



The Feasts, Jesus, and the New Covenant Community



What Does the Bible Say?

The Feasts, Jesus, and the New Covenant Community

What Does the Bible Say?

Published and Distributed by
BIBLE ADVOCATE PRESS
—a ministry of the
Church of God (Seventh Day)

First Edition, October 2013



BIBLE ADVOCATE PRESS
Post Office Box 33677
Denver, Colorado 80233-0677
publications.cog7.org/tracts-books/tracts

This booklet is one of many pieces of literature published by the Bible Advocate Press promoting Bible study. The literature is printed and distributed without charge in the hope that those who receive it will be inspired to study their Bibles and learn more about Christ.

This free literature program is supported by freewill offerings. Your correspondence and contributions may be sent to:



Bible Advocate Press
P. O. Box 33677
Denver, Colorado 80233-0677
U.S.A.

The Bible Advocate Press has a lot to offer on the Internet. Check out our other literature at publications.cog7.org/tracts-books/tracts.

Unless otherwise noted, scripture taken from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture taken from the New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

The Feasts, Jesus, and the New Covenant Community

What Does the Bible Say?

Introduction

In Leviticus 23 is Scripture's most detailed description of the feasts of the Lord given to the children of Israel. Seven feasts were commanded as consecrated times of rest, convocation, sacrifice, and commemoration, serving as mileposts throughout the year. Each one symbolically marked a significant event in the redemption history of God's chosen people. The remainder of Scripture underscores the sacred and significant nature of these days for God and the Israelites. This causes us to ask, "What are followers of Christ to do with these feasts?"

For many, the feasts are largely ignored. Passover is seen as a precursor to the Lord's Supper, and perhaps a vague connection is made between Christ's advents (past and future) and the Feast of Tabernacles, His death and the Day of Atonement, or His resurrection and the Feast of Firstfruits. The outpouring of the Spirit occurred on the Day of Pentecost, but this fact receives little significance. Beyond this, some believers don't give much thought to the feasts, except that they belong to an obsolete covenant.

On the other end of the spectrum others insist that observance of the feasts is required of Christians. More than a sterile requirement, they see it as a sacred meeting time with God, to be celebrated and cherished. For this group, the feasts serve as a graphic representation of God's plan: past, present, and future. To fail to observe the feasts is not only disobedience but also a great personal loss for any Christian.

Between these two poles another group recognizes the feasts as God-given types that find their complete fulfillment in the living person and ongoing work of Jesus Christ. These people consider the feasts as valuable, tangible symbols of our Lord and Savior contained in the old covenant. As such, they should be studied in relationship to Christ, and if one desires, even commemorated as a means of glorifying Christ and appreciating the beautiful tapestry of God's Word and plan. At the same time, the feasts as *commanded observances* are seen as belonging exclusively to the old covenant. Observing them is not a *covenant requirement* for Christians who relate to God under the terms of the new covenant in Jesus' blood. It is this position that describes the perspective of the Church of God (Seventh Day).

Here we will explain and support this view by surveying what Scripture says about the annual festivals.

Feasts in the Old Testament

Torah (Genesis—Deuteronomy)

The Torah is incredibly significant in our understanding of the feasts. There God's explicit commands regarding the feasts tell of their origin, purpose, and function within His covenant with the children of Israel. These texts are primary as they lay the foundation for all future biblical discussion of the feasts. The historical, poetic, and prophetic books occasionally address Israel's attitudes and actions related to the feasts, but the Torah gives us insight into the divine will.

Key observations: The feasts were given as part of God's covenant with the children of Israel at Sinai. Only those who took part in this covenant by virtue of circumcision and covenant faithfulness could observe these feasts.

God intended that the feasts be kept perpetually by the children of Israel, as part of His covenant with them.

The feasts and their observance were tied up in the redemptive history of the children of Israel and were intimately connected to their specific cultural, geographic, ritual, and covenantal context. The instructions given for observing the feasts have application only within that specific culture, geography, ritual, and covenant.

The observance of each of the feasts included sacrifices as part of the Israelite cultic practices. By *cultic* we are not referring to a cult or the occult but to the rites and rituals of worship given to the children of Israel by God.

God showed flexibility in allowing the feasts to be observed out of schedule under certain circumstances. This underscores God's emphasis on the heart of the observer and the meaning of the feast itself, rather than insistence on exact dating.

