

Palisades Community Bible Church

Online Bible Study

What Are The Jewish Holidays?

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By; Brent Briggs

Do you ever wonder about the Jewish holidays? Do you know what they are about? Do you know what they are for? Other than the occasional “day off” we may not pay much attention to them. Because of the close relationship Jews and Christians share, spiritually, understanding the special holy days that Jews celebrate can help Christians understand more about God’s character. I’d like to suggest to the Jewish community that the reverse is also true!

HOLY DAYS

In the Bible, the word **holy** means “set apart.” God is holy. In God’s word, Jews and Christians are called to be holy; set apart for God’s purposes. A holy day is ‘set apart’ to focus on the things of God. There are holy days mentioned in the Bible, and, over the centuries, both Jews and Christian have instituted other holy days by **tradition** (inherited, established or customary practices).

The Bible mentions at least eight holy days (or groups of days), also known as feasts or festivals. Seven of these observances are commanded in the Mosaic Law. Purim was instituted later. As you’ll see, most of these celebrations are closely linked, and several overlap on the calendar. I hope you’ll come to see how each of these rituals remind us of God; His power and His love. They also point to the Messiah! They are:

Passover: Chief of the three great historical annual festivals of the Jews, it is held on a specific date in the Jewish calendar; usually in March or April. It is a remembrance of the Lord's passing over the houses of the Israelites (Ex. 12:13) when the first born of all the Egyptians were destroyed. It isn’t a day or a week, but an evening meal called a “Seder.” Each portion of the meal, is symbolic of what God did for His people in the Exodus from Egypt.

Unleavened Bread: The Feast of Unleavened Bread starts in the same month, and overlaps, Passover, at twilight, on a specific date on the Jewish calendar. This is a 7-day feast; the first and last days are to be Sabbaths. These sabbaths involve rest, prayer and keeping the days holy. Leaven is a symbol of sin in our lives. All leaven and leavened products must be removed from the home and nothing containing leaven is allowed during the seven days. This illustrates the futility of cleansing one's self from sin.

First Fruits: This festival comes a day following Passover. It's a Sabbath (Numbers 28:26) to celebrate the first fruits of the harvests and to express gratitude and thankfulness for God's provision. (Leviticus 23:10).

Pentecost/Weeks: Described in Leviticus 23, The Feast of Weeks is the second of the three "solemn feasts" that all Jewish males were required to travel to Jerusalem to attend (Exodus 23:14–17; 34:22–23; Deuteronomy 16:16). This important feast gets its name from the fact that it starts seven full weeks, or exactly 50 days, after the Feast of Firstfruits. Since it takes place exactly 50 days after the previous feast, this feast is also known as "Pentecost" (Acts 2:1), which means "fifty."

Rosh Hashana/Trumpets: The beginning of ten days of consecration and repentance before God. It is one of seven Jewish feasts or festivals appointed by the LORD and one of three feasts that occur in the autumn. Its name comes from the command to blow trumpets (Leviticus 23:24; Numbers 29:1-6). It is also called Rosh Hashanah, which means "Head of the Year," because it marks the beginning of the Jewish calendar. During this celebration, no kind of work is to be performed, but offerings are to be brought before the Lord.

Commemorating the end of the agricultural and festival year, The Day of Atonement falls on the tenth day of this month, and the Festival of Booths begins on the fifteenth day. Trumpets on first day of the month herald a solemn time of preparation for the Day of Atonement; called "Ten Days of Repentance" or the "Ten Days of Awe." The trumpet sound is a call to introspection and repentance. Atonement is necessary for inclusion in the "Book of Life." (Psalm 69: 27-28, Exodus 32: 30-33)

Better known today as Rosh Hashana, which literally means "head of the year." Jews believe that on this day God created the heavens, the earth, Adam, that

Samuel was born on this day and the first temple was dedicated on this day. "Rosh Hashana" is not found in the Scriptures, but was so named around 200 AD.

Tabernacles/Booths: The Feast of Tabernacles, also known as the Feast of Booths and Sukkot, is the seventh and last feast that the Lord commanded Israel to observe and one of the three feasts that Jews were to observe each year by going to "appear before the Lord your God in the place which He shall choose" (Deuteronomy 16:16). The importance of the Feast of Tabernacles can be seen in how many places it is mentioned in Scripture. In the Bible we see many important events that took place at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles. For one thing, it was at this time that Solomon's Temple was dedicated to the Lord (1 Kings 8:2). It was also during this feast that Ezra proclaimed the Word of God and a great revival occurred among the Israelites (Nehemiah 8), and Jesus said "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water" (John 7:37-39).

This feast usually occurs in late September to mid-October; five days after the Day of Atonement and at the time the fall harvest had just been completed. It is a celebration of God's protection during the 40 years in the wilderness and His continued provision.

