

A.W. Pink:

Exposition of the Gospel of John

CHAPTER 25

CHRIST AND THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES

John 7:1-13

Below we give a rough Analysis of the passage which is to be before us:—

1. Jesus walked in Galilee: verse 1.
2. Time: immediately before the Feast of Tabernacles: verse 2.
3. The request of Christ's brethren: verses 3-5.
4. Christ's reply to them: verses 6-8.
5. Christ still in Galilee: verse 9.
6. Christ goes up to the Feast: verse 10.
7. The attitude of men toward Christ: verses 11-13.

John 7 begins a new section of this fourth Gospel. Our Lord's ministry in Galilee was now over, though He still remained there, because the Judeans sought to kill Him. The annual Feast of tabernacles was at hand, and His brethren were anxious for Christ to go up to Jerusalem, and there give a public display of His miraculous powers. To this request the Savior made a reply which at first glance appears enigmatical. He bids His brethren go up to the Feast, but excuses Himself on the ground that His time was not yet fully come. After their departure, He abode still in Galilee. But very shortly after, He, too, goes up to the Feast; as it were in secret. The Jews who wished to kill Him, sought but were unable to discover Him. Among the people He formed the principal subject of discussion, some of whom considered Him a good man, others regarding Him as a deceiver. And then, in verse 14 we are told, "Now about the midst of the feast Jesus went up into the temple, and taught." Such is a brief summary of the passage which is to be before us.

That our passage will present a number of real difficulties to the cursory reader is not to be denied, and perhaps the more diligent student may not be able to clear up all of them. The simplest and often the most effective way of studying a portion of God's Word is to draw up a list of questions upon it. This will insure a more definite approach: it will save us from mere generalizations: it will reveal the particular points upon which we need to seek God's help.

Who are meant by "his brethren"? (verse 3)—brethren who did not "believe in him" (verse 5). To what did Christ refer when He said, "My time is not yet come" (verse 6)? Why did Christ refuse to go up to the Feast with His brethren (verse 8)? And why, after saying that His time was not yet come, did He go to the Feast at all (verse 10)? What is meant by "He went not openly, but as it were in secret" (verse 10)? If He went up to the Feast "as it were in secret," why did He, about the midst of the Feast, go into the temple, and teach (verse 14)? These are some of the more pertinent and important questions which will naturally occur to the inquiring mind.

It should be obvious that the central item in our passage is the Feast itself,[1] and in the scriptural significance of this Feast of tabernacles must be sought the solution of most of our difficulties here. It will be necessary, then, to compare carefully the leading scriptures which treat of this Feast, and then shall we be the better able to understand what is before us. Having made these preliminary remarks we shall now turn to our passage and offer an exposition of it according to the measure of light which God has been pleased to grant us upon it.

"After these things Jesus walked in Galilee" (John 7:1). The first three words intimate that a new section of the Gospel commences here—cf. John 6:1 and our comments thereon. "After these things" probably has a double reference. In its more general significance, it points back to the whole of His Galilean ministry, now ended. There is a peculiar and significant arrangement of the contents of the first seven chapters of John: a strange alternating between Judea and Galilee. In John 1 the scene is laid in Judea (see verse 28); but in John 2:1-12 Christ is seen in Galilee. In John 2:13 we are told that "Jesus went up to Jerusalem," and He remained in its vicinity till we reach John 4:3, where we are told, "He left Judea, and departed again into Galilee." Then, in verse 1, we read, "Jesus went up to Jerusalem," and He is viewed there to the end of the chapter. But in John 6:1 we are told, "After these things Jesus went over the sea of Galilee." And now in John 7 we are to see Him once more in Jerusalem.

But why this strange and repeated alternation? In the light of Matthew 4:15—"Galilee of the Gentiles"—we would suggest two answers: First, this fourth Gospel, in a special manner, concerns the family of God, which is made up of Jew and Gentile; hence the emphasis here by our attention being directed, again and again, to both Judea and Galilee. But note that Judea always comes before Galilee: "To the Jew first" being the lesson taught. In the second place, if our references above be studied carefully, it will be seen that the passages treating of Galilee and what happened there, come in parenthetically; inasmuch as Jerusalem is both the geographical and

moral center of the Gospel.

