

# BEYOND TODAY

A Magazine of Understanding

March-April 2023

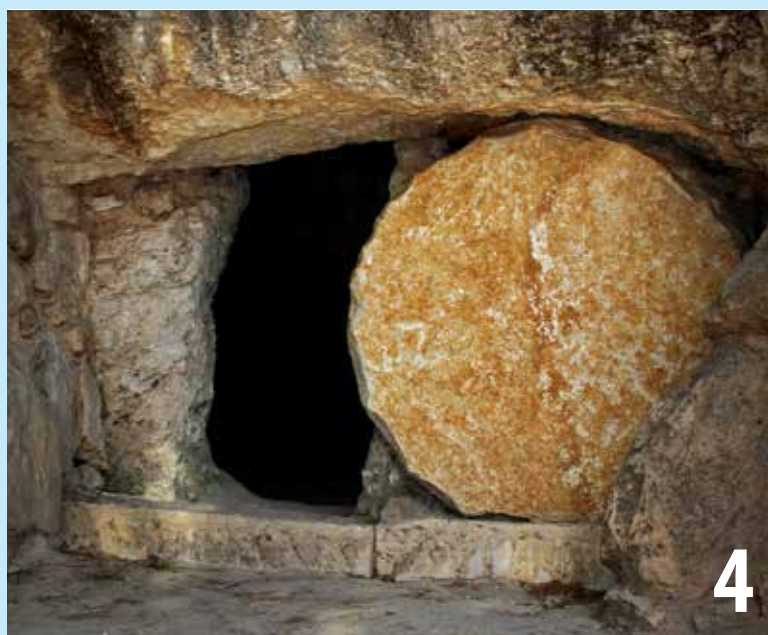
## Good Friday + Easter Sunday: *It Doesn't Add Up!*

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# Does It Really Matter to God?



**Scott Ashley**  
Managing editor

**T**his time of year should remind us of the incredible story of God's deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. God's intention was that they be a model to other nations, showing the blessings that would come from obeying Him (see Deuteronomy 4:1-9). For this reason, God gave them specific instructions on how to worship Him.

But while Moses went up Mt. Sinai to receive further instructions, rather than faithfully obeying God the Israelites came up with their own "better idea"! They constructed a golden calf to help celebrate "a feast to the LORD" (Exodus 32:5). They brought offerings, feasted and "indulged in pagan revelry" (verse 6, New Living Translation). They disobeyed God and mixed the pagan worship they had learned in Egypt with directions they had received from God.

What was God's reaction to this? He told Moses: "Go down the mountain! Your people whom you brought from the land of Egypt *have corrupted themselves. How quickly they have turned away from the way I commanded them to live!*" (verses 7-8, NLT, emphasis added throughout).

God clearly expects a higher standard from those who say they follow Him. He desires that His people worship Him "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23-24)—not by taking idolatrous pagan practices and relabeling them as somehow honoring the true God.

How angry was God at their actions? His "*fierce anger . . . blaze[d] against them*" and He determined to destroy them (verses 9-10). Only after Moses pleaded with Him did God spare them (verses 11-14).

So how did the Israelites' decision to mix pagan practices with God's instruction turn out? As punishment for this "great sin" (verses 30-31), *3,000 Israelites perished* (verses 27-28). Their experiment was a disaster!

The apostle Paul explained that their experiences are a continuing example for us and "were written down to warn us who live at the end of the age" (1 Corinthians 10:1-11, NLT).

Their example indeed holds important lessons for Christians today. That compromising generation that worshiped the golden calf never learned to faithfully obey God. They would wander in the wilderness for 40 years until they died off (Numbers 14:33-35) and God could then work with another generation.

Part of the explicit instructions God would give them


and their descendants was a clear warning against incorporating pagan practices and traditions into their worship: "When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, *take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them*, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you *do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.'*"

*"You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it"* (Deuteronomy 12:29-32).

Tragically, they would still not heed God's instruction. Again and again they relapsed into adopting idolatrous pagan practices. After warning upon warning from God's prophets, His patience ran out. Eventually the nation divided and was invaded, and the people were ultimately taken into foreign captivity—first by the Assyrian Empire and later by the Babylonian Empire (2 Kings 17:7-20).

In spite of this tragic history, millions of people today think the prohibitions against mixing pagan practices with worship of the true God were annulled by Jesus Christ and/or the early Church. This is a dangerous and poisonous lie! Notice what the apostle Paul wrote to God's people in Corinth, a city steeped in paganism and idolatrous practices, regarding whether such things have any place among God's people:

*"What fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with [the devil]? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? . . . Therefore 'Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you . . . ' Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God"* (2 Corinthians 6:14-18; 7:1).

Does it really matter to God? *Absolutely, it does.* This time of year is a stark reminder that, like the ancient Israelites, we have a choice. Will we follow God or human tradition? The articles in this issue will help give you the knowledge, wisdom and courage to worship God "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23-24). 

# Good Friday + Easter Sunday: *It Doesn't Add Up!*

How can we fit three days and three nights between a Friday afternoon crucifixion and an Easter Sunday sunrise? The fact is, *we can't*. So what is the truth about when Jesus was crucified and resurrected?

by Scott Ashley

**A**bout one billion Protestants and another billion Catholics believe that Jesus Christ was crucified and entombed on a Friday afternoon—"Good Friday"—and raised to life again at daybreak on Easter Sunday morning, a day and a half later.

Yet when we compare this to what Jesus Himself said about how long He would be in the tomb, we find a major contradiction. How long did Jesus say He would be in the grave? "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, *so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth*" (Matthew 12:40, emphasis added throughout).

The context in which Jesus Christ said these words is important. The scribes and Pharisees were demanding a miraculous sign from Him to prove that He was indeed the long-awaited Messiah. "But He answered and said to them, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and *no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah*'" (verse 39).

This was the *only* specific sign Jesus gave that He was the promised Messiah: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, *so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.*"

## Traditional timing doesn't add up

The Gospels are clear that Jesus died and His body was hurriedly placed in the tomb late in the afternoon, just before sundown marking the beginning of a Sabbath (John 19:30-42).

By the traditional "Good Friday–Easter Sunday" timing, from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown is one night and one day. Saturday night to Sunday daybreak is another night, giving us a total of two nights and one day. So where do we get another night and two days to equal the three days and three nights Jesus said He would be in the tomb?

This is definitely a problem. Most theologians and reli-

gious scholars try to work around it by arguing that any part of a day or night counts as a day or night. Thus, they say, the final few minutes of that Friday afternoon were the first day, all day Saturday was the second day, and the first few minutes of Sunday morning were the third day.

Sounds reasonable, some conclude.

The trouble is, *it just doesn't work*. That only adds up to three days and *two* nights, not three days and *three* nights.

Also, John 20:1 tells us that "on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early, *while it was still dark*, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb."

Did you catch the problem here? John tells us *it was still dark* when Mary went to the tomb on Sunday morning and found it empty. Jesus was *already resurrected well before daybreak*. Thus He wasn't in the tomb *any* of the daylight portion of Sunday, so none of that can be counted as a day!

That leaves us with, at most, part of a day on Friday, all of Friday night, a whole daylight portion on Saturday, and most of Saturday night. That totals one full day and part of another, and one full night and most of another—still *at least a full day and a full night short* of the time Jesus said He would be in the tomb!

Clearly something doesn't add up. Either Jesus mis-spoke about the length of time He would be in the tomb, or the "Good Friday–Easter Sunday" timing is not biblical or accurate.

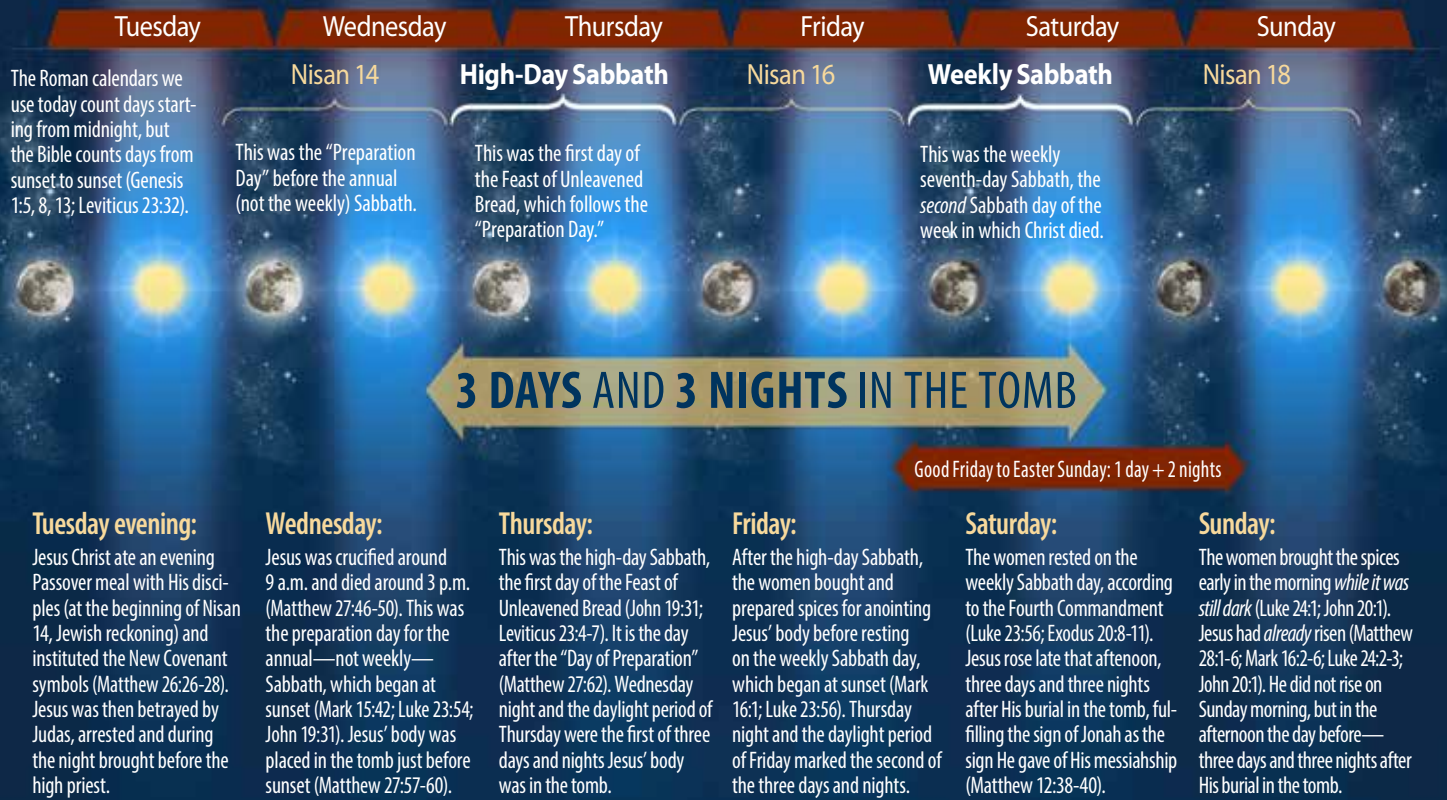
Obviously both cannot be true. So which one is right?

## God-given time reckoning is the key

The key to understanding the timing of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection lies in understanding God's timetable for counting when days begin and end, as well as the timing of His biblical festivals during the spring of the year when these events took place. It's not hard to figure



# The Biblical Chronology of Jesus Christ's Burial and Resurrection



## Tuesday evening:

Jesus Christ ate an evening Passover meal with His disciples (at the beginning of Nisan 14, Jewish reckoning) and instituted the New Covenant symbols (Matthew 26:26-28). Jesus was then betrayed by Judas, arrested and during the night brought before the high priest.

## Wednesday:

Jesus was crucified around 9 a.m. and died around 3 p.m. (Matthew 27:46-50). This was the preparation day for the annual—not weekly—Sabbath, which began at sunset (Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54; John 19:31). Jesus' body was placed in the tomb just before sunset (Matthew 27:57-60).

## Thursday:

This was the high-day Sabbath, the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (John 19:31; Leviticus 23:4-7). It is the day after the "Day of Preparation" (Matthew 27:62). Wednesday night and the daylight period of Thursday were the first of three days and nights Jesus' body was in the tomb.

## Friday:

After the high-day Sabbath, the women bought and prepared spices for anointing Jesus' body before resting on the weekly Sabbath day, which began at sunset (Mark 16:1; Luke 23:56). Thursday night and the daylight period of Friday marked the second of the three days and nights.

## Saturday:

The women rested on the weekly Sabbath day, according to the Fourth Commandment (Luke 23:56; Exodus 20:8-11). Jesus rose late that afternoon, three days and three nights after His burial in the tomb, fulfilling the sign of Jonah as the sign He gave of His messiahship (Matthew 12:38-40).

## Sunday:

The women brought the spices early in the morning *while it was still dark* (Luke 24:1; John 20:1). Jesus had *already* risen (Matthew 28:1-6; Mark 16:2-6; Luke 24:2-3; John 20:1). He did not rise on Sunday morning, but in the afternoon the day before—three days and three nights after His burial in the tomb.

out when we look closely at what the Bible says.

We first need to realize that God doesn't begin and end days at midnight as we now do. That is a humanly devised method of counting time. Genesis 1:5 tells us quite plainly that God counts a day as beginning with the evening (the night portion) and ending at the next evening: "So the evening [nighttime] and the morning [daylight] were the first day." God repeats this formula for the entire six days of creation.

