

## Deut 16:1-17 The Three Yearly Pilgrimage Feasts/Festivals Reviewed

Deut 16:16 *Three times a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses: at the Feast of **Unleavened Bread**, at the Feast of **Weeks**, and at the Feast of **Tabernacles**...*

Our text today mentions three yearly festivals. They are called “pilgrim” feasts because the Israelites had to make a journey—a pilgrimage—to the central altar to gather for these events. And Moses is reviewing the stipulations of these feasts. He’s already given the rules for these feasts in Lev and Numb, so this is just a review.

Cf. Colossians 2:13–16 ... *He has made [you] alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, 14 having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.... 16 So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths,*

Christians don’t have to be concerned about the OT festivals. We are not under the stipulations and regulations of the OT law. We don’t have to travel to Israel to participate in these feasts three times a year. In fact, no one has kept these feasts according to the biblical pattern since 70 AD, when the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed.

So why bother thinking about these feasts? Why not just skip over them? These events were important for OT Israel, and these feasts still have some connections to NT Christian life. So although we don’t keep these feasts today, we still need to understand why they were important to Israel and what timeless principles they contain.

Let’s look at the three yearly pilgrim feasts and consider what we can learn from them today.

- I. 1-8 Passover—celebration/commemoration of the exodus from Egypt after the death angel “passed over” the houses marked with blood (cf. Ex 12)
  - A. The feast was observed on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the first month of the Jewish religious year (Abib/Nisan—late March or early April) at twilight.  
Jews today still celebrate Passover; they did so just a few weeks ago, about the same time we celebrated Resurrection Sunday.

- B. Each family selects an unblemished lamb, kills it, and roasts and eats it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, and discards any remnants after the meal.
- C. Previously, before entering the PL, Israel conducted the Passover sacrifice in their tents privately. But when they settled down in the PL, they were supposed to gather at the central altar to hold this feast.
- D. .3end Note the purpose for this feast—“that you may remember the day in which you came out of the land of Egypt.” So it’s a feast of remembrance or commemoration; it’s to help them remember a historical event and the significance of that event.
- E. .3end The feast was to be conducted perpetually into the future, “all the days of your life” – this feast was to be commemorated every year.
- F. .8 The Feast of Unleavened Bread followed immediately after Passover and was considered an extension of Passover. During this time, all bread eaten must be unleavened. In fact, all leaven was to be removed from the home (vs. 4). They ate unleavened bread in commemoration of the fact that Israel had to leave Egypt quickly (vs. 3). It also was called the bread of affliction because it reminded them of their slavery in Egypt.

What does the NT do with Passover? Christianity retains some of the connections with this feast.

The Last Supper was a Passover meal. And during this meal, Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper. He took some of the elements of the Passover meal—the bread and the wine—and infused them with new meaning.

The LS is not a continuation of the Passover meal; the LS is different in its meaning and purpose. The Passover meal was held to remember Israel’s exodus from Egypt. The LS is held in remembrance of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross.

Further, the NT shows that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Passover celebration.

1 Cor 5:7 ... *Christ our passover is sacrificed for us:*

Jesus fulfills the OT shadow and type. He is the fulfillment of the lamb who was sacrificed at Passover. That animal was to be an unblemished lamb, which speaks of Christ’s sinlessness. The blood of the Passover lamb was shed, which corresponds to Jesus’ bloody, sacrificial death on the cross. Eating the lamb of the Passover is similar to eating the elements of the LS—Jesus said “this is my body/blood.” So Jesus fulfills the OT Passover symbolism.

There is some historical interest here as well. The Last Supper was likely held on Thursday evening, Nisan 15—probably April 2, 33 AD. That means that Palm Sunday of that week, the day of the triumphal entry—the Sunday before Jesus’ resurrection—would have been the same day that the Jews selected their lambs for the Passover. And that Thursday—the same day as the Last Supper—would have been the day the Jews began slaughtering their lambs for the Passover. So Jesus was crucified on April 3, 33 AD, around the same time that the Passover lambs were being sacrificed. Cf. John 1:29.

Another connection: In 1 Cor 5:6-8, where Paul states that Christ is our Passover, he urges us to “purge out the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened.” Eating unleavened bread is part of Passover. Leavening in this case is seen as sin, and the church must purge out the sin from its midst.

*1Co 5:8 Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened [bread] of sincerity and truth.*

Notice that language—“let us keep the feast.” That does not mean that we actually have to keep the OT feast of Passover, but it means that we purge the leaven out of our lives. And the leaven in view is malice and wickedness. Get rid of such sins and replace them with sincerity and truth. So again the symbolism of Passover reminds us to purify our lives from sin.

