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IN THE ARROYO

In Albuquerque we are blessed(?) with a number of arroyos. For those who are not totally familiar with the area or the Spanish of the American Southwest, an arroyo is essentially a large, natural ditch running from the mountains toward the desert. Presumably at one time they were streambeds, or channels for run-off water as it flows from melting snows toward the river valley. Usually they are dry and have steep sides. Therein lies the problem. When it rains in the mountains, the water flows rapidly down the arroyos. The skies can be clear where you are standing and the arroyo suddenly become a rushing stream. Many of the arroyos in Albuquerque have had their sides reinforced with concrete walls. Occasionally there are ladders so that people who are stupid enough to be in, or have to work in, the ditch can climb out in an emergency.

One such arroyo runs down the middle of the busiest freeway in the city. Normally it is relatively dry, although several arroyos flow into it. Currently the government is reconstructing one of the roads over the freeway and the arroyo. Part of this road work involves construction of a support pylon in the middle of the arroyo. To that end, they leave heavy construction equipment in the ditch at times, as it is difficult to remove it.

Recently we had a heavy rain in the hills. As I was driving home, in sunlight, I looked into the arroyo and saw a wall of water moving down the channel. Granted it was only about six to twelve inches deep, but it was moving at about twenty to thirty miles an hour. Anyone caught in its path would have been easily swept off his feet. As I proceeded up the freeway I began to see debris carried along this rapid river, including scaffolding from the construction work. Shortly thereafter I saw an amazing sight. A construction lift, essentially a small, heavy tractor with a lift platform on top of it, was floating down the arroyo! The rushing water had picked up this nearly one ton piece of metal and was bearing it to its doom.

Life, it occurs to me, can be like that flood in the arroyo. It can be overwhelming. We have obligations to meet, people to see, places to go, things to do. I don't think this is unique to Americans, either. I have seen it in Japan and other places. Life seems to sweep us before it

like a flood. We have trouble keeping our heads above water. We say we would like to slow down, but we can't. We need someone to throw us a rope and pull us out of the channel. That is just what Jesus has done. He came down into the arroyo himself, and pulled us out. He tells us not to play in the ditch again.

No man can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the other and despise the one. Ye cannot serve God and mammon. Therefore I say unto you, be not anxious for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than the food, and the body than the raiment? (Matt 6:24-25)

Moses says that God carries our lives away "like a flood." (Ps 90:5) He continues, "The days of our years are threescore years and ten, or even by reason of strength fourscore years; yet is their pride but labor and sorrow; for it is soon gone, and we fly away." (Ps 90:10) What is Moses' solution to the overwhelming flood? It is found in verse 12. "So teach us to number our days, that we may get us a heart of wisdom." Wisdom comes from realizing there is a limit to the flood, an number that will end our days. Since we are not here on earth forever, wisdom teaches us that the eternal life is much more important. Whether we live to eighteen or eighty, the flood that sweeps us away here is nothing compared to the world to come.

Since we should look to the things of that world, we should spend more time in this world preparing for that one. "Seek ye first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." (Matt 6:33)

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THE FALL FEASTS AS A UNIT

The year 2004 is unusual in at least one respect. Normally the fall holidays mandated in Leviticus 23 occur during the two months of September and October. This year, all three feasts fall, or at least begin, in one month on the Gregorian calendar, the month of September. That gives me a chance to look at all of these holidays—Rosh HaShanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot—together, as a single unit. (Rosh HaShanah is September 16th. Yom Kippur is September 25th. Sukkot begins September 30th.)

The Jewish sages long ago recognized that while these feasts/fasts held their own meanings and value, it was as a single unit that they revealed God's will for man—a “plan of salvation”, so to speak. In essence, the thought is as follows. Rosh HaShanah (the Feast of Trumpets) announces or calls for repentance. Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) seals man's fate for the year based on his repentance. Sukkot (the Feast of Booths) celebrates that God has spared his people and allowed them a new year to do better than in previous years. Following this progression, I will look at each holiday

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separately and then make some observations about them as a whole.

Rosh HaShanah

The Feast of Shofars (ram's horn trumpets) celebrates the new year and marks the beginning of the “Days of Awe.” It was mandated for the Jewish nation in Leviticus 23:24-25.