"After these things," then, points back to the conclusion of His Galilean ministry: John 2:1-11; 4:43-54; 6:1-71. But we also regard these words as having a more restricted and specific reference to what is recorded at the close of chapter 6, particularly verse 66. "After these things" would thus point, more directly, to the forsaking of Christ by many of His Galilean disciples, following the miracles they had witnessed and the teaching they had heard.

"After these things Jesus walked (literally, "was walking") in Galilee." It appears as though the Lord was reluctant to leave Galilee, for it seems that He never returned there any more. It was useless to work any further miracles, and His teaching has been despised, nevertheless, His person He would still keep before them a little longer. Jesus walking in Galilee, rather than dwelling in privacy, suggests the thought of the continued public manifestation of Himself: let the reader compare John 1:36; John 6:19; John 10:23 and John 11:54 for the other references in this Gospel to Jesus "walking", and he will find confirmation of what we have just said. Again, if John 7:1 be linked with John 6:66 (as the "after these things" suggests) the marvelous grace of the Savior will be evidenced. Many of His disciples went back and walked no more "with him." Notwithstanding, He continued to "walk," and that too, "in Galilee"!

"After these things Jesus walked in Galilee: for he would not walk in Jewry, because the Jews sought to kill him" (John 7:1). Let the reader turn back and consult our remarks on verse 15 concerning "the Jews." It is indeed solemn to trace right through this fourth Gospel what is said about them. "The Jews" are not only to be distinguished from the Galileans, as being of Judea, but also from the common people of Judea. Note how in our present passage "the are distinguished from "the Jews": see verses 11, 12, 13. "The Jews" were evidently the leaders, the religious leaders. Notice how in John 8:48 it is "the Jews" who say to Christ "Thou art a Samaritan, and hast a demon." It was "the Jews" who cast out of the synagogue the man born blind, whose eyes Christ had opened (John 9:22, 34). It was "the Jews" who took up stones to stone Christ (John 10:31). It was "the officers of the Jews" who "took Jesus, and bound him" (John 18:12). And it was through "fear of the Jews" that Joseph of Arimathaea came secretly to Pilate and begged the body of the Savior (John 19:38). And so here: it was because of the Jews, who sought to kill Him, that Jesus would not walk in Judea, but remained in Galilee. Christ here left us a perfect example. By His actions, He teaches us not to court danger, and unnecessarily expose ourselves before our enemies. This will be the more evident if we link this verse with John 11:53, 54: "From that day forth they took counsel together for to put him to death. Jesus therefore walked no more openly among the Jews; but went thence unto a country near to the wilderness," etc. It will thus appear that our Lord used prudence and care to avoid persecution and danger till His time was fully come; so it is our duty to endeavor by all wise means and precautions to protect and preserve ourselves, that we may have opportunities for further service.

"Now the Jews' feast of tabernacles was at hand" (John 7:2). By comparing this verse with John 6:4 it will be seen that upwards of six months is spanned by John 6 to 7:1. John 6:4 says the Passover was nigh, and from Leviticus 23:5 we learn that this Feast was kept in the first month of the Jewish year: whereas Leviticus 23:34 tells us that the Feast of tabernacles was celebrated in the seventh month. How evident it is then that John was something more than an historian. Surely it is plain that the Holy Spirit has recorded what He has in this fourth Gospel (as in the others) according to a principle of selection, and in consonance with a definite design.

"Now the Jews' feast of tabernacles was at hand." As already intimated, it will be necessary for us to give careful attention to the leading scriptures of the Old Testament on the Feast of tabernacles, that we may ascertain its historical and typical significance, and thus be the better prepared to understand the details of the passage now before us.

