

The Light of Sukkot

John 9:1-7

¹The Feast of Tabernacles had ended. The crowds had dispersed and those who had traveled to Jerusalem from the outlying regions were making their way home. The sukkot were being cleared away along with well-shaken lulavs, bent and broken from the joyous celebration. Jerusalem was returning to its usual bustling pace. People were still talking about the spectacular light that had shined from the Temple and cast a glow upon the whole city.



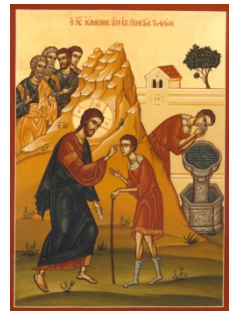
²However, it was difficult for the man who sat by the entrance to the Temple courtyard to understand these conversations. He had never even seen the giant candelabra shining into the night. Although he had felt its warmth and heard it crackle, he had never even seen fire. For this man had been born blind. "I was blind when the festival began and now it's over, and I am blind still," he thought. "And so it shall probably be until the end of my days; I shall sit here, begging for a few measly coins always." He nodded in the direction of the sound of someone walking into the Temple. "The Lord bless you," he said to the wind.

Later that day, he heard a group of people approaching. The group paused before him and the blind man heard one of them ask, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man, or his parents, that he should be born blind?" The beggar steeled himself for the answer to come. He didn't think he could bear it if the rabbi were to say something about his parents, whom he loved and who had always shown him compassion, even though they must have been disappointed that their child was...well, broken.

As these thoughts went through his mind, he heard the rabbi reply, "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him." The beggar was astonished and then he had another thought, but he was too afraid to speak it: "This must be the man called Jesus." He had heard rumors and rumblings about Jesus for weeks. People spoke freely about Him in front of the beggar, for they must have assumed that just because he couldn't see, there must be something wrong with his hearing. So, the blind man had heard plenty. Some had called Jesus a lunatic or a liar, but many were saying that He was the Prophet who was to come, that He was the Messiah, the Anointed One.

³Then, as if to answer the blind man's unspoken question, "Who are you?" the rabbi softly said, "While I am in the world, I am the Light of the world."

When He had said this, the blind man heard the sound of someone spitting on the ground, and then there were hands firmly but gently rubbing what smelled and felt like clay on his eyes. Under ordinary circumstances, the beggar was sure he would have pulled away, but he sat there, unmoving, until the man spoke again and said, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam." The beggar silently got to his feet and began to stumble in the direction of the pool. When he reached it, he knelt down, drew in a breath and began dousing his eyes with water. As he washed away the mud, it was as if he were wiping away darkness. The first thing he saw was light, blurred by tears...



John, a first-century Jewish man who believed in Jesus, recorded this Sukkot miracle.⁴ Jesus' healing of the blind man shocked the people of that day, not only because the act itself

¹ Story from "A Messianic Midrash – the Miracle at Sukkot; Sept. 2003 by Jews for Jesus

² <http://patriotroom.com/images/upload/beggar.jpg>

³ <http://catholic-resources.org/Images/Blind/John9-Brookline-1small.gif>

⁴ John 9:1-11

was so amazing, but also because the timing of the act was especially significant. It is no coincidence that Jesus performed this miracle immediately after Sukkot, for He used both the healing and the holiday to make some earth-shattering statements about himself. Thousands of years later, people are still grappling with the meaning behind this miracle.

A close look at the history of Sukkot, how it was celebrated in Jesus' day and the meaning of light in the Old Covenant, will help us better understand what Jesus meant when he said He was the "Light of the World."

Sukkot—celebrating God's presence and provision

Since the time of Adam and Eve's catastrophic choice in the garden called Eden, humanity experienced exile from God's immediate and intimate presence. Then God called Abraham, and promised to make his descendants into a great nation, a nation through whom all other nations would be blessed.⁵

Consider,

- **Genesis 33:17 HCSB** but Jacob went on to Succoth. He built a house for himself and stalls for his cattle; that is why the place was called Succoth.

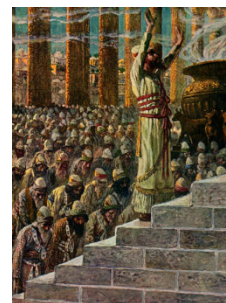


⁶The patriarchs of our faith lived as nomads, dwelling in temporary shelters (which they called *sukkot*), looking ahead to the time when God would provide a land for them and restore them to paradise, just as he had promised.

Likewise, their successors, upon their exodus from slavery in Egypt, lived in sukkot during forty years of wandering in the wilderness.

Though they dwelt in these flimsy shelters for forty years, God provided constant reminders of his watchful care: the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night signified his presence with his people. God also made a holy place for himself in the midst of the people: the tabernacle, a place where the Israelites could be reconciled to him through sacrifices. Yes, we wandered for forty years—but we did not wander alone.

