

Count off seven weeks from the time you begin to put the sickle to the standing grain. ¹⁰ Then celebrate the Feast of Weeks to the LORD your God by giving a freewill offering in proportion to the blessings the LORD your God has given you. ¹¹ And rejoice before the LORD your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name—you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, the Levites in your towns, and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows living among you. ¹² Remember that you were slaves in Egypt, and follow carefully these decrees.

¹³ Celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days after you have gathered the produce of your threshing floor and your winepress. ¹⁴ Be joyful at your Feast—you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, and the Levites, the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns. ¹⁵ For seven days celebrate the Feast to the LORD your God at the place the LORD will choose. For the LORD your God will bless you in all your harvest and in all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete.

¹⁶ Three times a year all your men must appear before the LORD your God at the place he will choose: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles. No man should appear before the LORD empty-handed: ¹⁷ Each of you must bring a gift in proportion to the way the LORD your God has blessed you. (Deuteronomy 16:9-17)

Celebrate!

Do suicide rates go up during the holidays? Are people more depressed from Thanksgiving to New Year's than they are any other time of the year? What do you think? If you believed what you often see on TV, you'd be convinced that our population is going to drop over the next six weeks. But you know what? Most studies show that suicide rates actually go down during the holidays. They peak in the spring and in the fall. But that doesn't mean that the holidays are easy. Stress levels often go up during the weeks and days before a holiday – there's just so much to do. And it's often true that when families get together unresolved issues surface. Still, most of us look forward to Christmas and Thanksgiving, even though we do experience more stress and sometimes serious disappointment about how it went. In the Old Testament lesson that we have before us tonight, we see that God invented holidays and gave them to us as a gift. Twice tonight, God tells Israel to rejoice. He doesn't suggest it. He doesn't encourage it. He commands it because he loves us and he wants us to have joy. So tonight as we prepare for Thanksgiving tomorrow, let's take to heart God's love for us. My friends, **celebrate!**

I.

Now, God did not actually command the American holiday of Thanksgiving. The two holidays that are commanded in these verses are ceremonial law. God commanded them both as part of Israel's Old Testament worship. When Jesus came, God's Old Testament calendar of celebrations came to an end. But the concept of celebration goes beyond those Old Testament laws. It's part of how we Christians respond to the love that God shows us. Both of these holidays help us to see the attitude that fits a Christian best on Thanksgiving: **celebrate all that God has done for you!**

What were the holidays God commanded here? The Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles. The Feast of Weeks comes after counting off seven weeks after Passover—hence the name. The Feast of Tabernacles comes a little later and is named for the tent-like structures that the people made to remember their time in the wilderness. Both of these holidays were harvest festivals. I wonder if we can appreciate just how big a deal a harvest festival was in the ancient world? We can go to the grocery store and buy any kind of fruit or vegetable any time of the year. And it's always fresh. That just wasn't true in the ancient world. Even kings couldn't get fresh oranges in the winter. You only got fresh fruits and vegetables when they were harvested. The rest of the time, you had to eat canned or dried fruits and vegetables. For ten or eleven months, you watched your food supply slowly dwindle while you waited for what was growing in your field to ripen. Then, for a brief moment, you had more food in your barn than you were going to have for a whole year. And it was fresh and sweet like you wouldn't get it again for months. It's not surprising that almost every ancient culture celebrated harvest festivals. That's what Thanksgiving is, too. It started as a celebration of the first crop that came in after the first horrible winter that the Pilgrims spent starving at Plymouth. So when God tells his Old Testament to rejoice in these festivals, a great deal of what he says applies to us.

He told them to rejoice in the rich bounty he was giving them. We live in the most prosperous society in the history of the world. We have more food and better quality food available to us for less money than any people in history. That's before we add in bigger houses with heating and air conditioning and indoor plumbing or multiple cars – sometimes more than we can fit in our garages, or so much clothing that most of us need to go through our closets and get rid of stuff we just don't wear anymore. But does all that physical prosperity make us more grateful to the Lord? I'm not sure that it does. I think we've become just a little bit entitled – we expect all that stuff as the minimum that an American should have. So this is a good opportunity for us to remember just how richly God has blessed us and rejoice because it shows that he loves us. Rejoice because every day of our lives he showers us with more physical blessings that we can count.

But that's not all God called his Old Testament people to celebrate. God told them to remember that they were once slaves in Egypt but he had brought them out and led them through the wilderness and given them a home. When God said this, they hadn't actually gotten to that home yet. But God knew what he was doing and he wasn't saying this just for that generation who witnessed the plagues and marched through the Red Sea. He wanted Israel to remember his love for the next 1500 years until Christ came because they were God's chosen people. Every blessing he gave them on this earth was a sign of the love he had for them.

