

Christian Holidays #16

by: Ronald L. Dart

It seems to me that we of the Christian faith have lost touch with our roots in some very important ways. We are so comfortable in the modern world, so at home, and so in touch that some of our old hymns really don't mean that much to us any longer. Do you remember for example, the hymn "I'm bound for the promised land." It says "On Jordan's stormy banks I stand, and cast a wistful eye, to Canaan's fair and happy land, where my possessions lie. I am bound for the promised land, yes I am. I'm bound for the promised land, all who will come and go with me. I am bound for the promised land."

Shucks folks, we cast a wistful eye at the next years BMW sitting in the show room, not to Canaan's fair and happy land where our possessions lie. Our possessions are in the garage.

What do Jordan and Canaan have to do with the Christian faith?

There is another old gospel song that says "This world is not my home. I am just a passing through, if heaven is not my home, Oh Lord, what shall I do? The Angels beckon me from heavens open door, and I can't feel at home in this world anymore."

One of the most fundamental Christian beliefs is that we are not at home here. We are strangers, we are pilgrims, we look for a better world to come and like a stranger and a pilgrim in a foreign land we're not supposed to be comfortable in this world. But boy, comfort are us in this modern world.

Christianity is a faith for the hard times. It doesn't seem to flourish among wealth and easy times and easy going. You know one of the reasons the Christian faith took such firm root among black slaves was that this life in human flesh offered them so little hope.

They identified with Moses, because Moses was the great leader who led the slaves out of Egypt. "Go down Moses, way down to Egypt land, tell old Pharaoh let my people go", goes one of the great old black spirituals. They identify with Jesus too, some said "Poor little Jesus boy, lay you in a manger, poor little holy Child, they didn't know who you was."

These black spirituals also identified with Jordan and Canaan as well. As the old song, "Deep River." "I long to cross over Jordan, deep river, I long to cross over in the camp ground." The Jordan River in the hymns became a symbol of passing from this life into the next life.

I remember so very well my father who sang bass in a gospel quartet had a solo number he used to do, that was titled "I won't have to cross Jordan alone." It was "When I come to the river at the ending of day when the last winds of sorrow have blown, there will be somebody waiting to show me the way, I won't have to cross Jordan alone."

This hymn presumed that this life was a hard, tough way, to go, and that we look forward to the time that we can move into a better life, and a better land, and the river Jordan was the symbol of the crossing point when we move from this life into the next life, from this miserable wretched world into the next world.

You know it's hard to account for the shift that has taken place among Christians who no longer want to read the Old Testament or even think about the significance of the Old Testament to the Christian faith, and I can't help wondering how much of that has to do with prosperity?

Paul Lived in Hard Times

The apostle Paul, you know, wrote out of hard times. He wrote "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable" (1 Corinthians 15:19). In his time it was no picnic being a Christian and the world in which he lived and walked in which they had their being was a hard place to be and all of them felt that there had to be something better than this.

Paul also wrote of Israel of old times when he said to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 10:11 "Now all these things happened to Israel for examples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come."

In other words, all of the things that happened to them, and all the things they did and all of the suffering they endured, all of the correction and chastisement, all of this had to do with us. It is written down there to admonish us "upon whom the ends of the world are come."

Christians of earlier generations found much in the history and practice of Israel that they could identify with. They saw themselves in the Church as the Israel of God.

Holidays in the Bible

In this series of programs I've been talking about the holidays in the Bible that many people assume are merely Jewish holidays. I think many people are surprised to find how meaningful these days are to Christians.

There is one day in particular, one festival in particular, that falls in line with all these old hymns I've been talking about, which form a very great part of Christian tradition.

There is one chapter in the Bible where all of the holy days, all the holidays, of God are listed and it's Leviticus chapter 23. And here it is where Moses outlines for Israel what he

calls the appointments of Jehovah. They are the feasts of the Lord in your King James version of the Bible, but word 'feast' is the Hebrew word "moed" which basically means 'appointments' or 'appointed times.' These are times that we are going to get together with God.

Feast of Tabernacles

In Leviticus 23:33 God gives us a holiday that is called the Feast of Tabernacles. "The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, {34} Speak to the children of Israel, saying, The fifteenth day of this seventh month shall be the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days to the LORD. {35} On the first day shall be an holy convocation: you shall do no servile work therein."

