

# Easter

## *The Rest of the Story*



# The resurrection of Christ: Hope for the ages

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is *the* key historical and spiritual reality for a Christian. Without His resurrection, “your faith is futile” (1 Corinthians 15:17). Christ’s resurrection is the culmination of the most important series of events of all time.

For a believer, the focus on Christ’s resurrection is a central tenet of faith. What the disciples saw after three days and three nights was a tomb without a body and the risen Christ in recognizable bodily form. They saw and touched Him. Their mourning was indeed turned to joy. Christ was raised from the realm of the dead and appeared multiple times over the coming days before finally ascending to heaven. Because of this, Christians have the opportunity to receive eternal life.

It’s surprising then, that the day most people celebrate to remember this most important of events actually *obscures* the truth of Christ’s suffering, death and resurrection. As we’ll see, Easter customs not only have non-Christian origins, they actually *change* the story and keep Christians from fully understanding the truth of salvation.

Truly understanding the history and life-changing significance of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection

requires us to place this event within the proper context of God’s festivals. These are the same festivals God gave to Israel and that Christ and His disciples were observing when He died.

We’ll also see that instead of observing the false traditions associated today with Easter, the early Church observed the Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread. These festivals and their meaning have the same relevance for Christians today that they had during the first century. The modern world has not moved beyond the need for the power of the resurrected Christ. When we observe the holy occasions God ordained, it helps us understand and appreciate Christ’s atoning sacrifice. We become sensitive to *His* life in us and begin to live by His Word and Spirit. Not only is this a key to understanding the salvation process but it is the foundation for building a successful Christian life today.

Today there are many attacks on our faith and basic truths of the Bible. You can prove Christ’s life, death and resurrection and in doing so gain insight into the most basic and essential needs of life. You can also prove the origins of the false traditions of Easter and see that God’s biblical festivals hold the true meaning of salvation.



## Easter vs. the Bible

**F**or millions of professing Christians Easter is the most important day of the calendar year because it commemorates Jesus' resurrection. Easter sunrise services are considered the holiest assembly of the year—a time when Christians reaffirm that Jesus is risen and their hope in Him is true.

But if you look more closely at this holiday you'll see that, despite its Christian veneer, it has done much damage in obscuring the truth of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. It's a day built on a lie, not on the great truth of Jesus' atoning sacrifice. There are two main problems with the Easter celebration. The first is that its customs and practices are based in ancient paganism, not in the Word of God.

### A day with unchristian origins

As with Christmas, we 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 Jesus Christ's life, in this case 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").

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 Greek word rendered "Easter" in this verse is actually *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 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 Chaldean deity Astarte is in fact mentioned in the Bible. She is referred to as "Ashtoreth 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, provides 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.

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Hare and rabbit were the most fertile animals our fore-fathers knew, serving as symbols of abundant new life in the spring season" (*Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs*, 1958, pp. 233, 236).

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 began to be viewed as gods, goddesses and supernatural powers to be worshipped and feared. Man soon created his own gods, contradicting God's instruction against idolatry (Exodus 20:3-6; Deuteronomy 5:7-10).

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"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. Complementing the rebirth of the sun were spring fertility rites, whose surviving symbols thread their way throughout Easter celebrations.

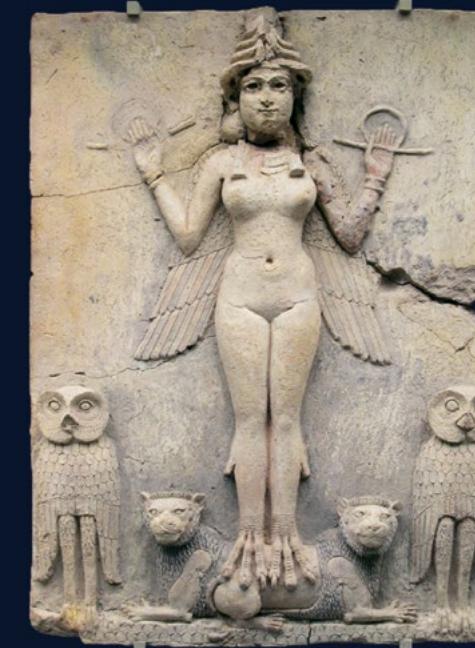
In addition to rabbits and eggs, another popular Easter custom had pre-Christian origins: "Also popular among Europeans and Americans on Easter is ham, because the pig was considered a symbol of luck in pre-Christian European culture" (*The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1987, p. 558, "Easter").

