

THE FESTIVE SCROLLS

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2000

New Creation Teaching Ministry
Thursday Morning Studies
Term 2

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Study 1A: The Passover

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

The name 'Festive Scrolls' may not be immediately familiar to us because of the arrangement of the books of the Old Testament in our Bibles. The five books of Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and Lamentations don't seem to be connected in way what so ever! However, in the Hebrew Old Testament these five books are grouped together in the section of the Bible known as Wisdom literature. They were called the Festive Scrolls (or *Megilloth*) because they were set to be read at temple or synagogue for one of the five festivals in Israel's annual life. Along with the Psalms, these were the only parts of the Wisdom Literature that were used in temple worship in Israel.

The five scrolls were set for the following festivals:

- Song of Songs – Passover
- Ruth – Pentecost
- Lamentations – Remembrance of the Temple's Destruction
- Ecclesiastes – Tabernacles
- Esther – Purim

Some of these festivals are commanded in the Scriptures, and others grew out of Israel's experience. The association of the scrolls with the festivals enriched Israel's worship and brought the active Word of God to them so that the festivals were not simply parties or rituals, but a dynamic encounter with the living God.

PASSOVER

1. The Name

This festival has a number of slightly different names in the Old Testament – it is called Passover (e.g. Ex. 12:43; Num. 9:2,5,6,12,14), the Feast of the Passover (Ex. 34:25) [this becomes its regular name in the New Testament], the Lord's Passover (Ex. 12:11,27,48; Lev. 23:5; Num. 10:14, 28:16; Deut. 16:1) and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Ex. 12:17, 23:15, 34:18; Lev. 23:6; Deut. 16:16.)

2. The Time and Duration of the Feast

It was the first festival of Israel's year, and was celebrated at the Spring Equinox, in the first month of the Hebrew year, Nisan (or Abib, its older name which means 'the heading' referring to the forming of the heads on the barley at this time). It was, when Israel possessed the Promised Land, one of three festivals each year at which all men were required to appear at the sanctuary (Ex. 23:14–17.)

Whilst the Passover began on the fourteenth day of the month, preparation was to begin on the tenth day in the selection of a lamb for the Passover meal by the male head of the family (Ex. 12:3). The Passover was held on the fourteenth day of Nisan (Ex. 12:1–14), and this celebration inaugurated the linked Feast of Unleavened Bread which ran from 15 to 21 Nisan (Ex. 12:15–20). In that Feast, on 16 Nisan, a barley sheaf (the first fruits) was offered by priest as a wave offering to bless the opening of the harvest (Lev. 23:10–14).

3. The Observance of the Feast

Initially, Passover was a family event, and later public observances were added to it when the tabernacle (and temple) became the focal point for Israel's worship. These two aspects of Passover were quite distinct. Exodus 12:1–13:16 outlines the instruction for the ongoing

personal, familial observance of Passover in the historical setting of which the festival was to speak. It is helpful to separate out the joined elements of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread when considering the manner in which the feast was observed.

We see there this order to the observance of the Passover:

- (1) On the tenth day of *Nisan*, the family head would choose the Passover lamb or kid (12:3), to be a male, a year old and without blemish (12:5). This choice would also take into consideration the number within the household; if it was too much for one household, then others could join with them (12:4). This animal was separated from the flock and kept for four days (12:6).
- (2) On the fourteenth day, in the evening, all the lambs were to be killed (12:6). Blood was to be taken and daubed with a bunch of hyssop (12:22) on the doorposts and cross beam of the house designated for the passover meal (12:7). The purpose of this daubing was to be a sign – not for the Lord but for Israel. It is a sign to the people of God's promise to pass over the marked houses; the gathering of the people in the houses was a response of faith to the promise of God. On seeing the blood the Lord would pass over that house, not visiting there his judgment of the tenth plague (the killing of the first born males) (12:12–13). In this way we see that the Passover Lamb was substitutionary, but it is not spoken of as being a propitiatory sacrifice. In fact the word used to describe it in 12:27 is *zebach*, which is the same word used to identify the peace offerings.
- (3) The whole family would then gather in the daubed house to eat the animal which was to be roasted whole – not boiled, nor eaten raw (12:9) – and to be completely devoured, burning up in the morning anything that remained (12:10). It could not be carried from one house to another, but had to be eaten in the house where it was prepared (12:46). The lamb or kid was to be eaten with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs (12:8). The

meal was to be eaten with the family dressed ready for travel, and they were to eat in haste (12:11). Only those who were circumcised were to be allowed to eat (12:43–45,47–49).

- (4) Numbers 9:9–14 restates much of this prescription, but also adds that if a person wilfully neglects the keeping of Passover, he is to be excommunicated from Israel.
- (5) When the gift of the temple was given to Israel, then the gathering for Passover was to be there, and not in the home, and the blood of the Passover animal was to be presented at the Temple – which indicates that the Temple was symbolically Israel's dwelling place.

For the Feast of Unleavened Bread:

- (1) On the fourteenth day of Nisan, all leaven was to be removed from the house in preparation for eating unleavened bread for the seven days of the festival. If a person ate anything leavened in those days, they were to be excommunicated from Israel (12:15).
- (2) On the fifteenth day there was to be a holy assembly of the people, and also on the 21st day (the beginning and the end of the week.) These days were to be extraordinary Sabbaths, with the only work permitted being the preparation of food for eating that day (Ex. 12:16.)
- (3) When the gift of the tabernacle/temple was given to Israel, then special burnt and cereal offerings were to be offered on the seven days of the festival in addition to the regular morning sacrifices (Num. 28:16–24).
- (4) On the sixteenth day of Nisan, the first fruits of the barley were to be presented before the Lord as a wave offering. This offering was connected with the next festival in Israel's year, the Feast of Weeks (or Pentecost) (see Lev. 23:10–16).

