



Scale model of Herod's Temple. Gates from front to back: Golden Gate, Nicanor Gate, and the large double gates of temple proper. Semicircular stairs descent from Nicanor Gate into the Court of Women. The gates of the temple were left open so the public could gather in the Court of the Women.

# Jesus Christ and the Feast of Tabernacles

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When John alludes to “the Jews’ feast of tabernacles” and “that great day of the feast” in John 7:2, 37, he has immediately tapped into a considerable body of cultural, social, and religious images and knowledge in the hearts and minds of an audience from the first century AD who would have been familiar with contemporary Jewish practices.<sup>1</sup> However, youth and young adults in the twenty-first century are less likely to have sufficient understanding of this feast. By making the context of the Feast of Tabernacles explicit, teachers can help students better understand Jesus Christ’s declarations in John 7–8 and the miracle he performs in John 9 so they can have greater faith in him and the power of his Atonement.<sup>2</sup>

## Overview of the Feast of Tabernacles

Elder Bruce R. McConkie (1915–85) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles noted, “It appears to have been our Lord’s deliberate design to dramatize the great truths relative to himself by associating them with the religious and social practices then prevailing.”<sup>3</sup> Our students will likely miss the deliberate

design of the Savior, which John intended to convey in John 7–9,<sup>4</sup> if we do not help them become familiar with the religious and social practices pertaining to the Feast of Tabernacles. Bruce K. Satterfield’s research on the Feast of Tabernacles provides a critical foundation for this article, which intends to reinforce key points of his work and suggest further implications between the Feast of Tabernacles and the text in John.<sup>5</sup>

From the direct references to the Feast of Tabernacles in John 7 (see vv. 2–3, 8, 10–11, 14, 37), we glean only a few scant details. We know that the feast was held in Jerusalem where the temple was located (see John 7:3). As with all major feasts of the Jews, it was likely crowded—which made it possible for the Savior to arrive and stay “in secret” (John 7:10). The eight-day feast allowed Jesus to teach in the temple “about the midst of the feast” (John 7:14) and again on the “last day” of the feast (John 7:37). We also read that the last day of the feast was called the “great day of the feast” (John 7:37), although the text offers no explanation as to what this means. In other words, allusions to the location, popularity, and duration of the feast require additional explanation in order to optimize the edifying value of the Savior’s teachings and healing in John 7–9.

In general, the Jewish feasts were both commemorative and instructive occasions. Activities and rituals during the feasts reminded Israelites of significant historical events and often anticipated future events.<sup>6</sup> The earliest scriptural injunctions concerning the Feast of Tabernacles, also known as the Feast of Booths, indicated to Israel that the feast was to help them remember “when [the Lord] brought them out of the land of Egypt” (Leviticus 23:43). For example, the children of Israel were commanded to construct and dwell in booths throughout the week of the feast to remind them of their years of wandering in the wilderness before the Lord brought them into the promised land. During one of the celebratory processions of the feast, those in the procession carried a *lulab* (a plume of branches from a tree or bush) in their right hands and a citron (a small citrus fruit) in the left. The *lulab* represented Israel’s traveling through various types of foliage in their journey through the wilderness, and the citron signified the fruit of the land God had promised to his people.<sup>7</sup>

Other aspects of the feast—such as the water-drawing ceremony and the lighting of enormous lampstands in the courts of the temple in conjunction with the reading of Messianic passages in Zechariah 14—pointed to the future coming of the Messiah, as will be discussed later in this paper.<sup>8</sup> The timing of

the feast, held in the fall around the time of the yearly harvest or in-gathering, pointed both backward to the time when God gathered Israel out of Egypt and forward to the time of “the final harvest when Israel’s mission should be completed, and all nations gathered unto the Lord.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, Israelites who gathered to the temple in Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles were inundated with festivities and symbols that inspired thoughts on a variety of themes, such as deliverance (past and future), the coming of the Messiah, and the eventual gathering of all God’s children to him.

To help modern students better understand and apply some of the great truths found in John 7–9, teachers can explain four major aspects of the Feast of Tabernacles: (1) dwelling in booths, or *sukkot*; (2) the lighting of the lampstands in the Court of the Women; (3) the additional sacrifices and offerings throughout the week; and (4) the drawing of water from the Pool of Siloam and its pouring on the altar of the temple. Each of these ceremonies was deliberately designed to stir deep religious recollections and feelings in the hearts and minds of the participants.<sup>10</sup>

The Feast of Tabernacles lasted eight days, beginning on a Sabbath and ending on the next Sabbath (see Leviticus 23:39). It was also known as the Feast of Booths, or *sukkot*, because of the temporary booths or shelters participants constructed and lived in during the week-long festival. Moses instructed the children of Israel throughout their generations to make booths of “the boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook” (Leviticus 23:40). They were to dwell in these booths all week so they would always remember that the Lord “made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when [he] brought them out of the land of Egypt” (Leviticus 23:43).