Key texts: Exodus 12:1-50; 13:3-10; 23:14-19; 34:18-25; Leviticus 16:29-34; 23:1-44; Numbers 9:1-14; 15:1-31; 28:1-31; 29:1-40; Deuteronomy 16:1-17; 26:2; 31:9-13.

Historical and poetic books

Despite the fact that they cover a vast span of history (nearly a millennium from the conquest of Canaan to the sixth century BC return from exile), the historical books say very little about the feasts. Based on what they do say, we can presume that a significant reason for this silence is the widespread

non-observance of the feasts throughout Israelite history. Thus while the historical books add little or nothing to our understanding of God's intentions for the feasts, they do highlight the general neglect of them by God's people. This comes as no surprise, since the period of the judges was characterized by everyone doing what was right in his own eyes (Judges 21:25), and the monarchy consisted of mostly evil kings and some righteous ones whose religious reforms were often short-lived and incomplete. Nevertheless, the historical books do have some notable highlights.

Key observations: A characteristic of several righteous kings and leaders was their decision to observe the feasts in accordance with God's commands. Neglected as they were, the feasts remained a vivid symbol of covenant faithfulness.

God continued to be flexible regarding the feasts when the people desired to honor Him and include as many as possible in the observance. Once more, this underscores God's emphasis on the heart of the observer and the meaning of the feast itself, rather than insistence on exact dating.

The feasts remained a strictly covenant observance that was limited to those who entered into the covenant between God and the children of Israel.

Key texts: Judges 21:19; 1 Chronicles 23:30, 31; 2 Chronicles 2:4; 5:1-10; 7:8, 9; 8:13; 30:1-27; 31:3; 35:1-19; 1 Kings 8:1-10, 65, 66; Ezra 3:1-6; 6:19-22; Nehemiah 8:13-18; 10:33; Psalm 81:1-5; Psalms 120—134.

Prophetic books

If the Torah told what God commanded regarding the feasts, and the historical/poetic books told something of Israel's failure to consistently observe them, the prophets tell what God desired in connection with feast-keeping: covenant faithfulness in the weightier matters of the law. The prophets call for God's people to pursue righteousness, justice, mercy, and faith. In the absence of these, the feasts are a revolting charade. However, when the heart of the covenant is observed faithfully, then the feasts are welcome acts of worship.

The prophets give special insight into the feasts as they give voice to God's wrath as He prepares His people for impending judgment and God's hope as He foresees a day when they will be restored. In His wrath He rejects the insincere worship of His wicked people, even the worship that occurs on the feast days. In His hope He envisions a rebuilt temple in which the feasts can be observed in holiness and sincerity, drawing the nations to worship Him.

Key observations: The connection between the validity of feast-keeping

and broader covenant-keeping is clarified, underscoring the fact that the feasts were part of God's covenant with Israel.

In various ways, feast-keeping, particularly the Feast of Tabernacles, symbolized covenant faithfulness. Isaiah and Zechariah's visions of a Day of the Lord, marked by Gentiles keeping the feasts, indicate the significance of these days in symbolizing the terms of the covenant with Israel.

Key texts: Isaiah 1:1-20; Lamentations 1:4; 2:6, 7; Ezekiel 36:38; 45:1-25; 46:1-24; Hosea 2:11; 9:5; 12:9; Amos 5:21; 8:10; Nahum 1:15; Zechariah 8:19; 14:16-19; Malachi 2:3.

Feasts in the New Testament

Gospels

The Gospels mark an important transitional period, from the old covenant to the new. While Jesus participated as an Israelite in the old covenant, He was also the embodiment of the new covenant. His incarnation on earth marked a unique time in history when one covenant was being fulfilled and made obsolete, and another was being instituted. As a Jewish man, Jesus faithfully abided by the old covenant. But as the incarnate Son of God, He demonstrated through word and deed that He was the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets and all that they contained, including the feasts.

Key observations: Unlike the Old Testament historical period in which the feasts were commonly neglected, the Gospels depict an era in which observance of the feasts was normative among God's covenant people.

Jesus, His family, and all His Jewish associates appear to have habitually observed the feasts at their appointed times, in their appointed places, and with their appointed customs.

Particularly in the Gospel of John, Jesus' teaching indicates various ways in which He personally fulfilled the feasts. A pattern is evident as a feast is mentioned and then Jesus teaches or demonstrates something significant about His identity with a striking parallel to the feast. The Gospel writers consistently focus on Jesus' identity and work, rather than on the feast, which serves simply as a backdrop for His ultimate claims.

