

## HOLIDAYS

### Introduction

Holidays are embraced by most working people as days they do not have to work, i.e., holidays are days spent at leisure and doing discretionary things. On many holidays, business activities and established routines are suspended in order to commemorate or celebrate particular persons or events, e.g., Presidents Day, Memorial Day, Mother's Day, Father's Day, or Thanksgiving. In some cultures, vacations away from work, for any duration, are called holidays.

For persons of faith, some holidays commemorate significant religious events and people, e.g., Passover by Jews in remembering God's protection from the death of their first-born in Egypt; Christmas and Easter by Christians to celebrate the birth and resurrection of Jesus Christ, respectively. All religions of the world have such holidays.

Whether secular or religious, people often embrace holiday time off, yet neglect to remember the person or event for which a holiday is commemorated. They celebrate the holiday with little or no understanding of what the holiday is truly all about.

### Christian Holidays

Christians around the world celebrate numerous holidays, e.g., Epiphany, Christmas, Palm Sunday, Easter, Pentecost, and many others. Interestingly, many of the holidays celebrated by Christians were preceded by similar ancient pagan celebrations for totally different reasons. Pagan holidays were almost always associated with following the sun or the movement of celestial bodies around the sun; they were observed at the time of the winter and summer solstices.

In the early days of the Christian Church, pagan holidays were frowned upon. As time passed, the Church created an ecclesiastical calendar of Christian holidays to help believers resist being absorbed by pagan traditions. The ecclesiastical calendar has several dozen holidays, with some only celebrated by Catholics and Orthodox Christians. We encourage you to explore an ecclesiastical calendar and acquire a better understanding of the significance of these holidays. Against the backdrop of concern

that the early Church had about conforming to the world, consider what the Bible says about tradition and celebrations.

### Biblical Tradition and Celebration

The Hebrew people of the Old Covenant from which the New Covenant of Jesus Christ emerged, had many traditions and celebrations, and still do. In fact, God encouraged them to remember the significant ways He moved in their midst and guided their paths. After God delivered the Israelites from Egyptian slavery and let them wander in the wilderness for 40 years, and just after crossing the Jordan River and entering the land of Canaan promised to them, God told them to commemorate the moment. **“Take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan from right where the priests stood . . . according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites . . . to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, ‘What do these stones mean?’ tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. . these stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever. So, the Israelites did as Joshua commended them” (Joshua 4:1-8).**

Why did God have the Israelites do this? To remember the faithfulness of God in delivering them to a better world. This was one of many significant events in Old Covenant life that Jewish people celebrated, and still do today. The Jewish calendar has 24 such holidays – Purim, Passover, Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and Hanukkah, to mention only a few, all observed to remember the ways their Mighty God had dwelt in their midst, guided, protected, and delivered them. Without repeated observances of significant historical events, Jews would tend to forget them, their meaning, and the loving ways God was faithful to them.

When Jesus ushered in a New Covenant, many early Jewish Christians continued to celebrate and commemorate the observances they had before becoming followers of Christ. Gentile Christians, on the other hand, had no such traditions or observances. History shows that some Gentile Christians embraced the old traditions (and some still do today) while others started to participate in the worldly (pagan) holidays and traditions, a reality that led to the creation of an ecclesiastical calendar based in the Christian faith.

It would be good at this point to define ‘tradition’. Merriam-Webster’s primary definition is – *an inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior (such as a religious practice or a social custom)*. Religious traditions are generally based in divine revelation and are biblically based. Secular traditions, on the other hand, are based in human thought and reasoning. Both religious and

secular traditions, as well as the holidays that sometimes accompany them, are very resistant to change.

Not surprisingly, Jesus had harsh words for the Pharisees who were strict traditionalists. Jesus, in one encounter with some Pharisees, told them that the many traditions and requirements they imposed on people were not really the essence of Old Covenant Law. Jesus cited their hypocrisy on cleanliness, tithing, respect of persons, and others; then added “**you load people down with burdens (traditions) they can hardly carry, and you yourselves (Pharisees) will not lift one finger to help them**” (**Luke 11:37-54**). In essence, Jesus was saying ‘**your traditions miss the point.**’

The apostle Paul wrote about traditions. “**See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ**” (**Colossians 2:8**). Paul was instructing them to base what they do, including traditions, celebrations, and holidays, on spiritual truth centered in Jesus and Scripture, not on the philosophies and traditions of the world. Paul was saying ‘**your traditions miss the point.**’

Paul was even more to the point about traditions and principles when he wrote to Christians in the province of Galatia, “**Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God – or rather are known by God – how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you**” (**Galatians 4:8-11**). Paul’s concern focused on their traditions and holiday celebrations that were not centered in Jesus Christ, ones in which they were repeatedly ‘going through the motions,’ doing them by rote without any thought about what they were doing or missing completely what the traditions or celebrations meant.

