
Old Testament Festivals

—their significance, fulfillment and relevance

Part of the *Digging Into God's Word* Bible study series



Why study the “Jewish” festivals of the Old Testament?

- 1) **Visualized Theology**—each festival or “appointed time” commanded by God in the Old Testament conveyed an important spiritual message to the nation of Israel. By observing them, they physically, mentally and emotionally experienced the spiritual reality God wanted them to remember (see Exodus 13:9). These lessons have no less relevance for us today.
- 2) **Fulfillment in the New Covenant**—Christians aren’t commanded to observe these festivals anymore because they have been fulfilled, as has been all of the OT ceremonial law, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, understanding these festivals helps us to better appreciate what Jesus accomplished for us in his death and resurrection and will in his second coming.
- 3) **Background Context**—in order to better understand later passages in the OT and in the NT that relate to one or more of these festivals, it is very helpful to understand what these festivals were about, why they were important and when they occurred. These festivals defined the religious calendar of the Jewish people of the Old and New Testaments. Knowing the historical background of the people and events in Scripture is a key part of the observation step of inductive Bible study, which the “Digging Into God’s Word” series is all about.

The Hebrew Religious Calendar		
Jewish Month	Western Calendar*	Festivals
1. Abib or Nisan	April	Passover, Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits
2. Ziv	May	
3. Sivan	June	Pentecost
4. Tammuz	July	
5. Ab	August	
6. Elul	September	
7. Ethanim or Tishri	October	Trumpets, Atonement, Tabernacles
8. Bul	November	
9. Kislev	December	Hanukkah
10. Tebeth	January	
11. Shebat	February	
12. Adar	March	Purim

* the lunar Jewish months actually begin in the month prior to the western month listed

“They [the Levites] were also to stand every morning to thank and praise the LORD. They were to do the same in the evening and whenever burnt offerings were presented to the LORD on Sabbaths and at New Moon festivals and at appointed feasts. They were to serve before the LORD regularly in the proper number and in the way prescribed for them.”

1 Chronicles 23:30-31

Old Testament Calendar of Worship Included (Numbers 28-29):

- Morning and evening sacrifices every day
- Extra sacrifices on every Sabbath, *Shabbat*, (Friday evening to Saturday evening), plus Israelites were to refrain from work.
- Extra sacrifices at the New Moon, *Rosh Chodesh*, the first day of each month
- Extra sacrifices and various other observances at the appointed “feasts”
- *The sacrificial system was completed and fulfilled in Christ’s death (Hebrews 7:22-28)*

Appointed Times—Israel’s Calendar of Redemption (Leviticus 23)					
Festival	Date	Historical Significance	Theological Significance	Fulfillment Event	Selected References
<u>*Passover</u> <i>Pesach</i>	14 Abib (Friday)	Event: salvation & redemption from slavery in Egypt	personal redemption by blood/death	Death of Jesus Christ on the cross; Lord’s Supper	Ex. 12-14; 2Chr. 29-30 Lk 22:15-22; 1Cor 5:6-8
<u>Unleavened Bread</u>	15 Abib (Sabbath) for 7 days	moral separation / dependence upon Egypt	holiness, purity, being separate from the world	Victory over sin in the believer’s life	Ex. 12-14; 1Cor 5:6-8
<u>Firstfruits</u>	16 Abib (Sunday)	Thanksgiving for beginning of barley harvest	God’s ownership; resurrection	Resurrection of Jesus	1Cor. 15:20-22 Rom. 8:23 James 1:18
<u>*Weeks/Harvest</u> <i>Pentecost-Shavuot</i>	6 Sivan (7 weeks later)	Climax of wheat harvest	completion of God’s provision	Coming of the Holy Spirit to empower	Acts 2
<u>Trumpets</u> <i>Rosh Hashanah</i>	1 Tishri	preparation for Day of Atonement; civil new year	summoning Israel for repentance	Rapture? Israel 1948? <i>no consensus</i>	Ezra 3:1-6; Neh. 8
<u>Day of Atonement</u> <i>Yom Kippur</i>	10 Tishri	national sorrow for sin; scapegoat	national repentance	repentance of the remnant of Israel Romans 11	Lev. 16 Zech. 12:10 Rom. 3:21-26 Hebrews 9-10
<u>*Tabernacles / Ingathering</u> <i>Sukkot</i>	15 Tishri for 8 days	protection and provision during 40 years in wilderness	God’s protection and provision; universal worship	Millennial Kingdom of the messiah	1Kings 8 Zech. 14:16ff
<u>Dedication / Lights</u> <i>Hanukkah</i>	25 Kislev 8 days	cleansing of the temple after Maccabean Revolt in 165 BC			John 10:22 (Daniel 8:9-14) 1Macc. 4:52-59 2Macc. 10:5-8
<u>Purim</u>	14-15 Adar	deliverance of Jews in Persia in the time of Esther			Esther 9
* During these three festivals the Israelites were required to gather in Jerusalem to celebrate (Exodus 23:14-17)					

Other seasonal practices:

- Every 7 years: cancel debts, Israelite slaves released, land lies fallow (Deut. 15)
- Jubilee every 50 years: land returns to original owner; slaves/debts canceled (Lev. 25)
- *These have also been fulfilled in Jesus as they foreshadowed spiritual conditions (Luke 4:16-21; cf. Isaiah 61)*

Application for today:

Isaiah 1:14-15 “Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood;”

God has never desired mere ritual observance from his people. (Matthew 15:3-9; Isaiah 29:13; Hebrews 10:1-10; Psalm 40:6-8). Above all else, God desires a real relationship with his people, who worship him out of the earnestness of their hearts. The new covenant in Christ gives us the gift of his Holy Spirit in our hearts so we are freed to know and love God (Heb. 8:7-12).

Colossians 2:16 Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.

These Old Testament festivals teach a spiritual lesson, but their greater purpose was to point ahead to the Lord Jesus. The fullness of a life that pleases God flows out of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom is all the fullness of God (Col. 1:19) and in whose love we receive fullness (Eph. 3:19; Col. 2:10). There is no truer spirituality than faith in Jesus that expresses itself in God-honoring, self-sacrificial love (Gal. 5:6).

Further Biblical Study:

Kinds and purposes of the altar sacrifices (burnt, sin, fellowship, etc.)

Other New Testament references to these feasts, special days, sacrifices with their meaning and fulfillment.

Resources:

God's Appointed Times by Barney Kasdan

Seven Festivals of the Messiah by Eddie Chumney

<http://www.jewfaq.org/toctimes.htm> – take note that this is an orthodox Jewish site and that Judaism has changed since the first century AD; still a very informative website.