

The Feasts of the Lord – Sukkot or Tabernacles

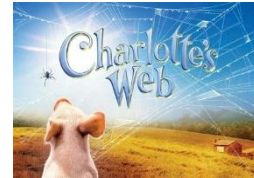
Spilman Memorial Baptist Church, Kinston NC

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October 26, 2025

Text: Leviticus 23:1-4, 33-44

Purpose: The Seven Feasts of the Lord were instituted for the children of Israel to observe every year in its season. Today we will be examining the last feast, Sukkot – The Feast of Tabernacles.



In a small town, farmers of the community had gotten together to discuss some important issues. About midway through the meeting, a wife of one of the farmers stood up and “spoke her peace.”

When she was done, one of the old farmers stood up and said, "What does she know about anything? I would like to ask her if she knows how many toes a pig has?"

Quick as a flash, the woman replied, "Take off your boots sir, and count them yourself!"¹

The Feasts of the Lord – by Kevin Howard and Marvin Rosenthal²

About 25 years ago, I came across the book, *The Feasts of the Lord*, by Kevin Howard and Marvin Rosenthal. Their book presents a unifying history of the various Feasts of the Lord as



outlined in scripture. My words today are drawn from this resource. Leviticus 23 is the only place in scripture that lists all seven of the special Feasts of the Lord in one place.



Throughout scripture you see these Feasts of the Lord repeating over and over in the story and history of Israel and the Lord. Their book looks at these Seven Feasts of the Lord as literally being fulfilled by Jesus.

So far, we have examined the Spring Feasts (Feast of Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Firstfruits), Shavuot – the Feast of Weeks or Passover, and the first two Fall Feasts (Rosh Hashanah – the Feast of Trumpets, Yom Kippur or The Day of Atonement). Today we are looking at the seventh and final feast given to Israel, Sukkot or the Feast of Tabernacles.

This feast is the most joyful and festive of all Israel's feasts. It is also the most prominent feast, mentioned more often in Scripture than any of the other feasts. This feast also served as the historical backdrop for the important teaching of the Jesus as the Messiah in John, chapters 7-9.

THE BIBLICAL OBSERVANCE

The Meaning of Sukkot

The Feast of Tabernacles is known by at least two names in Scripture.

Most often it is referred to as Sukkot, or "Tabernacles." The English word "tabernacle" is from the Latin *tabernaculum* meaning "booth" or "hut." It acquired this name from the



biblical requirement for all Israelites to dwell in tabernacles or temporary shelters during the holiday. It was to be an annual reminder of God's provision during the forty-year wilderness sojourn when Israel had lived in similar shelters. This final feast of the year is also known in Scripture as *"the Feast of Ingathering"* (Ex. 23:16; 34:22), for it was observed after all crops had been harvested and gathered.



The feast was celebrated with great joy. The joy was twofold, for it commemorated God's past goodness and provision during their wilderness sojourn, and it commemorated God's present goodness and provision with the completion of the harvest.

The Time of Sukkot

The feast of Tabernacles falls in the autumn of the year. On the Hebrew calendar it occurs on the 15th day of Tishri, the seventh month (usually late September to mid-October), only five days after the solemn Day of Atonement.

The Feast of Tabernacles lasts for seven days. The first day and the day after Tabernacles (the eighth day, known as Shemini Atzeret) are considered sacred assemblies, or sabbaths (Lev. 23:36, 39). As such, no work of any kind is permitted on these days.

The Feasts of the LORD	
Passover	Nisan 14
Unleavened Bread	Nisan 15 - 21
Firstfruits	Day after Shabbat
Weeks	50 days after ULB
Trumpets	Tishri 1
Atonement	Tishri 10
Tabernacles	Tishri 15 - 21

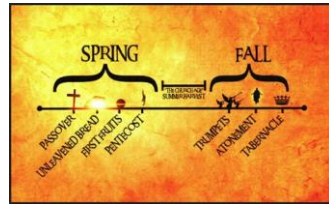
Levitical Feasts (Lev. 23)			
Feast	Season	Purpose	Type
Passover	Spring	Redemption	1 Cor. 5:7
Unleavened Bread	Spring	Separation	John 6:35
1st fruits	Spring	Praise	1 Cor. 15:20
Pentecost	Spring	Praise	Acts 2:1-4
Trumpets	Fall	New Year	Matt. 24:31
Atonement	Fall	Lev 16	Zech. 12:10
Booths	Fall	Wilderness provision	Zech. 14:16-18

The Record of Sukkot

Three portions of Scripture outline the biblical observance of the Feast of Tabernacles. The people were to live in booths and rejoice before the Lord with branches (Lev. 23:33-43). There were to be many daily, sacrificial offerings (Num. 29:12-39). In a sabbatical year, the Law was to be publicly read during Tabernacles (Dt. 31:10-13).

