

# THE JOY OF LIVING WATER: JESUS AND THE FEAST OF SUKKOT

*With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. (Isaiah 12:3)*

Water was of great importance to the people of the Bible. They lived in a dry country, completely dependent on the seasonal rains. Fresh water was not available everywhere and the task of digging wells and cisterns was a difficult one. Such an important resource as fresh water would naturally be a picture or symbol of spiritual reality as well. God frequently made use of common cultural phenomena to teach the truths of faith. He was Shepherd, Potter, and King. The people were sheep, clay, and subjects. Water became symbolic as well.

## LIVING WATER

There were different types of water found in the land of Israel. Cistern water was rainwater trapped in pits dug into rock and plastered to prevent leakage. Most homes and public buildings had them. The water was often dirty, having flowed from roofs or streets into the cistern. This source of water was not dependable because one season it might not rain or the plaster might leak and the water seep away.

Running water, especially spring water, was different. It stayed fresh and clean. And most springs were dependable, providing water year round. This constant fresh source of water was called "living water," probably portraying its life-giving qualities as well as its constant freshness. God provides (and is described as) living water (Psalm 107:9; Isaiah 35:6-7, 58:11; Jeremiah 2:13; Zechariah 14:8; John 4:13-14, 7:37-38). Living water was cleansing (Leviticus 15:1-3). The ritual bath of Jesus' day, the *mikveh*—used before coming into the presence of God at the Temple or to the synagogue worship service—contained flowing water, or living water. John the Baptist's choice of the Jordan River for his symbolic cleansing likely was based on the need for fresh, moving water to symbolize cleansing. Jesus described Himself as living water (John 4:13-14, 7:37-38), and the people of His day understood the meaning. Only God could provide living water. It would not fail to satisfy any thirst. But it was the connection between living water and the feast of Sukkot that gave Jesus' image of living water the clearest meaning. He chose that feast day to reveal that He was living water.

## THE FEAST OF SUKKOT

In the Old Testament, God instituted a religious calendar for the Israelites to follow. The seventh day, the seventh year, and the end of seven "seven years" were significant to Him. Within each year, there were seven specified feasts (Leviticus 23). In the spring, three feasts were celebrated together: Passover, Unleavened Bread, and Firstfruits. These feasts remembered, respectively, Israel's deliverance from Egypt, God's gift of the Promised Land, and the spring harvest. Fifty days after Passover came Shavuot, sometimes called Pentecost, which celebrated the end of the grain harvest and the anniversary of the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. In the fall were the holy days of Rosh Hashanah, or the feast of Trumpets, and Yom Kippur, the day of atonement when Israel went before the Lord and asked forgiveness to escape His judgment. Immediately after these two feast days came the most joyous one of all, the only feast God commanded the people to "rejoice before him" (Leviticus 23:40)—the feast of Sukkot, or Tabernacles as it would come to be known. And rejoice they did.

The week-long celebration began after the fall harvest (figs, pomegranates, dates, and grapes) had been gathered and the olives hung heavy on the trees. Now was the time to be glad. Following God's command the people built booths of olive, palm, and myrtle branches (Nehemiah 8:15). The booths provided shade, but there needed to

be enough space in the branches so the people could see the sky, reminding them of their years in the wilderness. These booths, or *sukkot* (pi. *sukkah*) gave the feast its name.

For seven days, the people ate, lived, and slept in these booths. Since this was one of the three feasts in which everyone was commanded to come to Jerusalem (Passover and Shavuot are the others), thousands of people crowded the streets of the city, and there were *sukkot* everywhere. The children loved it, and so did the adults. It was a time to praise God for the past gifts of freedom, land, and bountiful harvests.