In the seventh month, in the first day of the month, shall ye have a sabbath, a memorial of blowing of trumpets, an holy convocation. Ye shall do no servile work therein: but ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD.

Verse 24 calls it a “memorial” of blowing trumpets. What does this day memorialize?

The shofar was used to call an assembly together. (Ex 19:13; Num 10:2, etc.) It was also used as an alarm. (Ezek 33:1-6; Jer 4:19, etc.) It is in these capacities, perhaps, that it serves as a memorial. Not as

a memorial of past events, it serves, rather, as a memorial of the year just past. Autumn is beginning; the feast falls on what is considered a New Years Day. Summer is over; the Day of Atonement is nigh. It is time to reflect on the sins of the past year and seek forgiveness, first of men and then of God. The blowing of the shofar gives warning, then, of impending doom if repentance and atonement are not made.

We may also think of the holiday in terms of calling an assembly. We are called to assemble before the righteous judge. Judgement is about to be made. In fact, the sages say that God makes judgement for sin on Rosh HaShanah. However, he waits ten days to seal, or finalize, that judgement. During that ten days, we are given an opportunity to bring evidence mitigating the punishment. We are to bring forth “fruits fitting for repentance.” (Matt 3:8)

On Rosh HaShanah, the shofar is blown one hundred times. There are three types of blasts blown on the trumpet. (See “Sound the Trumpet” in the September 2001 issue.) The long blast, Tekiah, may symbolize the calling of an assembly. It is blown to get people's attention. The series of short blasts, Teruah, seems to portray a sense of urgency. The almost breathless nature of the blasts says that there is no time for a long blast; the time for action is now. The third type of blast, Shevarim, is an undulation between two notes, much like a shorter version of the sirens of many fire vehicles or ambulances. It is described as a wailing. This calls attention to the nature of the following ten days—days of mourning because of sin. It tells us that now is the time to weep and wail, that perhaps God may hear our sorrow and reduce our sentence. One final blast, the Tekiah Gedolah, is a single note held as long as possible. It calls to God to pay attention to our repentance.

Yom Kippur

The Day of Atonement is the most solemn day of the Jewish calendar. It is the day when God allows no more repentance; when he seals man's judgement for the year, for good or ill. It is described in Leviticus 23:27-32.

Also on the tenth day of this seventh month there shall be a day of atonement: it shall be an holy convocation unto you; and ye shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD. And ye shall do no work in that same day: for it is a day of atonement, to make an atonement for you before the LORD your God. ...It shall be unto you a sabbath of rest, and ye shall afflict your souls: in the

ninth day of the month at even, from even unto even, shall ye celebrate your sabbath.

God calls for his people to do no constructive work and to “afflict your souls.” This is usually taken to mean a fast for at least twenty-six hours. (See “Afflict Your Souls” in the October 2003 issue.) Why should we afflict our souls, including refraining from constructive work?

Consider a man who is worried about whether his wife, who is in the late stages of a difficult pregnancy, will live or die. As she is wheeled into the delivery room, does he leave the hospital and go to work? No, he calls and tells his supervisor that he won’t be at work today. His wife means more to him than his job. What man among us, if he cares for his wife, would turn as soon as the doors are closed behind her, and head for the hospital cafeteria? No, he eschews, rather than chews, all food. Even if a nurse tells him it will be a while, he stays in the waiting room, worried more about his wife than his belly. It is only after he knows she is safe that he feels hunger.

So it is on Yom Kippur. It is not my wife, but my life, in the balance. God is deciding life and death, mercy or punishment. How can you eat at a time like this? Many Jews eat a large meal just before the sundown that marks the beginning of the Day of Atonement. Some may even equate this to a condemned man’s last meal. (As I wrote this article by hand, I abbreviated Day of Atonement as “DOA.” The prayer on every Jewish person’s lips this day is that they not be considered DOA—Dead on Arrival.)

Each year, the Day of Atonement reminds man that he is not in control. He doesn’t control his life, or his death. He doesn’t even control his appetite. God controls his destiny. God alone decides whether he will receive good or bad next year. God holds everything in his hands. How could sinful man not worry, and show it by fasting and refraining from work.

Sukkot

The Feast of Booths is the most festive occasion of all the holidays given in the Law. Only the rabbinic holiday of Purim may be more festive. The passage giving the laws for Sukkot is found in Leviticus 23:34-43.

