

# CELEBRATING OUR JEWISH ROOTS AN OVERVIEW

## Objectives:

- To better understand the teachings of the New Testament by looking at the Jewish feasts and how they interface with and enhance our Christian faith.
- To gain an awareness of the Jewish calendar.
- To present an overview of the class schedule.

## Approach:

*"The train dragged on with human freight. Pressed together like cattle in the crowded trucks, the unfortunate occupants were unable to move. The atmosphere was stifling. As the Friday afternoon wore on, the Jews and Jewesses in the Nazi transport sank deeper and deeper into their misery. Suddenly an old Jewish woman managed with a great effort to move and open a bundle. Laboriously she drew out two candlesticks and two challot. She had just prepared them for the Sabbath when she was dragged from her home that morning. They were the only things she had thought worthwhile taking with her. Soon the Sabbath candles lit up the faces of the tortured Jews and the song of 'Lekhah Dodi' transformed the scene. Sabbath with its atmosphere of peace had descended upon them all."<sup>1</sup>*



*(transition)*

Have you ever wondered what was so special about the Jewish observance of the Sabbath and feast days? Why would an old woman feel that candlesticks and bread were the only worthwhile things she could take to a concentration camp? I can think of many items I would rather have, can't you? And yet, those candlesticks and bread represented more than physical survival to her, they represented spiritual survival and a heritage that has spanned many centuries. I believe it is time that we as believers take a closer look at these special observances because they are part of our heritage as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Grunfield as quoted by Mains, 1987.

## I. WHAT FEASTS DID GOD ORDAIN?

A. **The Hebrew word for feast (mo'ed) means "a set or appointed time."** In Lev. 23 God lists 7 feasts that the Israelites were to observe forever. He refers to these feasts as "my feasts" (Lev. 23:2)--God owns them. These feasts are more than festive occasions, they are solemn appointed times set for us to meet with God. They are memorials to what God has done throughout redemption history.

B. **There are seven feasts that God ordained in Lev. 23.** "Seven" is the number of completion and/or perfection. Let's list some of the "sevens" we see in Scripture:

- *7 days in week,*
- *7 branches of candlestick,*
- *7 seals,*
- *7 trumpets,*
- *7 priests,*
- *7 churches,*
- *7 spirits,*
- *7 stars,*
- *7 years of tribulation,*
- *Book of Revelation uses the number "7" more than 50 times--it records the consumption of the age*

C. **The holidays are divided into two sets: those that occur in the Spring and those that occur in the Fall.**

1. "The two sets of holidays coincide with the two annual seasons of rain in Israel. Spring brings the former rain, the latter rain comes in the fall."<sup>2</sup>
2. Hosea 6:3 points to the two reigns of Jesus: "He will come to us like the rain, like the latter and former rain to the earth." Hosea meant that Jesus would come twice--once in the former rain and once in the latter rain.

D. **The Spring Feasts or the Former Rain**

1. Passover--commemorates Israel's redemption from slavery in Egypt.
2. Unleavened Bread--the second seder of the Passover week of observance
3. Firstfruits--celebrates the early Spring harvest. It occurs on the Sunday after Passover.
4. Pentecost--celebrates the summer harvest

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<sup>2</sup> Hagee, 1999.

### E. The Fall Feasts or the Latter Rain

1. Rosh Hashanah--the Jewish feast of the civil new year
2. Yom Kippur--most revered day of all the Jewish holy days
3. Tabernacles--celebrates the Fall harvest of ingathering.  
*The Puritans modeled the American holiday of Thanksgiving after this feast.*

**F. Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles are the pilgrimage feasts.** Every male had to observe these feasts in Jerusalem. Deut. 16:16-17



*King's Highway  
From Jericho to Jerusalem—a pilgrimage route*

**G. Other holidays have been added to the Jewish calendar over the years.** We will look at two during this class: Purim and Hanukkah. These two feasts are found in the Bible and were added to commemorate important historical events.

## II. WHY STUDY THESE CELEBRATIONS?

### A. Jesus observed them.

1. He and His disciples walked 75 miles from Galilee to Jerusalem at least 3 times a year (for the pilgrimage feasts) to celebrate in the temple.
2. He more than kept the Law regarding feasts. John 10:22 records His presence at a minor feast where attendance was not required (the Feast of Dedication -- Hanukkah).

### B. We can understand the Bible more completely.

1. Most of Scripture came to us through the mouths of Jews. In order to fully appreciate a lot of the NT, we need to understand the context in which it was written. Many times, that context involved Jewish feasts and holidays.

2. Without an understanding of Jewish customs relative to these sacred days, we do not fully comprehend the depth of meaning in many NT teachings. Example: John 7:37-39

On the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles the priest went down to the pool of Siloam and drew a pitcher of water. He then poured it out in the temple as the people prayed for rain for the following year's harvest and also the latter rain of the Holy Spirit.



*Path from temple to Pool of Siloam  
Model of Jerusalem during time of Christ*

**C. We can have a deeper appreciation for the Lord's Supper.**

1. The sacrament of communion comes from Jesus' last supper which was a Passover Seder.
2. By understanding the historical and cultural significance of Passover, we can more fully appreciate the concept of Jesus, the Lamb of God who took away the sins of the world.

**D. We can develop new traditions that will help preserve our homes.**

1. It is said that the Sabbath has preserved the Jews through years of persecution and dispersal. Their observance of the Sabbath has preserved them rather than they preserving the Sabbath.
2. What is preserving our homes?