The Pharisees had adopted another custom based on God's commands in Leviticus 23:40. They took the branches of the three trees—olive, palm, and myrtle—and tied them together. Holding this cluster of branches (called *lulav*; pi. *lulavim*) in one hand and a citron (the fruit they decided was mentioned in Leviticus 23:40) in the other, they carried them to the Temple for each of the seven days of the festival (as religious Jews still do today). Here the people, and even the youngest children, would wave their *lulavim* joyously, as they danced, sang, and chanted the *Hallel* (Psalms 113-118) in a time of great celebration rivaling any holiday the world has ever known. A procession of priests—who made the festive sacrifices (literally hundreds of animals were offered) and carried water and wine to be poured into the silver funnels on the altar as drink offerings—would lead the men and boys around the altar in the priests' court in front of the Temple. Whenever they came to the Hosanna (Psalm 118:25), they waved their *lulavim* toward the altar as they sang, "O Lord, save us! O Lord, grant us success!" After several hours of intense rejoicing before the Lord, the people returned to their booths to rest, eat, and prepare for the next day's celebration.

## SUKKOT IN HISTORY

The commands in Leviticus 23 leave little doubt as to the importance of this great celebration to God. But three historical events added even more to the joy the people felt on this great fall festival. The first, described in 2 Chronicles 5-7, was the dedication of the First Temple of Solomon (see 2 Chronicles 5:3, 7:9), which took place during Sukkot. For seven days, the nation of Israel celebrated and rejoiced because God had chosen to live among them. The ark, the resting place of God's glorious presence, was moved into the Temple, God's earthly home, in a spectacular display of His glory (2 Chronicles 5:13-14). After the people said an impassioned prayer for God's presence (2 Chronicles 6), God sent fire from heaven to consume the sacrifices, a stunning display of His power and love (2 Chronicles 7:1-3). On the day the Temple was dedicated, Solomon and the people offered more than 140,000 sacrifices, a measure of their joy. Afterward, everyone went home filled with happiness (2 Chronicles 7:10). The people of Jesus' day, though Solomon's Temple had been destroyed and the ark had disappeared, remembered their joy and celebrated God's presence in the Temple of Herod, still in the same location. Their jubilation was no less than in Solomon's time.

The second event was the celebration of Sukkot following the reconstruction of Solomon's Temple (destroyed by the Babylonians) by the exiles after their return from Babylon. Though this building was not as glorious as the first, the people's devotion to their God was stronger than ever. When the Torah was read and the feast of Sukkot described, Nehemiah, the high priest, commanded that it be celebrated again (Nehemiah 8:13-18), and the people's joy was "very great" (Nehemiah 8:17). As the people of Jesus' time remembered this ancient celebration, their joy grew greater, for God had not forgotten them.

The third event is not mentioned directly in the Bible. Between the Old and New Testaments, the Jews were severely oppressed by the Hellenistic Greeks from Syria. Antiochus, the king of the Syrians, was determined to Hellenize the Jews, so he outlawed the Sabbath, circumcision, and the study of Torah. Sacrifices were ordered to the pagan king, even in the Temple itself. The great altar of the Temple was defiled by the offering of pigs on it. The entrails of these unclean animals were dragged around the Temple courts, defiling them as well. A statue of the king was placed in the Temple. It was a time of great anguish for the Jewish people.

But God sent deliverance. An old priest, Mattathias, began a revolt by refusing to make the royal sacrifice in a small town near Jerusalem. His son, known as Judah Maccabee, led a group of freedom fighters against the far stronger Greek army. Trusting God, these rebels miraculously defeated the army of Antiochus and reclaimed the city of Jerusalem. Reaching the Temple, Judah ordered a complete cleansing and rededication of the building, and the altar was rebuilt.

The menorah, or eternal light, in the Holy of Holies had been extinguished while Jerusalem was under Syrian control. Though only a small supply of sacred oil remained, Judah ordered the lamp lit. Miraculously, it burned for eight days, the entire time of the rededication of the Temple, when new oil was purified. The celebration of this great deliverance of God became known as the Feast of Dedication, or Hanukkah (which Jesus also celebrated—see John 10:22-23). It was celebrated after Sukkot that year.

