



Why Should You Rejoice at the Feast?

You are specifically commanded by God to rejoice at the Feast of Tabernacles. But why? And what should you rejoice about?

By Clayton Steep

There's no doubt about it. We all like to be happy.

God designed us that way. He knows happiness is the best state to be in.

I Timothy 1:11 calls God the "blessed God." The word *blessed* here actually can be translated "happy." God is the "happy God."

And that is the way He wants us to learn to be always. He ordained His commandments and laws for the purpose of producing and preserving happiness.

The Bible shows God wants us to learn to rejoice all the time. "Rejoice evermore," urged the apostle Paul (I Thess. 5:16).

Paul would, of course, be the first to agree that this life has periods of severe trial, even for Christians. But, considering the final outcome — that all things work together for good to those who love God (Rom. 8:28) — we should be able to rejoice even in trials (Jas. 1:2). "Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice," Paul emphasized (Phil. 4:4).

If that is true all year long, it is especially so at the Festival season.

Among the instructions God gave about how to observe His feasts, time and again He gave the command to rejoice in regard to the Feast of Tabernacles. "Ye shall rejoice before the Lord your

God," says Leviticus 23:40, for example.

Not only should you as an individual rejoice, but you should help others rejoice. The Feast is a time to come together with members of your family to worship before the Creator. It is a family occasion. And those who are alone — that is to say, without members of their physical families in attendance — are to be included in the rejoicing as well (Deut. 16:14).

Everyone is to have a happy time!

God's Church is one family. There should be no hard feelings among any of its members at the Feast (or, for that matter, at any other time!), no discourtesy, no competing for advantages, no selfishness — only seeking to give and serve in unity of spirit (Ps. 133:1). Each of us should, as much as lies within us, assure that not one unpleasant incident mars the Feast for ourselves or for anyone else. There should be only rejoicing.

God's Holy Days are rich with true meaning. Rejoice in that meaning and have a good time

Photos: Jeff Zhorne, Jonathan Jewell



within the bounds of God's laws. That's the rule of the Feast.

Rejoice about the past

Whatever your background, whatever kind of life you had before becoming a Christian, rejoice about it. Rejoice about the experiences you had, the lessons you learned. Be thankful for that which was pleasant



and profitable. And for that which was not pleasant, at least you can be thankful that it is past.

Since you have been called to a new life in Christ, you have left



behind all the sins and mistakes of your former life. This certainly is a cause for rejoicing: "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered" (Ps. 32:1). "My lips shall greatly rejoice when I sing unto thee," David exclaimed, "and my soul, which thou hast redeemed" (Ps. 71:23).

Rejoice also about the experi-

But What If 'Everything Goes Wrong'?

By Art Docken

The barracks was a long, narrow room with a door at one end and a single window at the other. Bare, unpainted, wooden walls and worn, splintered floorboards made the room about as inviting as a county jail.

Ancient cots — 10 to 15 of them — sat perpendicular to the wall. Equally aged pads served for mattresses and a single, threadbare blanket lay on each bed, to be used to ward off the near-freezing night chill. What few belongings the occupants possessed were hung from nails driven into the wall.

The common toilet was in another building down the muddy street. The shower room was in the other direction. The floor and one wall in the shower room were concrete. Out of the wall protruded several pipes from which poured water of one temperature — cold. Of course, there was no heat in any of the rooms.

Sound like a prisoner of war camp? A young man who lived under those conditions wrote to our office in Manila, Philippines, some years ago and described his feelings during his days at that camp.

"I thank God for making it possible for me to attend the Feast of Tabernacles!" he wrote. This was, he said, the first time he had ever slept on a real bed, the first time he had ever used a shower. It was also the first time he had ever

eaten three balanced meals in one day, fellowshiped with God's people, sang psalms, heard a choir singing praises to God or listened to a minister of God preach a sermon.

Yes, this young man was describing his first Feast of Tabernacles at Baguio City, Philippines. The drab barracks, cold showers, sparse meals, the rather inexperienced choir and even the speakers were all something rare and wonderful to him.

"Now," he declared, "I know what the world tomorrow will be like — I can imagine how wonderful it will be."

This man truly rejoiced in the Feast in spite of what many would have considered unbearably harsh conditions. For him, perhaps, it was easy to rejoice — so much of what he experienced was new and better than he had ever known before. It's unfortunate, but many of us are not that "blessed."

God commands His people to rejoice at the Feast no matter what the conditions are (Deut. 16:14-15, Lev. 23:40). And yet we are often beset by problems, both great and small, in preparing for and attending the Feast.

How can we rejoice when our car breaks down or our accommodations are not as nice as we had hoped for? How can we rejoice when a family member becomes ill and misses sermons, dances and other activities? Does God really expect us to rejoice if everything seems

to go wrong and we think we are having a terrible time?

