

Christmas 2014

"We Wish You a Merry Sukkot & a Happy New Jerusalem"

Each year, on December 25th, we celebrate Jesus Christ's UnBirthday.

You know what an UnBirthday is, don't you? It's what the Mad Hatter and the March Hare and the Dormouse were celebrating when Alice came upon their tea party in Wonderland.

An UnBirthday is any day that is **not** your birthday - but you celebrate it anyway.

To quote the Mad Hatter, "Statistics prove that you've one birthday. Ah, but there are three hundred and sixty four UnBirthdays!"

It even has its own song - *A Very Merry UnBirthday to You*.

Without being irreverent, December 25th is one of Jesus' three hundred and sixty four UnBirthdays, because almost everyone agrees that He wasn't born on that date.

We've been told through the years that there is really no way of knowing when Jesus was born.

That's not exactly true. There is a lot of biblical evidence that points to Jesus being born during the annual Jewish Feast of Tabernacles.

One Bible verse that's popular on Christmas cards is John 1:14, which says,

John 1:14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

When the apostle John said that Jesus, whom he referred to as "the Word," "became flesh and **dwelt** among us," the word for "dwelt" is *tabernacled*. It's likely that John used this word intentionally to associate Jesus' first coming into the world with the feast by that name.

The Feast of Tabernacles has at least three other names in the Bible: the Feast of Booths, the Feast of Ingathering, and *Sukkot* (pronounced sueCoat).

It is observed in the fall, from the 15th to the 22nd of the Jewish month, Tishri, corresponding to late September or early October on our Gregorian calendar.

During this time many Jewish families were to construct a *sukkah*, a small hastily built shelter in which meals were eaten throughout the festival. The *sukkah* was to remember the huts [plural: *sukkot*] Israel lived in during their forty year wandering in the desert after the exodus from Egypt.

Here is the 411 God gave to Moses about celebrating the feast:

Lev 23:39 'Also on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the fruit of the land, you shall keep the feast of the LORD for seven days; on the first day there shall be a sabbath-rest, and on the eighth day a sabbath-rest.

Lev 23:40 And you shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of beautiful trees, branches of palm trees, the boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days.

Lev 23:41 You shall keep it as a feast to the LORD for seven days in the year. It shall be a statute forever in your generations. You shall celebrate it in the seventh month.

Lev 23:42 You shall dwell in booths [*sukkah*] for seven days. All who are native Israelites shall dwell in booths,

Lev 23:43 that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.' "

Besides John's implication, why do we think Jesus was born on *Sukkot*? I'll give a quick summary.

In the first century, there were so many priests serving in the Temple at Jerusalem that they were divided into groups. Each group was called a *course*. There were twenty-four such courses, and each one of them would begin and end their service in the Temple on the Sabbath, a tour of duty lasting one week.

We know from the Bible that John the Baptist's dad, Zacharias, was of the course of Abijah (Luke 1:5).

Why tell us which course of priests he belonged to? Because that knowledge allows us to calculate, from the Jewish calendar, *exactly when he served in the Temple*.

His service began on the second Sabbath of the third month, Sivan (corresponding to late May or early June).

He was busy serving in the Temple when the angel appeared to him and told him that he and Elizabeth would conceive, and have a son, whom they were to name John, who would be the forerunner of Jesus.

After completing his Temple service on the third Sabbath of Sivan, Zacharias returned home and John was soon conceived.

The information about John is important because, according to the Gospel of Luke, the Holy Spirit visited the virgin Mary in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy:

Luk 1:24 Now after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived; and she hid herself five months, saying,

Luk 1:25 "Thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

Birth of Jesus Foretold

Luk 1:26 Now in the sixth month [of Elizabeth's pregnancy] the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth,

Luk 1:27 to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

After the angel described to Mary that she would give birth to the Savior of the world, she went to visit Elizabeth, and she stayed with her for the last three months of her pregnancy, until the time that John was born.