4. The Purpose of the Feast

Clearly the first Passover was not a remembrance but the actual event of God's deliverance of His people from the tenth plague, and the first Feast of Unleavened Bread was the actual exodus of Israel from Egypt. The keeping of the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread was to recall these saving events in the life of the people and to celebrate them (see Ex. 12:14,17; 13:3). The Passover and Exodus were with a view to Israel's entering the Promised Land, and when that goal was reached, then the festival week was to be kept (13:5).

Ex. 13:8–10 gives a good explanation of the purpose of the festival. Firstly it provided an opportunity for instruction of the generations of the saving act of God. Note the words of the father to the son: 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.' This remembrance of God's saving action was personalised – every generation was to see itself saved in that action of God in the first Passover and Exodus. The festival wasn't simply the remembrance of a long ago event – but a celebration of God's salvation which was a dynamic reality for the participant as much as for those who actually departed Egypt that night.

Secondly, this remembrance was to serve as a 'memorial between your eyes' – much like the phylacteries – small boxes containing Scripture verses that Jews would wear, one on their foreheads and one on their forearms during prayer. The purpose of the memorial was to stir Israel up to remembrance of God's law – '...that the law of the Lord may be in your mouth...' – and so to active obedience. In this celebration of God's saving love for them in the events of the exodus, Israel was to be renewed and reinvigorated in their service and love to the Lord.

Finally, the inclusion of the waving of the first fruits of the barley crop during this festival recalled to the people that there was a goal and a destiny to the Exodus. Their salvation was not simply from Egypt, but to the Promised Land.

The name comes from the Hebrew verb *pasach* which means to 'pass over' probably in the sense 'to spare, to omit' but possibly in the sense 'to spring over, to leapfrog'. In Isaiah 31:5, the meaning of the verb is used in parallel with a word meaning 'defend, protect.

Study 2A: The Feast of Weeks

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THE FEAST OF WEEKS

1. The Name

This festival has a number of slightly different names in the Old Testament – it is called the Feast of Harvest (Ex. 23:16), the Feast of Weeks (Ex. 34:22, Deut. 16:10), the Day of First Fruits (Num. 28:26); and in Jewish tradition it also became known as the Feast of Conclusion, as it marked the ending of the grain harvest. It was, when Israel possessed the Promised Land, one of three festivals each year at which all men were required to appear at the sanctuary (Ex. 23:14–17.) In the New Testament we know this Festival by its Greek name, Pentecost (Acts 2:1) which comes from the Greek word meaning 'fiftieth'.

2. The Time and Duration of the Feast

It was the second festival of Israel's year, and was celebrated in the third month of the Hebrew year, Iyyar (or Ziv, its older name). It took place seven weeks (or 50 days) after the waving of the barley sheaf on the second day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Lev. 23:15–16).³ It was a one day long feast. It took place after a regular Sabbath day (Lev. 23:16), and it was a day of extraordinary Sabbath rest (Lev. 23:21).

3. The Observance of the Feast

This feast was one of the holy convocations (a hag, a pilgrim festival) in which all the men of Israel were to gather at the place where the Lord caused His Name to dwell.

Leviticus 23:15–22 spells out the nature of worship on that day:

(1) On that day a cereal offering of new grain was to be presented to the Lord. From Deut. 26:1–4 we may be able to deduce that this was a tithe of the crop – although that passage seems to indicate that the tithe was presented only every three years– and then for the use of the disadvantaged in the community of God’s people.

(2) Also offered with this cereal offering were two loaves of bread to be made at home, baked with leaven.

(3) With the cereal offerings were to be presented seven yearling lambs, a bull and two rams for a burnt offering (with their attendant cereal and drink offerings) – which when burned on the altar would be a pleasing aroma to the Lord. Also to be offered were a male goat for a sin offering and two yearling lambs as a peace offering – these were to be waved with the bread of the first fruits, and so were to be ‘holy to the Lord for the priest.’

(4) From Deut. 16:9–12 we see that there was to be rejoicing for the whole nation on this day, with jubilant consumption of free will offerings shared with disadvantaged neighbours.

4. The Purpose of the Feast

The Feast of Weeks was clearly a celebration of the faithful provision of the Lord in the harvest that was now concluded, and the offering of the first fruits was a redemption of the whole crop. The (reservation and) giving of tithes was an indication that all that Israel had came from the Lord, and was worship in the same spirit as the prayer of 1Chronicles 29:14–17, where David blessed the Lord for the gathering of materials for the building of the Temple:

‘14 But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you. 15 For we are strangers before you, and sojourners, as all our fathers were; our days on the earth are like a

shadow, and there is no abiding. 16 O LORD our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own. 17 I know, my God, that you try the heart, and have pleasure in uprightness; in the uprightness of my heart I have freely offered all these things, and now I have seen your people, who are present here, offering freely and joyously to you.’

The Lord’s provision to Israel was a sign of His covenant faithfulness. Israel was secure as a nation only because of the Lord’s faithfulness to them. Exodus 34:21–24 speaks of the three pilgrim feasts to Jerusalem, and the Lord speaks directly to Israel about this matter. The promise there is that Israel will possess the Promised Land and that the Lord will dispossess the nations for them, and then also that during these festivals, when the army of Israel will be at Jerusalem, that the Lord will not allow any nation to desire Israel’s land. Recognition of the Lord’s faithfulness would not leave Israel exposed to danger! The same principle lay behind the Sabbath observance (of all sabbaths, as well as this day.) Likewise from Deut. 26:14, we see that there was no ‘profaning’ of the tithe by the people (by eating it!), again as a sign of trust in the Lord and responding trust and faithfulness to His own trustworthy faithfulness. Israel was provided for and defended by the Lord who had bound them to Himself by covenant promises.

