

GOD'S FESTIVALS AND HOLY DAYS

By

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In the Old Testament, God sanctioned certain days and seasons for His people to celebrate. These Festivals and Holy Days had meaning to the ancient Israelites, the first century Church of God and have importance for us today. They foreshadow future events and have spiritual relevance for New Testament believers. Those who wish to keep the Holy Days should do so according to what the Bible says, and NOT according to human tradition. Most holidays that the Christian church keep, such as Christmas and Easter, have roots in pagan religious tradition. When Christians honor these corrupt 'holy days' or holidays, it is an insult to God. He finds it offensive. True Christians will not partake in anything having to do with paganism. However, even with regard to the real Holy Days, people who have truly 'entered the rest of God' will not necessarily 'keep' these days, since to these mature Christians EVERY day is the same in Christ, (see Romans chapter 14, esp. v. 6).

FEASTS AND FESTIVALS - the holy convocations, the regular assemblies of the people of Israel for worship of the Lord.

The feasts and festivals of the nation were scheduled at specific times in the annual calendar and they were both civil and religious in nature. Some feasts and festivals marked the beginning or the end of the agricultural year, while others commemorated historic events in the life of the nation. All of the feasts were marked by thanksgiving and joyous feasting.

Meat, a scarce item in the daily fare of the people, was eaten at these affairs, and wine was also consumed. The fat and the blood of the animals were reserved for sacrifice to God. The libation (or offering) of wine may have been drunk by the worshipers as part of the meal ceremony. First the blood and the fat were offered to God; then sometimes the worshipers ate.

The feasts and festivals of Israel were community observances. The poor, the widow, the orphan, the Levite, and the sojourner or foreigner were invited to most of the feasts. The accounts of these feasts suggest a potluck type of meal, with some parts of the meal reserved for the priests and the rest given to those who gathered at the Temple or the altar for worship. One of the feasts, Passover, originated in the home and later was transferred to the Temple. The rest were apparently observed at specific times during the year and in designated places.

The Hebrew word for "pilgrimage" seems to be reserved mostly for the three great annual feasts: the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Tabernacles. These feasts are discussed in Leviticus 23. Every Israelite male was expected to observe them.

The religious pilgrimage from the various towns and cities to the Temple or to the LEVITICAL CITIES scattered throughout the land became annual events. This yearly event may also have progressed from an annual "pilgrimage" early in Israel's history to a "proceSSIONAL" at the Temple or at the Levitical center in later times. In all the feasts and festivals the nation of Israel remembered its past and renewed its faith in the Lord who created and sustained His people.

Following is a complete list of all the feasts and festivals observed by the people of Israel. Some were annual events, while others occurred weekly or once every several years.¹

Sabbath. The Sabbath is taught in many places, including Exodus 16:22-30; 20:8-11; 23:12; 31:12-16; 34:21; 35:2-3; Leviticus 23:3; 26:2; Numbers 15:32-36; 28:9-10; Deuteronomy 5:12-15. The Hebrew word for Sabbath means "to cease or abstain." Two reasons are given for observing the Sabbath: Creation and Exodus.

Exodus 20:8-11 reminded the nation of Israel to remember that God rested on the seventh day (Gen. 2:2). This grounds the observance of the Sabbath in the creation of the world. Deuteronomy 5:12-15 reminded Israel to remember its bondage years when there was no rest. This passage fixed the origin of the Sabbath in the bondage of the Hebrews in Egypt.

The Israelites were instructed to include the family, the hired servants, the stranger, and even their domestic animals in observance of this holy day. All were commanded to cease from normal labor. This included the command not to gather firewood (Num. 15:32-36) or to kindle a fire (Ex. 35:2-3). Stoning to death was apparently the penalty for gathering firewood on the Sabbath. Those who violated the Sabbath would be excommunicated from the community or could be put to death (Ex. 31:12-16).

The Sabbath became not only a day of rest but a convocation to the Lord as well. A specific sacrifice on the Sabbath is required in Numbers 28:9-10. It included a lamb, a grain offering mixed with oil, and a drink offering. This was to be offered as a burnt offering. In later periods, prayer and other rituals became the procedure for observing the Sabbath.

The purpose of the Sabbath was twofold. It symbolized that the nation of Israel had been set apart by the Lord as His special people. The Sabbath was also a celebration of the fact that the land belonged to God. This is seen in His provision of a Sabbatical Year—one year out of every seven when the land should rest from cultivation in order to renew and replenish itself.

