

From Holidays to Holy Days: God's Plan for You

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From Holidays to Holy Days: God's Plan for You

Why do the customs and celebrations of the major “Christian” holidays have so little connection to the actual events of the Bible? Which of today’s holidays are even taught in the Bible? What religious festivals did the early New Testament Church celebrate, and what did they mean to them? And most important, what do the festivals of the Bible mean for you today? God’s overlooked festivals reveal a vast eternal plan few have ever truly appreciated!

Christmas: What Would Christ Want You to Do for His Birthday?

If you strip Christmas of its crass commercialism, pre-Christian customs and biblical inaccuracies, what do you have? If Christ and the early Christian Church didn't celebrate Christmas, should we?

Today, Christmas has become a nostalgic icon of a past that never was. Santa Claus, the Christmas tree and lots of gifts take center stage in Christian and non-Christian homes. (These are often followed by burdensome credit card bills, a flurry of fir needles and kids wondering what else their parents are lying to them about.) These and other customs have little connection to the Bible, and few celebrants seem to really wonder what Jesus Christ thinks or what He would really want us to do.

Would you be shocked to know that the Bible doesn't tell when Jesus Christ was born and that the early New Testament Church didn't celebrate Christmas? Or that Christmas was banned by the Puritans of New England? Or that some Christians today do not celebrate Christmas for biblical and doctrinal reasons?

Pagan roots

Why? The primary problem is that the roots of Christmas lie in pagan religious practices, rather than in Christian ones.

The World Book Encyclopedia explains, "The first mention of the celebration of

Christmas occurred in A.D. 336 in an early Roman calendar, which indicates December 25 as the day of observance" (1990, article "Christmas"). Notice this first mention of Christmas is more than 300 years after Christ's lifetime! The date of Christ's birth is not recorded in the Bible. So why did they pick Dec. 25?

"This celebration was probably influenced by *pagan* (unchristian) festivals held at that time. The ancient Romans held year-end celebrations to honor Saturn, their harvest god; and Mithras, the god of light. Various peoples in northern Europe held festivals in mid-December to celebrate the end of the harvest season. ... [Their] customs gradually became part of the Christmas celebration" (ibid.).

Even religious people who celebrate Christmas have written about its pagan roots. Consider this history from the "Grace to You" website: "The decision to celebrate Christmas on December 25 was made sometime during the fourth century by church bishops in Rome. They had a specific reason for doing so.

"Having turned long ago from worship-

ing the one true God and creator of all things, many early cultures in the Roman empire had fallen into sun worship. Recognizing their dependence on the sun's yearly course in the heavens, they held feasts around the winter solstice in December when the days are shortest. As part of their festivals, they built bonfires to give the sun god strength and bring him back to life again. When it became apparent that the days were growing longer, there would be great rejoicing.

“The church leaders in Rome decided to celebrate Christ's birth during the winter solstice in an attempt to Christianize these popular pagan celebrations. For the most part their efforts failed to make the people conform, and the heathen festivities continued.”

“An affront to the grace of God”

For decades, newspapers and newsmagazines have been examining the history of Christmas each December, cutting through the nostalgia to expose a truer picture. “Through most of its history, the Christmas season has been a time of raucous revelry and bacchanalian indulgence more akin to Mardi Gras or New Year's Eve than to a silent holy night. So tarnished, in fact, was its reputation in colonial America that celebrating Christmas was banned in Puritan New England, where the noted minister Cotton Mather described yuletide merrymaking as ‘an affront unto the grace of God’” (Jeffery L. Sheler, “In Search of Christmas,” *U.S.*

News and World Report, Dec. 23, 1996).

Christmas's bad name continued as cities and celebrations grew. In 1828, “New York City organized its first professional police force in response to a violent Christmas riot” (ibid.). But wild and sometimes violent celebrations were soon to be transformed into the family-friendly gatherings around the Christmas tree that have become the stuff of nostalgia. Ironically, much of the image adjustment came through the power of advertising and the commercialism so many today decry.

“The new tradition of Christmas gift giving created an instant retail bonanza, and merchants and advertisers soon began to promote the season nearly as much as they promoted their wares. By the 1870s, one historian observes, ‘department stores often outdid the churches in religious adornment and symbolism, with pipe organs, choirs, . . . statues of saints and angels’ in a manner that bathed ‘consumption in the reflected glory of Christianity’” (ibid.).

Many people today want to put Christ back into Christmas, but the fact is that He was never in Christmas in the first place. Dec. 25 was a polytheistic festival based on myth. Just proclaiming something is Christian does not make it so, no matter what our traditions have been or what rationalizations we may use.

Consider some of the customs of Christmas. For instance, over the decades,

parents have lied to their children about Santa Claus and his workshop at the North Pole. Where in the Bible does God excuse us for lying—especially to our children?

Even the gift-giving customs have pagan roots. In his book *4,000 Years of Christmas: A Gift From the Ages* (1997), Episcopal priest Earl Count relates historical connections between the exchanging of gifts on the 12 days of Christmas and customs originating in ancient, pagan Babylon. He also shows that mistletoe was adopted from Druid mystery rituals and that Dec. 25 has more to do with the ancient Roman Saturnalia celebration than with Jesus.

What about Jesus Christ's birth?

But what if you were able to strip away all the pagan customs and to avoid the commercialism? What if you could just focus on the birth of our Savior? Wouldn't Christmas be a good time for that?

As we have already seen, the date of Christ's birth is not given in the Bible, and Dec. 25 was chosen because of the holidays many pagans did not want to give up. Interestingly, we can prove from the Bible that Christ was not born anywhere near Dec. 25.

Notice Luke 2:8-11: "Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they

were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.'"

One commentary states, "As these shepherds had not yet brought home their flocks, it is a presumptive argument that October had not yet commenced, and that, consequently, our Lord was not born on the 25th of December, when no flocks were out in the fields. On this very ground the nativity in December should be given up" (*Adam Clarke's Commentary*, note on Luke 2:8).

The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary agrees: "These humble pastoral folk are out in the field at night with their flock—a feature of the story which would argue against the birth (of Christ) occurring on Dec. 25 since the weather would not have permitted it" (1971, note on Luke 2:4-7).

