

The Plan of God A Journey Through The Bible

By James Summerville

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). And so begins your story. Not only your story, but the story of your parents, grandparents, and great-great-great-great grandparents.

Your story has an end, located in the last few chapters of the book of Revelation. These chapters describe the return of Jesus; the banishment, temporary and permanent, of Satan and his demons; the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth; the first through third resurrections; and the relocation of God the Father’s throne to a transformed earth.

You can’t find your name in these chapters? Don’t worry, neither can I. Rest assured, however, your name is there. It’s in the chapter describing the first and second resurrections. Hopefully it’s also located in the verses about God’s kingdom.

Oops, I made a mistake. In the second paragraph I wrote that your story “has an end.” Actually, your story has no end, unless you’re one of the few unfortunate people who’ll end up in the lake of fire. Let’s assume you’re not one of them. Therefore, where will you go? Heaven? Don’t be silly; where did you get that idea?

Most Christians believe they’re destined for heaven. Yes, heaven is a comforting thought to the relatives of the dying and the dead. But it’s wishful thinking. The hope of heaven after death is unbiblical. In other words, it’s not in the Bible.

No, you’re not going to heaven when you die. Don’t worry: you’re not going to hell, either. By the way, hell is a fictional place, as real as Shangri-la or Sesame Street.¹

Instead, you’re destined for the

grave. God said to Adam, “Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:17-19).

Bummer! You work and work and work, and then you die. Notice that God did not mention the afterlife, just the cold grave. Thankfully your story doesn’t conclude there.

A thousand or so pages later in your Bible, in his first letter to the Greek Corinthians, the Apostle Paul describes a resurrection from the dead. “For since by man came death, by Man also came the *resurrection of the dead*. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the *firstfruits*, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming. Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death” (I Corinthians 15:21-26).

According to Paul, the grave is nothing more than a temporary stop in our journey, an interlude in the story of our lives. Think of your life as a play in several acts. Act I is the story of your earthly life. Death is intermission. Act II begins when God resurrects you upon Jesus’ return, not a moment sooner. Act II will be set in the kingdom of God on earth.

Paul also used an interesting analogy. He labeled Jesus as “the firstfruits.” How peculiar. Why would Paul, in writing to a gentile (i.e. Greek) church in Corinth,

¹ See our publication “Hell is a Myth”

use the name of an ancient Hebrew festival, the *Feast of Firstfruits*, to describe Jesus?

Furthermore, earlier in his letter Paul used a name of an ancient Hebrew holy day to describe Jesus. “Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, *our Passover*, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the *feast*, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the *unleavened bread* of sincerity and truth” (I Corinthians 5:6-8).

Here Paul referred to Jesus as our “Passover,” the first of the seven major ancient Hebrew holy days and festivals. After accepting the sacrifice of Jesus our Passover, he urged the Corinthians (and by extension, us) to become unleavened, an unmistakable reference to the festival immediately following the Passover, the *Feast of Unleavened Bread*. Why would Paul use the names of ancient Hebrew holy days and festivals to describe Jesus and us?

“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*’ [LEVITICUS 23:1-2].”

God’s holy days & festivals

Oops, I made another mistake. Until now I’ve used the preface “Hebrew” when mentioning these holy days and festivals. Yet according to the 23rd chapter of the book of Leviticus, they’re not “Hebrew” holy days and festivals. Rather, they’re God’s holy days and festivals: “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*’” (Leviticus 23:1-2).

These holy days and festivals belong to God. He gave them to mankind, not just to the ancient Hebrews. They’re a gift from God. Who are we to refuse a gift from God?

God’s holy days & festivals: His gift to mankind

Most Christians have responded, “Thanks but no thanks.” What’s the use, they ask, of some archaic festival? They have a point. For example, how does the ancient *Feast of Unleavened Bread*, which commemorated the exodus of the ancient Israelites from Egypt, apply to modern-day Christians?

The exodus of the Israelites from Egypt: what an exciting story! And Cecil B. DeMille’s account of it, *The Ten Commandments*, starring Charlton Heston: what a movie! (Granted, the special effects are cheesy; still, it’s a stirring story.) Yet this Feast is much more

than a quaint festival commemorating an historical event. It’s much more than the premise of a famous movie. Indeed, this Feast is an integral part of our story, the story of mankind.

Pardon the analogy

God’s gift, His holy days and festivals, illustrate the story of mankind. Indeed, they are the story’s table of contents.

The table of contents describes a story’s content and divides it into neat, discernable parts. By looking at the table of contents we’re able to discern the outline of a particular story. Similarly, by understanding the historical and prophetic purpose of God’s holy days and festivals, we can discern the outline of our story—again, the story of mankind. By grasping the outline of human history, we can begin to understand where we’ve been, where we are, and where we’re headed.

Good news

We’re headed to the Kingdom of God, that is, if we’re converted Christians who’ve accepted God’s gift of salvation. In God’s kingdom we’ll meet our spiritual (and for some of us, distant and physical) ancestors. Whom would you like to meet first? Moses? Ruth? Adam? Eve? Abraham? Daniel? Peter? Paul? We’ll also meet Jesus and God the Father.

