

Christ In The Feast Of Sukkot

September is the month of what the Jews call “high holy days.”

The month begins with Rosh Hashana, which begins the Jewish New Year.

It is celebrated by the blowing of the shofar, a ram’s horn which makes a strange, screeching sound and acts like a modern-day siren, to call people to consider their status before God and repent of their sins.

It sort of resembles our idea of making New Year’s resolutions.

Rosh Hashana is followed by Yom Kippur, which is the holiest day of the Jewish calendar.

And the feast which followed Yom Kippur is the feast we are celebrating today—the feast of sukkot, but before we talk about the feast of sukkot we need to understand exactly what Yom Kippur was all about.

Yom Kippur means “Day of Atonement” and its history stretches all the way back to the time when God created Adam.

In his first recorded words to Adam, God commanded him not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

He warned him that if he ate of it, he would surely die.

The penalty for sin would be death.

As the rabbis say, there can be no forgiveness of sin apart from the shedding of blood.

But later, at the time of the Exodus, God gave the Israelites a totally unexpected and miraculous gift: He told them that one day of each year, on the day of Yom Kippur, God would forgive the sins of Israel by allowing the blood of a goat to act as a substitute for the blood of the Israelites.

The death of a goat would atone for the sins of Israel.

So on the day of Yom Kippur, the high priest would enter the most sacred room in the Jerusalem temple which was called the “inner sanctuary” or the “Holy of Holies.”

Two things were kept in the Holy of Holies: the ark of the covenant which contained the tablets upon which God inscribed the Ten Commandments, some manna and Aaron’s rod, and above the ark of the covenant, what was called the mercy seat of God.

On the day of Yom Kippur—and on that day alone out of the whole year—the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies with two goats. He would sprinkle the blood of the first goat on the mercy seat of God.

The blood of the first goat would then serve as a substitute for the High Priest's blood and according to God's mercy cleanse him of his sin.

Once the high priest had been purified by the blood of the first goat, he would lay his hand on the head of the second goat and God would transfer all the sins of Israel to that goat.

The goat would then be led out into the wilderness and left to die.

The goat was called the "scapegoat" since it paid with its life for the sins of the Israelites.

After doing these two things the high priest would come out of the holy of holies and proclaim that all the sins of Israel had been atoned for by the blood of the scapegoat.

Yom Kippur was originally called Yom Caphar—which meant "Day of Covering" because on that day all the sins of Israel were covered over and removed from God's sight.

Eight days after Yom Kippur, Israel would begin their celebration of God's gracious forgiveness of their sins in The Feast of Sukkot.

The Feast of Sukkot lasted eight days: it began on a Sabbath and ended on the following Sabbath.

In the feast of Sukkot, God commanded the Israelites to rejoice in his provision for all their needs: for his deliverance of them from slavery in Egypt during the Exodus, for his deliverance of them from their sins at Yom Kippur, and for his continuing provision of their needs in the gathering of the harvest.

The way the Israelites were to do this was to construct small booths or huts which resembled the lean-tos or small portable structures they ate and slept in during the Exodus.

The Hebrew word for these structures is "sukkot" which means "huts."

Here are God's words in Leviticus 23: "The Lord said to Moses, "say to the Israelites: 'On fifteenth day of the seventh month the Lord's Feast of the Tabernacles begins, and it lasts for seven days...So beginning with the fifteenth day of the seventh month, after

you have gathered the crops of the land, celebrate the festival to the Lord for seven days; the first day is a day of rest, and the eighth day also is a day of rest. On the first day you are to take choice fruit from the trees, and palm fronds, leafy branches and poplars, and rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days. Celebrate this as a festival to the Lord for seven days each year. This is to be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come; celebrate it in the seventh month. Live in booths—"sukkot"—for seven days: all native born Israelites are to live in booths so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the Lord your God."

So there were two things God commanded the Israelites to celebrate during the Feast of Sukkot: their Exodus journey and the present harvest.

Before the Israelites entered the promised land it was called Canaan and it was inhabited by Canaanites.

The Canaanites had their own religion in which they also celebrated the harvest.