But Judah and the religious leaders were concerned. Sukkot was the celebration of God's goodness and the time to pray for His future blessings, especially for the fall rains. Judah ordered Sukkot to be held even though the time was past (2 Maccabees 10:5-8). So the Sukkot celebration took on even greater happiness as it recalled God's miraculous deliverance and preservation of His people and His Temple for a third time. Several Sukkot and Hanukkah customs became intertwined. The palm branch became the symbol of political as well as religious freedom. The chant of Hosanna (or "O Lord, save us") now was understood to mean not only the salvation of deliverance from Egypt, the provision of rain for next year's harvest, and the forgiveness requested by the sacrifices, but it also was a prayer for political freedom. (This connection, along with the waving of palm branches, was to have interesting application in the ministry of Jesus—see Luke 19:28-44.)

Four great menorahs (over 75 feet high), placed in the women's court in remembrance of the miraculous unending supply of oil on Hanukkah, were also lit on Sukkot, commemorating God's deliverance of His people from the Syrians. (The bowls on top of the branched candles held more than 10 gallons of oil. The wicks were made from the worn-out breeches of the priests.) The light of the candles could be seen in every house in Jerusalem. Tradition records that the people, upon seeing the light, sang these words: "Our ancestors turned their backs on the Temple of the Lord, but our eyes are on the Lord." Truly the feast of Sukkot was one of great celebration. A rabbi once said, "Whoever has not seen Sukkot has not witnessed real joy."

## SUKKOT AND LIVING WATER

There was another special element to the celebration of Sukkot, and it involved living water. Sukkot took place at the end of the dry season. The rains needed to begin immediately to ensure a harvest the following year. Thus the celebration of God's harvest was coupled with fervent prayer for next year's rains. Some believe this custom came from Solomon's prayer at the Sukkot dedication of the Temple (2 Chronicles 6). He prayed that God would forgive the sins of the people when they prayed toward the Temple and that He would not withhold the rains (2 Chronicles 6:26-27). The people knew that no rain meant no life. So the priests added a ceremony that included a prayer for rain. They may have based this ceremony on Isaiah 12:3: "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation."

This part of the ceremony involved a procession of priests, accompanied by flutes, marching from the Temple to the Pool of Siloam, which was fed by the Spring of Gihon. One of the priests filled a golden pitcher (more than a quart) with water, and the procession returned to the Temple. They arrived just after the sacrifices were laid on the altar. The priest carrying the pitcher entered the priests' court through the Water Gate and, to the blast of the shofar, approached the altar. He made one circle around the altar as the crowd sang the *Hallel*. Then the priest climbed the ramp and stood near the top of the altar. Here there were two silver funnels leading into the stone altar for the daily drink offerings. As the crowd grew silent, the priest solemnly poured the water into one of the funnels. Again the people, accompanied by the Levitical choir, began to chant the *Hallel*. The sound was deafening because of the thousands of pilgrims jammed into the Temple courts. In this way, they asked God for life-giving rain. The living water they used apparently acknowledged it was God who brought rain and

life. The chant of the Hosanna—"O Lord, save us!"—now meant "Save us by sending rain as well."

It seems hardly possible, but the celebration became even more intense as the week drew to a close. When the seventh day of the feast arrived, the courts of the Temple were packed with worshipers. Chants of praise were heard throughout the city, and thousands of *lulavim* waved in the air. The priestly procession went to the living water of the Pool of Siloam. As the massive crowd waited expectantly, the sacrifices were offered, and the priests chanted, "O Lord, save us! O Lord, grant us success!" (Psalm 118:25).

