

Christian Doctrine

Fulfillment of the Spring Festivals

Colossians 2:16-17

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Colossians 2:16-17 (NASB95)

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INTRODUCTION:

We are in a new topical series that I have entitled "Christian Doctrine". This morning, I would like to show how Jesus became the reality of these feasts. We have a lot to cover this morning, so I am going to cut straight to the chase.

In Leviticus 23 we find the most comprehensive record of how the Israelites were commanded by God to observe **seven** feasts over a period of seven months. The Hebrew word for feasts is strictly translated as "appointed times". Four feasts were in the spring and the final three were observed in the fall. The feasts have multiple layers of meaning and application. They were related to the agricultural cycle and historical events meant to remind the Hebrews of what the LORD has done for them. As important as these recognitions were, they are nothing compared to what the feasts are ultimately about.

All Stand and Read Scripture

Colossians 2:16-17 (NASB95)

¹⁶ Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day— ¹⁷ things which are a *mere* shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.

Prayer

The days regularly observed by the Israelites were a shadow or prophetic observances pointing to what their Messiah has done or will do. In other words, every single feast was really about one of the major works that Jesus would perform. When the Israelites observed the feasts they were in a sense carrying out a ritual that, in the end, would celebrate what Jesus, the Messiah, would accomplish for us.

These were days appointed and ordained by God to be kept to the honor of His name. These times of celebration are important not only to Israel, but also to the overall message of the Bible, because each one foreshadows or symbolizes an aspect of the life, death, resurrection, and return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

While Christians are no longer under any obligation to observe any of the Old Testament feasts, we should understand their significance and importance, nonetheless.

The feasts often began and ended with a "Sabbath rest," and the Jews were commanded to not do any customary work on those days. Both the normal weekly Sabbath and the special Sabbaths that were to be observed as part of the Jewish feasts point us to the ultimate **Sabbath rest**, which is found only in Jesus Christ. It is a rest that Christians

experience through faith in the finished work of Christ upon the cross. Lord willing, we will cover that subject next week.

Beginning in the spring, the seven Jewish feasts are **Passover**, the **Feast of Unleavened Bread**, the **Feast of Firstfruits**, the **Feast of Weeks**, the **Feast of Trumpets**, the **Day of Atonement**, and the **Feast of Tabernacles**. The Jewish feasts are closely related to Israel's spring and fall harvests and agricultural seasons. They were to remind the Israelites each year of God's ongoing protection and provision. But, even more importantly, they foreshadowed the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Not only did they play significant roles in Christ's earthly ministry but they also symbolize the complete redemptive story of Christ, beginning with His death on the cross as the Passover Lamb and ending with His second coming after which He will "tabernacle" or dwell with His people forever.

Here is a brief summary of the spiritual significance of each of the seven Jewish festivals or feasts. It is interesting to note that the first three occur back to back, almost simultaneously. The Feast of Unleavened Bread starts the very day after Passover is celebrated. Then, on the second day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Firstfruits begins.

The first four of the seven feasts occur during the springtime (Passover, Unleavened Bread, First Fruits, and Weeks), and they all have already been fulfilled by Christ in the New Testament. The final three holidays (Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and Tabernacles) occur during the fall, all within a short fifteen-day period.

Many Bible scholars and commentators believe that these fall feasts have not yet been fulfilled by Jesus. As the four spring feasts were fulfilled literally and right on the actual feast day in connection with Christ's first coming, these three fall feasts, it is believed by many, will likewise be fulfilled literally in connection to the Lord's second coming. This is consistent with the prophesies of the Old Testament and the promises made by Jesus in that many of them we not be fulfilled until the second coming of Christ.

In a nutshell, here is the prophetic significance of the first **four** Levitical feasts of Israel:

BODY:

I. Passover.

Passover is one of the most widely celebrated Jewish holidays. It is one of the three "pilgrimage" festivals in Scripture, during which the Jews were commanded to travel to Jerusalem and observe the feasts together. Passover takes place in the spring, during the Hebrew month of Nisan. In Western countries, Passover is celebrated in early- to mid-April and is always close to Easter.

The book of Exodus tells of the origin of Passover. God promised to redeem His people from the bondage of Pharaoh. God sent Moses to the Egyptian king with the command that Pharaoh "**let my people go**". When Pharaoh refused, God brought ten plagues on the land of Egypt. The tenth and worst of the plagues was the death of all the firstborn in Egypt.

The night of the first Passover was the night of the tenth plague. On that fateful night, God told the Israelites to sacrifice a spotless lamb and mark their doorposts and lintels with its blood. Then, when the Lord passed through the nation, He would "pass over" the

households that showed the blood. In a very real way, the blood of the lamb saved the Israelites from death, as it kept the destroyer from entering their homes. The Israelites were saved from the plague, and their firstborn children stayed alive. From then on, every firstborn son of the Israelites belonged to the Lord and had to be redeemed with a sacrifice.