What this means is it's a holiday. We take off work and go to church. The holy convocation is an assembly and we all get together to worship God. No servile work, that little distinction means, we can do work to put food on the table and to cook and so forth, but we can't do our normal jobs.

Now Israel, while they had a priesthood and the tabernacle, they also had to make certain offerings on these days but when we go on to verse 39 it tells us this: {39} "In the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the fruit of the land, you shall keep a feast to the LORD seven days: on the first day shall be a Sabbath, and on the eighth day shall be a Sabbath."

A Yoke of Bondage

Now this is really tough, right? We take off work two days and we celebrate. How hard is this? What is really amusing to me about this is that there are some people who in their interpretation of the New Testament decide that the 'yoke of bondage' spoken of in the New Testament must be all of the Old Testament laws like the Sabbath, the holidays and so forth and so on. Now think of it. Here are people who have been slaves all their lives, who worked every hour they could every day of their life, from daylight to dark and along comes somebody who says Let's put a 'yoke of bondage' on these people. Let's give them the day off, because in fact that's what these are, holidays.

Holidays are where we eat and drink. We celebrate, we come together and we worship and celebrate God.

A Brush Arbor

Now what Israel was supposed to do on the first day was (Leviticus 23:40): "You shall take you on the first day the boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days. {41} You shall keep it a feast, an appointment unto the LORD, seven days in the year. It shall be a statute forever in your generations: you shall celebrate it in the seventh month."

Now what were they to do with these tree limbs? They were to make themselves a brush arbor. This was something that used to be done in the autumn among farm people in certain parts of the country.

I remember, for example, my grandfather in a place not far from his farm every year in the autumn, the guys would all get together, they build a brush arbor over somewhere to the northeast side of the property, across the river and through the woods, as the saying goes, and they would have a preacher come in, and they would go out there every evening for a seven-day revival. Now you see this was back in rural Arkansas in the 1930s and 1940s, when life was harder then. The whole idea of the brush arbor had to be taken from the Feast of Tabernacles. This was back in a time when people with a hard life paid more attention to the Old Testament.

Dwell in Booths

The Scripture goes on to say in Leviticus 23:42 "You shall dwell in booths seven days; all that are Israelites born shall dwell in booths."

Booths is another word for tabernacles.

You do this so {43} "That your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. {44} And Moses declared to the children of Israel the feasts, the appointed times, of Jehovah."

Israel lived in booths or tabernacles for 40 long years in the wilderness. They all were not made out of the branches of trees, most were tents that they carried along with them on their backs, because many of the places they went, there were no palm trees, there were no trees that they could make booths, or brush arbor's out of.

There was plenty of time for them, in that 40 years to develop a yearning for a better land, for a better world. This idea is deeply rooted in the Bible and it is not merely Jewish, it was around long before there was a Jew and it persisted all the way into Christianity.

This idea that this world is not where we belong. We can't expect to be comfortable here. We're looking for something better, for something more.

There is a passage, for example, in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews. We're in the New Testament now.

Abraham Dwelt in Tabernacles

Hebrews 11:8 is talking about Abraham, the father of the faithful and he says "By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should later receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing where he went. {9} By faith he sojourned

in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise:"

Now, among Christian people, the word 'tabernacle' has taken on a wide variety of meanings. You will see some very elaborate churches called Tabernacles. But for Abraham and Isaac his son, it was a tent. Essentially both Old Testament and New Testament where you see the word 'tabernacle' think tent, because most of the time, that's precisely what it was, just a shelter that was put up.

Hebrews 11:10 "Abraham looked for a city which had foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

Now in Abraham's case, he was not even at home in the promised land. He was looking for a city his entire life. He left the city on God's command and spent the remainder of his life living in tents and he, in a sense, as a messenger of God is picturing to us down through all the generations what the life of the man of God in this world is supposed to be.

The writer of Hebrews goes on to say in Hebrews 11:11 "Through faith Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was way past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised. {12} There sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead." Abraham was an old man when his son was born. Continuing in verse 12 "So many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable." Then he says something surely astonishing. He says {13} "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them far off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth."