From Deut. 16:9–12 and 26:5–11 we see that there was a close connection between this feast and the remembrance of God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt. This was not grounded in anything about Israel (‘A wandering Aramean was my father...’) but from the Lord’s own faithfulness and grace. Just as the Lord had been gracious and kind to Israel in deep need, so the Feast of Weeks was an expression of that kindness of the lord to others who were in need. Lev. 23:22 links the law of gleaning – where Israel was forbidden to reap right to the borders of their land and also were forbidden to go through a second time to gather what was missed, in order that the ‘poor and the stranger’ may have them. ‘I am the Lord your God.’

Deut. 16:9–12 stresses that the rejoicing of the Feast of Weeks is to be shared throughout the community of Israel – ‘... you and your son and your daughter, your manservant and your maidservant, the Levite who is in your towns, the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow who are among you ...’

For Israel the Feast of Weeks became a time of remembrance of God’s covenant love and of rededication of themselves to the Lord. In 2Chronicles 15:1–15, King Asa used the gathered celebration of the third month (i.e. Feast of Weeks) as an opportunity to rededicate Israel to the Lord following a period of terrible idolatry.

Study 3A: The Feast of Remembrance of the Destruction of the Temple

THE FEAST OF REMEMBRANCE OF THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE

1. The Name, Time and Duration of the Feast

This festival is a non-canonical fast (i.e. it is not prescribed in Scripture, although its origin is mentioned in the Old Testament.) It is called in Hebrew the ninth of *Ab* – indicating the day on which this fast was held, and the day which it commemorated – the burning of the Temple on the ninth day of the fifth month (see 2Kings 25:8, Jer. 52:12). It is a fast which is still observed with great seriousness by Orthodox Jews today, even though it is not Mosaic in its origin. (The Mosaic law actually provided for only one communal fast day – the Day of Atonement.)

2. The Observance and Purpose of the Feast

This feast was a fast, and as the word indicates, abstinence from food was the basic act of all fasts. In the Old Testament the purpose of fasting was to enable a person or community to be concentrated on, and dedicated to, lamentation or mourning for a dire situation and to seek the intervention of the Lord in His sovereign grace into that situation. Very often the situation had arisen by the hand of the Lord as a judgment, and so the fasting was also an act of repentance. Other signs of repentance and mourning often accompanied the abstaining

from food, such as abstinence also from water and wine (1Sam. 7:6, Dan. 10:3, Jonah 3:5–8); the rending of garments, or the exchanging of them for sackcloth; weeping; confession; the leaving of hair undressed and body unwashed (2Sam. 12:16). Sacrifices were offered on the fast days.

The fast for the destruction of the Temple is mentioned in Zechariah 7:1ff. There it is clear that a fast day for this purpose had been in held for some years – perhaps all the years of the exile? – and had been linked with another in the seventh month which commemorated the murder of Gedaliah on the second day of that month (see Jer. 41). The mention of the fast was in the setting of a question as to whether it was still appropriate to continue those fasts now that the exile had been completed and the temple reconstructed. (We only hear about this fast day on the day when Zechariah declared that it was time for it to end!) The Word of the Lord through Zechariah was to end the fast, and not simply because the situation was now reversed, but because the holding of fasts and feasts was ambiguous – was it really for me you fasted? ... were you not just feasting for yourselves? Whilst the fast (or feast) could be a time of self-dedication to the Lord, it could also be (and actually had become) a form of self-preservation or self-serving.

Quite clearly, the destruction of the Temple was a terrible blow to the people of Israel. It is 2Chronicles 36:15ff which gives us a clear and thorough understanding of God's dealings with Israel in these events. The destruction of the Temple was the culmination of God's prophetic word to His people over many years. The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place... The patient and persistent grace of God was what underlay the sending of prophets time and again to Israel. [Yet it was also His pity on His dwelling place – ???] The refusal of the people to hear the prophets – i.e. their despising of the grace of God – aroused the wrath of the Lord until there was no remedy – that is, judgment was unavoidable. This judgment was the terrible judgment of the Babylonian invasion.

It wreaked terrible havoc amongst the people, but also terrible damage was done to the Temple, His dwelling place. During the exile of the people the land was given enjoyment of the Sabbaths it had not been given – all the time of its desolation it rested – until the time of God's redemption and restoration came in the raising up of Cyrus.

The Temple had been given as the place of meeting with the Lord and as the sign of His gracious presence amongst His people. The Temple indicated the hearing, merciful ear of the Lord to the prayers of His people (see 1Kings 8:27ff.) The destruction of the Temple then was felt in terms of the Lord's shutting off His grace and mercy to them. In fact, the Temple had become a point of presumption by the people, who had assumed that it guaranteed the grace and mercy of the Lord even should they persist in their sin and wickedness without repentance – see Jeremiah 7:1–8:–1

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: 2 Stand in the gate of the LORD's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the LORD, all you men of Judah who enter these gates to worship the LORD. 3 Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your doings, and I will let you dwell in this place. 4 Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.' 5 For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly execute justice one with another, 6 if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, 7 then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers for ever. 8 Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail.

The fast for the destruction of the Temple then was not simply a wallowing in self-pity, but rather a confession and acknowledgment that the people had sinned and a seeking of the renewal of God's action of grace to His people. Such a fast only made sense in connection with a determination to live according to God's holy law in the strength of His covenant grace.

