

## THANKSGIVING, CHRISTMAS AND SUKKOT

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Thanksgiving is over, Christmas is coming. The Christmas spirit, or the Christmas frenzy is already upon us. Walmart employee trampled to death as people push for “stuff”. Is this how God would have us celebrate the birth of His son? How are supposed to celebrate? Christmas isn’t really in the Bible... or is it? And neither is Thanksgiving, or is it? I’d like to talk to you today about both Christmas and Thanksgiving, and about the common roots that they both have... common roots that stem from a very special celebration that God asked his people to remember. Let’s start with Thanksgiving:

1621. Plymouth Rock, MA. William Bradford, their governor, writes "they had all things in good plenty".

Bradford “They gathered in their **small** harvest.” Winslow “Our corn did well, our barley was mediocre, and our peas were not worth gathering.”

Truth is that the previous 10 months, since their 7-week journey in the Mayflower, had been devastating. Weakened by the seven-week crossing and the need to establish housing, many became sick and began to die -- one per day, then two, and sometimes three. They dug the graves at night, so that the Indians would not see how their numbers were dwindling. At one point, there were only seven people, out of 102, strong enough to get wood, make fires, and care for the sick. By the spring, they had lost 46 of the original 102. Of the 17 male heads of families, ten died during the first infection; of the 17 wives, only three were left.

Voyage to plant the first colony was “**undertaken for the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian faith.**” These were religious people. Familiar with the Bible, and not just the NT, but also the OT. In fact some of the early Pilgrims knew Hebrew and referred to the Hebrew Bible. First Publication was book of Psalms with frequent notes in Hebrew to clarify meaning and understanding.

So when harvest came, even if it was small, they were going to celebrate. It would have been natural to look at Scripture where God gave his people instructions regarding celebrating the harvest.

1. The Pilgrims modeled Thanksgiving after the Biblical festival of Sukkot.

### **Deut 16:13-15**

2. The festival of Sukkot is also called the Ingathering meaning “harvest”, and celebrated God’s provision. (Ex 23:16, Deut 16:13-15)
3. The Hebrew sukkot (singular sukkah) is translated “tabernacles, booths, shelters”

Seven Biblical – not Jewish – Festivals. mo’edim “appointed times

### **Lev 23:1-4**

4. The seven Biblical “Festivals” are God’s “appointments” with his people (Lev 23:1-4)

When did God tell them to celebrate Sukkot?

### **Lev 23:33-35**

7<sup>th</sup> Festival. In the 7<sup>th</sup> month. For 7 days. Starting on 15 Tishrei – exactly 6 months after Passover. Usually falls during October. First Thanksgiving celebration in 1621 was several days long. Probably took place in October.

What did they do? Burnt offerings. They rejoiced with palm branches and other branches from leafy trees. And they lived in Sukkot.

### **Lev 23:39-44**

5. On Tishrei 15, usually in October, God’s people live in Sukkot. (Lev 23:39-44)

Why did they live in Sukkot? Rabbis teach it they were living in the presence of God. Under his canopy of the heavens. His creation. Nothing between them and the heavens above. PLUS, God’s presence was with them in the wilderness. Where? The tabernacle. Pillar of fire and pillar of cloud that was God’s presence

at the Tabernacle. They weren't wandering in the wilderness – in the desert. They were being led, by God's presence. And in the desert, they couldn't live without God's provision.

#### **Ex 40:34-38**

He gave them manna to eat – a scanty harvest. Just enough for one day. And he provided water from the rock. Sukkot celebrates God's presence in their midst. It also celebrates his provision. God's presence and God's provision go hand in hand. That's Sukkot. We're in temporary huts, reminded that all we need is God. We don't need the big homes, the beach houses, the fancy cars, the electronic toys. Strip it all away. Live in a sukkah. Experience God alone. Nothing but his presence. And know that with His presence alone will come whatever provision, whatever harvest we need

6. God's provision is a direct result of His presence.

People lived in temporary dwellings – sukkot. And God lived in their midst, also in a temporary dwelling place – the mishkan, the Tent of Meeting, the tabernacle. But after they were able to go into the promised land, after God taught them the lessons of dependency that he wanted them to learn in the desert, God said build me a permanent place to live; build me a Temple, and I will live there, and meet you there at the appointed times. So Solomon built the Temple, and God's presence was in the Temple. And the people, through the priests, would make sacrifices and offerings to God, and would literally meet with God there at the Temple. God's presence was in the Temple. Guess which day Solomon dedicated the Temple?