In Leviticus 23, where God lists all of His holy Sabbaths and festivals, He makes it clear that they are to be observed "from evening to evening" (Leviticus 23:32)—in other words, from sunset to sunset, when the sun went down and evening began.

This is why Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, followers of Jesus, hurriedly placed His body in Joseph's nearby tomb just before sundown (John 19:39-42). A Sabbath was beginning at sundown (John 19:31), when work would have to cease.

## Two kinds of "Sabbaths" lead to confusion

As John tells us in John 19:31: "Therefore, because it was the Preparation Day, that the bodies [of those crucified] should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken [to hasten death], and that they might be taken away."

In the Jewish culture of that time, the chores of cooking and housecleaning were done on the day before a Sabbath to avoid working on God's designated day of rest. Thus the day before the Sabbath was commonly referred to as the "preparation day." Clearly the day on which Christ was crucified and His body placed in the tomb was the day immediately preceding a Sabbath.

The question is, *which* Sabbath?

Most people assume John is speaking of the regular weekly Sabbath day, observed from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset. From John's clear statement here, most people assume Jesus died and was buried on a Friday—thus the traditional belief that Jesus was crucified and died on "Good Friday."

Most people have no idea that the Bible talks about *two kinds* of Sabbath days—the normal weekly Sabbath day that falls on the seventh day of the week (not to be confused with Sunday, which is the *first* day of the week), and seven *annual* Sabbath days, listed in Leviticus 23 and mentioned in various passages throughout the Bible, that could fall on *any* day of the week.

Because traditional Christianity long ago abandoned these biblical annual Sabbath days (as well as the weekly Sabbath), for many centuries people have failed to recognize what the Gospels plainly tell us about when Jesus Christ was crucified and resurrected—and why "Good Friday–Easter Sunday" never happened that way.

Most people fail to note that John explicitly tells us that the Sabbath that began at sundown immediately after Jesus was entombed was one of these *annual* Sabbath days. Notice in John 19:31 his explanation that “that Sabbath was a *high day*”—“high day” being a term used to differentiate the seven annual Sabbaths from the regular weekly Sabbath days.

So what was this “high day” that immediately followed Jesus Christ’s hurried entombment?

The Gospels tell us that on the evening before Jesus was condemned and crucified, He kept the Passover with His disciples (Matthew 26:19-20; Mark 14:16-17; Luke 22:13-15). This means He was crucified on the Passover day.

Leviticus 23, which lists God’s festivals, tells us that on the day after the Passover a separate festival, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, begins (Leviticus 23:5-6). The first day of this Feast is “a holy convocation” on which “no customary work” is to be done (Leviticus 23:7).

This day is the first of God’s annual Sabbaths in the year. This is the “high day” of which John wrote. Several Bible commentaries, encyclopedias and dictionaries note that John is referring to an annual Sabbath here rather than the regular weekly Sabbath day.

Passover began at sundown and ended the following day at sundown, when this annual Sabbath began. Jesus kept the Passover with His disciples, then was arrested later that night. After daybreak the next morning He was questioned before Pontius Pilate, crucified, then hurriedly entombed just before the next sunset when the “high day,” the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, began.

It should be noted that the Jews often generically

referred to the whole Feast of Unleavened Bread as “Passover,” explaining why the day of Christ’s trials and crucifixion is even called “the Preparation Day of the Passover” (John 19:14)—that is, of the first Holy Day or annual Sabbath of the Passover week.

Leviticus 23 tells us the order and timing of these days, and the Gospels confirm the order of events as they unfolded.

### Jesus crucified on Wednesday, not Friday

It can be shown that in the year Jesus was crucified the Passover meal must have been eaten on Tuesday night and that Wednesday sundown marked the beginning of the “high day,” the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Jesus, then, was crucified and entombed on a *Wednesday* afternoon, not on *Friday*. Proof of this can be found in the Gospels themselves.

Let’s turn to a seldom-noticed detail in Mark 16:1: “Now *when the Sabbath was past*, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, that they might come and anoint Him.”

In that time, if the body of a loved one was placed in a tomb rather than being buried directly in the ground, friends and family would commonly place aromatic spices in the tomb alongside the body to reduce the smell as the remains decayed.

Since Jesus’ body was placed in the tomb just before that high-day Sabbath began, the women had no time to buy those spices before the Sabbath. Also, they could not have purchased them on the Sabbath day, as shops were closed. Thus, Mark says, they bought the spices *after the Sabbath*—

## Centuries-Old Documents Show Evidence for a Wednesday Crucifixion

**D**id you know there is additional historical evidence for a Wednesday crucifixion? Although it was a minority position and ran against the prevailing teachings of the Roman church, some early historical documents acknowledge a Tuesday night Passover, a Wednesday crucifixion and a Saturday afternoon resurrection—matching the biblical record.

Around the year 200, a document purporting to pass on apostolic instruction, called the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, mentions that the last Passover of Jesus Christ and His disciples was on a Tuesday night.

This document states: “For when we had eaten the Passover *on the third day* of the week at even [Tuesday evening], we went forth to the Mount of Olives; and in the night they seized our Lord Jesus. And the next day, which was the *fourth* of the week [Wednesday], He remained in ward in the house of Caiaphas the high priest” (emphasis added throughout).

Paradoxically, the text goes on to mention that Jesus was crucified on a Friday—showing great confusion about the dates, for the biblical account clearly states that Christ was crucified in the daylight period following the night of that Passover meal and arrest. Nonetheless, the document demonstrates that Passover was then understood by some to have been on Tuesday evening, which would place the crucifixion on the next day, Wednesday.

Epiphanius (A.D. 367-403), the bishop at Salamis, wrote that “Wednesday and Friday are days of fasting up to the ninth hour because, *as Wednesday began* the Lord was arrested and on Friday he was crucified.” As we can see, even though the prevailing view was that Friday was the day of the crucifixion, Wednesday was known as the day of Christ’s arrest (happening as it did in the early predawn hours that day).

By the fifth century, Easter Sunday celebrations were widespread. However, a church histo-

rian of the time named Socrates notes in a section of his history titled “Differences of Usage in Regard to Easter” that some Christians celebrated the resurrection *on the Sabbath* rather than on Sunday. As he put it, “Others in the East kept that feast on the *Sabbath* indeed.”

Bishop Gregory of Tours (538-594), although himself believing in a Sunday resurrection, noted that many believed Jesus rose *on the seventh day of the week*, stating, “In our belief the resurrection of the Lord was on the first day, and *not on the seventh as many deem.*”

So rather than a monolithic acceptance of the Good Friday–Easter Sunday scenario, there was confusion about the timing of Christ’s crucifixion in early centuries. Moreover, these historical records show that a minority of Christians during that time understood the biblical timing of a Tuesday evening Passover, a Wednesday crucifixion and a late Saturday afternoon resurrection.

—Mario Seiglie

“when the Sabbath was past.”

But notice another revealing detail in Luke 23:55-56: “And the women who had come with [Christ] from Galilee followed after, and they observed the tomb and how His body was laid. Then they returned and prepared spices and fragrant oils. *And they rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment.*”

Do you see a problem here? Mark clearly states that the women bought the spices *after* the Sabbath—“when the Sabbath was past.” Luke tells us that the women prepared the spices and fragrant oils, after which “*they rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment.*”

So they bought the spices *after* the Sabbath, and then they prepared the spices *before resting on* the Sabbath. This would be a clear contradiction between these two Gospel accounts—unless *two* Sabbaths were involved!

Indeed when we understand that *two different Sabbaths* are mentioned, the problem goes away.

Mark tells us that after the “high day” Sabbath, which that year must have begun Wednesday evening at sundown and ended Thursday evening at sundown, the women bought the spices to anoint Jesus’ body. Luke then tells us that the women prepared the spices—activity which would have taken place on Friday—and that afterward “*they rested on the Sabbath* [the normal weekly Sabbath day, observed Friday sunset to Saturday sunset] *according to the commandment.*”

By comparing details in both accounts along with a proper understanding of three days and three nights, we can clearly see that two different Sabbaths are mentioned along with a workday—Friday—in between. The first Sabbath was a “high day”—the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which fell on a Thursday that year. The second was the weekly seventh-day Sabbath.

The original Greek in which the Gospels were written also plainly tells us that two Sabbath days were

involved in these accounts. In Matthew 28:1, where Matthew writes that the women went to the tomb “after the Sabbath,” the word *Sabbath* here is actually *plural* and should be translated “*Sabbaths.*” Bible versions such as Alfred Marshall’s Interlinear Greek-English New Testament, Green’s Literal Translation, Young’s Literal Translation and Ferrar Fenton’s Translation make this clear.

### When was Jesus resurrected?

We have seen, then, that Jesus Christ was crucified and entombed on a Wednesday, just before an *annual* Sabbath began—not the weekly Sabbath. So when was He resurrected?

John 20:1, as noted earlier, tells us that “on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early, *while it was still dark*, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.” The sun had not yet risen—“*it was still dark,*” John tells us—when Mary found the tomb empty.

Obviously, then, Jesus was not resurrected at sunrise on Sunday morning. So when did that happen? The answer is plain if we simply read the Gospels—especially Jesus Christ’s own words—and accept them for what they say.

“For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, *so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth,*” said Jesus (Matthew 12:40).

As we have seen, Jesus must have been entombed—placed “in the heart of the earth”—just before sundown on a Wednesday. All we have to do is count forward. One day and one night brings us to Thursday at sundown. Another day and night brings us to Friday at sundown. A third day and night

brings us to Saturday at sundown.

According to Jesus Christ’s own words, He would have emerged from the grave three days and nights after He was entombed, at around the same time—near sunset. Does this fit with the Scriptures? Yes—as we have seen, He was already risen and the tomb empty when Mary arrived “while it was still dark” on Sunday morning.

While no one was around to witness His resurrection (which took place inside a sealed tomb watched over by armed guards), Jesus Christ’s own words and the details recorded in the Gospels show that it had to have happened three days and three nights after His burial, near sunset at the end of the weekly Sabbath.

Try as one might, it is impossible to fit three days and three nights between a late Friday burial and a Sunday morning resurrection. The Good Friday–Easter Sunday tradition simply isn’t true or biblical. But when we look at all the details recorded in the Gospels and compare them with Jesus’ own words, we can see the truth—and it matches perfectly.

The words of the angel of God, who so startled the women at the empty tomb, are proven true: “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; *he has risen, just as he said*” (Matthew 28:5-6, New International Version).

Let’s not cling to religious traditions and ideas that aren’t supported by Scripture. Be sure that your own beliefs and practices are firmly rooted in the Bible. Are you willing to make a commitment to worship God according to biblical truth rather than human tradition? **BT**

### LEARN MORE



What you have read here is only part of the story. For how did Easter come to be such a popular holiday if Jesus wasn’t resurrected on Sunday? And how did such curious symbols as rabbits and brightly painted eggs come to be associated with the day? To discover the rest of the story, download or request our free study guide *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?*

**[BTmagazine.org/booklets](http://BTmagazine.org/booklets)**



# What Does the Feast of Unleavened Bread Mean for Christians?

Central to our understanding of the biblical Feast of Unleavened Bread is the realization that the resurrected Jesus Christ lives His life in every individual Christian.

by Vince Szymkowiak

**G**rowing numbers of Christians around the world are discovering and celebrating the biblical festivals outlined in Leviticus 23. By looking at the symbolism associated with these days, they are coming to view them in light of the life and mission of Jesus Christ.

After all, Jesus Christ Himself commenced the acting out of the plan of salvation by becoming our sacrificial Passover lamb. As the apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 5:7, “For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us” (compare Isaiah 53:7-9; 1 Peter 1:18-19). Furthermore, Jesus started His Church on another of these festivals, the Feast of Pentecost (Acts 2). He must have considered them important.

During the spring of the year (March-April in the northern hemisphere), immediately after Passover and weeks before the Feast of Pentecost, falls another biblical feast—the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23:6-8; Exodus 12:17-18). Here we’ll take a brief look at the greatest event to have ever taken

place during this feast—and what it means for Christians today.

## **The greatest among several great events**

Some might say that the Exodus from the slavery of Egypt, which also took place immediately after Passover during the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Numbers 33:3), was the greatest event to have ever happened during this spring festival.

Others might view the crossing of the Red Sea, which is traditionally assigned to the last day of Unleavened Bread, as another of the great festival events. This crossing signified that Israel was, at long last, finally free from Egyptian domination. Freedom was then a reality. Later, after Israel entered the Promised Land, the miraculous conquest of Jericho apparently took place over the seven days of this same feast.

Other great Unleavened Bread events involved rededicating of the people of God to their Creator. Two examples are recorded in 2 Chronicles. Chapters 29 through 31 describe the return to godly worship led by King Hezekiah, and chapters 34 and 35 tell of another under King Josiah. These chapters reveal the tremendous excitement and joy God’s people felt as they recommitted themselves to Him (2 Chronicles 30:21-23; 35:17-18).

But one other event that took place during the Days of Unleavened Bread is much greater in its ultimate impact than any of these wonderful events. That event is the resurrection of Jesus Christ!

We know that Jesus was crucified on the day before a Sabbath, as John 19:31 tells us. While most people assume that the Sabbath mentioned here was the regular weekly Sabbath



day (observed Friday sunset to Saturday sunset), John plainly tells us that this particular Sabbath “was a high day”—a term used for the seven annual Holy Days that were part of God’s festivals.

A careful reading of the Gospels shows that this “high day” was the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, a Holy Day (Leviticus 23:2, 6-7) that can fall on a weekday.