That couldn't be more true for us. God has set us free not from physical slavery but from slavery to sin and death and hell. You don't have to think very hard to recognize your own sin – like that ingratitude we all feel. After you're done making excuses or comparing yourself to other people who are worse or insisting that you're a good person, what you have left is guilt. You know that you've done wrong. You also know that you can't stop sinning. It's going to happen again tonight, to say nothing of tomorrow. We were born slaves to sin. But Jesus set us free. He died and paid for all our sins and all our guilt. He rose and God forgave us. The Holy Spirit came to us in the gospel and made us his new people. He works in our hearts to assure we are forgiven, to take away our guilt and our pain. Now, we're on their way to the Promised Land. When we get there, it's going to be better than anything we can even imagine. What more could we have to celebrate?

God gave us this tremendous gift by bending down from heaven and telling us. After the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70, the Jewish people couldn't celebrate these festivals anymore. God told them that every male had to come to the temple three times a year and celebrate. But there was no temple anymore. So the rabbis shifted the emphasis of the Feast of Weeks away from God's gifts in the harvest to God's gifts in his word. For almost twenty centuries now, Jewish people have used this festival to commemorate the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai. They focus on counting off those weeks and relate it to the people wandering through the desert waiting to get to Mt. Sinai, where God came to them and made them his people. We Christians recognize that we wouldn't be God's true people if we didn't have the gospel. We wouldn't realize how blessed we are in every part of our lives if God didn't teach us that every good and perfect gift comes from him. So we give thanks to God that he loved us enough to share that word with us and give us faith. Celebrate God's love this Thanksgiving.

II.

And don't do it alone. That's the other thing that really comes out in this reading. Twice in this reading, God lists who they should include in their celebration. He starts with their children, so family celebrations are something that God favors. He includes servants, which would've been part of your household back then. But a modern example might be people who work for you or people whom you pay to do things for you. He lists the Levites – people who worked at the temple. These were people God called to serve their spiritual needs. And finally, he includes the alien and the fatherless and the widow. These were people who were poor and alone and who had no rights in their society. My friends, **celebrate with the people God has given you.**

So how do we include all those people in our celebrations? Again, this is Old Testament ceremonial law, so God isn't making a rule here that we have to invite all these people to our house for Thanksgiving. But there is a spiritual point here: true thanksgiving to God includes other people. Thanking God means sharing our joy with those around us, with those we are close to, inside and outside our families, with those who are part of our spiritual family at church and with those who are in need. Real faith and real observance of God's law means showing love to those who need it.

So what would that look like among us? It's going to vary in every family. Some people might decide that they're going to work at a soup kitchen on Thanksgiving serving meals to people in need. That's a great way to show your faith. Other people might celebrate with their families and use the time to enjoy the closest

relationships in our lives. That's God pleasing, too. But share the joy. Be a person whose faith shines out in service to others. Look for ways to ease the burden of your family members, of your church family and of those you come in contact with in our society.

And then finally, God told his people not to come to his temple empty handed. He told them to bring offerings on these festivals that were in keeping with how God had blessed them. For us today, that reminds us that the way God chooses to share the joy about Jesus is through the church. Our offerings support the preaching of the gospel. God calls us, too, to bring an offering that reflects how he has blessed us.

Now, all that might make us feel just a little guilty. Do we show real gratitude toward God by sharing our joy with the people around us? How much do we do for those in need or even for those who are hurting in our congregation or our family? Have we often come to God's house empty handed? Maybe we are guilty. But the key to dealing with that is not to beat ourselves up over it. That doesn't actually make God happy. The key is not to balance every failure with a good deed. We can never keep up. The key is repentance. It's admitting we haven't always reflected God's love for us. That's sin. But we trust that Jesus has taken all that sin away. We know that he laid down his life on the cross so that all our selfishness and thoughtlessness is wiped away. God has forgiven us in Christ. That is what gives us peace.

Now, as forgiven and loved children God calls us to celebrate all that he has done. Part of that celebration is a truly generous spirit. Not something trumped up because we feel guilty, but a grateful response to God's love. I'm not going to stand up here and list ways that you can be generous. I could never finish the list and I don't know what opportunities you have in your life. But I will encourage you to think about your families. God gave them to you. Share your joy with them. I bet there's someone in your family that really needs it. I will encourage you to think about your church. Share your joy with the people God has gathered into this congregation. I'm sure there are people who would deeply appreciate it. I will encourage you to remember all those who are struggling and hurting all around us. God calls us to help them. How you do it is between you and God. But celebrate his love by sharing that love with the people around you. And don't forget that that includes supporting the work of sharing the gospel here and throughout the world.

God celebrates by showing us his love. That's how he calls us to celebrate. Show love, my friends. No one has a better reason to celebrate than you do. You are children of God. You are watched over and cared for by the Ruler of the universe and he promises that you will always have all that you need. You are forgiven and loved and looking forward to eternity with Jesus. Celebrate and share that love. Amen.