The Book of Common Prayer catches up this attitude in its confession, and the exhortation which immediately precedes the confession:

Ye that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbours, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways; Draw near with faith, and take this Holy Sacrament to your comfort; and make your humble confession to Almighty God.

Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Maker of all things, Judge of all men: We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, Which we, from time to time, most grievously have committed, By thought, word, and deed, Against thy Divine Majesty, Provoking must justly thy wrath and indignation against us. We do earnestly repent, And are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; The remembrance of them is grievous unto us; The burden of them is intolerable. Have mercy upon us, have mercy upon us, most merciful Father; For thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ s sake, Forgive us all that is past; and grant that we may ever hereafter Serve and please thee In newness of life, To the honour and glory of thy Name; Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Study 3B: The Scroll of Lamentations

THE FAST OF THE TEMPLES DESTRUCTION AND THE SCROLL OF LAMENTATIONS

1. Key Features of the Fast of the Temples Destruction

Last study we saw the following elements of the Fast of the Temples Destruction:

It was a time of remembering the tragedy of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in the Babylonian invasion and exile.

This was linked to fasting and other activities as sign of mourning and repentance.

Originally it was a time to confess the sins that had led to the judgment of the exile, and to seek afresh the grace of God for His people Israel.

It became an opportunity for Israel to turn from their sins at whatever point in their history, and to seek afresh the reality of the grace of God.

2. The Book of Lamentations

The scroll of Lamentations is placed in English Bible, and LXX, immediately following Jeremiah, and is even called The Lamentations of Jeremiah (the Prophet), but there is nothing explicit in the text that attributes this scroll to Jeremiah s hand. However, parts – especially chapter 3 – are particularly consonant with Jeremiahs mood and outlook. It is probably best to respect the anonymity of the Hebrew text, whilst at the same time recognising the existence of a very ancient tradition which ascribes the book to Jeremiah s hand, probably from a misapplication of 2Chronicles 35:25, which actually speaks of a lament Jeremiah made over the

death of Josiah, not over the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

In Hebrew the scroll is entitled *ecah*, Oh, how – from the word which begins the first, second and fourth chapters. The Rabbis referred to this collection of poems as *qinoth*, dirges or lamentations – and this formed the basis for the name in Latin and English.

The five chapters are each separate poems which have similar structure. Chapters 1, 2, 4, and 5 all have 22 verses, and chapter 3 has 66 verses. Chapters 1 to 4 are what we call acrostic poems – each verse begins with the next letter of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Chapter 5 is not acrostic, but has the 22 verse pattern. Each verse in chapters 1 to 3 generally has 3 lines (there are some exceptions); the reason that in English chapter 3 has 66 verses is that each line of the verses has been numbered. Chapter 3 stands out also because each of the lines in each verse begins with the acrostic letter, unlike the first line of the verse only in the other acrostic poems. Each verse in chapter 4 has 2 lines, and each verse in chapter 5 has one line. Acrostic poetry indicates to the reader that the writer is searching out a theme thoroughly, that he is wanting to explore it from a variety of angles. Perhaps the most famous acrostic poem in the Scriptures is Psalm 119, in which the beauty and glory of the law of God is searched out so thoroughly. So, in the Lamentations, the writer is thoroughly expressing the grief of Israel at the temple's destruction and also trying to come to a thorough understanding as to what this meant for the relationship of the people with the Lord.

Chapter 3 also stands out in the scroll for its pivotal role in defining the theology of the book. Chapters 1 and 5 are summaries of the disaster, chapters 2 and 4 are more explicit detailings of the death and devastation, and chapter 3 moves from a communal focus to an individual's lament which also issues in worship of the Lord. What this man discovers in his soul-searching anguish becomes an appeal to the whole nation to experience that dimension of faith experienced by that representative individual. Right at the heart of chapter 3 –

verses 31 to 36 – is the crux of the whole scroll. Everything leads up to it and flows away from it.

Chapter 1

This chapter describes Jerusalem, alone, deserted, and in mourning. The people are gone into exile and are wandering homeless. The Temple is defiled and destroyed. No one gathers for the appointed feasts. The royal family is no longer ruling. All her wealth has been stolen. The army is destroyed. The city is scourged by famine. There is no one to comfort or to help.

Verse 2 says that what she is bereft of is her collection of lovers, and her friends; these in fact have become her enemies. The questions are in the reader's mind – Did not Jerusalem have one lover, one friend – the Lord? Did He abandon her? Why the plural lovers and friends? Verse 5 tells us that the Lord has made her suffer, for the multitude of her transgressions. Verse 8 speaks of how Jerusalem sinned grievously and therefore became filthy, and because of this her fall is terrible and she is left with no comforter. Verse 12 shows that she understands that this terrible sorrow has come upon her from the hand of the Lord in the day of his fierce anger. Verses 13 to 15 spell this out in detail:

“From on high he sent fire; into my bones he made it descend;
 he spread a net for my feet; he turned me back;
 he has left me stunned, faint all the day long.
 “My transgressions were bound into a yoke; by his hand they were
 fastened together;
 they were set upon my neck; he caused my strength to fail;
 the Lord gave me into the hands of those whom I cannot
 withstand.
 “The LORD flouted all my mighty men in the midst of me;
 he summoned an assembly against me to crush my young men;
 the Lord has trodden as in a wine press the virgin daughter of
 Judah.”

And on through this chapter, the lament makes clear that the disaster that has come upon Jerusalem is thorough and devastating, and that it has come to them from the hand of the Lord as judgment on their sins.

The lament acknowledges the rightness of Gods judgment: verse 18 says, The Lord is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word. Yet there is still the appeal to the Lord for His intervention and help, and particularly for His execution of judgment against those who have so treated His people, even though it is by His command that such things have been done. This terrible judgment has at last caused Israel to turn from her idols and to cry out to Him who is their true lover, their true friend.