The observance of the Sabbath set the Israelites apart from their neighbors. Unfortunately, burdensome restrictions and heavy requirements eventually grew up around its observance. The day that was set apart for rest, renewal, and worship became a day filled with rules of many things that must not be done.

Jesus attempted to restore the purpose of the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1-14; Mark 2:23-3:6; Luke 6:1-11). He declared God's intention for the Sabbath by pointing out that "the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27).

Author's Note: The 'Sabbath Rest' spoken of in the Bible in Heb 4:1-16 -

Promised Rest for God's People

4 God's promise of entering his place of rest still stands, so we ought to tremble with fear that some of you might fail to get there.² For this Good News—that God has prepared a place of rest—has been announced to us just as it was to them. But it did them no good

¹Ronald F. Youngblood, general editor; F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, consulting editors, *Nelson's new illustrated Bible dictionary: An authoritative one-volume reference work on the Bible with full color illustrations [computer file], electronic edition of the revised edition of Nelson's illustrated Bible dictionary, Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

because they didn't believe what God told them.³ For only we who believe can enter his place of rest. As for those who didn't believe, God said,

“In my anger I made a vow:
‘They will never enter my place of rest.’”

even though his place of rest has been ready since he made the world.⁴ We know it is ready because the Scriptures mention the seventh day, saying, “On the seventh day God rested from all his work.”⁵ But in the other passage God said, “They will never enter my place of rest.”⁶ So God's rest is there for people to enter. But those who formerly heard the Good News failed to enter because they disobeyed God.⁷ So God set another time for entering his place of rest, and that time is today. God announced this through David a long time later in the words already quoted:

“Today you must listen to his voice.
Don't harden your hearts against him.”

⁸ This new place of rest was not the land of Canaan, where Joshua led them. If it had been, God would not have spoken later about another day of rest.⁹ So there is a special rest still waiting for the people of God.¹⁰ For all who enter into God's rest will find rest from their labors, just as God rested after creating the world.¹¹ Let us do our best to enter that place of rest. For anyone who disobeys God, as the people of Israel did, will fall.

¹² For the word of God is full of living power. It is sharper than the sharpest knife, cutting deep into our innermost thoughts and desires. It exposes us for what we really are.¹³ Nothing in all creation can hide from him. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes. This is the God to whom we must explain all that we have done.

Christ Is Our High Priest

¹⁴ That is why we have a great High Priest who has gone to heaven, Jesus the Son of God. Let us cling to him and never stop trusting him.¹⁵ This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same temptations we do, yet he did not sin.¹⁶ So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it.²

Sabbatical Year. The concept of the sabbatical year was that the land was to be given a rest every seventh year. This law included grain fields and vineyards. Even that which grew from the planting and pruning of the sixth year was not to be consumed by the owner.

Eventually, the cancellation of debts was added to the land rest as a part of the sabbatical year. Debts to fellow Israelites were to be forgiven during this year, although debts of non-Israelites might be collected. But the spirit of generosity was encouraged even toward non-Israelites. Indentured servants were to be granted their freedom. They were also to be provided with grain, meat, and drink in generous portions.

The purpose of the sabbatical year was renewal-renewal of the land, renewal of hope in the canceling of debts, and renewal of life in a new start.³

Jubilee, Year of. The references to the Year of Jubilee in the Bible include Leviticus 23:15-16; 25:8-55; 27:14-24, Jeremiah 34:8, 14-17; and Isaiah 61:1-2.

The Jubilee Year began with the blowing of the RAM'S HORN. It took place after seven Sabbatical years, or every 49 years; and the 50th year was thereby set aside as the Year of Jubilee. Once the Israelites entered and possessed the Promised Land, it became their obligation to observe this year.

The Year of Jubilee was a special year in family renewal. A man who was bound to another as a slave or indentured servant was set free and returned to his own family. If any members of his family were also bound, the entire family was set free. Houses and lands could also be redeemed in the Year of Jubilee. If they were not redeemed within a year, however, they became the permanent possession of the previous owner. The land owned by Levites was exempted from this law; they could redeem their land at any time.

The rights and privileges extended by the Israelites to other Israelites did not extend to non-Israelites. Servants obtained by Israelites from the non-Israelite world were permanent slaves. And property purchased from non-Israelites was not redeemable. The law of the Year of Jubilee favored the Israelites.

