

God's Appointed Times
Feast of First Fruits – Sfirat Haomer/Yom HaBikkurim

First Fruits – *Leviticus 23:9-14, I Corinthians 15:20-23*

Purpose

Sfirat Haomer means “the counting of the sheaf”, and refers to the early spring harvest of barley. The purpose was to give the people an opportunity to bring the first fruits (sheaves) of the first harvest of the year as an offering of thanks to God. And, because God was faithful in the early harvest, He would certainly provide the harvests in the late summer/early fall.

Practice (Old and New Testament)

The Feast of First Fruits was to be celebrated on *the day after the Sabbath* (v. 11) immediately following the Passover. Depending on the interpretation (Pharisees or Sadducees), *First Fruits* would either fall on the first day of the week – or – it would fall on Nisan 16 regardless of the day of the week. By Jesus time, Nisan 16 had become the prevalent day of celebration of *First Fruits*.

Observation involved bringing the first sheaves of the barley harvest to the Temple/tabernacle and the priest would wave the sheaf in the air in celebration. This was accompanied by a praise service involving music, psalms and dance. Participants were also required to offer a burnt offering, grain offering and drink offering. It also set the stage for the next and final spring feast, Shavuot, which would occur 50 days later and celebrated the later spring harvest of wheat. The theme surrounding First Fruits was new life, new birth, harvest [and ultimately, resurrection].

Firstfruits has always been a sign to God of faith, trust and commitment. The first of everything belongs to God. (see lesson on *God's Principles and Priorities on Time, Talent and Treasure, Part 1. First Things First*). The Feast of First Fruits shows us that life – new life, resurrected life – truly belongs to God.

Prophetic Fulfillment by Christ

I Corinthians 15:20-23 tells us that Christ is the firstfruits of all those who will be resurrected. It is not merely an indication of order, but a direct reference to the fact that by rising from the grave, Christ is the direct fulfillment of the feast of First Fruits!

The traditional observance involves raising the grain that has come from the earth and waving it before the Lord for all to see. In *John 12:23, 24, 32*, Jesus alludes to the fact that a seed of grain must be buried in the ground and die in order for it to produce a harvest, which in turn is lifted up for all to see during the celebration of First Fruits. Jesus then goes on to say that He will be lifted up accordingly. So, it was no coincidence that Christ was crucified on Passover, and rose again on the day of First Fruits! *So, what happened to the celebration of Christ's resurrection through the Feast of First Fruits?*

Practical Applications, Observations and Challenges

In AD 325, the Church Council of Nicea established that Christians should not be allowed to commemorate Passover and its associated feasts, but would observe the resurrection on a “new” holiday called Easter, which would be celebrated on the Sunday after the spring equinox, based on the appearance of the full or new moon. The decision was made to coincide the Christian celebration of the resurrection with the pagan spring festival honoring *Eastre*, the Saxon goddess of springtime and fertility. The thought was to ease converted pagans into Christianity and a celebration of Christ's resurrection by melding a new tradition with the old.

- What is the proper way to celebrate and remember the resurrection of Christ?
- How does this change your view of the Easter holiday? Or does it?
- Has Christ's fulfillment of the Passover week days/feasts become more meaningful to you?

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The Traditions of Easter - <http://wilstar.com/holidays/easter.htm>

As with almost all "Christian" holidays, Easter has been secularized and commercialized. The dichotomous nature of Easter and its symbols, however, is not necessarily a modern fabrication.

Since its conception as a holy celebration in the second century, Easter has had its non-religious side. In fact, Easter was originally a pagan festival.

The ancient Saxons celebrated the return of spring with an uproarious festival commemorating their goddess of offspring and of springtime, *Eastre*. When the second-century Christian missionaries encountered the tribes of the north with their pagan celebrations, they attempted to convert them to Christianity. They did so, however, in a clandestine manner.

It would have been suicide for the very early Christian converts to celebrate their holy days with observances that did not coincide with celebrations that already existed. To save lives, the missionaries cleverly decided to spread their religious message slowly throughout the populations by allowing them to continue to celebrate pagan feasts, but to do so in a Christian manner.

As it happened, the pagan festival of *Eastre* occurred at the same time of year as the Christian observance of the Resurrection of Christ. It made sense, therefore, to alter the festival itself, to make it a Christian celebration as converts were slowly won over. The early name, *Eastre*, was eventually changed to its modern spelling, *Easter*.