Another connection: The bondage of Israel in Egypt is somewhat parallel to the spiritual bondage unbelievers experience under sin before salvation. Unbelievers are captive to the world, the flesh, and the devil. Only after the sinner trusts in Christ can he be set free from this bondage. The Passover feast pictures (generally) salvation and deliverance from sin. We must apply the blood of Christ to ourselves. Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Our faith in Christ and his blood shed for us spares us from spiritual slavery and death.

And one other parallel comes to mind, and that is the importance of community. In fact, that is true of all three of these feasts. After the exodus and during their time wandering in the wilderness, Israel was all together all the time. They lived in close proximity to the central altar. But once they enter the PL, they would be dispersed and widespread. So it was important that all of them come together regularly to re-unite, to fellowship together, and to rejoice in God’s goodness.

Likewise, one of the purposes of the NT church is to bring people into fellowship regularly. We are dispersed throughout most of the week, and we come together on the Lord's Day for fellowship, instruction, and service. The community aspect of the Christian life is very important.

Some of our religious duties can be done at home and in private. But some of our religious duties require us to gather together in assembly at church. The LS is one of those occasions that requires assembly; we cannot conduct the LS at home in private. The LS is a church ordinance; we do not conduct the LS without the assembly of the church.

**Trans:** The feast of Passover was very significant for the OT Jews, and it continues as significant for NT Christians as well. Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us. We are free from the slavery of sin because of his blood shed and applied to us.

- II. .9-12 Pentecost (aka Feast of Weeks, First Fruits, or Harvest)—an annual harvest festival observed seven weeks (50 days) after the second day of the Passover festival (Lev 23:15-21; Num 28:26). The Feast of Weeks would be in May or June of our calendar.

The festival got the name *Pentecost* based on the Greek reading of the terms “fifty days” in Lev 23:16. This was the interval between the beginning of the barley harvest and the end of the wheat harvest.<sup>1</sup>

- A. The Feast of Weeks included a first fruits offering; the farmer would bring some of the first cuttings—the first fruits—of his grain harvest, probably barley, and present it to God. This offering recognized that the whole harvest came from God and ultimately belonged to God.
- B. .10 This freewill offering was based on how God had blessed them. People would give in proportion to their income or harvest.
- C. .11 It was a family celebration, an occasion for rejoicing. The focus of the festival was this feast, in which the family was to celebrate the bountiful blessings and plentiful harvest.
- D. .11end This was to be done at the central altar, not at home. Israel had to assemble for this feast.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward J. Woods, *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, vol. 5, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 212.

- E. .12 It's purpose is to remember that Israel was a slave in Egypt. They lived in poverty as slaves in Egypt, but they would soon have their own land and an abundant harvest from that land. So they should be thankful and rejoice over the blessings God had given them in the PL.

What does the NT do with Pentecost? A couple of interesting connections:

The church began “when the day of Pentecost had fully come” (Acts 2:1). Many people were in Jerusalem at that time because of Pentecost, but the feast itself does not seem to have any significance to the NT church.

Paul may have had the Feast of Weeks in mind in 1 Cor 16 when he tells Christians to give their offerings as the Lord has blessed them (cf. vs. 10end).

Pentecost/Weeks was a time of rejoicing and sharing. Israel was expected to share their harvest with the needy among them—the “the Levite, the stranger and the fatherless and the widow” (.14c). Likewise, the church is responsible to care for those among them who are in need. Further, social status has no bearing in the NT church. All believers in Christ from any social or economic background are welcome.

We further see that proportional giving is a timeless principle that still pertains today. The OT believers gave an offering at Pentecost/Weeks that was a portion of the harvest, a proportion of the abundance that God had given them. Likewise, NT giving ought to be proportional. If God has blessed you with abundant resources, then your giving ought to be abundant. If your resources are small, your giving will likely be small as well. But the timeless principle is that we give proportionally.

**Trans:** So we've looked at Passover and Pentecost/Weeks. The third festival is...

- III. .13-15 Tabernacles (aka Booths or Ingathering/Harvest; *sukkot*)—another harvest festival demonstrating gratitude for God's presence and provision (cf. Ex 16:13-16, 23:16; Lev 23:34-39; Num 29:12f).

- A. The feast began four days after the Day of Atonement, on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of Tirshri (i.e., Sept-Oct), at the end of the grain and grape harvests. It was a seven-day end-of-the-harvest-season celebration held at the central altar.