The Importance of Sukkot

Because of the joy associated with the Feast of Tabernacles, it became the most prominent of Israel's holidays. It was referred to simply as "the holiday" by the ancient rabbis.



The importance of the Feast of Tabernacles is also seen in its inclusion as one of the three pilgrim feasts. Three times during the year, all Jewish males were required to appear before the Lord in the Temple (the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Tabernacles - Ex. 23:17; 34:22-23; Dt. 16:16). These were known as the pilgrim feasts because of the required pilgrimage to Jerusalem. During the Feast of Tabernacles, the people brought their tithes and offerings to the Temple, for they were not to "*appear before the LORD empty-handed*" (Dt. 16:16).



In the days of the Temple, the Feast of Tabernacles was viewed with great awe, for it was during the Feast of Tabernacles that Solomon dedicated the newly built Temple to the Lord. At that ancient observance of

Tabernacles (2 Chr. 5:3), the Shekinah glory of the Lord descended from Heaven to light the fire on the altar and fill the Holy of Holies (1 Ki. 8; 2 Chr. 7:1-10).

The Prayer of Sukkot

The Feast of Tabernacles occurs at Israel's change of seasons and marks the beginning of the winter rainy season. One may be surprised to learn that Jerusalem receives as much precipitation each year as London, England (twenty inches). The major difference is that Jerusalem's rainfall occurs between November and March. These refreshing rains bring necessary moisture for working the soil and the sprouting of new crops. If for some reason the weather patterns are such that several weeks of rainfall are missed, a dire water shortage can quickly develop for the coming year's crops. Because the Feast of Tabernacles is observed at this important juncture when the anticipation of rain is at its highest, the two have become inseparably connected. Even today, the prayers for rain remain an important part of Tabernacles' observance.



The Service of Sukkot

In the days of the Temple, Jewish pilgrims flocked to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles. They came from every village within the nation and from many foreign countries, most often in large caravans for protection. It was a joyous trip with much singing and laughing along the way.



Upon arrival in Jerusalem, the pilgrims focused their energies upon building booths for the feast. By the afternoon of Tishri 14, thousands upon thousands of leafy booths lined the streets and dotted the surrounding fields and hills. All were carefully located within a Sabbath day's journey (a little more than a half mile) of the Temple.



At sundown, the blast of the shofar (ram's horn) from the Temple announced the arrival of the holiday. A sense of increased excitement fell over the city as darkness came.

Myriads of twinkling campfires studded the surrounding countryside like an intricate lacework of tiny amber jewels. Well into the night, muffled laughter and cheery conversations could be heard drifting over the night breezes.

The Water-Libation Ceremony

During the Feast of Tabernacles, the intense anticipation of rain came to be reflected in the Temple services. Each morning of Tabernacles, a water libation (sacrificial pouring out of a liquid) was offered to the Lord as a visual prayer for rain.



Shortly after dawn each morning, while the many sacrifices were being prepared, the high priest was accompanied by a joyous procession of music and

worshipers down to the Pool of Siloam. The high priest carried a golden pitcher capable of holding a little more than a quart of water. He carefully dipped the pitcher into the pool and brought it back to the Temple Mount.

At the same time, another procession went down to a nearby location south of Jerusalem known as Motza where willows of the brook grew in great abundance. There they gathered the long, thin willows and brought them back to the Temple. At the Temple, the willows were placed on the sides of the altar so that their tops formed a canopy of drooping branches over the altar.



Meanwhile, the high priest with the water from the Pool of Siloam had reached the southern gate of the Temple. It was known as the Water Gate because of this ceremony. As he entered, three blasts of the silver trumpets sounded from the Temple, and the priests with one voice repeated the words of Isaiah, *"Therefore with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation"* (Isa. 12:3).

As the high priest poured out the water libation before the Lord, a drink offering of wine was simultaneously poured into the other basin.



Three blasts of the silver trumpets immediately followed the pouring and signaled the start of the Temple music. The people listened as a choir of Levites sang the Hallel (Psalm 113-118).