Leviticus 23 reveals the fact that there were seven Feasts in Israel's religious calendar, but there were three of these which were singled out as of special importance. This we gather from Deuteronomy 16:16, where it is recorded that Jehovah said to Israel, "Three times in a year shall all thy males appear before the Lord thy God in the place which he shall choose i.e. in the tabernacle, and afterwards the temple; in the feast of unleavened bread inseparably connected with the passover, and in the feast of weeks i.e. pentecost, and in the feast of tabernacles." We reserve a brief comment on the first two of these, until we have considered the third.

The first time the Feast of tabernacles is mentioned by name is in Leviticus 23, namely, in verses 34-36 and 39-44. As this passage is too long for us to quote here in full, we would request the reader to turn and read it through carefully before going farther. We give now a brief summary of its prominent features. First, the Feast began on the fifteenth day of the seventh month (verse 34). Second, it was a "holy convocation," when Israel was to offer "an offering made by fire unto the Lord" (verse 36). Third, it lasted for eight days (verse 39). Fourth, those who celebrated this Feast were to take "boughs of goodly trees" (verse 40). Fifth, they were to "rejoice before the Lord their God seven days" (verse 40). Sixth, they were to "dwell in booths" (verse 42). Seventh, the purpose of this was to memorialize the fact that "Jehovah made their fathers to dwell in booths, when he brought them out of the land of Egypt" (verse 43). In Numbers 29:12-40 we have a detailed record of the ritual or sacrificial requirements connected with this Feast.

Though Leviticus 23 is the first time the Feast of tabernacles is mentioned by name, there is one earlier reference to it, namely, in Exodus 23:16, where it is termed the Feast of Ingathering,[2] "which is the end of the

year (i.e. of the sacred calendar of Feasts), when thou hast gathered in thy labors out of the field." The Feast of tabernacles, then, was the grand Harvest Festival, when the Lord of the harvest was praised for all His temporal mercies. This one was the most joyous Feast of the year. It was not observed by Israel till after they had entered and settled in Canaan: their dwelling in booths at this Feast memorialized their wanderings in the wilderness.

The Old Testament records but two occasions when this Feast was ever observed by Israel in the past, and they are most significant. The first of these is found in 1 Kings 8, see verses 2, 11, 13, 62-66, and note particularly the "seventh month" in verse 2 and the "eighth day" in verse 66. This was in the days of Solomon at the completion and dedication of the Temple. In like manner, the antitypical Feast of tabernacles, will not be ushered in till the completion of the spiritual "temple," which God is now building (Eph. 2:22; 1 Peter 2:5). The second account of Israel's past celebration of this Feast is recorded in Nehemiah 8:13-18. The occasion was the settlement of the Jewish remnant in Palestine, after they had come up out of captivity.

We cannot offer here anything more than a very brief word on Deuteronomy 16:16. The three great Feasts which God required every male Israelite to observe annually in Jerusalem, were those of unleavened bread (inseparably connected with the passover), of weeks (or pentecost), and tabernacles. The first has already received its antitypical accomplishment at the Cross. The second began to receive its fulfillment on the day of pentecost (Acts 2), but was interrupted by the failure of the nation to repent (see Acts 3:1-21). The third looks forward to the future.

"Now the Jews' feast of tabernacles was at hand." Someone has pointed out that in John 5, 6, and 7 there is a striking order followed in the typical suggestiveness of the contents of these chapters. In John 5 Israel may be seen, typically, as being delivered from the bondage of Egypt: this was adumbrated in the deliverance of the impotent man from lifelong suffering. In John 6 there is repeated reference made to Israel in the wilderness, eating the manna. While here in John 7 Israel is viewed in the land, keeping the Feast of tabernacles.