The procession returned and entered the Court of the Gentiles, then went through the Water Gate into the priests' court. As hundreds of priests chanted the Hosanna ("Deliver us! Save us!") and thousands of people jammed into the Temple courts, the procession circled the altar seven times (remembering the walls of Jericho, which fell after seven circuits because of God's great power). Then there were three blasts on the trumpets, and the crowd grew still as the priest poured the living water into the tunnel. Now the chanting became even more intense: "Save us, hosanna! Help us, hosanna!" and the next verse: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD" (Psalm 118:26). The waving of the *lulavim* reached a frenzy as branches were beaten against the ground until the leaves fell off.

Gradually, the people fell silent as they returned, exhausted, to dismantle their booths before journeying home. God had blessed them. They had celebrated joyously His presence, thanking Him for His gift of land and the bountiful harvest. They had begged for His continued blessing of the rains and had pleaded for political freedom as well. They were now prepared to face another year.

## JESUS' TEACHING

In the context of Sukkot, the water ceremony, and the menorah blazing with light, Jesus dramatically presented the message of His new kingdom. He had gone to Jerusalem for Sukkot (John 7:10) and had spent time teaching the great crowds who thronged the Temple (John 7:14). On the "last and greatest day of the Feast" (John 7:37), in the midst of the water ceremony, the chanted prayers, and the plea through the offering of living water, Jesus stood and said, "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" (John 7:37-38).

Did He say this during the silence that fell as the priest poured the water? Was His shout heard above the chants of "Save us"? Or was it as the crowd began to leave that Jesus explained His ministry in the symbol of living water, streams that flow from within those who believe? Did Jewish tradition support His teaching that living water represented God's Spirit (John 7:39)? It is not stated in the Bible. But the setting Jesus chose to give this lesson, and the similarity of His meaning to Jewish tradition, meant that His shouted promise in the Temple must have had stunning impact. "Let him come to *Me!*"

John's gospel also recorded another teaching during the time of Sukkot. Though it is not placed on the exact days of the feast, it is during Jesus' visit to Jerusalem for Sukkot. In the context of a joyous feast, ended each day with the blazing candles in the Temple courts, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). The crowd, having just seen how the Temple candles had lit up the city, must have been strongly affected by Jesus' words, the mastery of His teaching, and the Old Testament background. Jesus is "living water," as taught during the water ceremony, and He is the "light of the world," in the context of the great Temple lights.

## CONCLUSION

The importance of the Jewish background to Jesus' work cannot be exaggerated. It gave Him the context He needed to make His teachings relevant, powerful, and practical. The feast of Sukkot has additional lessons. It was (and is) a feast of great joy. Jesus experienced that emotional celebration of God's goodness. In many ways, the Christians of today have exchanged the ability to celebrate before the Lord for the shallow "happiness" of the secular world or for the always somber mentality of worship. There were solemn times in Temple worship, reminding the Jewish people to be sober, holy, and serious about their faith. But they also had Sukkot. It reminded them that God wants His people (including us) to celebrate before Him (Leviticus 23:40). How many modern-day Christians truly celebrate with this kind of joy before the Lord?

A second lesson can only be suggested here. The seven Jewish feasts also became the outline for Jesus' ministry. He died on Passover, was buried on the feast of Unleavened Bread, and was raised on the feast of Firstfruits. He sent the Holy Spirit on Shavuot (Pentecost). Rosh Hashanah (the trumpet call to judgment) and Yom Kippur (judgment day) in some sense will be fulfilled upon Jesus' return, though He has already fulfilled some elements of these two feasts.

And what comes after the final judgment? Heaven! The new Promised Land! Sukkot is the feast that celebrated the Promised Land, God's deliverance, living water, and God's blessing. Sukkot is a feast that will be fully realized in heaven. There will be living water (Revelation 7:17), the eternal presence of God (Revelation 21:22), and the light (Revelation 22:5).

Sukkot taught the Jewish people to be joyful, in anticipation of heaven. Take the most joyful celebration that ever existed and imagine it lasting forever. That is heaven. No wonder some Jewish Christians (and some Gentile ones, too) celebrate Sukkot.