That's not the only biblical fact that Christmas customs have wrong. Joe Kovacs, author of *Shocked by the Bible*, points out, "If asked how many wise men were present at the Bethlehem manger when Jesus was born, most people would likely answer, 'Three.' They would be wrong. The correct answer from the Bible is actually ... zero!" (2008, p. 3).

Matthew 2:1, 11 shows the true story not pictured in nativity scenes: "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea

in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem. . . . And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshipped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”

The Bible does not list how many wise men were there, and they came into the house (not to a manger) where they saw the young Child. So, the traditional story of three wise men coming to the manger is just not found in the Bible.

An additional significant reason for not celebrating Christmas is that God nowhere commands us to observe Christ’s birthday. If He had wanted us to, He would have told us when He was born and told us how to celebrate it. While He doesn’t want us to celebrate His birthday, Jesus does instruct us to memorialize His death and its spiritual significance (see “The Passover: What Did Jesus Do for You?” page 18).

What difference does it make?

Some people will wonder, “What difference does it make? Those pagan customs now have ‘Christian meanings’ associated with them. Doesn’t that make the customs acceptable?” If we leave the decision up to human opinion, the debate about whether it makes any difference could probably go on endlessly. But since God specifically addresses the issue of what customs to use in worshipping Him, we

should look to the Bible for the answer.

It’s found in Deuteronomy 12:29-32: “When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.’ You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.”

Consider also what Jesus Christ pointed out to a devoutly religious group, the Pharisees, in Mark 7:6-9: “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men. . . . All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition.”

God does not condone pagan practices or human traditions. In God’s eyes, it *does* make a difference. He wants to be worshipped the way He instructed, without the trappings people have added over the centuries.

In spite of what many who think of themselves as Christians have attempted to do, it is impossible to turn a pagan custom into a Christian one. Only God has the

authority to determine how people should worship Him.

It's clear that Christmas is not how Christ wants us to worship Him.

Do Good Friday and Easter Sunday Shroud the Truth of Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection?

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are vitally important—too important to allow human customs and traditions to obscure what God has done for you. How can you connect rabbits and eggs with the customs Christ taught? And how can you fit a Good Friday afternoon crucifixion and Easter Sunday sunrise resurrection with the three days and three nights Christ gave as the sign of His authority?

His friends and family were devastated! Their hopes were dashed; their hearts broken. Jesus, their beloved leader, had been arrested, tried by jealous men and beaten and crucified by their oppressive overlords.

Some of the women had seen Jesus' lifeless body quickly wrapped in a cloth and placed in Joseph of Arimathea's own tomb just before sunset. They decided to buy more spices to rewrap their Lord's body in the most respectful way they knew. But during this festival season of

holy times, it was challenging to buy the additional spices. They finally had them after the Sabbath, and returned to the tomb while it was still dark.

On the way they must have worried how to move the heavy stone door of the tomb. Suddenly they noticed it had been rolled away! Jesus' body was gone! Two dazzling angels appeared and announced, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen!" (Luke 24:5-6).

What incredible news! Though Jesus

had talked many times of His death and resurrection, His disciples had not understood. The Gospels recount several poignant scenes as various ones came to realize it was true. Jesus was alive again!

And the Bible gives amazing details that verify this miracle. John records that he ran with Peter to the tomb. Though John arrived first, Peter went in and “looked intently at the winding sheet, because it was lying in a very unusual position. Instead of being spread out in a long, jumbled strip, it was still all wrapped together in one spot...

“In other words, no one had removed the graveclothes from the corpse in the usual way; it was as if the body had simply passed right out of the headcloth and shroud and left them empty!” (Gleason L. Archer, *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, 1982, p. 349).

Jesus was alive again, and the disciples’ hope was restored. Everything He promised was coming to pass just as He said. The fact of Jesus Christ’s death—and His defeat of death through the resurrection—inspired and motivated His followers to fearlessly spread His message throughout the Roman world. They were now willing to die for the Man who gave His life for them, and led the way in conquering death!

The only sign Jesus gave

The disciples did not believe Jesus fulfills only *some* of His promises. They firmly believed God makes *all* of them come to

pass. So why do so many today misunderstand a key promise Jesus Christ made about His death and resurrection?

Consider the background of this promised sign:

The religious leaders of Jesus Christ’s day didn’t believe Him, and they wanted Him to prove whether He was the Messiah, the Son of David, as some of the people were saying (Matthew 12:23, 38).

Earlier in this same chapter Jesus had healed a man with a withered hand. What was the Pharisees’ response? They plotted “how they might destroy Him” (verse 14). Then He cast out a demon, and they accused Him of working for Satan (verse 24)!

So when they asked for another sign, Jesus said:

“An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (verses 39-40).

Jesus referred to the great miracle from the book of Jonah, a well-known story still taught to children in Sunday school today. Jonah was inside a miraculous fish for three days and three nights before being spit out, alive, on the shore. And Christ let everyone know that He would be in the grave for the exact same length

The Origins of New Year's Day

What about New Year's Eve and New Year's Day? Are these celebrations God approves of? Since God set the first month of the year on the sacred calendar to begin in what we call March or April, obviously it is not God's new year (Exodus 12:2; Deuteronomy 16:1). And God didn't command a celebration for that day either.

So what is the origin of New Year's Day? "In early times, the ancient Romans gave each other New Year's gifts of branches from sacred trees. In later years, they gave gold-covered nuts or coins imprinted with pictures of Janus, the god of gates, doors, and beginnings. January was named after Janus, who had two faces—one looking forward and the other looking backward. The Romans also brought gifts to the emperor. The emperors eventually began to demand such gifts. But the Christian church outlawed this custom and certain other pagan New Year's practices in A.D. 567" (*The World Book Encyclopedia*, 1990, article "New Year's Day").

Today, too often New Year's Eve is treated as an excuse for drinking too much and lowering moral standards. It is one of the most dangerous times of the year for drunk driving, and every year warnings are given about those who fire guns into the air in celebration—an act that too often turns deadly.

For all these reasons, celebrating the pagan holiday of New Year's is not pleasing to God.

of time. He said that would be the only sign He would give them. How could His prophecy be more specific or important than that?

How do you get three days and three nights between Friday afternoon and Sunday morning?

Yet today most churches ignore this sign or try to explain that it didn't really mean three full days and three full nights.

Why? Because of a common misunderstanding about the holy times during that week many call Holy Week.