#### **II Chron 7:8-9**

7. Solomon dedicated the Temple on Sukkot. God's presence was in the Temple. (I Kings 8:65, II Chron 7:8-9)

About 300 years later, the Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians, and God's people were taken away into captivity. And for 70 years there was no Temple. But then, under Persian King Cyrus, God's man, Zerubbabel along with a group of God's people, goes back to Jerusalem and rebuilds the Temple. The place where they would meet God. Where His presence would be. Where they would again experience his Provision. So they regather again in Israel, and what is the first thing they do, just before the rebuild the Temple?

#### **Ezra 3:3-4**

Interesting that even though they were afraid of the people, they celebrated. Like Abraham, they celebrated the promise. God's presence. God's provision. He would be there. They didn't feel it, they didn't see it yet, but by faith there were going to celebrate it! God's presence in their midst. He would be there. Again.

8. At the regathering of Israel, before Zerubbabel rebuilt the Temple, they celebrated Sukkot. (Ezra 3:3-4, Zech 14:16-17)
9. When the rebuilding was complete, Ezra & Nehemiah celebrated Sukkot. (Neh 7:73, 8:13-18)

And when everything was complete. The Temple, the wall around Jerusalem, the celebrated Sukkot again. A dedication – a remembrance and a praise of God's presence and his provision.

Another 300 years goes by, and the Temple is nearly destroyed again. The evil Greek / Selucid ruler Antiochus Epiphanes IV, a type of Antichrist, the one prophesied in the Book of Daniel, sacrifices a pig to his god in the Temple and goes into the holy of holies and defiles it with pig blood. He does this on the 25<sup>th</sup> of Kislev, which occurred in late December, when the pagan world had week long festivals for the birth gods like Zeus, Saturn, Isis, and Mithra, often associated with the sun and the winter solstice.

The Jews fight back, and after a 3 year, they actually beat the Greek Selucids and gain their independence. The first thing they do is clean and rededicate the Temple, exactly 3 years to the day that Antiochus desecrated it. And you know what they did? They celebrated Sukkot. Even though it was 25<sup>th</sup> of Kislev, in December not October. They celebrated Sukkot. God's presence in their midst, in the Temple, had been restored. That December Sukkot is today remembered as Hanukkah.

10. The Maccabees cleansed and rededicated the temple in December by celebrating a late Sukkot, now called Hanukkah.

About 160 years later, God's presence was experienced in a totally new way. In a little village of Bethlehem, just a few miles south of Jerusalem, a baby was born in an stable. Probably a cave, since they were commonly used as animal stables in that area. That baby was the Son of God. God's very presence, sent by the Father, to live in our midst.

### **John 1:14**

11. God's gave us His **Presence** in the birth of Jesus, **living** in our midst. (John 1:14)

We now see that Sukkot, which has always been a celebration of God's Presence and his Provision, has forshadowed something else. God Ultimate Presence and His Ultimate Provision through sending his Son to dwell in our midst. Dwell in midst. To Tabernacle among us, some version of the Bible translate it. In other words, to **sukkot** among us. Do you know what the word for an animal stable is, in Hebrew?

### **Gen 33:17**

Jacob built a **stable** for his animals. In the Hebrew it says he built a **sukkah** for his animals. So Jesus was born in a stable, called a **sukkah**. What day of the year?? We really don't know for sure. But we do know it wasn't Dec 25. That day was picked several hundred years later for totally different reasons. Probably it was a way for the church at that time to give Christian meaning to existing pagan celebrations. Like we have Fall Festival instead of Halloween.

### **Luke 2:8**

Around Bethlehem they would grow wheat and barley in the fields. If the shepherds were really in the fields with their flocks, as Luke says, they it would have to be between the end of the wheat harvest and before the plowing of the fields. That would be roughly between the first of July and the first of November.

