

God's Festivals: Keys to Humanity's Future



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"The Lord is . . . not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance."

—The apostle Peter (2 Peter 3:9)

The Holy Scriptures reveal that God has a *comprehensive plan* to save mankind. The plan revolves around the prophetic mission and work of Jesus Christ. "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that *the world through Him might be saved*" (John 3:17, emphasis added throughout).

Therefore, God has "made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, *which he purposed in Christ*, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to *bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ*" (Ephesians 1:9-10, New International Version).

Throughout this *Bible Study Course* we emphasize God's intention to *save*—through Jesus Christ—the vast majority of mankind from the penalty of eternal destruction we all have earned by sinning. When God completes His majestic plan, He will have given all of mankind the opportunity to come to repentance.

But bringing all people to repentance, by persuading them to turn from their sinful ways so that they can receive eternal life, is an awesome task. Today—with most of humanity still under the sway of the great deceiver, Satan the devil—relatively few are even called to repentance. Still fewer are actually repenting.

Nevertheless, when Jesus returns, all then alive—and all their descendants afterwards—will be taught how to obey their Creator. Finally God will resurrect from their graves those untold millions who have died without ever receiving a clear understanding of His ways. He will teach them to turn to the truth and to Him.

God reveals His splendid plan in the prophecies and teachings of the Scriptures. God has provided us with the keys to unlock His plan through His sacred festivals.

Most people probably understand that Jesus was crucified on the biblical Passover—the first of these marvelous festivals. Some have heard that the biblical festivals point to Christ and His role. Yet few grasp their deeper significance and value. The majority of churchgoers view them as irrelevant to their relationship with God. The Scriptures, however, tell us otherwise! The festivals are keys to a correct understanding of God's master plan and to Christ's central role in that plan.

God instituted and commanded the observance of these sacred festivals to make known to His people the correct *sequence of events* in His blueprint for humanity's salvation. They reveal the *framework* that organizes the major events of God's plan in a logical order. They also reveal the *structure* on which biblical prophecy is based. They disclose God's *grand design* for man's

awesome future. (To understand how the majority of humanity has been deprived of the keys that unlock a comprehensive understanding of God's plan and purpose for humankind, be sure to read "Humanity's Fruitless Quest for Life's Purpose," page 4.)

FESTIVALS OF HOPE

When God freed the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, He revealed to them, in addition to the weekly Sabbath, His seven *annual* festivals. The apostle Paul tells us these observances are "*a shadow of things to come*" (Colossians 2:16-17)—that is, they *foreshadow* and *reveal* the basics of His plan of salvation.

God originally gave them as *harvest* festivals—and for an appropriate reason. The writers of the Bible often compare the *spiritual harvest* of human lives to the agricultural harvests that *physically* sustain life. Therefore we find harvest analogies and parables to represent aspects of God's plan to bring humanity to repentance. God's goal is to harvest human beings—you and me—into His Kingdom. One of Christ's best-known parables that illustrates this is the famous illustration of the sower and the seed (Matthew 13:3).

Jesus compared the work God began through Him to a harvest. Christ told His disciples: "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work. Do you not say, 'There are still four months and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are *already white for harvest!* And he who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, that both he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together" (John 4:34-36).

Here Jesus links the concept of a harvest to His work of bringing *eternal life* (salvation) to humans. "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The Greek word translated into English as "Jesus" means *Savior*. Its Hebrew equivalent, translated into English as "Joshua," means *God is salvation*.

Jesus' role in securing our salvation is the nucleus of God's plan. Paul, writing to the young evangelist Timothy, explained that God "has saved us and called us with a holy calling . . . according to His own *purpose* and *grace* which was given to us *in Christ Jesus before time began*, but has now been revealed *by the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ*, who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Timothy 1:9-10).

THE PASSOVER

What annual festivals occur early in the spring?

“On the fourteenth day of the first month [of the Hebrew calendar] at twilight is the LORD’s Passover. And on the fifteenth day of the same month is the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the LORD; seven days you must eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall have a holy convocation; you shall do no customary work on it . . . The seventh day shall be a holy convocation; you shall do no customary work on it” (Leviticus 23:5-8).



The two early-spring festivals are the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The sacrificial lamb was slain on the Passover (the 14th of Nisan), and the Days of Unleavened Bread were observed for seven days from the beginning of the 15th of Nisan to the end of the 21st day. It was during these days that ancient Israel marched out of the land of Egypt toward Mount Sinai.

Occurring during the physical harvests of life-sustaining food products, God’s festivals all point to aspects of His spiritual harvest of humanity to eternal life.

What did the Passover service mean to the ancient Israelites?

“And when your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians” (Exodus 12:26-27, NIV).

“Then Moses called for all the elders of Israel and said to them, ‘Pick out and take lambs for yourselves according to your families, and kill the Passover lamb. And you shall take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and strike the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood that is in the basin. And none of you shall go out of the door of his house until morning. For the LORD will pass through to strike the Egyptians; and when He sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over the door and not allow the destroyer to come into your houses to strike you” (Exodus 12:21-23).

The ancient Israelites knew that the firstborn in each family was spared from death only because God could see the blood of sacrificed lambs at the entrances to their houses. Throughout Egypt all those living in houses not having their entrances smeared with the blood of these

God planned from the beginning to both *create* and *save* mankind through Christ. Describing Jesus’ role, Paul explains: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For *by Him all things were created* that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created *through Him* and *for Him*. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, *that in all things He may have the preeminence*” (Colossians 1:15-18).

Christ’s role in God’s master plan was not an afterthought. Everything in that plan is directly related to Jesus’ mission and work as our Savior.

The apostle John refers to Jesus as *“the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world”* (Revelation 13:8). Jesus, speaking about the specific importance of His crucifixion to humanity’s salvation, told His disciples, “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, *will draw all peoples to Myself*” (John 12:32). Christ’s task is not only making salvation possible but leading “all peoples” into a lasting relationship with Him and His Father.

Christ’s role in humanity’s salvation is crucial. His role is also *the central theme of God’s sacred festivals*, which reveal the sequence of events in His plan. The festivals all occur during harvest seasons in the Holy Land, where Jesus grew up and lived His human life.

Seven annual festivals are listed in the Scriptures: (1) the Passover, (2) the Feast of Unleavened Bread, (3) the Feast of Firstfruits (Pentecost), (4) The Feast of Trumpets, (5) the Day of Atonement, (6) the Feast of Tabernacles and (7) the Last Great Day. Each focuses on a specific aspect of God’s plan.

In Exodus 23:14-16 God reveals to us the proper seasons for the festivals: *“Three times a year you are to celebrate a festival to me. Celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread; for seven days eat bread made without yeast, as I commanded you. Do this at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in that month you came out of Egypt. No one is to appear before me empty-handed. Celebrate the Feast of Harvest [Pentecost] with the firstfruits of the crops you sow in your field. Celebrate the Feast of Ingathering [Tabernacles] at the end of the year, when you gather in your crops from the field” (NIV).*

During the three festival seasons of the year—spring, early summer and fall—God commands that a “holy convocation” (Exodus 12:16), *a sacred assembly*, take place every *annual sabbath* or special *“high day”* (John 19:31). No one is to perform any regular work or labor on those days (Numbers 28:18, 25, 26; 29:1, 7, 12, 35).