"His brethren therefore said unto him, Depart hence, and go into Judea, that thy disciples also may see the works that thou doest" (John 7:3). These "brethren" were the brothers of Christ according to the flesh: that is, they were sons of Mary too. That they were completely blind to His Divine glory is evident from the fact they here told Him what to do. Blind to His glory, they were therefore devoid of all spiritual discernment, and hence their reasoning was according to the carnal mind. But what did they mean by "Go into Judea, that thy disciples also may see the works that thou doest"? The answer is to be found in the "also" and the "therefore" at the beginning of the verse—"His brethren therefore said unto him," etc. The "therefore," of course, looks back to something previous. What this is, we find in the closing verses of John 6. In the first part of that chapter we have recorded a wonderful "work" performed by the Lord. But in verse 66 we are told, "From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him." Now, said these brethren according to the flesh, do not waste any further efforts or time here, but go to Judea. They were evidently piqued at the reception which Christ had met with in Galilee. His work there seemed to amount to very little, why not, then, try Jerusalem, the headquarters of Judaism! Moreover, now was an opportune time: the Feast of tabernacles was at hand, and Jerusalem would be full.

"For there is no man that doeth anything in secret, and he himself seeketh to be known openly. If thou do these things, show thyself to the world" (verse 4). Note the "if" here. There was evidently a slightly veiled taunt in these words. We take it that these brethren were really challenging Christ, and that the substance of their challenge was this: "If these works of yours are genuine miracles, why confine yourself to villages and small country-towns in Galilee, where the illiterate and unsophisticated habituate. Go up to the Capital, where people are better qualified to judge. Go up to the Feast, and there display your powers, and if they will stand the test of the public scrutiny of the leaders, why, your disciples will gather around you, and your claims will be settled once for all." No doubt, these "brethren" really hoped that He would establish His claims, and in that event, as His near kinsmen, they would share the honors which would be heaped upon Him. But how insulting to our blessed Lord all this was! What indignities He suffered from those who were blind to His glory!

"If thou do these things, show thyself to the world." How these words betrayed their hearts! They were men of the world: consequently, they adopted its ways, spoke its language, and employed its logic. "Show thyself to the world" meant, Accompany us to Jerusalem, work some startling miracle before the great crowds who will be assembled there; and thus, not only make yourself the center of attraction, but convince everybody you are the Messiah. Ah! how ignorant they were of the mind of God and the purpose of His Son's mission! It was "the pride of life" (1 John 2:16) displaying itself. And how much of this same "pride of life" we see today, even among those who profess to be followers of that One whom the world crucified! What are the modem methods of evangelistic campaigns and Bible conferences—the devices resorted to to draw the crowds, the parading of the preacher's photo, the self-advertising by the speakers—what are these, but the present-day expressions of "Show thyself to the world"!

"If thou do these things, show thyself to the world." One other comment, an exegetical one, should be made on this before we pass on to the next verse. Here is a case in point where "the world" does not always signify the whole human race. When these brethren of Christ said, "Go show thyself to the world," it is evident that they did not mean, "Display yourself before all mankind." No, here, as frequently in this Gospel, "the world" is merely a general term, signifying all classes of men.

"For neither did his brethren believe in him" (John 7:5). How this illustrates the desperate hardness and depravity of human nature. Holy and perfect as Christ was, faultless and flawless as were His character and conduct, yet, even those who had been brought up with Him in the same house believed not in Him! It was bad enough that the nation at large believed not on Him, but the case of these "kinsmen" (Mark 3:21, margin) was even more excuseless. How this demonstrates the imperative need of God's almighty regenerating grace! And how this exemplifies Christ's own teaching that "No man can come to me except the Father which hath sent me draw him"! And how striking to note that the unbelief of His "brethren" was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy: "I am become a stranger unto my brethren, and an alien unto my mother's children" (Ps. 69:8). Then Jesus said unto them, My time is not yet come: but your time is alway ready" (John 7:6). These words of Christ must be interpreted in the light of the immediate context. His brethren had said, "Go show thyself to the world." But His time to do this had not then come, nor has it yet arrived. Not then would He vindicate Himself by openly displaying His glory. This was the time of His humiliation. But how plainly His words here imply that there is a time coming when He will publicly reveal His majesty and glory. To this He referred when He said, "And they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (Matthew 24:30). And what will be the effect of this on "the world"? Revelation 1:7 tells us: "Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him." And solemn will be the accompaniments of this showing of Himself to the world. Then shall He say, "But those mine enemies, which would not that I should reign over them, bring hither, and slay them before me" (Luke 19:27); see, too, the last half of Revelation 19. How little, then, did these brethren realize the import of their request! Had He openly manifested Himself then—before the Cross—it would have involved the perdition of the whole human race, for then there had been no atoning-blood under which sinners might shelter! Thankful must we ever be that He did not do what they asked. And how often we ask Him for things, which He in His Divine wisdom and grace denies us! How true it is that "we know not what we should pray for as we ought" (Rom. 8:26)!