John 6 serves as an excellent example. The narrator tells us that the Passover is near (v. 4) and then relates Jesus' multiplication of the loaves, His walking on water, and His teaching on His identity as the true bread of heaven/life. The parallel to the Exodus story with the crossing of the Red Sea and the provision of manna is striking: Jesus demonstrates through word and deed that He alone provides redemption, provision, and life.

Jesus' death occurred in close proximity to the Passover, immediately

following His initiation of the new covenant in His flesh/blood, symbolized by bread and the fruit of the vine.

Key texts: Matthew 26:2, 5, 17-19; 27:15; Mark 14:1, 2, 12-16; 15:6; Luke 2:41, 42; 22:1, 7-15; 22:1, 7-15; 23:17; John 2:8, 9, 13, 23; 4:45; 5:1; 6:4; 7:2, 8, 10, 11, 14, 37; 10:22; 11:55, 56; 12:1, 12; 13:1-4, 29; 18:28, 39; 19:14.

Acts

Acts records incidents from the first 25-30 years of the church's history, beginning with Jesus' ascension and ending with Paul's imprisonment in Rome. The book follows the outline given in Jesus' commission in Acts 1:8: "You shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." (NASB) In keeping with Acts' narrative style, the few places that mention the feasts make no comment on their significance for the Christian community. Rather, they are referred to as temporal markers that imply some connection between the story and the timing of a feast.

The significance of this ongoing shift should not be overlooked. In the Old Testament, references to the feasts were always made in connection with covenant faithfulness. Feast laws were given as part of the covenant. Feasts were ignored in neglect of the covenant, and they were kept in honor of the covenant. But after the transition marked by the Gospels, Acts makes no reference to the feasts as covenant obligation.

Key observations: Jesus chose the Day of Pentecost as the day on which to pour out the Holy Spirit on His disciples. Neither Acts 2 nor any other scripture makes an explicit theological link between the time of this event and the arrival of the Spirit. However, many Bible students do see a parallel between the giving of the law and the giving of the Spirit. All that is explicit in the text is that the outpouring of the Spirit occurred when Jerusalem was full of Diaspora Jews who subsequently heard and accepted the gospel message.

Peter was arrested by Herod during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and Herod intended to hold him till after the feast. Instead, Peter was miraculously released from prison and led out by an angel of the Lord. The parallel to the exodus of the children of Israel released from the bondage of an evil king and led out by an angel of the Lord during the night is implicit.

In one place Luke mentions that Paul modified travel plans to be in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost (cf. 1 Corinthians 16:8). The rationale given is not that Paul felt obligated to observe the feast, but, as chapters 20-21 reveal, he was anxious to arrive in Jerusalem because he believed

God was directing him there, despite impending persecution. Upon arrival in Jerusalem, Paul hurried to meet his Christian brothers. Only then was he compelled to go to the temple and engage in cultic rituals to appease Jewish Christians who were zealous for the law.

In Acts 20:6 Luke mentions that the disciples were in Philippi during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, followed by a five-day trip to Troas and a weeklong stay there. This is a significant passage, given the expectation that all Jewish men would be in Jerusalem during the Passover. Apparently the early Christians did not abide by this requirement (Deuteronomy 16:16).

Key texts: Acts 2:1-47; 12:1-5; 20:6, 16; 21:15-29.

Epistles

If the Gospels marked a transition from the old covenant to the new and Acts narrates the lives of people living in that new covenant, the letters provide us with theological reflection on what new covenant life entails. The non-Pauline epistles say nothing explicit in regard to new covenant feast observance. Paul says very little, but in a few passages he reveals a view indicating clearly that Christ both fulfills and supersedes the feasts and that new covenant feast-keeping relates generically to Christian living, not to old covenant prescriptions. Such a view accords nicely with the relationship between the old and new covenants as described by the author of Hebrews.

Key observations and texts: In numerous places, Paul claims that Christ has provided the “atonement” for sin (e.g. Romans 5:6-11). Such a claim entails the obsolescence of the Day of Atonement, the appointed day for offering sacrifices to atone for the sins of the children of Israel. Paul’s claim that Jesus has once and for all provided atonement renders all other sacrifices superfluous. It also calls the believer to observe Christ’s death/resurrection as holy, rather than a day on which animal sacrifice was offered to atone for other people’s sins under an obsolete covenant. No surprise then that Paul never claims to observe the Day of Atonement, nor instructs believers to do so. Rather, he instructs them to commemorate the death of Christ through sharing in the bread and the cup (1 Corinthians 11:17-34).

