

# "TABERNACLES TOMMOROW"

by  
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## Chapter 17

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The ancient prophets speak about Israel's distant future in great detail: there are prophecies that predict her repentance, redemption, and rejoicing in the coming of her messianic King. But the feasts of the Hebrew calendar are not mentioned--none, that is, except the Passover and Tabernacles (Ezekiel 45:21-25). The prophet Zechariah also writes of the celebration of Sukkot in the future. The Lord deems this feast so important that the Gentiles are commanded to observe it as well. The prophet states: "Then it will come about that any who are left of all the nations that went against Jerusalem will go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to celebrate the Feast of Booths" (Zechariah 14:16).

The prophet Zechariah wrote of a future day when all the nations of the earth, not only the Jewish people, will be called upon to celebrate the feast of Tabernacles. This command might seem mysterious at first glance, but when viewed in light of Israel's calling and mission, the place accorded Tabernacles is appropriate.

### THE CALLING AND MISSION OF ISRAEL

The future observance of Sukkot by the nations of the world rests upon Israel's election and mission. The universal concern of God's plan for the Jewish people reaches back to His covenant with Abraham. In that agreement God promised, "And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you *all the families of the earth shall be blessed*" (Genesis 12:3, italics added). From Abraham's loins, God would raise up a people, Israel, to be a blessing to the nations. Israel's election must always be linked with her mission to the Gentiles. Israel was chosen to be God's vehicle of blessing to the world.

Moses wrote regarding the choosing of Israel:

For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples.  
(Deuteronomy 7:6-7)

God's choice of Israel was not based upon Abraham's merit or their own. God chose Israel because He *decided* to love that nation. "The Lord loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the Lord brought you out by a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 7:8).

God's love was an electing love. He chose one people as His means to bless all mankind. For some sovereign reason unknown to us, God chose to love the Jewish people and through this nation to express His love for the world.

God's loving choice of Israel does not effect the salvation of individual Jewish people. Rather, God chose a people for service--service that was directed toward the rest of the world. So although God limited His line of promise by choosing one nation above the others, His redemptive plan was intended for the entire world.

#### WITNESSES OF THE ONE TRUE GOD

The prophet Isaiah wrote that the role of the nation of Israel was to be a witness for God: " 'You are My witnesses,' declares the Lord, 'and My servant whom I have chosen, in order that you may know and believe Me, and understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me' " (Isaiah 43:10; cf. 43:12; 44:8).

In this verse, the prophet set the scene of a cosmic law court, where God is the judge and the nations of the world stand trial for their idolatry. Israel is the star witness for the prosecution. They were chosen to hold aloft a testimony of the uniqueness of their God. The Lord, speaking through Isaiah, says, "I, even I, am the Lord; and there is no savior besides Me" (Isaiah 43:11). What was Israel's mission? To proclaim to the world that the God of Israel is the only true God and there is no other Savior but He.

#### MISSIONARY PRIESTS

Israel was to be more than a witness to the nations; they were also to be an intercessor on the nations' behalf. They were commissioned for this holy responsibility at Mount Sinai. God said to Moses,

You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.  
(Exodus 19:4-6)

Once again God expressed His concern for the world when He declared, "All the earth is Mine." He chose Israel from among all the peoples of the earth for an eternal purpose--that they might be His vehicle to restore and reclaim a rebellious world. Israel was not chosen for their own sake, but for the sake of the nations. God describes their unique position as "a kingdom of priests." Their role was to intercede with a holy God for a sinful world.

In the passage above, God called the people by an endearing term, *segullah*, translated "possession," but perhaps better translated as "special treasure." Although Israel was to be God's treasure and possession, they must never forget that the entire world belonged to the Lord and was the subject of His concern.

## ISRAEL'S FAILURE

Israel failed in their mission to reach the world. Not only were they disobedient to the commandments of God, but they did not extend themselves in missionary activity. And yet, the God of all grace did not renege on His choice. He would still use the nation of Israel to bless the world.

Israel did not fulfill their mission, but God completed the task Himself. He sent His Son Jesus to live perfectly under the law, to be a light to the nations and to intercede once for all on behalf of Jews and Gentiles. The faithlessness of man can never thwart the faithfulness of God. The Gentiles most assuredly would share in the salvation brought by the Divine Seed of Abraham. Paul wrote:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us--for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"--in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (Galatians 3:13-14)

It is tempting for some to think that Israel's role in world redemption is finished. But that is not true. For although Israel failed in their mission, they remain chosen (Romans 11:25-29) and still have a role to play in the future. The apostle Paul declared: "Now if their transgression be riches for the world and their failure be riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!" (Romans 11:12). And again he wrote, "For if their rejection be the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?" (Romans 11:15).

The apostle spoke of a future time when Israel will once again don the mantle of obligation and fulfill their role as a missionary nation. In some remarkable way the nation of Israel will again be used by God to bring the message of the Messiah to the nations; for Israel will be central to His kingdom ministry.