Occurring during the *physical harvests* of life-sustaining food products, God’s festivals all point to aspects of His *spiritual harvest* of humanity to eternal life. As is so often the case in the Scriptures, God uses physical things to help us better understand spiritual truths. Jesus Himself frequently drew physical analogies to teach spiritual principles.

Let’s now begin exploring the spiritual truths God reveals through His seven annual festivals.

sacrificed lambs lost their firstborn. But the families of Israel, being obedient to God's command to sacrifice a lamb, were delivered from death. Their firstborn did not perish.



The apostles Paul and Peter understood that the slain Old Testament Passover lamb foreshadowed the death of Jesus Christ as our sacrifice for sin.

compare Leviticus 23:14; 21, 31, 41). The word translated "forever" in these verses usually means *perpetual* rather than eternal. In other words, these festivals were given as permanent festivals, observances we should keep throughout our physical existence. God never intended them to be mere temporary observances that we would discard at a later date, as is commonly taught today (be sure to read "What Did Paul Really Say in Colossians 2:16?," page 12).

Does God still expect us to observe the Passover?

"And you shall observe this thing as an ordinance for you and your sons forever" (Exodus 12:24).

God instituted the Passover, and all His other festivals, as continual, enduring and permanent observances (com-

What meaning does the Passover have for Christians?

"For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us" (1 Corinthians 5:7).

"For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake" (1 Peter 1:18-20, NIV; compare Exodus 12:3-6).

The apostles Paul and Peter understood that the slain Old Testament Passover lamb foreshadowed the death of Jesus Christ as our sacrifice for sin.

Notice the reaction of John the Baptist to Jesus: ". . . John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'" (John 1:29). John also understood the symbolic and prophetic relationship of the Old Testament Passover to the work and mission of Jesus the Messiah.

God's plan for the redemption of mankind *begins* with Christ's sacrifice for our sins. Amazing as it may seem, this *first step* in God's master plan of salvation has been observed since the days of Moses in the Passover festival (Hebrews 11:24-28). Through the observance of His sacred festivals, God had ancient Israel act out, every year, the major steps in His plan of human redemption. Our redemption begins with our accepting Christ's sacrifice for our sins.

Was Jesus aware of the relationship between His crucifixion and the Passover?

Humanity's Fruitless Quest for Life's Purpose

Of the more than six billion people on earth, most spend their lives—some woefully short—struggling to exist. Such has been the condition of humanity since the dawn of history. Most people long to know if their lives have purpose and meaning and whether they have any reason to have hope in their future.

Opinion surveys reveal the questions that most puzzle and perplex us: Why was I born? Is there a reason for my existence? Is this present life, with its hardships and suffering, all there is?

People have long tried to answer these questions through their own reasoning, seldom realizing that God has already revealed the answers through His Word and through His festivals. Man's attempts to answer these questions, however, have produced some mystifying speculations that have added to our confusion about the future.

In ancient times man's hopeful conjectures about an afterlife focused on the existence of a peaceful materialistic paradise abounding with pleasures. Ancient man gave these hopes names such as Elysium, the Elysian Fields, Valhalla and El Dorado. Today such hopes commonly fall under descriptions such as "heaven" for those who anticipate some kind of paradise.

Are the traditional views of an afterlife consistent with God's purpose? Do they reflect His plan for humanity? Or does He have designs that are far superior? We must understand why so many erroneous views of our future, originally introduced through idolatrous religions thousands of years ago, are still so deeply entrenched and remain so popular in our culture. Historians are impressed and amazed by how alike and enduring these traditions are—especially the similarity in the solutions they propose to people's fears and disappointments.

Studies over the years, especially in comparative religion, have identified some remarkably similar themes in ancient traditions that transcend nearly all eras, regions and cultures. They show that people have always had similar concerns, regardless of their physical and social conditions or the time in which they lived. Through the centuries most cultures have sought answers to the same questions. Their common objectives have been to determine why we exist and which is the best and right way to live. People have pondered these questions since the beginning of history.

We find records of ancient peoples in areas as diverse as Europe, South America, Asia, Africa and the Middle East struggling with the same issues. As they watched

“Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished all these sayings, that He said to His disciples, ‘You know that after two days is the Passover, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified’” (Matthew 26:1-2).

“Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end” (John 13:1).

Did Jesus look forward to participating in the Passover service with His disciples?

“Then came the day . . . on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, ‘Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover’” (Luke 22:7-8, NIV).

“When the hour had come, He sat down, and the twelve apostles with Him. Then He said to them, ‘With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer’” (verses 14-15).

“While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take and eat; this is my body.’ Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’” (Matthew 26:26-28, NIV).

On the night before His death Jesus instituted the *New Testament Passover service*. Anciently, lambs were sacrificed as forerunners of Christ’s sacrificial death on

the Passover. But Jesus instituted new symbols of His suffering and death—unleavened bread and wine.

Should Christians continue observing the New Testament Passover service?

“For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy [irreverent] manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 11:23-27, NIV).



Jesus instituted new symbols of His suffering and death—unleavened bread and wine.

Paul shows that the earliest Christians not only observed this festival annually—with its new symbols of bread and

rivers such as the Nile and the Euphrates rise and fall, and as they watched the paths of the stars across the night sky, they attempted to deal with the big questions. They searched for meaning, but they based their conclusions on wrong assumptions and traditions.

Societies have long looked to the night skies to find their place in the cosmos. There they imagined giant immortals acting out scenes on a celestial stage that related to their destiny. They invented warrior gods and terrible beasts that came and went in regular cycles. In this way they attributed their problems and weaknesses to the gods they themselves had invented.

Paul Deveraux, author of *Secrets of Ancient Places*, comments on the development of common themes: “Belief systems, deities, specific rituals and taboos may be *cultural inventions*, varying from society to society, but . . . it is instructive to note just how many underlying themes *recur* in societies which had no contact with one another or belonged to different chronological periods, even though they may be overlaid by differences of architectural innovation and other cultural variables. The *shared realities of nature and human consciousness* are the great constants, and it is these which can be glimpsed shining through” (1992, pp. 35-36, emphasis added).

From these shared perceived realities come recurrent themes about life that are ultimately addressed by the

true God through His annual festivals. Themes such as the need for redemption through sacrifice, the desire for one’s life to be spiritually transformed through contact with deity, hope for universal peace and belief that a deity (or deities) will pass judgment on the world are found in most of these cultures.

Tragically, man has long sought to explain his place in the world by devising *mythical answers* to questions relating to these persistent themes. As a result most people of ancient cultures looked upward—to physical objects in the sky—for their answers. They worshiped the sun, moon, planets and stars.

In stark contrast the Holy Scriptures are refreshingly different in describing humanity’s future. God tells His people not to follow superstitious practices like looking to created objects in the sky as sources of revelation, but to look directly to Him for answers that are true and real: “. . . Take heed, lest you lift your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, you feel driven to worship them and serve them . . .” (Deuteronomy 4:19).

