

Thanksgiving in Bible Times

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The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 34 Speak to the people of Israel, saying: On the fifteenth day of this seventh month, and lasting seven days, there shall be the festival of booths to the LORD. 35 The first day shall be a holy convocation; you shall not work at your occupations. 36 Seven days you shall present the LORD's offerings by fire; on the eighth day you shall observe a holy convocation and present the LORD's offerings by fire; it is a solemn assembly; you shall not work at your occupations. 37 These are the appointed festivals of the LORD, which you shall celebrate as times of holy convocation, for presenting to the LORD offerings by fire-burnt offerings and grain offerings, sacrifices and drink offerings, each on its proper day- 38 apart from the sabbaths of the LORD, and apart from your gifts, and apart from all your votive offerings, and apart from all your freewill offerings, which you give to the LORD. 39 Now, the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall keep the festival of the LORD, lasting seven days; a complete rest on the first day, and a complete rest on the eighth day. 40 On the first day you shall take the fruit of majestic trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days. 41 You shall keep it as a festival to the LORD seven days in the year; you shall keep it in the seventh month as a statute forever throughout your generations. 42 You shall live in booths for seven days; all that are citizens in Israel shall live in booths, 43 so that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. 44 Thus Moses declared to the people of Israel the appointed festivals of the LORD" (Leviticus 23:33-44).

1. The Origin of Thanksgiving

In two weeks, we will have Thanksgiving. If we ask our children about the images of Thanksgiving they have what do you think they would say? I think most kids would say that Thanksgiving is "a time for family, parades, lots of delicious food, and football games." This is what most Americans do on Thanksgiving. However, Thanksgiving has a deeper meaning. It is much more than family gathering, parades, food, and games. It is a time give thanks to God together for the blessings of the year.

Let me remind you of the story of the first Thanksgiving. In September 1620, a small ship called the Mayflower left Plymouth, England, carrying 102 passengers. They were religious separatists seeking a new home where they could freely practice their faith. They sailed across the Atlantic Ocean to settle

in the New World. The Pilgrims settled in the Plymouth area. Their first winter in the New World was harsh. They had arrived too late to grow crops, and without fresh food, half the colony died from disease. The following spring, the Wampanoag Indians and Squanto taught the Pilgrims how to grow corn, extract sap from maple trees, catch fish in the rivers and avoid poisonous plants. In November 1621, bountiful crops of corn, barley, beans, and pumpkins were harvested. The colonists had much to be thankful for, so a feast was planned. They invited 90 Native American Indians and celebrated together and gave thanks to God for three days. The focus of the first Thanksgiving was to give thanks to God for the first harvest in the New World.

2. Feast of Booths (Tabernacles)

Today's Old Testament lesson, Leviticus 23 talks about a tradition of Thanksgiving in biblical times. There are three important holidays for the Israelites: Passover, the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), and the Festival of Booths (Tabernacles). These three holidays are called pilgrimage festivals because in ancient times all Israelite men were required to travel to the Temple in Jerusalem, to take part in the festival celebrations.

This morning I would like to focus on "Feast of Booths" because it was at this time in ancient Israel when the harvest season was over they gave thanks to God. They praised God for providing more than enough food for the people to survive. In Leviticus 23:34 & 35, God says to Moses, "***On the fifteenth day of this seventh month, and lasting seven days, there shall be the festival of booths to the Lord. ³⁵ The first day shall be a holy convocation; you shall not work at your occupations.***

"The Feast of Booths" is ***Sukkot*** in Hebrew. This festival is celebrated on the 15th day of the seventh month. This year it starts on October 13 and ends October 20. When the Jews celebrate this festival, the Israelites are supposed to do the followings; 1) no work on the first day; 2) present the Lord's offerings by fire for seven days; 3) live in temporary shelters for seven days. This is a reminder of when their ancestors were in the wilderness at the time of Exodus, God took care of them. Leviticus 23:42 & 43 says, "***You shall live in booths for seven days; all that are citizens in Israel shall live in booths, ⁴³ so that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt.***

Even today the Jews build their own booths, a four-sided, temporary structure with palm branches for the open roof, through which the night sky is visible. For seven days, the family eat their meals and sleep in it. They remember what the Lord had done for their ancestors in the wilderness. They remember that God protected and fed the Israelites. God did not simply provide their shelters in the wilderness, but dwelt with His people.

