

Week #: 22 Text: Luke 1,2; Matthew 2; Micah 5:2-5; Psalms 118:14-15; John 1:14; Leviticus 12:6-8 Title: About Hanukkah and Christmas

Songs: Angels We Have Heard on High
O, Come Let Us Adore Him

Videos: Candlelight, by The Maccabeats (Can be found on YouTube)
The Festival of Hanukkah / Chanukah

- This year it falls on: December 2-10, 2018
- Hanukkah is a very old Jewish holiday that started over the rule of three kings and takes place in the time period between the Old Testament and the New Testament.
- Israel was controlled by the Hellenistic Seleucid Empire (Greeks).
- Antiochus III ruled the Seleucid Empire from 222-186 B.C. . He was friendly with the Jews.
 - Antiochus III lowered taxes.
 - He granted money from the government for use by the Temple.
 - He let the Jews live, as Josephus puts it, "*according to the law of their forefathers.*"
 - He even annexed the land of Jerusalem and let them live there without much control.
- When he died his son Seleucus took over, and he was not as friendly to the Jews.
 - From 187-175 B.C., Seleucus ruled the Hellenistic Seleucid Empire.
 - When he came to power, he wanted to use the money collected by the Temple (the Temple tax – ½ shekel paid by every adult male annually and intended to be used for the running of the Temple) to pay back the Roman Empire for his debt from the war.
- Antiochus IV Epiphanes (son of Antiochus III and brother of Seleucus) gained control of the empire when Seleucus was assassinated.
 - He ruled from 175-164 B.C.
 - He didn't like the Jews and executed many of them.
 - He made their religious practices illegal, such as circumcision or celebrating the Shabbat.
 - He took away the role of the high priest, not allowing them to go to the Temple or to make sacrifices in worship to God.
 - In a vulgar act, he sacrificed a pig on the altar at the Temple and he put a statue of Zeus in the Temple and told the Jews to pray to it.
 - The Jews were so upset that five zealot brothers, known as the Maccabees, led a rebellion against Antiochus. From 167-160 B.C. they fought battle after battle, eventually coming to Jerusalem. The 40,000 soldier army of Antiochus III was eventually driven out of Jerusalem, and the Maccabees took control over the Temple once again.
 - They removed the false gods and then went on a search for the holy oil to light the menorah, which is a symbol of God's light. The oil had to be sealed by the high priest, symbolizing that it met the requirements set by God for use in the Temple. Only one sealed jar of oil was found, so more would have to be made.
 - Because of the war in which they had been fighting, they could not make the oil themselves until after a period of seven days of purification.
 - The Jews spent 8 days going through the purification processes set up by God, cleaning the Temple and finally making the oil on the 8th day so they could rededicate the Temple to God.
 - The miracle of Hanukkah is that even though they only had enough lamp oil for one day, the lamp burned for eight days while they cleaned the Temple and made new oil.
 - Now every year this miracle is remembered in the celebration of Hanukkah.

- Hanukkah was celebrated even by Jesus.

John 10:22 says, "Now it was the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus walked in the Temple in Solomon's Porch."

- The *Feast of Dedication* is known today as *Hanukkah*.
 - Jesus didn't celebrate Christmas – Christmas celebrates Jesus.
- Hanukkah Celebration Customs:
 - At dark, everything stops and the candelabra is lit, shining the light of God into the darkness. This menorah has 8 candles on it – the one in the center is used to light the others each day, remembering the menorah of the Temple that was lit with oil.
 - Time is spent with loved ones, singing songs and playing games, and talking of the light of God.
 - It is a reminder of the miracles we have had in our lives. We tend to focus on what miracle we need next, instead of what miracles God has already done for us. Hanukkah is a focus back on what God has done for us.
 - What miracle has God done for you? _____