The Bible concludes with this scenario. However, the Bible is very long: it contains sixty-six books collected into two testaments. I’ve provided a brief synopsis of the Bible’s conclusion. But, just like any other book, the Bible contains a beginning, middle, and an end. It makes no sense to begin our journey through the Bible in, say, Malachi (the last book of the Old Testament), or in one of the four Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life. Rather, we should begin in Genesis, the first book of the Bible.

A short journey through the Bible

The story of mankind begins in the Garden of Eden, somewhere to the east of Jerusalem, exact location unknown.

Adam and Eve had it all. The whole world was literally at their fingertips. Adam was married to an impossibly beautiful woman. Adam himself was no slouch, either. Food was plentiful and free. And most important, they communed directly with God.

Then one day they sinned. Beguiled by Satan’s false promises, Eve and then Adam disobeyed God by tasting the forbidden fruit. God was angry and

thus expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. In time they had children, their children had children, and so on, and soon the earth became populated. Unfortunately, mankind followed in Adam and Eve's footsteps, and worse, in the footsteps of their murderous son Cain. They strayed from God's laws (Romans 1:18-32), committing the same crimes that make the front pages of our newspapers. In a mere fifty chapters describing in part the first few thousand years of our existence, we read about murder, lying, stealing, rape, incest, slavery, war, prostitution, paganism, etc. Mankind was so bad that God destroyed everyone, save Noah and his family, in a great flood.

After the flood, God made an "everlasting" covenant with Noah and reaffirmed His laws. The everlasting covenant gave man the right to self-government. In other words, God gave us the responsibility to govern ourselves according to divinely-inspired laws (e.g. the death penalty for convicted murderers: Genesis 9:5-7). Unfortunately man has proved unwilling and therefore incapable of governing himself properly. A short time later, our ancestors were erecting monuments to pagan gods and to themselves

(e.g. the Tower of Babel). In the book of Isaiah, God criticized mankind: "The earth is also polluted by its inhabitants, for they transgressed laws, violated statutes, broke the everlasting covenant" (Isaiah 24:5). Here God referred to an everlasting covenant with mankind, the same covenant made thousands of years earlier with Noah.

Man has failed to govern properly; in other words, we've broken "the everlasting covenant."

After mankind's failure to obey His laws and statutes (for their own good), in essence God said, "Fine. If mankind doesn't want to obey Me, I'll pick someone and give him the opportunity to obey My laws. If he's obedient, I'll bless him and his children." God found that man. His name was Abram.

We know him as Abraham, a man referred to as God's friend (Isaiah 41:8, James 2:23). "Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws" (Genesis 26:5). As a result, God made two covenants with him (described in Genesis 17 & 22). Under these covenants, God promised that Abraham would become the forefather of several numerous, prosperous, and strong nations. Moreover,

everyone on earth would be blessed through Abraham's descendants. These promises would be realized in the progeny of Abraham's son Isaac and grandson Jacob (Genesis 21:12, 35:9-15).

Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel (Genesis 35:10), had twelve sons. Because of a famine, Jacob, his sons and their families migrated to Egypt, the superpower at that time. Israel prospered in Egypt (Exodus 1:7). After some time, the native Egyptians and their rulers (the Pharaohs) became jealous and nervous. Perhaps, they thought, one day the Israelites would take over Egypt. To prevent this, the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites (Exodus 1:11-14). Centuries of slavery ensued. Whipped into submission, the Israelites cried out to God for help. "Then the children of Israel groaned because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry came up to God because of the bondage. So God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob" (Exodus 2:23-24). Enough was enough. God appointed a champion for the Israelites. His name was Moses.

God said to Moses, "I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land...Come now, therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring My people, the



children of Israel, out of Egypt" (Exodus 3:7-10). God promised to strike the Egyptians with plagues if Pharaoh failed to free the Israelites.

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"It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God" ¹

Because Pharaoh failed to heed Moses, Egypt fell "into the hands of the living God," with disastrous consequences. Ten plagues followed—the Nile turning into blood; frogs, knats, and flies overwhelming the land; disease and boils afflicting the Egyptians and their livestock; hail and locusts destroying the crops; and darkness enveloping Egypt. Last but certainly not least, the tenth plague killed the firstborn of every Egyptian household: "Now it came about at midnight that the LORD struck all the

firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of cattle” (Exodus 12:29-30).

Before He killed the firstborn of Egypt, God instructed the Israelites to perform an elaborate ceremony, described in the 12th chapter of Exodus. On the 10th day of that month, christened by God as the first month in the newly-given Hebrew calendar (corresponding to our March or April, depending on the lunar cycle of a given year), the Israelites had to “take a lamb for themselves, according to their fathers’ households, a lamb for each household.” They kept it until the 14th day of the same month, whereupon they killed it at twilight. They put the lamb’s blood on their two doorposts, and subsequently cooked and ate it in haste: it was the “Lord’s Passover”—“Passover” because upon seeing the blood of the sacrificial lambs, God “passed over” the Hebrew households and thus spared their lives.

During that night, “Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, ‘Up! Leave my people, you and the Israelites’....And at the end of four hundred and thirty years, to the very day, all the hosts of the LORD went out from the land of Egypt” (Exodus 12:31, 40-41).