First, try to do the math. Almost all churches teach Jesus Christ died and was buried late Good Friday afternoon, then was raised early Easter Sunday morning. That's Friday night, Saturday day and Saturday night: two nights and one day. When "days and nights" are explicitly noted as they are in Matthew 12:40, full 24-hour periods are intended.

A Guide to the Gospels states, "When the number of 'nights' is stated as well as the number of 'days,' the expression ceases to be an idiom, and becomes a literal statement of fact, and there were not three 'nights' between Friday evening and Sunday morning by any process of reckoning" (W. Graham Scroggie, 1995, p. 570).

Why would Jesus make a point of saying three days and three nights if He didn't mean it? Is this a contradiction in the Bible or is there a simple explanation everyone would understand if they

celebrated the festivals of the Bible as Jesus and His disciples did?

Jesus clearly stated that He and His disciples were celebrating the Passover when He washed their feet and added the New Testament ceremony of the bread and the wine. He said: "With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer" (Luke 22:15).

Jesus and His disciples followed the command found in Leviticus 23 describing the "feasts of the Lord." "On the fourteenth day of the first month at twilight is the Lord's Passover" (verses 4-5). Biblical days started in the evening, so after that Passover ceremony, but still on the Passover day, Jesus was arrested, beaten, crucified, killed and buried. In fact, the Jewish leaders were urgent that Jesus' body not remain on the cross the next day.

"Therefore, because it was the Preparation Day, that the bodies should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away" (John 19:31).

Most people today would see the word *Sabbath* and assume this means Saturday, since the regular weekly Sabbath day taught in the Bible is from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset. But most miss the fact that John called it a "high day." What did he mean? Let's quickly go back to Leviticus 23. What comes right after the Passover (the 14th)?

“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” (Leviticus 23:6-7).

This First Day of Unleavened Bread was an annual Sabbath day—a high day. And it doesn’t always fall on Saturday.

So the logical explanation is that Christ was exactly right about the three days and three nights. People today are just confused about when He died and was resurrected. It couldn’t have been on a Friday afternoon and Sunday morning.

The accompanying chart shows the math that works—the chronology of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection that matches the biblical festivals and confirms the only sign Jesus said He would give!

How did we get Good Friday and Easter Sunday customs?

If Jesus and the apostles celebrated the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread, how did the Christian world today come to have the nonbiblical customs and celebrations of Good Friday and Easter Sunday?

As the new Christian religion spread, it met persecution and faced new ideas from within and without. Over the decades, fragmentation and doctrinal drift occurred. For many, the teachings of the Bible began to take a backseat to the

desire to avoid persecution or to win new converts. The apostles warned of these trends even in the first century.

Historian Will Durant explained the fragmentation of Christianity as various beliefs were being absorbed. “Faced with the hostility of a powerful government, the Church felt the need of unity; it could not safely allow itself to be divided into a hundred feeble parts by every wind of intellect, by disloyal heretics, ecstatic prophets, or brilliant sons. Celsus himself had sarcastically observed that Christians were ‘split up into ever so many factions, each individual desiring to have his own party.’ About 187 Irenaeus listed twenty varieties of Christianity; about 384 Epiphanius counted eighty. At every point foreign ideas were creeping into Christian belief, and Christian believers were deserting to novel sects” (*The Story of Civilization*, Vol. III, 1944, p. 616).

Dr. Durant explains that a controversy arose between the Eastern churches that were still observing the New Testament Passover on the 14th day of the first month of the Hebrew calendar, and the Western churches who had adopted a Sunday date for what later became known as Easter. “Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, visiting Rome about 156, tried and failed to persuade Anicetus, Bishop of Rome, to have the Eastern date [the biblical date] observed in the West; and on his return he rejected the Pope’s suggestion that the Eastern churches should accept the Western date” (*ibid.*, p. 617).

The Roman church and its pope grew in power, absorbing elements of the Roman Empire. “As Judea had given Christianity ethics, and Greece had given it theology, so now Rome gave it organization; all these, with a dozen absorbed and rival faiths, entered into the Christian synthesis” (ibid., p. 618). Dr. Durant explained that the church “took over some religious customs and forms common in pre-Christian Rome ...”

By the fourth century, Emperor Constantine saw the church as a political ally he could exploit if he could unify it. Though not then claiming to be a Christian himself, he called the Council of Nicea in 325 and presided over it to restore unity. One of the decisions of this council was that all churches must celebrate Easter Sunday. Those who were faithful to the biblical command had to flee.

As the government-recognized church spread through Europe, the Easter celebration began to evolve. Often new converts remained attached to their pre-Christian religious practices, which then became connected with the Easter celebration.

“Around the Christian observance of Easter ... folk customs have collected, many of which have been handed down from the ancient ceremonial and symbolism of European and Middle Eastern pagan spring festivals brought into relation with the resurrection theme” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition, article “Easter”).

That’s how pagan fertility symbols like the rabbit and eggs became connected with Easter. Even the name itself seems to come from Eostre, the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring.

Many would be shocked to know the Easter bunnies and colored eggs they share with their little children were connected to pagan fertility rites. Others will just see this as quaint, and the cleaned up paganism as acceptable when used to honor Jesus Christ. But is God pleased when pagan customs are appropriated to worship Him?