Yes, He does. Remember, God does not promise that you will have no problems. He does not command you to "have a great time." He commands you to *rejoice*, and there is a difference.

Certainly, most of us have a wonderful time at the Feast. It is exciting to gather together with God's people, sing praises to God with one voice, hear inspired sermons. But we will have problems. We all do. But that, too, is part of the Feast.

The first year that the Feast of Tabernacles was in Baguio City, a typhoon raged through the Philippines. Roads were washed out, airports closed, electrical power was cut. Half of the members were unable to even reach Baguio City.

At the opening service a few candles were lit and some who had flashlights brought them to shine on the minister, Pedro Ortiguero. As the members sat in the drafty hall, wet and cold, Mr. Ortiguero read from God's Word the instructions concerning the Feast of Tabernacles. When he reached verse 40 of Leviticus 23 he read with special emphasis, "And ye shall *rejoice* before the Lord your God seven days."

"Brethren," said Mr. Ortiguero, "God commands us to rejoice and so we are going to rejoice in spite of everything!" How could they rejoice? Because they understood that the Feast pictured a better world tomorrow. They realized that



ences you've had so far in your Christian life. Recall what God has done for you — the times He has helped you, the strength He has given you, the lessons He has taught you.

out His salvation in your life.

Rejoice about the present

The Feast of Tabernacles is an excellent opportunity to take inventory of all your blessings, to

Never forget these experiences. Take time to recall and profit from them. The very reason you are now dwelling in a temporary tabernacle of flesh is to learn lessons that will qualify you for an eternal inheritance. Rejoice that God has been working

be thankful for them. And to tell others about them.

Have you ever been to a get-together or party where the conversation just seemed to be stuck on trivia? Actually, it probably didn't stick there very long; it more than likely began to degenerate as conversations in such situations often do.

It is to be hoped that you will not find yourself in such a circumstance at the Feast. But if you do, start referring to some of the things you are thankful for. Do it in a natural way — not like some of the boisterous, so-called testimonies certain religious groups in the world are noted for. You aren't trying to "witness for

the Feast looked into the future — that it did not focus on today's problems.

The difficulties we encounter in order to observe the Feast are as much a part of the Feast as are the sermons and other activities. Do you really think that all will be perfect on this earth on the day Christ returns? Certainly not.

The earth will be a chaotic mess (Isa. 24:1-6), probably similar to the wasteland described in Genesis 1:2. Someone will have to clean up that mess and we, God's people, will be the only ones able to do it properly.

Gathering and teaching Israel will be difficult. They will have been prisoners of war, half dead and still ignorant of God's way of life. It will take patience to teach them the proper way to live. And that's just Israel. Every other nation on earth will also require training.

But we will do it, patiently working with those people just as we must carefully deal with the unconverted (and sometimes the "converted"!) at the Feast. Not everyone will suddenly rush to Jerusalem to accept God's ways — Zechariah 14:16-19 proves that.

Ezekiel 38 and 39 describe a war that will take place against Israel after they have been reestablished and will be living in peace and prosperity. Isaiah 30:20-21 shows how we will need to be constantly working with people who want to go their own way.

All mankind will learn a new language (Zeph. 3:9). Have you ever tried to learn a foreign language? That will take much time and patience right there.

The waste cities will be rebuilt (Isa.

61:4), but they will be rebuilt properly. That means a lot of tearing down and cleaning up. We will solve massive problems of food and water supply, proper sanitary facilities — even providing vines and fig trees (Mic. 4:4)!

Problems? Certainly. But every Feast of Tabernacles will see more people coming to rejoice before the Lord. Every year greater numbers of people from every nation will venture to Jerusalem to learn the laws and ways of the God of Israel (Isa. 2:1-4, Mic. 4:1-5).

As the years pass there will be less sickness, fewer dying of famine, less rebellion, less suffering around the earth. It will take time, but at every Feast we will be able to look back at a year of tremendous progress and rejoice before the Lord in person.

We have always encountered problems at the Feast of Tabernacles. Hurricanes, wind, rain and snowstorms have disrupted many Feasts. Did you ever have your tent blow down in one of Big Sandy's famous rainstorms? Remember the hurricane that almost washed out the first Feast on Jekyll Island, Ga. — the blizzards that tied up traffic in Squaw Valley, Calif.? And speaking of traffic, how about those traffic jams at Lake of the Ozarks, Mo.? Does the Feast come right at harvest time for you, or do you have trouble getting your children excused from school?

The list could go on. God's people have faced, and either solved or endured, every problem, and still every Feast is "the best yet."

Some few do complain, but they see

the Feast only in light of the present. They forget the words of the apostle Paul: "For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18).

