the God of your father Abraham; do not fear, for I am with you. I will bless you and multiply your descendants for My servant Abraham's sake.'" Like Isaac, we need assurance, we need to believe, that God is with us.

In Jacob's case, he is on his way to Egypt to meet with Joseph, filled with a stressful mixture of joy and fear, when the event of Genesis 46:1-4 occurs:

So Israel took his journey with all that he had, and came to Beersheba, and offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. Then God spoke to Israel in the visions of the night, and said, "Jacob, Jacob!" And he said, "Here I am." And He said, "I am God, the God of your father; do not fear to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there. I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also surely bring you up again; and Joseph will put his hand on your eyes."

Thus, at Beersheba, each of the three patriarchs receives assurance of the companionship of God. What might have been the reaction of the Israelites when Amos said, "Don't pass over to Beersheba"?

It is a pastor's responsibility, not only to help to build peoples' trust in God, but also from time to time to sow doubt about their condition or standing before God. This is necessary because we often assume that all is well in our relationship with God. Amos filled not only the role of prophet but also of pastor of these wayward people, who were falsely confident in their standing with God.

Seek a Means of Life

An analysis of Paul's writings shows that his tactics at meeting church problems varied. At times, he energetically battered the opposition's position, and at others, he merely asked questions accompanied by some well-placed, incisive, solid, logical reasoning. In Amos 5:5, the prophet uses some strong imperatives, then turns to a recitation of matters the Israelites would have immediately recognized as accurate, even though they might not have accepted the truth of his statements.

Could these people have assumed—because of the general prosperity in Israel—that God was with them in all they did, despite all the evidence of their sinfulness Amos observed during their festival in Beersheba? Were they blind to the fact that prosperity is no guarantee that one is righteous before God?

The essence of the "God is with you" promise is that all is well and peace exists between God and a person; there is no barrier or constraint between them, and harmony reigns. Thus, the two can walk together because they have an understanding (Amos 3:3)—in fact, they may even have a covenant.

Amos had many reasons to believe that their assumption that God was with them was on shaky ground. First, in Amos 5:6, he briefly warns them of the fire of God's judgment, an allusion to the Day of the Lord, soon to fall upon them. He knows they are not seeking God to walk in His steps, so he proceeds to list a number of their sins. Finally, in verses 18-20, he shows them that they had no fear of the consequences of their way of life.

They truly assumed that everything was okay between them and God despite the sorry record of their sins that Amos laid before them! They completely ignored the fact that they, in reality, lived their lives apart from God. They really did not know the God they claimed to be walking with!

Consider the seriousness of verses 14-16:

Seek good and not evil, that you may live; so the Lord God of hosts will be with you, as you have spoken. Hate evil, love good; establish justice in the gate. It may be that the Lord God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. Therefore the Lord God of hosts, the Lord, says this. . . .

Nowhere else in the Bible do three successive verses feature the awesome name, "the Lord God of hosts," underscoring His leading the armies of heaven! Amos is making a very strong point by drawing their attention to the sovereign, omnipotent God of Armies, who is so far above us He is out of sight. These complacent people might choose to believe they were walking with Him, but it begs the question, did this great God want to walk with them as they were?

Adam would have happily remained in the Garden, provided he could hide, but God knew He could not allow such a condition to continue. What good would it do Adam? The Israelites' complacency had been telling them that, when the Day of the Lord arrived, God would side with His people, making it a day of great glory for them. Instead, Amos informs them that it would be just the opposite! It is a time of wailing and disaster (verses 16-17). They had been feeding themselves on false hopes. God says, "I will pass through you"!

In saying, "Seek good and not evil, that you may live; so the Lord God of hosts will be with you, as you have spoken" (verse 14), Amos admonishes them to seek holiness. He is urging them to see that it is not just a way or rule of life, but a *means* of life. Hebrews 12:14 confirms its importance, ". . . without holiness no one will see the Lord." When the people of God follow the way that accords with God's will, they come into possession of life. We must never presume God's grace or take it for granted. We must always fervently seek and submit to the will of God in order to be in His Kingdom.