Luke 1:56 And Mary abode with her about three months, and returned to her own house.

Luke 1:57 Now Elisabeth's full time came that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son.

Working from the information about John's conception and advancing six months, we arrive late in the ninth month of Kislev for the time frame for the conception of Jesus.

It is notable here that the first day of the Jewish festival of Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, is celebrated on the twenty-fifth day of Kislev according to the Hebrew calendar, which may occur at any time from late November to late December in the Gregorian calendar.

Do you think it was mere coincidence that the Light of the World was conceived during the Festival of Lights?

It might be that the Holy Spirit came upon the virgin Mary on what would have been December 25th on our calendar.

I'm not trying to somehow defend our celebration of Jesus' birth in December by saying He was conceived at that time; these are just the facts.

A likely date for the birth of John the Baptist would be the fifteenth day of the first month on the Jewish calendar, Nisan - which is the day after Passover on which the Feast of Unleavened Bread begins.

Since Jesus was conceived six months after John the Baptist, we need only move six months farther down the Jewish calendar to arrive at a likely date for the birth of Jesus. From the fifteenth day of the first month, Nisan, we go to the fifteenth day of the seventh month, Tishri.

And what do we find on that date? It is the Feast of Tabernacles.

It gives more weight to this other famous Christmas Scripture from Isaiah:

Isa 7:14 Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name **Immanuel**.

Immanuel means "God with us." The Son of God had come to dwell with, or *tabernacle*, on earth with His people; and He did it while they were tabernacling in booths.

These calendar calculations fit perfectly into the overall biblical narrative of the birth of Jesus. For example we know from the Gospel of Luke that Jesus was born in a stable, and laid in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Scholars like to point out that there weren't any "inns" in Bethlehem; and that the word Luke chose for "inn" is a particular word that means the guest room of a house. The thought is that Joseph and Mary arrived and all the guest rooms in the family dwelling were occupied, so they stayed downstairs, among the animals.

While it's true that houses were set up that way, if, in fact, all the guest rooms were occupied, what kind of hospitality was it to let the greatly pregnant woman stay with the animals?

Could any of the other family members have been in greater need of better accommodations than Mary?

I'm hinting that Joseph and Mary were being spurned on account of her becoming pregnant before they were married. Joseph's family didn't buy into the virgin birth.

There **were** inns in Israel. You remember in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, he took the man who had been robbed and beaten to an inn, and paid the innkeeper to care for him.

If there *was* an inn in Bethlehem, it's likely Joseph and Mary were turned away on moral grounds, and not because it was at capacity. There was no room in the inn for a suspected adulterous with an incredible story of how she had become pregnant without ever knowing a man.

Here's something else to consider about the stable and manger scene. If Jesus *was* born on the Feast of Tabernacles, it's likely Joseph built them a booth, a *sukkah*, to live in, *and that is where Jesus was born*.

In fact, that makes the most sense overall.

What about the manger - the feeding trough? There's a verse in the Book of Genesis that makes a connection between *Sukkot* and animals:

Gen 33:17 And Jacob journeyed to Succoth [*Sukkot*], built himself a house, and made **booths** for his livestock. Therefore the name of the place is called Succoth [*Sukkot*].

Jesus came as God in human flesh, in His fleshly tabernacle, **at the Feast of Tabernacles**. *Talk about perfectly fulfilling types and prophecies.*

The Feast of Tabernacles continued to be prominent in Jesus' life. Remember the Mount of Transfiguration, when Jesus was seen in His glory with Moses and Elijah? Do you recall what Peter said?

Mat 17:4 Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here **three tabernacles**: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

He suggested they build "tabernacles" - booths - for themselves, **because it was the Feast of Tabernacles.**

In John's Gospel, in chapter seven, we read,

Joh 7:37 On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink.

Joh 7:38 He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water."

