

Celebrating Amazing Moments With God

Lesson 11

Becoming a generous church

February 19, 2012

This lesson is designed to give students an opportunity to take a step back so they can take another look at God. This may sound like a strange thing to say but the fact is that we've all met someone who surprised us. We thought we knew what they were like. But we didn't. We may have even been amazed at how different they were than we had first imagined.

No doubt, you have some students in your class who are wrestling with this same thing when it comes to God. They honestly think they know what God is like—but they don't. They may see God as a benevolent grandfather who is largely untroubled even though he is surrounded by a bunch of spoiled kids. Perhaps others imagine that God is irritable, perhaps even cranky. They may not say it—but they look at the judgments in the Old Testament and tell themselves, "It isn't safe for me to get too close to God." Unfortunately, this isn't true, but they believe it so it has become their reality—wanting to love God but being irrationally afraid of Him at the same time.

But, in the end, God is who He is. He isn't who we think He is, who we may want Him to be or who we think He should be. He is who He is—and **the Bible gives us good insights into what God is really like.**

The Bible does this in several ways—

- **First, the Bible gives us clear revelation of what God is like.** We are told, for instance that—
 - God is holy (Is. 6.3; Rev. 4.8)
 - God is righteous (Ps 89.14; 97.2)
 - God is good (Mk. 10.18)
 - God is love (2 Cor. 13.11)
 - God is benevolent (Ps. 145.9, 15f.)
 - God is merciful (Eph. 2.4; 1Pt. 1.3)
 - God is full of grace (Eph. 1.6; 2.7)
 - God is truth (1 Jn. 5.20; cf. Jer. 10.10; Rom. 3.4)

- **Second, Jesus tells us, "If you really know me, you will know my Father as well** (Jn. 14.7). One of the strange realities of life is that many people are absolutely convinced that Jesus, the Son is much more loving, kind and gentle than our Heavenly Father. But Jesus tells us this isn't the case. If we really know who Jesus is—we'll also know who the Father is and what He's like. We have Jesus' word for this.

- **Third, we see what God is like by what he says and emphasizes in Scripture.**

- God has a tender heart for the poor (Dt. 24.14; Ps. 140.12; Prov. 17.5; 19.17; 21.13; 22.9; 22.22-23; 28.27; 29.7; 31.9).
 - God has a tender heart for the widow and orphan, too (Dt. 10.18; Ps. 146.9; Prov. 15.25).
 - God comforts His people (Mt. 23.37-38; 2 Cor. 1.3-4).
- **Fourth, we see what God is like by what He does in Scripture.** Our study will focus on a major part of this truth today. While it is surprising to many people, just as Jesus went to celebrate the wedding in Cana, God likes to celebrate with His people. We see this in the great festivals God gave Israel to celebrate.
- Passover
 - Shavuot (pronounced sha-voo-it)
 - Sukkoth (pronounced su-kuth)
 - Purim (pronounced poor-um, either is correct)
 - Chanukah (pronounced ha-na-kah)

Israel was designed to be a joyful nation, a nation that was constantly celebrating how God had powerfully moved in the lives of His people. Modern Jewish people who have grown up in observant Jewish homes (homes that actually celebrated their Jewish faith and traditions) are a quick to testify that celebrating the Jewish holidays filled their lives with love, joy and laughter while they were growing up.

- It's amazing to think that God gave His people religious festivals that lasted up to a week. Imagine what it would be like to celebrate Thanksgiving for a week with your family and friends. Or, to celebrate Christmas for a week.
- Imagine building a hut with your children, then eating and sleeping in it. Wouldn't that be great fun? Every year they would look forward to this religious holiday the way Christian children look forward to Christmas. It's different. It's fun. It's special. And, it reminds God's people that this world is not their permanent home. They are just passing or tabernacling (tenting) through life the way the ancient Israelites tabernacled (tented) through the wilderness. This is the richness God gave His people with the Feast of Sukkoth.
- ❖ **God wrapped some of the most important lessons in life that His people should know within the rich, and often fun-filled tapestry of the Jewish festivals—**
- Passover celebrates Israel's deliverance from a land of bondage.
- Shavout (pronounced sha-voo-it) celebrates the giving of the Law to Israel