The fifteenth day of this seventh month shall be the feast of tabernacles for seven days unto the LORD. On the first day shall be an holy convocation: ye shall do no servile work therein. ...And ye shall take you on the first day the boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and ye shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days. ...Ye shall dwell in booths seven days; all that are Israelites born shall dwell in booths: That your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths,

when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

After the days of repentance and introspection, Sukkot is a veritable release. God has allowed his people to live. The atonement is accomplished. The death sentence is lifted. It is a time for celebration! Yet even in celebration one is reminded of the potential for returning to sin.

Sukkot requires the Jews to live in rude dwellings, rather than houses. This is to remind them of the exodus from Egypt. This is the period between slavery and true freedom—between release from sin and the promised land of true righteousness. Man is reminded that there is yet a promised land. While God may atone, for which we celebrate, we know we have not yet achieved a state of perfect righteousness. Still, the release from sin is certainly worthy of great celebration.

The Fall Holidays as a Unity

If the rabbis can see this period of time as a unity, how much more can those of us that believe in Yeshua ha Moshiach (Jesus the Christ)! The three holidays show us

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the gospels and the church.

John came before Jesus, warning, “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matt 3:2) His call to repentance is much like the blowing of the shofar on Rosh HaShanah. Jesus is our atonement. “By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” (Heb 10:10) The Day of Our Atonement came on a Passover one year. Since Jesus has paid the price of our atonement, and since he only had to do it once, then we must now be able to celebrate the Feast of Booths in the household of God, the church. The price has been paid for sin. Atonement has been made. We need no longer fast, but rather feast on the word of God. Yet even in our celebration we know that there is a Promised Land yet to come. We are only in the period between freedom and true righteousness, yet have the true righteousness that comes through God’s grace, the forgiveness of sins.

The great thing about all this is, we don’t have to wait for fall. Our Sukkot will last until we hear the shofar one final time, and assemble at God’s throne.

WHAT AN ELDER IS NOT

My home congregation is about to select men to join those who are already elders of the congregation. During such a time we often read those passages that describe what an elder is, and what the qualifications are for that office. There are discussions over what is meant by “the husband of one wife,” or “having believing [faithful] children.” There is often mention that, as a pastor (shepherd) of the flock, an elder must be a good leader and have a good knowledge of the Bible. We talk a lot about what an elder should be, but we rarely discuss what an elder should not be.

Elders are not, or at least are not supposed to be, the first resort when one member has a problem with another. Unfortunately, many people seem to think they are. In congregations where I have worshipped, for instance, several times elders have told me that somebody had a problem with what I taught or how I ran my Bible class. To the credit of those elders, they asked the individuals if they had come to me first. (They had not.) These individuals, whomever they were, either chose to ignore scripture, were intimidated by me (who “wouldn’t hurt a fly”), or they were under the mistaken impression that going to the elders was the proper first step in dealing with a problem.

Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. (Matt 18:15-17)

Nothing in that passage says to go to the elders first, or even second. The first resort is always supposed to be a private conversation between the offender and the offended. The only way an elder should be involved is if he is one of those two people.

In modern America we have improperly made elders into the “board of directors” of a congregation. They make decisions about spending the church treasury. They decide whether to build a new building, or recarpet the old one. In some cases they are even asked to pick out the color of the carpet. Sometimes men who are elders may become involved in decisions about finances or the physical property of a church, but that should be because of their specialized expertise, not because they are an elder. The apostles determined it was “not fitting that we should forsake the word of God, and serve tables.” (Acts 6:2) An elder is charged with the oversight of the church regarding the word of God. (Acts 20:28-32; 1 Peter 5:1-3) If it was not fitting that the apostles, who had been with Jesus, forsake the word of God, how much less fitting is it that men without special revelation should do so. If the men chosen in Acts 6 can truly be called the ministers (deacons) of the apostles, then the details of the physical aspects of the church should rightly belong to the deacons.

An elder once told me that they were “busy enough” without adding unnecessarily to their duties. That is probably true in most congregations. Let us not add to their burden by complaints that we should try to resolve ourselves, first. Let us not further burdening them with matters that could be properly handled by the deacons. Being an elder is a hard, responsible job. As far as is within us, let us honor them and not burden them.

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