"Then Jesus said unto them, My time is not yet come: but your time is alway ready." There was no "pride of life" in Christ. He demonstrated this in the great Temptation. All the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them could not tempt Him. Instead of seeking to show Himself before the world, instead of advertising Himself, instead of endeavoring to attract attention, He frequently drew a veil over His works and sought to hide Himself: see Mark 1:36-38; Mark 7:17; Mark 7:36; Mark 8:26, etc. After He had been transfigured on the holy mount and His glory had appeared before the eyes of the three apostles, He bade them "that they should tell no man what things they had seen" (Mark 9:9). How truly did He make Himself of "no reputation"! But how different with these brethren. "Your time is alway ready," He said. They were ever willing and wanting to win the applause of men, and make themselves popular with the world.

"The world cannot hate you; but me it hateth, because I testify of it, that the works thereof are evil" (John 7:7). How this helps us to fix the meaning of the last clause of the previous verse. "Your time is alway ready" meant, as we have said, Your time to display yourself before the world, in order to court its smiles, is ever to hand. But how solemn is the reason Christ here gives for this! It was because they had not cast in their lot with this One who was "despised and rejected of men." Because of this, the world would not hate them. And why? Because they were of the world. Contrariwise, the world did hate Christ. It hated Christ because He testified of it (not "against" it!), that its works were evil. The holiness of His life condemned the worldliness of theirs. And right here is a solemn and searching test for those who profess to be His followers today. Dear reader, if you are popular with the world, that is indeed a solemn sign, an evil omen. The world has not changed. It still hates those whose lives condemn theirs. Listen to the words of Christ to His apostles, "If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you" (John 15:19). Here our Lord tells us plainly that the world hates those who are truly His. This, then, is a searching test: does the world "hate" you?

"Go ye up unto this feast: I go not up yet unto this feast; for my time is not yet full come. When he had said these words unto them, he abode still in Galilee" (John 7:8, 9). The meaning of these verses is really very simple. Christ plainly qualified Himself. He did not say that He would not go up to the Feast; what He said was, He would not go then—His time to go had not "yet come." "My time" must not be confounded with "Mine hour" which He used when referring to His approaching death. The simple force, then, of these verses is that Christ declined to go up to the Feast with His brethren.

"But when his brethren were gone up, then went he also up unto the feast" (John 7:10). How tragic is this. How it reveals the hearts of these "brethren." They left Christ for the Feast! They preferred a religious festival for fellowship with the Christ of God. And how often we witness the same thing today. What zeal there is for religious performances, for forms and ceremonies, and how little heart for Christ Himself.

"But when his brethren were gone up, then went he also up unto the feast, not openly, but as it were in secret" (John 7:10). The first part of this verse supplies another reason why He would not accompany His brethren to the Feast, as well as explains the somewhat ambiguous "as it were in secret." The general method of travel in those days, and especially at festival seasons, was to form caravans, and join together in considerable companies (cf. Luke 2:44). And when such a company reached Jerusalem, naturally it became known generally.

It was, therefore, to avoid such publicity that our Lord waited till His brethren had gone, and then He went up to the Feast, "not openly, (R.V. publicly)", but as it were in secret," i.e., in private. "But when his brethren were gone up, then went he also up unto the feast." the words we have placed in italics are not so much a time-mark as a word of explanation. The "when" has the force of because as in John 4:1; 6:12; 6:16, etc.