After the Exodus

Led by an inspired Moses, the Israelites fled Egypt. Soon the Pharaoh’s army was in hot pursuit. God intervened, however, by miraculously separating the Israelites from their pursuers with a literal wall of fire. Then God parted the Red Sea and the Israelites walked across, between walls of water.

Visualize this scene. Two groups of people separated by a wall of fire; the Red Sea parted; the Israelites walking across on dry land; the Egyptians stunned and dumbfounded. The obvious question: confronted by such astounding miracles, why did the Egyptians continue to pursue the Israelites? Why not cut their losses, pack it in, and call it a day?

The Egyptians pursued the Israelites because their firstborn children had just died. They were angry. They wanted revenge. They wanted to re-enslave them. However, God had other plans for the Israelites.

The wall of fire dissipated and the Egyptians continued their pursuit. They began to cross the Red Sea. Once the last Israelite

had crossed over, and while the Egyptians were in the middle of the Red Sea, God told Moses to “Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the waters may come back upon the Egyptians....And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and when the morning appeared, the sea returned to its full depth, while the Egyptians were fleeing into it. So the LORD overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea....Not so much as one of them remained....So the LORD saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians” (Exodus 14:26-30).

And thus the grateful and obedient Israelites soon entered the Promised Land and lived happily ever after? Not quite. God was beginning to unveil his plan for mankind. Step #1: create a nation called Israel.

A nation born

The Israelites emerged from Egypt as former slaves descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But that’s all they had in common: slavery and ancestry. Everything else—their law, customs, theology, expectations, etc.—was molded by their experience in Egypt.

Nations cannot survive on shared memories alone, which become dimmer with time. In order to thrive, new nation-states need (a) laws to regulate behavior by their citizens and leaders, for an orderly society; (b) institutions and bureaucracies to enforce those laws; and (c) symbols to educate and unite people. Such symbols remind them about they have in common.

Take America, for instance. Our Constitution created Congress to make laws, the Presidency to enforce them, and the Judiciary to interpret them. Moreover, as the U.S. matured, we created national holidays

(symbols) that remind us of our heritage and commonalities. For example, July 4th reminds us of our independence; Thanksgiving hearkens back to various periods in our history, beginning with the Pilgrims and continuing through the Civil War, when Lincoln issued his famous Thanksgiving Proclamation.

Our laws, institutions, and holidays: they define us as a nation, they set us apart from other nations, they remind us of our heritage. In short, they’re the ingredients that helped build America.

Shortly after the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt, God used these same ingredients to forge a nation in His image. After all, He created Adam and Eve



in His image. He wanted to do the same with Israel.

The nation born, part II

At Sinai, God delivered His famous Ten Commandments, which formed the foundation of a host of laws to follow. These laws defined and regulated the relationship between God and the Israelites, between the Israelites and their government, and between the Israelites themselves. Moreover, God appointed Moses and others, such as the seventy elders and the Levites, as governors to enforce the laws, settle disputes, and perform certain rites (e.g. superintending the tabernacle, etc.).

Furthermore, God created national (symbolic) holy days and festivals to commemorate events in the early history of Israel. As we've seen, shortly before the Exodus, God instituted the Passover ceremony and the Festival of Unleavened Bread, which memorialized the Lord's Passover and the subsequent exodus from Egypt: "Now this day [the 14th day of the first month, on which the 'Lord's Passover' occurred] will be a memorial to you, and you shall celebrate it as a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations you are to celebrate it as a permanent ordinance. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread [the commencement of the Feast of Unleavened Bread], but on the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses; for whoever eats anything leavened from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel. On the first day you shall have a holy assembly, and another holy assembly on the seventh day; no work at all shall be done on them....You shall also observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread, for on this very day I brought your hosts out of the land of Egypt; therefore you shall observe this day throughout your generations as a permanent ordinance" (Exodus 12:14-17).

The Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread are but two of God's commanded, commemorative, symbolic holy days and festivals. They're described best in the 23rd chapter of Leviticus. They reminded the Israelites that:

God had rescued them from slavery in Egypt (Passover & the Feast of Unleavened Bread);

God had blessed them (the Feast of Firstfruits, or Weeks);

God will protect them when they're in battle, and has provided them with special events

throughout the year, announced by the blowing of *shofars* or trumpets (hence the Feast of the Memorial of the Blowing of Trumpets);

God will forgive them when they repent of their sins (Day of Atonement); and

God provided for them during their forty-year trek in the wilderness, and will continue to do so (Feast of Tabernacles and the day immediately following this Feast, hereinafter referred to as the Last Great Day).

The sociological reason for God's Holy Days: the need to build unity

Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding **in the sight of the peoples** who will hear all these statutes, and say, '**Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people**'" (Deut. 4:5-6). Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding **in the sight of the peoples** who will hear all these statutes, and say, '**Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people**'" (Deut. 4:5-6).