Christians are Strangers

You know there is nothing more fundamental to the Christian faith than the awareness that we are strangers and pilgrims on the earth and that we are not at home. What's interesting about this is that if somebody gives you a promise, if God gives you a promise and you die not having received the promise, how can you die in faith? Well, only if you realize that this world, this life, is not all there is, that this world is not your home, that your home is elsewhere. He goes on to say in verse 14 of Hebrews 11 "They that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country."

In a sense, the observance of the Feast of Tabernacles, is a confession. It's a confession that one is a stranger and a pilgrim in this world and we seek a country, a city, a better world than the one in which we now live. We are not yet at home.

Verse 15 "Truly, if they had been mindful of that country from where they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. {16} But now they desire a better country, that

is, an heavenly one: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he has prepared for them a city."

The idea of a great city also passed into Christian hymns as a symbol of our home of the better and a more continuing and enduring world. "I am bound for that city" is another old hymn.

Faith in a Better Resurrection

The very idea that the man Abraham is, that he lived his entire life, in hope of something he never got, a permanent home. In this, I guess, is the fundamental definition of faith. I fear sometimes we think that having faith means that God is going to give it to me in this life and I believe he will give it to me next week, next month, or the latest next year.

No, No! Faith means a commitment to something beyond this life. Abraham confessed in the process that his home was not in this world. Something I fear, many of us Christians have completely forgotten.

What shall I say, the writer of Hebrews says in verse 32, "For the time would fail me to tell of Gedeon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthae; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets: {33} Who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, {34} Quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. {35} Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection."

The better resurrection, is transcending Jordan, crossing the river, moving from this world into the next world. People actually accepted torture and did not accept deliverance that they might achieve that.

Promises Fulfilled in the World to Come

Hebrew 11:36 "Others had trials of cruel mockings and scourgings, yes, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: {37} They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; {38} (Of whom the world was not worthy) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth." Not one of them was ever at home. Not one of them had a recliner, not one them had a table that he could sit at, with his wife and children and sometimes have a warm meal.

Verse 39 "These all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promises." God gave these people all kinds of promises and they lived this miserable life and never received any of them.

Verse 40: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect."

You know there is only one conclusion that you can draw from this, that the promises is not in this world, it is across Jordan. It's in the world to come. You know all of this has very much to do with the Feast of Tabernacles as a Christian holiday.

Objections

Now I can already hear someone objecting saying "Well yes, but you've already read it out of the book, it was for people who were Israelite born who were supposed to keep this feast. It was a part of their national history." Yes, but there's something very important you should know about that.

So, how about this objection? Are these festivals only for people who are Israelite born? Well, there are a couple of important things to say about this. One is that it was the dwelling in booths, dwelling of Tabernacles, in particular, that was a lesson for the Israelites and then they did this, as an example, for us upon whom the end of the world is come, for us to learn from what they went through in their 40 years in the wilderness.

The festival is one of the appointed times of Jehovah, one of the feasts of Jehovah, it is not merely an Israelite Festival and there is a fascinating passage of Scripture that casts an entirely different light on the subject. You find it oddly enough, in a prophecy for the future. The prophecy is found in chapter 14 of Zechariah and its stunning in some of its implications.

The Day of the Lord

Zechariah 14:1 "Behold, the day of the LORD comes, and your spoil shall be divided in the midst of you."

I pause to tell you. Most students of the Bible realize that the day of the Lord is a singular time in history. It takes place right at the very end time and is the time of God's wrath. He goes on in verse 2 to say: "I will gather all nations against Jerusalem to battle; and the city shall be taken, and the houses rifled, and the women ravished; and half of the city shall go forth into captivity, and the residue of the people shall not be cut off from the city."

These are bad tidings for the people who live in Jerusalem. At some point in the future that slow boil of bubble, of present troubles, is going to boil over. It is strange, isn't it, that half of the city goes forth into captivity while half of them are left behind. Here we sit looking at Jerusalem, a city divided half and half. One wonders how this will play out. The good news is that when this finally takes place, God himself will take a hand.

Verse 3 "Then shall the LORD go forth, and fight against those nations, as when he fought in the day of battle. {4} His feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives."

There is a striking thing about this, God's feet have not stood on the Mount of Olives since the last day that Christ stood there, when He was taken up into heaven in front of the very eyes of His disciples.