At the proper time, the congregation waved their palm branches toward the altar and joined in singing: *"Save now, I pray, O LORD; O LORD, I pray, send now prosperity"* (Ps. 118:25). At the same time the priests, with palm branches in hand, marched once around the altar.

Psalm 118 was viewed as a messianic psalm and as such gave the feast a messianic emphasis. This is why Jesus was greeted by the crowds shouting Hosanna (Hebrew for "Save now" in Ps. 118:25) and waving palm branches on His triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Mt. 21:8-9; Lk. 19:38; Jn. 12:13). They viewed Him as the Messiah King, come to deliver Israel in fulfillment of Psalm 118. They hailed Him with the messianic imagery of palm branches from the Feast of Tabernacles.

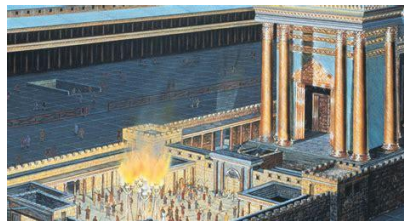


This same imagery is in view in Revelation 7:9-10 where redeemed saints worship, with palm branches in hand, around the throne of God and the Lamb.

The water-drawing ceremony is also from antiquity. Although debate exists as to whether Isaiah alluded to the water-drawing ceremony (Isa. 12:3) or the ceremony was derived from the words of Isaiah, it is known that the ceremony was in use at least 100 years before the time of Jesus.

The Temple-Lighting Ceremony

The celebration of the water pouring was observed during the evenings of the feast by an impressive light ceremony in the Temple.

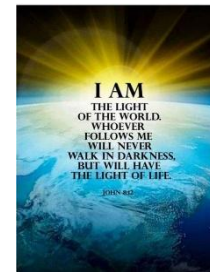


As the second evening of Tabernacles approached, the people crowded into the vast outer court of the Temple known as the Court of the Women. On this occasion a

barrier was raised to divide the men from the women. In the center of the court stood four towering menorahs (lampstands), each with four branches of oil lamps.

The Feast of Tabernacles began in the middle of the lunar month when the harvest moon was full and the autumn sky clear. The outline of the surrounding Judean hills was clearly visible in the soft moonlight. Against this backdrop, the light of the Temple celebration was breathtaking.

This celebration was repeated every night from the second night until the final night as a prelude to the water drawing in the morning. Nothing in ancient Israel compared to this light celebration. The light celebration was reminiscent of the descent of the Shekinah glory in Solomon's day and looked forward to the return of the Shekinah in the days of the Messiah (Ezek. 43:1-6).

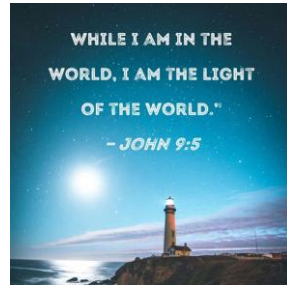


John recorded that it was the day after the Feast of Tabernacles (the eighth day), which was considered a sabbath, when Jesus returned from the Mount of Olives to teach in the Temple (John 8:2; 7:2, 37): As the Pharisees came to entrap Him, Jesus proclaimed, *"I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life"* (Jn. 8:12).

The Pharisees did not question the meaning of His statement. They knew that it was a messianic claim, for they immediately called Him a liar. They were familiar with the many titles in Scripture which ascribe light to the Messiah. He is called the *"Star out of Jacob,"* the *"light of Israel,"*

the *"light of the Gentile nations,"* a *"refiner's fire,"* a *"burning lamp,"* and the *"Sun of righteousness."*

Later that day, the Messiah reinforced this same truth when He healed the blind man. As He did so, He repeated, *"As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world"* (Jn. 9:5). The Pharisees were again angered at Jesus.



The issue continued to be His messiahship (Jn. 9:22). This time, however, they chose to find fault in that He had healed the blind man on the eighth day, which was considered a sabbath by Scripture (Jn. 9:14). Although there were no Mosaic laws against the act of healing on the Sabbath, the traditions of the Pharisees classified it as work and therefore forbade it.

More than just a messianic claim, Jesus' claim to be the *"light of the world"* carried a reference to the Temple light celebration. The celebration was still vivid in their minds. They had just celebrated it six nights in a row.

The light that He offered (salvation, Isa. 49:6) would light not just the Temple, it would light the whole world. He himself was the source.