Thoughtful dwellers in these temporary booths might have pondered on their continual dependence upon the Lord God of Israel for deliverance (as they contemplated their historic deliverance from Egypt), direction (as they reflected on the Lord leading them through the wilderness), and security (as they gratefully considered the promised land in which they now lived). During the days of Israel’s sovereignty, those dwelling in booths during the Feast of Tabernacles may have also thought about the freedom granted to them through the Lord (not entirely different from other holidays celebrating national freedom in many countries).<sup>11</sup> However, in Jesus’ day, if celebrants pondered such freedom, their prayers would have been offered as a hope for future deliverance from Roman subjugation.

Following the evening sacrifice on the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles, the gates of the temple were left open so the public could gather in the Court of the Women<sup>12</sup> and participate in the lighting of four giant lampstands, each over seventy feet (twenty-one meters) tall. Each lampstand had four golden bowls filled with oil at their tops. Priests climbed ladders to each bowl and lit the wicks, which were made from the worn-out clothing of the priests collected throughout the year. The light from the lampstands was so bright that it was said to light up every courtyard in Jerusalem. The lighting ceremony was accompanied with music, singing, and dancing that lasted well into the night and even into the early morning. It is unclear whether the ritual was performed anew every day or whether the lamps were simply kept lit throughout the week of the festival.<sup>13</sup>

While most participants in the Feast of Tabernacles would never see the sacred lampstand, or menorah, found in the holy place of the temple, where only priests were allowed, this celebration brought a likeness of the same symbol into public view. Just as the golden lampstand in the holy place stood before the most holy place in the temple, these four impressive lampstands may have stirred participants to reflect on the need for inspired enlightenment to prepare them to return to God's presence.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the Feast of Tabernacles more additional sacrifices were offered than were offered during Passover, the other major sacrificial feast—twice the number of rams and lambs and five times the number of bullocks. In addition, Alfred Edersheim points out that the number of each sacrifice—70 bullocks, 14 rams, 98 lambs, and 336 ephahs of flour for the meat offering—is divisible by seven. The number seven often signifies completion and perfection in Hebraic symbolism.<sup>15</sup> Many Israelites living in Jesus' day seem to have forgotten the true purpose and meaning of these sacrifices, which was to point them toward the Messiah (see 2 Nephi 25:24–25; Jacob 4:5). While sacrifice under the Mosaic law served several purposes, one major reason God instituted these sacrifices was to signify the “great and last sacrifice,” which would accomplish the “infinite atonement which will suffice for the sins of the world” (see Alma 34:9–14).

The fourth significant event of the Feast of Tabernacles was “the drawing of water from Siloam and its libation [pouring] on the altar (of this it was said that he who has not seen the joy of the drawing of water at the Feast of Tabernacles does not know what joy is)” (Bible Dictionary, “Feasts,” 673).

The parade-like ritual of this ceremony was perhaps the most notable and popular event of the festival:

During the preparation of the [morning] burnt offering, a procession of priests, with the accompaniment of singing and flute playing, wended their way from the temple down to the Pool of Siloam, where a priest filled a golden flask with water while a choir repeated Isaiah 12:3: “With joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.” . . .

The priests returned to the temple via the Water Gate, a gate on the south side of the wall immediately surrounding the temple within the Court of the Gentiles [where the procession was joined by other pilgrims who had come to the temple for the feast]. When they arrived at the Water Gate, a blast was made on a *shofar*, or ram’s horn. . . .

Upon the blasting of the *shofar*, the group moved toward the altar of sacrifice located in the Court of the Priests that immediately surrounded the temple. The priest carrying the golden flask filled with water ascended the altar and prepared to pour the libation on the morning burnt offering. While doing this, the procession [carrying their *lulabs* and citrons] that had followed the priest circled the altar. . . .

The priest who had charge of pouring the water then offered the water libation with a wine libation in two silver bowls on the southwest corner of the altar.<sup>16</sup>

This ceremony was accompanied by great rejoicing and singing from the congregation. It was performed every day of the feast in the same way, “except on the seventh day, when the priests (and perhaps the pilgrims) circled the altar seven times instead of just once.”<sup>17</sup>

This ritual performed at the sacrificial altar consists of several aspects that added to its spiritual richness. The Pool of Siloam received its water from the Gihon Spring, a natural water source, making the water in Siloam “living water,” or water suitable for ritual purification. The concept of “living water” is critical to understanding the significance of this ceremony. Living water had to come directly from God (via rain or other “pure” or natural sources, such as a spring). It was used for all ordinances and rituals requiring water in the law of Moses. Based on recent archaeological research, the Pool of Siloam was likely a *mikveh*, an ancient ritual bath for purification, and not a reservoir for drinking water.<sup>18</sup> Thus the water from Siloam symbolized the cleansing and sanctification necessary to prepare one to return to God.

The water from Gihon was channeled into the Pool of Siloam via Hezekiah’s Tunnel, which had been dug to preserve the people of Jerusalem during the Assyrian siege in the days of Hezekiah (see 2 Kings 17–18). While the Pool of Siloam in Jesus’ day was not likely the same pool as the one from Hezekiah’s and Isaiah’s day,<sup>19</sup> the site likely still reminded those in Jerusalem

of God's power to preserve and deliver them in the face of overwhelming opposition and adversity.