Jesus remained in the grave for three days and three nights, just as He had promised (Matthew 12:40). It is impossible to reconcile Jesus’ statement in Matthew 12 with the idea of a Friday afternoon crucifixion followed by a Sunday morning resurrection. (See the chart on page 5.)

Three days and three nights from the time of His entombment, just before the beginning of the first Holy Day of Unleavened Bread, brings us to near sunset ending the weekly Sabbath, still during the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread, as the time when Jesus was resurrected.

In actuality there was no Sunday morning resurrection. It happened the afternoon before. But on that Sunday it

**At the core of the meaning of this feast is the truth that the resurrected Jesus Christ now lives His life in every individual Christian!**

was made known, and word spread quickly that the tomb was empty and that He had appeared first to Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-18) and then to other followers.

### The greatest event in human history

Now, if we were followers of Jesus in Jerusalem at the time of His crucifixion and then were told that He had been resurrected, what would be the topic of our conversation for the rest of the spring festival? What would be in your thoughts? Undoubtedly we would all be thinking about the greatest event to have ever taken place in the history of humanity, the very statement of the angel: “He is risen!” (Matthew 28:6-7).

These Days of Unleavened Bread marked a turning point in the way the spring festival was to be celebrated down through the ages. Yes, Christians would still recall the Exodus, the coming out of Egypt, as a type of redemption from sin and release from the bondage of Satan. There would still be an emphasis on eating unleavened bread as a physical reminder that we are to become spiritually unleavened by removing sin from our lives.

But at the very center of it all—at the very core of the meaning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread—is the all-encompassing truth that the resurrected Jesus Christ, the One who was raised during this spring festival, now lives His life in every individual Christian!

Jesus repeatedly emphasized the importance of His own resurrection. During the last supper, He told the disciples that He would soon be betrayed, but He also told

them that He would live again: “Because I live, you will live also” (John 14:19). He had just promised them that Christians would not be left as orphans (verse 18)—that is, spiritually unprotected and totally vulnerable to the power of Satan.

He stated that both the Father and He would live in the hearts and minds of Christians by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (verses 20-26). Since the resurrected Jesus Christ now lives in us, we are given the strength to conquer our sins. This new life, now made possible by the living Christ, empowers us to overcome “the sin which so easily ensnares us” (Hebrews 12:1).

### Symbolism of unleavened bread

Part of God’s instruction for the Days of Unleavened Bread is to put leavened bread products out of our homes (Exodus 12:15-16). The apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 5:8, encouraged the mostly gentile church there to “*keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness [lingering sinful attitudes], but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth*”—a clear reference to the Feast of Unleavened Bread (emphasis added).

Paul recognized that the unleavened bread of this feast is symbolic of sincerity and truth, which should be hallmarks of the life of every Christian. He also understood that leaven during this time symbolized sin, and this feast pictures our need to make every effort to eliminate it completely from our lives.

The truly great story about the Days of Unleavened Bread is the story of the resurrected Christ living His life in those of us who have truly repented of living in sin and have received God’s Holy Spirit! This empowers us to overcome sins in a way that previously was simply not possible.

Yes, the Feast of Unleavened Bread is a festival that helps us to focus on replacing sin with righteousness. But the only real way to put sin *out* of our lives is to put Jesus Christ *into* our lives! We are promised that we can truly put sin out of our lives because Jesus Christ lives within us (compare Galatians 2:20; Romans 7:23–8:4).

### What it takes to overcome sin

Paul tells us in Romans 13:12 that we are to “put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light” (New International Version). He then lists the “deeds of darkness” as sins such as revelry, drunkenness, lewdness, lust, strife and envy. Then in verse 14 he shows the way to conquer such sins—by being clothed “with the Lord Jesus Christ” (NIV).

In our struggles against sin, not only during the Days of Unleavened Bread but throughout the entirety of our lives, we can choose to fight on our own strength or we can surrender our will to God and rely on the risen Christ

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Who's behind the *Beyond Today* magazine and television program? Many readers have wondered who we are and how we are able to provide *Beyond Today* free to all who request it. Simply put, *Beyond Today* is provided by people—people from all walks of life, from all over the world, as enabled by God.



These people have a common goal—to proclaim the gospel of the coming Kingdom of God to all the world and to teach all nations to observe what Christ commanded (Matthew 24:14; 28:19-20).



We are dedicated to proclaiming the same message Jesus Christ brought—the wonderful good news of the coming Kingdom of God (Matthew 4:23; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:43; 8:1). That message truly is good news—the answer to all the problems that have long plagued humankind.

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who lives His life in us through the power of the Holy Spirit. With this kind of power working against our sins, the very “power of His resurrection” (Philippians 3:10), we can say with Paul, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

We can struggle all alone, or we can rely on the power of the only One who never once sinned, Jesus Christ. He tells each of us as sinners, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). He encourages us to place our yokes and burdens on His powerful shoulders to find spiritual rest, saying, “My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (verses 29-30).

He promises that His faithful followers will never perish, nor will anyone be able to take them from His hand, because it is He who gives eternal life (John 10:27-28). We follow His instructions by coming to Him so that we may have life (John 5:40).

## Jesus Christ lives again in us

Yes, Paul reminded Christians to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). Yet he was in no way preaching a works-based salvation, for in the next verse he explains that “it is God who works in you both to will [that is, to have the desire to overcome] and to do [to act on that desire] for His good pleasure” (verse 13).

Embedded in the meaning of the Days of Unleavened Bread is the belief that central to coming out of sin is the realization that the resurrected Jesus Christ lives His life in each one of us.

Indeed, as Paul also said, “If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!” (1 Corinthians 15:17). And he further stated, “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20, King James Version).

It is the resurrection of Christ, and His living again in Christians to empower them to remove the leaven of sin from their lives, that gives these spring festivals—the Passover, the Festival of Unleavened Bread and Pentecost—such a deep and lasting meaning. Isn't it time you looked more deeply into the meaning of these biblical festivals and what they teach us about the life and mission of Jesus Christ? **BT**

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# EASTER:

## Masking a Biblical Truth

Have you ever considered what a strange holiday Easter is? People pretend that rabbits can lay colorful eggs and then hide them for children to find. Where did such bizarre customs come from?

How did they come to be associated with Jesus' resurrection? The truth is stranger than fiction!

**Y**ou can read your Bible cover to cover and you'll find that the popular customs associated with the Easter celebration—rabbits, Easter-egg hunts and sunrise services—have nothing to do with the biblical record of Christ's life or His rising from the dead.

Where, then, did these practices originate?

*The Encyclopaedia Britannica* tells us, "As at Christmas, so also at Easter, popular customs reflect many ancient pagan survivals—in this instance, connected with spring fertility rites, such as the symbols of the Easter egg and the Easter hare or rabbit" (15th edition, Macropaedia, Vol. 4, p. 605, "Church Year," emphasis added throughout).

The word *Easter* appears once in the King James Version of the Bible, in Acts 12:4, where it is a mistranslation. Reputable scholars and reference works point out that the word *Easter* in this verse is a gross mistranslation of the Greek word *pascha*, meaning *Passover*. Modern translations correctly translate this word "Passover"—as even the King James Version does in other verses (see Matthew 26:2, 17-19; Mark 14:12; 1 Corinthians 5:7).

Notice what *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* says about the term *Easter* here: "*Pascha* . . . mistranslated 'Easter' in Acts 12:4, KJV, denotes the Passover . . . The term 'Easter' is not of Christian origin. It is another form of *Astarte*, one of the titles of the Chaldean goddess, the queen of heaven. The festival of Pasch [Passover] held by Christians in post-apostolic times was a continuation of the Jewish feast . . . From this Pasch [Passover] the pagan festival of 'Easter' was quite distinct and was introduced into the apostate Western religion, as part of the attempt to adapt pagan festivals to Christianity" (1985, p. 192, "Easter").

### Easter's ancient history

The roots of the Easter celebration date to long before Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection. Various Easter customs can be traced back to ancient spring celebrations surrounding *Astarte*, the goddess of spring and fertility. The Bible refers to her as "Ash-toreth the abomination of the Sidonians" (2 Kings 23:13) and, as *Vine's* mentions, "the Queen of Heaven," whose worship God condemned

(Jeremiah 7:18; 44:24-28).

Francis Weiser, professor of philosophy at Boston College, has provided these facts: "The origin of the Easter egg is based on the fertility lore of the Indo-European races . . . The Easter bunny had its origin in pre-Christian fertility lore. Hare and rabbit were the most fertile animals our forefathers knew, serving as symbols of abundant new life in the spring season" (*Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs*, 1958, pp. 233, 236). (For more information about these symbols, see "Fertility Symbols: Beneath the Dignity of God" on page 13).

Fertility rites and customs were incorporated into religious practices early in history. After Adam and Eve rejected God in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3), humanity looked for other explanations for life. Forces of nature and seasons that could not be controlled came to be viewed as gods, goddesses and supernatural powers to be worshiped and feared. Man soon created his own gods, contradicting God's instruction against idolatry (Exodus 20:3-6; Deuteronomy 5:7-10).

"The pagan nations made statues or images to represent the powers they

worshiped. Most of these idols were in the form of animals or human beings. But sometimes the idols represented celestial powers, like the sun, moon, and stars; forces of nature, like the sea and the rain; or life forces, like death and truth . . .

“In time an elaborate system of beliefs in such natural forces was developed into mythology. Each civilization and culture had its own mythological structure, but the structures were often quite similar. The names of the gods may have been different, but their functions and actions were often the same. The most prominent myth to cross cultural lines was that of the fertility cycle. Many pagan cultures believed that the god of fertility died each year during the winter but was reborn each year in the spring. The details differed among cultures, but the main idea was the same” (*Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 1995, “Gods, Pagan,” p. 508).

In pagan mythology the sun represented life. The sun supposedly died around the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year (the date set for Christmas celebrations is rooted in this myth). Complementing the rebirth of the sun were spring fertility rites, whose surviving symbols thread their way throughout Easter celebrations. (See “Resurrection Myths Led to Easter Customs,” beginning on page 15.)

In addition to rabbits and eggs, another popular Easter custom had pre-Christian origins: “Also popular among Europeans and Americans on Easter is ham, because the pig was considered a symbol of luck in

pre-Christian European culture” (*The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1987, p. 558, “Easter”).

### Sex rites in ancient cultures

Ancient fertility rites revolved around overt sexual immorality and perversion. Such rites are referred to throughout the Bible under a variety of names and descriptions.

The Babylonian and Assyrian fertility goddess was *Ishtar*, from which derives the names *Astarte* and *Ashtoreth* and very likely the Anglo-Saxon *Eostre* or Germanic *Ostara*, goddess of spring, the origin of the word *Easter*. (The word *east*, the direction of the sunrise, comes from this same word.)

Ishtar symbolized Mother Earth in the natural cycles of fertility on earth. Many myths grew up around this female deity. She was the goddess of love, and the practice of ritual prostitution became widespread in the fertility cult dedicated to her name.

“Temples to Ishtar had many priestesses, or sacred prostitutes, who symbolically acted out the fertility rites of the cycle of nature. Ishtar has been identified with the Phoenician *Astarte*, the Semitic *Ashtoreth*, and the Sumerian *Inanna*. Strong similarities also exist between Ishtar and the Egyptian *Isis*, the Greek *Aphrodite*, and the Roman *Venus*.

“Associated with Ishtar was the young god *Tammuz* (*Ezek[iel]* 8:14), considered both divine and mortal. In Babylonian mythology *Tammuz* died annually and was reborn year after year, representing the yearly cycle of the seasons and the crops. This pagan

belief later was identified with the pagan gods *Baal* and *Anat* in Canaan” (*Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, “Gods, Pagan,” p. 509).

It was believed that *Ishtar* brought about the rebirth or resurrection of *Tammuz* in the spring, coinciding with the blossoming of nature. (For more details, again see “Resurrection Myths Led to Easter Customs,” beginning on page 15.)

Throughout the Old Testament, God expressed His anger with His people when they served these false gods (*Judges* 2:13-14; 10:6-7; 1 *Kings* 11:5-11; *Ezekiel* 8:14-18).

### Easter was no part of early Church worship

The New Testament does not mention an Easter celebration. Early Christians had nothing to do with Easter. Instead, they kept the Passover, instituted by God centuries earlier at the time of the Exodus (*Exodus* 12:13-14; *Leviticus* 23:5). Jesus Christ personally kept this festival (*Matthew* 26:17-18) and gave it a clearer meaning under the New Covenant with His institution of the symbols of bread and wine for His beaten body and shed blood, signifying His suffering and death on our behalf (verses 26-29). He is the Lamb of God, offered as the true Passover sacrifice for the sins of the world (*John* 1:29; 1 *Corinthians* 5:7).

Jesus told His followers to continue this observance in remembrance of Him and His death (1 *Corinthians* 11:23-26). Soon, however, pressure to replace Passover with popular Easter customs began to build. This move-

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# Fertility Symbols: Beneath the Dignity of God

Because reproduction in nature is critical for food and perpetuation of life, mankind has long been intrigued by fertility. Have you ever wondered why eggs and rabbits—the popular hallmarks of Easter—were selected as symbols of fertility?

“In traditional folk religion the egg is a powerful symbol of fertility, purity and rebirth. It is used in magical rituals to promote fertility and restore virility; to look into the future; to bring good weather; to encourage the growth of crops and protect both cattle and children against misfortune, especially the dreaded evil eye. All over the world it represents life and creation, fertility and resurrection . . . Later [customs concerning eggs] were linked with Easter. The church did not oppose this, though many egg customs were pre-Christian in origin, because the egg provided a fresh and powerful symbol of the Resurrection and the transformation of death into life” (*The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1987, p. 37, “Egg”).

