You Shall Rejoice!

inTro

Read This Week's Passage:
Deuteronomy 16:1–17

POINTER TO JESUS

Imagine if you had ninety-one days each year when you didn't have to work or go to school, and would spend your time rejoicing in God, fellowshipping with others, and remembering your blessings. This is how God intended the Israelites to celebrate the feasts. The Sabbath made up fifty-two of those days (Lev. 23), but it was a special type of feast day that was not connected to the sanctuary because it began at creation and will continue on in the new earth. The sanctuary feasts were to follow the plan of salvation, specifically connected to how God rescued Israel in the past, and were also tied to the agricultural year. In addition, the feasts pointed to the Messiah, and their fulfillment in Him happens in three aspects.

First of all, because Jesus was the one true faithful Israelite, each of the sanctuary feasts was fulfilled in His life on earth. This is one of the reasons we are not required to keep them anymore. As a part of the whole sanctuary service, the Old Testament makes clear that the feasts were to point to the Messiah, who would fulfill them as the ultimate sacrifice and High Priest (Exod. 25:8–9; Pss. 40:8, 110:1–7; Dan. 9:24–27). Second, the feasts point forward to the second coming of Jesus. Third, as we are already saved by Jesus’ death on the cross, yet not totally saved because we are not yet in heaven, the feasts point to spiritual aspects of our experience here on earth, as we enter the heavenly sanctuary by faith. We look forward to what God will do in the future, and they help to keep our focus there. Every time we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we are keeping a mini-Passover feast.
Write out Deuteronomy 16:1–17 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out Deuteronomy 16:16, 17. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
THE THREE MAIN FEASTS

God wants to dwell with us, and that is the main function of the sanctuary, for us to live with God in His house and to worship Him. The feasts are truly an evangelistic tool for reviewing the plan of salvation each year. The Passover was the foundational feast, even marking the beginning of the year (Exod. 12), celebrating the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. The focus was on the lamb, who was to be blameless and perfect, and sufficient for everyone. Jesus is called our Passover Lamb, as the one who died for our sins, who was perfect and blameless, and whose sacrifice was sufficient for the whole world (1 Cor. 5:7, 11:23–26; John 1:29).

The blood of the sacrificed lamb was spread on the doorposts, which is where the names of each household were engraved in Egypt. Thus, the people were covering their names with the blood of the lamb, personally appropriating the deliverance for themselves. The lamb was also slain “at twilight” (Exod. 12:6, literally “between the evenings” in Hebrew), which could be interpreted as the night before or the night of the Passover. Jesus fulfilled both possible interpretations, celebrating the feast with His disciples the night before (Matt. 26:27–28), and dying as the Passover Lamb on the night of (Matt. 27:46).

The Feast of Weeks was another time of extra special rejoicing. Everyone was to be involved, including all family members, ministers, foreigners, the fatherless, and the widows. The purpose was to remember that they had been slaves and that God had rescued them, once again placing themselves into the story even though they had not personally experienced it. The Feast of Weeks first happened at Sinai, where the people covenanted with God; Pentecost in Acts 2 is the fulfillment of the first Pentecost on Sinai, and many of the same things happen in each (fire, wind/noise, God’s law on the hearts, and so on).

The Feast of Tabernacles is called the greatest of all feasts, with the main requirement being: “You [shall] surely rejoice” (v. 15)! Once again, everyone is involved and is remembering God’s blessings in the literal and spiritual harvests. Leviticus 23 describes the building of booths to live in for seven days during this feast, in order to remember how God protected them during their wilderness wandering. This is the feast when Jesus said some of His greatest statements of Messiahship and divinity (John 7–8), as He is the true booth (Amos 9:11) and came to tabernacle among us (John 1:14). Ultimately, we look forward to living with God in His tabernacle the New Jerusalem (the shape of the Most Holy Place) forever!
IF ONLY WE REMEMBERED

Of the three types of laws, we have looked at Deuteronomy 14, which addresses universal laws, and discussed how most of the rest of Deuteronomy 12–26 consists of application laws. The third main category of laws is Sanctuary laws, which God makes clear were never meant to be kept forever, but were pointing forward to the Messiah. However, we are also not prohibited from keeping them, and the sanctuary does not go away but points forward to the heavenly sanctuary, where we will live for eternity. We will keep the Sabbath feasts forever, and the other feasts are also significant again in a literal sense in heaven. It is important to look closely at the biblical text to understand in which category each law is found.

Another aspect of the feasts that is still relevant for us is the gathering together in celebration at the place the Lord will choose for worship. Although we may not keep these celebrations, it is important to find times to celebrate together outside of the weekly Sabbath celebrations. Too often, the Lord’s Supper is very solemn and somber, when the Bible describes it as celebratory and a feast. If we could recapture that, it would help us to remember that God desires for us to rejoice together with Him and each other.

Unfortunately, Israel also forgot these all-important times of celebration, and only sporadically observed the feasts. And yet, when they did, amazing things happened—people repented, and reformations began. When Hezekiah rededicated the temple after Ahaz had desecrated it, he called for a Passover celebration, but most of the people laughed at the messengers and did not come. However, those who did come celebrated an extra week because they had so much joy and thanks to God. It had not been celebrated since Solomon’s time (2 Chron. 30). When Josiah found the book of Deuteronomy (2 Kings 23) and read it, he tore his clothes and saw the need for repentance (2 Chron. 34). He called for a Passover, this time involving all of Israel and Judah, and all the priests and Levites. The author of 2 Chronicles notes that it had not been celebrated like that since the time of the Judges. It is no wonder that the people had forgotten God and worshiped other gods.