A passage in which he discusses the excommunication of a sinning brother, Paul calls on the Corinthians to “keep/celebrate the feast” by purging the Christian body of sin (1 Corinthians 5:7, 8). Here, Paul provides a parallel between the old covenant observance of Passover/Unleavened Bread and the new covenant experience. He states that Christ is the Passover, sin (specifically, malice and wickedness) is leaven, and the Christian body is, and must remain, a new lump of unleavened bread by living in sincerity and truth.

Thus in the only passage of Scripture where Christians are instructed to keep a feast, they are directed to do so in a purely figurative way by virtue of living a sanctified life. Furthermore, the recognition that Christ is the Passover serves to indicate the secondary place of the old covenant Passover observance in our understanding of redemption history. In the old covenant, the Passover stood as God's redemptive act *par excellence*. As such, it was worthy of commemoration. However, in the new covenant the Passover is no longer God's greatest redemptive act; Christ's death is. Therefore it is Christ who ought to be commemorated by Christians in holy living and in the ritual of the Lord's Supper (this is likely the "love feast" to which Jude refers, 1:12).

In discussing the Resurrection, Paul says that Jesus Christ is raised from the dead as the "firstfruits" of those who are asleep (1 Corinthians 15:20-24). This *word picture* suggests that believers will be raised as the harvest that follows this "firstfruit." Given that the Feast of Firstfruits consisted in large part of waving a sheaf of grain on the day after the Sabbath and that Christ appeared after His resurrection on the day after the Sabbath, Paul likely is drawing on the imagery of the feast here to indicate how Christ has fulfilled and superseded it. Accordingly, Paul's audience should understand that whereas the children of Israel remembered a past day when they entered the Promised Land and reaped a physical harvest of grain, Christians look to their future entrance into eternal glory through the spiritual harvest of resurrected believers. To follow Paul's teaching, this celebration would not consist of the observance of a given day but rather the living of a "resurrected" life (Romans 6:1-14).

The festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths (whether weekly or annual) referred to in Colossians 2:16, 17 should not be understood as good faith observances of Christians. Rather, they must be understood against the backdrop of the "Colossian heresy," a syncretism of Christian, Jewish, and pagan practice whereby rituals and angels were elevated over Christ in a bizarre hierarchy. Thus this passage is not helpful in directing us toward or away from festival observance per se but in warning us against allowing any such observance to diminish Christ.

In Galatians 4:10 Paul mentions one of the specific ways that the Galatians had returned to a bondage to the law, in that they "observe days and months and seasons and years." If this refers to observances from the Jewish calendar, then Paul's admonition here must factor seriously into a discussion of Christian festival observance. If one asks why Paul considers festival observance to be a reversion to legal bondage, there are likely two answers.

First, the Galatians were seeking justification through observance of the

law and thus had fallen from grace (5:4). Any obedience to the law that has as its goal meriting salvation is an affront to the free grace of God in Jesus Christ. But Paul may have another concern, more specific to festival observance. Festival observance in Paul's day still followed the biblical mandate for blood sacrifice in the temple. To engage in such a practice in light of what Christ had done was at best to misunderstand — and at worst to reject — His atoning work on the cross.

Feasts today: a conclusion

Given our survey of Scripture, our conclusion regarding the place of the feasts in the lives of Christians today is predictable. We consider these feasts to have been given to the children of Israel as part of their unique covenant with God. As such, their observance was necessarily tied to the history, culture, geography, and cultic rituals of the children of Israel. No one outside of this unique covenant was ever instructed, or even permitted, to observe these feasts.

As members of the new covenant, we see the entire old covenant, including the feasts, as fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. We recognize Jesus alone as our Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7), our unleavening agent (1:30), the first fruit of our resurrection (15:20), the giver of the Pentecost Spirit (Acts 2), the one announced by the final trumpet (1 Thessalonians 4:16), our atonement (Romans 5:11), and the one who has already (and will eternally) tabernacled with us (John 1:14; Revelation 21:13). As such, we may celebrate Christ in the feasts, but we do not — indeed cannot — observe the feasts. At least five major implications flow from this reality.