The Easter bunny is the modern replacement for “the hare, the symbol of fertility in ancient Egypt” (*The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition, Macropaedia, p. 333, “Easter”). It’s no secret that rabbits are extremely prolific. Their does (females)



bear several litters of two to eight young each year, and gestation takes about a month. Contrary to God’s instruction, these pagan fertility symbols credit divine powers to the creation (rabbits and eggs) instead of the Creator (Romans 1:21-25).



In contrast to pagan celebrations, God promised to bless His people with abundance in return for their love and obedience. Notice Moses’ words of encouragement to Israel shortly before his death:

“Then it shall come to pass, because you listen to these judgments, and keep and do them, that the LORD your God will keep with you the covenant and the mercy which He swore to your fathers. And He will love you and bless you and multiply you; He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your land, your grain and your new wine and your oil, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flock, in the land of which He swore to your fathers to give you. You shall be blessed above all peoples; there shall not be a male or female barren among you or among your livestock” (Deuteronomy 7:12-14).

People have the choice of looking to God as their Creator for reproductive blessings or looking to the creation. Given the history of rabbits and eggs as pagan fertility symbols, do you think God is pleased when people include these as symbols of their worship? (See Deuteronomy 12:2-4, 28-32.)

ment was the basis for much contention over the next three centuries.

Notice how *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* describes this period: “The earliest Christians celebrated the Lord’s Passover at the same time as the Jews, during the night of the first full moon of the first month of spring (Nisan 14-15). By the middle of the 2nd century, most churches had transferred this celebration to the Sunday after the Jewish feast. But certain churches of Asia Minor clung to the older custom, for which they were denounced as ‘judaizing’ (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 5, chapters 23-25). The first ecumenical Council of Nicaea in [A.D.] 325 decreed that all churches should observe the feast together on a Sunday” (15th edition, Macropaedia, Vol. 4, pp. 604-605, “Church Year”).

“After long and fierce controversies over its date (which is governed by the lunar calendar), the date for Easter set by the Council of Nicaea in 325 is the first Sunday after the full moon that follows the spring equinox. Easter became the centre of a fixed liturgical structure of times and festivals in the church year” (*ibid.*, p. 499, “Christianity”).

## Pressure against the biblical Passover

Why did Easter replace the biblical Passover?

Though Easter was clearly pagan in origin, Christian leaders of the first two centuries after Christ’s crucifixion employed the same philosophy in establishing the new holiday that they later applied to Christmas. Believing that people are free to select their own times and customs of worship, they went about gradually replacing the biblically commanded Passover with their humanly devised celebration of Easter.

It was easier to draw pagan worshipers into this new version of Christianity and maintain their devotion by identifying the time-honored spring resurrection feast of the pagan mystery religions with the resurrection of Christ.

Anti-Jewish prejudice also seems to have been a major factor in the church leaders’ decision to make such changes. According to the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*: “The early development of the celebration of Easter and the attendant calendar disputes were largely a result of Christianity’s attempt to emancipate itself from Judaism. Sunday had already replaced the Jewish sabbath early in the second century, and despite efforts in Asia Minor to maintain the Jewish Passover date of 14 Nisan for Easter [or, rather, the true Passover] (hence the name Quartodecimans [meaning ‘Fourteeners’]), the Council of Nicea adopted the annual Sunday following the full moon after the vernal equinox (March 21)” (Walter Elwell, editor, 1984, “Easter”).

Before A.D. 70, Christianity was “regarded by the Roman government and by the people at large as a branch of the Jewish religion” (Jesse Hurlbut, *The Story of the Christian Church*, 1954, p. 34). Christianity and Judaism shared the biblical feast days, although Christians observed them with

added meanings introduced by Jesus and the apostles.

However, two Jewish revolts against the Roman Empire, in 64-70 and 132-135, led to widespread persecution of Jews and suppression of Jewish religious practices. Jews were even driven from Jerusalem and forbidden to return on pain of death. As pressure mounted, some Christians began to abandon beliefs and practices perceived as being too Jewish. Over time many abandoned their weekly Sabbath day of rest and worship in favor of worship on Sunday, the pagan day of the sun, and abandoned the Passover in favor of Easter to distance themselves from Jews.

*The New Catholic Encyclopedia* explains: "Originally both observances [Passover and Easter] were allowed, but gradually it was felt incongruous that Christians should celebrate Easter [which they wrongly called Passover] on a Jewish feast, and unity in celebrating the principal Christian feast was called for" (1967, Vol. 5, p. 8, "Easter Controversy").

### Passover-Easter debate

Acceptance of Easter over Passover did not come without resistance. Two religious leaders of the mid-second century—Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna in Asia Minor, and Anicetus, bishop of Rome—debated this very point.

Anicetus argued for what became known as Easter while Polycarp, a student of the apostle John, defended observing "the Christian Passover, on the 14th of Nisan, the first month of the Jewish ecclesiastical calendar, regardless of the day of the week" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition, *Micropaedia*, Vol. 8, p. 94, "Polycarp").

Polycarp taught observance of the Passover as the early Church had observed it. Eusebius said Polycarp did so because this was the way "he had always observed it with John the disciple of our Lord, and the rest of the apostles, with whom he associated" (*Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History*, 1995, pp. 210-211). To be clear, Polycarp and other Christians of the second century were still following the example of Jesus Christ in observing the biblical Passover (compare 1 Corinthians 11:1; 1 Peter 2:21; 1 John 2:6). (To learn more about this fascinating episode from history, be sure to read "Would You Stand With Polycarp?" beginning on page 17.)

Several decades later another church leader in Asia Minor, Polycrates, argued with a new bishop of Rome, Victor, over the same issue.

Regrettably, people's reasoning won out over the directions of God and the example of Jesus Christ and His original disciples, and this new holiday of Easter won out over the biblically commanded Passover.

### A new worship theme

As Easter replaced Passover, not only was a new *date* selected (the Sunday after the spring equinox rather than

the biblically directed Nisan 14), but a new *theme* was introduced. Rather than commemorating Christ's death as directed by the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 11:26), the new holiday was designed to celebrate His resurrection. This new theme easily accommodated the pagan fertility symbols. It also helped distinguish the Christian community from the Jews, a major goal of church leaders of the time.

Although Christ's resurrection is an important basis of our hope that we, too, can be resurrected (1 Corinthians

The New Testament does not mention an Easter celebration. Instead, early Christians, following Jesus' example, kept the Passover!

15:17; Romans 5:10), and it was critical for God's plan of salvation to continue, Scripture has never explicitly directed a particular celebration of this event.


Indeed, the love of God is primarily expressed to all humanity through the crucifixion of Jesus Christ (John 3:16; Hebrews 9:28). His death, through which our sins may be forgiven, is the primary focus of the Passover, not His resurrection. Many precise details of His death and events leading up to and encompassing it were prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures hundreds of years in advance.

The decision of God the Father to willingly give His only begotten Son—and of Jesus Christ to surrender His life to torture and execution as a sacrifice for the sins of humanity—were far more demanding than the demonstration of God's power over death through the resurrection.

### A better way

As we have seen, Easter and its customs originated not from the Bible, but in pagan fertility rites. It is a curious mixture of ancient mythological practices and arbitrary dating that obscures and discredits the proof of Jesus Christ's messiahship and resurrection.

Having learned the sources and background of this major religious holiday, one might rightly wonder which days, if any, a Christian should observe. God in His Word shows a better way of life with better days of worship He has appointed for His people. To learn more, be sure to read "What Does the Feast of Unleavened Bread Mean for Christians?" beginning on page 8. **BT**



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# Ancient Resurrection Myths Led to Easter Customs

How did so many strange customs come to be associated with the resurrection of Jesus Christ? The answer lies in pagan myths that long preceded His coming to earth!

by Scott Ashley

**H**ow did worship of an ancient god and goddess come to be associated with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Although the details are lost in time, a closer look at the ancient mythology surrounding their worship will help us understand how pagan practices have survived in popular Easter customs.

Two of the earliest recorded deities were the Babylonian fertility god Tammuz and the goddess Ishtar. Every year Tammuz “was believed to die, passing away from the cheerful earth to the gloomy subterranean world” (Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 1993, p. 326).

The seasonal cycle came to be connected with Tammuz’s supposed annual death and resurrection. “Under the names of Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis, and Attis, the peoples of Egypt and Western Asia represented the yearly decay and revival of life . . . which they personified as a god who annually died and rose again from the dead. In name and detail the rites varied from place to place: in substance they were the same” (p. 325).

Many of these rites revolved around inducing the return of Tammuz from the dead. One of these ceremonies is recorded in Ezekiel 8:14, where Ezekiel saw in vision an abominable sight: women “weeping for Tammuz” at the very temple of God.

*The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*



This terracotta plaque, dating to about 2000-1600 B.C., depicts a dead god, likely Tammuz, resting in his coffin.

the land. Such renewal was encouraged and celebrated by licentious fertility festivals . . . The women would have been lamenting Tammuz’s death. They perhaps were also following the ritual of Ishtar, wailing for the revival of Tammuz” (Ralph Alexander, Vol. 6, 1986, pp. 783-784).

As worship of Tammuz and Ishtar spread to the Mediterranean region, including the territory of biblical Israel, the pair came to be worshiped under other names: Baal and Astarte (Ashtoreth), Attis and Cybele, and Adonis and Aphrodite. God heatedly condemned the sensual, perverted worship of Baal and Astarte, the “Queen of Heaven” (Judges 2:11-15; 3:7-8; 10:6-7; 1 Kings 11:4-6, 31, 33; 16:30-33; 22:51-53; 2 Kings 23:13; Jeremiah 7:18).

## Pre-Christian customs linked to Christ

In ancient worship we find the

The ancient religious rites involved in the worship of false gods like Tammuz were in many ways the forerunners of Easter celebrations.

says regarding this verse: “Tammuz, later linked to Adonis and Aphrodite by name, was a god of fertility and rain . . . In the seasonal mythological cycle, he died early in the fall when vegetation withered. His revival, by the wailing of Ishtar, was marked by the buds of spring and the fertility of

mythology that would ultimately link these ancient customs to Christ’s death and resurrection. Says author Alan Watts: “It would be tedious to describe in detail all that has been handed down to us about the various rites of Tammuz, Adonis . . . and many others . . . But their universal

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theme—the drama of death and resurrection—makes them the forerunners of the Christian Easter, and thus the first ‘Easter services.’ As we go on to describe the Christian observance of Easter we shall see how many of its customs and ceremonies resemble these former rites” (*Easter: Its Story and Meaning*, 1950, 2023, pp. 46-47).

Watts describes some of the similarities and parallels: “Shortly before the vernal [spring] equinox . . . the members of this cult [of Tammuz-Ishtar, Attis-Cybele and Adonis-Aphrodite] began a fast—as Christians also have the fast of Lent, beginning forty days before Easter” (p. 47).

He tells how some worshippers would cut down a tree, then carry it “with reverence and ceremony to Cybele’s temple and set it up in the central sanctuary [where] . . . upon its central stem [or trunk], was hung the figure of the young God” (pp. 47-48).

“Here, for the remaining days of the fast, the worshippers gathered to sing hymns of mourning for the dead Attis . . . And to this day, on Good Friday at the Veneration of the Cross, Christians sing their hymn of mourning for another and greater one who died on a Tree . . .” (p. 48).

As the fast drew to an end, a remarkable rite took place: “The figure of the dead Attis was taken down from the tree and buried under the twilight sky. Far into the night his devotees stood around the grave and sang hymns of mourning. But as dawn approached, a great light was kindled, as today Christians light the Paschal Candle on Easter Eve as a symbol of the risen Christ” (p. 50).

Frazer describes the idolatrous worship this way: “The sorrow of the worshippers was turned to joy . . . The tomb was opened: the god had risen from the dead; and as the priest touched the lips of the weeping mourners with balm, he softly whispered in their ears the glad tidings of salvation. The resurrection of the

god was hailed by his disciples as a promise that they too would issue triumphant from the corruption of the grave. On the morrow . . . the divine resurrection was celebrated with a wild outburst of glee. At Rome, and probably elsewhere, the celebration took the form of a carnival” (p. 350).

## An ancient celebration adopted

In its various forms, worship of Tammuz-Adonis-Attis spread around the Roman Empire, including to Rome itself. As Christianity spread through the empire, religious leaders apparently merged customs and practices associated with this earlier “resurrected” god and applied them to the resurrected Christ.

Says Frazer: “When we reflect how often the Church has skilfully contrived to plant the seeds of the new faith on the old stock of paganism, we may surmise that the Easter celebration of the dead and risen Christ was grafted upon a similar celebration of the dead and risen Adonis” (p. 345).

In this respect Easter followed the pattern of Christmas in being officially sanctioned and welcomed into the church. As Frazer goes on to say: “Motives of the same sort may have led the ecclesiastical authorities to assimilate the Easter festival of the death and resurrection of their Lord to the festival of the death and resurrection of another Asiatic [or Middle Eastern] god which fell at the same season. Now the Easter rites still observed in Greece, Sicily and southern Italy bear in some respects a striking resemblance to the rites of Adonis, and I have suggested that the Church may have consciously adapted the new festival to its heathen predecessor for the sake of winning souls to Christ” (p. 359).