- Sukkot (pronounced Su-kuth) celebrates Israel’s journeying (tabernacling or tenting) through the wilderness.
- Purim (pronounced pure-um or poor-um) celebrates Israel’s deliverance from wicked Haman through God’s providential hand.
- Chanukah (pronounced ha-na-kuk) celebrates the religious liberty Israel won from the Hellenistic Greeks during the time between the Old and New Testaments.
- As we consider Israel’s religious festivals it become clear that Israel was designed to be a joyful nation, a nation that was constantly celebrating how God moved powerfully and dramatically through the lives of His people.
- Modern Jews who have grown up in observant Jewish homes (homes that actually practice their Jewish faith and traditions) are quick to testify that celebrating the Jewish holidays filled their lives with love, joy and laughter while they were growing up.

We find the roots of the joy-filled life God had intended for His people reaching back into the Old Testament. A good example of this is found in what Moses told the children of Israel in regard to celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles. God commanded the Jewish people to “Be joyful at your feast”—

Question—Does the following command regarding the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles sound burdensome?

“Celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days after you have gathered the produce of your threshing floor and your winepress. *Be joyful at your Feast*—you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, and the Levites, the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns. For seven days celebrate the Feast to your Lord your God at the place the Lord will choose. For the Lord your God will bless you in your harvest and in all the work of your hands, and *your joy will be complete...*” (Dt. 16.13-17).

Question—Can you imagine week long celebrations filled with joy and rejoicing. That’s what God created for His people. He delights in our joy. He wants to bless us. Then, He wants to celebrate with us. He commanded this in regard to the people of Israel. It is true for us, too (Rom. 15.4).

Question—Many Christians feel like God expects His people to be somber. How do you reconcile this philosophy with God’s command in Deuteronomy 12.7: “Rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the Lord your God has blessed you.”

- ❖ Linking ideas from Scripture allows us to see the BIG picture of what God is like...and what He expects us to be like.
- **First link:** “Rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the Lord your God has blessed you” (Dt. 12.7).

- **Second link:** “For God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9.7).
- **Seeing where the links lead: Giving wealth to a nation**
 - The Jewish people were impoverished slaves in Egypt...a people of poverty
 - This literally changed overnight—on the night of Passover. We read, “The Egyptians urged the people to hurry and leave their country. ‘For otherwise,’ they said, ‘we will all die!’ So the people took their dough before the yeast was added, and carried it on their shoulders in kneading troughs wrapped in clothing. The Lord had made the Egyptians favorably disposed toward the people, and they gave them what they asked for; **so they plundered the Egyptians**” (Ex. 12.33-37).
 - God moved in the heart of the Egyptians, stripping them of their wealth and giving it to the Jewish people. He created personal wealth and a national treasury for His impoverished people in a single night!
 - It has been quipped that God paid His people 400 years of back wages on the night of Passover! Jacob and his family came to Egypt as a wealthy people. They were stripped of their wealth and made slaves. Now, God restored their wealth.
 - **We find the next link in Exodus in Exodus 35.4-9:** “Moses said to the whole Israelite community, ‘This is what the Lord has commanded: From what you have, take an offering for the Lord. *Everyone who is willing* is to bring to the Lord and hair; ram’s skins, dyed red and hides of sea cows, acacia wood; olive oil for the light; spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense; and onyx stones and other gems to be mounted on the ephod and breast-piece.”
 - **Put it all together.** 1. The people of Israel were impoverished slaves. 2. When they left Egypt on the night of Passover God made them a wealthy people. 3. Now, God is asking for some of that wealth to be returned...but only from, “Everyone who is willing.”
 - In other words, **it was really His money that He arranged for them to have**...hadn’t he moved the hearts of the Egyptians they would have left impoverished...but as it is, they are now wealthy.
 - **God could have kept it all.** He could have demanded whatever He wanted. But He told Moses to tell the people that the gifts for building the tabernacle should come from the heart of “Everyone who is willing.”
 - **God wants His people to give out of a heart of love and devotion** not out of reluctance. If money was an issue to God he simply wouldn’t have given it to them in the first place. As it is, the money is only a symbol by which we express how

attached our hearts are or aren't to God. Jesus made this plain when he declared, ,
"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Mt. 6.21).