Chapter 2

This chapter spells out more thoroughly still the outpouring of God s anger in judgment. Quite clearly the Lord has turned against His people – v. 3: He has withdrawn from them his right hand in the face of the enemy... , and more v. 4: He has bent his bow like an enemy, with his right hand set like a foe... and then v. 5: He has become like an enemy, he has destroyed Israel... Even His own feasts (v. 6), His own vice-regent/king and priests, his altar and his holy place he has rejected. In setting himself against His people, He Himself bears the pain and the judgment. So thorough is Jerusalem’s fall that the poet cannot find any analogy to compare: For vast as the sea is your ruin; who can restore you? (v. 13)

The poet calls the people to cry aloud to the Lord, to bring their sorrow and their tears to the throne of Him who has wrought this devastation. As fierce and full as the wrath of God is, the people are called to call on God against God as it were. They are called upon to present to the Lord in prayer just what His desolations have done amongst the people. Look O Lord and see!

Chapter 3

In this chapter we see the agony of the nation focused in a representative individual, but he also leads the nations to a new and deeper understanding of their situation.

This man has certainly experienced the fullness of the judgment and borne its complete desolation (vv. 1–18). He has known the judgment as Gods own personal opposition and action (see v. 12, cf. 2:4) His final words sum up where this judgment has led him – Gone is my glory, and my expectation from the Lord. He knows that he has no claim on the Lord, that he can presume on nothing.

What is it that comes to him here at the end of his tether? But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope... This man claims God against God; he has received the revelation of the truth of God s character and being and he holds to this even against God. Verses 22 to 36 spell out this truth of the character and being of God. As thorough as the judgment has been.

Study 4A: The Feast of Tabernacles

THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES

1. The Name

This festival has a number of (some slightly) different names in the Old Testament – it is called simply:

the Feast (hahag) (1Kings 8:2,65; Ezra 45:25),

the Feast of the Lord (hahag YHWH) (Lev. 23:39; Jdg. 21:19; Num. 29:12),

the Feast to the Lord (hahag YHWH) (Num. 29:12; Deut. 16:15);

the Feast of Ingathering (hahag ha asiph) (Ex. 23:16; 34:22);
and

the Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths) (hahag hasucloth – from the Hebrew verb sch, to weave) (Lev. 23:34; Deut. 16:13,16; 31:10; 2Chr. 8:13; Ezra 3:4; Zech. 14:16,18,19.)

2. The Time and Duration of the Feast

It was the third of the pilgrim festivals of Israel's year, and was celebrated in the seventh month of the Hebrew year, Tishri. That month began with the Feast of Trumpets on the first day and then was followed on the tenth day with the Day of Atonement. The Feast of Trumpets was a summons of the people into the Lord's presence, and the Day of Atonement was a day of fasting and purification of the Temple, priesthood and people in preparation for the festival to come. Tabernacles began on the fifteenth day of the month and lasted eight days. It coincided with the end of the summer harvest and the wine pressing, and marked the start of autumn.

3. The Observance of the Feast

This feast was one of the holy convocations (a hag, a pilgrim festival) in which all the men of Israel were to gather at the place where the Lord caused His Name to dwell. As well as the men, it was a feast open to wives, children, servants, Levites, aliens, orphans and widows (see Deut. 16:14). By the time of the prophet Zechariah, we see a time coming when not only would it be open to aliens but actually required of them to go up (Zech. 14:16ff). It would seem that the feast that Hannah attended at Shiloh yearly with her husband was the Feast of Tabernacles (1Sam. 1:3,19,27.)

From Lev. 23:33–36, 39–43 we see that the first day of the feast was a Sabbath day; no labour was to be done on it. It was a day of convocation (i.e. gathering). Likewise the closing day, the eighth day was to be a day of gathering at the Temple with abstinence from work. The whole of the feast was to be a time of joy and celebration. Branches of fruit trees, palm trees, leafy trees, and willows were to be waved in jubilation at the temple, and branches were also to be woven into booths (or shelters) in which the Israelites were to camp for the days of the festival. The purpose of the booths was to be a remembrance of the saving acts of God in the Exodus, and a celebration of the covenant loyalty of the Lord. On each of the days of the feast, personal offerings were made to the Lord of flour and oil.

In Numbers 29:12ff we see that there were also communal burnt offerings (an odour pleasing to the Lord) to be made for the whole of the people of Israel. Daily for the first seven days, a number of bulls, two rams, and fourteen unblemished male lambs and their attendant cereal and drink offerings were to be offered. The number of bulls changed each day, beginning with thirteen on the first day, and decreasing each day by one to the seventh day when seven were offered. On the eighth day, one bull, one ram and seven male lambs were offered, as well as a goat for a sin offering, and the attendant cereal and drink offerings. Also at this time, freewill offerings and votive offerings that had been promised during the year were

presented to the Lord – see Numbers 29:39, and Deuteronomy 12:17–18; 15:19–20; 16:13–15.

In Deuteronomy 31:9–13 we learn that every seventh year, the year of release, the Feast of Tabernacles was to be the time when the law of the Lord was to publicly read to the assembly of Gods people, both old and young. We see this happening in Nehemiah 8:13ff after the return from exile.

By the time of the New Testament, a number of additional features had become associated with the Feast of Tabernacles, including the fetching of water from the Shiloh Spring to be poured out as an offering on the altar, the lighting of candles in the Court of the Women for a night-long dance (led by the priests), accompanied by the Levitical singing of the Psalms of Ascent, ending with a solemn procession by the priests to the Temple east gate at day break, to rededicate themselves (and the people) to the Lord. It is this festival that Jesus attended in John 7:14ff.