**E. We can be better prepared to witness to our Jewish friends.** A missionary studies the cultural distinctives of the people group to whom he is ministering. These feasts are part of the cultural distinctives of the Jewish people.

**F. We will be better prepared for heaven.**

1. Matt. 26:29 tells us that we will celebrate Passover with Jesus in heaven.
2. Zech. 14:16-18 indicates that the whole world will go to Jerusalem to observe the Feast of Tabernacles during the millennial reign of Jesus.

### III. THE JEWISH CALENDAR

**"A Jew's calendar is his catechism.' One could teach all of Jewish history and dogma through the Jewish calendar."**<sup>3</sup>

**A. The year: "In Biblical times, years were identified according to historical happenings--i.e. 'in the year King Uzziah died.'"**<sup>4</sup>

1. Creation is the starting point for the Jewish year. It has been determined that the exact year of creation was 3761 B.C.E. (Before the common era) Jews do not use B.C. and A.D. for that implies accepting Jesus as Messiah. They use C.E. common era and B.C.E. before the common era.
2. Thus 1999 on the Jewish calendar is seen as 5759 (3761 + 1998 = 5759). 5760 begins on September 10.

**B. The month: The Jewish calendar is a lunar rather than solar one.**

1. It is based on the phases of the moon instead of on the earth's revolutions around the sun.
2. Thus there are 12 lunar months of 29 or 30 days.
3. "In order to reconcile the lunar calendar to the solar year, every 19 years a second month of Adar must be added in seven different leap years." <sup>5</sup>

**C. The day: it begins at sundown or when the moon rises.**

1. *Gen. 1:5 "So the evening and the morning were the first day."*
2. Monday actually begins on Sunday evening at sunset.

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<sup>3</sup> Greenberg, 1983.

<sup>4</sup> Hagee, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

## IV. HOW CAN WE INTEGRATE JEWISH OBSERVANCE WITH OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH?

### A. God intended for the NT church to be comprised of Jews and Gentiles.

Ephesians 2:11-22 teaches that Christ came to bring Jews and Gentiles together into one body. His new covenant was thoroughly rooted in the old covenant and we should have "grown up" knowing about these important feasts.

*"We study a Hebrew book--written by Hebrews; we serve a Hebrew Lord--who had Hebrew disciples; we desire to follow the first century church--which was first predominately Hebrew; and through Christ, we are grafted into a Hebrew family! It makes sense to study the Hebrew culture."*<sup>6</sup>

### B. Recognize the continuum of church history reflected in these feasts.

1. "If you want to understand what God will do in the future, look to what He has done in the past."<sup>7</sup>
2. Four of these 7 feasts have already found their fulfillment in Christ:
  - a. Passover: Jesus' crucifixion -- the Lamb of God
  - b. Unleavened Bread -- Jesus' burial
  - c. Firstfruits -- Jesus' resurrection
  - d. Pentecost -- the birth of the church
3. The final three feasts have yet to find their fulfillment in the church age. Many believe that future eschatological events will occur around these feasts:
  - a. Rosh Hashanah -- rapture of the church
  - b. Yom Kippur -- judgment
  - c. Tabernacles -- the millennium

### C. Study the New Testament looking through the lenses of the customs surrounding these feasts.

1. Blessing of children -- Matt. 19:13-15 -- this was a common occurrence in Jewish homes. It occurred each Sabbath. The children Jesus blessed knew what He was doing--their father recited those same blessings to them weekly.



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<sup>6</sup> Scarlata, 1997

<sup>7</sup> Hagee, 1999.

2. Whitewashing of tombs -- this important preparation was done prior to Passover. Many people crowded into Jerusalem during Jesus' time to observe Passover. Without hotels and condos, they resorted to staying with friends and camping in caves. Since many caves were used as burial sites and coming into contact with a dead person made one unclean, the practice was to whitewash the tombs just before Passover so visiting worshippers would not wander into a tomb inadvertently. In Matt. 23:27-28, Jesus compares the Pharisees to these whitewashed tombs--pretty on the outside but defiled on the inside.
3. Rabbis have determined that Pentecost falls on the anniversary of the giving of the 10 commandments to Moses. When the Holy Spirit came on the believers during Pentecost, it was the birthday of the church. Isn't it interesting that the Spirit came on the anniversary of the day the Law came?

**D. Build new traditions around these feasts into our families and thus preserve them.**

Conclusion:

*"But in these last days, God is doing a marvelous thing. He is breaking down the walls of . . . misunderstanding that have divided the Jew and Gentile believers. (Just as He is tearing down the walls between black and white and other discriminations.) He is sovereignly pouring out His Spirit on thousands of Jews to prepare them for the coming of the Messiah. At the same time, God is stirring in the hearts of Christians a holy love for the Jewish people and awakening them to the Jewish roots of their Christian faith. Many Christians are realizing that the origin of our faith is Jerusalem, not Athens, Rome, Geneva, Wittenberg, Aldersgate, Azusa Street, Springfield, Nashville, Tulsa, etc. As a result, Christian churches around the world are reaching out to the Jewish people in their communities, singing songs from the Old Testament, rediscovering their Jewish roots and celebrating the Jewish holidays as fulfilled in Jesus. It is clearly God's appointed time to reconcile Jew and Gentile, binding us together by His Spirit in the Messiah."*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Booker as quoted by Scarlata, 1997.

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