1. **Institution.** In Leviticus 23:34, 39-43 God instituted Sukkot as a permanent statute throughout our generations, so that we would remember His presence with us during that time, and so that we would rejoice in his provision:
2. **Fall festival.** After settling in the Promised Land, Sukkot became associated with the Festival of Fall Harvest, called the "Feast of Ingathering".⁷ This was an autumnal celebration of thanksgiving for the fruit harvest, held during the full moon of the month of Tishri.
3. **Solomon's temple.** ⁸King Solomon dedicated the First Temple on Sukkot. The Shekinah glory of the Lord descended to light the fire on the altar and filled the Holy of Holies.⁹
4. **Hakhel.** Later, it became customary (based on Deuteronomy 31:10) that every seven years pilgrims would gather in the Temple Courtyard during Sukkot to listen to the reigning king read passages from the Torah. This ceremony was called Hakhel (which meant "assemble" or the "assembly"), and it was a very joyful event.



⁵ Genesis 12:2-3

⁶ <http://www.peopleandplaces.us/eh66/nomad20.jpg>

⁷ In Hebrew Ch'ag Ha'asif; Exodus 23:16; 34:22

⁸ <http://jerusalem-4thtemple.org/images/temple-maps/Gallery%20Doc%20Images%20Solomon%20Temple%20Dedication.jpg>

⁹ 1 Kings 8; 2 Chronicles 7:1-10



5. Second temple. Sukkot was the first holiday to be observed after the Babylonian captivity, when the Second Temple was dedicated.¹⁰

6. One of the “Three Pilgrimage Festivals (Shalosh Regalim).”

¹¹Sukkot became the single most important festival held in the Promised Land, called the “Feast of the Lord”¹² or simply “THE feast”.¹³ Along with the Passover and Shavuot, Sukkot is one of the three “pilgrimage festivals” that unites all Israel in holy celebration. After the solemnity of Yom Kippur, Sukkot was a time of camping out and rejoicing in the Lord’s provision and love.

7. Reminder of our “Wayfarer” status. Sukkot also reminds us that we are sojourners too; nomads merely passing through. Like our

Father Abraham, we are living in a foreign land as “strangers and sojourners,”¹⁴ looking forward to the City of God.¹⁵ We do not need the so-called securities that this world can offer us to be happy and provided for – not if we truly understand that we are surrounded by God’s sheltering Presence. What more could we want, especially as we consider this fleeting and moribund world we live in?

- **2 Corinthians 4:17-5:2 HCSB** For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory. (18) So we do not focus on what is seen, but on what is unseen; for what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (5:1) For we know that if our earthly house, a tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. (2) And, in fact, we groan in this one, longing to put on our house from heaven,
- 8. Sukkot in the future.** When He returns as King, to establish His Messianic rule on earth, He will once again “tabernacle with Israel” in Jerusalem.¹⁶ The visible manifestation of the Lord, the shekinah glory, will be seen as a shining fire over all of Mount Zion.¹⁷
- **Isaiah 4:5-6 HCSB** Then the LORD will create a cloud of smoke by day and a glowing flame of fire by night over the entire site of Mount Zion and over its assemblies. For there will be a canopy over all the glory, (6) and there will be a booth for shade from heat by day, and a refuge and shelter from storm and rain.

Sukkot offers us a glimpse of the future, when God’s promise to Abraham will be fulfilled and all nations of the earth will be blessed through the nation He first chose. There is a key passage that describes when all of the nations of the earth will journey there to celebrate Sukkot.

- **Zechariah 14:16-19 HCSB** Then all the survivors from the nations that came against Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the LORD of Hosts, and to celebrate the Festival of Booths. (17) Should any of the families of the earth not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the LORD of Hosts, rain will not fall on them. (18) And if the people of Egypt will not go up and enter, then rain will not fall on them; this will be the plague the LORD inflicts on the nations who do not go up to celebrate the Festival of Booths. (19) This will be the punishment of Egypt and all the nations that do not go up to celebrate the Festival of Booths.

¹⁰ Ezra 3:2-4

¹¹ http://judaica-art.com/images/uploads/The_Second_Temple_Sanctuary_2.jpg

¹² Leviticus 23:39; Judges 21:19

¹³ 1 Kings 8:2, 65; 12:32; 2 Chronicles 5:3; 7:8

¹⁴ In Hebrew *ger v'toshav*

¹⁵ Hebrews 11:9-10

¹⁶ Ezekiel 37:27-28; Revelation 21:3

¹⁷ Isaiah 60:1, 19; Zechariah 2:5

According to Scripture, the joy we experience during Sukkot is just a taste of greater joy to come. "Indeed, the whole symbolism of the Feast, beginning with the completed harvest, for which it was a thanksgiving, pointed to the future. The Rabbis themselves admitted this."¹⁸

It is probable that our Master was born during Sukkot. As the adopted son of Joseph¹⁹ He attended the festival but did so "secretly".²⁰ When He comes again as the Son of David²¹ it will be openly, with the Clouds of Glory".²²

Sukkot's illumination ritual.