True knowledge and divine revelation come only from worshiping our Creator, not His creation. Such worship is organized around His commanded assemblies on His holy Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11) and His annual feast days (Exodus 23:14-16).

wine that Christ instituted to represent His suffering and death—but also that all Christians should *continue* observing it until Christ returns. Even then Jesus indicates it will continue in His Kingdom (Matthew 26:29).

Since it is a *memorial*, this God-given event should be observed only once every year as God has commanded (Numbers 9:2-3)—not at our discretion nor on some weekly or monthly schedule. This festival should be observed on the exact annual date that is the anniversary of Christ’s death for our sins—the annual Passover festival in the spring of each year—and in the proper manner as described above. (For the correct dates for all of God’s festivals see “The Annual Festivals of God,” page 7.)

Christ’s supreme sacrifice by means of His crucifixion—which occurred precisely on the biblically commanded Passover date—is the foundation of the Christian faith. It reflects the all-encompassing love God has for His creation and His concern for the ultimate well-being of every human being (John 3:16).

THE FEAST OF UNLEAVENED BREAD

Why did ancient Israel observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread?

“ . . . For seven days eat unleavened bread, the bread of affliction, because you left Egypt in haste—so that all the days of your life you may remember the time of your departure from Egypt” (Deuteronomy 16:3, NIV).

“Eat unleavened bread during those seven days; nothing with yeast in it is to be seen among you, nor shall any yeast be seen anywhere within your borders. On that day tell your son, ‘I do this because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt’” (Exodus 13:7-8, NIV).

What instruction did Paul give Christians in regard to this festival?

“Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Corinthians 5:8).

Paul did not treat these festivals as outdated Jewish traditions. He considered them essential observances for God’s called and chosen people in all ages and cultures. He understood their relationship to Christ’s role in God’s master plan.

Paul commanded the Corinthian Christians—mostly gentiles (non-Israelites)—to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread. His instructions show that Christians from non-Jewish communities and cultures kept the Days of Unleavened Bread. Setting an example for all Christians today, these Jews and non-Jews observed these days in accordance with God’s laws.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread, the second of God’s annual festivals, represents the *second step* in God’s plan for our redemption. Its main focus is on Christ as our Deliverer, our Savior. Therefore it is a thoroughly *Christian* festival.

That is why Paul compares a Christian’s deliverance

from sin through the sacrifice and assistance of Christ to *Israel’s deliverance* from the Egyptian army at the Red Sea (which probably occurred on the final day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread). He writes: “Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers [ancient Israel] were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:1-4).

After we are justified by Christ’s sacrifice at the time of baptism, we must be *led out of sin* and into a righteous pattern of life just as Israel was led out of its bondage during the same Days of Unleavened Bread. This festival represents the work of the living, resurrected Christ directly *leading and assisting* us in overcoming sin.

Paul explained: “Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, *we shall be saved from wrath through Him*. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, *we shall be saved by His life*” (Romans 5:9-10).

Paul later expressed the same basic thought in different words: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13). He also explained: “. . . God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, *which is Christ in you, the hope of glory*. We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, *struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me*” (Colossians 1:27-29, NIV).

Did Paul explain the spiritual lesson behind our observance of the Feast of Unleavened Bread?

“Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us” (1 Corinthians 5:6-7).

One purpose for the Feast of Unleavened Bread is to remind us that, after we accept Christ’s sacrifice at the time of baptism, we must allow God’s Spirit to help us *grow up* into Christ spiritually (Ephesians 4:15; compare Galatians 2:20). Leavened bread represents the *wrong motives* (malice) and *sin* (wickedness) that may still reside in our thinking. Unleavened bread represents having our hearts filled with *sincere* motives—an eagerness to apply the *pure truth* revealed in God’s Word.

Jesus earlier made the same point to His disciples. He told them, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy” (Luke 12:1). He also compared leaven to the false doctrines taught by many of the religious leaders of the day (Matthew 16:6-12). They, like many false teachers today, substituted their own ideas and traditions for God’s commandments (Matthew 15:3-9).

Those who accept Christ as their Passover—as the New Covenant Lamb of God—have their sins covered by His

sacrifice, providing they sincerely repent of their wickedness and malicious motives so they can *begin conforming their lives to the truth* as it is revealed in God’s Word.

Therefore, just as God delivered ancient Israel from literal slavery, *God’s second step* in His plan of salvation is freeing repentant Christians from *spiritual slavery* to wickedness (Romans 6:17-19).

The Feast of Unleavened Bread celebrates Christians being miraculously delivered from this spiritual bondage of sin just as surely as God delivered the ancient Israelites from their Egyptian bondage. It reminds us that our deliverance from sin and our salvation are available only through a personal relationship with Christ, the “Lamb of God” who took on Himself the penalty for our sins (1 Thessalonians 5:9-10; John 1:36). As our High Priest, He actively helps us, if we really are His servants, to put the *leaven of sin* out of our lives so we may become *spiritually unleavened* (Hebrews 3:1; 10:19-23; 1 Corinthians 5:7).

The Feast of Unleavened Bread celebrates Jesus’ role in helping us remove spiritual leaven including malice, wickedness and hypocrisy from our character and in replacing those evil qualities with godly obedience, love and truth.

Therefore, “seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy *and find grace to help in time of need*” (Hebrews 4:14-16). He leads and assists us in resisting even the temptations of sin.

Christ is actively perfecting God’s own nature in His servants (Matthew 5:48; 2 Peter 1:4). That is why Paul told Christians, “Therefore let us keep the feast [of Unleavened Bread] . . .” (1 Corinthians 5:8).

PENTECOST

Was observing Pentecost important to the apostle Paul?

“For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the Day of Pentecost” (Acts 20:16).

“But I [Paul] will tarry in Ephesus until Pentecost” (1 Corinthians 16:8).

The Scriptures record that, on at least these two occasions, Paul carefully arranged his schedule according to where he wanted to be on the Festival of Pentecost. The only logical reason for Paul to “tarry in Ephesus until Pentecost” would be to observe this feast day with the gentile Christians there. As with Paul’s instruction to gentile Christians in Corinth to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread, here we again find an obvious indication that early Christians, Jew and gentile alike, observed God’s annual festivals.

What biblical events are associated with the Feast of Pentecost?

“The LORD our God made a covenant with us [ancient Israel] in Horeb . . . The LORD talked with you [ancient Israel] face to face on the mountain from the midst of the fire” (Deuteronomy 5:2, 4).

“When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit . . .” (Acts 2:1-4, NIV).