Joh 7:39 But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

The "feast" was Tabernacles. One of the most important ceremonies of the Feast of Tabernacles involved priests pouring out water drawn from the pool of Siloam. The officiating priest would draw water from the pool and pour it into the basin near the altar in the Temple, to commemorate the occasions when the Lord provided the wandering Jews with water in the wilderness.

It was on the "great day of the feast" of Tabernacles Jesus made this promise about living water - **just at the moment the priests were pouring out water as a part of their annual ritual.**

Jesus was declaring that He was Messiah and that everyone who would believe in Him would receive the gift, or indwelling, of the Holy Spirit, the "living water," not measured in terms of a trickling spring, but a flowing river.

Jesus was saying in effect "I am the reality that the water in this ceremony symbolizes - the true life giver through whom the Holy Spirit is also given."

The Feast of Tabernacles will be important in the future. Because God is so meticulous in keeping to the Hebrew calendar, when it comes to the nation of Israel, many scholars have suggested that the Second Coming of Jesus will coincide with it.

His meeting with Moses and Elijah gives credibility to this idea. It was a preview of His Second Coming, in which two witnesses we believe to be Moses and Elijah, will precede Him.

Beyond that, once Jesus returns to rule and reign on the earth for one thousand years, the Feast of Tabernacles will continue to be observed:

Zec 14:16 And it shall come to pass that everyone who is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and **to keep the Feast of Tabernacles.**

We're not done yet with Tabernacles. On into eternity, when the apostle John describes the renewed heavens and earth, we read,

Rev 21:1 Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea.

Rev 21:2 Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

Rev 21:3 And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the **tabernacle** of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God.

Rev 21:4 And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

Rev 21:5 Then He who sat on the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." And He said to me, "Write, for these words are true and faithful."

Rev 21:6 And He said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. **I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts.**

Key things to pull out of that passage are, "the tabernacle of God is with men"; and that Jesus will fulfill His promise, made in His first coming at a Feast of Tabernacles, to "give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts."

Those are both references to the Feast of Tabernacles - telling us that it prefigured, and pointed to, God's ultimate plan, which is to dwell among us in a perfect relationship of mutual love, unhindered by sin.

If you've been here for the last few studies as we completed the Gospel of Matthew, we've been talking a lot about the Hebrew calendar and its feasts.

There are seven of them, in total. Tabernacles was the last feast in the Hebrew calendar year; but, if Jesus was born then, it can be our starting point.

The Feast of Tabernacles - Jesus Christ was born; Immanuel, God with us, comes to save us from our sin.

Even though I mentioned Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, and it comes next on the calendar, it wasn't an 'original' feast; it wasn't mentioned in the Jewish scriptures. It seems, however, that God acknowledged it; and that it represents Jesus as the Light of the World.

Next on the 'official' calendar come the three spring feasts - Passover, Unleavened Bread, and First Fruits.

Passover falls on Nisan 14, and it was on that very day, at 3:00 in the afternoon, that Jesus died on the Cross, for our sins, *exactly* as the Passover lambs were being sacrificed in the Temple.

John the Baptist had announced Jesus as "the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world."

The next day, as Jesus's body lay in the tomb, Nisan 15, was the beginning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Leaven represented sin, and the Jews were forbidden to eat anything with leaven, or even have it in their homes. Jesus' sinless life, and sinless body, fulfilled that feast.

On Nisan 16 was the Feast of First Fruits, when Jews presented the first of their harvest as an offering to the Lord, confident of the greater harvest to come.

Jesus rose from the dead on First Fruits, with the promise that all who believe in Him - all His harvest - will also be resurrected.

And a few other saints were raised at that time, too, as first fruits. They came out of their graves and showed themselves to folks in Jerusalem.

Fifty days later was the Feast of Pentecost. It celebrated the larger harvest. It was on the Day of Pentecost that Jesus sent God the Holy Spirit upon the gathered disciples, and three thousand new souls were harvested as Peter preached Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected.

