

Yahweh's Banquets

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[0 : 00] So as we come into Deuteronomy 16, I want you to imagine with me that you are a 12-year-old Jewish boy named Zach, living in Israel 80 years after Deuteronomy.

You live on a farm with your five brothers and sisters, your six uncles and aunts, and more cousins than you can count, with three dogs, five grandparents, 48 sheep, which you take care of because you've become very good with the sling. A number of people have also attached themselves to your family, including Uncle Amen Hop from Egypt, who eats smelly food and tells very strange stories, and has two twin daughters who tease you constantly and speak a completely different language, and they're very confusing to you, and there are 22 chickens. And you're absolutely exhausted because you've just come home from one of your three favourite weeks in the year, three long family camps where you gather up all your family and extended household, and you head down to the sanctuary in Gilgal. You live in tents with all the other families from your town and from all over Israel, eating more food than you can possibly imagine, and having a ball with the other kids. And it's April, and you've just come back from the Passover festival. And it was mayhem on the first night. On the first night, you get to stay up all night, no bedtime, and eat barbecued lamb.

And then for the rest of the week, you have to eat this revolting matzah bread without leaven, even though the rest of the food is pretty good. And the games that are organised by your older cousins are fantastic, especially raiding the tents of those boys from the tribe of Reuben, who always seem to be able to have candies in their tents. And now you're back with the family, and it's the Shabbat meal, and everyone is around the table, and your curiosity has got the better for you, better of you. And you say to your father, Father, I have some questions. Can I ask them?

And there's a bit of silence goes around the table. A number of cousins lift their eyes to the roof. Some of them pretend to yawn. Ezzie offers to take the plates out for the first time in his life.

[2 : 26] But your father puts his hand up. He says, of course, Zach, ask away. So if you're Zach, you say, I've got three questions, Dad. And here is my first question. When we go up, why do we go up to the sanctuary when we go up to the sanctuary? I mean, the barley is ripe and ready to gather, and we don't touch it. We all race off to Gilgal to have the Passover feast. Why do we wait till after we've gathered in the grain and then go? And why do we go at all? I mean, the twins say that no one in Egypt celebrates Passover. Why are we the only ones to do it? And why do we have to eat that matzo bread? Tastes disgusting. And your father turns to you and says, well, that's actually three questions, Zach. But the basic answer is this. It's because Yahweh is our God and we are different.

And it's Yahweh, our God, who invites us to come and appear before him three times a year. That's why we have these three festivals, Passover, Weeks and Booths. And when we go up there, we're celebrating the great rescue that we had from Egypt because we were slaves and Pharaoh wouldn't let us go.

And God caused plagues to come on Egypt, including the last one, where the angel of death passed over the land. But for all of us who sacrificed the Passover lamb, God passed over us and then rescued us from Egypt. And it all happened, you remember, that night in such a hurry, we weren't able to make proper bread or let it rise. And so we ate unleavened bread. We call it the bread of affliction because of our suffering in Egypt. And that's the start of our year. And that's why we go up. And if you're Zach, you might say something like, yeah, but Dad, you were never in Egypt. Our grandma and grandpa were never in Egypt. We were never slaves. And your father would say, yes, Zach, that's another way that we're different. You know how sad it is when great-grandma lost her memory. She couldn't really remember who she was. She couldn't remember her name or our names. Remember that the memories were up there. She just didn't know that they belonged to her. And one of the reasons we go up,

Zach, is because redemption from Egypt is your memory. We go up to Gilgal to make sure the memories belong to us because it's our memories who tell us who we are. That's the way God works. He's bound himself to us over generations. You remember Moses said, the eternal God is your refuge from generation to generation. So when we go to the feasts, what we're doing is we're deliberately remembering.

We're entering into the experience. And God says to you and to me, he says, you, Zach, you were a slave. God rescued you from slavery and brought you to this land. And when we meet in the presence of God in the sanctuary, we live that experience again for that first generation. We're there.

[5 : 39] Okay, Dad, you say, I've got a second question and everyone shifts in their places. Your father says, well, you've already had five questions actually. Oh, please, Dad. Okay. Ask your second question.

Question two. Last year, Dad, at the Feast of Weeks, why did you take up so much grain and feed everyone else? Why didn't you keep it and make a bit of money? And your father says, that's a very good question.