4. The Purpose of the Feast

The Feast of Tabernacles was at its simplest level a celebration of the goodness of the Lord in His faithful provision of the harvest, and time to express thankfulness to Him. This thankfulness was expressed in a joyful receipt of His gifts and bounty in the feasting and celebration which took place in His presence. Psalm 116 was one of the Psalms sung as the water was poured out on the altar in later Tabernacles celebrations:

12 What shall I render to the LORD for all his bounty to me?

13 I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD,

14 I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people. (Psalm 116:12–14)

This thankfulness stands in contrast to much of Israel s history of grumbling, of complaining, of finding fault with the Lord and His gifts to them. When the people had the first opportunity to enter the Promised Land, the Lord had shown them abundant bounty in the land – branches laden with fruit! – but they had found fault and had not entered; this resulted in the judgment of the wandering.

There was also the remembrance and celebration of the Lords guidance and care of His people through the years of the wilderness wandering from Egypt to the Promised Land. When the Lord promised judgment to faithless Israel through the prophet Hosea (12:9), He declared that He would again cause them to dwell in tents, and this came with a reminder of the appointed feast. So, the Feast of Tabernacles could have served as a warning to Israel of the reality of judgment that could come again to them; it was a call to renewed faithfulness and trust in the Lord.

In this context then, the seven-yearly reading of the law of the Lord (Deuteronomy) was a call to renewed covenant faithfulness, with promises of blessing in the way of faithfulness and obedience to the voice of the Lord, and of covenant curses in the way of unfaithfulness and disobedience.

In Zechariah 14:16–18 we see that the Feast of Tabernacles was also a time to acknowledge the Kingship of the Lord.

Study 4B: The Scroll of Ecclesiastes

THE SCROLL OF ECCLESIASTES AND THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES

1. Key Features of the Feast of Tabernacles

Last study we saw the following elements of the Feast of Tabernacles:

- It was a time of celebration of the goodness of the Lord in the harvest provision.
- It was a time of thanksgiving and remembrance of the Lord's guiding and care of His people in the events of the wilderness wandering, and also served as a warning to Israel of future judgment should they abandon the Lord.
- It was a time for Israel to renew themselves in dedication to the Lord and His Law.
- It was a time to acknowledge the Kingship of the Lord.
- Finally, it was time spent in the Presence of the Lord, and so it pointed Israel to the time of completion of God's salvation history, when that salvation reached to the ends of the earth.

2. The Book of Ecclesiastes

This book is called in Hebrew Qoheleth, of which the Greek translation is Ecclesiastes. If we were to give it an English name we would call it The Preacher as this is the meaning of both these words. This Preacher was a man who addressed an assembly of people, probably not a priest. The book says that it is Solomon who reaches here, but most scholars today, including those who are conservative, consider that this is a symbolic ascription and not a literal one. It

seems most likely that book in its current form comes from the same period of time as the book of Malachi, because of linguistic considerations.

Probably the scroll was read and discussed in the synagogue or in the outer courts of the Temple. This latter setting meant that there was never a fixed congregation. The preaching had to have an element of ad hoc-ness – it was given on the run and was shaped in some way by the interaction with the congregation. Yet for all this, the Preacher has a body of truth he wished to communicate, and he organised and presented it with careful intention. In some ways Qoheleth may have been close to the lecturers in our day who speak on business principles, organization, self-development, salesmanship, coping with stress. Today these speakers mix psychology, religion and other wisdoms to produce a methodology to make the most of life. The Preacher is a man of a different order, being not primarily pragmatic in his concern but realistic.

The fact that the scroll was read in synagogue or Temple court tells us something very significant that we may easily overlook. Those to whom the book is primarily addressed are the religious ones. The sermon we are given in the book is nothing if not realistic. True realism is always found, by those who are avoiding the truth, to be disillusioning. Many have considered the message of the Preacher to be essentially negative or pessimistic. Others accuse him of being a cynic, or a secularist, a satiated and disillusioned pleasure-seeker, or a nihilist. Generally this tells us more of the mind of the critic than the Preacher. Others seem to like him because to their mind he agrees with their agenda on life, but often that too indicates a superficial or narrow reading of the book. The Preacher faces the issues of life, death, pleasure, pain, happiness and grief. He understands the gamut of experience that the course of life can run, and yet he is not disillusioned with it. Religious people are often skeptical, disillusioned and cynical, quite secular really for all their religious claims.

Chapter 3 also stands out in the scroll for its pivotal role in defining the theology of the book. Chapters 1 and 5 are summaries of the disaster, chapters 2 and 4 are more explicit detailings of the death and devastation, and chapter 3 moves from a communal focus to an individuals lament which also issues in worship of the Lord. What this man discovers in his soul-searching anguish becomes an appeal to the whole nation to experience that dimension of faith experienced by that representative individual. Right at the heart of chapter 3 – verses 31 to 36 – is the crux of the whole scroll. Everything leads up to it and flows away from it.

Chapter 1

This chapter describes Jerusalem, alone, deserted, and in mourning. The people are gone into exile and are wandering homeless. The Temple is defiled and destroyed. No one gathers for the appointed feasts. The royal family is no longer ruling. All her wealth has been stolen. The army is destroyed. The city is scourged by famine. There is no one to comfort or to help.