Five feasts down... Two to go.

The Feast of Trumpets, or *Rosh Hashanah*, occurs on the first day of the seventh month. The first day of every month is begun with the blowing of trumpets, but there is deeper significance attached to the blowing of trumpets on the first day of the seventh month. *Rosh Hashanah* heralds the beginning of the period known as the High Holy Days with The Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) occurring ten days later, on the tenth of the month.

The ten days from the blowing of the trumpet to the Day of Atonement are known as "the days of awe," and they are a time of national repentance for Israel. It was a time of confession, prayer, and fasting, in preparation for the Feast of Tabernacles.

We know that there is coming upon the world a terrible time of trouble called the Great Tribulation. While it affects the entire planet, it is especially for the nation of Israel to be brought to repentance and faith in Jesus as their Savior.

The Great Tribulation begins when the Jews sign a peace treaty with the man the Bible calls the antichrist. They will seem to be gathered safely in their land; but after three and one half years, they will be forced to flee for their lives into the wilderness to be supernaturally protected by God.

Thus, Trumpets and the Day of Atonement could correspond to the Great Tribulation.

Which brings us back to the Feast of Tabernacles and the Second Coming of Jesus, when the Lord will once again be on the earth, dwelling among men.

All of the spring feasts were fulfilled, by Jesus, to the very day. It is a matter of history.

If Jesus was born on Tabernacles, that, too, has been partially fulfilled, to the very day.

Do you have any doubts that the fall feasts will be fulfilled?

Should we therefore start using the Hebrew lunar calendar?
Should we start observing the Jewish feasts?

Not at all!

The event that is of interest to us is not discoverable on a calendar, because it could happen at any moment.

That event is the coming of Jesus to resurrect the dead believers of the church age in which we are living, and to rapture - to snatch away - believers who are alive at the time.

Besides the sense of awe we should have at God's precise predictions, calendared for His people, what can we derive from all this?

God created man to be in a relationship with you - a love relationship. That, in itself, is humbling and awe-inspiring.

In order, however, for there to be love, there must be choice. Forced love is not love at all. So God gave our parents, Adam and Eve, a choice to love Him by obeying His one simple command.

They disobeyed, and the creation was plunged into the corruption of sin.

What did God do? He promised to come and tabernacle among us, as God in human flesh, to be the light of the world, and provide us with the living waters of salvation.

To do all that, He'd have to die on the Cross, in our place, as our substitute.

He came... He lived... He died... He rose from the dead - all according to the plan proclaimed throughout the pages of the Bible, and calendared for us in Israel's feasts.

And He is coming again, to finish what He started.

When it's all said and done, "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

In other words, God's original intention for creating mankind will be realized.

Right now, tears flow; death and sorrow and pain seem to be the dominant headlines in the world, and in our personal lives.

As we celebrate Jesus' UnBirthday, many of us are feeling the stress of the holidays; we are depressed. It's not our best Christmas.

It's a myth that suicide is more common around the holidays. (Springtime is actually the peak). But holiday cheer isn't a given either.

Rocky Balboa represented everyone who has ever been depressed around the holidays. When Adrian said to him, "It's Thanksgiving," Rocky answered, "Yea, to you it's Thanksgiving; to me it's Thursday."

Maybe you are as happy as the proverbial lark. One of the connotations of the phrase, "happy as a lark," is that you choose to be unaware of life's grimmer realities.

Look around; the world is a terrible place of suffering and evil. Just when you think it can't get any worse, there's an ISIS to contend with; or an outbreak; or some other catastrophe.

Only One can wipe away all tears. Only One can put an end to the death and the sorrow and the pain.

He did it by tabernacling among us; by dying for us; by rising from the dead. He's coming back to finish it.

Why wait? He is not willing that any should perish, but rather that they - that you - would come to Him and drink of the waters of life.