Jeremiah 34:8, 14-17 warned Judah for first practicing the Jubilee and then taking away people's liberty. Apparently, those who gained wealth and power in Israel did not observe this festival willingly. The inscription on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia-"Proclaim liberty throughout the land to all the inhabitants thereof" (Lev. 25:10)-is a modern application of the Year of Jubilee.⁴

Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. References to the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread include Exodus 12:1-13:16; 23:15; 34:18-20, 25; Leviticus 23:4-14; Numbers 28:16-25; Deuteronomy 16:1-8; Joshua 4:19-23; 5:10-12; and 2 Chronicles 30:2, 3, 13, 15.

The Passover was the first of the three great festivals of the Israelite people. It referred to the sacrifice of a lamb in Egypt when the people of Israel were slaves. They smeared the blood of the lamb on their door posts as a signal to God that He should "pass over" their houses when He destroyed all the firstborn of Egypt (Ex. 12:13).

Passover was observed on the 14th day of the first month, Abib, with the service beginning in the evening (Lev. 23:6). It was on the evening of this day that Israel left Egypt. Passover commemorated this departure from Egypt in haste. Unleavened bread was used in the celebration because this showed that the people had no time to put leaven in their bread as they ate their final meal as slaves in Egypt.

³Ronald F. Youngblood, general editor; F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, consulting editors, *Nelson's new illustrated Bible dictionary: An authoritative one-volume reference work on the Bible with full color illustrations [computer file], electronic edition of the revised edition of Nelson's illustrated Bible dictionary, Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

⁴Ronald F. Youngblood, general editor; F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, consulting editors, *Nelson's new illustrated Bible dictionary: An authoritative one-volume reference work on the Bible with full color illustrations [computer file], electronic edition of the revised edition of Nelson's illustrated Bible dictionary, Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

Several regulations were given concerning the observance of Passover. Passover was to be observed "in the place which the LORD your God will choose." This implied the sanctuary of the tabernacle or the Temple in Jerusalem.

Joshua 5:10-12 refers to the observing of Passover in the plains of Jericho near Gilgal. Second Chronicles 30:1, 3, 13, 15 describes a Passover during the reign of Hezekiah. Messengers were sent throughout the land to invite the people to come to Jerusalem to observe the Passover. Many refused; some even scorned the one who carried the invitation. Because the people were not ready to observe the Passover, a delay of one month was recommended. That year the Passover was on the 14th day of the second month. Even after the delay many still were not ready to observe the Passover.

In New Testament times, large numbers gathered in Jerusalem to observe the annual Passover. Jesus was crucified in the city during one of these Passover celebrations. He and His disciples ate a Passover meal together on the eve of His death. Like the blood of the lamb that saved the Hebrew people from destruction in Egypt, His blood, as the ultimate Passover sacrifice, redeems us from the power of sin and death (1 Cor. 5:7).⁵

Unleavened Bread, Feast of. This feast began on the 15th day of the first month as a part of the larger celebration of Passover (Ex. 13:3-10; Lev. 23:6-8). Manual labor was strictly forbidden. Strangers and native-born people alike were punished if they failed to keep this holy day. Convocation began the feast.

Only unleavened bread was to be eaten during this feast. Bread without leaven commemorated the haste with which Israel left Egypt. As the blood was drained from the sacrificial animal, so the life or the power of leaven was removed from the bread offered to God during this annual celebration.⁶

Pentecost (or Weeks, or Firstfruits) Feast of. Biblical references to the Feast of Weeks include Exodus 23:16; 34:22; Leviticus 23:15-21; Numbers 28:26-31; Deuteronomy 16:9-12; and 2 Chronicles 8:13. This feast was observed early in the third month on the 50th day after the offering of the barley sheaf at the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It included a holy convocation with the usual restriction on manual labor.

Numbers 28:26-31 describes the number and nature of offerings and Deuteronomy 16:9-12 describes those who were to be invited to this feast. They include servants, sons and daughters, Levites, the fatherless, the widow, and the stranger.