The water-pouring ritual was also accompanied by a prayer of gratitude for the rains that had brought forth the harvest of the previous year and a plea for rain for the coming year to provide another harvest. On the eighth day of the feast, the "great day of the feast," which was also a Sabbath day, the water drawing and pouring ceremony was not performed, but a prayer for rain was still offered with the sacrifices. Thus reflective participants in this ritual were drawn into a commemorative environment of gratitude and purification that signified their constant dependence on God—all centered on the most significant sacrificial site in all Israel, the altar of the temple.

### **Messianic Connections with the Feast of Tabernacles**

These four aspects of the Feast of Tabernacles were impressive activities and ceremonies for stirring the religious memories and feelings of the people. However, their most significant value in the Savior's day consisted in their power to prepare the people to accept the Messiah and the salvation offered only through him. By the time the Savior arrived in Jerusalem and began teaching in the temple "about the midst of the feast" (John 7:14), the pilgrims there had been living in booths for several days, participated in the stirring ceremonies of the lighting of the lampstands, rejoiced in the pouring of the water on the altar multiple times, and been involved in the additional animal sacrifices. The feast provided an intense physical learning experience that had the potential to prepare the hearts and minds of the people who heard the Savior's teachings to accept him as the Messiah.

This section will explain how four specific passages of scripture in John 7–8 and the miracle found in John 9 become more powerful declarations and demonstrations of the divinity of Jesus Christ and his saving power when understood in context of the Feast of Tabernacles. We will examine them in the order in which they appear in the scriptures.

*John 7:37–39.* Unfortunately, John did not provide details about what Jesus first began to teach the multitudes in the temple under these circumstances, except that the people "marvelled" at what he taught (John 7:15). He does report the controversy generated by Jesus' presence and his teachings amidst a substantial portion of the Jewish population who had assembled for the feast. This "division among the people" (John 7:43) provided those

present with a key opportunity to determine whether or not they believed that Jesus was indeed the Christ (see John 7:15–36, 40–53).

In this environment, Jesus waited until “the last day, that great day of the feast” to stand and cry to all the people within the temple, “If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water” (John 7:37–38). The typical position of teachers was to sit while they taught. Jesus emphasized his declaration by standing and speaking in a loud voice.<sup>20</sup> For people who had been so engrossed in expressing gratitude to God and offering supplication to him for water to sustain their physical lives, this declaration brought to their minds the need for spiritual sustenance as well. “The scripture” the Savior referred to is not easily identifiable. He may have been alluding to Isaiah 12:3 and drawing water out of the “wells of salvation,” as employed during the water-drawing ceremony. Or he may have been referring to Isaiah 58:11 or Jeremiah 2:13 and Jeremiah 17:13, in which the God of Israel is directly referred to as the “fountain of living waters.”<sup>21</sup>

The Savior waited until the “great day of the feast,” on which there was no water-pouring ceremony, to publicly declare that he was the source of “living water.” In the absence of the celebration involving the waters of Siloam, his words invited the people to come unto him as the only true source for salvation.<sup>22</sup> John clarifies that those who believed in Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah and followed him would receive the Holy Ghost, who would provide consistent spiritual sustenance (see John 7:39).<sup>23</sup> Recipients of this living water would then be able to share their witness of Christ by the power of the Spirit with others, who could then receive the “living water” also.<sup>24</sup>

By referring to himself as the source of “living water,” Jesus proclaimed his divinity—he is the “fountain of living waters.” Only those who accepted him as the one sent from God to save mankind could be baptized and receive the cleansing through the Holy Ghost necessary for them to return to God (see John 3:5). Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles explained how faith in Jesus Christ that leads to obedience will bring about the fulfillment of the Savior’s promise in John 7:37–38:

By living the gospel of Jesus Christ, we develop within ourselves a living spring that will quench eternally our thirst for happiness, peace, and everlasting life. The Lord explains clearly in the Doctrine and Covenants that only faithful obedience can tap the well of living water that refreshes and enlivens our souls: “But unto him that *keepeth my commandments* I will give the mysteries of my kingdom, and

the same shall be in him a well of living water, springing up unto everlasting life” [D&C 63:23].<sup>25</sup>

Mormon taught that only through a process that begins with “faith unto the fulfilling the commandments” can we receive “the visitation of the Holy Ghost, which . . . filleth with hope and perfect love . . . until the end shall come, when all the saints shall dwell with God” (Moroni 8:25–26). Students who understand more clearly that faith in Jesus Christ is essential to receiving the Holy Ghost may feel inspired to increase their faith in the Savior by being more obedient to his commandments.<sup>26</sup> The abundant joy experienced by those who participated in the water-pouring ceremony pales in comparison with the joy that comes to those who receive the gift of the Holy Ghost, “the greatest gift that can be bestowed upon man” in mortality.<sup>27</sup>

*John 8:12; 9:4–5.* Although the Feast of Tabernacles was over by the time we come to John 8, it had likely not been over for very long (see John 8:2). Jesus was still teaching in the temple in Jerusalem.<sup>28</sup> Undoubtedly, the recent display of the giant burning lampstands was fresh in the minds of those who heard Jesus proclaim, “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12). The Pharisees seemed to have missed the main point of his statement in favor of seizing upon a supposed opportunity to catch him in an apparent legalistic argument (see John 8:13–19). We will explore the significance of the Savior’s declaration in the context of the Feast of Tabernacles and its implications for our students.