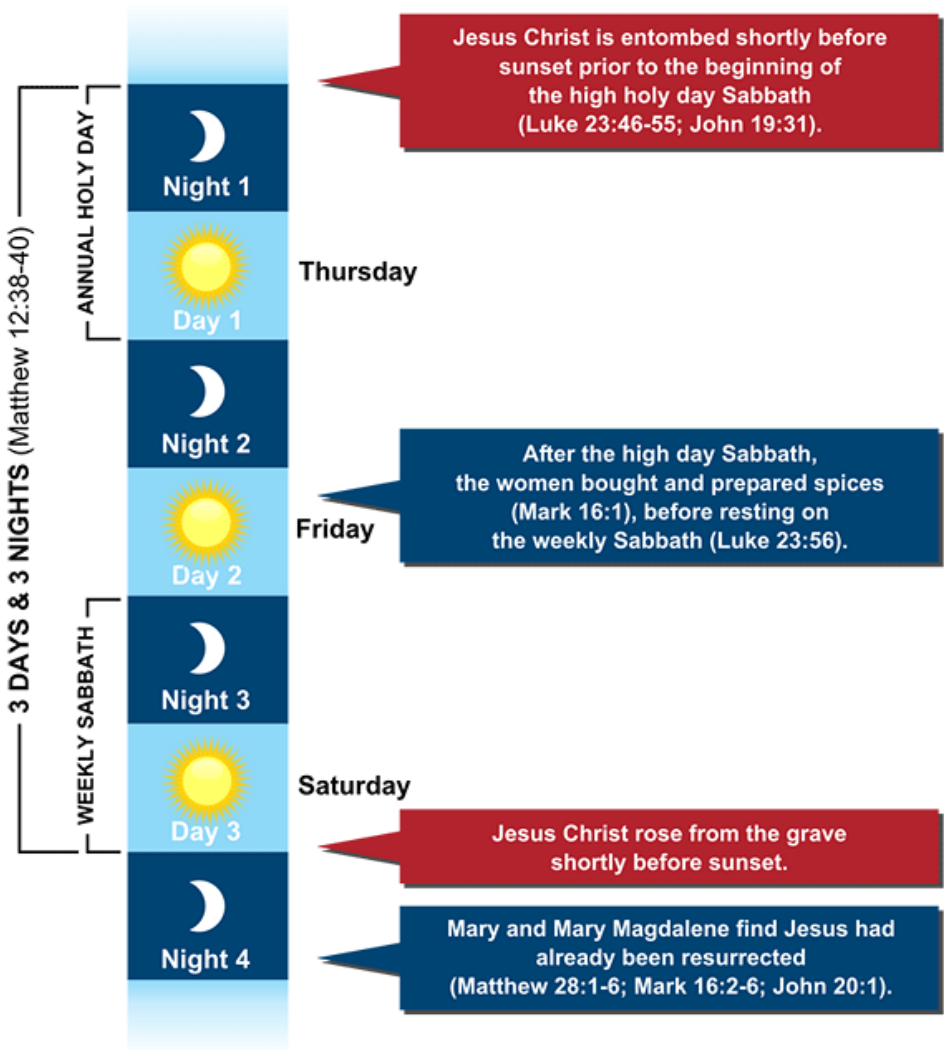
“And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men,” Jesus said (Matthew 15:9).

God has always wanted us to serve Him in the way He wants to be worshipped. He inspired this strong command to not follow the religious customs of the pagans: “Do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.’ You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way” (Deuteronomy 12:30-31).

Easter became the most important holiday of the Christian calendar in spite of the fact it is not commanded in the Bible. In fact, its pagan customs are condemned in the Bible. Christians are commanded to observe Christ’s death each year, but nowhere commanded to celebrate His resurrection.

While the traditional major “Christian” holidays aren’t commanded in the Bible,

3 Days & 3 Nights (Matthew 12:38-40)



there are festivals Jesus Christ and the New Testament Church celebrated and that have great meaning for your life

today. Learn more about them starting with the next chapter, “What Festivals Does God Want Us to Celebrate?”

What Festivals Does God Want Us to Celebrate?

Digging into God’s harvest festivals yields deeper understanding of what God wants for you and all humanity!

If you wandered into the hills around Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on any July 1, you might find yourself dropping to the ground or running the other way as thousands of Union and Confederate troops appeared around you.

The 145th anniversary reenactment of the battle of Gettysburg (held in 2008) involved 13,000 reenactors, 500 mounted cavalry and 100 cannons. This annual replay of the crucial American Civil War battle is one of the most famous of the many reenactments and living history events held around the world that bring the past to life.

In addition to acting out the past, many people also engage in drills and war games to practice for potential events. Acting these out also helps people get a head start on preparing for the future.

Reenactments and proactive drills can make important events and dry words on a page come to life.

The Bible also promotes this powerful educational technique.

Answers to questions we’ve all wondered about

In the Bible, God established an annual reenactment and preview of His plan of salvation. The seven steps of this plan remain a mystery to many people today, and even Christians who base their beliefs on the Bible have often missed the significance of these ancient festivals.

When we understand the symbolism and celebrate these seven festivals, we uncover greater understanding of the unified, perfectly connected plan of God.

Not understanding the unifying pattern of God’s harvest plan makes understanding some of the most challenging questions more difficult. Questions like:

- Why is there so much suffering in the world?
- Why did Jesus have to die?

- Since He did give His life, how does He want us to respond?
- Where is God working today?
- How will He save this world from total destruction?
- What is the source of evil in the world, and how can it be neutralized?
- What is the way to real, lasting peace?
- What will happen to those billions of people who have never even heard of Jesus Christ and those who've never understood who He is and what He offers?

This exciting study will begin to explore the encouraging and sometimes surprising answers.

The feasts in the Old Testament, New Testament and the future

The seven “feasts of the LORD” are all listed in Leviticus 23 and are celebrated during the harvest seasons in the Holy Land.

- Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread come at the start of the spring barley harvest.
- The Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, is celebrated at the end of the grain harvests.
- The last four festivals fall in the autumn harvest season. These are known as the Feast of Trumpets, Day of Atonement, Feast of Tabernacles and Eighth Day (which we usually call the Last Great Day).

Even though these harvest festivals were announced to the nation of Israel at the time of Moses, God calls them “feasts of the LORD” and “My feasts” (Leviticus 23:2).

Jesus Christ, His apostles and the early New Testament Church all celebrated these festivals. You can find three quick examples by looking at John 7:37; Acts 2:1; and 1 Corinthians 5:7-8.

Many are also surprised to learn that these festivals are prophesied to be celebrated by all nations after Jesus Christ’s second coming to establish the Kingdom of God. Consider what the prophet Zechariah recorded about the time after Jesus Christ returns to the Mount of Olives (Acts 1:9-11; Zechariah 14:4):

“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” (Zechariah 14:16).

The Feast of Tabernacles will be one of the major international festivals of the Kingdom of God, so doesn’t it seem strange that so few Christians today have looked into it and the other “feasts of the LORD”?

The harvest analogy

A major theme of the Bible is spiritual growth and bearing spiritual fruit. God uses the analogy of spiritual harvests as a description of His awesome plan of salvation. Let’s consider some examples that

correspond with the harvest seasons.

The first produce to become ripe in the spring was called the firstfruits and was offered to God (Exodus 23:19). Spiritually, Jesus Christ was the perfect firstfruit and the first one to be resurrected to immortality:

“But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians 15:20).

