

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN - PART X

THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES AND THE GROWING CONFLICT IN JERUSALEM

I. The Gospel then shifts from Galilee to a scene in Jerusalem surrounding the feast of Tabernacles and describes a scene of increasing tension.

A. The Feast of Tabernacles was one of the three highest Jewish Feasts (alongside Passover in March or April and the Feast of Weeks seven weeks later.) This feast took place in late September or early October on the occasion of the harvest. Although Passover was theologically more important, by Jesus' time this feast generally drew more Jews to Jerusalem than any other. All Jews within fifteen miles of Jerusalem were obliged to attend it, and many more did so every year.

1. It was a celebration of God's providence for His people in the desert and throughout their history. The people would stay in tents (also called tabernacles or booths) to recall their journeying in the desert. Lev. 23:40-42. There were seven days of great celebration and an eighth day of transitioning back to regular life. The Temple was also filled with lights and, on the seventh and highest day, there was a procession of water, which was then poured over the altar. Jesus develops the theme of water and lights in chapters 7 and 8.

2. Being at the harvest it was also a thanksgiving for the fertility of the land. See Ex. 26:16, 34:22; Lev. 23:39; Duet. 16:13-15. Because the food was bountiful at this time, it was sometimes called simply "a feast." See 1 Kings 8:2, 65, 12:32; Is. 30:29; Ezek. 45:25; Neh. 8:14. Every seventh year, there was a reading of the law because it was a Sabbath year, in which no harvest was gathered.

3. This feast was the occasion for the dedication of the original Temple, see 1 Kings 8. See also 2 Macc. 10:6-8, describing the rededication of the Temple as "like the feast of Booths."

4. Later on, it would become an anticipation of the ingathering of the nations to worship God. See Zech. 14:16.

5. The Pilgrims based Thanksgiving largely on this feast.

B. Because Jesus' popularity and opposition was rising rapidly, some of His "brethren" (which in Hebraic Greek meant any close

relative), who still did not understand Him, urged Him to make a dramatic move in Jerusalem during this feast.

- Ironically, they speak the truth when they say that no one acts in secret who wants His deeds to be known. Jesus earlier made a similar point about people who do evil deeds wanting the darkness. See John 3:20-21. However, they do not understand that Jesus is keeping His power to perform miracles largely disguised because worldly power is not the power He wants to show. Thus, the Gospel points out that they still do not believe.
- Jesus points out that the time for manifesting His glory and the time of His suffering has not yet come. (The two go very much together, especially in John.)
- Jesus says that their time is always present, which has at least two possible meanings. One meaning may be ironic, saying that those who seek the approval of the world will always seek it. Another meaning may be that, because we do not know God's timing, Jesus' disciples should always be looking for an opportunity to witness to the faith. Jesus, knowing more about God's timing, was more select.
- In any case, Jesus keeps Himself in secret for the time being. St. John Chrysostom, in one of his homilies, said that, while Jesus could have kept persecution at bay through many means (as He will do soon) He chose to stay in secret for awhile, to give assurance to Christians who would later be persecuted that worshiping in secret to avoid such persecution is permissible. See St. John Chrysostom Homily XLVIII.

C. Jesus' statement that He is not going up to the feast may be a bit puzzling, given the fact that He will soon do so. However, in Greek the present tense can easily imply that He is not currently going up, with no necessary implication about the future. (One old text adds the word "yet" to emphasize this fact.) In addition, the term "going up" also refers to Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. See John 3:13, , 6:62, 20:19. See also Luke 9:51; John 8:28 (using similar terms for Jesus' death.)

II. Jesus eventually comes to the feast, but gets there in secret.

A. Part of the idea is that His opponents probably wanted to arrest (or assassinate) Him before He got to Jerusalem and present His conviction or death as a fait accompli, as they would later do. By going up in secret, Jesus does not allow His opponents to know where He is until all the crowds are already gathered, when an arrest would make a public scene.

- Nevertheless, the chief priests and Pharisees eventually send officers to arrest Jesus when Jesus Himself makes speaks openly about the plot to kill Him and continues to make it clear that He is from heaven itself.
- It is noteworthy that there is a pall over the crowds, such that no one dares speak his mind for fear of the Jewish authorities. But there is still "murmuring" going on beneath the surface.

B. The power of Jesus' words shows forth as even His opponents wonder where He is getting His knowledge from.

- John the Baptist was the son on a priest, and so would have had a great deal of formal education, but that level of formal education would not be available to a carpenter's son. It is this formal education the leaders say Jesus is lacking, for any Jew should have studied the Hebrew Scriptures and traditions to a certain degree.
- Jesus points out that His wisdom is directly from above. This source contrasts with the teachings of the leaders in Jerusalem, who drew based their preaching primarily on scholarship. Jesus does not criticize this approach, but reminds them of where all of this learning is supposed to come from.
- Jesus also says that, if one chooses to do God's will, he will recognize the voice of God. Jesus then points out that the crowd is not keeping the law, for some are trying to kill Him and others are not defending Him.
- Jesus then justifies His cure on the Sabbath by a common sense analogy to the current teaching of the Jews, which was that circumcision was to be performed on the eighth day after birth, even if doing so would break the usual rules of the Sabbath. The implication is that, if people really read the Scriptures with good faith, they would see that His ministry is from God.