According to ancient sources,<sup>29</sup> Zechariah 14 was read during the lighting ceremony previously described. The four lampstands each had four bowls, a number used frequently in scripture to represent geographic completeness, such as the four corners of the world. As the four bowls on the four lampstands were lit, pilgrims at the feast would have heard the references to light in Zechariah 14:6–7, signifying that the Messiah would ultimately be the Light of the World, and not just for the Jews. Furthermore, the references to “all the nations,” “all the families of the earth,” and “all nations” in Zechariah 14:16–17, 19 in conjunction with worshipping the Lord in Jerusalem at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles pointed to the eventual gathering together of all God’s children through the coming Messiah.<sup>30</sup> By proclaiming himself as the Light of the World and the Light of Life in context of these recently transpired festivities, Jesus declared unequivocally that he was indeed the Messiah

of whom the prophets of old had testified. Only through him could the people find the way to salvation and avoid the darkness of sin.<sup>31</sup>

It was said that the light from the great lampstands in the Court of the Women during the Feast of Tabernacles lit up every courtyard in Jerusalem. Likewise, Jesus Christ can be a source of light for each of us during difficult or challenging times. While we often associate darkness with despair and discouragement, light often brings feelings of hope and assurance. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught how Jesus Christ can be a source of light for us personally:

Every one of us has times when we need to know things will get better. . . . For emotional health and spiritual stamina, everyone needs to be able to look forward to some respite, to something pleasant and renewing and hopeful, whether that blessing be near at hand or still some distance ahead. . . .

My declaration is that this is precisely what the gospel of Jesus Christ offers us, especially in times of need. There *is* help. There *is* happiness. There really *is* light at the end of the tunnel. It is the Light of the World, the Bright and Morning Star, . . . the very Son of God Himself. . . . To any who may be struggling to see that light and find that hope, I say: Hold on. Keep trying. God loves you. Things will improve. Christ comes to you in His “more excellent ministry” with a future of “better promises.”<sup>32</sup>

Students who are taught to look to Jesus Christ as the Light of their lives will be taught to look to a source of guidance and hope that will never fail them. Just as those who rejoiced around the giant lamps and sang praises to the God of Israel for his light in their lives, our students can experience joy in their daily lives as they find constant hope and assurance in Jesus Christ, the Light of the World. The Savior’s reuse of this metaphor in John 9:4–5 will draw upon this meaning of the Savior as a source for hope amidst darkness.

*John 8:31–36.* In the Savior’s declarations in John 7:37–39 and John 8:12, reference to two key features of the Feast of Tabernacles—the water-pouring ceremony and the lighted lampstands—may be seen as rather overt. In John 8:31–36, the background of the Feast of Tabernacles may be less obvious, but it can still enhance our understanding of the Savior’s discourse on spiritual freedom and how he used the occasion of the festival to point to his divinity. For a whole week, the pilgrims who gathered to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles lived in booths to commemorate their wandering in the wilderness after God delivered them from bondage in Egypt and guided them to freedom in the promised land. As the Savior now addressed those who had at least professed a belief in him,<sup>33</sup> he returned to themes of

bondage and deliverance that had just been commemorated during the Feast of Tabernacles.

It may seem that the Savior's audience had forgotten the historical significance of the booths they lived in during the Feast of Tabernacles. How could they say that they were "never in bondage to any man" (John 8:33) when they had just spent a week commemorating their deliverance from Pharaoh and when they were currently subject to the emperor of Rome? However, when the Savior promised that those who continue in his word would be his disciples and be free (see John 8:31–32), they seem to have followed his transition from physical bondage and deliverance to spiritual bondage. They responded by alluding to their lineage as heirs of Abraham, implying that they had received promises of spiritual liberation and independence regardless of their current political or physical status (see John 8:33).<sup>34</sup> Making this transition from physical bondage to spiritual bondage is important for helping students understand and apply what the Savior teaches next.

Speaking to a group who may have consented to accept Jesus as a prophet or as a potential political Messiah, the Savior draws their attention to his divine spiritual mission by asserting that "whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin" and that only "if the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed" (John 8:34, 36). Proud of their lineage and stubborn in their traditions, this group of would-be believers would not accept this declaration. As one scholar noted, "People do not always, or even usually, realize that they are in bondage. They tend to rest in some fancied position of privilege, national, social, or religious. So these Jews, proud of their religion, did not even know their need to be free."<sup>35</sup> And from what did they need to be free? Elder Bruce R. McConkie answered: "Free from the damning power of false doctrine; free from the bondage of appetite and lust; free from the shackles of sin; free from every evil and corrupt influence and from every restraining and curtailng power; free to go on to the unlimited freedom enjoyed in its fulness only by exalted beings."<sup>36</sup>

Modern audiences may also struggle occasionally with a degree of spiritual complacency and fail to recognize their own spiritual bondage and need for deliverance. However, "all have . . . come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23) and need to be freed by the Great Deliverer, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The Savior drew upon the theme of deliverance during the Feast of Tabernacles to declare his divine power, and modern students who

understand this context can gain a greater sense of their need for that power in their own lives.