In their celebration they offered thanks to their gods, Baal and Ashteroth, for creating them and giving them the land they lived in.

But God displaced the Canaanites with the children of Israel, and he commanded the Israelites to offer their thanks not to God the Creator, as the Canaanites did, but to God the Redeemer—the God of the Exodus.

His First Commandment is: "I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of Egypt with a mighty, outstretched arm. You shall have no other gods before me.

The Exodus is a pivotal event in the Old Testament and that is why God appointed it along with the harvest as a feast of thanksgiving for the Israelites.

For he is a God who not only gives us our daily bread, but who delivers us out of slavery to sin.

And just as the God of the Exodus sent Moses to deliver His people out of slavery to Pharaoh and lead them through the wilderness of Sinai to the land he had promised Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, so did the God of all mankind send His Son, Jesus Christ, to deliver His people out of slavery to sin and death, lead them through the wilderness of this sinful world and deliver them into the heavenly land He had promised in the writings of the Prophets.

Moses died and the place of his grave is unknown.

But Jesus rose from the dead and lives forever—in heaven and on earth through his body, the church.

God-fearing Jews all over the world have been celebrating the Feast of Sukkot this past week by building small booths and sleeping and eating in them.

And so can we who are children of the New Israel celebrate God's deliverance of us from our slavery to sin and death.

And that is why we are celebrating it today.

Later in the Old Testament era the Israelites added three rituals to the Feast of Sukkot which are still practiced today.

The first was called the "waving of something called a "lulav" and something called an "etrog."

The lulav is a bouquet of palm and poplar leaves and the etrog is a citron—a fruit that looks like a cross between a lemon and an orange.

In Jesus' day, the High Priest would stand before a sukkah with the lulav in his right hand and the etrog or citron in his left, and wave both of them as a thank-offering to God for the harvest.

The Jews still practice that ritual today.

The second ritual was the ceremonial pouring of water, in which the high priest could bring a pitcher of water from the Pool of Siloam, whose waters provided healing, and ceremonially pour it out on the ground before all the people.

The water symbolized two things: the rainy season which followed the Feast of Tabernacles and brought vegetable life out of the earth, and the Holy Spirit which brought spiritual life and healing to God's people.

He would recite words from *Psalms 118* as he poured out the water:

"Give thanks to the Lord for He is good; his love endures forever."

"The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

"Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter and give thanks to the Lord."

“The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this and it is marvelous in our eyes.”

“This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Psalm 118 is the last of six consecutive *Psalms* which are called “hallel” *Psalms* or “songs of rejoicing.”

As in “Hallelujah” which means “rejoice in Yahweh.”

It is filled with messianic references that anticipate the One Who would fulfill all the reasons for rejoicing that are contained in the Feast of Sukkot.

Therefore it’s not surprising when we read in the *Gospel of John* that Jesus chose the Feast of Sukkot to proclaim the gifts he was bringing to mankind.

“On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and cried out in a loud voice, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.’ By this he meant the Holy Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.”

Jesus came to harvest human souls from the grips of the Evil One.

He came to deliver His people out of their slavery to sin and death and offer them eternal life.

He came to send the Holy Spirit to all who would receive Him; to plant a spring of living water to flow from within them.

The third ritual can no longer be practiced because the Jerusalem temple no longer stands.

As long as it was there, however, there were sixteen columns that were each eighteen feet high that stood in the temple courtyard.

Each column had a bowl of oil at its top which, when it was lit, served as a giant candle to illuminate the night.

On the evening of the last day of the Feast of Sukkot, the giant candles were lit and the flames sent out light from the temple into all the streets of Jerusalem.

And it was at the very end of the Feast that Jesus spoke the following words: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Our God is the God of Rosh Hashanah, who calls us to repent of our sins.

Our God is the God of Yom Kippur, who sent his Son, the Lamb of God and our divine scapegoat, to atone for our sins with his blood.

Our God is the God of the Feast of Sukkot, who sustains us with each year's harvest as we make our journey through the wilderness of this world.

And our God is the God of the Exodus, who will one day welcome each one of us to the heavenly courts where we will dwell with Him forever.

So in the words of the song we sang right before the message: Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say, "Rejoice!"

Amen.