Of course, God doesn't need us to give him anything. He doesn't force us to give him anything. God wants us to enjoy his blessings in his presence with others. But this is another way that we are different from other nations. Our God, Yahweh, blesses us because he delights to do it and to draw us closer to him. And the free will offering that we give to him shows how God includes us in the power of blessing others. See, when God gave this festival, Moses told us that we should bring a free will offering. How much? Just as much as God blesses you. And how much has God blessed us? You remember, Zach, last year, the crop was just amazing, particularly the grain and the grapes. You know, we made so much wine, we couldn't drink it in 10 years. You show how much you think God has blessed you by your offering. Two years ago, there wasn't much in the harvest. But last year, it was terrific.

And when we take it up, the idea, Zach, is that God is the host of the festival. He owns the land. He sends the rain. He makes the crop grow. He pours down his blessing. And by gathering at the sanctuary and giving generously our free will offering, we connect all those blessings to God again and to each other. Do you remember the Shimon farm in the next town? Remember, Shimon had five years of just amazing crops, more than anybody else around. And he began to think that he was a very clever farmer and he grew power. He grew proud. He thought he had the magic touch. And so he stopped bringing the free will offering and he turned it into money. And he just forgot that it was God who had done the blessing in the first place. And now what is left of the farm? It's nothing but weeds.

Okay, son, that's enough. Time to clean up and go to bed. And Zach says, yeah, dad, I got another question, but I just want to ask you this on your own. And your father says, you're just trying to get out of the cleanup. No, no, dad, I really want to ask you this on your own. All right, Zach, he says.

[8 : 14] Let's go outside. Just one more question between you and me. And so you go outside the tent and it's a beautiful night. It's getting cool. The stars are in the sky and you walk a little way to the vineyard and you say to dad, here's my third question, dad. Why do we have Uncle Amenhop from Egypt living with us? You know, why do we welcome Egyptians? They were the ones that enslaved us.

They're not even Jewish. And why do we feed those kids from Moab who lost their parents last year? And why do so many widows join us at the feast? I mean, don't they have families? Sometimes it feels like you love Amenhop, the Egyptian more than you love us. And Zach's father is quiet for a while.

And he says, Zach, do you think God loves us? Yes. Do you think God loves the aliens? Those who come from other countries who decide to stay here as sojourners, God fearers? Zach, you remember in the law of Moses in Deuteronomy chapter 10, which you've already learned off by heart. God says, look up at the stars. And in chapter 10, verse 22, we read this. Moses said, your fathers went down to Egypt, 70 persons. And now the Lord, your God has made you as numerous as the stars of heaven. Look up.

Behold, to the Lord, your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth. And that is all, all that is in it. And you may say, if you're Zach, yeah, dad, I remember that. And that's where God says that he loves our fathers. And that's why he's chosen us. Yes, says dad. But do you remember what God says about those who are in need? In chapter 10, verse 18, we read this. God executes

justice for the fatherless and the widow and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you are sojourners in the land of Egypt. Son, we love others because God first loved us. We love those in need like a man and his twins because God loves them. And this is another way that we are different from other nations. We love outsiders. We are generous to others because God has been generous to us. We bless others with the blessings that we have received from God because you cannot out give God. Now, Zach, go to bed.

[10 : 58] You're absolutely exhausted. No more procrastination. And I hear you need a good sleep because there are some feral dogs you need to take the sling to tomorrow. And that, friends, is Deuteronomy 16.

And I want to draw out two lessons from this section of God's word. Two things it teaches us. The first is the shape of family. Here in Deuteronomy 16 and throughout the book of Deuteronomy, God gives us an expanded view of what makes a family. When God saves his people, he draws the map of family differently than the way we do it today in a bigger way than the nuclear family of dad, mum, two, 2.1 children or whatever it is. At the end of the book of Deuteronomy in chapter 32, Moses teaches Israel to sing a song. And in verse 6 of that song, he says, is Yahweh God, is he not your father who created you, who made you and established you. And the fact that God is our father changes the way we think about family.

And it's very interesting because this is a thousand years before Jesus Christ came and taught us to call God our father in heaven. God still puts himself forward as the father of his people. This has radical implications for the shape of our family. In our chapter that we read earlier, in chapter 16, in the festival of weeks, in verse 11, we read this, And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you, your son, your daughter, your male servant, your female servant, the Levite who is within your towns, the sojourner, the fatherless, the widow, who are among you at the place the Lord your God will choose to make his name dwell there.