Students struggling to be free from sin and transgression may also gain greater confidence in the Savior's promise of freedom, as explained by Elder Richard G. Scott of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles: "I testify that when a bishop or stake president has confirmed that your repentance is sufficient, know that your obedience has allowed the Atonement of Jesus Christ to satisfy the demands of justice for the laws you have broken. Therefore you are now free. Please believe it. To continually suffer the distressing effects of sin after adequate repentance, while not intended, is to deny the efficacy of the Savior's Atonement in your behalf."<sup>37</sup>

When the Divine Redeemer of mankind makes us free, we are truly free.

*John 8:51–53, 58.* While the additional sacrifices were offered during the Feast of Tabernacles, participants sang the Hallel, Psalms 113–18.<sup>38</sup> In these psalms, we can see how the numerous deaths of these animals were accompanied by expressions of great faith and hope for divine help in overcoming the ultimate bondage—death. For example, in Psalm 116, we read:

The sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell gat hold upon me: I found trouble and sorrow.

Then called I upon the name of the Lord; O Lord, I beseech thee, deliver my soul. . . .

For thou hast delivered my soul from death. . . .

I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living. . . .

What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits toward me? . . .

Thou hast loosed my bonds.

I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving, and will call upon the name of the Lord. (Psalm 116:3–4, 8–9, 12, 16–17)

We see this hope repeated in the 118th Psalm:

The Lord is my strength and song, and is become my salvation.

The voice of rejoicing and salvation is in the tabernacles of the righteous. . . .

I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord. . . .

He hath not given me over unto death. (Psalm 118:14–15, 17–18)

The myriad animal sacrifices during the Feast of Tabernacles, combined with these hymns of hope for deliverance, would have been fresh in the minds of those who heard the Lord declare: "If a man keep my saying, he shall never see death" (John 8:51).

The immediate rejoinder from Jesus' opponents focused on the literalness of the statement "Art thou greater than our father Abraham, which is

dead? and the prophets are dead” (John 8:53). However, their objection was not aimed at the eventual triumph of man over death. They had spent the previous week singing about their hope for immortality in the face of animal sacrifices that reminded them of the inevitability of death. Their protest was aimed at the one making the claim. There was no doubt that Jesus was claiming “superhuman power.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore, the people asked the real question: “Whom makest thou thyself?” (John 8:53). In one of the most unequivocal declarations of his divinity in the Gospel of John, Jesus of Nazareth answered simply, “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58). He was not claiming to be merely another prophet or messenger from God. Jesus was identifying himself as the Great Jehovah, the God of Israel. Those who rejected his claim as blasphemous took up stones to end his life, but he escaped, for his time had not yet come.

While these well-known statements of the Savior in John 8:51, 58 are inherently powerful, understanding them in the immediate context of the Feast of Tabernacles adds to their poignancy. Observing the deaths of hundreds of animals throughout the festal week may have heightened the pilgrims’ sense of their need for deliverance from their own inescapable demise. Their consciousness of the inevitability of death enhanced the power of the Savior’s promise to give them everlasting life. As C. S. Lewis noted, “You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you. It is easy to say you believe a rope to be strong and sound as long as you are merely using it to cord a box. But suppose you had to hang by that rope over a precipice. Wouldn’t you then first discover how much you really trusted it? . . . Only a real risk tests the reality of a belief.”<sup>40</sup>

While our students cannot experience the full vicarious nature of the sacrifices at the Feast of Tabernacles, helping them understand and visualize the context can help them better appreciate the Savior’s promise to deliver them from death. Perhaps they will also be filled with the same gratitude repeated in the closing of the Hallel: “His mercy endureth for ever” (Psalm 118:1–4, 29).

*John 9:1–7.* As Jesus left the temple grounds, he and his disciples “passed by . . . a man which was blind from his birth” (John 9:1). While we never learn the exact age of the man, we understand from his parents’ later statement that he is “of age” (John 9:21) and that the man was an adult member of the community who had lived without sight for many years. Here was a man who had spent his entire life in physical darkness. Though he had never

known physical light, he could still be brought into the light through Jesus Christ. Regardless of the cause for the man's condition, Jesus affirmed again to his disciples, "I am the light of the world" [John 9:5], as though to teach: "Whenever you remember that I opened the blind eyes, physically, remember also that I came to bring light to eyes, spiritually."<sup>41</sup>

"In the Old Testament the giving of sight to the blind is associated with God himself (Exod. 4:11; Ps. 146:8). It is also a messianic activity (Isa. 29:18; 35:5; 42:7), and this may be its significance in the New Testament. It is a divine function, a function for God's own Messiah, that Jesus fulfills when he gives sight to the blind."<sup>42</sup> On at least four previous occasions, Jesus had restored sight to the blind (see Matthew 9:27-31; 12:22-37; 15:29-31; Mark 8:22-26). The miracle was not unique, but the manner in which it was accomplished was. The Savior's deliberate actions were meant to convey yet another proof of his divinity to those who witnessed them.

