

A Boothful Thanksgiving

Leviticus 23: 33-36, 39-43

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How would you like to have a Boothful Thanksgiving? A Boothful Thanksgiving? What kind of a holiday is that? If you were Jewish, living in the days of Jesus, it very well might be a wonderful holiday that you would be eagerly awaiting. It would occur after all the crops from your fields had been harvested, including the grapes from your vineyards. It would be a time to celebrate with friends and family and it would also be a time to do something special. It would involve building a booth or tent on the flat roof of your home. For an entire week you and your family would spend a great deal of time eating and sleeping outdoors. Because it was still rather warm in the early fall, it would provide you with an opportunity to savor the light evening breezes as the children enjoyed their rooftop adventure. But why? The answer is found in God's Word. It was read this morning from the book of Leviticus and is referenced in many other places throughout the first five books of the Old Testament.

In the Old Testament, the Jewish people were commanded to celebrate three important festivals each year. Each had an agricultural and a spiritual meaning. The first was Passover. Celebrated in the spring, it marked the time of year when lambs were born. It also commemorated the exodus of the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt. The second was Pentecost. It was celebrated early in the summer when the fields of barley were ripe unto harvest. This holiday signaled the beginning of the harvesting season which would take place throughout the summer. It also commemorated the giving of the Mosaic Law to the people of Israel on Mount Sinai. Lastly there was the Festival of Booths or Tabernacles. It took place early in the fall and was a time of thanksgiving for all of the crops that had been gathered and stored away for the winter. It was also a time to celebrate God's provision for His people during the forty years that they wandered in the wilderness. Yes, like their ancestors who lived in tents during that desert sojourn, families would build a tent-like dwelling of palm branches on the rooftops of their homes. They would spend an entire week living in these makeshift dwellings, especially when they bedded down for the night. (you already said living in so leave the bedded down out)

So, what do you think? Should we build some booths or tent like tabernacles outside of our homes to express our gratitude unto God during this upcoming Thanksgiving holiday? Anybody want to volunteer to put up a tent and live in it for a week? Probably not. Nevertheless, this ancient festival of the Jewish people does have some things to say to us as we prepare our own thanksgiving celebrations this week as well as what the Pilgrims in New England experienced during their first thanksgiving celebration.

First of all, this yearly festival reminded the Jewish people of their past. Their ancestors had wandered in the wilderness for forty years. In spite of the fact that they were often disobedient and rebellious, failing to trust the Lord, God never gave up on them. Throughout all of those years of wandering, He continued, for example, to feed them with a divine "manna" that was provided each and every day with the exception of the Sabbath, the day of rest. Not until they had successfully entered the Promised Land and began to partake of its bounty did the manna cease to appear. In chapter five of the book of Joshua, verse 12, we find these words, "The manna stopped the day after they ate this food from the land; there was no longer manna for the Israelites, but that year they ate of the produce of Canaan."

Likewise, the Pilgrims, who landed in the New World in November of 1620, knew that God had taken care of them. Having consumed most of their provisions before their arrival, they faced a bleak winter without food or shelter. However, their needs had been met by a friendly Indian named Squanto who taught them how to hunt and fish. They also discovered stashes of corn that had been buried in an abandoned Indian village. This became the corn which was planted the following spring. Having built a stockade and a common storehouse, they were nevertheless unprepared for the sickness that set in upon them. Nearly half of their number died that winter, but those who survived knew that had it not been for the Lord, all of them would have perished. Now as they prepared for a thanksgiving celebration with their friends, the Patuxet Indians, it was a time to briefly reflect upon their not too distant past. God had protected and watched over them during that first year in America.

Second, the festival of booths was a time for the Jewish people to celebrate the present. It was a time to relax and enjoy the bounty of the crops that

had been harvested, especially the grapes which would be fermented and turned into wine, a drink that was safer to drink than water and which brought an added measure of joy as it was consumed. It was a time to celebrate with friends and family, a time to relax and enjoy each other's company after so many months of backbreaking labor. It was also a time to gather for worship to thank the Lord for His blessings. In fact, some people even made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to present an offering unto the Lord in the temple.

Likewise, the Pilgrims had a thanksgiving celebration in the fall of 1621. The harvest of Indian corn had been excellent. They had also learned how to catch the fish that were so plentiful in the bay and they had learned how to hunt in the forests surrounding their settlement. Best of all they did not have to fear an attack from the Indians. They had made peace with their Native American neighbors, a peace that lasted for forty years. For three days they enjoyed each other's company. The Indians taught the Pilgrims how to make popcorn and the Pilgrims in turn introduced to the Indians to fruit pies. Their festivities were not restricted to just eating, however. There were shooting contests with guns and bows and arrows, military drills, foot races and even wrestling matches. It was quite a celebration. Best of all it was a time to give thanks unto God as William Brewster, the governor, led them in prayer.

Third and finally, for both the Jewish people in the Holy Land and the Pilgrims in New England, it was a time to look forward to the future. A few weeks earlier the Jewish people had celebrated the dawn of their new year, Rosh Hashanah. It was a solemn occasion celebrated at the temple, the once a year occasion when the high priest entered into the Holy of Holies to offer a sacrifice unto God. It was a time to secure God's blessings for the coming year. For the Pilgrims it was also a time to pray for God's blessings in the coming year, especially when they welcomed a boatload of new settlers, thirty-five additional colonists who arrived with no food, no clothing, no tools, not even any bedding. The Pilgrims realized that their bountiful harvest would soon be consumed. It would be half rations for everyone until the next summer. Nevertheless, even in those once again difficult circumstances, they could look forward to the future with a spirit of hopefulness and faith. They had planted an outpost for the Lord in a new world where they could honor and worship Him freely.

All of this brings me to this concluding question, the same one that I asked at the beginning of this message. Do you want to have a Boothful Thanksgiving? Now to be clear, that doesn't require pitching a tent in the front yard of your home, although I would be glad to lend you one of mine. Nor does it require summoning a tribe of Indians to enjoy the Thanksgiving feast with you. However, there is one thing which all of us should endeavor to do. The Thanksgiving holiday is a time to remember and give thanks for all of the ways that the Lord has blessed and watched over us in the past, especially when things were difficult. It is also a time to celebrate and give thanks for the present and all of the ways God is blessing us right now. Finally, it is a time to look forward to the future and give thanks for all of the ways the Lord is going to prosper and sustain us in the future. That's what it means to have a Boothful Thanksgiving. Or in the words of Saint Paul, "In all things, give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18).