 - Game: Dreidel
 - This game was important to play because it would teach children the importance of this festival, and it could be played without the Seleucids (Greeks) or later the Romans knowing what they were doing, since all religious practices had been outlawed.
 - A top with four sides is spun around. Four Hebrew letters appear on the sides: נ (Nun), ג (Gimel), ה (Hei), ש (Shin), which together form the acronym for "שם היה גדול נס" (**Nes Gadol Hayah Sham** – "a great miracle happened there").
 - Each side has a numerical value, so points are accumulated as the top is spun.
 - Foods served during Hanukkah are oily (fried) – a reminder of the miracle with the oil. A particular favorite is latkes – a potato and onion pancake, fried in oil. Another favorite is donuts, especially those filled with jelly.
 - Oily foods have been made to symbolize the miracle of Hanukkah since the first celebration, but it wasn't until the Middle Ages that jelly donuts became tied to Hanukkah.
 - Food historian Gil Marks wrote that the first recipe for the jelly donut was found in 1485, in a cookbook printed in Nuremberg, Germany, called the *Kuchenmeisterei* (Mastery of the Kitchen) — one of the first to be printed on Johannes Gutenberg's printing press. The original donut recipe didn't have a hole, but rather was a pillowy pocket of dough, filled with jam. The recipe instructed bakers to make a jam "sandwich" with two circular pieces of dough, to be fried in lard.
 - Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the tradition of jelly donuts traveled with Polish Jews wherever they immigrated.

We've all heard *the Christmas Story*, but what about *the Story of Christmas*? That's what we're going to be talking about today.

Why do we call it *Christmas*?

- Communion is a way for us to remember Jesus and the Last Supper.
- Some churches call it Communion while others call it a Eucharist, a word that means "to give thanks."

- In those churches, the celebration of a Eucharist is called a *mass*.
- Once a year in Europe, these churches would hold a special mass to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. That celebration was called *Christ's Mass* – which through time was later shortened to *Christmas*.

Why do we celebrate on December 25th?

- Before Jesus' time, the Romans would have celebrations around December 21st – 25th to celebrate the winter solstice (the shortest day of the year).
- One of the roman gods was the sun, so they thought that worshipping the sun would cause it to come back into the sky instead of fading away more and more each day. Their longest celebration was held on the day of the solstice, and it seemed to work as the days then would gradually grow longer after their celebrations.
- By 350 A.D. many Romans had converted to Christianity, so the leader of the church, Julius I, declared that December 25th shouldn't be a day for celebrating the sun, but instead should be for celebrating the Son of God.

What year was Jesus born?

- Our modern dates (Gregorian calendar) are based on a calendar set up by Julius I (known as the Julian calendar).
- In 525 A.D. Dionysius, a church leader, was given the task of determining when Jesus was born for the new calendar system. Unfortunately, he got it wrong.
 - The Bible says King Herod (Herod the Great) was still alive when Jesus was born.
 - When precisely Herod the Great ruled is disputed. According to one theory, Herod reigned from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C. This view is generally accepted today, but it has been vigorously challenged in favor of a more traditional dating, which would extend Herod's reign to 1 B.C. (And also place the beginning of his reign in 39 B.C.).
 - There is great debate as to the year Herod the Great died. Most historians go back to Josephus' writings that state that he died around 4 B.C., however earlier manuscripts of Josephus' writings state 1 B.C., not 4 B.C. Modern books of Josephus state the 4 B.C. date. It was obviously a clerical error that has never been corrected in our modern printings.
 - More and more it is accepted now that Herod the Great reigned from 39 B.C. until 1 B.C. Therefore, Jesus was likely born around 1-2 B.C. (This date matches up with what was going on in the heavens, as discussed in the video *The Star of Bethlehem*.)

Why do we cut down trees as part of the celebration of Jesus' birth?

- The tradition of the Christmas tree comes from Northern Germany, where, for thousands of years, tribes decorated with tree branches, and before they knew the gospel story, they thought some trees were linked to gods.
- One particular giant oak tree was called the *Oak of Thor*. They believed that if anyone cut it down, the god Thor would strike them dead.
- A Christian missionary named Boniface went to Northern Germany to tell them the gospel story. Boniface tried to preach the gospel and find a way to show them that Thor was a false god, so he chopped down the Oak of Thor. Of course, he did not die, and everyone then realized Thor was a false god. Boniface was then able to teach the gospel story and they began to listen.
- According to tradition, Boniface then pointed to a small evergreen tree that was growing next to the Oak of Thor and told them this should be their new symbol, as it remained ever green in the midst of the troubled world, and it pointed towards heaven, reminding them to remain in Christ. It was after this that people

started cutting down small fir trees and hanging them from the ceilings of their houses to remind them of Jesus.

Where was Jesus born?