The young man who rejoiced in spite of the rather primitive conditions in the Philippines was able to do so because he saw a great contrast between what he had always known in this world and the conditions prevailing at God's Feast. He rejoiced because he could see that God's way is best and because he knew that in the Millennium God's influence will permeate the whole earth.

Today, most of our members in the Philippines enjoy better accommodations than were available at that first Feast — and they still rejoice before the Lord, looking forward to the Kingdom of God ruling on this earth.

Each year God's Church grows — in spite of problems. Those problems have only strengthened our resolve that God's way certainly is the only way to live.

Jesus Christ "for the joy that was set before him [the joy of knowing about the Kingdom of God] endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds" (Heb. 12:2-3).

How much more should we endure the petty problems that may come our way during God's feasts and wholeheartedly rejoice before our God! □

the Lord," as they term it. You are just expressing gratitude to other brethren for some of the things God has done for you.

God listens for such conversations and they are noted in a book of remembrance, as Malachi 3:16 points out. Start the ball rolling. You may be surprised at how the whole tenor of conversation changes. (If it doesn't change, perhaps you ought to consider "rejoicing" elsewhere!)

Be thankful for the fact that God has called you, that you are among those personally and individually selected by the almighty God to be part of His Work and to partake of salvation now. Be thankful for the Holy Spirit, the Church and the brethren.

In addition to all the blessings in the spiritual realm, be grateful for all the physical blessings you have. Take time during the Feast to think about them. And to rejoice about them.

Rejoice in trials

It's easy to rejoice when all is going well, but how can you rejoice when things are not going smoothly, when you have major problems to go back to after the Feast, when you are up against an obstacle, persecution, even physical pain? That question is often asked.

But on what level are such problems? Are they not on the physical, material level — that is to say, the level having to do with this present, temporary existence? Of course they are!

Not a one of them can rob you of your eternal inheritance. Let's keep things in perspective! The reason we reside in temporary dwellings annually at the Feast of Tabernacles is to remind us that this life is only for a short while. We are only pilgrims.

We need to stop letting this limited, transitory, earthly sphere dominate our thoughts. "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth," wrote Paul (Col. 3:2, Revised Standard Version). How well we do that will determine how much we can rejoice even in the face of severe trials.

If, with the eyes of faith, we are looking to Jesus Christ and the deliverance He shall surely provide — at the time that is best for us, in the way that is should be able to deprive us of joy?

No problem in the world can take our salvation from any of us against our will. Read carefully Romans 8:35-39, letting the meaningful words sink in: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . .

"Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Rejoice about God's laws

We should rejoice at the Feast about the way of life God has given us — His laws and commandments. This is contrary to our carnal, natural minds. But let's let that part of us that is being converted by God's Spirit rejoice.

Paul admitted his nature was contrary to God's laws (Rom. 7:23-25). But, he wrote, "I delight in the law of God after the inward man" (verse 22). As David expressed it, "The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart" (Ps. 19:8).

If you have been in God's Church for any length of time, you no doubt know what an exhilarating experience it is when you do everything right according to God's instructions and the results are strikingly obvious: Everything turns out just fine. And you wonder, Why can't I do that more often?

You can. We all can, if we put more effort into it. After all, what is more important during this short period of time we are dwelling in these tabernacles of flesh

than to learn to obey and delight in God's laws?

Rejoice about the future

As God's children, our lot — our inheritance — is not in this life. Our hope is to awake in the resurrection, or to be instantly changed at the Second Coming of Christ (Ps. 17:15). We should never lose sight of that great occasion. At the Feast we are celebrating the fact that this fleeting life is not all there is. Far from it. What really counts is the life to come. And only what leads to that life matters now.

If, at the Feast location you attend this year, you have a view of the stars in the night sky, take time to look up at them. Gaze at the heavens. Let your mind try to encompass all those lights. Out there in the known universe are an estimated hundred billion galaxies, each with a hundred billion stars. And who knows what lies beyond that? Yet God comprehends it all. He created it all. He controls it all.

What does that say about the level upon which the God Family lives and operates? Can you imagine yourself someday stepping out of the physical existence that now confines you and "inhabiting eternity" along with God (Isa. 57:15)? Can you imagine yourself sharing the inheritance of all things with Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:17)?

Well, try to imagine it. Get used to the thought, because it is in your future and it is going to happen to you if you remain faithful to your calling!

The cheap tinsel this world has to offer can't even begin to compare to the glorified state we shall enter. The Feast of Tabernacles pictures that wonderful time. What a blessing it is to understand the meaning of God's feasts and to be able to rejoice in what they portray!

"Blessed is the people that know the joyful sound [an expression often translated "the festal sound" or "the sound of the trumpet"]: they shall walk, O Lord, in the light of thy countenance. In thy name shall they rejoice all the day" (Ps. 89:15-16). □