To learn more about how today’s Easter customs are rooted in ancient pagan practices, be sure to read “Easter: Masking a Biblical Truth,” beginning on page 11. **BT**



# Would You Stand With Polycarp?

A long-time elder who remained faithful to apostolic teaching and practice, including God's festivals, is brought to the arena to reject Christ or die. Would you choose as he did?

by Darris McNeely

The chants of the crowd in the Roman theater at Smyrna grew louder, demanding the deaths of more Christians. "Away with the atheists!" they cried, in reference to these deniers of the Roman gods. Many Christians had already been killed in the arena throughout this period of violent games.

"Let search be made for Polycarp!" they shouted, this man being, as they later called him, "the puller down of our gods, who teaches many not to sacrifice nor worship."

After a few days, Polycarp was found and brought before the Roman magistrate in the theater. With the crowd calling for his blood, the proconsul pressed him to swear by Caesar's spirit and curse Christ, effectively telling him, "Deny your faith, and I will set you free."

Polycarp refused, saying: "Eighty-six years have I been His servant, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

The pressuring intensified, the magistrate threatening death by wild beasts or fire and again promising release if Polycarp would recant his faith.

Here was a moment of supreme testing for this aged man who was a leading elder of the Church of God in the province of Asia (now western Turkey) during the second century A.D. Taught directly by the apostle John, he had held the church in his region to the teachings of Christ and stood firm at a time when others were compromising. A dedicated pastor, Polycarp had known this moment of trial and testing of his faith would come.

Let's take a further look at this man and his setting, then return to what happened on that day—considering his final answer and what our own resolve must be.

## A time of testing

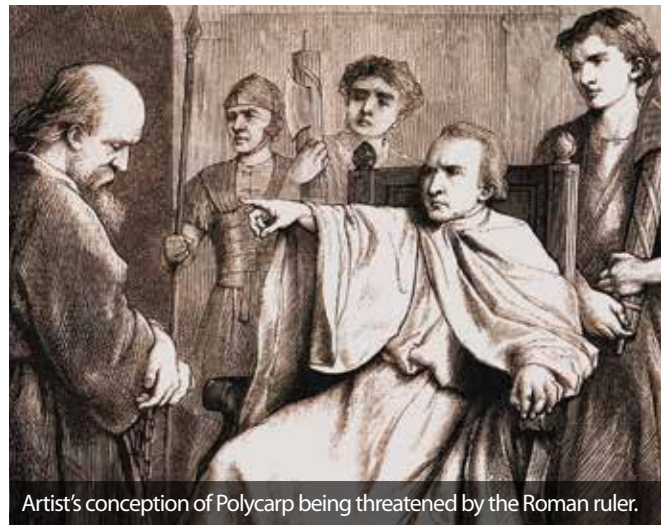
Polycarp lived in the period after the age of the original apostles—when the teachings and practices Jesus delivered to the original Church were being distorted and changed. It was a time of great internal stress for the Church.

It was also an age of martyrs, with severe pressure from *outside* the Church. Roman authorities were clamping down on these subversives who refused even token participation in emperor worship, a symbol of state loyalty.

Decades prior, Jesus had directed the apostle John in the book of Revelation to write a series of messages to the seven churches of Asia, including Smyrna, each fitting the

locale and spiritual condition of the recipients (though also meant for the Church through the ages).

Christ's message for members in Smyrna, where Polycarp was bishop, is found in Revelation 2:8-11. It was intended to help them face a time of intense trial and



Artist's conception of Polycarp being threatened by the Roman ruler.

martyrdom. In referring to Himself here as "the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life," Jesus was assuring His followers that He is in control of history from beginning to end, and that His dominion extends even over death and life. As He suffered and died and was raised to eternal life, so would it be with His followers.

The message mentions opposition from those claiming to be Jews but who really weren't. This likely applied on multiple levels—not merely to Jewish resistance, some even partnered with Roman authorities, but to false Christians (Paul having referred to true Christians as "Jews inwardly" or spiritually in Romans 2:29).

The first disciples were Jews, but their belief in the resurrected Christ brought a clash with the mainstream Jewish faith. The addition of gentiles to the Church made relations worse. As the divide with Judaism widened, Christians encountered increased animosity from those with whom they had much in common. Some of the Jews of Smyrna were among those calling for Polycarp's death.

Meanwhile, due to persecution, a growing number among the Christians were beginning to abandon all things "Jewish." The early Church kept God's seventh-

day Sabbath. Its members observed the Passover and other festivals God gave to Israel. Polycarp was keeping the Passover and other biblical festivals. He taught the churches of Asia to do the same. Yet heretical teachings were gaining ground, being embraced by more and more Christians in the Roman world.

Jesus says in His message that the attacks of those who claimed to be the true covenant people of God were effectively of a different fellowship—the synagogue or assembly of Satan.

Persecution for the Church can come from without and within. The true source is identified here. It is *Satan*. The Church always contends against spiritual wickedness in high places (Ephesians 6:12). Jesus wants His followers to remember that. He overcame Satan, and through Him we also can defeat the attacks Satan engineers against those who follow biblical truth.

### The Quartodeciman Controversy

One of the great controversies among Christians at that time was the continuing observance by Polycarp and others of the Passover on the biblical date of the 14th of the Hebrew month of Nisan in the spring in the northern hemisphere. The church of Rome and other western congregations had shifted to the observance of what would later be called Easter Sunday.

Polycarp traveled to Rome to discuss the matter with the Roman bishop Anicetus, but the contention remained unresolved:

“For neither could Anicetus persuade Polycarp to forego the observance {in his own way}, inasmuch as these things had been always {so} observed by John the disciple of our Lord, and by other apostles with whom he had been conversant; nor, on the other hand could Polycarp succeed in persuading Anicetus to keep {the observance in his way}, for he maintained that he was bound to adhere to the usage of the presbyters [or elders] who preceded him [in Rome]” (Irenaeus, Fragments 3, Ante-Nicene Fathers, newadvent.org).

While they sought peace among congregations, the rift continued to grow. The matter became more heated a few decades later, when a Roman bishop sought to excommunicate the eastern churches over this.

History labels those who kept the Passover observance and Festival of Unleavened Bread according to the teaching handed down from the apostolic era as Quartodecimans (or “Fourteeners,” for the 14th of Nisan). Church historian Henry Chadwick writes: “There can be little doubt that the Quartodecimans were right in thinking that they had preserved the most ancient and apostolic custom. They had become heretics simply by being behind the times” (*The Early Church*, 1967, p. 85).

Christians who keep these festivals today can be assured that they are holding firm to observances God

instructed through Israel and the apostles.

### A story for the ages

With that background, we return to Polycarp before the Roman proconsul being pressed to renounce his Christian faith under threats of execution.

This story of faith is recorded for us in greater detail in an early letter from the Smyrna congregation known as “The Martyrdom of Polycarp” (also reproduced in Eusebius’ *History of the Church*, both of which you can find online).

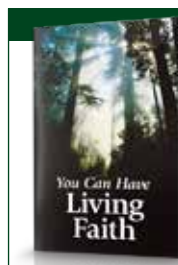
Faced with being burned alive, Polycarp said: “You threaten with fire that burns for a bit and after a little while is quenched, for you are ignorant of the fire of the future judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly. But why do you delay? Come, do what you will.”

He thus stood firm in his convictions. Wood was quickly gathered, and Polycarp was tied up on the pyre. With his final prayer looking ahead to his resurrection, the fire was lit. But remarkably it billowed up around him without burning him. So an order was given to stab him through the flames, whereupon he bled to death, the fire strangely ceasing. At some agitators’ insistence, his dead body was then burned, successfully this time.

The story of Polycarp is one for the ages. It speaks of faith from a time when people of faith were under fire—*literally*. And there are lessons for us today. Faith in the Bible is under attack from many quarters. A rising tide of secular hostility to the Bible continues to mount. And it’s even harder for those who seek authentic, biblical Christianity.

Would you stand up for your faith against attack, to the point of death, as Polycarp and others did? It was not just the pagan Romans who stood against them but those they shared some commonality with, the Jewish community. And over time, the rising heresies among the Church grew to overwhelm and persecute the few who persisted in the truth.

What does it take to stand with a man of faith like Polycarp? It takes faith based on truth revealing God’s great plan for human salvation. The festivals of God, the same that Polycarp held to, commemorate the steps in that plan. This understanding provides something worth standing for, and worth dying for, as did Polycarp and those who stood with him! **BT**



#### LEARN MORE

What does the Bible teach about faith? What kind of faith does God expect of us? Do you have this kind of faith? To learn more about this crucial subject, download or request our free study guide *You Can Have Living Faith*. A copy is waiting for you!

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# Are More Waking Up to the Feasts of the Lord?

Curiosity is growing among believers in Jesus about the festivals of the Bible. Will more come to accept them as part of Christian faith and practice? Will you?

by Darris McNeely

**S**ixty years ago, I began observing the biblical festivals of God as a young boy. It started with my mother. After several years of study and seeking, she found that the Bible set forth the observance of the weekly seventh-day Sabbath and annual feasts of the Lord, leading her into deeper understanding of God than what she had as part of a major Protestant denomination.

As my mother learned about the feasts and started to keep them, she taught them to me. No other family members observed these festivals. No one else in our small Midwest community kept them either. We were alone in what we did.

Today we are not alone. Today there is a growing interest in the feast days of the Bible. This is not the first time for such growing interest. Religious history tells us that when people through the ages began to read the Bible in their own languages, they began to read about the biblical Sabbath and God's other feasts. This led to more people keeping these festivals.

A lot of people are now taking a closer look at what these days are about. Perhaps many of these people will take the step of actually observing them. They certainly should. These are God's own festivals. And one day the whole world will celebrate them!

## Foundational yet often forsaken

As a pastor and teacher for nearly 50 years, I have taught the observance and meaning of these days all over the world. They reveal deep insight into the mind of God and His plan for humanity.

The words of Leviticus 23:1-2 set the foundation: "And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: "The feasts of the LORD, which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations, these are My feasts"' (emphasis added). Accepting the feast days as *belonging to God* gives not only the right foundation but the basis for understanding every other reference to these festivals throughout the Bible.

God wanted the ancient Israelites to be swept clean of all the pagan teaching they might have absorbed in Egypt and for them to worship in ways acceptable to Him. He defined the holy times in which they were to come and worship

Him as part of His revealed truth. Observing these days as instructed would have set and kept the nation on the right course. Sadly, the Israelites often strayed.

Observing God's festivals is part of His requirement to worship Him "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23). These days were taught and observed by the early apostles and Church. When they are observed with God's work through Christ at the center, they give enlarged meaning and understanding.

The feasts of the Lord fell out of favor with growing numbers among the early Church as pagan influences introduced other festivals and ideas about worship. Over time, the birthday of the sun god, Sol Invictus, on Dec. 25 was adopted as the birthday of Jesus, and Easter took the place of the biblical feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread. The biblical festivals came to be viewed as unnecessary and were scorned as "Jewish" practices unbecoming Christians.

The familiar pattern in the tragic story of ancient Israel repeated itself. Idolatry crept into worship, and the feast days were forgotten until a righteous leader would rediscover and proclaim the truths from the law. Josiah's reforms in the seventh century B.C. are a classic example.

## Renewed interest today

Which brings us back to the present. Observers of the religious landscape clearly see the decline in traditional religion, the return of pagan ideas and a restlessness for authentic religion.

As noted earlier, there is a growing interest in these biblical feasts. Last year saw the publication of a book with an intriguing title—*The Rose Guide to the Feasts, Festivals and Fasts of the Bible*. This book surveys the festivals of God in their biblical and cultural setting and what they meant in biblical times. It shows how groups today, such as the Messianic movement, observe the days with a focus on the work of Christ being portrayed through them.

This is not the only book by authors who see great value in the feasts of God. In recent years many Bible scholars and teachers have studied the feasts to find additional meaning. This has led others to dig deeper into what these days mean. Our *Beyond Today* office regularly receives requests from religious teachers asking us to send multiple

copies of our study guides for use in their classes. In their studies they come across the festivals, questions are asked and discussions form around the topic. We are always glad to fill these requests free of charge as part of our ministry.

One of our United Church of God elders, John Miller, has found a growing interest in the feasts of God among his community in northeastern Ohio. More than 35 years ago he left a conservative church community to keep God's Sabbath and Holy Days. Meeting some resistance, he and his wife stepped out in faith to obey God. Today he's encountered others who want to know more and have also stepped out in faith to keep these days.

He calls it a new frontier, stating: "The landscape regarding the Sabbath and the feasts of the Lord has changed dramatically over the past five to 10 years. Large numbers of people have become interested in the meaning and significance of these Holy Days and have begun integrating them into their lives. This is a journey on a spiritual frontier in pursuit of 'what is truth.'"

He adds: "The people who have discovered the Sabbath and the Holy Days realize the world is headed in the wrong direction. They realize established institutions, both secular and religious, have not been forthright or acted in the interests of the people they are supposed to serve. Instead, their pursuit of self-interest has led to corruption and deception.

"Somehow the ancient text of the Bible becomes their go-to book in search of meaning, and they quickly realize that much of what they thought was in the holy book is not there but is rooted in traditions of men or, worse, pagan practices. This discovery causes many to embark on a journey of discovery in search of truth, often accompanied by a deep sense of disillusionment with the established order of things."

When people read the Bible with an open heart and mind, they come to see that the feasts and Sabbaths of the Lord have great purpose and meaning for them!

### A decision must be made

This echoes what my mother, and many others, concluded those many years ago—embracing the life-changing conviction that God's teachings must be obeyed. We must do as Jesus taught, which is to "live . . . by every word of God" (Luke 4:4). It is to put aside the things that are contrary to that and cling to what is true, following Christ.