This first spiritual harvest is pictured in the spring feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread.

Next came the conclusion of the spring grain harvest at the Feast of Pentecost. Not only did the New Testament Church begin on Pentecost, but Jesus Christ talked about the Church age in terms of a harvest:

“Then He said to His disciples, ‘The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest’” (Matthew 9:37-38).

The apostle Paul explained that in God’s plan, we each have an order:

“For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His

coming” (1 Corinthians 15:22-23).

As we will see, this same pattern carries on to the large harvest represented by the four fall festivals. They demonstrate God’s love and desire to bring all people to repentance and salvation as His children forever (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). The final spiritual harvest is described by the apostle John:

“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” (Revelation 20:12).

Not only will the books of the Bible be opened to their understanding, but the Book of Life will also be opened, representing the opportunity for salvation. Another passage that describes the same second resurrection says God will put His Spirit in them (Ezekiel 37:14).

Shocking as it may seem, God’s plan leaves no one behind and shortchanges no one—all will have a full chance for salvation. God “desires all men to be saved” (1 Timothy 2:4), and that’s what His plan, reenacted and previewed through His festivals, is all about!

Should Christians Celebrate Halloween?

Halloween, with its dark and demonic themes, seems an unlikely holiday for Christians to celebrate. Yet it has become increasingly popular in America and other countries, marketed as a harmless dress-up night for kids and an excuse to party for adults. Where did Halloween come from?

“The Celtic festival of Samhain is probably the source of the present-day Halloween celebration. The Celts lived more than 2,000 years ago in what is now Great Britain, Ireland, and northern France. Their new year began on November 1. A festival that began the previous evening honored Samhain, the Celtic lord of death. The celebration marked the beginning of the season of cold, darkness, and decay. It naturally became associated with human death. The Celts believed that Samhain allowed the souls of the dead to return to their earthly homes for this evening” (*The World Book Encyclopedia*, 1990, article “Halloween”).

It seems costumes of animal heads and skins played a part in their celebration, as well as fortune-telling using the remains of the animals that were sacrificed. So how did this gory pagan holiday become associated with Christianity?

“Many of the customs of the Celts survived even after the people became Christians. During the 800’s, the church established All Saints’ Day on November 1. . . . The people made the old pagan customs part of this Christian holy day” (ibid.).

In spite of its marketing as innocent entertainment for children, Halloween remains a celebration of evil, not a fitting holiday for Christians.

The Passover: What Did Jesus Do for You?

After 30 years of preparation and 3½ years of teaching His disciples, Jesus Christ knew what was ahead for Him. “You know that after two days is the Passover, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified” (Matthew 26:2).

One of His 12 closest friends had allowed greed and perhaps disillusionment to turn him against Jesus. For 30 pieces of silver he agreed to betray Jesus to the religious leaders.

In this time of impending trial, Jesus asked His disciples to prepare for His final Passover (Matthew 26:18-20).

This evening, commemorated since the time of the Exodus from Egypt, involved the sacrifice of an unblemished lamb whose blood protected the Israelites while the firstborn of the Egyptians were slain (Exodus 12:5-7, 12-14). The New Testament makes clear that this lamb represented Jesus Christ. As John the Baptist had announced about Jesus, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

This last Passover was special, and Jesus taught His disciples new elements that would become the basis of the New Testament Passover service.

First, Jesus Christ set the example of love and service through washing His dis-

ciples’ feet (John 13:4-13). Then He told them, “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you” (John 13:14-15).

The symbols of the bread and the wine

After the foot washing, Jesus instituted two deeply meaningful symbols of the New Testament Passover.

“And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body.’ Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins’” (Matthew 26:26-28).

Jesus said the bread represented His body. He willingly suffered to take our infirmities and bear our sicknesses (Matthew 8:16-17; Isaiah 53:3-5). Jesus is also the Bread that makes eternal life possible as

we allow Him to live in us (Galatians 2:20). The wine represents His shed blood given for the forgiveness of our sins.

The apostle Paul repeated these Passover instructions about the bread and the wine in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. He reminded the Church, both Jews and gentiles, of the vital importance of this memorial that represents Christ's death and a renewal of our commitment to God made at baptism.

Why did Christ have to die?

Why did Jesus come to the earth as a human being to die? Because of sin—the destructive thoughts and actions that go against God's will (1 John 3:4).

God reveals His thinking and way of life throughout the Bible, and especially in His Ten Commandments and His good and beneficial laws that show us how He intends life to be lived. When we break

His laws, we bring automatic penalties on ourselves, and especially the penalty of death—eternal death. We have all earned this penalty (Romans 3:23; 6:23).

God, in His perfect eternal justice, must exact the penalty; but in His awesome mercy, Jesus Christ was willing to pay that penalty for us! “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). Christ gave His life so we could repent and be saved (1 Timothy 2:4).

That is the solemn yet joyous message of the annual Passover.

Next, let's consider the meaning of the unusual sounding “Feast of Unleavened Bread,” which helps reveal the second step in God's plan of salvation.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread: Pursuing a Life of Righteousness

The troubles and suffering in this world are caused by sin—the breaking of God’s holy, good and beneficial laws. Jesus Christ was willing to give His life to save us from sin’s death penalty. His sacrifice was the first step in God’s plan to save us from sin and death, and it makes all the other steps possible.

But how does God want us to respond to that awesome, merciful sacrifice? Would He be pleased, having broken us free from enslavement to sin (as the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt), to have us willingly go back to sin again? Or would He much rather have us learn to look at sin as He does and to strive with His help to avoid it at all costs?

The Feast of Unleavened Bread comes immediately after the Passover and teaches us lessons about how we should respond to Jesus Christ’s gracious sacrifice.

Deliverance from slavery to sin

After years of harsh slavery in Egypt, the people of Israel were overjoyed to leave Egypt during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Egypt and its leader, Pharaoh, serve as a symbol of sin and Satan.

But soon Pharaoh pursued the Israelites, trapping them at the Red Sea. He didn’t want them to be free, just as Satan doesn’t want us to escape from his clutches. Israel

was helpless, as are we. Our strength is not sufficient.

But God provided the Israelites a way to escape—directly through the Red Sea! And He offers us a way out through His miraculous help. The apostle Paul explained that the Red Sea served as a type of baptism, the beginning of the conversion process made possible by God’s help (1 Corinthians 10:1-4).