### God isn't pleased with mixing pagan practices with true worship

It's easy to see and prove the pagan and unchristian origins of the traditions associated with Easter. The question is why Christians should care whether Easter is pagan in origin. A popular opinion is that as long as the day is kept in honor of Jesus and His resurrection, it trumps any past pagan associations. Is this true?

God inspired the prophet Jeremiah to take Israel to task for their mixture of true religion and pagan practices.

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***Ishtar the goddess of fertility, from whose name the word "Easter" comes.***

***"You must not worship the LORD your God in their way, because in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the LORD hates" (Deuteronomy 12:29-31, New International Version).***

"Do not learn the way of the Gentiles; do not be dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the Gentiles are dismayed at them. For the customs of the peoples are futile..." (Jeremiah 10:2-3).

This echoed God's command to Israel when they entered the Promised Land: "The LORD your God will cut off before you the nations you are about to invade and dispossess. But when you have driven them out and settled in their land, and after they have been destroyed before you, be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods, saying, 'How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same.' You must not worship the LORD your God in their way, because in worshiping their gods, they do all

kinds of detestable things the LORD hates" (Deuteronomy 12:29-31, New International Version).

When you consider the unchristian and unbiblical pagan origins of Easter traditions and remember God's command to not be involved in the ways that other religions worship their gods, it becomes clear that God isn't pleased with such customs in worshiping His Son and commemorating Jesus' resurrection.

The second reason Easter isn't a proper way to worship Jesus and remember His resurrection is that it entirely obscures the facts of His life, death and resurrection. When you celebrate Easter, you're allowing yourself to be removed from the Passover.



# How Easter replaced the biblical Passover

Why did Easter replace the 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 worshippers into 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 R.K. Bishop: "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 Nicaea adopted the annual Sunday following the full moon after the vernal equinox (March 21)" (Walter Elwell, editor, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1984, "Easter").

Photo: James Pauls/Stock/Thinkstock

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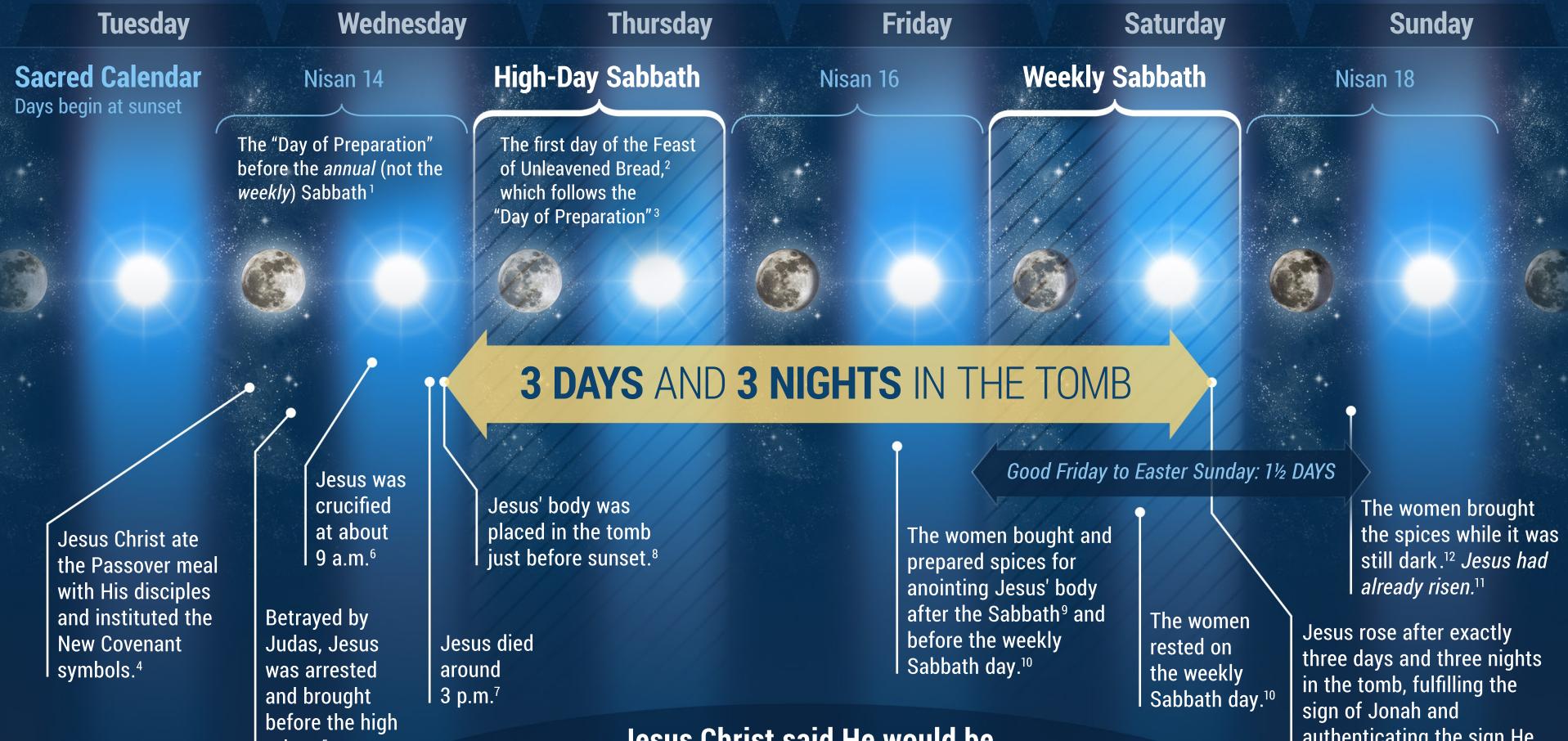
Before A.D. 70, Christianity was "regarded by the Roman government and by the people at large as a branch of the Jewish religion" (Jesse Lyman Hurlbut, *The Story of the Christian Church*, 1954, p. 34). Christianity and Judaism shared the biblical feast days, although Christians observed them with added 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 on a Jewish feast, and unity in celebrating the principal Christian feast was called for" (1967, Vol. 5, p. 8, "Easter Controversy").