By forcing the Israelites to do the same things (e.g. provide offerings, refrain from working, fasting, etc.) on the same days, and worship in the same manner with the same people, the holy days and festivals united the Israelites by reminding them of their common heritage, destiny, and God. Thus the holy days and festivals created a sense of collegiality, and of nationalism and patriotism, three necessary ingredients for building a successful nation-state. In essence, the holy days and festivals were the

social glue that God used to bind the Israelites into a nation. Hence the sociological reason for God's holy days and festivals.

God's guinea pig

Most Christians believe that these Old Testament laws, holy days and festivals are purely Jewish and therefore have no significance for modern-day Christians. Well, they're wrong: "Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding **in the sight of the peoples** who will hear all these statutes, and say, '**Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people**'" (Deut. 4:5-6).

Here we catch a glimpse of the transcendental purpose of God's laws, holy days & festivals. In a way, Israel was God's guinea pig. By delivering His laws, holy days & festivals to Israel, and expecting the Israelites to obey them (Isaiah 5:1-7), God expected other nations to take notice and gradually emulate Israel

(Duet. 4:6). This scenario would result in the gradual expansion of God’s laws, holy days & festivals throughout the Middle East and beyond. Thus their significance transcended boundaries.

On with the story

Moses was succeeded by Joshua, who led Israel into the Promised Land (Canaan). Joshua’s generation obeyed God; subsequent generations did not. “(T)here arose another generation after them (Joshua’s generation) who did not know the LORD, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel. Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD...they followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them....The anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He gave them into the hands of plunderers....so that they could no longer stand before their enemies” (Judges 2:8-14).

How could the Israelites turn against God so quickly? Two reasons: (1) they wanted to become like the neighboring pagan nations (they wanted to fit in rather than stand out), and (2) they were illiterate and thus unable to consult the written records demonstrating their identity and proclaiming God’s laws and theology. This explains their ignorance of God and His miraculous works.

It’s apparent that at this time, no one city-state or nation could dominate this region. Therefore, during the next three centuries, different city-states and nations jostled for supremacy in the Middle East. On several occasions neighboring city-states and nations (e.g. Moab, the Philistines, Midian, Ammon, etc.) conquered the tribes of Israel. During this time, the Israelite tribes were in a loose confederation similar to the U.S. states under the Articles of Confederation, before the Constitution created a strong federal government. Unable to defeat them without God’s help, and after several decades of foreign rule, they sought God’s help. God mercifully delivered them by providing strong judges (e.g. Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, Samson, Samuel, etc.) who could muster the strength and resolve to defeat the foreign nations and city-states. Nevertheless, the Israelites never lost their desire to fit in. They clamored for a king because neighboring countries

had kings (I Samuel 8:7-8). So God appointed a king, Saul. Upon Saul’s death in battle, and after a nasty civil war, David was appointed king. David united the twelve tribes into a powerful kingdom.

Despite his several sins, among them adultery, murder, and arrogance, David was a man after God’s “own heart” (I Sam. 13:14). Indeed, God predicted that upon David’s death, “I will raise up your descendant after you (David), who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men, but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever” (II Samuel 7:8-16).

Thus David’s throne would last forever. In fact, Jesus will inherit this throne upon His return: “And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:32-33). Somewhere on this earth is the Davidic throne that the returning Jesus will inherit.

I’ve jumped a few thousand years, from David (ca. 1000 BC) to the eventual return of Jesus. Let’s slow down to discover what happened after David.

The rise and fall of Solomon

Solomon’s story is instructive. Just one of several sons of David, Solomon was appointed to succeed David. At first, Solomon was humbled by his calling, so much that he asked God for wisdom to rule justly. God answered his prayer and gave him wisdom and riches beyond his wildest imagination.

Israel reached its apex during the reign of Solomon. “Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand by the sea in multitude, eating and drinking and rejoicing. So Solomon reigned over



THE RISE AND FALL OF KING SOLOMON

all kingdoms from the River to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt...and he had peace on every side all around him” (I Kings 4:20-21, 24-25). And, “So King Solomon surpassed all the kings of the earth in riches and wisdom” (I Kings 10:23).

Despite God’s blessings, and despite his abundant wisdom, Solomon committed apostasy. Solomon entered into alliances with other nations by marrying the daughters of their kings and officials. God had warned Solomon not to marry foreign women, for they would turn his heart away from His truth. So they did. “For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians...Solomon did evil in the sight of the LORD, and did not fully follow the LORD, as did his father David” (I Kings 11:1-6).

God punished Solomon by promising to break up the kingdom of Israel, not during Solomon’s days, but during the reign of his successor. After Solomon, the Kingdom of Israel was divided into two lesser kingdoms: the house of Israel, comprising the ten northern tribes; and the house of Judah, comprising three tribes: Judah, Levi, and Benjamin.

The rise and fall of northern tribes of Israel

The northern ten tribes of Israel were first confederated under Jeroboam. However, Jeroboam established an unfortunate precedent that was followed by all of his successors: he disobeyed God by altering His truth and adopting pagan customs (I Kings 12:25-32).