What leaven pictures

The Feast of Unleavened Bread gets its name from the requirement to get rid of and avoid leavened bread and eat unleavened bread for these seven days (Exodus 12:15). During this time leaven is used as another symbol of sin.

Leaven is an ingredient that produces fermentation or a chemical process to make dough rise. Leavening includes yeast and chemical leavening agents, such as baking powder, baking soda (sodium bicarbonate) and potassium bicarbonate. Leavening can be found in such things as bread,

cookies, cake, crackers, cereals and pies.

Since leaven typically puffs things up, it is associated with that root of many sins, pride. Some of the other spiritually damaging sins that leaven pictures in the Bible are malice, wickedness, hypocrisy and wrong teachings (1 Corinthians 5:8; Luke 12:1; Matthew 16:11-12).

Yeast also spreads and permeates the dough unseen. Paul used this characteristic to point out the danger of sin to the church in Corinth, probably during the Feast of Unleavened Bread: “Your glorying is not good. 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).

Removing leaven from our homes gives us an object lesson in the work and challenge involved in removing sin from our lives. Hard-to-find leaven reminds us that we need to carefully examine our lives for sin, repent and seek God’s help to remove it.

Out with the bad and in with the good

In addition to putting out sin, we are to replace it with good thoughts and actions—symbolized by the eating of unleavened bread.

Paul continued his letter to the Corinthians this way: “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’s clear statement to the Corinthian Christians, “Let us keep the feast,” should answer the critics who consider these wonderful and meaningful festivals to be out-of-date or only for the Jews. He also clearly shows the need to remove the bad (malice and wickedness) and replace it with good (sincerity and truth).

We are to prepare for the Feast of Unleavened Bread by removing physical leaven and spiritual leaven—sin. During the festival, the focus shifts from ridding ourselves of something to taking in or “eating” something. The clear instruction for those seven days is to learn the spiritual lessons of eating unleavened bread (Exodus 12:14-20; 13:6-7; Leviticus 23:6), which is symbolic of living sin-free just like Jesus Christ. We are to eat of “the bread of life,” as Jesus explained in John 6:27-63.

So, the Feast of Unleavened Bread is a time to concentrate on putting the righteousness of Jesus Christ (the true “bread of life”) *into* our lives (Galatians 2:20). Naturally, the more we do that, the more sin will be kept out. To overcome sin, we must “not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). In other words, the more Christ is living in us and the more we are living righteously, the less opportunity there will be for the leaven of sin to find a place in our lives. Living by—eating fully of—the unlev-

ened bread of sincerity and truth is the key to purging out the “old leaven” of sin.

But though our response to sin should be vehement repentance, a desire to “sin no more” and to put on righteousness, we discover quickly that we can’t do it on our own (2 Corinthians 7:10-11; John 8:11; Romans 7:23-25). We must have God’s help.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread reminds

us that submitting to our Deliverer is the only right response to Jesus’ gracious sacrifice. We are not saved by good works, yet we’re “created in Christ Jesus for good works” (Ephesians 2:10). A thankful, forgiven Christian will seek His help to not return to the slavery of sin.

That’s what we’ll cover next, as we look at the third step in God’s plan of salvation pictured by the Feast of Pentecost.

Pentecost: God Gives the Holy Spirit

Jesus’ crucifixion on Passover was a pivotal event in history. And just over seven weeks later, another watershed event occurred on the Feast of Pentecost.

Pentecost of promise

“When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:1-4).

During His ministry, Jesus Christ had told His disciples about the power of

His Holy Spirit that they would need and would receive. By faithfully obeying God’s command to gather on His feasts, they were ready to receive this miracle.

God used the accompanying miracles to draw a large crowd to hear Peter preach a powerful sermon:

“Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.’ Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and

brethren, what shall we do?’

“Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ...’

“Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them” (Acts 2:36-38, 41).

The power of the Spirit

As we saw in the last chapter, even after deciding to repent and turn from sin, we find we need additional help. And that help comes through the Holy Spirit.

It is through the power of the Holy Spirit that our minds can be renewed and our lives transformed (Romans 12:2). The Holy Spirit allows the perfect laws of God to be written in our hearts and minds (Hebrews 8:10).

The “love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit” (Romans 5:5). Later in the letter to the Romans Paul showed that this love fulfills all the commandments, since the Ten Commandments actually define how to love our neighbors and love God as He wants to be loved (Romans 13:8-10).

And beyond all this, having the Holy Spirit makes us children of God, eligible

to inherit all things (Romans 8:16-17; Hebrews 2:8-10)!

Who is being called to the Church now?

Even though God called 3,000 to the Church of God on its first day, the growth hasn’t always been that fast. In fact, God says the Church is just a little flock and a group of firstfruits of His harvest (Luke 12:32; James 1:18).

Only those God the Father calls can become part of His Church now (John 6:44). But that doesn’t mean that the vast majority of humanity is lost forever. As we will see, God has a plan to call every person at the time that is best for that person.

What is the Church’s role in the plan of salvation?

Members called to God’s Church now are not just called to receive salvation for themselves. The Church of God has a job to do, to preach the good news of the Kingdom of God and help members prepare to serve in that Kingdom (Matthew 24:14; 28:19-20).

So Church members are not only firstfruits of the Kingdom, but workers preparing for the great fall harvest season. We will study the fourth step in God’s plan in the next part.

The Feast of Trumpets: Alarm of War, Announcement of Peace

The first three festivals reenact events that have already taken place and are ongoing in the lives of Christians. The last four festivals preview dramatic future events in God’s plan of salvation. All four festivals occur during the fall harvest season in the Holy Land.

The fall festivals begin with the Feast of Trumpets. In the Bible, trumpets are used as signals of important events, such as giving an alarm of war, heralding a coronation and calling the people to a meeting (Jeremiah 4:19; 1 Kings 1:34; Numbers 10:1-2, 9-10). The Bible describes earthshaking end-time events that are pictured by this festival.

Trumpet plagues

The book of Revelation lists seven terrible plagues announced by seven trumpets (Revelation 8-11). These plagues will come in the times just ahead of us because of humanity’s sins. Consider the sixth trumpet and its announcement of a 200-million-man army preparing for a battle that will kill a third of humanity (Revelation 9:16-18). In spite of these punishments, human leaders and their subjects will continue to pursue selfish and ungodly goals and sins (Revelation 9:20-21).