- The offering for the tabernacle was astonishing. We read in Exodus 36.4-6, "So all the skilled craftsmen who were doing all the work on the sanctuary left their work and told Moses, 'The people are bringing more than enough for doing the work that the Lord commanded to be done.' Then Moses gave the order and sent this word throughout the camp, 'No man or woman is to make anything else as an offering for the sanctuary. And so the people were restrained from bringing more, because what they had was more than enough to do all the work.'"
- As we know, the Israelites failed many times on their way to the Promise Land. But on this one occasion, giving gifts to build the tabernacle, they expressed their love and glorified God in the process.

❖ The tabernacle was the place in which God chose to dwell among His people (in the Holy of Holies).

- Imagine the awe-struck people of Israel gathered around it seeing the shekinah glory (a fiery pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night) reaching skyward. **Note:** This was not the introduction of the fiery cloud, (shekinah glory). It joined them almost immediately upon their exodus from Egypt as a visible symbol of God's presence with them. But once the tabernacle was completed the shekinah glory came to rest over the holy of holies.
- Imagine the joy that filled their hearts as they celebrated their redemption from Egypt year by year during the Passover...and during the Feast of Tabernacles.
- Laughter filled the air and joy filled their hearts as families gathered together to celebrate the goodness of God.
- Their God had given them much and they had much for which to give praise Him.

❖ A key to understanding how the tabernacle and religious festivals filled the hearts of God's people with joy.

- The fiery cloud by day, pillar of fire by night was called the shekinah glory of God. Shekinah, in biblical Hebrew, means to *dwell, inhabit or settle*. The shekinah glory of God had joined them shortly after they had entered the wilderness (Ex. 13.20-22).
- When the tabernacle was completed it dwelled over the holy of holies.
- Whenever the ancient Israelites saw the shekinah glory of God over the tabernacle they were reminded that God's presence dwelled in the holy of holies.

GOING GENEROUS!

a Sermon Series by Dr. Jay Dennis & Connect Group Study by Pastor Terry Delaney

- It is easy to let this thought slip by us all too quickly with little or no thought. So let's stop and focus on it: **GOD'S PRESENCE IS HERE, IN THIS PLACE, RIGHT NOW IN THIS PRESENT MOMENT. GOD IS HERE, LITERALLY, WITH ME THIS VERY MOMENT. I'M NOT ALONE. GOD IS HERE. WOW!**
- Talk about excitement and joy. God created a sense of His power and presence in the religious festivals of Israel and seeing the cloud of shekinah glory over the tabernacle (and later, over the temple).
- David wrote in Psalms 22.3 that God indwells the praise of His people.
- Naturally, God is omnipresent. But there are times when God reveals (unveils) more of Himself to his people than at other times.
- The celebration of the religious festivals relived the outpouring of God's love, power and provision for his people resulting in a virtual eruption of praise. As the ancient visible testimony of it in the ever-present shekinah glory.
- The result was joy. As David writes in Psalms 16.11, "You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore."
- As we have seen, when God's people are drawn into God's presence, since the amazing reality of His deliverance, feel His joy filling their souls, burst forth in praise—they become a generous people, giving so much that, in Moses' case, they have to be told to stop giving.
- That's how it was for a moment of time in ancient Israel when it came time to build the tabernacle.
- What about today? The presence and glory of God doesn't indwell a manmade tabernacle (tent), it indwells every born again believer. We have the presence and power of God actually living with us in the person of God the Holy Spirit.
- The question is—do we feel His power and joy? Is He moving us to extravagant generosity? If not, why not? We can grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4.30) and we can quench what He wants to do in and through us (1 Thess. 5.19). May this never happen.
- "May we never put out the Spirit's fire," may God always reign in our hearts.