"Then went he also up unto the feast." This simple sentence gives us a striking revelation of our Lord's perfections. In order to appreciate what we have here it is necessary to go back to the first verse of the chapter, where we are told, "Jesus walked in Galilee, for he would not walk in Jewry, because the Jews sought to kill him." Why is it that the Holy Spirit has begun the chapter thus? The central incident in John 7 is Christ in Jerusalem at the Feast of tabernacles. Why, then, introduce the incident in this peculiar way? Ah! the Holy Spirit ever had the glory of Christ in view. Because the Jews "sought to kill him" He "walked in Galilee." And therein, as pointed out, He left us an example not to needlessly expose ourselves to danger. But now in verse 10 we find that He did go to Judea, yes to Jerusalem itself. Why was this? We have to turn back to Deuteronomy 16:16 for our answer. There we read, "Three times in a year shall all thy males appear before the Lord thy God in the place which he shall choose; in the feast of unleavened bread, and in the feast of weeks, and in the feast of tabernacles." According to the flesh Christ was an Israelite, and "made under the law" (Gal. 4:4). Therefore, did He, in perfect submission to the will of His Father, go up to Jerusalem to keep the feast. In the volume of the book it was "written of him," and even though the Jews "sought to kill him," He promptly obeyed the written Word! And here, too, He has left us an example. On the one hand, danger should not be courted by us; on the other, when the Word of God plainly bids us follow a certain line of conduct, we are to do so, no matter what the consequences.

"Then the Jews sought him at the feast, and said, Where is he? And there was much murmuring among the people concerning him: for some said, he is a good man: others said, Nay; but he deceiveth the people. Howbeit no man spake openly of him for fear of the Jews" (John 7:11-13). Mark what a strange variety of opinions there were concerning Christ even at the beginning! In the light of this passage the differences and divergencies of religious beliefs today ought not to surprise us. As said the late Bishop Ryle, "They are but the modern symptoms of an ancient disease." Christ Himself distinctly affirmed, "Think not that I am come to send peace." Whenever God's truth is faithfully proclaimed, opposition will be encountered and strife stirred up. The fault is not in God's truth, but in human nature. As the sun shines on the swamp it will call forth malaria: but the fault is not in the sun, but in the ground. The very same rays call forth fertility from the grainfields. So the truth of God will yield spiritual fruit from a believing heart, but from the carnal mind it will evoke endless cavil and blasphemy. Some thought Christ a good man; others regarded Him as a deceiver: sufficient for the disciple to be as His Master.

"Some said, he is a good man: others said, Nay; but he deceiveth the people" (John 7:12). "The Lord might bring blessing out of it, but they were reasoning and discussing. In another place He asks His disciples, 'Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?' They tell Him, 'Some say that thou art John the Baptist; some Elias; and others, one of the prophets.' It was all discussion. But when Peter replies, 'Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God,' He tells him, 'Blessed art thou Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.' There was personal recognition of Himself, and where there is that, there is no discussion. Discussing Him as subject-matter in their minds, they had not submitted to the righteousness of God. Where people's minds are at work discussing the right and the wrong, there is not the mind of the new-born babe; they are not receiving, but judging" (J.N.D.).

"Howbeit no man spake openly of him for fear of the Jews" (John 7:13). What a solemn warning to us is this! What an awful thing is the fear of man! How often it has silenced faithful witness for Christ! It is written, "The fear of man bringeth a snare" (Prov. 29:25). This is still true. Let us pray then for holy boldness that we may testify faithfully for an absent Savior before a world that cast Him out.

The following questions on our next portion may help the student:—

1. Wherein is verse 15 being repeated today?
2. Why did Christ speak of His "doctrine" rather than doctrines, verse 16?
3. What is the relation of verse 17 to the context?
4. Wherein does verse 18 help us to carry out 1 John 4:1?
5. What is the difference between "the law of Moses" (verse 23) and "the law of God" (Rom. 7:22, 25)?
6. To what did the speakers refer in the second half of verse 27—cf. verse 42?
7. What comforting truth is illustrated in verse 30?

ENDNOTES:

[1] Note there is a sevenfold reference to the "Feast" in John 7.

[2] That this is the same Feast appears by a comparison of Deuteronomy 16:16 with Exodus 23:14-17.