On Pentecost, according to a respected Jewish tradition, God established Israel as His holy people—through

The Annual Festivals of God

Roman Year	Feast of Unleavened Bread	Feast of Pentecost	Feast of Trumpets	Day of Atonement	Feast of Tabernacles	Last Great Day	
2001	April 7	April 8-14	May 27	Sept. 18	Sept. 27	Oct. 2-8	Oct. 9
2002	March 27	March 28-April 3	May 19	Sept. 7	Sept. 16	Sept. 21-27	Sept. 28
2003	April 16	April 17-23	June 8	Sept. 27	Oct. 6	Oct. 11-17	Oct. 18
2004	April 5	April 6-12	May 30	Sept. 16	Sept. 25	Sept. 30-Oct. 6	Oct. 7
2005	April 23	April 24-30	June 12	Oct. 4	Oct. 13	Oct. 18-24	Oct. 25
2006	April 12	April 13-19	June 4	Sept. 23	Oct. 2	Oct. 7-13	Oct. 14
2007	April 2	April 3-9	May 26	Sept. 13	Sept. 22	Sept. 27-Oct. 3	Oct. 4
2008	April 19	April 20-26	June 8	Sept. 30	Oct. 9	Oct. 14-20	Oct. 21
2009	April 8	April 9-15	May 30	Sept. 19	Sept. 28	Oct. 3-9	Oct. 10
2010	March 29	March 30-April 5	May 22	Sept. 9	Sept. 18	Sept. 23-29	Sept. 30

In biblical reckoning, days begin in the evening (Genesis 1:5), when the sun goes down (Joshua 8:29; 2 Chronicles 18:34; Mark 1:32), and are counted “from evening to evening” (Leviticus 23:32). Thus, all God’s festivals begin the evening

just before the dates listed in this table. For example, in 2004 Passover is observed Sunday evening, April 4, after sundown, and the Feast of Unleavened Bread begins Monday evening, April 5. The festivals end in the evening on the dates given.

His covenant with them—after He spoke the Ten Commandments from the top of Mount Sinai. A special relationship between Him and the Israelites was sealed at that time. They then became known as the “congregation of the LORD” (Numbers 27:17).

Equally important, Pentecost is also the anniversary of the beginning of Christianity under the New Covenant. It was on Pentecost that God first made His Spirit available to all who would repent—thus beginning the Church, which He commissioned Christ to build (Matthew 16:18). Pentecost is especially significant to Christians because on that day God established the New Testament Church.

Pentecost represents God using His Church—those who are converted, revitalized and transformed by His Spirit—to do His work in this current age of Satan’s spiritual dominance over humankind.

After Jesus’ resurrection, what did He tell His disciples?

“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

The first part of this prophecy was fulfilled when, on the Feast of Pentecost, Christ’s disciples received the Holy Spirit and began their work of proclaiming His gospel to the world (Acts 2:1, 4-18). Their lives began to miraculously change. This spiritual transformation, made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit, is the *third major step* in God’s master plan of salvation.

God’s gift of His Spirit began the fulfillment of the prophecies in Jeremiah 31:31-33 and Ezekiel 36:26-27. He promised to make a new covenant with the community of faithful believers. Through the Holy Spirit He promised to write His laws on their hearts and minds and no longer only on tablets of stone, as in the time of Moses. It was on the Feast of Pentecost of Acts 2 that the

Church of God—the faithful believers in Christ imbued with God’s Spirit—was founded and began preaching Christ’s gospel to the world.

Anciently the Festival of Pentecost only anticipated a converted body of believers, but now it annually acknowledges and celebrates the importance of the Church and its work in God’s plan.

Does the Bible refer to the Feast of Pentecost by other names?

“And you shall observe the Feast of Weeks, of the firstfruits of wheat harvest . . .” (Exodus 34:22).

“On the day of firstfruits, when you present to the LORD an offering of new grain during the Feast of Weeks, hold a sacred assembly and do no regular work” (Numbers 28:26, NIV).

The Greek word *pentekoste*, which means “50th,” became the New Testament name for the Old Testament “Feast of Weeks” because it occurs 50 days (seven weeks plus one day) after the first weekly Sabbath that falls during the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23:10-16).

Pentecost was also known as “the Feast of Harvest, the *firstfruits* of your labors” (Exodus 23:16). This name foreshadowed the establishment of the New Testament Church. Christians are those “who have the *firstfruits* of the Spirit” and those who are “redeemed from among men, *being firstfruits* to God and to the Lamb” (Romans 8:23; Revelation 14:4). James writes, “Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of *firstfruits* of His creatures” (James 1:18).

The festivals that follow Pentecost point to God’s plan for bringing *the rest of humanity* to repentance. The aspects of God’s plan represented by the three spring festivals—Passover, Unleavened Bread and Pentecost—have *already* occurred. But the prophetic implications of

Are the Biblical Holy Days Christian Festivals?

Why do most people keep holidays that are different from the festivals listed and described in the pages of the Bible? When were the biblical feasts abandoned, and why? How can we be sure which sacred days Christians should observe?

Here are the answers!

Jesus Himself set an example for us (1 John 2:6) in observing the sacred festivals commanded in the Holy Scriptures (Matthew 26:17; Mark 1:21; Luke 4:16, 31; John 7:8-10, 14, 37). His apostles and their converts, walking in His footsteps and following His example, continued observing the same festivals (Acts 2:1; 12:2-4; 16:13; 18:4, 19, 21; 20:6; 27:9; 1 Corinthians 5:7-8). The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (13th edition), under “Festivals,” states that it is “abundantly clear that Christ and His disciples observed the appointed Jewish feasts.”

Faithful Christians continued, for several centuries after Christ’s death, to follow His and the apostles’ examples in keeping the festivals. But this all changed when a

politicized and paganized form of Christianity developed within the Roman Empire.

Historian Stewart Easton explains how and when the change occurred—with the help of the Roman emperors. “Constantine [A.D. 306-337], though not baptized a Christian until he was on his deathbed, took an active interest in the [Christian] religion, presiding over the important Council of Nicea . . . During the fourth century, under imperial protection . . . , the Christian religion . . . made rapid progress, even in the rural areas where the old gods had never altogether lost their appeal. When at the end of the century (A.D. 392) [Emperor] Theodosius I decreed that henceforth Christianity was to be the only religion in the [Roman] empire, the countryside perforce had to submit and adopt at least the forms of Christianity. But it would probably have been difficult for any observer to detect much difference . . . It is clear that these folk knew little enough of the teachings or theology of Christianity, and the *festivals and ceremonies of paganism* for the most part

the last four festivals, observed in the autumn of each year, are yet to be fulfilled. Those look forward to prophetic events *yet to occur*.

Let's see how the later festivals represent aspects of God's great plan to offer salvation to many more people.

THE FEAST OF TRUMPETS

What distinguishes God's fourth festival, the Feast of Trumpets?

"Speak to the children of Israel, saying: 'In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall have a sabbath-rest, a memorial of blowing of trumpets, a holy convocation' (Leviticus 23:24).

The Feast of Trumpets is observed on the first day of the seventh month of the Hebrew calendar—falling in the autumn in the northern hemisphere, in September or October. This festival, today known as Rosh Hashanah by Jews, also begins the Jewish civil year. In ancient times Israel celebrated it with an emphasis on the blowing of trumpets, the primary method of announcing a gathering of the people or warning them of impending danger or war.

Significantly, the bulk of the prophecies of the book of Revelation are represented by the *blowing of seven trumpets* that symbolize the main progression of events in the catastrophic time known as the Day of the Lord in many prophecies relating to the last days. The sounding of trumpets in Revelation warns of impending disasters just as did the blowing of trumpets in ancient Israel.