1. We should take care how we refer to these celebrations. The words *observe* and *keep* are loaded with biblical meaning and should be reserved for God's commandments. Words like *celebrate* and *remember* are more appropriate for voluntary customs like commemorating Jesus' fulfillment of annual festivals. Those who celebrate the festivals in various ways ought to be honest in recognizing that in so doing they are not observing or keeping God's commandments. God's commandments regarding these feasts cannot be kept in a new covenant context. Since the death of Christ, no one keeps or observes the feasts, but some Christians do celebrate and commemorate the ways in which Christ fulfills them.
2. Another loaded word often associated with the annual festivals is *holy*, as in the *annual holy days*. The word *holy* is significant in Scripture. In regard to behavior, it indicates pure living and separation from unrighteousness. In regard to objects (including days), it indicates a separation from the profane for unique use by God and His people. Holy things

must be treated as holy. Those who treat them otherwise are guilty of sin. Within an old covenant context, the annual festivals were set aside as “holy days.” Those who did not treat them as such were guilty. However, these days have no such designation in the new covenant. They were set aside as holy in the old covenant but are not in the new. Like vessels in the temple and garments of the priests, these days were once holy but are no longer. To continue to refer to them as “holy” is to assign them a value that God no longer assigns. It is also an implied indictment of all those who do not treat them as “holy.” Out of concern for truth and love of our brethren, such a designation should be avoided.

3. Some fear that those who celebrate Christ in the feasts are returning to the bondage of the law. In light of Paul’s teachings in Galatians and elsewhere, they fear for the salvation of those who attach *any* special significance to these days. To those with these concerns we say that Paul’s issue in addressing the Galatians was the attempt to be *justified* through the works of the law. For those who are simply seeking fellowship and edification, not justification, in celebrating Christ in the feasts, we ought not invoke Paul’s message to the Galatians. Instead we ought to seek Paul’s wisdom in his letter to the Romans. There Paul encourages them not to judge one another concerning their varying regard for certain days and other voluntary practices (Romans 14:1-23). To meet together on a given day and celebrate the way in which Christ fulfilled a given part of the old covenant is not required of Christians, but neither is it harmful. Indeed, for many it can be beneficial. So we ought not judge our brethren in this regard but commit to not causing them to stumble.
4. Paul’s counsel in Romans 14 is a double-edged sword. Those who do attach special significance to these days should not judge their brethren who do not (vv. 5, 6, 10-12). Recognizing that commemoration of these days is not mandatory for salvation or sanctification should caution us against expecting anyone else to assign them the same significance we do.
5. The celebration of Christ as the fulfillment of the feasts provides an exciting opportunity that is particularly beneficial to the Church of God (Seventh Day). In a church in which Christmas, Easter, and most of the “Christian year” are not observed, yearly celebrations can be hard to come by. The annual festivals provide biblically based opportunities throughout the year to focus on given aspects of Christ’s past, present, and future work. Recognizing the connection between Christ and the annual festivals can aid us in recognizing the relationship between the covenants and making optimum use of the entirety of Scripture. By safeguarding the practice from legalism and misunderstanding, celebration of Christ in the feasts can serve as a wonderful opportunity for individuals, families,

and local congregations to come together in joy and fellowship.



Frequently Asked Questions

Given that they are listed together in Leviticus 23, why do you observe the seventh-day Sabbath but not the annual feasts?

True enough, the weekly Sabbath heads the list of Hebrew calendar observances in Leviticus 23. Along with the annual feasts, it is classified there as “appointed times which you shall proclaim as holy convocations” (v. 2). To this degree, the Sabbath and the annual feasts are similar. But in many important ways they are different.

The weekly Sabbath pre-dates the old covenant with the children of Israel, whereas the feasts do not. The hallowing of the seventh day as a day of rest occurred at Creation (Genesis 2:1-3), and the Sabbath was described by Jesus as a gift to humanity (Mark 2:27). Before any Sabbath law was codified, God indicated His desire for people to observe the Sabbath through the provision of extra manna on the sixth day (Exodus 16:22-30). Conversely, the feasts originated at specific times in the redemption history of the children of Israel, beginning with the Passover at the time of the Exodus. Each feast was given specifically in commemoration of God’s relationship with the children of Israel and the only instructions for feast-keeping given in Scripture relate to that specific people and covenant.