Day of Atonement: (Leviticus 23:27-28), also known as Yom Kippur, is the most solemn holy day, held in late September to early October. The high priest performs rituals to atone for the sins of the people (Leviticus 16:1-34). This was not a ceremony to be taken lightly, and the people must understand that atonement for sin is to be done God's way. Two goats were offered as sacrifices for the uncleanness, sin and rebellion of the Israelites. One goat was accepted and its blood was sprinkled on the Ark of the Covenant. The other was released into the wilderness – carrying upon itself all the sins of the people who were being forgiven for one more year.

The goat sent into the wilderness is a symbol of Messiah who took upon himself the sins of all mankind.

Purim: In February/March Jews commemorate being saved from persecution in the ancient Persian Empire (the book of Esther). The Jewish people of the city of Shushan were threatened by the villain Haman, a prime minister who convinces the King Ahasuerus to kill all the Jews. The Jews were saved by the heroic Queen

Esther, Mordecai's niece, who married King Ahasuerus. When Ahasuerus discovers that his wife Esther is Jewish, he decides to reverse Haman's decree, and instead of the Jews being killed, Haman, his sons, and other enemies are killed instead. Queen Esther proclaims an ongoing observance in (Esther 9:20-32).

Hanukkah does not qualify as a God ordained observance. It is a celebration of the Maccabean Jews regaining control of Jerusalem and rededicating the Temple in the 2nd century BC. The book of Maccabees is not considered part of the canonized Old Testament by protestants. Hanukkah is observed for eight nights and days which may occur at any time from late November to late December. It is not commanded by God, though not forbidden. Although a relatively minor holiday in religious terms, it has gained cultural significance due to it occurring around the same time as Christmas.

OK, What Does All This Really Mean?

Long before the Word of God was written on sheepskins and papyrus rolls, God commanded 'His people' to REMEMBER HIM. Each of these celebrations is SYMBOLIC representation of specific things God wants 'His people' to never forget, and to teach following generations. Each of these symbols illustrates what God DID, IS DOING, and WILL DO. His motivation is for faithful, dedicated, obedient followers to set themselves apart from this sin-filled world and hold fast to their God! These celebrations and special feasts are remembrances of the works of God. Look at how Jesus fit into these holy observances.

Jesus was crucified as the "Passover Lamb" and rose from the grave during the "Feast of Firstfruits." Following His resurrection, Jesus spent the next 40 days teaching His disciples before ascending to heaven (Acts 1). **Fifty days** after His resurrection and ascension into heaven to sit at the right hand of God, Jesus sent the "Holy Spirit" as promised (John 14:16–17) to indwell the disciples and empower them for ministry. The promised Holy Spirit arrived on the "Day of Pentecost", which is another name for the "Feast of Weeks."

The spiritual significances of the Feast of Weeks are many. Leaven in Scripture is often symbolic of sin and this is the only feast where leavened bread is used. The two loaves of leavened bread foreshadow the time when the Messiah will make both Jew and Gentile to be ONE in Him (Ephesians 2:14–15). The leavened bread

also illustrates there is still sin within the body of Christ, and will be there until Christ returns.

On the Day of Pentecost, or the Feast of Weeks, the “firstfruits” of the church were gathered by Christ as some 3,000 people heard Peter present the gospel after the Holy Spirit had empowered and indwelt the disciples as promised. With the promised indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the first fruits of God’s spiritual harvest under the New Covenant began. Today that harvest continues as people continue to be saved, but there is also another coming harvest whereby God will again turn His attention back to Israel so that “all of Israel will be saved” (Romans 11:26).

The Feast of Trumpets, along with the other six festivals of the LORD, foreshadowed certain aspects of the ministry of Jesus Christ. The prophets linked the blowing of trumpets to the future Day of Judgment: Joel 2: 1 “Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming. It is close at hand” (Zephaniah 1:14, 16).

In the New Testament, we see that Jesus’ Second Coming will be accompanied by the sound of a trumpet (1 Corinthians 15:51-52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). Each of the judgments in Revelation 8-9 is also signaled by a trumpet. Just as the shofar called the Jewish nation to turn their attention to the Lord and ready themselves for the Day of Atonement, so will the “trump of God” call us to heaven and warn the world of coming judgment.

What all this means is that God commanded the Jewish Holy Days to be observed so that His power, His blessings, and His Messiah would not only be remembered, but continue to be anticipated.

The Book Of Life

The Book of Life occurs in the Old, and New Testament. It is mentioned one time in Philippians (Philippians 4:3) and six times in the book of Revelation (Revelation 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27). It occurs in the Old Testament in Psalm 69, and in Exodus.

The Greek phrase translated as Book of Life is ‘biblion ho zoe’. The first Greek word can be translated as “book, roll, scroll, record” or “the contents of a book.” The second Greek word means “the.” The third Greek word, zoe, means “life” or

“vitality.” Taken together the Book of Life refers to those who will have vitality of life.