There's another way to get at the date. It starts with Luke 1:5

### **Luke 1:5**

Zechariah was from the priestly division of Abijah. He was doing his priestly service when he found out that he and Elizabeth would have a baby. That would be John the Baptist. We know that Mary become pregnant when Elizabeth is in her sixth month. So we know John the Baptist is born about 6 months before Jesus.

From I Chron 24 we see that the division of Abijah is the 8<sup>th</sup> division. They each serve for one week. So assuming the first division starts serving the first week of the Jewish year, we can estimate when Zechariah was doing his priestly service. Assume he goes home quickly after the news, and Elizabeth become pregnant more or less right after that. 40 weeks later, John the Baptist is born. Surprisingly enough, calculating like this, that date turns out to on or at least very near Passover. So one could argue that perhaps John the Baptist was born on Passover, the prepare the way for the Messiah, who about 33 years later would be sacrificed on that very same day. Now we know Jesus was born about 6 months after John. Exactly 6 months after Passover we have the appointed time of Sukkot!! Can't prove it, but I must say it makes a lot of sense. Even just from the symbolish of Sukkot. **Celebrating God's Provision through his Presence in our midst.**

12. Jesus was born in a **stable**, called a **sukkah**, perhaps during the time of **Sukkot**.  
(Gen 33:17, Luke 1:5, I Chron 24:7-18, Luke 1:23-24, Luke 1:35-36)

13. Christmas is a reflection of **Sukkot**, celebrating God's **presence** and **provision**.

Take this celebration and what it stands for one step further. The Temple, is destroyed. God's presence is no longer there. And Jesus was crucified on Passover, Buried on the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and Resurrected on the Festival of First Fruits, and then ascended to heaven. 50 days after he was resurrected, an the Festival of Weeks, also called Pentecost, something happened. God's Provison was given again. He Presence was again sent among us, in the form of his Holy Spirit. Where is God's Temple now? Where does he dwell, where does he tabernacle now?

### **I Cor 3:16**

14. If you are a child of God, His **presence** now dwells in **you** (Jer 31:33, I Cor 3:16-17)

Sukkot was always a celebration of God's Provision and Presence. The celebrated when the Temple was built. When it was rebuilt. When it was cleansed and rededicated. I would suggest as we celebrate Christmas, and consider it's roots in Sukkot, that God would have us **cleanse** and **rededicate** our lives, our Temple. It's not just a story about God's presence coming into the world 2000 years ago. It's also about God living in **me** and in **you**. And just like the evil Antiochus tried to desecrate the Temple of old, the Adversary today, Satan himself, wants to desecrate you. He would love to have your body soiled by the sin, sucked up in the materialism of a secular Christmas. He would love to splash pig blood in your heart, in the holy of holies, where the very presence of God is supposed to live. Defile you, with your actions, your addictions, your attitudes, your selfishness...

15. Christmas is a time to **cleanse** and **rededicate** our lives.

And One more thing...Sukkot. It's picture of God's ultimate Harvest. When God's people, all those who believe in Him, Jews and Gentiles alike, are gathered as the bride of Christ, to rule with Him, the very Presence of God, again physically living in our midst. That's the final Sukkot.

16. The "harvest" foreshadows Jesus **gathering** his people as his **bride**. (Rev 19:7-8)

#### **Rev 19:7-8**

His bride is be dressed in white linens. What do those white linens symbolize? Our deeds of righteousness. As we celebrate Christmas, it should be a reminder to also prepare for the final Sukkot. Are we dressing in our white linens? Are we doing deeds of righteousness? What does that mean?

Let me suggest that we get a picture of what that means in the parable Jesus teaches in Matt 25. I hope you will spend some time discussing this in small groups tonight.

#### **Matt 25:34-40**

17. Christmas is a time to focus on **helping those in need**. (Matt 25:31-46)

Don't let Satan rob us of the real meaning of this celebration. Don't let him defile you. Don't be deceived into thinking this celebration is about you. It's not. Its about God. It's about God living in you, and about others feeling (not seeing), but actually experienceing God living in you. As we feed the hungry, provide for those in need, care for those who are hurting, they experience God's Presence and Provision. They experience the real meaning of Christmas. The real meaning of Thanksgiving. They can experience Sukkot through you. They can know first hand, of God's Presence and God's Provision, by your actions, by your love. This is what I long for my life to reflect. And not just in December, but 365 days a year.