Closer examination of one piece of the textual context can help us begin to unlock the instructive nature of this miracle for modern students. When Jesus says, "I must work the works of him that *sent* me" (John 9:4; emphasis added), it is the tenth time we have read the word *sent* since the beginning of John 7. The Savior has been emphasizing his role as the one "sent" by the Father for several chapters.<sup>43</sup> This has been prelude for why the Savior now sends the blind man to the Pool of Siloam to be healed. John interprets Siloam to mean simply "Sent" (John 9:7) to correspond with his repeated usage of the term to refer to the divine commission of the Savior.<sup>44</sup> Thus, the Pool of Siloam becomes a symbol for the Savior himself, an especially critical association given the daily processions to the Pool of Siloam during the Feast of Tabernacles.

However, before sending the man to the Pool of Siloam, the Master Healer and Teacher "anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay" (John 9:6). Similar to Enoch's preparation to receiving spiritual sight in Moses 6:35, washing the clay from blind eyes may signify cleansing ourselves of the natural, earthly man (see 1 Corinthians 15:47-50). Like the man born blind, the natural man is blind and has no knowledge of the way to salvation—he is enveloped in spiritual darkness. Only by coming to Jesus Christ can we receive spiritual sight and know the way to salvation.

While the Savior could have simply healed the man of blindness, he seems to have had a much broader purpose in this miracle to demonstrate how "the works of God should be made manifest in him" (John 9:3). This miracle is



Courtesy of David M. Whitchurch

Northern steps of recently excavated Pool of Siloam looking toward the west. The pool was discovered during the repair of the large drainage pipe in the top, center of the picture.

not only about God's compassionate work for one blind man, but about his healing, redemptive power for all mankind. Though there were several pools in Jerusalem where the man may have washed the clay from his eyes, Jesus may have had at least three reasons for sending the man to the Pool of Siloam to have his sight restored.

First, as mentioned earlier, the Pool of Siloam was likely a *mikveh*, used for ceremonial washing and cleansing preparatory to entering the temple and participating in the rituals therein. Thus, the Pool of Siloam provided the blind man with "living water" in which to wash away his symbolic earthly self and receive spiritual, as well as physical, sight.

Second, Siloam was not the closest *mikveh* to where the blind man likely was at the time. According to John 9:1, the Savior and his disciples were not far from the temple when they came upon the man born blind. The closest *mikveh* would have been the Pool of Bethesda, which was only approximately 1,000 feet (300 meters) away, while the Pool of Siloam was approximately 2,100 feet (640 meters) away.<sup>45</sup> The extra distance required the man to exercise faith in the Healer who gave him the instructions, which was the real key to the man's conversion as recorded in John 9:24–38.

Finally, by choosing the Pool of Siloam as the place for the miracle to occur, the Savior was superimposing himself on the most important event of the Feast of Tabernacles. It was as if he were saying, “You come to the Pool of Siloam to ‘draw water out of the wells of salvation’—*I am* the well of salvation.”

When the blind man goes to the Pool of Siloam to be healed and receive his physical sight, he represents each of us, who must come unto the Savior in faith to receive the divine healing and spiritual sight necessary so God can do whatever work is necessary for each of us to receive our immortality and eternal life (see Moses 1:39). And just as the “living water” of Siloam is poured upon the altar of the temple, it is only as we receive the Holy Ghost and the power of Christ’s Atonement that this work can be accomplished—“there shall be no other name given nor any other way nor means whereby salvation can come unto the children of men, only in and through the name of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent” (Mosiah 3:17). John continues to employ this symbolism of light/sight and dark/blind in Jesus’ discussion with the leaders of the synagogue in John 9:39–41, emphasizing to all people that only those who believe in Christ receive the true light of God.

## Conclusion

Understanding the scriptures in context increases faith and inspires action. Brother Chad H. Webb reinforced this principle when he taught, “There is power in the principles that are couched within the stories of the scriptures. Part of that power is seeing those principles in context. . . . We teach the principles the Lord intended to preserve in the context and content of scripture. . . . Personal application will come naturally.”<sup>46</sup>

Students who learn the Savior’s teachings and miracle of healing at the Pool of Siloam in John 7–9 against the backdrop of the Feast of Tabernacles may be more inspired to seek for the gift of the Holy Ghost in their lives through faithful obedience to Jesus Christ. They can have greater spiritual clarity and direction in their lives by focusing on the Light of the World. They can experience increased confidence in the Savior’s power to free them from sin through his Atonement, which can increase the likelihood that they will repent and turn to him for deliverance when they feel the bondage of sin. They can find comfort and hope in the Savior’s power over death in bringing to pass the resurrection of all mankind. And students who remember the healing at the Pool of Siloam may be more inclined to turn to the Savior

for healing and enlightenment, knowing he was “sent” from God for our salvation. **RE**

## Notes

1. Many biblical scholars agree that the Feast of Tabernacles provides important contextual background for John 7–8. See Bruce K. Satterfield, “John and the Feast of Tabernacles,” in *The Testimony of John the Beloved: The 27th Annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium*, ed. Craig J. Ostler, Daniel K Judd, and Richard D. Draper (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998), 249; Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 371–72; Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 222; and F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 140. This article accepts this conclusion and posits further that the meaning of the healing in John 9 is also enhanced when viewed in context of the Feast of Tabernacles.