The presence of the weekly Sabbath among the Ten Commandments indicates its place in God’s enduring moral law. The absence of the annual feasts from this list calls their perpetual ethical nature into question.

Jesus taught frequently on appropriate Sabbathkeeping, but His only teaching in connection with the feasts indicated His complete fulfillment of them. Thus, we can observe from Jesus’ example and teaching how we ought to keep the Sabbath, but His example and teaching regarding the feasts give us no direction as to whether or how we should observe the feasts.

While the apostles followed Jesus’ custom of attending synagogue on the weekly Sabbath, we see no such custom on the apostles’ part of observing the feasts. The New Testament records one instance in which Christian disciples were in Philippi rather than Jerusalem during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and two instances in which Paul actively sought to be in Jerusalem at Pentecost time, but Scripture does not claim that he observed the feast. Thus, it does not state explicitly that any Christian observed any of the

feasts, and indicates that observance of the feasts was not their custom.

Observing the weekly Sabbath is compatible with Jesus' work. Observing the feasts is not. The weekly Sabbath includes no sacrifices. The call to rest, remembrance, and gathering can be answered in any covenant. However, given the theological implications of Jesus' person and works, observance of the feasts according to old covenant regulations was rendered impossible because every feast included sacrifices that were made obsolete in the light of Christ. Those who insist on feast observance in the new covenant must face the reality that they are not observing the feasts as God commanded them to be observed. On what basis, then, can they claim that they are obeying God, and that those who do not observe the feasts are not?

For these reasons we continue to observe the Sabbath, but not the annual feasts.



Weren't the feasts instituted on the fourth day of creation?

The Hebrew word *mowed*, translated “seasons” in Genesis 1:14, is the same Hebrew word often translated “appointed times” in reference to the annual feasts (e.g. Leviticus 23:2). However, this does not mean that the feasts originated at creation.

The word *mowed* has a wide range of meaning. It is used throughout the Old Testament to refer to an appointed time, place, or meeting. Oftentimes this refers to the appointed time, place, and meetings associated with the annual festivals, but at other times there is no connection. For instance, the word is used in Jeremiah 8:7 in reference to birds who are aware of the appropriate times for their seasonal migrations. Thus, in each occurrence of the word, we must consider the context. Given the context of Genesis 1:14, it is quite likely that the word *mowed* here should be understood in a general sense as referring to the natural seasons of the year.

Still, some scholars believe that there is a connection between *mowed* in Genesis 1:14 and the annual festivals. If such a connection exists, it must be carefully understood. The Torah was written for the children of Israel sometime after the events it relates took place. It is a collection of books that served to guide them in fulfilling their covenant obligations. If the author intended to draw a connection between the annual festivals and the creation of the moon, which makes lunar calendars possible, it is a generic connection in which the author wants to impress upon the audience God's foresight and providence. In other words, the author would be saying, “God created the moon, knowing the day would come when He would give you a lunar calendar by which you would reckon your sacred appointments with

Him.” This is very different than saying, “God created the moon and in so doing instituted the annual festivals.”

Simply put, there is no ambiguity about the institution of the annual festivals in Scripture. They were given at specific times in the history of the Israelite people, thousands of years after the creation of the cosmos. This reality is underscored when we consider the purpose of the various feasts and the state of the created order before sin and death entered.

Two examples along these lines should suffice to make the point. First, why would Adam and Eve observe the Day of Atonement in a world without sin? Second, what meaning could the Passover possibly have to Adam and Eve when there was no such thing as the land of Egypt or firstborn sons? Those who claim that the feasts, like the Sabbath, were instituted at Creation should face the implausibility of that claim.



Some Old Testament prophets describe festival observances in eschatological visions. Doesn't festival observance in the end times indicate that we should observe them now?

In his final recorded vision, Isaiah looks to the future of Jerusalem and in 66:18-24 envisions a future gathering of all nations to come and see the glory of the Lord. He sees a time in which all mankind will come and bow before the Lord from “new moon to new moon” and from “sabbath to sabbath” and the descendants of God’s covenant people will endure forever.

Similarly, in his final recorded vision, Zechariah looks to the future of Jerusalem, and in 14:9-20 he also envisions a gathering of all nations under the dominion of the Lord as the only God. After God judges those who gathered to war against Jerusalem, those who are left will go up every year to worship God and celebrate the Feast of Booths. If they don’t do this, they will not receive rain.