Thankfully, the seventh trumpet also heralds good news: “Then the seventh angel sounded: 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).

Finally Jesus Christ will intervene in world affairs to stop humanity from self-destruction: “For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened” (Matthew 24:21-22). Jesus Christ’s return is this world’s only hope, and thankfully it is a sure hope.

Jesus’ second coming will be with power and will be visible to all. After the tribulation and frightening signs in the heavens, “the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. 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 24:30-31).

The Bible does not describe a secret rapture to take Christians to heaven. Instead Christ’s coming is powerfully and loudly announced, and He comes down to this earth, to the Mount of Olives, to begin to establish His long-promised utopian Kingdom of God (Zechariah 14:4, 16).

The first resurrection to eternal life

As Jesus Christ mentioned, the elect will be gathered with the great sound of a trumpet at His return. This is another incredible event pictured by the Feast of Trumpets. The apostle Paul announced it this way:

“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” (1 Corinthians 15:51-52). Paul also made clear that this would occur when Jesus Christ was returning (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

The Feast of Trumpets focuses on these pivotal events that signal the end of human rule and the establishment of God’s wonderful Kingdom on earth.

Zechariah 14 and Revelation 19 recount the final battle when the evil end-time “beast” and other world leaders try to fight the returning Christ. They will prove no match to our all-powerful Messiah, and the stage will be set for the fifth step in God’s plan, pictured by the Day of Atonement.

The Day of Atonement: Removing the Last Enemy; Reconciling All to God

The Day of Atonement is different from the other festivals. For one thing, God commanded His people to fast (not eat or drink, Esther 4:16) on this day to draw close to Him, while all the other festivals involved enjoying food and drink. (In the New Testament, Atonement was even referred to as “the Fast” in Acts 27:9.)

Also, the rituals God gave ancient Israel for the Day of Atonement are unique, intriguing and often misinterpreted. But considered in conjunction with the prophetic timeline in Revelation, the meaning becomes clearer.

The binding of Satan

The events pictured by the Feast of Trumpets are recounted in Revelation 19, and the next prophetic event begins in Revelation 20:

“Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years” (verses 1-2).

The apostle John describes Satan as the one who “deceives the whole world” (Revelation 12:9). Satan uses his evil influence to broadcast ungodly attitudes and sinful thoughts to gullible humanity

(Ephesians 2:2). We cannot shirk our personal responsibility for our sins and just blame Satan (James 1:14), but we can recognize his subtle but pervasive influence that has thwarted most people from having a close relationship

After Jesus Christ’s return, Satan must be removed in order to pave the way for reconciliation of humanity and God. With Satan around, real, lasting peace is not possible.

The two goats

The rituals God gave ancient Israel for the Day of Atonement included one involving two goats. The high priest was to present them before God, and God would show which one was “for the LORD” to be sacrificed (representing Jesus Christ) and which was for Azazel (the Hebrew word translated as “scapegoat” in the New King James Version). The goat for Azazel was left alive.

“And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel ... and shall send him away by the hand of an appointed man into the wilderness. And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land which is cut off; and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness. ...

“And he that letteth go the goat for Azazel shall wash his clothes and bathe his flesh in water” (Leviticus 16:21-22, 26, Jewish Publication Society).

The connection between the goat for Azazel and the binding of Satan in Revelation 20 becomes more clear when you note that most scholars believe Azazel is the name of a demon inhabiting

the wilderness (*Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 1, p. 326).

Atonement: becoming at one with God

With Satan removed, humanity will find it easier to see how awful sin is and how wonderful our merciful God is. Over time each person will come to recognize his or her own sins and will have the chance to repent and seek God’s forgiveness and reconciliation. Atonement and unity with God will become the norm rather than the exception.

The removal of Satan helps make possible the sixth step in God’s plan, a utopian world pictured by the sixth festival, the Feast of Tabernacles.

The Feast of Tabernacles: A Bountiful Harvest

With Satan removed and Jesus Christ reigning as King of Kings, the knowledge of God will spread around the world. Those who were faithful to God will serve with Jesus Christ in teaching and administering His way of life for 1,000 years (Revelation 20:4).

Consider some of the prophecies of this time of peace and prosperity that will result from living God's way of life:

“Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Many people 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 shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and rebuke many people; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (Isaiah 2:2-4).

“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 11:9).

These and many other Bible passages paint a beautiful picture of good news about this coming millennial reign of Jesus Christ that will inaugurate the eternal Kingdom of God.

Past and future celebrations

The Feast of Tabernacles was so important to Jesus Christ that He went to Jerusalem to celebrate it even though He knew His life would be in danger (John 7:1-26).

And, as we discussed earlier, the Feast of Tabernacles is destined to be a major international festival of the Kingdom of God, celebrated even by nations that resisted it at first (Zechariah 14:16-19).

Since Jesus Christ celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles, and since He will force people to honor it in the future, it only makes sense for us to celebrate it today.

Significance of tabernacles

The name “Feast of Tabernacles” comes from the tabernacles or temporary dwellings that God commands His

people to stay in during this seven-day festival. These temporary living quarters rehearsed the exodus from Egypt, but also serve as a reminder of the temporary nature of our physical life (Leviticus 23:43; 2 Peter 1:13-15). This helps us realize this physical life is not all there is, which helps us focus on those things that are eternal (2 Peter 3:10-13).

As much as everyone will enjoy the time of peace and prosperity, the real

accomplishment of this 1,000 years will be in the people who fully commit themselves to God, repent and seek first His Kingdom and righteousness. It seems a large harvest of future children of God will come from this time in history.

However large this harvest is, it seems it will not be as large as the harvest at the seventh step in God's plan, pictured by the Eighth Day or Last Great Day.

The Eighth Day: The Final Harvest

As we saw, the seven-day-long Feast of Tabernacles is associated with the 1,000 years of Jesus Christ's rule on the earth. So continuing in Revelation 20, we come to the Great White Throne Judgment, which corresponds with the Eighth Day, also called the Last Great Day. Verse 5 points out that "the rest of the dead" wouldn't be resurrected until after the thousand years, which would make this the second resurrection.

"Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. 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" (Revelation 20:11-12).

Another view of the second resurrection

This same resurrection is described in other passages that help us to understand it more fully.