Isaiah spoke of a day when Jerusalem would be restored, both physically and spiritually:

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not keep quiet, until her righteousness goes forth like brightness, and her salvation like a torch that is burning. And the nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; and you will be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord will designate. You will also be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. (Isaiah 62:1-3)

In that day, Israel will not be the tail, but the head of the nations (Deuteronomy 28:13). Jerusalem will be the spiritual focal point of the world because the King of Jerusalem, the Prince of Peace, will reign in His chosen city. Isaiah wrote of that joyful occasion: "Break forth, shout joyfully together, you waste places of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted His people, He has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared His holy arm in the sight of all the nations, that all the ends of the earth may see the salvation of our God" (Isaiah 52:9-10).

The day is coming when a restored and renewed Israel will once again become a light to the nations, for the destiny of Israel is linked to the destiny of the world. Their testimony will be

glorious and true because the One who is all-glorious in truth will sit upon His throne. In that day, the Jewish people will be "life from the dead" for the nations of the earth.

#### UNIVERSAL THEMES IN THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES

God's concern for the Gentiles is most evident in the Talmudic writings regarding Sukkot. In Jewish sources, Israel's role in world redemption is a major theme of the feast of Tabernacles. This is reiterated in the midrash on Psalm 109:4: "At the festival of Tabernacles we offer up seventy bullocks (as an atonement) for the seventy nations, and we pray that rain will come down for them."<sup>1</sup>

Israel is considered a nation of intercessors for the sins of the Gentiles. That universal theme is also recounted in the later and more mystical literature of the Kaballah and the Zohar.

#### ZECHARIAH 14

The traditional Bible reading on the second day of Sukkot is taken from the fourteenth chapter of the book of Zechariah. An additional portion read on Sukkot speaks about the war of Gog and Magog (Ezekiel 38:14-39:16). This seems incongruous--what thematic relationship does this Scripture portion have to the feast of Booths? Although it may not be evident to the casual reader, the common thread uniting these two passages is God's universal concern for the redemption of the nations. In Zechariah 14, the judgment against rebellious nations will be that God withholds life-giving rains. The judgment in Ezekiel 38 upon hostile nations will also be rain--judgment rain of "hailstones, fire, and brimstone" (v. 22). The Lord declared, "I shall magnify Myself, sanctify Myself, and make Myself known in the sight of many nations; and they will know that I am the Lord" (v. 23). Whether in blessing or in judgment, God intends to show the nations that He is the Lord.

#### THE MEANING OF THE PROPHECY

The prophet Zechariah spoke of the end of days, when Israel and the nations will celebrate the feast of Tabernacles. In that day, Israel will be redeemed and her enemies destroyed.

The day of restoration will take place after the "time of Jacob's distress" (Jeremiah 30:7), or, in the New Testament, the Great Tribulation (Matthew 24:21). The prophet wrote of Israel's indescribable agony during this terrible period:

"And it will come about in all the land," declares the Lord, "that two parts in it will be cut off and perish; but the third will be left in it. And I will bring the third part through the fire, refine them as silver is refined, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on My name, and I will answer them; I will say, 'They are My people,' and they will say, 'The Lord is my God.' " (Zechariah 13:8-9)

From the midst of this great tribulation, the Jewish people will cry out to God; and in His great

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<sup>1</sup> Goodman, p. 43.

mercy, the Lord will send His Messiah, Jesus, to deliver them from destruction (Zechariah 12:10). Israel will be restored, both spiritually and nationally. Her enemies will be crushed, and the Messiah will reign, not over Israel alone but over *all* the nations of the earth: "The Lord will be king over all the earth; in that day the Lord will be the only one, and His name the only one" (Zechariah 14:9).

God's plan for the heathen is not to destroy them but to bring them into subjection at His feet. He will command the faithful among the Gentiles to come to Jerusalem and celebrate the feast of Booths (Zechariah 14:16). Why did God choose Sukkot, and not one of the other major festivals, as the test of obedience for the Gentiles?

Some scholars believe that Sukkot, as the feast of Ingathering, is the most appropriate time for God to gather the human fruit for His kingdom.<sup>2</sup> Others believe that the heathen, who have been brought out of the wanderings of this life into the blessedness of God's kingdom, celebrate the feast of Thanksgiving out of their overflowing gratefulness to the God who redeemed them.<sup>3</sup>

Most important, though, Zechariah describes the conversion of the nations to the one true God. In every age, God gives His people obligations. The feast of Tabernacles must be viewed as one of the kingdom obligations of the Gentiles. It is their opportunity to worship God as well as His test point for their obedience. The prophet warned the recalcitrant and disobedient nations that there would be stinging judgment for any who would not keep the feast. The judgment, in keeping with the theme of the feast of Ingathering, calls for God to withhold rain. If the nations were not willing to worship God in Jerusalem, He would withhold the provision of food as well as His blessings.

We would be remiss not to mention the ultimate and eternal significance of the feast of Tabernacles. The apostle John wrote:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them, and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." (Revelation 21:3-4)

Ultimately, the whole earth will become the sukkah booth of God, and He will reign in the presence of His Son for all eternity. This reminds us of Solomon's prayer, where he understood clearly God's intention to fill His redeemed earth with His very presence. Doesn't this give a whole new perspective to why Tabernacles is called the season of our joy? What greater joy can there be than to be in the presence of God forever?

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Lee Feinberg, *God Remembers: A Study of the Book of Zechariah* (New York: American Board of Missions to the Jews, 1965), p. 261.

<sup>3</sup> Keil and Delitzsch, vol. 6, p. 1499.