The children of Israel in Egypt followed God's command and kept the first Passover. However, none of the Egyptians did so. All through Egypt, behind the unmarked, bloodless doorways of the Egyptians, the firstborn children died at midnight.

Exodus 12:30-32 (NASB95)

³⁰ Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians, and there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was no home where there was not someone dead. ³¹ Then he called for Moses and Aaron at night and said, "Rise up, get out from among my people, both you and the sons of Israel; and go, worship the Lord, as you have said. ³² Take both your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and go, and bless me also."

Along with the instruction to apply the Passover lamb's blood to their doorposts and lintels, God instituted a commemorative meal: fire-roasted lamb, bitter herbs, and unleavened bread. The Lord told the Israelites to "observe this rite as a statute for you and for your sons forever", even when in a foreign land.

Passover and the story of the exodus have great significance for Christians also, as Jesus Christ fulfilled the Law, including the symbolism of the Passover. Jesus is our Passover.

1 Corinthians 5:7-8 (NASB95)

⁷ Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are *in fact* unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. ⁸ Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

He was killed at Passover time, and the Last Supper was a Passover meal. In passing the elements and telling the disciples to eat of His body, Jesus was presenting Himself as the ultimate Passover Lamb. By spiritually applying His blood to our lives by faith, we trust Christ to save us from death. The Israelites who, in faith, applied the blood of the Paschal lamb to their homes become a model for us. It was not the Israelites' ancestry or good standing or obedient nature that saved them; it was only the blood of the lamb that made them exempt from death. This is how John the Baptist referred to Him.

John 1:29 (NASB95)

²⁹ The next day he *saw Jesus coming to him and *said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

II. Feast of Unleavened Bread.

The Bible tells us that the Israelites were to eat only unleavened bread every year during Passover as a commemoration of the Exodus from Egyptian bondage. Since the children of Israel left Egypt hastily, they did not have time for the bread to rise, so it was made on that very first Passover without leaven, also known as yeast. In describing this bread and why it was eaten, the Bible informs us of the following:

Deuteronomy 16:3 (NASB95)

³ You shall not eat leavened bread with it; seven days you shall eat with it unleavened bread, the bread of affliction (for you came out of the land of Egypt in haste), so that you may remember all the days of your life the day when you came out of the land of Egypt.

According to the Hebrew lexicon, the term "unleavened bread" in Hebrew means "bread or cake without leaven." In the Bible, leaven is almost always symbolic of sin. Like leaven that permeates the whole lump of dough, sin will spread in a person, a church, or a nation, eventually overwhelming and bringing its participants into its bondage and eventually to death. As Paul told the Romans "**the wages of sin is death**".

This is the reason that Christ died—to provide a way out of this judgment for sin if man will repent of his sins, accept Christ as his Passover sacrifice, and have his heart changed so that he can conform his life to what God commands. Just as Israel was to remove yeast from their bread, so are Christians to purge evil from their lives and live a new life in godliness and righteousness. Christ, as our Passover Lamb, cleanses us from sin and evil, and by His power and that of the indwelling Holy Spirit, we are freed from sin to leave our old lives behind, just as the Israelites did.

III. Feast of Firstfruits.

The **Feast of Firstfruits** was a festival commanded by the Lord that took place within the Passover celebration. It was celebrated on the sixteenth day of the Jewish month Nisan, two days after the Passover festival began (roughly late March to early April). The Feast of Firstfruits served as a reminder to the Israelites of God's provision in the Promised Land. Ultimately, the Israelites were to acknowledge that God had rescued them from slavery in Egypt and provided them a place to live and grow crops.

As its name suggests, the Feast of Firstfruits required the Israelites to bring "**a sheaf of the first grain**" they harvested each year to the priest. A sheaf is a bundle or a cluster of harvested grains. The priest would then take the sheaf and wave it before the Lord the day after the Sabbath. On the same day, all the Israelites were to sacrifice a year-old lamb without defect as a burnt offering and give a food offering of grain, oil, and wine. The Israelites were not allowed to eat any of the crop until the day the first portion was brought before the priest. The firstfruits belonged to God, and the people of Israel acknowledged God as the source of their crops and their provision overall.

Seven weeks after the Feast of Firstfruits, the Israelites celebrated the **Feast of Weeks**, one of the three "solemn feasts" that required all Jewish males to travel to Jerusalem. What is interesting about these three major feasts is that each required the "firstfruits" to be offered at the temple, but for different crops. The **Feast of Tabernacles** involved offering the first of the olive and grape harvests. The **Feast of Weeks** involved offering the first of the wheat harvest. And the **Feast of Firstfruits** (within Passover) specifically involved offering the first of the barley harvest.