That path of discipleship, as Scripture shows, often begins with returning to God and worshiping Him on the days He appointed—not on what people substituted as right in their own eyes. My mother walked away from Christmas, Easter and Sunday to worship God on His Sabbath and to keep all His feast days.

After conducting a diligent search of the Scriptures in

this regard, a decision must be made. Will you step out in faith and obey God's teaching? Or will you put it aside as merely an interesting study? When King Josiah heard from the Scriptures that a feast should be kept, he took action:

"Now it happened, when the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, that he tore his clothes. Then the king commanded . . . 'Go, inquire of the LORD for me, for the people and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found; for great is the wrath of the LORD that is aroused against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us'" (2 Kings 22:11-13).

What Josiah heard from God's law was that the festivals were to be observed. So he made plans for the nation to keep the Passover then after many years of neglect.




When people read the Bible with an open heart and mind, they come to see that the feasts and Sabbaths of the Lord have purpose and meaning for them!

Scripture teaches that every great revival within Israel took place in the context of observing the feasts of the Lord. The greatest revival is yet ahead after Christ returns, when the whole world will observe God's festivals, such as the Feast of Tabernacles (see Zechariah 14:16-19).

But if God is already opening your eyes to His truth, your responsibility to live by His revealed teaching is *now*. As the apostle Paul said regarding one of God's festivals, "Therefore let us keep the feast . . ." (1 Corinthians 5:8).

Is your life in need of a spiritual revival? It may be time for you to start keeping God's feasts! **BT**



LEARN MORE

Most people know nothing about God's feasts, even though they're plainly mentioned in the Bible. Jesus and the early Church celebrated them. Shouldn't you? Download or request our free study guide *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*.

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# “When You Walk Through a Storm . . .”

Do you remember this song “You’ll Never Walk Alone”? It’s hard to hold your head up high while going through the storms of life.

by Janet Treadway

Recently I drove through a storm in which it was raining so hard I could barely see the car in front of me. The rain was so heavy my car started sliding. I prayed all the way home asking God to help me.

The next day the sun came out, and I was shocked at how clean my car was! Before the rain, my car was covered with dirt. Then, while I drove, I noticed something I hadn’t noticed before. Not only was *my* car shiny and clean, but so was every car I passed! I could not help but thank God for a free car wash not just for me but for everyone else.

Sometimes life can feel like a dangerous storm that we will not make it through! We may think we will never survive the storms of life. We wonder how any good can come from it and whether the sun will ever shine again in our lives.

Going through these storms is not fun. We all know that storms can be chaotic and dangerous, uprooting everything in their path. That’s how we may feel while going through the trials of life. But reflecting on the words of the song “You’ll Never Walk Alone” can be an encouragement to all of us! What can we learn from these lyrics?


*Hold your head up high!* That’s hard to do when you walk through a storm. But you can because you know you’re not alone. In Isaiah 41:10 God tells us: “Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.” So hold your head up high, know that God is walking with you and don’t be afraid of the dark. Why?

Because *at the end of a storm there’s a golden sky.* Remember when Noah and his family went through the

Flood. What happened after? God sent a rainbow, a symbol of hope. Rainbows appear as perfect arcs when the sun shines onto water droplets, scattering its white light into an array of brilliant colors. Noah’s family endured a horrific storm for 40 days and 40 nights before the sun came out. They had to keep at their life and work on the ark through all that time. We also have to keep walking through the storms of life because the sun will come out with a golden sky.

*Walk on, walk on with hope in your heart,* trusting that *you’ll never walk alone.* Deuteronomy 31:8 tells us: “The LORD is the One who goes before you. He will be with you, He will not leave you nor forsake you; do not fear nor be dismayed.” You can walk on through the storm because God is walking with you! When you get weak, stressed, frightened and tired, ask Him for help!

Always stay focused on God. As I was driving in that storm, I had to stay focused on God because an accident could have happened so easily. But God did not abandon me and He will not abandon you! He will stay with you, and the sun will shine! In 2 Corinthians 4:8-9 the apostle Paul writes, “We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” Because God is with us! Ask God to encourage you, and He will!

It seems the storms of life are on the rise. But I also see where God has intervened and blessed His people, those who obey and remain faithful to Him. Keep walking through the rain with your head held high—because God is walking with you. With His help you will win the battle over the storms you are going through! 

# Could Ukraine war lead to nukes, regime change?

U.S. and European government aid has enabled Ukraine to keep resisting and prolonging Russia's invasion of the country—and it has raised growing fears of Russia resorting to nuclear warfare.

Many in America were disturbed several months back with the appearance of a New York City public service announcement on TV about what to do should there be a nuclear attack (“New York Put Out a PSA in Case of a Nuclear Attack, Leaving Many Residents Confused,” NPR, July 13, 2022). Mayor Eric Adams said it was not alarmist.

A *Time* article on Nov. 4 was headlined “The Risk of Nuclear War Is Now a Daily Issue for the Biden Administration.” A *Business Insider* headline Dec. 26 reported, “The UN has said nuclear war is ‘back within the realm of possibility.’ Here are the places in the US most likely to be hit in a nuclear attack.” A *Daily Mail* headline stated on Jan. 17: “How to survive a nuclear explosion: Scientists reveal the safest places to take shelter when a blast wave hits . . .”

Could this really happen? Horrifically, it could, especially as Vladimir Putin is backed into a corner. He and other Russian leaders have made several threats about nuclear options, especially with Western nations sending in tanks and other advanced weapons—with further talk of possible troops on the ground. Putin said in December that he might consider adding a nuclear first strike to disarm an opponent to Russia's military doctrine (“Putin Says Russia May Add Nuclear First Strike to Strategy,” Bloomberg, Dec. 9).

The next month, Former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, who serves as deputy chairman of Putin's security council, sent a message to

NATO stating that “the defeat of a nuclear power in a conventional war may trigger a nuclear war” and that “nuclear powers have never lost major conflicts on which their fate depends” (“Putin Ally Warns NATO of Nuclear War if Russia Is Defeated in Ukraine,” Reuters, Jan. 19, 2023).

A few days later, the symbolic “Doomsday Clock” of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, representing their estimation of the closeness of the world to apocalyptic devastation, was moved up from 100 seconds before midnight—where it sat for two years—to 90 seconds before midnight—the closest it has ever been to the cataclysmic



hour (“2023 ‘Doomsday Clock’: This Is How Close We Are to the Apocalypse, Scientists Say,” ABC News, Jan. 24).

Several Western leaders have spoken of keeping the pressure on until Putin resigns or is removed by others among his people. But as one writer asks: “Is anybody focusing on what would happen in Russia if Putin is ousted? What does a destabilized Russia look like as criminal oligarchs scramble to fill a power void? Some are wondering about this age-old truth, ‘better

the devil you know than the devil you don’t” (Mark Stevens, “Do We Really Want Putin Ousted?,” PatriotNewsfeed, Jan. 26).

Journalist Stanislav Kucher gives a more comprehensive analysis, sorting through expert opinions in a piece titled “Russia After Putin: When and How It Might Happen—and How Dangerous It Might Get” (Grid News, Jan. 23). Regime change seemed unthinkable not long ago, but now it looks like a real possibility. A major question is whether there would be a quiet voluntary departure for Putin to get away safely or a coup. The former could come in stages, with Putin selecting a successor—who would need to be less hardline and more acceptable to Western leaders. On the other hand, with a coup, there could be a bitter struggle. One Russian media analyst imagines “a fight between ‘clans surrounding Vladimir Putin today [that] look like organized crime groups.’”

Kucher points out that many Russians aren't interested in a softer, peacetime leader—“they dream of an even stronger hand than Putin's at the till.” Yet he feels that protracted internecine warfare could lead to the collapse of the country, which many predict will happen.

That said, we could still see some limited nuclear exchange amid all this. The situation is dire.

These are grave times—leading on to the last days of this age. The Bible does foretell terrible catastrophic world war to come, with weapons of mass destruction unleashed. But it seems we have some time yet. Still, there could be some great calamities before that—even nuclear ones. Keep reading *Beyond Today*, with hope fixed on the Kingdom Jesus Christ will bring to the earth at the end of the madness of this age.

## American unbelief growing

According to a recent Pew Research Center report, if present trends continue, “Christians could make up less than half of the U.S. population within a few decades” (“Modeling the Future of Religion in America,” PewResearch.org, Sept. 13, 2022). “Depending on whether religious switching continues at recent rates . . . the projections show Christians of all ages shrinking from 64% to between a little more than half (54%) and just above one-third (35%) of all Americans by 2070. Over that same period, ‘nones’ [non-affiliated] would rise from the current 30% to somewhere between 34% and 52% of the U.S. population.”

The report further points out: “These projections indicate the U.S. might be following the path taken over the last 50 years by many coun-

tries in Western Europe that had overwhelming Christian majorities in the middle of the 20th century and no longer do. In Great Britain, for example, ‘nones’ surpassed Christians to become the largest group in 2009.”

Pew further found that whereas 60 percent of Americans believe the United States was founded as a Christian nation, less than half (45%) believe it should be a Christian nation now to one degree or another. And “when asked about the amount of influence the Bible should have on our laws, 27% of U.S. adults said, ‘If [laws] conflict, Bible should have more influence than will of people,’ and 19% said, ‘Will of people should have more influence’” (“Pew: 45% of U.S. Adults Think America Should be a ‘Christian Nation,’” CNS News, Nov. 8, 2022). Yet it seems that governance today follows neither the Bible nor the will of the people.

“The survey also revealed that 23% believe religion is gaining influence in the U.S. while 74% said it was losing influence” (ibid.).

## War on wellness?

Many today suffer with health issues, but it's good to try to be as healthy as we can, which is greatly impacted by our choices. During Covid lockdowns, athletic participation declined while screen time went up dramatically—worsening physical health and



making people more susceptible to disease.

A recent study found that “men and women who worked out at least 30 minutes most days were about four times more likely to survive covid-19 than inactive people . . . The study found that exercise, in almost any amount, reduced people’s risks for a severe coronavirus infection” (“Regular Exercise Protects Against Fatal Covid,” *The Washington Post*, Dec. 21, 2022). And, as is well known, physical fitness helps in avoiding all kinds of other health problems.

In a recent social commentary, TV host Laura Ingraham spoke out against the increasingly common approach of normalizing obesity among children and adults as part of inclusivity and diversity affirmation.

As she stated: “While encouraging kindness is one thing, glamorizing obesity with its many health risks is quite another. But that’s exactly what’s happening in this inclusivity cult. They’re normalizing something we should be strongly discouraging . . . The more overweight we are, the greater the chance we’re going to develop diabetes, heart disease and cancer. But the

popular culture says, ‘Stop the shaming, start the selling’ [with advertising promoting obesity acceptance along with unhealthful foods and habits] . . . If we truly care about young people and adults who are struggling with their weight, the last thing we should do is slather them . . . with happy talk. We should respect them enough to tell them the truth. This overwhelmingly is about self-control, diet and exercise . . .” (“Unhealthy and Unaccountable,” Fox News, Jan. 11, 2023). But as she further points out, to even suggest that is now labeled fat-shaming and bullying.

Parents are being told by medical professionals to help overweight children as young as 12 and 13 by turning to prescription drugs and major surgeries, when that used to be reserved for extreme cases. It’s “removing personal responsibility from life and replacing it with the ‘We’re all victims of circumstances’ mentality and offering shortcuts courtesy of big pharma and the medical industrial complex.”

On top of this, *Time* magazine recently published a bizarre article claiming that exercise originated in white supremacy and was later promoted to shame gay people with AIDS (“Exercise Is ‘White Supremacy’: Time Magazine Article Connects Peloton, AIDS and 9/11 in Fitness Conspiracy Theory,” *The Blaze*, Dec. 29, 2022). This is of course absurd—but it’s all of a piece with the movement to effectively promote unhealthiness.

A spiritual war is being waged against society, with the ultimate goal of collapsing it and destroying our nations and mankind at large—the principal foe being Satan the devil.

The Bible is clear that bodily exercise does profit us, though not to the extent of godliness (1 Timothy 4:8). Of course, being in good health positively affects our spiritual life, as it helps us to remain alert in prayer and Bible study, to more easily fellowship with others, and to do more in our serving of others and continuing to do so. Again, this concerns matters of health we have some control over—not disabilities our efforts have no effect on.

## American beliefs on last days, whether Bible determines right and wrong

As the world around us gets crazier and darker, a recent U.S. poll by the Pew Research Center shows that a majority of respondents, 58 percent, said *no* when asked if we are living in the end times. Yet 39 percent said *yes*, including nearly half (47%) of professing Christians (“2 in 5 Americans, Nearly Half of Christians, Believe ‘We Are Living in the End Times’: Poll,” Fox News, Dec. 12, 2022).

The Bible gives us definite signs of the end time. And Jesus told us, “Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near” (Luke 21:28). Terrible events will come, but God will see us through these if we remain close to Him. To better understand the times we live in, be sure to send for or download our free study guide *Are We Living in the Time of the End?*

Meanwhile, a July 2022 study shows that while a majority of Americans express support for traditional moral values, just 29 percent believe the Bible should serve as the foundation for determining right and wrong. The America’s Value Study by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University found that the most prominent determinant (from 42% of respondents) is “what you feel in your heart” (“Most Americans Don’t View the Bible as Primary Determinant of Right and Wrong: Study,” *The Christian Post*, Nov. 6, 2022). Yet Scripture tells us that “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” (Jeremiah 17:9). Right and wrong is defined by God, not by us. His Word tells us to “trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5). And it further warns us, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death” (Proverbs 14:12).