Verse 2 says that what she is bereft of is her collection of lovers, and her friends; these in fact have become her enemies. The questions are in the reader's mind – Did not Jerusalem have one lover, one friend – the Lord? Did He abandon her? Why the plural lovers and friends? Verse 5 tells us that the Lord has made her suffer, for the multitude of her transgressions. Verse 8 speaks of how Jerusalem sinned grievously and therefore became filthy, and because of this her fall is terrible and she is left with no comforter. Verse 12 shows that she understands that this terrible sorrow has come upon her from the hand of the Lord in the day of his fierce anger. Verses 13 to 15 spell this out in detail:

“From on high he sent fire; into my bones he made it descend;
he spread a net for my feet; he turned me back;
he has left me stunned, faint all the day long.
“My transgressions were bound into a yoke; by his hand they were
fastened together;

they were set upon my neck; he caused my strength to fail;
the Lord gave me into the hands of those whom I cannot
withstand.

“The LORD flouted all my mighty men in the midst of me;
he summoned an assembly against me to crush my young men;
the Lord has trodden as in a wine press the virgin daughter of
Judah.”

And on through this chapter, the lament makes clear that the disaster that has come upon Jerusalem is thorough and devastating, and that it has come to them from the hand of the Lord as judgment on their sins.

The lament acknowledges the rightness of God's judgment: verse 18 says, The Lord is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word. Yet there is still the appeal to the Lord for His intervention and help, and particularly for His execution of judgment against those who have so treated His people, even though it is by His command that such things have been done. This terrible judgment has at last caused Israel to turn from her idols and to cry out to Him who is their true lover, their true friend.

Chapter 2

This chapter spells out more thoroughly still the outpouring of God's anger in judgment. Quite clearly the Lord has turned against His people – v. 3: He has withdrawn from them his right hand in the face of the enemy..., and more v. 4: He has bent his bow like an enemy, with his right hand set like a foe... and then v. 5: He has become like an enemy, he has destroyed Israel... Even His own feasts (v. 6), His own vice-regent/king and priests, his altar and his holy place he has rejected. In setting himself against His people, He Himself bears the pain and the judgment. So thorough is Jerusalem's fall that the poet cannot find any analogy to compare: For vast as the sea is your ruin; who can restore you? (v. 13)

The poet calls the people to cry aloud to the Lord, to bring their sorrow and their tears to the throne of Him who has wrought this

devastation. As fierce and full as the wrath of God is, the people are called to call on God against God as it were. They are called upon to present to the Lord in prayer just what His desolations have done amongst the people. Look O Lord and see!

Chapter 3

In this chapter we see the agony of the nation focused in a representative individual, but he also leads the nations to a new and deeper understanding of their situation.

This man has certainly experienced the fullness of the judgment and borne its complete desolation (vv. 1–18). He has known the judgment as God's own personal opposition and action (see v. 12, cf. 2:4). His final words sum up where this judgment has led him – Gone is my glory, and my expectation from the Lord. He knows that he has no claim on the Lord, that he can presume on nothing.

What is it that comes to him here at the end of his tether? But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope... This man claims God against God; he has received the revelation of the truth of God's character and being and he holds to this even against God. Verses 22 to 36 spell out this truth of the character and being of God. As thorough as the judgment has been

Study 5: The Feast of Purim and the Scroll of Esther

THE FEAST OF PURIM

1. The Name

This festival is called Purim (the Hebrew word meaning lots).

2. The Time and Duration of the Feast

It was the last of the festivals of Israel's year, and was celebrated on the fourteenth and fifteenth days in the last month of the Hebrew year, Adar (corresponding to our February–March). This was one month before Passover.

3. The Observance of the Feast

This feast was not prescribed in the law. The institution of Purim and the events that led up to it are set out in the book of Esther, which we will consider in a moment, and the historical evidence points to it being celebrated through the time of the Maccabees (between the Testaments). Purim is not mentioned in the New Testament, but it was widely celebrated by Jews in the time of Josephus.

Whilst the origins of Purim were in the deliverance of Israel from the plots of Haman whilst in exile under Persian rule, as Israel passed in its history from one civilisation to another, other occasions of persecution and opposition arose, and this festival became a general celebration of the Lord's deliverance from Israel's enemies. The thirteenth day is a day of fasting, in remembrance of Esther's fast and prayer before she approached the king. In the evening, the beginning of the fourteenth day, the scroll of Esther is read in the synagogues almost like a pantomime, with listeners shouting, shaking rattles and stamping their feet when Haman's name is read, and blessing the

names of Mordecai and Esther. On the morning, synagogue services are held again and gifts are distributed to the poor and to friends (?Christmas). The rest of the day, and the next day are spent feasting and rejoicing.

4. The Scroll of Esther

Both Jews and Christians were slow in admitting the book of Esther to the canon of Scripture, primarily because of its steadfast refusal to explicitly state the action of God in its narrative. In fact, the words God and Lord do not get used in the whole scroll. And yet the fact of it being in the canon indicates that it has clearly been seen as being the word of the Lord for us. Without being named, the Lord hovers in the narrative as the prime mover of the events, and the book is a testimony to the covenant faithfulness of the Lord to His people working out in the tumultuous events of history. More than that, we see that the Lord is determined to bring about the salvation of the world, despite the plots of Satan and those he energises – like Haman, for if Haman had succeeded in his plot and the Jews had been annihilated, then there would have been no Christ.

Chapter 1 sets the scene for Esthers arrival on the stage. we meet in this chapter the Persian king, Ahasuerus (perhaps better known to us as Xerxes). Susa (v. 2) was the winter capital of his vast empire (unbearably hot during summer). He gathered the princes of his empire for a six month long feast in Susa to display to them his royal glory, and this concluded with a sumptuous and luxurious seven day banquet. As part of that banquet he summoned his queen, Vashti to display her beauty for his guests. Ahasuerus obviously saw all things as serving his own sense of royal importance, and treated Vashti in this manner – as a token of his royal power. The queen refused his summons, and this shamed the king and brought him anger. His response was to get advice from his key wise men on how to handle this matter according to the law. Their advice was that she had not only done wrong to the king, but set a rebellious example to all women within the empire. She was to be disbarred from the privileges of being queen and that another be appointed in her stead,

and that by this action all women throughout the kingdom would be led to give due honour to their husbands.