The Date of Easter

Prior to A.D. 325, Easter was variously celebrated on different days of the week, including Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. In that year, the Council of Nicaea was convened by emperor Constantine. It issued the *Easter Rule* which states that Easter shall be celebrated on the first Sunday that occurs after the first full moon on or after the vernal equinox. However, a caveat must be introduced here. The "full moon" in the rule is the ecclesiastical full moon, which is defined as the fourteenth day of a tabular lunation, where day 1 corresponds to the ecclesiastical New Moon. It does not always occur on the same date as the astronomical full moon. The ecclesiastical "vernal equinox" is always on March 21. Therefore, Easter must be celebrated on a Sunday between the dates of March 22 and April 25.

The Significance of Christ's Resurrection

by Wayne Jackson

Christian Courier: Penpoints

<http://www.christiancourier.com/penpoints/resurrection.htm>

Each spring, millions of people around the world acknowledge, in some fashion or another, that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead some twenty centuries ago. Modern society calls it "Easter."

The origin of this term is uncertain, though it is commonly thought to derive from *Eastre*, the name of a Teutonic spring goddess. The term "Easter," in the King James Version of the Bible (Acts 12:4), is a mistranslation. The Greek word is *pascha*, correctly rendered "Passover" in later translations. In fact, though *pascha* is found twenty-nine times in the Greek New Testament, it is only rendered "Easter" once, even in the KJV.

Christians are not authorized to celebrate "Easter" as a special annual event acknowledging the resurrection of Christ. Faithful children of God reflect upon the Savior's resurrection **every Sunday**

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(the resurrection day - cf. Jn. 20:1ff) as they gather to worship God in the regular assembly of the church (cf. Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2).

We ought to be glad, however, that multitudes – usually caught up in pursuits wholly materialistic – will take at least some time for reflection upon the event of the Savior's resurrection. It is entirely appropriate that Christians take advantage of this circumstance; we should be both willing and able to explain to our friends – at least those who have some reverence for Christianity – the significance of the Lord's resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the foundation of the Christian system (cf. 1 Cor. 15:14ff). If there was no resurrection, Christianity is a hoax, and we are wasting our time. But the truth is, the event of Jesus' resurrection is incontrovertible. Professor Thomas Arnold of Rugby, a world-renowned historian, once said that Christ's resurrection from the dead is the "best-attested fact in human history" (**International Standard Bible Encyclopedia**, IV, p. 2569).

First, the resurrection is one of the major evidences that Jesus Christ is *the Son of God*. Paul affirmed that Christ is "declared to be the Son of God with power. . . by the resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:4).

Second, Jesus' resurrection represents an assurance that we can have *forgiveness from our sins*. Paul contended: ". . . if Christ hath not been raised, our faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins" (1 Cor. 15:17). The reverse of the apostle's affirmation would be this: If Jesus was raised, sins will be forgiven when we obey the gospel – Acts 2:38; 22:16.

Third, the resurrection tells the world that *the kingdom of God is ruled by a living sovereign*. The founder of Islam is dead and his bones lie dormant in the earth. But the founder of Christianity – sixty years after His death – appeared to John on the island of Patmos and said: "I am the first and the last, and the Living one. . . I was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore. . ." (Rev. 1:17-18).

Fourth, Jesus' resurrection proves that *physical death is not the termination of human existence*. God, who is the giver of life (1 Tim. 6:13), has the power to reanimate the human body. Christ's triumph over the grave is Heaven's pledge to us that we too shall be raised. This is why Jesus is referred to as the "firstfruits of them that are asleep" (1 Cor. 15:20,23).

Fifth, the Lord's resurrection previewed the *ultimate victory of Christianity over all its enemies*. In the book of Revelation, Jesus is depicted as a lamb that had been slain, but was standing again (5:6). This same Lord was "the lion of the tribe of Judah" that had overcome His foes (5:5). Christians too will overcome as a result of the Lamb's sacrifice and victory over death (cf. Rev. 12:11).

The resurrection of the Son of God should be a constant reminder to us of these wonderful biblical truths. We honor our Master's victory over death – not once-a-year, but every week!

- Wayne Jackson