2. “In providing context, it is essential to not lose sight of its purpose, which is to contribute to a better understanding of a particular scripture passage. Be careful not to turn context—such as the history, politics, economics, or language of the people in the scriptures—into the main focus of a lesson.” *Teaching, No Greater Call: A Resource Guide for Gospel Teaching* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1999), 55.

3. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–73), 1:452.

4. Furthermore, John seems to have constructed his narrative with this in mind: “Passover, the setting of the previous chapter, and Tabernacles (7:2) are some six months apart in the Jewish calendar, leaving a large narrative ‘gap’ at this point. The symbolism of the Tabernacles setting is probably more important than any attempt to establish a chronology of Jesus’ ministry.” *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 1180. In other words, John also deliberately chose the teachings of the Savior against the backdrop of the Feast of Tabernacles to emphasize the Savior’s divinity and his saving mission.

5. Bruce Satterfield is a faculty member of the Religious Education Department at Brigham Young University–Idaho.

6. See Satterfield, “John and the Feast of Tabernacles,” 251; Bible Dictionary, “Feasts,” 672–74.

7. See Morris, *Gospel according to John*, 372; Edersheim, *The Temple*, 217–18; and George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 1:456.

8. See Satterfield, “John and the Feast of Tabernacles,” 256–57.

9. Edersheim, *The Temple*, 213.

10. In Satterfield’s research, he proposed that the Mishnah, while redacted around AD 200 to codify much of the oral traditions believed to have been in practice among the Jews from 570 to 536 BC, still provided an accurate enough description of many of the events and rituals of the Feast of Tabernacles to be useful for a discussion of the feast at the time of Jesus; see especially his footnote 3. Satterfield, “John and the Feast of Tabernacles,” 260. Other biblical scholars, such as Edersheim and Morris, have concurred with this assumption. Commentary from other biblical scholars also seems to assume this line of reasoning, such as Frank E. Gaebelein, ed., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 86, 92; Craig S. Kenner, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New*

*Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 283, 285; and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Thomas A. Wayment, *Making Sense of the New Testament: Timely Insights and Timeless Messages* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 161.

11. Indeed, according to one commentary, the three major Jewish festivals—Passover, Weeks, and Tabernacles—were critical for marking “the formation of Israel” as a nation. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 374.

12. The Court of the Women comprised an area of about two hundred square feet (sixty square meters) between the court of the Gentiles and Nicanor’s gate, which led to the altar of sacrifice. It was likely the most popular place of worship in the temple. See Edersheim, *The Temple*, 225.

13. See Satterfield, “John and the Feast of Tabernacles,” 255–56; Edersheim, *The Temple*, 224–25.

14. “The lampstand often symbolically represents God’s perfect leadership in showing his people their way. It also represents the Holy Spirit.” Lawrence O. Richards, *Zondervan Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 388.

15. See Edersheim, *The Temple*, 219; Satterfield, “John and the Feast of Tabernacles,” 254–55.

16. Satterfield, “John and the Feast of Tabernacles,” 253–54.

17. Satterfield, “John and the Feast of Tabernacles,” 254.

18. See Hershel Shanks, “The Siloam Pool: Where Jesus Cured the Blind Man,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 31, no. 5 (September/October 2005): 16–23. Shanks’s article reports on the work of Ronny Reich, and the archaeologists’ conclusion that the Pool of Siloam was indeed a *mikveh* employs the same line of reasoning that identified the Pool of Bethesda as a *mikveh* in Urban C. von Wahldt’s article, “The Puzzling Pool of Bethesda: Where Jesus Cured the Crippled Man,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 37, no. 5 (September/October 2011): 40–47.

19. See Shanks, “Siloam Pool,” 18. The location of this pool has moved around from time to time because of cycles of destruction and reconstruction in Jerusalem. See Nehemiah 3:15, for example.

20. See Morris, *Gospel according to John*, 373–74.

21. Morris suggests that another possible symbolic meaning of the water-pouring ceremony may point to the occasion where God provided water from the rock to satisfy the thirst of the Israelites in the wilderness (see Numbers 20:2–11; Deuteronomy 8:11–18; see also William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, Daily Study Bible Series, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 249. Regardless of the specific allusion, Jesus seems to be using the occasion of the ritual prayer for physical water to point their attention to him as the only one who can satisfy their spiritual thirst. See Morris, *Gospel according to John*, 374.

22. “Just as the Passover setting was appropriate to bread, so the Tabernacles setting, with its celebration of the provision of water in the desert, is appropriate to this part of the discourse.” Dunn and Rogerson, *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, 1181.