Gilgal

Finally, what is Gilgal's significance in Israel's spiritual history? Israel's first experience at Gilgal occurs when the people cross into the Promised Land under Joshua: "Now the people came up from the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they camped in Gilgal on the east border of Jericho" (Joshua 4:19). In Gilgal, they set up the twelve stones taken from the Jordan as a memorial of their crossing (verse 20-24).

Joshua 5:1-12 records that it was in Gilgal that all the Israelite males who had been born during the forty years in the wilderness were circumcised, thus entering into the Old Covenant—in effect, becoming God's nation in the land. Verse 10 shows that they kept the first Passover in the Promised Land in Gilgal, and in verse 12, where they first ate the fruit of the land.

Chapters 9, 10, and 14 show that Joshua launched his military attacks from Gilgal against the people of the land to secure it for Israelite inhabitation. I Samuel 11:14-15 records that Saul was confirmed as Israel's first king in Gilgal. All this early history of Israel's occupation of Canaan made Gilgal a shrine to the Israelites' inheritance and possession of the land.

However, Amos again hits the people with a precisely aimed lightning bolt by saying, "Gilgal shall surely go into captivity [exile]" (Amos 5:5). He then fastens that thought more firmly in their minds by making it personal: "'Therefore I will send you into captivity beyond Damascus,' says the Lord, whose name is the God of hosts" (verse 27). In other words, even though they observed a festival in the shrine that commemorated possession of the Promised Land, those prosperous, lukewarm people listening to him would lose the land and be taken into captivity.

From this knowledge, we can begin to understand the attitude that Amos confronted. Generally, complacency or apathy was the problem, but specifically, it was much narrower.

With the Bethel illustration, Amos points out that they were mistaken in believing that God was in this place, and therefore their hope for life was a hollow one. They were assuming that simply because they were there, it would work in their favor.

The Beersheba illustration makes them face the fact that they were assuming God was with them. Their pride was almost boundless. They should have been asking whether God was pleased to walk with them.

The Gilgal illustration deals with their assumption that, because they were not only in the Promised Land but in full possession of it, everything was thus well with them.

Amos 5 highlights three critical assumptions, all of which are factors in a doctrine evangelical Christians term "eternal security." The context of the chapter shows a wealth of religious activity (verses 21-26). Amos mentions religious festivals, animal sacrifices, and music they believed to be glorifying to God, all indicating worship services of some kind. They went in for religion in a big way! Undoubtedly, they were wholehearted about it, so it was probably emotionally satisfying to them. But what good is worship if it does not get through to God? This is what Amos reveals to them. All of their enthusiasm was for naught because their daily lives did not match God's standards.

We are assured of making it into God's Kingdom on the strength of His ability to prepare us. So what is the problem? Verse 24 gives us some insight: "But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

The first phrase can just as easily read, "Let justice [or, *judgment*] roll down." There is a clever play on a word here, as *Gilgal* means "the rolling." The people attended the festivals in Gilgal, but before their arrival and after they returned home, justice and righteousness failed to roll down—we might say "trickle down"—into their everyday life. Things went on as before. They had fun at the feast all right, but nothing changed spiritually.

Justice is the fruit of righteousness. When linked as they are in this verse, *justice* stands for correct moral practice in daily life, and *righteousness* for the cultivation of correct moral principles. Justice is external, righteousness is internal. The trouble with Gilgal was that the people allowed their human nature to keep their religion in a box with no way for it to influence daily life.

Our Priorities Are Spiritual

Together, these three illustrations show that our relationship with God is not a game. Each of His festivals has a serious purpose in keeping us oriented toward the completion of His purpose for us as individuals, for His church, for Israel, and in due time, for the whole world. Presently, attention is focused on the church and our part in its life. The church exists to serve Him in witnessing the gospel to the world by our lives, as well as by preaching. We cannot witness well without preparation, and the festivals play an important role in this.

Let us all make sure that at this year's Feast of Tabernacles we give spiritual matters first priority in our minds, and let rejoicing be its fruit. The Feast is not a vacation, not a gospel concert, not a social tea party, not a substitute for a Christmas shopping binge. Even though it may have elements of these, we should not let them dominate. Make this Feast a springboard for significant, positive change!