**Quote:** Whereas the Feast of Weeks marked the [*beginning*] of the harvest season for wheat, the Feast of Tabernacles signified [the *end* of the harvest]. At the same time, almost all other crops of field and orchard matured by this time and were likewise gathered in.<sup>2</sup>

- B. Israel was supposed to gather branches and boughs, build a small booth/tabernacle/hut, and live in it briefly to remind them of their wanderings through the desert after the exodus from Egypt.
- C. The festival extended for seven days and finished with a special Sabbath on the eighth day. Everyone could participate—children, servants, Levite, stranger, orphan, widow—all who are “within your gates.”
- D. This was supposed to be a feast of great celebrating and rejoicing as they enjoy the harvest, life in the Promised Land, and the coming kingdom.

The last part of vs. 15 “you shall surely rejoice” in the original language says literally “only joy/nothing but joy” (רֶגֶזֶן בְּרֵגֶזֶן). It was intended to be a joyful celebration of the Lord’s goodness to them.

What does the NT do with Tabernacles?

There is no NT parallel to the feast of tabernacles. The church never wandered through the desert for 40 years. There are not really many connections to this feast in the NT. As far as I can tell, the feast is mentioned only one time in the NT, and only in passing (John 7:2).

About the closest we get to this feast is our Thanksgiving holiday—our end of the harvest celebration. And of course that is not a biblical holiday; it’s a cultural or historic holiday, but the Bible does not require it. Thanksgiving is a time to thank God for “your produce and all the work of your hands” (vs. 15). It’s a time to rejoice in all of God’s blessings to us.

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<sup>2</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 255.

We should note that these pilgrim feasts held two particular purposes: 1) to rejoice before the Lord because of his goodness to Israel; and 2) to share the blessings with the poor and needy of the land. An offering was collected during these events, and the materials were to be shared by all. All the adult males of the land were expected to attend these feasts (v. 16), and if possible, the whole family and everyone associated with it could come along. Only the males were required to attend, but everyone was welcome and encouraged to attend.

**Quote:** Attending these feasts gave the Israelites opportunity to acknowledge the Lord as their Deliverer and Provider. ... These festivals demonstrated that worshipping God should be a joyful experience in which the participants gratefully share in the bounty of His blessing.<sup>3</sup>

As I mentioned at the beginning, we are not obligated to observe these yearly feasts/festivals. They were required for Israel, but they are not for the church. The church is not Israel.

**Col 2:16** *So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths*

This verse teaches that Christians are not obligated to observe any of these feasts/festivals. God commands the Jews to observe them, but these were not for Gentiles, and not for Christians.

Christians are not under the stipulations and regulations of the OT law. We are under the New Covenant and under the law of Christ. These OT pilgrim feasts simply do not pertain to us directly.

If you are concerned about fulfilling the law, ...

Rom 13:8 ... *he who loves another has fulfilled the law.*

Rom 13:10 *Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.*

We are not under the stipulations and regulations of the OT law. However, as we've seen, there are some interesting parallels between these OT festivals and NT Christianity and church life. The most prominent of these themes are:

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<sup>3</sup> Jack S. Deere, "Deuteronomy," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 291–292.

The ongoing need for assembly. Israel assembled regularly for these feasts. The church began on the Day of Pentecost. Assembly is necessary for the church; the church assembles; the church is an assembly. Christ calls his people to assemble regularly—not three times a year, but every week. We gather weekly to commemorate Jesus' resurrection and to worship, instruct, fellowship, evangelize, and serve. We meet regularly to preach the Word and to make and mature disciples of Jesus Christ. We must not neglect the assembly.

These festivals/feasts were occasions for great celebration and rejoicing. God promised that, if the people would obey his commands, he would bless them with abundant crops and herds. They would have good reasons to celebrate and rejoice. Likewise, most of us have good reasons to rejoice because of the abundance that God has granted us. It is appropriate for us to celebrate and rejoice over God's blessings.

Proportional giving seems to be a timeless principle. Israel was to appear at these festivals with an offering proportional to the abundance of God's blessings. Likewise, we give proportionally. It's appropriate for us to bring an offering with us when we assemble. If God has blessed us abundantly, we ought to give generously.

Perhaps most importantly, Jesus is our Passover; it's through his blood that we are saved. He is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. It's important for us to remember what the Lord has done for us. We have an ongoing ritual that we observe to help us remember the Lord's death—the LS.

*1Co 5:8 Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened [bread] of sincerity and truth.*