In chapter 2, Ahasuerus set about searching for a replacement queen. Verse 1 indicates that something had distracted him – probably the years of the disastrous battles with the Greek army at Thermopylae and Salamis. An enormous number of women were gathered to be brought into the harem; the one who pleased the king was to be queen in the stead of Vashti. In this setting we learn of Mordecai, a Benjaminite, and his care for and adoption of his cousin, Hadassah when she was orphaned. Hadassah (or Esther – her Persian name) was very beautiful and was taken amongst those gathered for the harem. In the harem she found favour with the chief eunuch of the harem, Hegai, and she was advanced to the best place in the harem. In the process of selection, Esther found favour with the king and she was made queen in Vashtis place. This then provided a channel for Mordecai to bring news to the king of a plot that he had become aware of amongst the bodyguard of the king, to overthrow him. An investigation of Mordecais allegations proved it to be so, the men were dealt with and the event was recorded in the annals of the kingdom.

In chapter 3, Haman the Agagite is introduced to us. Quite likely he came from the eastern end of the Persian empire. He reached the pinnacle of power under Ahasuerus, and enjoyed the power of his position. The king had commanded that all should do obeisance to him, but Mordecai refused. No reason is given here, but it most likely involved similar issues to those that faced Daniel and the three men in Daniel: to comply would also have been an act of idolatry, an acquiescence to the assumption of divinity by the those in power. Quite clearly Mordecai saw it as a matter of loyal action as a Jew (v. 4). His refusal to comply infuriated Haman, not only against Mordecai, but the whole Jewish people. Haman sought the most propitious time for the unfolding of his plot, seeking the guidance of the gods by the use of the lot (Heb: *pur*) – and learned that the twelfth month was the time to attack. The assent of the king for a move

against the Jews was needed, and easily won by accusing the Jews of rebellion, and promising a bounty of 10000 talents of silver (which Haman would gain by plundering the Jews.) By giving the signet ring to Haman, the command given was sealed and, so, irreversible. This command was then promulgated throughout the whole empire.

In chapter 4 we see Mordecai's response. He tore his clothes and went into mourning – a cry which was undoubtedly a prayer to God for help. This response occurred throughout the realm – fasting, weeping, and mourning, with abasement. News of this was also brought to Esther and she sought news from Mordecai as to why he was so distressed. He gave her a full explanation of the situation, and sought that she go to the king to make supplication for the people. Without the summons or the favour of the king, Esther replied that this would be risky for her – maybe fatal! – and she was not sure that she was in the king's favour, having not been called to him for over a month. Mordecai urged her again – reminding her that she too was under threat. He trusted that relief for the Jews would come from some quarter – Esther's failure to be involved would only remove her from the blessing. He saw that the woman was providentially in this position. Nowhere in this has he mentioned the Lord by name, but clearly in his mind is the sovereignty of the Lord, and His determination to bring salvation to His people, and Mordecai's own trust in the Lord. Esther responded to this by asking Mordecai to gather the people to a fast for three days on her behalf, a time of prayer to seek the Lord's success in her approach to Ahasuerus. Following that time, she would entrust herself to the Lord in approaching the king.

In chapter 5 the king gave Esther an audience. Again nothing in the text explicitly points to this being the Lord's answer to prayer, but we see it. Esther proceeded wisely – again wisdom from the Lord – entertaining the king before leading him to her request. In this we see the providence of the Lord at work again – as indeed in every event in this book. Haman actually misread these events as positive to his

cause, as a favouring of him. His fury with Mordecai was increased and he raised gallows on which to hang him, at his wife's suggestion.

In chapter 6 a providential dream means that the king was reminded of the faithfulness of Mordecai in the warning of the plot, and Ahasuerus realised that he had not rewarded him. He set out to do so, and Haman actually became the agent through whom the reward was to be administered. Initially Haman thought the reward would be for him, and when he was asked as to what the reward should be, he suggested a great honour – and so he had to lead Mordecai through the city proclaiming honour to him! His advisers see in this the beginning of his downfall. Perhaps up to this time Haman had kept secret from his advisers and wife the fact that the plot he had was against the Jews, but now they recognise that a plot against them would fail (much as Balaam had done, when hired to curse Israel.)

Chapter 7 sees Esther's request finally made to the king. Haman was exposed and dumb-founded. His pleading with Esther for his life was interpreted by the king as an attempt at rape. In supreme irony the gallows he had made for Mordecai became the tool of his own execution. He fell into the trap he had so carefully laid for God's person.

In chapter 8 Mordecai is raised to the position formerly occupied by Haman. The edict of Ahasuerus during Haman's time could not be revoked, but Mordecai was given scope to write any edict that would ameliorate the effect of it. So a second decree was issued giving the Jews permission to defend themselves against attack, preemptively dealing with any forces that were likely to come against them on the day before the attack on the Jews was permitted. On hearing this proclamation, Jews throughout the empire rejoiced. The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honour. In fact, many from the nations declared themselves to be Jews in response to the rejoicing.

In chapter 9, the day arrives that the proclamation referred to. The day was changed from one of defeat for the Jews to one of victory

The Festive Scrolls

over their enemies. Verse 10 indicates that the Jews did not seek plunder at this time – only deliverance from their enemies. Thus the feast of Purim had its origins. **Chapter 10** closes with a final historical note, attesting to the wise use Mordecai made of his authority.