- Bethlehem
 - Beth means “place” or “house” and lehem means “bread” – so together it means “place of bread”, or a bakery.
 - Bethlehem is located about 6 miles SW of Jerusalem.
 - It is right where the desert and the farm land meet.
 - On one side of Bethlehem you can receive 28 inches of rain in a year. One mile east and there can be no rain to speak on in your lifetime. This is why you can have Ruth and Boaz the farmer and David the shepherd in the same town.
 - It is known as the *City of David*, because it is where David was from and where the prophet Samuel anointed David to be the king.
 - In the Old Testament, Bethlehem was an early Canaanite settlement connected with the patriarchs. Situated along an ancient caravan route, Bethlehem has harbored a melting pot of peoples and cultures since its beginning. The geography of the region is mountainous, sitting about 2,600 feet above the Mediterranean Sea.
 - In times past, Bethlehem was also called Ephrathah or Bethlehem-Judah to distinguish it from a second Bethlehem located in the Zebulunite territory.
 - It was first mentioned in Genesis 35:19, as the burial site of Rachel, Jacob's favored wife.
 - Members of Caleb's family settled in Bethlehem, including Caleb's son Salma who was called the "founder" or "father" of Bethlehem in 1 Chronicles 2:51.
 - In Micah 5:2-5, the prophet foretold that Messiah would come from the small and seemingly insignificant town of Bethlehem:

Micah 5:2-5

² “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
Though you are little among the thousands of Judah,
Yet out of you shall come forth to Me
The One to be Ruler in Israel,
Whose goings forth are from of old,
From everlasting.”

³ Therefore He shall give them up,
Until the time that she who is in labor has given birth;
Then the remnant of His brethren
Shall return to the children of Israel.

⁴ And He shall stand and feed[b] His flock
In the strength of the Lord,
In the majesty of the name of the Lord His God;
And they shall abide,

For now He shall be great
To the ends of the earth;

⁵ And this One shall be peace.

- The poignant story of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz from the book of Ruth is set primarily around the town of Bethlehem. King David, the great-grandson of Ruth and Boaz was born and raised in Bethlehem, and there David's mighty men lived. Bethlehem eventually came to be called the City of David as the symbol of his great dynasty. It grew into an important, strategic, and fortified city under King Rehoboam.
- Bethlehem is also noted in connection with the Babylonian exile (Jeremiah 41:17, Ezra 2:21), as some of the Jews returning from captivity stayed near Bethlehem on their way to Egypt.
- By the time of Jesus' birth, Bethlehem had declined in significance to a small village. Three gospel accounts (Matthew 2:1–12, Luke 2:4–20, and John 7:42) report that Jesus was born in the humble town of Bethlehem.
- At the time Mary was due to give birth, Caesar Augustus decreed that a census be taken. Every person in the Roman world had to go to his own town to register. Joseph, being of the line of David, was required to go to Bethlehem to register with Mary. While in Bethlehem, Mary gave birth to Jesus. Likely due to the census and the time of year in which they were traveling, the inn was too crowded, and Mary gave birth in a crude stable, or, more than likely, a cave that had been used as a sheepfold for thousands of years.
- Shepherds and later wise men came to Bethlehem to worship the Christ-child. King Herod, who was ruler in Judea, plotted to kill the baby-king by ordering the slaughter of all male children two years old and younger in Bethlehem and surrounding areas (Matthew 2:16–18).
- Herod was the greatest king the Middle East had ever known. He was an Idumean who, through various political intrigue and marriage into the Jewish royal line and with Roman support, had become the king of the Jews. Around this country, that king had built gigantic fortresses and palaces, but none greater than his fortress palace called the Herodium just a few miles from Bethlehem out at the edge of the Judean wilderness.
- Today, approximately 60,000 people live in and around the broader Bethlehem area. The population is divided primarily between Muslims and Christians, the Christians being predominately Orthodox.
- Under control of the Palestinian National Authority since 1995, Bethlehem city has experienced chaotic growth and a constant flow of tourism. It is home to one of the most sacred Christian sites in the world. Built by Constantine the Great (circa 330 A.D.), the Church of the Nativity still stands over a cave believed to be the very spot where Jesus was born. The place of the manger is marked by a 14-pointed silver star, called the star of Bethlehem.
- The original Church of the Nativity structure was partially destroyed by the Samaritans in 529 A.D. and then rebuilt by the Byzantine Roman emperor Justinian. It is one of the oldest surviving Christian churches in existence today.

At what time of year was Jesus born?