III. A dispute then arises about whether Jesus could be the Messiah.

A. On the one hand, the people recognize the power of His voice to bring about conversions and a renewal of worship and His ability to perform "signs," which were most likely miracles. Such things were indications that the long awaited kingdom of God was at last coming. The prophets had spoken about the Messiah as overcoming obstacles and bringing about a new creation. See, e.g., Is. 8:23-9:6, 11:1-12:6, 65:17-25, 66:18-24; Ezek. 37:15-28; Amos 9:11-15; Micah 4:6-8, 5:1-4; Zech. 6:9-15; see

also Ps. 2, 45, 110. Jesus Himself hints at the prophesy of Isaiah with the command to judge justly, not according to hearsay. See Is. 11:3-4.

B. On the other hand, many people believe that the Messiah should be from an unknown area, and they believed that Jesus was simply from Nazareth. This expectation is based in part from the view that he would come "on the clouds" as Daniel had prophesied and be appointed by the new Elijah as Malachi had prophesied. See Dan. 7:13; Mal. 3:23-24. Psalm 110 also spoke of the king as being begotten in mystery "from the dayspring." Ps. 110:3. Others object that the Messiah should be from Bethlehem, as Micah had prophesied, not realizing that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Micah 5:1. John is assuming the reader knows the true account of Jesus' birth.

- Jesus says or asks "You know Me and where I am from?" indicating just the opposite. They do not really understand the God who sent Him and Who He is from. He skips right over His birth in Bethlehem, possibly because telling them of that birth would have created expectations of a worldly kingdom.
- The officials rightly understand that He is saying that He comes from God, and thus send officers to arrest Him.
- Jesus then indicates He will return to the heaven from which He was sent, but the crowds cannot comprehend anything but an earthly one of going to foreign lands. Ironically, they are right that, through the Eucharist He will go to foreign lands, but they miss the main point.

C. The statement that they cannot go to where Jesus is going contains an image of the journey to the Chosen Land that the first generation of Chosen People, because of their unbelief, were unable to complete. See Num. 10:20-35; Heb. 3:7-19. Picking up on the theme of the journey in the desert, Jesus also speaks of Himself as providing the water for the journey. Cf. Ps. 78:15-16; Is. 28:21-22. Moses had struck rock and provided water for the people, but only after prayer and some impatience. See Ex. 17:1-7 Num. 20:1-13.

- On the seventh day of the feast, the highest day, Jesus goes further and indicates, by reference to the prophesies of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah and Joel that the those who believe will see a flow of water that will renew the people and allow them to give glory to God. See Is. 12:1-6; Ez. 47:1-13; Zech. 14:8; Joel 4:18. Isaiah, Zechariah, and Joel refer to a an idyllic time after a purification, and Ezekiel likewise refers to the restored Temple, from which will flow cleansing water for

all lands. It is not clear from the text whether the flow of water will be from Jesus to the believer or from the believer to the world. See Is. 58:11. It could very well mean both.

- In either case, the water brings the power of the Spirit, Who has not yet been revealed. This sermon is thus setting up the promises of the Last Supper regarding Jesus sending the Spirit of truth and understanding. Isaiah had spoken of the age in which the Spirit of the Lord would govern the people, and Joel of the Spirit being poured forth upon all of humanity. See Is. 11; Joel. 3; see also Num. 11:29. In saying that "there was no Spirit yet," John is saying that the spirit of God had not yet been poured out upon the people.

- The theme of cleansing water also sets up the next episode, regarding the forgiveness of the adulterous woman.

- This reference to water and to the prophets apparently makes some people believe that Jesus is the prophet that Moses spoke of so long ago. See Duet. 18:15-18.

IV. The authorities' plot to arrest Jesus fails because of the power of Jesus' words.

A. The Jewish authorities scorn Jesus and the crowds because they do not have sufficient learning, ignoring the fact that some of the prophets (e.g., Amos) and heroes (e.g., Gideon) of the Chosen People were taken from the seemingly lesser ranks. See, e.g., Judges 6:15, Amos 7:13-17.

B. It is ironic that the less educated, and very possibly pagan, soldiers appreciate the word of God, while those who are learned, but satisfied with their learning, do not.

C. Nicodemus sensibly proposes putting the questions to Jesus, referring back to Moses' instructions that judges must listen to both sides of a case before deciding it. See Duet. 1:16. Jewish law also established rules for proceeding with trials, which included the opportunity of the accused to confront witnesses. However, the authorities assume that Jesus is from Galilee, i.e. an area of mixed Jews and outsiders and, therefore, cannot be a prophet. Even on their own terms, they ignore the prophesy of Isaiah that the light of the new era will shine first in the northern tribes. Is. 8:23. However, the authorities, wanting a quick and easy answer rather than the truth do not care to investigate.

D. Possibly in order to avoid an immediate conflict, Jesus goes to the Mount of Olives, where He will stay again in His final week

before His death and Resurrection.