During Rosh Hashana/Trumpets, the annual Day of Atonement is anticipated. The observances put strong focus on atoning for one’s sins in order that their name might be recorded in the “Book of the Living.” This book contains the names of all those living upon the earth and the Book of Life contains the names of those who will live in heaven, beyond this life. It is obvious that David understood this when he prayed that God not let his enemies enter heaven and have them die immediately:

Psalm 69: 27 Charge them with crime upon crime; do not let them share in your salvation. 28 May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous.

In Exodus, we see Moses and God discussing the Book:

Exodus 32: 31 So Moses went back to the Lord and said, “Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. 32 But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.” 33 The Lord replied to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. 34 Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of, and my angel will go before you. However, when the time comes for me to punish, I will punish them for their sin.”

For the Christian, it is important to know that God has a record of those whom He will gather into Heaven. Of the Jewish rituals, this is the most serious, and because they reject God’s Messiah, and continue to anticipate His first coming. They must perform this rite each year (under their traditions).

It is extremely unfortunate for the Jew, still living under the old covenant, that they must literally “perform works” to secure their atonement for sin. They give to charities, perform acts of kindness and seek forgiveness of those they have wronged in the attempt to have their names written in The Book of the Living. How sad that they cannot see the atoning sacrifice Jesus made for them, FIRST, and then the Gentiles. How can they not see the significance in the Feast of Weeks in which the two loaves of leavened bread illustrate the time when Messiah will save both Jew and Gentile?

Jesus ushered in a new Covenant and performed the duty of the “Lamb of God” or the “Passover Lamb” who takes away the sins of those who receive Him as God’s Son. The work Jesus did on the cross ONE TIME was, and is, sufficient to atone for all the sin – past and future – for those who come to Him in faith alone.

What About Christian Holy Days?

These Jewish/Old Covenant holy days are not mandated for followers of Jesus Christ, but they can be observed as a remembrance of how Jesus perfectly fulfilled them. Indeed, many “complete Jews,” who have received Jesus as their Savior, continue to worship God with their Jewish family members. Becoming complete in Christ does NOT end, or replace, one’s status as a Jew. It actually fulfills the role of the Jew in History.

There are many Jews who have become Christian, and who pastor Christian congregations. I was a member of such a fellowship. Our pastor took us through many of the Jewish Holy Day observances so that we could understand how carefully God had painted the life and work of His Son upon everything associated with the Jews.

Over the centuries, various Christian churches have instituted holy days (or groups of days). The two most common are Christmas and Easter. Other commonly observed Christian holy days include Lent, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Pentecost, and Advent.

The New Covenant does not advocate the observance of any Christian holy days, but neither does it forbid such observance. This passage in Romans seems to lay down the guiding principle:

Romans 14:5 “One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.”

If a Christian is going to observe a holy day, he/she should be fully convinced that it does not violate God’s Word, that it can be done to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31), and that it would be spiritually beneficial (1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:23).

Ultimately, for the follower of Jesus Christ, every day should be a holy day. Every day of our lives should be set apart to worship God, obey His Word, and live a holy life. That is likely why the New Testament does not advocate specific holy days. Perhaps a good way to put it would be, “For the Christian, there are seven holy days: Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday.”

A Concluding Word About The Sabbath

I did my best to CONDENSE the descriptions of each of the Biblical Holy Days observed by Old Testament, Old Covenant Jews. In each of these rituals is the observance of the Sabbath, so let's focus on that before we conclude. Observing the Sabbath is extremely important to God. It's a day to shift one's focus from the trials and struggles of the world and rest in God's provision. For the faithful, God's blessings abound.

In a time when one's life support came from the work he performed; raising crops, tending animals, preparing food, building shelter – it was a time when stopping to rest for an entire day seemed ludicrous. It was just as crazy as looking at an image of a serpent on a staff to be healed from snake bite, or collecting ONLY the amount of manna one could eat in a day (or the excess would rot). From God's perspective, it was a way of demonstrating that faith in God's provision is fruitful! Putting one's eyes on the things of God meant taking them off the things of the world.

Under “The Law,” the strict observance of the Sabbath was mandated. Jesus was born under that law, and then fulfilled it. Therefore, the Christian has no legal mandate to observe a day per week of no work, and total focus on God.

HOWEVER, the principle of the Sabbath did not go away. Jesus never violated, or failed to observe these Jewish Holy Days. In fact, He honored them and made them more legitimate! God continues to honor the dedication of a day per week of total focus on Him.

We have allowed our social ills to infect us with the drive to run our lives without God. Whether we must work on the yard, or take our kids to sports, or obey the calendar of the schools, or we've just gotten lazy, it seems many Christians struggle to worship God one hour per week, on a Sunday.

How sad. **Mark 2: 27** “**God created the Sabbath for man, not man for the Sabbath.**” That means the one day per week we dedicate to worship is meant for US. Its benefits are OURS. Its blessings upon our families are THEIRS. Yet, the modern Christian seems to have lost sight of that.