This feast was also known as the Feast of Harvest as well as Pentecost (a Greek word meaning "fifty"). The early Christian believers, who were gathered in Jerusalem for observance of this feast, experienced the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit in a miraculous way (Acts 2:1-4).⁷

⁵Ronald F. Youngblood, general editor; F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, consulting editors, *Nelson's new illustrated Bible dictionary: An authoritative one-volume reference work on the Bible with full color illustrations [computer file], electronic edition of the revised edition of Nelson's illustrated Bible dictionary, Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

⁶Ronald F. Youngblood, general editor; F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, consulting editors, *Nelson's new illustrated Bible dictionary: An authoritative one-volume reference work on the Bible with full color illustrations [computer file], electronic edition of the revised edition of Nelson's illustrated Bible dictionary, Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

⁷Ronald F. Youngblood, general editor; F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, consulting editors, *Nelson's new illustrated Bible dictionary: An authoritative one-volume reference work on the Bible with full color*

Trumpets, Feast of or Seventh Month Festival. This festival is mentioned in Leviticus 23:24-25, 27-32 and Numbers 29:1-40. It was introduced with the blowing of trumpets, the halt of labor, sacrifices, and a testing (Lev. 23:24-32; Num. 29:1-40). The exact reason for its observance is not clear.⁸

Atonement, Day of. The tenth day of the seventh month was set aside as a day of public fasting and humiliation. On this day the nation of Israel sought atonement for its sins (Lev. 23:27; 16:29; Num. 29:7). This day fell in the month equivalent to our August, and it was preceded by special Sabbaths (Lev. 23:24). The only fasting period required by the Law (Lev. 16:29; 23:31), the Day of Atonement was a recognition of people's inability to make any atonement for their sins. It was a solemn, holy day accompanied by elaborate ritual (Lev. 16; Heb. 10:1-10).

The high priest who officiated on this day first sanctified himself by taking a ceremonial bath and putting on white garments (Lev. 16:4). Then he had to make atonement for himself and other priests by sacrificing a bullock (Num. 29:8). God was enthroned on the MERCY SEAT in the sanctuary, but no person could approach it except through the mediation of the high priest, who offered the blood of sacrifice.

After sacrificing a bullock, the high priest chose a goat for a sin-offering and sacrificed it. Then he sprinkled its blood on and about the mercy seat (Lev. 16:12, 14, 15). Finally the 'scapegoat', (*Author's Note: The goat that is sacrificed represents Christ who died for our sins, and the second goat, the one that is sent out in the wilderness, represents the duality of Christ and His innocence and was rejected without a cause. This second goat was also called 'azazel', which means 'the goat of removal'. It is interesting that the name of this second goat is translated as 'scapegoat' which implies one who receives blame for something he did not do!*) bearing the sins of the people was sent into the wilderness (Lev. 16:20-22). This scapegoat symbolized the pardon for sin brought through the sacrifice (Gal. 3:12; 2 Cor. 5:21).⁹

Author's Note: The Day of Atonement in the Year of Jubilee, (the year of restoration, see Lev 25:8-55) was a special one in that the 'TRUMPETS' were to be blown 'LOUD and LONG throughout the land'. Remember, Christ will return at the Last Trumpet, I Thes 4:16. This is when He will 'restore all things'. Could it be that the Day of Atonement in the Year of Jubilee foreshadows Christ's Second Coming?

Tabernacles or Booths, Feast of. References to the Feast of Tabernacles in the Bible include Exodus 23:16; 34:22; Leviticus 23:33-36; 39-43; Numbers 29:12-32; Deuteronomy 16:13-16; Ezra 3:4; and Zechariah 14:16, 18-19.

illustrations [computer file], electronic edition of the revised edition of Nelson's illustrated Bible dictionary, Logos Library System, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

⁸Ronald F. Youngblood, general editor; F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, consulting editors, *Nelson's new illustrated Bible dictionary: An authoritative one-volume reference work on the Bible with full color illustrations [computer file], electronic edition of the revised edition of Nelson's illustrated Bible dictionary, Logos Library System, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.*

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A temporary booth, or shelter, near Jerusalem, set up to celebrate the Feast of Booths, also known as the Feast of Tabernacles (Ex. 34:22).

This festival was observed on the 15th day of the seventh month to celebrate the completion of the autumn harvest. Features of the celebration included a holy convocation on the first and eighth days, and the offering of many animal sacrifices. The Israelites were also commanded to live in booths made of palm and willow trees during the festival to commemorate their period of wilderness wandering when they lived in temporary shelters. This feast is also known as the Feast of Booths.¹⁰

Author's Note: This festival has a spiritual meaning in that we dwell in earthly or mortal, (temporary) tabernacles or tents, See II Cor. 5:1. The day following the Festival of Tabernacles is sometimes called 'The Last Great Day'. It is the eighth day of the festival. Eight is the number of newness. Some believe that this day represents the first resurrection and the time that we will get our new bodies! See, Rev.20:4-6, Rom. 8-23, I Thes. 5:13-17 and II Cor. 5:1-10.

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