## How can you make sense of the news?

So much is happening in the world, and so quickly. Where are today’s dramatic and dangerous trends taking us? What does Bible prophecy reveal about our future? You’re probably very concerned with the direction the world is heading. So are we. That’s one reason we produce the *Beyond Today* daily TV commentaries—to help you understand the news in the light of Bible prophecy. These eye-opening presentations offer you a perspective so badly needed in our confused world—the **perspective of God’s Word**. Visit us at [ucg.org/beyond-today/daily](http://ucg.org/beyond-today/daily)!







# The “Respect for Marriage Act”: Is it Truly Respectful?

New legislation has imbedded same-sex “marriage” into U.S. law. To what end?  
And does this law actually respect marriage, a divine institution established by God?

by John LaBissoniere

**O**n December 13, 2022, U.S. President Joe Biden signed into law the “Respect for Marriage Act,” which requires same-sex marriages performed in any state to be recognized throughout the country.

It’s been reported that “the new law intends to keep gay marriage legal, should the U.S. Supreme Court ever decide to reverse its 2015 decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which legalized same-sex unions nationwide. Similarly, the Respect for Marriage Act keeps interracial marriage legal should the Supreme Court revisit its 1967 decision in *Loving v. Virginia*, which struck down state laws barring the action” (Lawrence Richard, “White House Glows Rainbow Colors After Biden Signs Respect For Marriage Act,” Fox News, Dec. 14, 2022).

This legislation passed the Senate, with all the Democrats aided by votes of 12 Republican senators who were satisfied with an amendment to it adding purported religious protections. However, opponents argued that these supposed safeguards lacked real enforcement provisions, so that the law will result in unrestrained abuses.

According to the Alliance Defending Freedom: “On Nov. 29, the Senate passed the Respect for Marriage Act as amended with the *insufficient protections* for religious freedom. In doing so, the Senate rejected three proposed amendments that would have added more meaningful religious liberty protections to the bill” (Gregory Baylor, “What You Should Know About the Respect for Marriage Act,” ADFlegal.org, Dec. 14, 2022, emphasis added throughout).

## Potential adverse consequences of the law

In describing potential adverse outcomes of the new law, an article in *The Federalist* warned that “Christians, Jews, Muslims, and anyone else who dares maintain that marriage is a lifelong conjugal union between one man and one woman—the definition of marriage for thousands of years . . . will be branded a bigot and driven from the public square and marketplace.

“Anyone who owns a small business related to the wedding industry . . . will be sued into oblivion if they refuse services to same-sex couples. Religious colleges and uni-

versities will lose their tax-exempt status. Religious institutions of every kind, if they hold to their teachings and traditions about marriage, will face an onslaught from the Department of Justice and the federal bureaucracy” (John Davidson, “The ‘Respect for Marriage Act’ Is An Exercise In Tyranny, and Everyone Knows It,” Nov. 22, 2022).

The subjects of homosexual behavior and same-sex marriage have been hotly debated in many countries. Over the past several years, “marriages” of same-sex couples have been recognized in 33 nations. Yet while legislators and judges in democratic countries have the power, with consent of the governed, to enact laws they believe are just, that does not make such laws truly just and acceptable in the eyes of God. Even though particular behaviors and actions may be accepted by the majority in society, that does not make them in any way good, healthy or desirable.

## Deciding for themselves what is right and wrong

When God created the earth and all life on it, He said it was “*very good*” (Genesis 1:31). But the perfect way in which He established things *at that time* is *not* how we find them now. Because when sin entered the world through the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, everything changed.

What was perfect became contaminated. And since then the world has existed in a despoiled condition. Our first parents sinned by *deciding for themselves* what was right and wrong in eating fruit from the forbidden “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:15-16; 3:1-6).

From that time forward, each succeeding generation has followed the same unsound and harmful example by *also doing what seemed right in their own eyes* (Proverbs 14:12; 16:25; see 21:2). Taking that pathway throughout history has resulted in the terrible anguish and misery the world has heaped on itself—prodded by the devil’s nefarious influence (Genesis 3:3-24; 1 John 5:19). All of this must be considered when appraising the relative “goodness” of anything, including decisions by lawmakers and judges to approve same-sex marriage as law.

The only way to know if something is truly correct is to examine it in the revealing light of God's Word. For example, when considering the phrase "same-sex marriage," we need to realize that *only* our Creator has the right to define the marriage relationship. And regarding homosexual activity itself, the Bible plainly describes it as sinful (Leviticus 18:22; Romans 1:26-27).



Our Creator established the divine institution of marriage and family so that human beings could learn to love one another as He loves them!

### The dangers of homosexual behavior

Of course, we should show compassion to those who have same-sex attraction and who struggle with temptation to pursue this lifestyle while striving to avoid it with God's help. And we should have compassion to all who are deceived regarding this lifestyle and embrace it. Much research has revealed how perilous and destructive it can be.

For example, on March 9, 2016, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention placed the following statement on its website: "Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) have been rising among gay and bisexual men, with increases in syphilis being seen across the country. Gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men often get other STDs, including chlamydia and gonorrhea infections."

On Apr. 5, 2018, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services posted this statement on its website: "In the United States, gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (MSM) are the population most affected by HIV [human immunodeficiency virus]."

And Healthline.com reported: "Depression affects LGBT people at higher rates than the heterosexual popu-

lation, and LGBT youths are more likely than heterosexual students to report high levels of drug use and feelings of depression. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide is the third leading cause of death among people age 10 to 24 in the United States. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths in grades 7-12 are twice as likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers" (Michael Kerr, July 2016).

### An act that disrespects marriage—and its Creator

Homosexual behavior, which was not long ago labeled as immoral in many nations, is now essentially exempt from public criticism. If someone dares oppose it, he or she may be accused of promoting "hate speech." Nevertheless, homosexual activity and all other sexual activity outside of proper marriage between a man and a woman are severe violations of God's instructions, as He made crystal clear in the Bible (1 Timothy 1:9-10). Therefore, the "Respect for Marriage Act" clearly *does not* respect marriage—or God who made it.

Our eternal Creator established the divine institution of marriage and family so that human beings could learn to love one another as He loves them (Genesis 2:24). And He created sex as a means for a couple to conceive and bring children into a warm, tender and joyful family relationship (Genesis 1:28; 2:24; Malachi 2:15).

What a great blasphemy that lawmakers and governing leaders who have taken their oaths of office on the Holy Bible then turn around and effectively flush it and its words down the toilet, as they promote what it condemns and persecute those who stand with its truth and the God who gave it!

Since dangerous, lawless forces are at work in our midst (Ephesians 6:12), we must remain vigilant against an increasingly lawless and immoral society (Matthew 24:12; Philippians 4:7). Let us choose now to keep standing for what is right, trusting not in the wayward words and ideas of men but in what the Supreme Authority of the universe reveals through His Word, the Holy Bible (2 Samuel 22:31; 1 Thessalonians 2:13). In doing so, we offer Him the profound honor and deep respect He and His revealed truth rightly deserve! **BT**

#### LEARN MORE



Our Creator God made human beings male and female and gave us the institution of marriage and family for very important reasons. What is His plan for marriage? Download or request our free study guide *Marriage and Family: The Missing Dimension* to learn more!

**BTmagazine.org/booklets**



# Rising Prices, Surging Crime: What Can You Do?

As the cost of living escalates and crime intensifies, what can you do to aid your family? And where can you find lasting help, hope and stability in this time of turbulent change and uncertainty?

by John LaBissoniere

**A**mong today's many troubling issues is the fact that families are enduring financial turmoil as prices for food, gasoline, housing and nearly everything else skyrockets. Bills are piling up and worries magnify as an increasing number of people are living paycheck to paycheck. At the same time, lawlessness is mounting while government officials seem unable to deal with these issues.

What can you do? Precautions are vital in dangerous times (Proverbs 22:3; 27:12). What steps can you take? And what is *the most important* action you can take to bring help, hope and stability to you and your family?

## Taking action to deal with rising prices

Most of today's escalating costs are the result of inflation—the increase in the cost of goods and services which decreases people's purchasing power. Inflation is, in effect, an endless tax that impacts everyone, but especially those who are poor, middle class or living on a fixed income and already have difficulty affording necessities.

In addition, inflation leads to rising interest rates—increasing the cost of large purchases such as houses and vehicles—and slows overall economic growth.

So what are some practical actions you can take to contend with the rising expenses your family is experiencing?

If you're a conscientious shopper, you're likely already buying less expensive, generic-brand products, using manufacturers' coupons and reducing purchases of expensive prepackaged convenience foods. But what else can you do?

Consider changing *where* you shop, at least for some products. You may want to look for online-only and "dollar"-type stores for discounted food items as well as outlet grocery stores that offer significant markdowns as product "sell by" dates draw near. Also, consider shopping at "bulk" stores to purchase larger quantities of nonperishable food items, household paper products and other essentials—since doing so reduces your per unit cost.

You might also take a close look at what you're spending for cell phone plans, video streaming services, vehicle and home insurance premiums, gym memberships, cable subscriptions and your credit card interest rate if

you have to carry a balance. The recurring costs in these plans and services may be negotiable. Calling or writing to request lower rates is frequently successful—which can be valuable in helping reduce your monthly expenses.

Other money-saving suggestions include checking to see if you qualify for an energy assistance program. These are designed to help with monthly utility bills.

Consider replacing your old thermostat with a programmable one. You could save as much as 10 percent annually by turning down the heat in winter while you're at work or school. You could also consider asking your employer for a pay raise if you've been a reliable, hardworking employee—good employees are increasingly hard to find.

You can probably come up with some other ways to cut costs too. Do additional research online for more ideas.

## Protecting your home and family as crime surges

Sadly, criminal activity is surging in today's society. Since crime can occur nearly anywhere—including your own neighborhood—take preventative measures to safe-

When God is a priority in your life, you can ask Him to guide your daily decisions and actions and He will respond with favor.

guard your family. According to a recent article in *Forbes* magazine, "You can start protecting yourself by evaluating your home, changing your habits when you leave and putting other measures in place that could improve your home's security" (Emily Glover, "10 Ways to Secure Your Home Against Home Invasion," *Forbes*, July 25, 2022).

The article goes on to explain that "according to the U.S. Department of Justice, a burglary is considered a home invasion when a resident is present. Although burglaries can and do happen at any time, they are most common during daytime hours." Below are some valuable actions you can take to help protect your home and family:

- **"Keep Curtains and Blinds Pulled.** Criminals may look through windows to scout potential burglary targets or to evaluate whether residents are home. Keep curtains or blinds pulled down in any room where you aren't currently



enjoying the natural light. This also goes for when you leave the house for work, errands or trips.

- *“Invest in a Home Security System.* From ones that can be professionally installed and monitored to [do it yourself] options that offer great protection against home invasions.
- *“Get Motion-Sensing Lights.* You can set motion-sensing smart lights to activate when you are out of the house. If you’re on vacation, this can also signal to helpful neighbors who are keeping watch that something isn’t right.
- *“Don’t Broadcast Upcoming Departures.* As tempting as it may be to share upcoming travel plans on social media, it’s not worth the risk. Even telling a friend about your itinerary when you are in a public place can be ill-advised as you don’t know who else may be eavesdropping on the conversation.
- *“Keep the Doors Locked and Garage Shut.* If doors are left unlocked or the garage is open, fast-moving burglars can strike when you go out on a walk, or even are just in the yard. It’s also worth keeping your windows locked, and don’t forget any windows to the basement.
- *“Look Out for Neighbors (and Vice Versa).* What’s good for your neighborhood is good for your home. By making it clear to burglars that you live in a place where neighbors look out for each other, they may be deterred from trying their chances. If you decide to make a house key available to a neighbor, give it to them directly rather than leaving it in an outdoor hiding place.”

### The most important action you can take

While the above measures involving cost savings and protecting your home and family can be highly beneficial, there is another extremely important action you can take to assure that you and your family will have what is needed to live satisfactorily and safely.

At *Beyond Today* magazine we desire to help our readers understand the crucial significance of placing their lives in the hands of their Creator who says in His Word, the Bible, that there is no real security apart from Him: “Unless the LORD guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain” (Psalm 127:1).

Yet to those who trust Him He promises: “Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, *I will uphold you with My righteous right hand*” (Isaiah 41:10, emphasis added throughout).

The Eternal God is supremely willing to offer you and your family the help, strength and guidance needed to successfully handle life’s many troubles (Psalms 18:2-3; 91:5-7). King David of ancient Israel stated: “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? *My help comes from the LORD*, who made heaven and earth” (Psalm 121:1-2, English Standard Version).

Also, the apostle Paul wrote, “My God will supply *every need of yours* according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19, World English Bible).

These awesome promises can be yours if you place Him *first* in your life, turn from sin and diligently keep His commandments, which He designed for your full benefit (Psalm 119:2; Matthew 6:31-34; 19:17).

Jesus Christ declared, “And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30). When God and His ways are a priority in your life, you can ask Him to guide your daily decisions and actions, and He will respond with great favor. Plus, He will gladly help you prepare for *eternal life* in His coming magnificent Kingdom (John 10:28).

All of this involves maintaining a close and enduring relationship with God through Jesus Christ—by daily prayer and living by “every word of God,” the Bible (Luke 4:4).

Why is a steadfast relationship with Christ so crucially important? It’s because your human strength and resolve *can take you only so far*. However, with the overwhelming aid, power and peace of mind He provides, you enjoy a huge advantage, as the following passages make clear. Psalm 46:1 says, “God is our refuge and strength, *a very present help in trouble*.” Also, Hebrews 4:16 says we can “come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

Furthermore, as the apostle Paul wrote, “Let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7).