The Hoshana-Rabbah Ceremony

On the seventh and final day of the Feast of Tabernacles, the Temple services reached a climax. The anticipation of rain was at its annual high. Jewish tradition held that it was on this day that God declared whether there would be rain for the coming year's crops. Consequently, on this final day of



the feast, the Temple water-pouring ritual took on great importance. Water was the foremost thought on everyone's mind.

On the other six days of the feast, the silver trumpets gave three blasts. On this day, the trumpets gave three sets of seven blasts. On the other six days of the feast, the priests made but one circuit around the altar. On this day, the priests made seven circuits. As they marched around the altar, they sang the Hosanna verse (Ps. 118:25) and the people waved palm branches.

For these reasons, the day was known as the Hoshana Rabbah, or "Great Hosanna." Thoughts of rain for the coming year and messianic fervor (Ps. 118) were at their highest pitch.



Can you imagine for just a moment. It was the year somewhere around 30 to 32 AD. It was Hoshana Rabbah, the last day, the great day of the Feast of

Tabernacles. The bright morning sun was almost too warm as the throngs crowded the Temple courts for the Hoshana Rabbah service. As the people intently watched the priests conduct the service, a loud voice rang out from the crowd. The priests glared in consternation, and the people whipped around in great surprise to see who dared interrupt the service. They saw a young Galilean in His early thirties, the one whom many held to be a great rabbi, a prophet, or even the Messiah. He boomed: *"If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water"* (Jn.

7:37-38; Jn. 4:14). In other words, Jesus was saying, I am the answer to your prayers. I am the Messiah. I can save you now so that you will never thirst for salvation again.

The sound of His words echoed through their minds in the moment of electric silence that followed. Then the reaction broke loose. The religious leadership was infuriated, indignant, and extremely threatened. Who did He think He was to interrupt the Temple service, and from where did He get His authority to declare Himself the Messiah? He certainly had not been approved by them nor given their sanction to do this. They viewed it as a serious challenge indeed to their religious authority. *"Now some of them wanted to take Him, but no one laid hands on Him"* (Jn. 7:44).

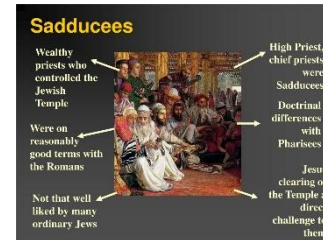


A spirited debate broke out among the people. They thought Him neither crazy nor unclear. The authoritative claim of His statement was understood by all. But a great debate arose regarding His identity. Some thought He was claiming to be *"the Prophet"* (Jn. 7:40) that Moses had predicted would appear within Israel (Dt. 18:15). He was. However, in their theology, they believed the prophet was not the same individual as the Messiah (cf. Jn. 1:19-21). Some believed He was claiming to be the Messiah, and He was. However, still others



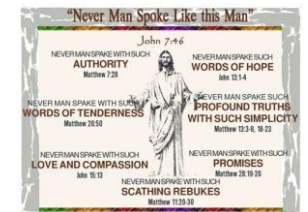
debated this notion with, *"Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the seed of David and from the town of Bethlehem, where David was?"* (Jn. 7:42).

These were ignorant that Jesus was, in reality, a descendant of David, and that His birthplace was Bethlehem. John recorded, *"There was a division among the people because of Him"* (J. 7:43).



In the wake of these disturbing events, the religious leadership called an emergency security meeting. It was a meeting of the chief priests, those twenty-four priests who were head over the twenty-four divisions of the priesthood (1 Chr. 24:1-19). They were aristocratic Sadducees who controlled the Temple worship. Also present were the Pharisees. They were the perpetuators of the oral, extrabiblical traditions within Israel. They controlled the synagogue worship. These two groups, usually at great odds over theology and engaged in religious power struggles, were united in their hatred of Jesus.

They summoned the officers to give an account as to why they had not arrested Jesus. The officers were Levites who patrolled the Temple compound and enforced Temple law. They were the security force, the Temple guard, whose responsibility it would have been to arrest Jesus for interrupting the service. A few days earlier, the officers had been commanded to arrest Jesus (Jn. 7:14, 30-32), but now they had missed the perfect occasion to do so. The officers, too, had been stunned by His statement, for they answered in their defense, *"No man ever spoke like this Man!"* (Jn. 7:46). After being rebuked in great rage, the officers were sent away.