Holiday celebrations and traditions are not inherently wrong. They can be great times in the life of the Church and the experience of families. They can stir our hearts, deepen our faith, and strengthen our relationship with God. Do they?

When we celebrate important Christian holidays or carry forward traditions of the family or church, do we ponder the very basis of the events and what they mean, or do we just go through the motions? Unfortunately, the latter is true of most holidays, religious or secular. Here are few holidays in which the original intent is missed by most who celebrate them:

**Christmas** is a good example. It is a wonderful celebration to remember the birth of Jesus, the Savior of the world. The true focus should be on Jesus and what His coming to the world means for our lives. But Christmas has evolved into something quite different for the world – Santa Claus, gift giving, decorations, and other observances. The thoughts behind some of these Christmas traditions may be good, but seldom is enough time given to pondering their meaning, if at all.

**Easter** is the same, though Christians likely give it more thought than other holidays. Easter's true focus should be the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the amazing, redeemed life that is ours because of Jesus' sacrificial act. Unfortunately, the celebration is easily diluted with bunnies, dying eggs, gift giving, decorations, and other observances. If there are valid aspects or bases of these traditions, are they given any thought or just done because they have always been done?

**Halloween** is probably the most concerning of all celebrations. Halloween, October 31, is an adaption of the Celtic pagan festival, Samhain, observed at the end of summer and beginning of the long, dark winter. Celts would light huge bonfires and wear costumes to ward off evil spirits thought to harm the approaching harvest. They believed that this seasonal transition was a time when spirits of the dead (ghosts) returned to earth. For them, the world of the living and dead was blurred.

In the eighth century, Pope Gregory III of the Roman Catholic Church, launched a different type of celebration by designating November 1 as All Saints Day when all the saints of the Church (living and dead) would be honored. The evening before, October 31, was known as All Hallows Eve and eventually became known as Halloween. Over time Halloween evolved into trick or treating, pumpkin carving, wearing costumes, and other traditions that had a quasi-connection to the original pagan celebration, with decreasing understanding of what was being observed. It would be fairly safe to say that most today who observe Halloween do so with little or no understanding of its significance or connection to the pagan world.

### Closing Thoughts

We believe holidays and traditions can be good. When celebrated in the right spirit with thoughtful understanding, we are better for them. But we are in danger of

returning to the state of the early church, i.e., being absorbed into the secular, worldly aspects of tradition that miss the point. We celebrate what we do not know. All who have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ need these reminders regarding Christian holidays:

They are for commemorating and remembering divine acts of God on our behalf.

They should be taken seriously, and enough time given to reflect on their deep significance. In light of this, some worldly holidays deserve no celebration.

Our traditions associated with holidays should be measured against God's Word. Do the ways we celebrate honor God or are they done with little thought of Him?

Like the stones from the Jordan River the Israelites were instructed to keep, holidays and traditions should be markers of our faith, memorials to the greatness of God.

**“So, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Gentiles, or the church of God . . . for I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved” (1 Corinthians 10:31-33).**

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This is an introduction on the subject of **Holidays**. Here are a few other resources you may wish to explore:

[Holy Days vs. Holidays \(lifehopeandtruth.com\)](http://lifehopeandtruth.com)

[PAGAN CHRISTIAN HOLIDAYS by Justin Taylor | Genesology — Werdsmith](#)

[10 Christian Holidays and Beliefs Steeped in Pagan Traditions \(historycollection.com\)](http://historycollection.com)

[What does the Bible say about traditionalism? | GotQuestions.org](http://GotQuestions.org)

[World Religious Holidays - Information from Holidays and Observances \(holidays-and-observances.com\)](http://holidays-and-observances.com)

[Christian Holidays 2021 and 2022 \(blankcalendarpages.com\)](http://blankcalendarpages.com)