- There are generally two times of year that people believe they can point to Jesus being born – I ascribe to the thinking that he was born during the Feast of Tabernacles (Festival of Sukkot), but some say it could have been at Passover.
- One thing we can say for certain is that Jesus was not born on December 25th.
- There are a few reasons that can point us towards the Feast of Sukkot for his birth.
 - The time frame of when Zacharias was at the temple
 - The time frame of when Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth
 - The shepherds being in the fields

- The song sung by the angels in the heavens.
- The scripture that reveals that Jesus came to sukkot, or dwell, with us. (John 1:14 “The Word became flesh and dwelt with us...”)

Jerusalem was a city of 100-200k people, but during three specific feasts – Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles – all Jewish people were required to go to Jerusalem, so it would easily swell to upwards of 2 million people.

I find it interesting that the three Feasts when everyone is required to go to Jerusalem are:

- Sukkot – when Jesus was born
- Passover – when Jesus died
- Pentecost – when the Holy Spirit came

Luke 1 (NKJV)

⁵ There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. ⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years.

⁸ So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.

- Zacharias was chosen to offer the incense in the Temple.
 - There were hundreds of thousands of priests, so the priestly duties, including that of the incense service, were performed *by a team of priests* whose individual duties were selected by lot.
 - God’s people often used lots (or in Hebrew, purim) to discern His will and direction. Acts 1:26 refers to the twelfth disciple position (after Judas) being filled by Matthias through the casting of lots.
 - A priest may never in his lifetime win the right to serve a duty in the temple.
 - They "won" various rights: the right to offer the incense, the right to prepare the incense, the right to scoop up ashes from the inner altar, the right to remove the ashes of the candlestick, etc.
 - Once you had served a duty, you could never serve that duty again in your lifetime. Being chosen to offer the incense was a rare experience and so it is significant that God has chosen Zacharias to serve him in the holy place at this particular moment.
- The Order of Abijah
 - David divided the descendants of Levi into smaller divisions so that each family would have an equal opportunity to minister (I Chronicles 24). Likewise, the priests were also divided. There were 24 divisions, which allowed each division, or order, to serve for two weeks each year.
 - The order of Abijah was the eighth order (v. 10).
 - During the Second Temple period, the twenty-four priestly divisions served in the temple at Jerusalem in a rotation system. At the time of the second temple there were at least 7,200 priests.
 - The priestly order of Abijah to which Zacharias belonged, originated with King David and his desire to build a Temple for the Most High God in Jerusalem. Not permitted to do so because he was a man of war who had shed much blood, David did the next best thing: He prepared for it with all his might by gathering gold, silver, jewels, etc., that would be needed in its building. (II Chronicles chapters 28 and 29)
 - Josephus confirmed this division:

"He divided them also into courses; and when he had separated the priests from them, he found of these priests twenty-four courses . . . and he ordained that one course should minister to God eight days, from Sabbath to Sabbath. . . . And this partition hath remained to this day." (Ant. VII 14:7)

- If the courses served in the same weeks of every year, this would have the Abijah division coming on duty at the following times:
 - **Passover week:** beginning the second Sabbath in Nisan (March-April) – because all divisions served this week.
 - **Pentecost week:** beginning the first Sabbath in Sivan (May-June) – because all divisions served this week.
 - **The tenth week of the year:** beginning the second Sabbath in Sivan (May-June). Abijah was the eighth course; the two pilgrimage festivals throws the rotation off by two weeks, resulting in the tenth week.
 - **The thirty-fourth week of the year:** beginning the second Sabbath in Tishri (September-October). (Twenty-four weeks later) This places the course of Abijah on duty on the Day of Atonement, Tishri 10.
 - **Tabernacles week:** beginning the third Sabbath in Tishrei (September-October) – because all divisions served this week.

Luke 1 (NKJV)

¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

- There was a whole multitude of people – this indicates thousands of people. It is the Greek word “plethora” – a lot of people were waiting for the incense to be burned. This would only happen at three times of the year – during one of the pilgrimage feasts. So this confirms that not only was it the 8th course, but that it is the Feast of Shavuot, because that’s when the two coincide.

Luke 1 (NKJV)

²³ When his period of his Temple service was over, he returned home. ²⁴ Following this, Elisheva his wife conceived, and she remained **five months** in seclusion, saying, ²⁵ “*ADONAI* has done this for me; he has shown me favor at this time, so as to remove my public disgrace.”

- This puts her in hiding until the end of November.

²⁶ Now in the **sixth month** the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary.

- In the sixth month Mary is visited by the angel. This puts that visit during the Feast of Hanukkah – the Festival of Lights.