Both these passages are examples of an apocalyptic vision of the Day of the Lord, complete with loaded symbolism and strange imagery. The various symbols communicate God’s justice and mercy, the importance of covenant faithfulness, and the separation of the holy from the profane. The primary application of these visions is to the old covenant people who received them. Appropriately, they incorporate a call for faithfulness to old covenant obligations, such as feast-keeping, which required Levitical sacrifices, as both the Isaiah and Zechariah texts confirm.

If we look at a parallel apocalyptic vision in the light of Christ and the context of the new covenant, we see a strikingly different picture. In Revelation 20-22 we also see an apocalyptic, eschatological vision. In

this vision we see symbols of God’s justice and mercy, the importance of covenant faithfulness, and the separation of the holy from the profane. However, while the two visions have some symbols used in common, there are also important differences.

For instance, Canaanites are used as a symbol of unclean people in Zechariah 14:21, while in Revelation 21:24 and 22:2 we see that people from all the nations are welcome in the New Jerusalem as those whose names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life. Thus, in Revelation the symbol of uncleanness means exclusion from the Book of Life, whereas in Zechariah it is nationality. In the Old Testament prophets, feast observance is used as a symbol of covenant faithfulness, but in Revelation it is not used. In fact, in the vision of Revelation the observance of lunar-based festivals kept in the temple becomes impossible as the sun and moon are replaced by the light of Jesus and the temple is replaced by the unmediated presence of God and the Lamb (Revelation 21:22, 23). These differences make sense if we understand that symbols have different meanings to people with different covenant obligations. The New Jerusalem of Revelation is very different from the future Jerusalem envisioned by Isaiah or Zechariah in terms of the *symbols*. However, they are very similar in terms of the *meaning* conveyed by those symbols.

Thus, the old covenant symbols of Isaiah’s and Zechariah’s visions, such as feast-keeping, should not be imposed upon new covenant believers indiscriminately. Rather, we should look at their visions and ask, “What does this vision mean in light of Jesus’ person and work? What does the more complete revelation of the new covenant documents tell us about what to expect in the Day of the Lord?” When we do this, it seems clear that observance of old covenant festivals no longer plays a part in new covenant symbolism regarding the coming Day of the Lord and the restoration of all things. As a result, there is no reason, based on these visions, to think that we ought to be observing these festivals today.



Didn’t Jesus fulfill some of the feasts completely, some partially, while others await future fulfillment? If so, shouldn’t we observe at least those that are not completely fulfilled as we wait for God’s plan to fully unfold?

Some believe that the feasts represent markers along God’s historic timeline and that only certain markers were passed during Christ’s first advent. Specifically, they acknowledge the radical transformation that has occurred

regarding the feasts of Passover, Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits, Pentecost, the Day of Atonement, but they anticipate a future fulfillment of the feasts of Trumpets and Tabernacles. This future fulfillment will not occur until Christ's return, when the final *trumpet* sounds and God *tabernacles* with His people forever.

While we acknowledge the power and beauty of the symbolism here, we also caution against the notion that Christ has not forever and completely fulfilled the old covenant, including the annual festivals. The book of Hebrews makes plain that in His death, Christ brought to an end the old covenant and instituted a new one (see especially chapters 8 and 9). In His death, Christ made the old covenant, in its entirety, obsolete (Hebrews 8:13). Anything that belonged exclusively to that covenant (including the annual festivals) thus became obsolete as well.



Don't certain individuals and congregations within the Church of God (Seventh Day) observe the feasts?

Historically, the majority of people within the Church of God (Seventh Day) have not observed the feasts, and festival observance has never been a part of our church's doctrines. However, the Church of God (Seventh Day) extends liberty to those who wish to celebrate the feasts within certain parameters. At the 2010 meeting of the North American Ministerial Council, these parameters were defined as follows.

Those who celebrate the feasts:

- Must be open in stating that their practice varies from the traditional practice of the Church of God (Seventh Day)
- Must not consider the observance mandatory
- Must not insist on observance after the fashion of Leviticus 23
- Must not consider observance a condition of salvation or church membership

These parameters recognize the reality that no one "observes" the feasts in the biblical sense, for observance of such feasts in the new covenant is impossible. Rather, people may choose — for personal and corporate edification — to celebrate the ways in which Jesus fulfills these feasts. Such celebrations can be beneficial, but are by no means necessary for salvation or holy living.