Which events in God's plan are directly connected to the sounding of a trumpet?

"Then the seventh angel sounded [the last prophetic trumpet]: and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He

shall reign forever and ever!'" (Revelation 11:15).

"For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

"And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (Matthew 24:31).

"Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory'" (1 Corinthians 15:51-54).

This pivotal event in prophecy, the triumphant return of Jesus Christ to rule the earth with the help of His resurrected saints, is specifically associated with the blowing of trumpets. The thunderous blast of the *last* trumpet will announce His second coming to establish the Kingdom of God on earth.

The return of Christ is the next aspect of God's plan prophesied in the Scriptures. It is the *fourth step*—the midway event—in God's seven-step master plan of salvation. (For a more thorough explanation of the prophetic events represented by the seven trumpets in Revelation, be sure to request your free copy of

were incorporated directly into the new official religion (The Heritage of the Past: From the Earliest Times to 1500, 1964, p. 402, emphasis added).

Charles Guignebert, who was a professor of the history of Christianity at the University of Paris, describes the continuation of the process: "Now at the beginning of the fifth century, the ignorant and the semi-Christians thronged into the Church in numbers. . . . They had forgotten none of their pagan customs. . . . The bishops of that period had to content themselves with redressing, as best they could, and in experimental fashion, the shocking malformations of the Christian faith which they perceived around them. . . . They had to be content with. . . postponing until a later date the task of eradicating their superstitions, which they preserved intact. . . . This 'later date' never arrived, and the Church adapted to herself, as well as she could, them and their customs and beliefs. On their side, they were content to dress up their paganism in a Christian cloak" (*The Early History of Christianity*, 1927, pp. 208-210, emphasis added).

During this time—in the early centuries after the passing of the original apostles—observance of biblical practices, including the seventh-day Sabbath and God's

festivals, practically disappeared from the new and growing religion. They were replaced with other practices and a new set of religious holidays.

Prophecy, however, reveals that God will require the whole world to observe these same biblical festivals in the future. For example, Zechariah prophesies that God will require people to attend the Feast of Tabernacles after Christ returns (Zechariah 14:16). Isaiah prophesies that people of all lands will regularly keep the weekly Sabbath during Christ's millennial reign (Isaiah 66:23). Isaiah and Micah prophesy of that time: "Many nations shall come and say, 'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.' For out of Zion the law shall go forth, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem" (Micah 4:2; compare Isaiah 2:3).

Some faithful Christians to this day observe the sacred festivals, the same festivals of God that Christ kept. God instituted these annual occasions to keep His people aware of Christ's mission as the Messiah. These sacred days really are *Christian festivals* in every respect, and Christians everywhere should observe them.

What must happen before these end-time events begin?

“And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14).

Christ promised to return when the true gospel of the coming Kingdom had been preached to the whole world. We are in that prophesied time when the Church continues its commission of proclaiming the gospel and making and teaching disciples (Matthew 28:18-20), as pictured by the Feast of Pentecost.

The Feast of Trumpets points us to the Day of the Lord, to the terrifying events that will occur just before and at the return of Jesus as King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Revelation 19:11-16). But it also points us to the joyous time when Christians, living or dead, will receive God’s gift of eternal life in the first resurrection. The Feast of Trumpets represents that pivotal time in God’s plan when He will bring this present evil age to an end and establish His rule and government over humanity.

THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

What was the significance of the Day of Atonement in ancient Israel?

“This shall be a statute forever for you: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall

afflict your souls [by fasting], and do no work at all, whether a native of your own country or a stranger who dwells among you. For on that day the priest shall make atonement for you, to cleanse you, that you may be clean from all your sins before the LORD” (Leviticus 16:29-30).

On the Day of Atonement each year the nation of ancient Israel was figuratively *cleansed* from its sins. This figurative cleansing was only a *type* of a spiritual cleansing that will occur first for the people of Israel, and then for the rest of the world, after Christ returns.

How will this universal reconciliation with God be brought about?

Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem, and to entreat the favor of the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment and saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.’” (Zechariah 8:22-23, NRSV).

Starting from Jerusalem, in a restored and spiritually cleansed nation of Israel (Ezekiel 37:21-28), Christ will begin the process of extending this reconciliation to all peoples until the whole world repents and is *at one* with God.

What is the real and permanent atonement for a person’s sins?

How Sacrifices and Festivals Are Related

Anyone who reads about God’s festivals in the Old Testament will notice that ritual sacrifices were intimately associated with sacred occasions. Why? What is the connection between sacrifices and God’s festivals?

First we need to understand that the sacrifices represented Jesus Christ. Notice this explanation in the book of Hebrews, written to Jewish Christians:

“... According to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission. Therefore it was necessary that the copies [that is, the earthly tabernacle and its sacrificial system] of the things in the heavens should be purified with these [animal sacrifices], but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us” (Hebrews 9:22-24).

In ancient Israel a physical tabernacle represented God’s presence among His people. But today, through His Spirit, God lives *in*—He dwells *in*—His people. Christians, therefore, as individuals (1 Corinthians 6:19) and as the Church, the “body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:12-13), are to be regarded as the “temple” of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22).

As the Scriptures explain, “Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, *with the greater and more perfect tabernacle* not made with hands, that is, not of this

creation. *Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood* He entered the Most Holy Place *once for all*, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit *offered Himself* without spot to God, *cleanse your conscience* from dead works to serve the living God?” (Hebrews 9:11-14).

The lesson here is that the blessings of God’s plan of salvation, as pictured by His festivals, are available only to those whom He redeems through Jesus’ sacrifice. The necessity for us to have our sins covered by Christ’s sacrifice was *symbolically* represented to ancient Israel—though the Israelites lacked a full understanding of what they were doing—through the ritual sacrifices God required them to make, especially during the sacred festivals.

In an even greater way we should be aware that Christ’s sacrifice is the key to our participation in God’s great plan. His sacrifice will always be the key to our salvation—and the key to our being able to understand God’s plan for our salvation as revealed in His holy festivals. Therefore there remains a vital, though infinitely better, relationship between His eternal sacrifice and God’s sacred festivals. This link between sacrifice and festival has never been broken.

“In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10, New Revised Standard Version).

“This righteousness [justification] from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood” (Romans 3:22-25, NIV).

Jesus died as the reconciling sacrifice for the sins of every human being so that humanity—the entire world—can at last be reconciled to God. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). The Day of Atonement represents *the fifth step* in God’s master plan for the salvation of mankind.

This part of God’s plan was depicted on the Day of Atonement in ancient Israel by two special sacrificial animals that were ceremonially set apart to represent reconciling the people to God, for figuratively cleansing them of their sins. But no animal sacrifice is adequate to cleanse us from our sins. “For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins” (Hebrews 10:4).

Two goats were figurative bearers of guilt. Both had all the sins of the people symbolically placed on them. One goat was left alive but banished to a wilderness. The other, representing Jesus, was killed as a sacrifice for sins (Leviticus 16:6-10, 15-16). In this drama the banished live goat represented Satan’s part in the people’s sins. The slain goat, picturing Christ, represented Him taking on Himself the penalty for the people’s sins.