³⁵ And the angel answered and said to her, “*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.* ³⁶ Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and **this is now the sixth month for her** who was called barren.

- So the end of December was the sixth month for Elizabeth.

⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her about **three months**, and returned to her house. ⁵⁷ Now Elizabeth's full time came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth a son.

- This puts John being born about March – the Feast of Passover

Luke 2 (NKJV)

⁶ So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. ⁷ And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

- If Mary conceived during the Feast of Hanukkah – the light of the world conceived during the Festival of Lights – and you add nine months to that, that puts Jesus being born at the end of September, which is the Feast of Sukkot (Tabernacles).
- There was no room in the inn because it was one of the pilgrimage feasts.
- Swaddling clothes were strips of the priestly garments that were stained and could not be worn by the priests any longer. They were ripped into strips and put in the Women's Court of the temple, and these are the cloths that were wrapped around Jesus when he was put in the manger. Our Messiah was wrapped in the priestly garments that were stained with our sins.
- The Feast of Sukkot is when you live in tents. They would build sukkahs all over the city and they would dwell in them for the seven days of the feast.
- A manger is not a feeding trough, it is a stone that had been hollowed out to hold water. So the Living Water was laid in a watering trough.
- The prettier we make Christmas the more we miss the point. God left heaven to be born in six feet of sheep manure because he wanted to say, "I love you."



Psalms 118:14-15 (NKJV)

¹⁴ The LORD *is* my strength and song, And He has become my salvation. ¹⁵ The voice of rejoicing and salvation *is* in the tents of the righteous;

- God pre-planned the happy birthday song for Jesus 1000 years in advance!

²⁴ This *is* the day the LORD has made; We will rejoice and be glad in it. ²⁵ Save now, I pray, O LORD; O LORD, I pray, send now prosperity.

Luke 2 (NKJV)

⁸ Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. ¹⁰ Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. ¹¹ For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

- Everyone travels from the north – Nazareth – together, for safety and for ease of travel. Mary and Joseph more than likely traveled with others as they were going the 40 miles south towards Jerusalem.
- Shepherds living "in the fields" is another indicator of the time of year pointing towards the Feast of Sukkot (also called Tabernacles)

- The fields were not pasture lands that the sheep would often be found grazing – they were the fields from the crops. Each farmer would pull in their harvest, then they would open the fields for the widows and orphans as they were directed to do (I Timothy 5:3-10).
- Once the people had gleaned all they could from the fields, the farmers would then turn them over to the shepherds, who would move their herds in to clean up what was left. Sheep eat everything down to the dirt, so it was a way of clearing the land for the next year's harvest.
- The sheep would have cleared all the farms within just a few weeks' time, so the time frame of when this could have taken place is very limited. It had to be after fall harvest, but before winter. It falls in line exactly with the time of Sukkot.

John 1:14

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.

- To dwell is “to tabernacle” – or “to sukkot.” This refers to the fact that Jesus sukkoted with us during the Feast of Sukkot.

Luke 2 (NKJV)

¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: ¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” ²¹ And when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the Child, His name was called JESUS, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.

- Feast of Tabernacles is seven days long – then on the eighth day, Jesus is circumcised and named in the Temple. Jesus is shedding his blood and fulfilling the covenant of Abram – circumcision – on the eighth day.

²² Now when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present *Him* to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every male who opens the womb shall be called holy to the LORD”), ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, “A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

- Everything was done according to Torah – they were to offer a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.

Leviticus 12

⁶ ‘When the days of her purification are fulfilled, whether for a son or a daughter, **she shall bring to the priest a lamb of the first year as a burnt offering, and a young pigeon or a turtledove as a sin offering**, to the door of the tabernacle of meeting. ⁷ Then he shall offer it before the LORD, and make atonement for her. And she shall be clean from the flow of her blood. This *is* the law for her who has borne a male or a female.

⁸ ‘**And if she is not able to bring a lamb, then she may bring two turtledoves or two young pigeons—one as a burnt offering and the other as a sin offering.** So the priest shall make atonement for her, and she will be clean.’ ”

- They were to bring a lamb and a turtledove, or a lamb and pigeon – except if they were too poor to bring both, then they were to bring the cheaper offering instead.
- This confirms that the Magi weren't there yet because they brought with them gifts. They would have surely had enough to afford to buy a lamb for this offering if they had been given the gifts.
- They were so poor they couldn't afford a lamb, but little did they know they brought the lamb with them anyway.