# The Chronology of Jesus Christ's Death, Burial and Resurrection



**Jesus Christ said He would be**

in the tomb for three days and three nights. What is the biblically accurate chronology of Jesus Christ's crucifixion and resurrection? This timeline accommodates three full nights and three full daylight periods. This is the only reckoning that fits Jesus' own prophecy of how long He would be in the tomb. It also fits perfectly with all the details recorded in the four Gospel accounts.

<sup>1</sup> John 19:31; Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54

<sup>2</sup> John 19:31; Leviticus 23:4–7

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 27:62

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 26:26–28

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 26:47–57

<sup>6</sup> Mark 15:25

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 27:46–50

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 27:57–60

<sup>9</sup> Mark 16:1

<sup>10</sup> Luke 23:56; Exodus 20:8–11

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 28:1–6; Mark 16:2–6; Luke 24:2–3; John 20:1

<sup>12</sup> Luke 24:1; John 20:1

## Three days and three nights

The choice of a Sunday date for Easter is based on the assumption that Christ rose from the grave early on a Sunday morning. The popular belief is that Christ was crucified on a Friday and rose on a Sunday. But neither of these suppositions is true. A close reading of the Bible makes that quite clear.



Matthew 12:38 shows some of the scribes and Pharisees asking Jesus for a sign to prove He was the Messiah. Jesus told them that the only sign He would give was that of the prophet Jonah: “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).

But can we fit “three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” between a Friday-afternoon crucifixion and a Sunday-morning resurrection? The traditional view of the crucifixion and resurrection only allows for Jesus to have been entombed for a day and a half.

Some try to reconcile Christ’s words with their belief in a Friday crucifixion and Sunday resurrection by rationalizing that Christ’s “three days and three nights” statement does not require a literal span of 72 hours. They reason that a part of a day can be reckoned as a whole day. Hence, since Jesus died in the afternoon—around “the ninth hour” after daybreak, or about 3 p.m. (Matthew 27:46-50)—they think the remainder of Friday constituted the first day, Saturday the second and part of Sunday the third.

However, they fail to take into consideration that only two nights—Friday night and Saturday night—are accounted for in this explanation. After all, the Bible is clear that Jesus had already risen before the daylight portion of Sunday (John 20:1). Something is obviously incorrect in this common conclusion regarding when Christ was in the tomb.

Jonah 1:17, to which Christ referred, states specifically that “Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.” We have no reason to think these days and nights were fractional. Nor is there any basis for thinking that Jesus meant only two nights and one day, plus parts of two days, when He foretold the length of time He would be in the grave. Such rationalization undermines the integrity of Jesus’ words.