The house of Israel lasted approximately 243 years. Despite God’s attempt to arrest its moral decline by sending prophets (e.g. Elijah, Elisha, Hosea, etc.) to its leaders and people, the house of Israel never departed from the sins of Jeroboam. Its descent into degeneracy culminated in its gradual conquest and exile by the Assyrians, from 745 to 718 BC (II Kings 17:5-6, 23). After their Assyrian captivity, the ten tribes comprising the house of Israel became “lost” to history. The prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea, and the authors of the New Testament, describe these northern tribes as “lost.” However, the Bible predicts their eventual reunification with their brethren, the Jews (Hosea 1:11; Zechariah 10:5; Ezekiel 37:15-22).

The rise and fall of Judah

The house of Judah, in the unified Kingdom of Israel and thereafter as the one of the two lesser kingdoms, survived for 345 years before it was conquered by Babylon in 586 BC. Unlike the house of Israel, on several occasions Judah was ruled by good kings (e.g. Jehoshaphat, Asa, Hezekiah, Josiah, etc.) who, while imperfect, tried to obey God and instituted godly reforms. Nonetheless, the people never lost their appetite to fit in rather than stand out. Therefore the godly reforms established by, for example, kings Hezekiah and Josiah were short-lived and did not survive their deaths.

Time and again God sent “prophets...saying, ‘Turn from your evil ways, and keep My commandments and My statutes, according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by My servants the prophets.’ Nevertheless they would not hear, but stiffened their necks, like the necks of their fathers, who did not believe in the LORD their God...they followed idols, became idolaters, and went after the nations who were all around them, concerning whom the LORD had charged them that they should not do like them” (II Kings 17:13-15).

“Yet the LORD would not destroy Judah for David his servant's sake, as he promised him to give him always a light, and to his children” (II Kings 8:19). In time, God’s disposition changed. In some eras, particularly toward the end of its independence, the house of Judah was irredeemably bad. For example, “The LORD did not turn from the fierceness of His great wrath with which His anger burned against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked Him. The LORD said, ‘I will remove Judah also from My sight, as I have removed Israel.’” (II Kings 23:26-26).

The removal of the Jews occurred a little over 130 years after the Assyrian conquest of the ten-tribe house of Israel. The Babylonians conquered the house of Judah and deported its inhabitants to Babylon.

The Babylonian Captivity and a Jewish renaissance

“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.” (Psalms 137:1). The psalmist was poignantly speaking for a bereaved nation cap-



tive in a foreign land. The exilic Jews began to realize that their wounds were self-inflicted. They had only themselves to blame. God sent several prophets to them with a message to repent or else. They ignored such warnings. God's patience wore thin and finally, with the Babylonian conquest in 586 BC, His patience disappeared.

However, the Jews experienced a renaissance in Babylon. "The Babylonian Exile forced a reassessment of Israel's relationship with God, issuing with renewed and assured hope of Israel's restoration and release from exile."³ After their exile, when they returned to Jerusalem during the reign of the Persian monarch Cyrus, and under the guidance of Ezra and other notables (e.g. Nehemiah, Zerubbabel, etc.), the Jews "publicly covenanted themselves to the Law....Henceforth the community conducted itself strictly according to the Mosaic law, which its 'scribes' 'fenced about' with numerous additional injunctions and prohibitions. This detailed code was widely inculcated in school and through ceremonies, daily worship, and readings....the Jews at last formed a true theocracy."⁴

The Jews expected this renaissance to culminate in the restoration of greatness achieved in the reigns of David and Solomon. "Hope of national recovery remained alive during the long years of Assyrian and Babylonian domination, however, and continued in the Jewish community (the remnant of the kingdom of Judah) that struggled for survival under Persian rule." These hopes are expressed in the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible.

A forlorn hope

The books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, and the others at the end of the Old Testament: they're testimonials of ancient prophets used by God to warn the Israelites of the consequences of their immorality. For example, God said to Ezekiel, "Son of Man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; therefore.... give them warning from Me" (Ezekiel 3:16-17).

At other times, these prophets saw divinely-inspired visions of the future. Isaiah described one of his visions thusly: "Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that

the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, 'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, And we shall walk in His paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and rebuke many people; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore" (Isaiah 2:2-4). Other prophets—specifically Micah (4:1-5), Zechariah (14:16-21), Ezekiel (chapters 36-48), and Jeremiah (31:31-40)—record similar visions.

Our brief journey through the Old Testament ends with these prophetic books predicting the glorious restoration of Israel by a messianic figure.

Centuries passed. The Jewish state reappears after the Babylonian exile, disappears under the conquering armies of Alexander the Great, regains its independence in the Maccabean revolt, and succumbs to the Roman General Pompey in 63 BC. All the while, many Jews never gave up hope for the arrival of their messiah, who would save them from the Romans and inaugurate God's Kingdom on earth.

A Messiah they didn't expect

"Liar!" they must've screamed. "You promised the Kingdom, but look at you: bloodied to a pulp, nailed to the stake like a common criminal," they must've thought. "You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God," they sarcastically taunted, "come down from the cross" (Matthew 27:40). There's hardly anything uglier than an angry mob. And it was a mob who with one voice declared, "Crucify Him!" Why were they so venomously angry at Jesus?