These and other biblical promises affirm marvelous benefits that tower far above and beyond anything you could ever obtain on your own or even think up (Ephesians 3:20). So why carry the entire burden yourself when Jesus said, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

As you face increasing expenses today and as crime and lawlessness could perhaps affect the safety of your family, be sure to take the appropriate actions to care for and safeguard them. But *most importantly*, place yourself and your concerns in the hands of your Creator!

If you diligently and humbly seek, trust and obey Him, He will be more than willing to give you the help, hope and stability you need. To be sure, “He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him” (Hebrews 11:6). Therefore, will you seek God and follow His ways? He wants to help you and your family and is looking forward to doing so! **BT**



#### LEARN MORE

In financially challenging times like this, how can you stretch your money to make it go further? The Bible contains a great deal of sound financial advice, and we’ve compiled that into our free guide *Managing Your Finances*. Download or request your free copy today!

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# Hearing the Only Voice That Matters

Above the constant barrage of voices that would shape who we are, hear and heed the one that is ultimately vital to your life now and forever.

by Robin Webber

**T**he Grand Canyon in Arizona is a remarkable sight. Whether in person or seeing a photograph, people contemplate how multiple forces of sun, wind, rain, snow and river formed such a spectacle. It's a defining portrait of cause and effect.

Likewise, we are molded by elements that steadily create indelible impressions that, like this famous natural wonder, are on full display for those who experience us, from God above to those here below.

Unlike the Grand Canyon's ongoing existence subject to nature's elements, we as disciples of Jesus Christ have a *choice* upon accepting His call of "Follow Me" (Matthew 4:19; 16:24) as to what ultimately shapes our minds—even as forces continually press to erode our time and shape us differently.

One unrelenting force God wants us to consider is that of "voices" coming at us every day throughout our lives. These voices have incredible impact on us, just as much as sun, wind and rain on the Grand Canyon. They affect us from "womb to tomb" and sculpt our view of God, of ourselves and of what God is performing in others.

Voices matter! The patriarch Job, when being chiseled away by his friends' accusatory conclusions, cried out, "How long will you torment my soul, and break me in pieces with words?" (Job 19:2).

My question to you is this: *To what voices are you listening? Only one voice really matters*, and we must hear that voice loud and clear.

## The Shepherd's sheep know His voice

There is a "prince of the power of the air," Satan himself (Ephesians 2:2), who seeks to ensnare us in his self-seeking and self-destructive image. To use familiar jargon of today, *it's time to cut the cable* and disconnect from him.

Unlike with the Grand Canyon, Psalm 90:10-12 (take a look!) tells us we do not have ages to be molded into the ultimate spiritual new creation our Heavenly Father intends that we become. The prophet Isaiah declares the ultimate voice that matters in molding us, praying, "You are our Father; we are the clay, and You our potter; and all

we are the work of Your hand" (Isaiah 64:8).

And Hebrews 13:20 tells us that our Heavenly Father has appointed Jesus Christ to be the "great Shepherd of the sheep." He earlier declared of Himself: "But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the door-keeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice" (John 10:2-4).

Jesus based this metaphor on a reality regarding shepherding in the Middle East. Flocks would intermingle as two shepherds shared time to break their occupational loneliness. When it came time to separate, each would summon their sheep by their unique vocal call or whistle, and the flocks would separate and follow their particular shepherd.

But such responsiveness doesn't happen overnight. Newborn sheep instinctively follow the flock around them. It's only later, by the steady attention of a loving shepherd and response by a maturing lamb, that the bond to a singular and caring voice develops.

David, who had served as a shepherd, referred to this reality in his personal claim: "*The LORD is My shepherd . . .*" (Psalm 23:1). All that follows in this beloved psalm—the Shepherd's guidance and steadfast presence through green pastures, still waters, paths of righteousness, shadowy valleys of dark times, and dwelling in the house of the Lord forever—is conditionally predicated on 1) the sheep hearing the voice of his particular Shepherd and 2) responding to His call above all other voices.

## Resist the serpent by the still small voice of God

But be advised: The same voice of the serpent that spoke to Eve in the Garden of Eden remains alive and active.

In 2 Corinthians 4:4, the apostle Paul identifies the serpent (Satan) with his barrage of voices coming our way as "the god of this age"—this culture, this society. As we saw, he is further called "the prince of the power of the air." He continues to seep into any provided crack to deter your focus from the only voice that matters.

We cannot stop Satan's *attempted* intrusion coming at



Like the Grand Canyon, we are shaped by forces that continually work to shape us differently.

us in many venues, but we do have the choice to reject it and to listen and respond to the Shepherd's voice. Psychologist Viktor Frankl, a World War II concentration camp survivor faced with a barrage of negative voices every day, is credited with having said: "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

One challenge faced by Jesus' followers is that in the moment we too often figuratively stand by a disheartened Elijah who is trembling at the voice of Queen Jezebel, who threatened to kill him. He flees to Mt. Sinai, hoping to hear God's voice in the passing wind, earthquake or fire, waiting for some kind of thunderous interruption by God rather than what he finally hears—"a still small voice." God asks him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (see 1 Kings 19:8-13). And He asks us the same. Why are we listening to *other* voices, including our own?

But make no mistake, our Heavenly Father through Christ does interrupt us today as much as in yesteryear. The risen Christ in His messages to the seven churches of Revelation concludes: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me" (Revelation 3:20).

But to hear His knock and voice, we have to *cut the cable* of other voices, pushing out the noise that hinders our ability to fully engage in responding to the awesome invitation of "Follow Me."

### Being filled with God's Word

However, it's not enough to just cut the cable! We need to replace it, connecting with the only voice that matters.

Why? Empty spaces by nature fill up one way or another. Satan loves to operate in a vacuum and fill it in his time and way. Romans 12:21 tell us, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Christ, the living Word, may be knocking on the door of your heart right now, the same voice that long ago taught us how to pray, saying in part, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11). Was Jesus speaking to something greater than sustenance for our physical well-being?

Author Bo Stern addresses this in her book *Beautiful Battlefields* in chapter 3, titled "Catching Manna." I'll summarize here with some additional thoughts. As Israel wandered in the wilderness, God provided manna to eat *each* day to fill their needs for survival in a hostile environment—with each Friday's portion carrying over to the next-day Sabbath (Exodus 16). The Master Teacher was realigning their mindset. The God of the universe did not give them what they needed for weeks or months all at once. They had to rely on Him in faith that they would be supplied their "daily bread" for each day alone and extra for the Sabbath. Day by day, they had to return in total reliance on their God to shepherd them through the wilderness.

We should consider that God was effectively weaning them—cutting the cable!—of their dependence on Egypt and its alluring voices to go back, and instead helping them to connect to Him and develop total reliance on Him to meet their needs. Rather than offering them stockpiles of sustenance up front, He chose to feed them day by day, presenting before them each day for 40 years the need to trust in His loving provision. He showed that His guiding voice alone was worthy, loving and reliable.

Jesus, the living Word of God, the same "I Am" who led Israel through the Sinai wilderness (see 1 Corinthians 10:4), cut the cable from the tempting voice of Satan in His own wilderness experience in Matthew 4 by proclaiming, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (verse 4). He was quoting Scripture (here from Deuteronomy 8:3), which guided and nourished Him in time of need.

God's Word will never direct us to something that goes against His nature or character. So although learning to discern and listen to His voice is a lifelong journey, you can count on this fact: The more you know God, the more clearly you can hear Him! **BT**

### LEARN MORE



How can we better respond to God and draw closer to Him, hearing His voice? The Bible gives us important keys and reveals tools we can use. Download or request our free study guide *Tools for Spiritual Growth* to learn more!

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### The Biblical Identity of Britain's Royal Family

Would you be willing to send me one additional copy of the Jan.-Feb. edition of your magazine? I would particularly like family and friends of mine to have a copy of the articles about the history and destiny of Britain's royal family. I have been made aware of this teaching, though sadly due to the Roman Catholic Church's doctrine of Replacement Theology, very few Christians realize this. I think that if it was more widely known, Britain and the Commonwealth today would be a lot more Christian than they are. I do trust that 2023 will be the year that the Christian gospel (the good news) will be widely proclaimed as never before.

*Subscriber in Isle of Man, British Isles*

Thank you for keeping us informed throughout 2022 with *Beyond Today*. I also greatly appreciated the printed information on the throne of Britain, which gave me a greater insight and history into God's plan. Every good wish.

*Subscriber in Western Australia*

### Readers thankful for *Beyond Today* magazine

Thanks for your material. During the two years I have been in detention, it has been of great benefit and I am very thankful for it. Moreover, all this material passes through many hands and is shared in all the cells here. These materials and many Bibles are falling apart from heavy usage, but we glue or repair them with whatever elements that we have available here. To see the torn and damaged booklets and magazines from so much use makes me smile and fills my heart, because while they fall to pieces, our lives are built, made new and stronger in the Word of God. With humility and a grateful heart.

*From the Internet*

I am so glad I found *Beyond Today*. It is the closest to the truth that I've found! If not for you I would not have gone deeper into Scripture with a brighter light shining for truth and spiritual understanding. Thank you for all you do, and the Lord bless you.

*Subscriber in Texas*

Thank you for your most awesome magazine. It is truly wonderful to find reading material that is biblical. What a great blessing! I wait for your magazine and reading it always gives me such joy. God bless you, and please continue to send your great literature.

*Subscriber in Canada*

### Audio version of *Beyond Today* magazine

Please look into doing an audio version of your magazines, even if for a fee. I find your magazines highly inspirational, full of knowledge and eye-opening. Sometimes I would love to be able to listen while I do house chores or tend to my little one.

*Subscriber in England*

*Great news—we do have audio versions of our articles within our magazine! When you click on a specific article within an issue of the magazine at [btmagazine.org](http://btmagazine.org), you will see a headphone icon with the word "Listen" on the right side of the page (or underneath the title when you're on a mobile phone). Please note that because it takes some time to record the articles, there is a lag before audio recordings of the current issue are available.*

### Looking to visit a church congregation

I have been following your church website for some time, reading magazines and watching some videos. I would like to know how I can be part of the church. Previously I have never attended one, and this one has strongly called my attention. I would like to be fully involved in it more than just watching its webcasts on Saturday. Thank you in advance.

*Reader in Guatemala*

*Yes, we'd love to have you visit! Go to [ucg.org/congregations](http://ucg.org/congregations) to find the one closest to you. We have pastors and church congregations all around the world, including Guatemala. We hope to see you soon!*

### Generous support from readers

Greetings. This is just a short note to thank you for your TV programs and magazines you so kindly send. Please keep sending them. We are sending a small donation to help with your great work for our Creator God.

*Subscribers in Victoria, Australia*

Thank you so much. And thank you for sending me the study guide *Jesus Christ: The Real Story*. It has answered everything that has been on my mind which had been stumbling blocks to understanding Jesus. The part I love the best is how you explain that Jesus is God. I would love it if I could have a few more copies of it to share with others. I would feel better if I could pay for the postage and printing costs. Please provide me with a way to pay \$50.

*Reader in Australia*

*We happily provide everything free of charge, as Jesus directed His disciples to do. We are, however, very grateful for the support we receive from thankful readers who appreciate and want to share in this work!*

Just a brief note and small donation to express my heartfelt gratitude for all your help in preparing me for my role in God's soon-coming Kingdom. I consider your wonderful ministry to be one of God's greatest blessings of the modern era.

*From the Internet*

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I really enjoy *Beyond Today* magazine. It gives a good understanding of the Bible and highlights information not found elsewhere. I highly recommend this magazine to all.

*—KT, Facebook fan*



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## How Much Do You Know About *the Real Easter Story*?

How much do you know about the origin of Easter and its popular customs? Take the following short quiz to assess your knowledge!

**1**  **TRUE** Easter didn't originate with Jesus Christ's resurrection, but had been celebrated for many centuries prior.  
 **FALSE**

**2**  **TRUE** Rabbits and eggs have nothing to do with Christ's resurrection, but are holdovers from ancient spring fertility celebrations.  
 **FALSE**

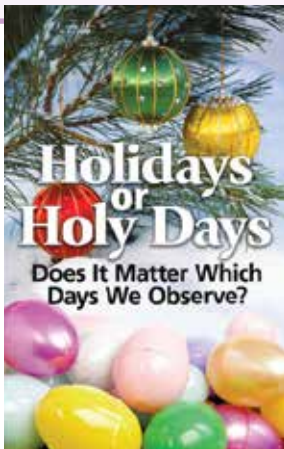
**3**  **TRUE** Easter gets its name from an ancient fertility goddess.  
 **FALSE**

**4**  **TRUE** Pagans celebrated the supposed resurrection of their false gods in the springtime many centuries before Jesus Christ.  
 **FALSE**

**5**  **TRUE** The word *Easter* appears only once in the King James Bible—and that one time is a mistranslation of the Greek word for *Passover*.  
 **FALSE**

**6**  **TRUE** Neither the apostles nor other members of the early Church celebrated Easter.  
 **FALSE**

**7**  **TRUE** Celebrations such as Easter are condemned in the Bible.  
 **FALSE**



The correct answer to all of the above questions is *true*—and you can verify most of these answers with a quick look through several good encyclopedias. Or, for an in-depth look at the real Easter story as revealed by history and the Bible, request your free copy of our study guide *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?*

Too many people go through life thinking they are honoring Jesus Christ through popular celebrations such as Easter. But before you celebrate Easter again, why not consider what Jesus Himself thinks about this holiday? As a serious Christian, don't you think it's time you considered His point of view?

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