THE MODERN OBSERVANCE

The Tabernacles

The primary symbol of the Feast of Tabernacles is the sukkah or tabernacle. It recalls Israel's hastily built housing in the wilderness. As soon as Yom Kippur has ended, booths are constructed in yards and patios of Jewish homes. The booths are made with no fewer than three walls covered with intertwined branches. The roofs are thatched so that there is more shade than sunlight during the day, but sparsely enough to allow the stars to be seen at night. Inside they are decorated with colorful harvest fruits and vegetables. During the Feast of Tabernacles, Jewish families eat their meals in the booths, and the very observant even sleep in them.



The Branches

“And you shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of beautiful trees, branches of palm trees, the boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days” (Lev. 23:40).



Scripture mentions four types of trees are used to fulfill this command.

- The *etrog*, a tree which produces small lemon-like fruit, is interpreted by Jewish authorities to be the "beautiful trees."
- The *lulav*, or long branch of a date palm, is held to be the "palm trees."

- The *hadas*, or myrtle tree, with its tiny leaves, is believed to be the "leafy trees." Usually three myrtle branches are held in the hand.
- The *arava*, or willow tree, is used in fulfillment of the "willows of the brook."

Usually, the etrog, or citrus branch, is held in the left hand, and the other three types of branches are bound together and held in the right hand. As in the ancient Temple services, the branches are held while the Hosanna verse (Ps. 118:25) is chanted.

The Synagogue

As a preservation of the ancient Temple ceremony, all congregants circle the synagogue while singing Psalm 118.



The Torah scroll on the center platform of the synagogue, instead of the ancient altar, is the object of the procession today.

After the cessation of the Temple services, the Feast of Tabernacles became more closely tied to Yom Kippur which occurs only five days earlier on the Hebrew calendar. Hoshana Rabbah, the last day of the feast, came to be viewed as the last day on which the judgments meted out by God on Yom Kippur could be reversed. On this day, willow branches are ceremonially beaten on the synagogue pews to remove the leaves, symbolizing repentance and removal of sins.

The Rejoicing

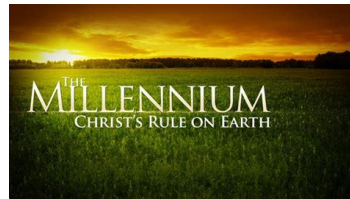
Even though the Temple water-drawing ceremony and light celebration do not exist today, the concept of rejoicing is still connected with the Feast of Tabernacles.

THE FUTURE FULFILLMENT

The Ingathering

The Bible often speaks of the final judgment as a harvest (Hos. 6:11; Joel 3:13; Mt. 13:39; Rev. 14:15). It is a future Day of Ingathering when God gathers His people unto Himself and burns the wicked like the chaff and stubble (Mal. 4:1-2). It is not surprising that the Feast of Tabernacles is tied to Israel's future as well as her past.

When the Messiah sets up His millennial Kingdom, He will gather the remnant of Israel back to her land. Isaiah described this event as the harvesting of olives. Tree branches are beaten with rods and the olive berries gathered once they fall to the ground. *"And it shall come to pass in that day That the LORD will thresh, From the channel of the River to the Brook of Egypt; And you will be gathered one by one, O you children of Israel. So it shall be in that day: The great trumpet will be blown; They will come, who are about to perish in the land of Assyria, And they Who are Outcasts in the land of Egypt, And shall worship the LORD in the holy mount at Jerusalem"* (Isa. 27:12-13; cf. Isa. 11:11-12; Jer. 23:7-8).



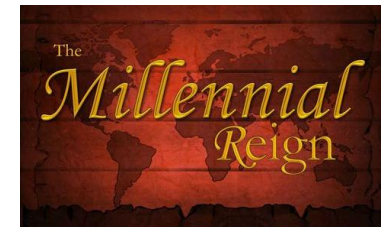
The righteous among the Gentiles, too, will be gathered to the Lord. In that day, the Gentiles will pray in Jerusalem. Zechariah prophesied: *"And it shall come to*

pass that everyone who is left of all the nations which Came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles. And it shall be that whichever of the families of the earth do not come up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, on them there will be no rain" (Zech. 14:16-17).

The Gentile nations that refuse to keep the Feast of Tabernacles in the millennial Kingdom will receive no rain upon their lands. This passage provided the biblical basis for the tradition of praying for rain during the Feast of Tabernacles.