A week earlier some of them had hailed Jesus as their prophesied Messiah: "The



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3 *The Complete Bible Handbook*, article on *Babylonia*, pg. 149

4 S.E. Finer, *The History of Government*, pg. 268

crowds going ahead of Him, and those who followed, were shouting, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David; Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest!’” (Matthew 21:8-9). He made a bold entry into Jerusalem by dramatically cleansing the Temple of God: “And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves. And He said to them, ‘It is written, ‘My house shall be called a ‘house of prayer,’ but you are making it a robbers’ den’” (Matthew 21:12-13). The people were excited. Apparently Jesus was not just another prophet, like the failed Judas of Galilee or Theudas, who promised but failed to deliver Israel from the despised Romans. To them, Jesus seemed like the real deal, the prophesied Messiah who would bring glory to Israel by overthrowing the Romans and restoring the great Davidic Kingdom.

THE JEWS WERE LOOKING FOR A
 MESSIAH WHO WOULD
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 GREAT DAVIDIC KINGDOM.

Clueless

The Jews were looking for a certain type of Messiah. “Prevailing Jewish tradition did not suggest that God would restore Israel and inaugurate the Kingdom through a condemned man who went meekly to his death. Quite the opposite: the Messiah was to fight earthly battles to rescue Israel from its foes and, even if this militaristic Messiah were to fall heroically in the climactic war, then documents found at Qumran (popularly known as the Dead Sea Scrolls) suggest that another “priestly” Messiah would finish the affair by putting the world to rights... ‘Like the David esteemed by tradition, the Messiah will be someone in whom are combined the traits of courage, piety, military prowess, justice, wisdom and knowledge of the Torah. The Prince of Peace must first be a man of war: his duty is to inflict final defeat on the forces of evil.’ There was, in short, no Jewish expectation of a messiah whose death and resurrection would bring about the forgiveness of sins and offer believers eternal life.”⁵

Likewise, Jesus’ disciples expected a conquering messiah. On at least three occasions, Jesus had predicted His own death. The disciples failed to understand His predications, or perhaps they didn’t want to understand. In many ways they were clueless. They didn’t understand that Jesus had to die (Mark 9:31-32). Nor did they understand that Jesus would rise three days after His crucifixion.

The disciples spent 3 ½ years under Jesus’ tutelage, and yet, they were still confused. We could hardly expect much more from a mob thirsty for bloody revolution. They expected Jesus to lead them into battle. In-

stead, when they saw Him nailed to that stake—a spectacle for all to see, an example to all would-be revolutionaries—they became bitterly disappointed, and then murderously angry. Jesus had failed them, just like Judas of Galilee and Theudas. Jesus promised so much, but in the end, nothing!

Of course, Jesus never promised a revolution, at least not then and there. Jesus’ battle was not with the Romans, but with someone much more dangerous, much more sinister. The outcome of this battle would decide the fate of mankind.

The Mother of all Battles

It was the proverbial battle between Good and Evil, personified by Jesus and Satan. The battle raged for 33 ½ years; in other words, as long as Jesus had lived. Satan tried to destroy Jesus at His birth (Revelation 12:4-5 cross-referenced with Matthew 2:16).

Furthermore, time and again, Satan tried to tempt Jesus into sinning. One sin—one wrong thought, one lustful glance, one curse—would disqualify Jesus from becoming our Savior. “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin” (Hebrews 4:15).

Satan was losing the battle: he failed to kill Jesus and to tempt Him into sinning. But he had another trick up his sleeve. He inspired Judas to betray Jesus into the hands of the Pharisees, who beat and humiliated Him. The Pharisees then delivered Jesus unto the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Pilate was a thug. According to tradition, he routinely tortured and killed people for imagined or petty offenses (Luke 13:1). However, in the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ trial, Pilate comes across sympathetically. He tried to release the beaten and bloodied Jesus (John 18:38; 19:4).

Why would a thug like Pilate try desperately to release Jesus? Did Pilate suddenly develop a conscience? We must place Pilate and the others in the context of that great cosmic battle between God and Satan. Satan knew that Jesus had to die to become our Savior. He had failed to kill Jesus, and to tempt Him into sinning. Now Satan tried to prevent His death (and thus prevent Him from becoming our Savior) by inspiring Pilate’s desperate attempt to release Jesus (John 19:12). Therefore Satan intended to inspire the Jewish officials and the Romans to beat Jesus to within an inch of His life, and then inspire Pilate to release Jesus from His divine destiny.

Satan failed again. By dying on the stake as our sacrificial lamb (I Corinthians 5:7), and by fulfilling His destiny, Jesus achieved victory over Satan (John 16:11).

Now what? Satan failed to kill Jesus, to tempt Jesus into sinning, and to prevent Jesus from becoming our Savior. Satan is desperate; he doesn't give up. He lost the battle but is trying to win the war by distorting Jesus' image and message, and the events concerning his death, burial, and resurrection.

The New Testament

The divinely-inspired authors of the New Testament waged a battle to define Jesus and His message. Because Jesus didn't leave behind any written statements, it was up to His disciples to accurately record what He said and did. Thus the Gospels provide "authoritative answers to questions about Jesus' life and ministry, and they strengthen believers' assurance regarding the reality of their faith"⁶ The book of Acts traces the exploits of Jesus' apostles and disciples, particularly those of the apostle Paul.