John 1:14 says, “**The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.**” Jesus came into the world to dwell with God’s people. Revelation 21:3 also says, “**See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.**” When the Israelites stay in booths, they are reminded that the Lord lived among them.

3. A Time of Rejoicing

That’s why the Feast of Booths is a time of rejoicing, not only because of the blessing of an abundant harvest, but also because of the dwelling of the Lord with His people. Leviticus 23:40 says, “**On the first day you shall take the fruit of majestic trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days.**” The Israelites rejoice before the Lord for seven days. God wants His people to be happy and joyful.

Are we joyful and happy? Why? In Philippians 4:4, Paul says, “**Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!**” This is what Paul says in prison. His outward circumstances are bad, but his inner attitudes are full of joy. He is full of joy because he knows that no matter what happens to him, Jesus Christ is with him. Why does Paul say this to the Philippians? It is because they are discouraged by the unpleasant circumstances including Paul’s imprisonment. Paul assures the Philippians that Jesus gives them deeper, purer, sweeter, more lasting pleasure and gladness than anything this world has to offer.

How can Paul have such a positive attitude? Paul says “**I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord**” (Philippians 3:8). When Paul compares the greatness of knowing Christ, everything else is rubbish. That’s why he is always joyful and grateful to the Lord.

4. A Time of Renewed Commitment

When the Israelites gather together to celebrate the feast of booths they present offerings. Leviticus 23:37 says, “**These are the appointed festivals of the Lord, which you shall celebrate as times of holy convocation, for presenting to the Lord offerings by fire-burnt offerings and grain offerings, sacrifices and drink offerings, each on its proper day.**”

God asks the Israelites for the additional offerings for the feast along with their regular offerings. In addition to the offerings that individual worshippers present, the people are supposed to present offerings to the Lord: the whole offering, the grain offering, the sacrifice, and drink offerings. Why do you think God asks for such different kinds of offerings when they

celebrate the feast of booths? Is it because God needs more offerings for himself? Of course not. God does not need money. Then what is the purpose of asking for offerings?

Luke 12:34 says, “***where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.***” We know that where we spend our money there our concern is. When we make offerings, we confirm that God is the one on whom we rely and trust. When we present our resources to God, we renew our commitment and dedication to the Lord.

One of the pastors who served Swift Memorial in the past left a will for our church. Our church received a check representing money specifically bequeathed to our church under the Last Will of Rev. Robert Edward Morgan. I was so touched by his thoughtful heart. His will shows us how much he cared about our church and loved us. Rev. Morgan wanted to pass God’s blessing to us.

5. Conclusion

Thanksgiving in biblical times was much deeper than the Thanksgiving of today. In ancient times, people gave thanks not only for blessings that they had received, but also God’s blessings for their ancestors. The Israelites remembered what God had done for their ancestors and experienced God’s care and protection by living in the shelters for seven days. And they expressed their thanks by presenting all kinds of offerings to the Lord. The feast of booths was a time to remember God’s dwelling with God’s people and His love for the people. By presenting offerings to the Lord, the people not only give thanks to the Lord but also renew their dedication to the Lord.

6. Application

For some people, Thanksgiving will be a difficult time to be grateful. For the families who lost their beloved children in the school shooting in Santa Clarita, CA last Thursday, Thanksgiving will be a day of grieving. But the Bible challenges us to remember of what God has done for us, from our ancestors long time ago to today.

How often do we take what we have for granted? Sometimes we forget about what God has done for us. The refrain of one hymn says, “Count your blessings, name them one by one; Count your blessings, see what God hath done; Count your blessings, name them one by one; Count your many blessings, see what God hath done.” Can we count what God has done for our ancestors and for us? What makes this year’s Thanksgiving special for you and me? I pray that we renew our commitment to the Lord on this Thanksgiving and give thanks to God by presenting something to the Lord. Amen.