Ceremonies on this day even pointed to the cleansing, or forgiving, through an atoning sacrifice, *of sins committed in ignorance.*

“But into the second part [of the tabernacle] the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people’s *sins committed in ignorance*; the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing” (Hebrews 9:7-8).

Why was the “Holiest of All,” the inner room of the tabernacle that symbolized direct access to God, not opened to the entire congregation “while the first tabernacle was still standing”? Because the atoning sacrifice of Christ had not yet been made. Only His sacrifice, not the sacrifice of animals, can truly atone for our sins. Anciently the Day of Atonement signified that Jesus would become the atoning sacrifice for humanity.

How do we know Christ’s death is the atoning sacrifice for mankind?

“... We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:1-2, New Revised Standard Version).

Paul confirms that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them . . .” (2 Corinthians 5:19, NRSV). *The American Heritage Dictionary*, electronic edition, defines the theological meaning of the word *atonement* as “reconciliation or an instance of reconciliation between God and human beings.” The Day of Atonement points to the time in the future when God will reconcile humanity to Himself through Christ. “Atone,” in English, means literally “at one.” The Day of Atonement represents the time when humanity will at last be *at one* with God, no longer separated from Him.

Why is atonement for mankind necessary? It is required for two reasons. First, “the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ . . .” (2 Corinthians 4:4, NIV). Second, humans are “darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart” (Ephesians 4:18, NRSV). People’s hardness of heart, caused by a combination of ignorance and human nature together with Satan’s influence, has led them to sin and fall short of God’s glory (Romans 3:23).

When will God remove Satan’s influence?

“And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations any more until the thousand years were ended” (Revelation 20:1-3, NIV).

Immediately after Christ returns, God will banish Satan for 1,000 years. This will fulfill God’s earlier pledge, in the presence of Adam and Eve, that the coming Seed (the Messiah) would “bruise” (impair and disable) Satan’s “head”—his leadership and influence over mankind (Genesis 3:15).

How will God begin to remove mankind’s hardness of heart?

“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9, NIV).

With Satan banished and his deceptive and destructive influence removed, Christ will begin dispelling the hardness of heart caused by ignorance and human nature by teaching everyone how to repent. The Day of Atonement, as a Christian festival, reminds us that the atoning sacrifice of Christ is not only for individual Christians in this age but for the forgiveness and reconciliation of all people. This atonement paves the way for Christ to gather all people—as many as are willing—into God’s Kingdom during Jesus’ 1,000-year reign after Satan’s banishment.

THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES

How is the festival that represents *the sixth step*

in God's plan to be observed?

"On the fifteenth day of the seventh month the LORD's Feast of Tabernacles begins, and it lasts for seven days. The first day is a sacred assembly; do no regular work . . ." (Leviticus 23:34-35, NIV).

"Seven days you shall keep a sacred feast to the LORD your God in the place [or places; Exodus 20:24; John 4:21] which the LORD chooses, because the LORD your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you surely rejoice" (Deuteronomy 16:15).

The first time the Bible mentions the Feast of Tabernacles it is called the Feast of Ingathering (Exodus 23:16). It was the great autumn harvest festival that people from every corner of Israel came together to observe. All during the harvest season they set aside animals and produce for this special week of rejoicing. Everyone enjoyed an abundance of food, drink and fellowship.

It was also a commemoration of the peace and safety God had promised if they would diligently obey Him. Notice the instructions He gave them: "But when you cross over the Jordan and dwell in the land which the LORD your God is giving you to inherit, and He gives you rest [peace] from all your enemies round about, so that you *dwell in safety*, then there will be the place where the LORD your God chooses to make His name abide. There you shall bring all that I command you . . .

And you shall rejoice before the LORD your God . . ." (Deuteronomy 12:10-12). This festival is a celebration of God's guidance, protection and blessings for His people.

Jesus Christ will give those same blessings even more abundantly to the whole world when He returns and establishes His reign on earth. What ancient Israel could enjoy for one week at the end of the fall harvest merely represented what He will bring to all mankind when He assumes the role of King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Will Christ insist that everyone observe the Feast of Tabernacles after He returns?

"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. And it shall be that whichever of the families of the earth do not come up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, on them there will be no rain. If the family of Egypt will not come up and enter in, they shall have no rain; they shall receive the plague with which the LORD strikes the nations who do not come up to keep the Feast of Tabernacles. This shall be the punishment of Egypt and the punishment of all the nations that do not come up to keep the Feast of Tabernacles" (Zechariah 14:16-19).

The joyful Feast of Ingathering represents the time

What Did Paul Really Say in Colossians 2:16?

The apostle Paul wrote to the Colossian Christians, a gentile congregation: "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: which are a shadow of things to come . . ." (Colossians 2:16-17, King James Version).

This passage, probably more than any other in the Bible, is interpreted by those who reject God's festivals as confirmation that the biblical feast days are unnecessary observances. Regrettably, such reasoning is based on poor scholarship and misleading translations from the original wording of Paul's instructions.

From the context we see that Paul, in this passage, is countering a local heresy. In doing so he actually confirms and explains the value of God's days to Christians. He explains that they foreshadow "things to come."

In other words, the focus of God's festivals is on the future, relating God's plan directly to the commission Christ gave His Church. So let's examine what Paul actually says about Sabbaths, new moons and "holydays" in this verse.

First we need to understand that Paul was confronting a heresy. False teachers had infiltrated the congregation in Colosse. These deceivers had influenced the Colossian Christians by introducing their own religious philosophy. This prompted Paul to warn the Colossians, "Beware lest anyone cheat you through *philosophy* and *empty deceit* according to the *tradition of men*" (Colossians 2:8). Humanly devised tradition—not the revealed instructions of God's Word in the Bible—was the problem Paul was countering. Earlier Jesus had taken the Pharisees to task over the same kind of

problem. They also had elevated their *traditions* to greater importance than God's commandments (Mark 7:8-9, 13).

Paul tried to keep the Colossians focused on Christ as the head of the Church (Colossians 1:18; 2:10, 19). But these false teachers were trying to persuade them to direct their worship toward angels (Colossians 2:18) and neglect their own bodies (verse 23). No such distorted ideas are taught anywhere in the Scriptures.

Paul characterized the Colossian heresy as "*empty deceit*" and "*the basic principles of the world*" (verse 8). The deceivers were persuading the Colossians to ignore plain biblical instruction in favor of "*traditions of men.*"

What type of deceitful regulations did Paul combat? "*Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle . . . according to the commandments and doctrines of men*" (verses 21-22). The heretics advocated man-made regulations concerning physical things that "perish with the using" (verse 22).

Why is this important? The deceivers were probably forerunners of a major religious movement, *gnosticism*, that flourished in the second century. They did not represent the mainstream Jewish thinking of that day, nor were they faithful to the Scriptures.

They believed salvation could be obtained through constant contemplation of what is "spiritual"—to, as Paul explained, the "neglect" of the physical body (verse 23). It appears they believed in various orders of angels and in direct human interaction with angels.