When the people returned from the exile, Ezra read to them from Deuteronomy and helped them to understand God’s word in their hearts. The people wept and repented of what they had done to bring the exile on themselves (Neh. 8). But Ezra called them to instead rejoice and celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles, which they did with great joy, and this had not been done since the time of Joshua. Celebrations are key in holding us together as a people, but most of all in connection with God who also loves to rejoice and celebrate and wants our hearts.
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Hebrews 10:19–25  
Revelation 19:6–9  
Zechariah 14:3–21  
John 7:2–39  
Nehemiah 8:8–18  
2 Chronicles 30

What other verses come to mind in connection with Deuteronomy 16?
REJOICING WITH GOD

God rejoicing with us. God desiring us to rejoice. God instituting celebrations to make sure we rejoice. This is the God we serve! And yet so often today we have forgotten how to rejoice in and with God.

Yahweh is the one who brought Israel out of Egypt, and this becomes the foundational motivation for their rejoicing and feasts (v. 1). God chooses the places to make His name abide and wants us to join Him there (v. 6–7, 11). It really is all about relationship, and God wants to be as close to us as possible, bringing great joy to our hearts.

The people were to rest on the feasts, not to work, because they were to instead focus on the work that God did (v. 10, 15). God is the one who blesses His people, and in remembering these blessings, our joy actually increases, and we are able to gain perspective on any trials we may be facing. The feasts take our minds off this world, and point our hopes and desires and dreams toward the heavenly reality that God longs for us all to experience.

Rather than an exclusive celebration, the feasts were to include any who wanted to come, and especially all those who were vulnerable. The people were to invite the servants, the Levites, the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows, and to celebrate with all of them (vv. 11, 14). Servants became equals in the feasts; Levites became heirs; foreigners felt at home; the fatherless and widows gained a spiritual family. The great needs of hearts were to be answered in the feasts. Each was to give as they were able, to contribute to the great celebration.

Today, the feasts are not normative or required, but are an invitation to joy and peace and rejuvenation. Now we can still come to the sanctuary by faith (Heb. 10:19–25), remembering what God has done for us in the past, claiming present assurance of salvation, and looking forward to the ultimate fulfillment in heaven. Although it is not a necessity, celebrating the feasts helps us to feel the reason for the prayer of the psalmist: “One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all of the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple” (Ps. 27:4). May that also be our prayer!
THE ANNUAL FEASTS

“At these yearly assemblies the hearts of old and young would be encouraged in the service of God, while the association of the people from the different quarters of the land would strengthen the ties that bound them to God and to one another. Well would it be for the people of God at the present time to have a Feast of Tabernacles—a joyous commemoration of the blessings of God to them. As the children of Israel celebrated the deliverance that God had wrought for their fathers, and His miraculous preservation of them during their journeyings from Egypt, so should we gratefully call to mind the various ways He has devised for bringing us out from the world, and from the darkness of error, into the precious light of His grace and truth.

“With those who lived at a distance from the tabernacle, more than a month of every year must have been occupied in attendance upon the annual feasts. This example of devotion to God should emphasize the importance of religious worship and the necessity of subordinating our selfish, worldly interests to those that are spiritual and eternal. We sustain a loss when we neglect the privilege of associating together to strengthen and encourage one another in the service of God. The truths of His word lose their vividness and importance in our minds. Our hearts cease to be enlightened and aroused by the sanctifying influence, and we decline in spirituality. In our intercourse as Christians we lose much by lack of sympathy with one another. He who shuts himself up to himself is not filling the position that God designed he should. We are all children of one Father, dependent upon one another for happiness. The claims of God and of humanity are upon us. It is the proper cultivation of the social elements of our nature that brings us into sympathy with our brethren and affords us happiness in our efforts to bless others.

“The Feast of Tabernacles was not only commemorative but typical. It not only pointed back to the wilderness sojourn, but, as the feast of harvest, it celebrated the ingathering of the fruits of the earth, and pointed forward to the great day of final ingathering, when the Lord of the harvest shall send forth His reapers to gather the tares together in bundles for the fire, and to gather the wheat into His garner. At that time the wicked will all be destroyed. They will become ‘as though they had not been.’ Obadiah 16. And every voice in the whole universe will unite in joyful praise to God. Says the revelator, ‘Every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb forever and ever.’ Revelation 5:13.” (White, Patriarchs and Prophets, 540, 541.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

What are some times in your life when you have clearly seen God working to rescue or save you, either physically or spiritually?

How can you incorporate more celebration with God in your spiritual life?

How can you make the weekly Sabbath a time of greater celebration in your own life?

In what ways can you join more in community with others who are also followers of God?

Reflect on how you can invite the vulnerable in your community to join you, and how you can serve them more effectively and personally.

How can you rejoice in God today?

What do you look forward to most about eternity with God in the New Jerusalem?