More than anyone else, Paul was responsible for the definition and spread of early Christianity. He made three missionary journeys throughout the Roman Empire. His letters to congregations throughout the Mediterranean (e.g. in Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colosse, Thessalonica, etc.) address situations and issues specific to those groups. His pastoral letters to Timothy and Titus offer advice to young evangelists.

Therefore, after Jesus, the apostle Paul is probably the most important person in the history of Christianity. From the *Columbia Encyclopedia*: "St. Paul's figure dominates the apostolic age, and his epistles have left a tremendous impression on Christianity. The first Christian theological writing is found in them, where it is characterized rather by spiritual fervor than by systematic analysis. St. Paul became a fountainhead of Christian doctrine, and countless interpretations have been given of his teachings....There can be no doubt that Paul's interpretation of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, his doctrine of the church as the mystical body of Christ, his teaching on law and grace, and his view of justification have been decisive in the formation of the Christian faith."

Other apostles and disciples (e.g. Peter, James, Jude, John) wrote similar letters to their congregations.

Like the Old Testament, the New Testament ends

with visions of the future in the book of Revelation. Instead of envisioning the restoration of Israel, the book of Revelation predicts the return of a triumphant Jesus. "The main theme of the book is that of God and Satan warring against each other, and of God's ultimate victory."⁷

The Old and New Testaments: poorly named?

In the book of Revelation, "John never quotes Scripture, but there are allusions to almost every book in the Bible, especially Genesis, Exodus, the Psalms, the Prophets, and above all Daniel. John takes up the Prophets' attacks on Israel's 'fornication' with foreign nations and their gods..."

Perhaps I'm nitpicking, but I believe the New Testament is poorly named. As demonstrated above, there's not much new about the New Testament because it's a continuation of the Old Testament. In fact, the New Covenant is a spiritualized version of the Old

Covenant (Hebrews 10:16-18). Therefore, what's old about the Old Testament?

Understandably, we've divided the Bible, admittedly a huge book, into testaments, books, chapters, and verses to make it readable and searchable. Our approach, unfortunately, encourages discontinuity. In other words, we instinctively approach the Bible as a collection of unconnected *old* and *new* stories, rather than a long continuous story beginning in the Garden of Eden and ending in the

relocation of God the Father's throne to a transformed earth, foretold in the last chapters of Revelation.

The biblical story

More than anything else, the Bible is about an ongoing story—the story of mankind, as told by God. The story begins in earnest with the account of Abraham. The rest of the story is devoted to how God fulfilled His two promises made to Abraham. The first promise of national greatness was fulfilled in the history of ancient Israel, under the reigns of David and Solomon, and in the histories of the United Kingdom and the United States. (The story of how the tribes of Israel became great nations, and of how two tribes in particular—Ephraim and Manasseh—became Great Britain and the



PAULS REISE NACH KORINTH - DIE HEILIGEN, ST. PETER UND PAULUS

⁶ *Introduction to the Gospels*, The MacArthur Study Bible

⁷ *The Complete Bible Handbook*, article on The Book of Revelation, pg 468

⁸ *Ibid*, pg 468

United States, is told elsewhere.⁹)

The Old Testament tells the story of ancient Israel. The story's table of contents is listed in the 23rd chapter of Leviticus, which contains the fullest description of God's holy days and festivals. Is it a coincidence that Israel's history began in earnest on a holy day (Passover)? Is it a coincidence that the restoration of the Davidic Kingdom (indeed, God's



THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES (Leviticus 23:34-43)

kingdom on earth), as foretold in the prophetic books of the Old Testament, begins during the Feast of Tabernacles (Zechariah 14:16-21). Is it a coincidence that, according to tradition, God delivered His Ten Commandments on the day celebrated as the Feast of Weeks or Firstfruits? Is it a coincidence that God used His holy days and festivals to unite Israel? "These local harvest festivals gradually took on a historical significance; they became pilgrimage occasions when the people heard their early history narrated on a central shrine. This created a sense of national bonding...Although some festivals and feasts did not originally have historical associations, all were eventually given them: indeed one of the distinguishing aspects of Israelite religion is the setting of its religious observances within the history of the people and their God."¹⁰ Therefore, these holy days and festivals form the table of contents of ancient Israel's story:

THE OLD TESTAMENT: THE STORY OF ANCIENT ISRAEL

- Chapter I: God saves ancient Israel on the **Day of Passover**, the catalyzing event which sets therest of history in motion.
- Chapter II: Israel's exodus from Egypt, as memorialized by the **Feast of Unleavened Bread**.
- Chapter III: According to tradition, God delivers the Ten Commandments to Israel on the day known as the **Feast of Weeks or Firstfruits**.
- Chapter IV: Significant events, such as wars and the dedications of the tabernacle and temple, are introduced by the blowing of trumpets, as symbolized by the **Feast of Trumpets**.
- Chapter V: The consecration of Israel on its national day of repentance, the **Day of Atonement**.
- Chapter VI: The restoration of the Davidic (messianic) kingdom, inextricably linked to the **Feast of Tabernacles** and the **Last Great Day** (Zechariah 14:16:21)

The New Testament continues the story begun in the Garden of Eden, or specifically, in the account of God's

two promises to Abraham. Whereas the Old Testament testifies how ancient Israel and its modern-day descendants fulfilled the first divine promise, the New Testament records how Jesus and His followers fulfilled the second divine promise. Indeed, Jesus was Abraham's descendant (Luke 3:23-34). It's obvious to Christians that the whole world has been blessed through Jesus, as foretold in

Genesis 22:18.