It's exactly the same list in the Feast of Booths. And that's because the household included people who were usually marginalised and dependent, the alien and the poor. This is particularly poignant for us at a time of coronavirus. We're so fatigued by isolation. And Vancouver is already the most disconnected and detached and distrustful city in North America. But we're made for relationships. We crave physical closeness to others. And social distancing and forced isolation is not good for us long term. And this morning, Deuteronomy comes to us like rain on dry ground. It tells us that God is our father. That we have a kinship that is deeper than genetics. And includes many who are in our lives who may be in need or whom God puts in our way. But you know, just imagine lifting Zach out and bringing him forward 3,500 years to today and plunking him down in a family in Vancouver. [14 : 03] Instead of being in a family, an extended family, hearing stories from his grandparents, he would see the family sitting around a TV, watching the stories of other families, and then going to their rooms where everyone has their own little screen.

You see, Jesus enlarged, radically enlarged family. The Son of God came to give us new birth into the family of God. And we learn through Jesus that we can be adopted by God the Father, given the Holy Spirit of adoption. And we suddenly find ourselves with brothers and sisters who are very different from us. And God gives us a responsibility for them because we belong to each other at a level that's even deeper than DNA. I've experienced this almost all my life. I've been loved and cared for by so many who were not related to me by birth, but by new birth. And I see this all the time as the minister and the pastor of St. John's, particularly in the generosity expressed in small groups. And if I was a Vancouverite and I didn't know much about Jesus Christ, the idea that Christians see themselves as a family, that they have this stability and security of spiritual bonds that express itself in love, and that they're open to others and to outsiders, it would make me want to make me long to become a Christian or at least to come and have a look. That's the first lesson, the shape of family. The second lesson is quite obvious, the shape of time. God shapes time and the lives of his people because he wants to shape their hearts and their souls and their lives toward him and toward each other. Now, before the pandemic, our lives tended to just be overscheduled and overwhelmed.

But look what God does here in chapter 16. He shapes their very time so that they will not be overwhelmed, but so that they would overflow with his blessing. And God commands these rhythms that root people in the land and in the blessing so that his blessings flow through them to those in need for hospitality and for blessing and for generosity. That's what this is about. God shapes the time, the life cycle of his people in the land around his blessing and generosity. So he gives them

one day a week as rest, the Sabbath, a day to put down being productive, allowing God to be God, recognising the gift of time comes to us from his hands. And then each year there are three festivals, as we've read in our chapter, in March and in May and in October, where you go to the sanctuary and you eat up for more than a week, eight days at a time, sharing with each other and eating in the presence of God. And in chapter 14, every year you give one tenth a tithe of all you produce and then you eat it with your extended household. And then every three years you take your tithe, tenth of all your produce, and you give it to the alien and to the fatherless and to the widow who are in your town for a bang-up dinner. And every seven years you release everyone who owes you anything. Why? It's because it's overflow. So in chapter 15, verse 10, when God instructs them to do this, he says, because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake.

And then every seven years in chapter 15, everyone who comes to work for you, servant or slave, you offer to free them. And if they want to go off on their own, you don't resent them. But in chapter 15, verse 14, you're told, furnish them liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, out of your winepress, as the Lord your God has blessed you, you shall give to him. Why?

Verse 15, you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you. Therefore, I command you this today. God shapes the time for his people so they may not be overwhelmed by busyness or stress, but by his generosity, which is the key to our generosity.

[18 : 25] That's what the festivals were for. The problem for us is that we live in a wealthy situation as wealthy people generally. And the problem always is that when God pours out blessings on us, it's easy to grab hold of the blessings and prevent it moving through us to others. And when we grab hold of the blessings and hold it to ourselves, it's because we forget God. And what these three festivals do is they bring the blessings that we've received back together with God. They bring these two things into connection. Of course, the highest blessing God can give us is himself. And this is exactly what he did in sending Jesus Christ for us. And Jesus fulfills all these festivals, but the principles remain the same. True generosity, that is soul-satisfying and God-satisfying, comes out of the overflow of God's blessing to us. And ultimately, we can't change our ungenerous hearts. We can't change ourselves.

Only Christ has the power to change us, to give us a new birth, to give us a new life, a new family, and a new generosity. So I encourage you, come to him, come to Christ, and ask him to show you his love and kindness, to change you and to give you his spirit. As the Apostle Paul said, you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. So now we're going to celebrate the love of God and his generosity to us by singing this song, What Love Is This?