23. “Most of Judaism did not believe that the Spirit was prophetically active in their own time but expected the full outpouring of the Spirit in the messianic age or the world to come. Water usually symbolized Torah (law) or wisdom in Jewish texts, but John follows Old Testament precedent in using it for the Spirit (Is 44:3; Ezek 36:24–27; Joel 2:28).” Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 283.

24. At least two major functions of the Holy Ghost match the symbolism of the “living water”: (1) those who are “born again” of water and the Spirit receive new spiritual life; and (2) those who receive the Holy Ghost are cleansed and purified. See 2 Nephi 31:17; 3 Nephi 12:2; D&C 19:31; 84:33.

25. Joseph B. Wirthlin, “Living Water to Quench Spiritual Thirst,” *Ensign*, May 1995, 18. The mysteries of God’s kingdom can be known only by the power and gift of the Holy Ghost; see D&C 76:5–10, 114–18.

26. “Strong faith is developed by obedience to the gospel of Jesus Christ; in other words, faith comes by righteousness.” Bible Dictionary, “Faith,” 669.

27. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Wilford Woodruff* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 49.

28. In fact, it is likely that Jesus is teaching “in the Court of the Women, the most frequented part of the Temple,” where the lamps had been lit throughout the week of the Feast of Tabernacles. See Morris, *Gospel according to John*, 388. “It is most unlikely that Jesus taught in the actual treasure chamber, so the word [“treasury” in John 8:20] probably means that part of the Temple area into which people came to cast their offerings into the chests. This must have been part of the Court of the Women. . . . There were thirteen trumpet-shaped collection boxes there, each with its inscription showing the use to which its contents would be put. In no other writing does the name ‘the treasury’ appear to be used for a section of the Court of the Women, but it is difficult to give John’s words any other meaning. This court was a place to which people resorted and where teaching could take place accordingly.” Morris, *Gospel according to John*, 394.

29. See Edersheim, *The Temple*, 213; see also Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 283.

30. See Satterfield, “John and the Feast of Tabernacles,” 257.

31. Modern revelation reiterates and emphasizes Jesus Christ’s role as the Light of the World (see D&C 88:6–13). Modern prophets have also taught specific ways that Jesus Christ can be the light for us in our lives. See Dallin H. Oaks, “The Light and Life of the World,” *Ensign*, November 1987, 63–64; Robert D. Hales, “Out of Darkness into His Marvelous Light,” *Ensign*, May 2002, 70; and M. Russell Ballard, “You Can Be the Voice,” *Ensign*, May 1980, 45.

32. Jeffrey R. Holland, “An High Priest of Good Things to Come,” *Ensign*, November 1999, 36.

33. See McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 1:456; and Morris, *Gospel according to John*, 404.

34. This line of reasoning seems consistent with a common theme in John: “John presents Jesus as a preexistent messianic figure who comes to rescue his people from this world of darkness, hostility and sin. . . . These images of restoration and exodus suggest that the individual who does not believe in Jesus exists in the realm of darkness, ignorance and death. Since those who do not believe in Jesus are not regarded as ‘children of God,’ they are in a spiritual sense living in exile because they are alienated from God.” Evans and Porter, *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 351.

35. Morris, *Gospel according to John*, 405.

36. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 1:456–57.

37. Richard G. Scott, “Peace of Conscience and Peace of Mind,” *Ensign*, November 2004, 18.

38. See Satterfield, “John and the Feast of Tabernacles,” 255.

39. Morris, *Gospel according to John*, 416.

40. C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Bantam Books, 1961), 25.

41. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 1:481.

42. Morris, *Gospel according to John*, 422.

43. In fact, the word *sent* occurs in the English King James Version more often in John (59) than in Luke (42), Matthew (35), or Mark (25). It also occurs with greater frequency in John (once per 1.5 pages) than in Mark (once every 0.83 pages), Luke (once every 0.8 pages), or Matthew (once every 0.66 pages). In John 7–9, there are thirteen uses of the word *sent*—22 percent of all the occurrences of the word in the Gospel of John. However, if we add the thirteen references found in the critical discourses of John 5–6, where Jesus discourses extensively on his relationship to the Father and his role as Redeemer, we see almost half of the uses of the word *sent* in the Gospel of John clustered in these five chapters. The Savior again refers to himself as the Sent One repeatedly in John 17 (six times) during the great Intercessory Prayer, in which he again stresses his relationship to the Father and his role as Redeemer.

44. The Greek form of Siloam is usually connected with the Hebrew *shiloah* (see Isaiah 8:6). Although this term may be derived from the lexical root *sh-l-h*, “to send,” some scholars derive it from a homonym used outside the Bible to designate water channels or canals. This article assumes a connection between Siloam and *sh-l-h*, “to send,” or at the very least a literary play on that meaning, as used by John in John 9:7.

45. Wahlde concludes that these two pools were the largest *mikva'ot* in Jerusalem and were likely built for the large crowds that gathered to Jerusalem during the festival seasons, such as the Feast of Tabernacles. See Wahlde, “The Puzzling Pool,” 47.

46. Chad H. Webb, “New-Hire Orientation” (meeting with newly hired teachers of Seminaries and Institutes of Religion, May 19, 2009), 9.