²³Those living at the time of Jesus understood that Sukkot's rituals had prophetic implications. One of the greatest of these rituals was the illumination of the Temple.

As I said earlier, over the years, the Temple became central to Sukkot. After all, both the First and Second Temples were dedicated on the Feast of Tabernacles and on both occasions God had shown His goodness and mercy by coming once again to dwell in the midst of his people, just as He had in the wilderness.

Years later, however, the Ark of the Covenant was captured and the glory of the Lord departed from the Temple; yet, the Temple remained the focus of the feast through splendid ceremonies such as the illumination rite.

According to the Mishnah (a major piece of Judaic literature written around 200 AD), four 75-foot candelabra stood within the court of the women. Each candelabrum had four branches, and at the top of every branch was a huge bowl. Four young men bearing ten-gallon pitchers of oil would climb ladders to fill the golden bowls and set them alight.

Picture sixteen beautiful blazes leaping toward the sky from those enormous golden lamps. Note that the Temple was on a hill, so the glorious glow was a sight for the entire city to see. The light was to remind the people of how God's shekinah glory had once filled his Temple. It looked forward to a time when that glory would return.

This time of returning glory was associated with the coming of the Messiah; connected with the hope of the earth's great harvest—joy in the conversion of the heathen world.

It was believed that in the time of the Messiah all nations would worship God, in accordance with the prophecy in Zechariah and the promise God made to Abraham, that in him all nations of the earth would be blessed. The Jewish people in Jesus' time were expecting this day with great anticipation. With the illumination of the Temple, they rejoiced over greater light that was to come.

Sukkot – introducing the Light of the World

It was into this scene of expectant hope that Jesus entered. Prior to His encounter with the blind man, Jesus was teaching in the court of women soon after the Temple illumination ceremony. Perhaps He was even standing right next to those magnificent candelabra when he declared to all who were gathered there,

- **John 8:12 HCSB** Then Jesus spoke to them again: "I am the light of the world. Anyone who follows Me will never walk in the darkness but will have the light of life."

Note also that the two great themes of Sukkot (during the Second Temple period) were 1) water and 2) light. It's likely that Jesus referred to Himself as both the "Living Water"²⁴ and

¹⁸ Edersheim, Alfred. *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1976, p. 149.

¹⁹ *Mashiach' ben Yosef*

²⁰ John 7:8-10

²¹ *Mashiach' ben David*

²² Matthew 24:30; Revelation 1:7

²³ http://www.bible-topten.com/4.The_16.jpg

the Light of the World²⁵ during the “drawing of the house of water” ceremonies during this festival.

Light has always been a sign of God's revelation and his presence. The presence of light has long been equated with the presence of God. Consider, for instance,

- ✚ the burning bush that Moses encountered,
- ✚ the pillar of fire that the Israelites followed,
- ✚ or the shekinah glory that once rested in the Temple,
- **John 1:4-5 HCSB** Life was in Him, and that life was the light of men. (5) That light shines in the darkness, yet the darkness did not overcome it.

So light was associated with the Messiah, God's Anointed One:

- **Isaiah 9:2-3 HCSB** The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of darkness, a light has dawned. (3) You have enlarged the nation and increased its joy. *The people* have rejoiced before You as they rejoice at harvest time and as they rejoice when dividing spoils.

The light was meant to symbolize the presence of God. That day in the Temple, Jesus said that He was the presence of God, right there, in their midst. At the same time, He was declaring that He was the Messiah. He was the Light that the people had been waiting for.

A few days after Jesus spoke these stunning words in the court of the women, He gave sight to a blind man. Perhaps those who had listened to his words and were familiar with the Scriptures were not surprised at this miracle. After all, earlier in his ministry Jesus had quoted the words of Isaiah 61 as applying to himself:

- **Luke 4:18-19 HCSB** **The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, (19) to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.**

The meaning of Jesus' words and deeds was certainly not lost on the people. Some chose to accept what He said and believed he was the Messiah, and some chose to reject Him, asking, "What kind of Messiah could come from Galilee?" They chose to ignore Isaiah's prophecy.

Conclusion

There are different types of blindness. There is a physical blindness that longs for physical light and there is another kind of blindness wherein a person shuts his or her eyes to things that they do not want to believe. If you look at the accounts of Jesus' life and death, you'll see that He came to take care of both kinds of blindness.

The religious leadership of Jesus' day refused to believe in the Sukkot miracle.²⁶ What the religious leadership had missed, a blind beggar found. "His day of ingathering had dawned."

For him, the joy of the Feast of Tabernacles was a personal reality, for he had been in the presence of the Light of the World.

²⁴ John 7:38

²⁵ John 8:12

²⁶ John 9:24-34