The Tabernacle

The Lord will not only gather His people, but He will tabernacle in their midst during the coming messianic Kingdom: *"My tabernacle also shall be with them; indeed, I will be their God, and they shall be My people. The nations also will know that I, the LORD, sanctify Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forevermore"* (Ezek. 37:27-28; cf. Rev. 21:3).

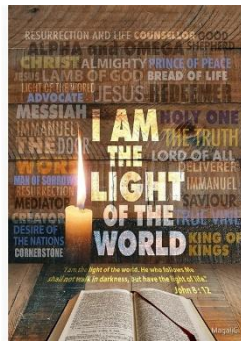


The sign of God's presence, the Shekinah glory, will be seen in Zion again (Isa. 60:1, 19; Zech. 2:5). It will appear as a shining fire over the whole

of Mount Zion. It will be like a tabernacle, providing protection and refuge for the nation after centuries of persecution and the time of Jacob's sore trouble. Isaiah prophesied: *"Then the LORD will create above every dwelling place of Mount Zion, and above her assemblies, a cloud and smoke by day and the shining of a flaming fire by night. For over all the glory there will be a covering. And there will be a tabernacle for shade in the daytime from the heat, for a place of refuge, and for a shelter from storm and rain"* (Isa. 4:5-6).

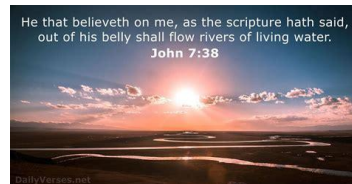
THE APPLICATION – Light

When the Messiah spoke of Himself as the light of the world, He referred to the salvation and forgiveness of sins that He offered to all those who put their trust in Him. As it was spoken by the Lord through the prophet Isaiah, *"I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, That You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth"* (Isa. 49:6). He offers that light to men today: *"He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life"* (Jn. 8:12). Have you experienced the life-changing light of the Messiah, or are you still walking in darkness?



THE APPLICATION – Water

There are three types of water sources in the land of Israel. Huge, rock-hewn collection tanks, known as cisterns, are used to collect rainwater during the rainy months. Massive cisterns, capable of holding millions of gallons of water, still exist today at the Masada stronghold. However, cisterns are the least desirable and valuable water



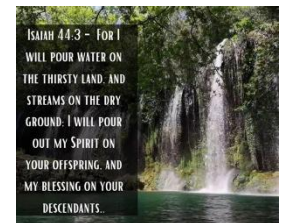
source in Israel - they can easily become contaminated or stagnant and are not replenishable until the next rainy season.

Wells are a more valuable water source. They provide fresh, replenished water, but even they can dry up during a drought. The most valued water sources in Israel are brooks and rivers which are fed by springs (such as those at Ein Gedi). These were known in the Bible as "living waters" or, in other words, waters with movement.

The Lord used this truth to illustrate Israel's rebellion and idolatry: *"For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, And hewn themselves cisterns - broken cisterns that can hold no water"* (Jer. 2:13).

When Jesus addressed the people in the Temple on the last day of the feast, He alluded to the same fact. He said, *"He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water"* (Jn. 7:38). This was the purest water, the most valued water, water that would never dry up. Jesus' reference to water was used with the exact same connection with the coming of the Holy Spirit. *"But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive"* (Jn. 7:39).

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit in relation to salvation was a much-repeated theme of the Old Testament prophets (Isa. 32:15; 59:21; Ezek. 11:19; 36:27; 37:14; 39:29; Joel 2:28-29).



The Lord said through Isaiah, *"For I will pour water on him who is thirsty, And floods on the dry ground; I will pour My Spirit on your descendants"* (Isa. 44:3).

The Hebrew prophet Zechariah prophesied a future, glorious day when Israel as a nation will look upon the pierced Messiah and repent of her rejection of Him. God's Spirit will be poured out upon them and they will enter into the New Covenant. *"And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn"* (Zech. 12:10).

Do you thirst today to have a living relationship with the Creator and God of the Universe and to know that you have eternal life? Jesus said, *"If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink"* (Jn. 7:37). There is only one water that will quench the spiritual thirst of man. It is the living water offered by the Lord.



LET US PRAY

Notes:

¹ Mikey's Funnies, *A Pig Funny*, Oct. 14, 2025

² *The Feasts of the Lord* by Kevin Howard and Marvin Rosenthal, Thomas Nelson Publishers, copyright 1997. (p. 134-148)