Paul indicates they regarded all physical things, including the human body, as decadent. He explicitly states that the

during which God will gather the great harvest of humanity into His family. First “all Israel will be saved, as it is written: “The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob”” (Romans 11:26, NIV).

Then God will offer salvation to everyone. The prophet Daniel makes this clear: “I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days . . . Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that *all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him*. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed” (Daniel 7:13-14).

How will knowledge of God’s ways go to all nations?

“Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power; but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years” (Revelation 20:6).

“In the last days the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and peoples will stream to it. Many nations will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.’ The law will

go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He will judge between many peoples and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore” (Micah 4:1-3, NIV).

What other blessings will abound during Jesus’ 1,000-year reign on earth?

“Righteousness shall be the belt of His loins, and faithfulness the belt of His waist. The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play by the cobra’s hole, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper’s den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:5-9).

THE LAST GREAT DAY

What is God’s seventh and last annual festival?

“Also on the fifteenth day of the seventh month,

heresies he was countering “concern things which perish with the using [physical things] according to the commandments and doctrines of men” (verse 22). Paul tells us he was countering *human* commandments and doctrines—not the commandments of God.

The Colossian heretics had introduced various man-made prohibitions—such as “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle” (verse 21)—against the *enjoyment* of physical things. They especially objected to the pleasurable aspects of God’s festivals—the *eating and drinking aspects*—that are commanded in the Scriptures (Deuteronomy 12:17-18).

When Paul wrote, “. . . Let no one judge you in food . . .” (verse 16), he wasn’t discussing what types of foods they should or should not eat. The Greek word *brosis*, translated “food,” refers not to the *kinds* of foods one should or should not eat, but to “the act of eating” (*Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, 1985, “Food”). The point is that the deceivers disdained feasting—any type of eating and drinking for enjoyment.

Paul instructed the Colossian Christians *not to be influenced by these false teachers’ objections* to eating, drinking and rejoicing on Sabbaths, feast days and new moons.

Perhaps we should, at this point, mention the relationship between *new moons* and God’s festivals. The dates for observing God’s festivals are determined by a lunar calendar. Therefore new moons—which mark the beginning of the months—are important for establishing correct festival dates. Unlike God’s Holy Days, however, new moons are not commanded observances in the Scriptures. In the Millennium the custom of making the arrival of each new moon a special occasion will again be restored (Isaiah 66:23), but no biblical

command exists now that requires their observance.

Now back to Paul’s main point: The Colossian deceivers had *no authority to judge* or determine *how* the Colossians were to observe God’s festivals. That is why Paul said, “Let no man therefore *judge* you in meat, or in drink, or in *respect of* an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days . . .” (verses 16-17, King James Version).

Notice that Paul tells them to reject *false human judgment*, not the judgment of God found in the Scriptures.

At this point we should note another grammatical matter. The words “respect of” are translated from the Greek noun *meros*, which denotes a *part* of something. Therefore a more accurate rendering of what Paul wrote would be “Let no man therefore judge you . . . in *any part* of a holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days . . .”

Paul is simply being consistent. Eating or drinking is an appropriate part of Sabbath and feast-day observance according to the Scriptures. Therefore Paul uses *meros* (“part”) to cover all parts or aspects of God’s Holy Days that these heretics might condemn or criticize. Nothing in this passage even suggests that God abolished His Sabbaths or Holy Days, nor authorized Paul to do so. Succumbing to the *judgmental influence* of those early gnostic heretics is what Paul condemns, not the observance of Sabbaths and feast days.

God’s festivals are times for joy and celebration. He commands us to attend them and *rejoice* with our children—our entire family (Deuteronomy 12:5, 7; 14:26). He wants us to delight in them. No wonder Paul condemns the misguided ascetic philosophy of the Colossian heretics with such vigor. Paul was defending the Christians’ right to enjoy feasting at God’s holy festivals.

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” (Leviticus 23:39).

“Also day by day, from the first day until the last day, [Ezra] read from the Book of the Law of God. And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day there was a sacred assembly, according to the prescribed manner” (Nehemiah 8:18).

The seven days of the Feast of Tabernacles are followed by another high day, on which God commands an assembly. This *eighth day* is the Last Great Day of the fall festival season, and it represents the final, or *seventh*, step in God’s plan of salvation.

As Christ’s 1,000-year reign on earth (Revelation 20:4) is followed by other prophesied events, the Feast of Tabernacles is also followed by a concluding festival that represents the conclusion of those final events—the final aspects of God’s purpose and plan for humanity on our physical earth. The book of Revelation reveals that all people who have ever died without hearing of Christ or learning God’s way of life are to be resurrected and given their opportunity to receive eternal life. This brings us to the concluding aspects of God’s plan.

John writes: “And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life

was cast into the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:12-15).

This is the resurrection of “the rest of the dead [who] did not live again until the thousand years were finished” mentioned in Revelation 20:5. This resurrection of many millions of people back to physical, perishable life is graphically depicted in Ezekiel 37:1-12. In this resurrection, according to Jesus, the dead of all past ages—people such as the queen of the South (or Sheba) from Solomon’s time, the inhabitants of the ancient Assyrian stronghold of Nineveh from Jonah’s time and the people of Christ’s time—will all be resurrected together (Matthew 12:41-42).

This judgment will take place over time as these people hear and learn God’s truth for the first time. Those who rise in this resurrection and repent—and the Scriptures indicate that most of them will repent—will receive God’s Spirit. “Then you . . . will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. *I will put my Spirit in you* and you will live . . . Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD” (Ezekiel 37:13-14, NIV). In this resurrection God will give them their opportunity for salvation—an opportunity they never had before.

Did Jesus speak of a connection between the Last Great Day and the receiving of God’s Spirit?

“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. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’ But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, [which] those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (John 7:37-39).

Most people cling to the notion that God sends those

Obedient Followers of God

Members of the United Church of God, an International Association, the publisher of this *Bible Study Course*, are committed to living by every word of God (Matthew 4:4), including His instructions to assemble on His annual festivals. Through these festivals God, through His written Word, regularly reminds us of His awesome and loving plan for humanity.

Members of the United Church of God are committed to proclaiming the truth about God’s plan and His coming Kingdom to the world (Matthew 24:14). They are part of the family God is building—His own children—who will receive eternal life at Christ’s return (1 John 3:1-2; 1 Corinthians 15:51-53).

As children of God, members of the Church anticipate a “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13). They eagerly await Jesus’ return so they can assist Him in bringing true repentance and salvation to the world (Luke 11:2; Revelation 3:21).

To fulfill their mission and maintain the closeness and unity Christ expects of them, members of His Church regularly assemble together as commanded in the Scriptures

(Exodus 20:8-11). They take seriously the admonition: “And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24-25).

The Church assembles together on the seventh-day Sabbath, as was the custom of Jesus and the apostles (Luke 4:16, 31-32; Acts 13:14, 42, 44). Its members strive to follow the example of Jesus and the apostles in all things (1 John 2:6; 1 Corinthians 11:1).

Members of the United Church of God are dedicated to preserving and proclaiming “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3, NRSV). They meet in many cities around the world. They are zealously committed to obeying God, loving one another and completing the Church’s mission of spreading the true gospel of the Kingdom of God.