Is it a coincidence that Jesus died as our sacrificial lamb on the 14th day of the 1st month, the day designated as Passover? Is it a coincidence that the birth of the Church occurred on Pentecost, the Greek term for the Feast of Weeks? Is it a coincidence that the apostles Paul and James labeled the church as "firstfruits." Is it a coincidence that the return of Jesus will be heralded by Trumpets, contextually an unmistakable reference to the Feast of Trumpets? Is it a coincidence that Jesus will force the nations to observe the Feast of Tabernacles (Zechariah 14:16-21).

God's story has a beginning, middle and an end. His holy days and festivals frame Part I of the story: how Israel fulfilled the first divine promise to Abraham. The second part of the story—the story of Jesus and the Church—can also be summarized by the holy days and festivals, its table of contents:

THE NEW TESTAMENT: THE STORY OF JESUS AND HIS CHURCH

- Chapter I: How Jesus became our atoning sacrifice, on the **Day of Passover**.
- Chapter II: What Jesus expects from His disciple, as symbolized by the **Feast of Unleavened Bread** (I Corinthians 5:8).
- Chapter III: The Creation of God's Church on the **Day of Pentecost**, anciently the Feast of Weeks or Firstfruits.
- Chapter IV: The Return of Jesus and the first resurrection, likely on the **Feast of Trumpets**.
- Chapter V: The banishment of Satan, as symbolized by the **Day of Atonement**.
- Chapter VI: The establishment of God's Kingdom on earth, which is inextricably linked to the **Feast of Tabernacles** (Zechariah 14:16:21).
- Chapter VII: The second resurrection and relocation of God the Father's throne to earth, symbolized by the **Last Great Day**.

⁹ See the *Divine Destiny of America*

11 ¹⁰ *The Complete Bible Handbook*, article on *Fasts and Festivals*, pg 69

The Christian significance of these holy days and festivals has been explained in our other publications. However, for your convenience, a summary of them

Passover: Acceptance of Jesus as our atoning sacrificial Lamb that was foreshadowed by the ancient Passover sacrifice. “For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us” (I Corinthians 5:7);

Feast of Unleavened Bread: In accepting the sacrifice of the unleavened “bread from heaven,” that is, Jesus (John 6:41), and understanding that, biblically, leaven represents sin (I Corinthians 5:7), Paul thus urges us to “*keep the feast* (of Unleavened Bread), not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (I Corinthians 5:7-8).

Pentecost, anciently the *Feast of Weeks or Firstfruits*: Those who have God’s Spirit are called firstfruits (I Corinthians 15:23, James 1:18, Revelation 14:4), and Jesus was the First of the firstfruits. Pentecost is also the birthday of Christianity and God’s Church, which is the collection of God’s saints or firstfruits.

Feast of Trumpets: The plan of God unfolds in these Festivals. Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread point back to Christ, as does Pentecost in pointing us back to the birthday of the Church. Sequentially, the Feast of the Memorial of Blowing of Trumpets looks forward to the return of Jesus and the first resurrection: “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the *trumpet of God*, and the dead in Christ will rise first” (I Thessalonians 4:16).

Day of Atonement: What happens after Jesus returns? The banishment of Satan, itself symbolized in the aforementioned ancient Israelite ceremony conducted on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). The ceremony foreshadowed Jesus’ sacrifice in the first century and foretells Satan’s banishment during the Millennium. Only at that time will man be “at one” with God.

Feast of Tabernacles: After Satan has been banished, Jesus will establish His Kingdom. We shall be kings and priests in that Kingdom (Revelation 5:10). Since this Feast follows the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Tabernacles foreshadows the establishment of God’s Kingdom on earth.

The Last Great Day immediately follows the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles. This Day represents the second resurrection for everyone not resurrected one thousand years earlier, and the ensuing 100-year judgment period in which everyone will have an opportunity for salvation.

The Plan of God

Actually, the Bible doesn’t provide us with a complete description of God’s plan. Because God is immortal, His plan did not begin in the Garden of Eden, nor does it end in the twenty-second chapter of Revelation. However, the Bible does describe a certain phase of that plan. This phase began in earnest with the divine promises to Abraham and continues through the establishment and maturation of the nation Israel and its modern-day descendants; the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus; the establishment and maturation of the Church; the return of Jesus and the concomitant first resurrection; the defeat and banishment, temporary and permanent, of Satan and his demons; the second resurrection; and the relocation of God’s throne to a transformed earth.

In a nutshell, this is the plan of God, or at least a phase of it. Amazingly, it’s summarized in God’s holy days and festivals. And as we’ve seen, these holy days and festivals provide the table of contents for the story of mankind, as told by God in His precious Bible.



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