Jesus left there and on that day the angel appeared to the disciples and said "You men of Galilee, why do you stand here gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as you have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11).

The implication is that He will come right back to the same place, and sure enough, Zechariah 14:4 says "In that day His feet shall stand upon the mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, and there shall be a very great valley; and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half of it toward the south."

Now, if you have been to Jerusalem, you will know that this is still future, because the Mount of Olives is still whole and the day that Christ returns and plants His feet on the mountain, it is going to split in two.

Verse 5 "You shall flee to the valley of the mountains; for the valley of the mountains shall reach unto Azal: yes, you shall flee, like as you fled from before the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah: and the LORD my God shall come, and all the saints with Him."

This implies, very clearly, the return of Christ. Of course, one thing that happens as Christ returns, is that the resurrection takes place (1 Corinthians 15) and the Saints rise to meet Christ in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17), and apparently from this, they come right back down here to the Mount of Olives with Him.

Verse 6 "It shall come to pass in that day, that the light shall not be clear, nor dark: {7} It shall be one day which shall be known to the LORD, not day, nor night: but it shall come to pass, that at evening time it shall be light. {8} It shall be in that day, that living waters shall go out from Jerusalem; half toward the former sea, and half toward the hinder sea." That's the Mediterranean Sea and the Dead Sea.

"In summer and in winter shall it be. {9} And the LORD shall be king over all the earth: in that day shall there be one LORD, and his name one."

Well, that's not too hard to understand, is it? We're looking at the kingdom of God, the establishment of His kingdom over the entirety of the earth. This is future stuff, isn't it?

One of the verses that is a little spooky is verse 12: "This shall be the plague wherewith the LORD will smite all the people that have fought against Jerusalem; Their flesh shall consume away while they stand upon their feet, and their eyes shall consume away in their holes, and their tongue shall consume away in their mouth."

I suspect it is out of something like this that the artists got their idea for the special effects in the Indiana Jones movie of 'Raiders of the lost Ark.'

The Feast of Tabernacles is to be kept in the Millennium

This is where we get to the interesting part. Zechariah 14:16 "It shall come to pass, that every one that is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall even go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles."

This dwelling in booths, the years that Israel lived in the wilderness, is not all there is to the Feast of Tabernacles because it's not just Jews who are going to be keeping it. Those years have nothing to do with these other nations.

Listen to how it goes on.

Verse 17 "It shall be, that whosoever will not come up of all the families of the earth unto Jerusalem to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, even upon them there shall be no rain."

Is it commanded? Oh yes, it is commanded and with sanctions.

Verse 18 "If the family of Egypt go not up, and come not, that they have no rain; there shall be the plague, wherewith the LORD will smite the heathen that don't come up to keep the Feast of Tabernacles. This shall be the punishment of Egypt, and the punishment of all nations that come not up to keep the Feast of Tabernacles."

This is emphasized again and again. Not only is it commanded, it is commanded with sanctions.

So the meaning of the festival certainly transcends the mere matter about a bunch of Hebrews living in tents in the Sinai Peninsula many thousands of years ago.

The Jewish historical meaning of the Feast of Tabernacles does not apply to the Egyptians, but the Egyptians have to keep the feast anyhow. Why? The reason can't be physical. It has to be spiritual. They too, need to confess that this world is not their home. This is not their hope. They also must come to confess that they need a city.

Zechariah 14:20 "In that day shall there be upon the bells of the horses, HOLINESS TO THE LORD; and the pots in the LORD'S house shall be like the bowls before the altar. {21} Every pot in Jerusalem and in Judah shall be holiness to the LORD of hosts."

We're not dealing with a situation where everything around us is common, except for a tiny few handfuls of sacred objects in the Temple. He says everything will be sacred to God and "All they that sacrifice shall come and take of them, and see there in that day there shall be no more Canaanites in the house of the LORD of hosts." I'm not sure exactly how to take all

of that, but one thing is for sure. All mankind is going to come up to Jerusalem, and everything in the city is going to be holy.

The Feast of Tabernacles makes the confession that we are strangers, that we're pilgrims, we don't belong here, that we are looking for a city. It looks forward to the kingdom of God and cries out like a slave: "Deep River Lord, I want to cross over into the camp ground." There is much more, but that'll have to wait until next time. Until then, I'm Ronald Dart, and you were born to win.

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