All who desire to learn the truth, obey God and fellowship with others of like mind and spirit are always welcome at services.

who die unsaved to an ever-burning hell to be tormented forever. This is one of the great deceptions Satan has foisted off on mankind. It is simply not true. Instead, the Scriptures consistently teach that each person who dies remains in his grave, having no consciousness or pain (Ecclesiastes 9:5; Psalm 6:5) until God resurrects him. (For detailed proof be sure to request the booklets *Heaven and Hell: What Does the Bible Really Teach?* and *What Happens After Death?*)

Jesus explained that everyone who dies will be resurrected from his grave, not from an ever-burning hell: “Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which *all who are in the tombs* [‘graves’ in most translations] shall hear His voice, and shall come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to *a resurrection of judgment*” (John 5:28-29, New American Standard Bible). Some translators incorrectly render this event as a “resurrection of condemnation.” Such translation does not accurately reflect what the Scriptures teach.

Humanity’s final judgment, according to the Scriptures, will *not* be in the form of a resurrection to automatic condemnation. Rather it will be the time when those who have never heard God’s truth explained will finally receive an opportunity to hear and repent—by being resurrected and taught God’s truth over a generously sufficient length of time to come to repentance and prove to God they really want eternal life and are willing to submit to Him.

Through God’s wondrous foresight, all people will enjoy the opportunity to learn His truth and come to repentance, because God “desires all men to be saved” (1 Timothy 2:4). God will forgive those who repent (the biblical indications are that most will repent) and give them His Spirit and ultimately salvation in His Kingdom. Remember, “the Lord is . . . not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). He provides for everyone to have a genuine personal opportunity to have his name written in the book of life.

Finally, this time of judgment will conclude when the incorrigibly wicked—those who, after receiving their opportunity to repent, still refuse to accept God’s ways—are cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14-15).

What do the Scriptures describe as the conclusion of this final judgment period?

“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. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 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. 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’” (Revelation 21:1-4).

What follows in Revelation 21-22 briefly describes the community of those who have received salvation living peacefully and harmoniously with each other in the presence of God for eternity. In His wonderful Kingdom God will reveal the meaning of His promise, “Behold, I make all things new” (Revelation 21:5).

God’s festivals celebrate the seven stages of His wonderful, all-encompassing plan so we can have faith in Him and rest assured that He knows what He is doing. He has thought out every detail to bring us—all who are willing—to repentance and give us eternal life.

By keeping His festivals we remain focused on what is important in our view of the future and our role in it. Each time we keep them we deepen our understanding of prophecies throughout the Bible that fill in the details of God’s wonderful plan.

Members of the United Church of God, publishers of this *Bible Study Course*, gather every year in dozens of locations around the world in obedience to God’s command to observe the Feast of Tabernacles. In addition, they keep God’s other annual festivals in their local congregations. Visitors are always welcome.

In this lesson we cover only the highlights of what the Bible reveals about God’s Holy Days and their relationship to biblical prophecy. For more information about God’s festivals be sure to request and study our 64-page booklet *God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*. For a more-thorough understanding of God’s plan as revealed in Bible prophecy, also request the booklets *Are We Living in the Time of the End?*, *You Can Understand Bible Prophecy* and *The Book of Revelation Unveiled*. All will add to your understanding of God’s festivals and their relationship to His plan and to the prophecies that reveal many of its details.

SOME FINAL REMARKS

This lesson completes the 12 in the *Bible Study Course*. Through them you learned the fundamentals that are essential for a correct understanding of the Holy Bible. We hope this is only your beginning of a thorough and continuing study of God’s Word.

Where do you go from here? We suggest you undertake a thorough review of all 12 of these lessons. Review is a vital key to comprehending and retaining what you have studied. You will learn even more than you gleaned from your first time through the lessons. Remember, too,



Members of the United Church of God gather every year in obedience to God’s command to observe the Feast of Tabernacles.

that growing in understanding of the Scriptures is a lifetime challenge. We hope it's one you never tire of. We urge you to develop a daily habit of studying your Bible and to continue reading *The Good News* magazine and the many booklets we publish for your continued biblical education.

We also have congregations around the world where personal instruction is available for those who wish to assemble together with others of like belief. Or, should you desire a visit from a qualified minister living in your area, feel free to contact us and we will forward your request to one near you who understands, teaches and practices God's Word.

We offer all of these services free of charge and without any obligation on your part. Our sole desire is to assist you in understanding and applying God's ways so your life will be pleasing to Him and so you will enter His Kingdom when Christ returns. We have appreciated your giving us this opportunity to help you better understand the Word of God. Let us know how we can continue to assist you.

If you have not yet done so, we also recommend that you read each of the free booklets mentioned in each lesson of this course. Be sure to also request and read the following free booklets that expand on the material covered in this lesson:

- *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind.*
- *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Keep?*
- *The Gospel of the Kingdom.*
- *Are We Living in the Time of the End?*
- *You Can Understand Bible Prophecy.*
- *The Book of Revelation Unveiled.*
- *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion.*
- *What Happens After Death?*
- *Heaven and Hell: What Does the Bible Really Teach?*
- *The Church Jesus Built.*
- *Fundamental Beliefs of the United Church of God.*

Points to Ponder

These questions are intended as a study aid, to spur further thought on the concepts discussed in this lesson and to help you apply them on a personal level. We suggest you take the time to write out your answers to these questions and compare them to the scriptures given. Please feel free to write us with any comments or suggestions, including questions about the course or this lesson.

- Did Jesus Christ keep the biblical festivals? (Matthew 26:17; John 7:8-10, 14, 37).
- Did the apostles continue to keep the biblical festivals after Jesus' death and resurrection? (Acts 2:1; 12:2-4; 16:13; 18:21; 20:6; 27:9; 1 Corinthians 5:7-8).
- What did the Passover mean to the ancient Israelites, and what does it mean for Christians today? (Exodus 12:26-27; 1 Corinthians 5:7; 11:23-26; 1 Peter 1:18-20).
- What is the spiritual lesson of the Feast of Unleavened Bread? (1 Corinthians 5:6-8; Luke 12:1; Romans 6:17-19).
- What events do the writers of the Bible associate with the Feast of Pentecost? (Deuteronomy 5:2, 4; Acts 1:8; 2:1-4, 36-41).
- Which events in God's plan does He connect with the sounding of a trumpet and thus the Feast of Trumpets? (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17; Matthew 24:31; 1 Corinthians 15:51-54; Revelation 11:15).
- What does the Day of Atonement picture? (1 John 2:1-2; John 3:16; Leviticus 16:6-10, 15-16; Revelation 20:1-3).
- After Jesus returns and God puts Satan away, what is the next step in God's plan of salvation for mankind? (Daniel 7:13-14; Revelation 20:6; Micah 4:1-3; Isaiah 11:5-9; Zechariah 14:16-19).
- After the seven-day Feast of Tabernacles, another festival follows on the eighth day. What does the Last Great Day picture? (Revelation 20:12-15; Ezekiel 37:1-14; Matthew 12:41-42; John 7:37-39; 2 Peter 3:9).

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