Ezekiel 37 describes a valley full of bones that God resurrects to physical life. In this passage God addresses the children of Israel being resurrected: "Then you shall know that I am the LORD, when I

have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves. I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land” (verses 13-14).

God raises these Israelites as living, breathing human beings, and He offers them His Holy Spirit, which is the same as offering them the chance for salvation and eternal life. God is completely fair and merciful, so these are people who did not have a chance for salvation in their previous lives in this world.

That is why He opens the Book of Life to them—to give them the chance to be written in it! The other books mentioned in Revelation 20:12 would be the books of the Bible, opened to their understanding for the first time.

But will only descendants of Israel have this chance? No, Jesus Christ makes plain that gentiles from all ages will have their opportunity during this Day of Judgment as well (Matthew 10:15; 11:21-24; 12:41-42). And so God’s stated desire will be fulfilled: “Who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4; see also 2 Peter 3:9).

What an amazing, merciful plan! What a wonderful future God has in store for us and everyone who will respond to Him!

What will you do now?

Studying these meaningful festivals—learning these wonderful truths about God’s plan—is only a first step. When God plants knowledge in our minds, He expects it to grow into right thoughts and actions.

What will you do with these precious seeds of knowledge? God designed His festivals to be celebrated annually to help us learn, remember and be motivated by these steps in His plan. He wants us to reenact the past events and to practice for the future ones.

The sidebar “A Calendar of God’s Annual Festivals” lists the dates of the festivals based on how they fall on our Roman calendars.

If you have questions or would like to locate a group near you that celebrates the “feasts of the LORD,” let us know. Our ministers would be happy to answer your questions.

You can contact us at our contact page cogwa.org/contact or check the Church of God, a Worldwide Association website for the congregation and pastor nearest you at cogwa.org/congregations. We would love to hear from you and to share these special occasions with you!

We think you’ll be glad you did!

What About National Holidays Like Thanksgiving, Purim and Hanukkah?

Since so many religious holidays have pagan roots, are all modern holidays suspect? What about national holidays such as Thanksgiving in the United States and Canada, and the Jewish national holidays of Purim and Hanukkah?

Though Purim and Hanukkah are not commanded feasts of the Lord, they are mentioned in the Bible. The book of Esther describes the events that led to the establishment of the festival of Purim, as God saved the Jews from destruction by evil Haman. Hanukkah was

also called the Feast of Dedication, mentioned in John 10:22-23. It celebrates the rededication of the temple after it had been defiled by Antiochus Epiphanes.

Both of these holidays were established to give thanks to God, just as the American and Canadian Thanksgiving days are. Though some modern customs of these days may not be pleasing to God, they are not rooted in paganism and do not subvert any of the truths presented in the festivals of God.

A Calendar of God's Annual Festivals

The festivals begin at sunset the day before the dates listed here. According to the Bible, days begin in the evening when the sun goes down (Genesis 1:5; Joshua 8:29; 2 Chronicles 18:34; Mark 1:32).

Roman Year	Passover	Feast of Unleavened Bread	Pentecost
2013	March 25	March 26-April 1	May 19
2014	April 14	April 15-21	June 8
2015	April 3	April 4-10	May 24
2016	April 22	April 23-29	June 12
2017	April 10	April 11-17	June 4
2018	March 30	March 31-April 6	May 20
2019	April 19	April 20-26	June 9
2020	April 8	April 9-15	May 31
2021	March 27	March 28-April 3	May 16

If you would like to know more about how these festivals are celebrated today or to find the locations where Christians are celebrating these days all around the world, check our website at cogwa.org/congregations. Our ministers would be happy to answer your questions or arrange for a private appointment if you would like. We look forward to hearing from you!

Feast of Trumpets	Day of Atonement	Feast of Tabernacles	The Eighth Day
Sept. 5	Sept. 14	Sept. 19-25	Sept. 26
Sept. 25	Oct. 4	Oct. 9-15	Oct. 16
Sept. 14	Sept. 23	Sept. 28-Oct. 4	Oct. 5
Oct. 3	Oct. 12	Oct. 17-23	Oct. 24
Sept. 21	Sept. 30	Oct. 5-11	Oct. 12
Sept. 10	Sept. 19	Sept. 24-30	Oct. 1
Sept. 30	Oct. 9	Oct. 14-20	Oct. 21
Sept. 19	Sept. 28	Oct. 3-9	Oct. 10
Sept. 7	Sept. 16	Sept. 21-27	Sept. 28

Who We Are

The Church of God, a Worldwide Association, Inc., is a vibrant and mission-driven community of believers living throughout the world. Our vision is to reach the ends of the earth with the gospel of the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:14-15) and to teach Christ's disciples the original, unchanging, authentic message He brought to earth (Matthew 24:14; 28:19-20).

Our roots

We trace our history back to the first-century Church of God. Jesus promised that from the time He founded the Church onward through His second coming to the earth there would always be believers who understood and held to the truth.

"I will build My church," Jesus said, "and the gates of Hades [the grave] shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). While Christ promised that His Church would never die out, He also prophesied the rise of counterfeit churches throughout the ages. In comparison to these other churches, His description of the original group of disciples proved prophetic, for He called them a "little flock" (Luke 12:32). The Church of God has always remained small in comparison to others, but Christ has kept His promise: His Church has survived, and it continues today.

In the United States the Church grew rapidly and did a powerful worldwide work under the direction of Herbert Armstrong (1892-1986). Incorporated as the "Radio Church of God" and later as the "Worldwide Church of God," Mr. Armstrong made

effective use of his background in advertising as he preached the gospel through radio, television and print media.

After Mr. Armstrong's death, the leaders of the Worldwide Church of God began changing the Church's traditional doctrines and practices. This led to a large number of faithful believers gradually separating themselves to continue the faith of the first-century Church, and over time a number of Church of God organizations formed. The Church of God, a Worldwide Association, is one of several organizations tracing its roots through Herbert Armstrong.

Our service to you

If you have questions or believe God is opening your mind to Jesus' first-century message, we have trained ministers around the world who will be pleased to counsel with you and welcome you into our congregations. Following Jesus' instruction to "freely give" what we have received (Matthew 10:8), our literature and counsel are free of charge. Our work is made possible by the tithes and offerings of members of the Church and those who voluntarily choose to support our efforts. Please contact us if we may be of assistance.

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