Since barley is a lighter grain that ripens more quickly than wheat, it was the "first of the firstfruit" offerings in the Jewish calendar. In other words, the Feast of Firstfruits marked the first harvest of the year, heightening the symbolism that reminded the Israelites of God's provision. The first thing the Israelites did after a long and laborious season of growing crops was express their thankfulness to God for meeting their needs. And because ancient Israel was an agriculturally based society, the Israelites were acknowledging God's provision for both their food and their income.

Like the other Jewish feasts in the Old Testament, the Feast of Firstfruits prophetically foreshadowed the coming Messiah and His ministry. Just as the first portion of the harvest in the Old Testament anticipated the full harvest still to come, Jesus' resurrection anticipated the full resurrection to come for all those who are in Christ. His resurrection from the grave signaled the very beginning of a brand-new creation promised in the Old Testament. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is also referred to as a firstfruit.

Romans 8:23 (NASB95)

22 For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. 23 And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.

For the ancient Israelites, the Feast of Firstfruits during Passover was an opportunity to show thanksgiving to God for all the ways He provided for them. For believers today, it is a foreshadowing and reminder of what Christ has done in redeeming creation and what He will finally do when He returns.

The Feast of Firstfruits pointed to the Messiah's resurrection as the first fruits of the righteous. Jesus was resurrected from the grave on this very day, which is one of the reasons that Paul refers to him as the "first fruits from the dead."

1 Corinthians 15:20 (NASB95)

20 But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.

IV. Feast of Weeks (Pentecost).

The Feast of Weeks is the second of the three "solemn feasts" that all Jewish males were required to travel to Jerusalem to attend. This important feast gets its name from the fact that it starts seven full weeks, or exactly 50 days, after the Feast of Firstfruits. Since it takes place exactly 50 days after the previous feast, this feast is also known as "**Pentecost**", which means "fifty."

Since the Feast of Weeks was one of the "**harvest feasts**," the Jews were commanded to "**present an offering of new grain to the Lord**" This offering was to be "**two wave loaves of two-tenths of an ephah**" which were made "**of fine flour baked with leaven.**" The offerings were to be made of the first fruits of that harvest. Along with the "**wave offerings**" they were also to offer seven first-year lambs that were without blemish along with one young bull and two rams. Another important requirement of this feast is that, when the Jews harvested their fields, they were required to leave the corners of the field untouched and not gather "**any gleanings**" from the harvest as a way of providing for the poor and strangers. Besides being called the **Feast of Weeks** this special feast celebration is called the "**Day of the Firstfruits**" and the "**Feast of Harvest**".

The Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) takes place exactly 50 days after the Feast of Firstfruits. It normally occurs in late spring, either the last part of May or the beginning of June. Unlike other feasts that began on a specific day of the Hebrew calendar, this one is calculated as being "fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath".

Like other Jewish feasts, the Feast of Weeks is important in that it foreshadows the coming Messiah and His ministry. Jesus was crucified as the "Passover Lamb" and rose from the grave at the Feast of Firstfruits. Following His resurrection, Jesus spent the next

40 days teaching His disciples before ascending to heaven. Fifty days after His resurrection and after ascending to heaven to sit at the right hand of God, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit as promised to indwell the disciples and empower them for ministry. The promised Holy Spirit arrived on the **Day of Pentecost**, which is another name for the Feast of Weeks.

The spiritual significances of the Feast of Weeks are many. Some see the two loaves of leavened bread that were to be a wave offering as foreshadowing the time when the Messiah would make both Jew and Gentile to be one in Him.

This is also the only feast where leavened bread is used. Leaven in Scripture is often used symbolically of sin, and the leavened bread used in the Feast of Weeks is thought to be representative of the fact that there is still sin within the church (body of Christ) and will be until Christ returns again.

On the Day of Pentecost, the “firstfruits” of the church were gathered by Christ as some 3,000 people heard Peter present the gospel after the Holy Spirit had empowered and indwelt the disciples as promised. With the promised indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the first fruits of God’s spiritual harvest under the New Covenant began. Today that harvest continues as people continue to be saved.

CONCLUSION:

So the question needs to be raised...Should Christians celebrate these Levitical feast days of Israel today? The scriptures indicate that it depends upon the Christian.

Whether or not a Christian celebrates the Jewish feast days would be a matter of conscience for the individual Christian. Christians are not bound to observe the Jewish feasts the way an Old Testament Jew was and although we are **not** to let anyone judge us by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day, we are also told not criticize another believer who does or does not observe these special days and feasts.

Romans 14:5-6 (NASB95)

⁵ One person regards one day above another, another regards every day *alike*. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶ He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God.

As Christians, if we choose to celebrate these special days, we should put Christ in the center of the celebration, as the One who came to fulfill their prophetic significance.

Go Tell it on the Mountain.