The reason that Friday is the day most think of as the day of Christ’s crucifixion is that Mark 15:42 states that it was the preparation day (the day before the Sabbath). In the normal weekly Sabbath cycle, Friday is indeed the preparation day. But in this case, there were two Sabbaths during that week. The Sabbath referred to in Mark 15:42 was an annual Holy Day—the First

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Day of Unleavened Bread. John 19:31 confirms this by specifically stating that it was a high day, or annual Holy Day. Then two days later was the weekly Sabbath, which is the one referred to in Luke 23:56.

### When did Jesus die and when was He resurrected?

Here’s the timeline: Jesus was laid in the tomb in a hurry, as sunset (the beginning of the Holy Day) was approaching (Mark 15:42). Joseph of Arimathea, wanting to properly bury Jesus before the beginning of the high

Holy Day, took down Jesus' body and wrapped it in linen. He then placed the body in the tomb (Luke 23:53; Mark 15:43). Luke's account then says Jesus' female disciples observed that He was buried as the Sabbath drew near (Luke 23:54-55).

After seeing Christ's body being laid in the tomb just before sunset, the women then "returned and prepared spices and fragrant oils [for the final preparation of the body]. And they rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment" (Luke 23:56). How could they have prepared these spices and oils in the very short time before sunset?

The wording of Mark 16:1-2 adds to the confusion some experience because it seems to suggest that the spices were purchased after the weekly Sabbath rather than before it on Friday? How is that possible?

*If Jesus were in the tomb only from late Friday afternoon to sometime early Sunday morning, then the sign He gave that He was the prophesied Messiah was not fulfilled.*

By comparing details in both Gospels—where Mark tells us the women bought spices after the Sabbath and Luke relates that they prepared the spices before resting on the Sabbath—we can see that two different Sabbaths are mentioned. The first, as John 19:31 tells us, was the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The second was the weekly seventh-day Sabbath. Mark did not mention this weekly Sabbath rest in his account, but Luke, who wrote his

account of these events later, did.

Thus, the women returned after seeing the burial Wednesday afternoon. They rested on the high-day Sabbath Wednesday night and Thursday. They bought the spices either Thursday night or Friday morning. They prepared them on Friday prior to sunset and then rested on the weekly Sabbath from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset.

Then, early on Sunday, before dawn, "while it was still dark" (John 20:1), they went to the tomb to apply the embalming mixture. They discovered that Christ had *already* been resurrected (Matthew 28:1-6; Mark 16:2-6; Luke 24:1-3). The only plausible timeline for the events of the crucifixion week is that Christ was in the grave three full days and three full nights, from late on a Wednesday until late on a Saturday.

Now, consider Christ's promise that He would be in the grave for the same

length of time that Jonah was in the belly of the great fish in conjunction with this historical record. What is the correct way to understand "three days and three nights" in both Matthew 12:40 and Jonah 1:17? It means three literal days and three literal nights—72 full hours.

### Sign of the Messiah

If Jesus were in the tomb only from late Friday afternoon to sometime early Sunday morning, then the sign He gave that He was the prophesied Messiah was not fulfilled. The claim of His Messiahship rests on the fulfillment of His words—it's that serious a matter.

When we allow the Scriptures to interpret themselves, all four Gospel accounts accurately harmonize and attest to the validity of Jesus' promise that He would be in the grave three days and three nights—not just part of that time.

Several Bible translations recognize that more than one Sabbath is discussed in these events. In Matthew 28:1 some Bible versions, including Alfred Marshall's Parallel New Testament in Greek and English, Ferrar Fenton's Translation and Green's Literal Translation, properly translate a phrase occurring here as "after the sabbaths." Young's Literal Translation and The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament (1992, p. 1270) similarly acknowledge that multiple Sabbaths are intended here.

Some stumble over Mark 16:9, not taking into account that there is no punctuation indicated in the original Greek. Therefore, to be in harmony with the material presented in the other Gospels, a better translation of the verse would be: "Now having risen, early the first day of the week He appeared first to Mary Magdalene..." So it's not saying that Jesus rose early on Sunday morning, but that He appeared early on Sunday morning to Mary Magdalene, having already risen some time earlier.

We can be assured that the duration of Christ's entombment before His resurrection, which He foretold as proof of His Messiahship, was precisely as long as He said it would be—equaling the "three days and three nights

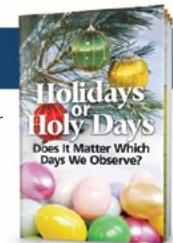
[Jonah was] in the belly of the great fish" (Matthew 12:40). Thus, Jesus rose late Saturday afternoon around sunset—not Sunday at sunrise—exactly three days and three nights after He was placed in the tomb just before sunset on Wednesday.

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Christ's prophecy of the time He would be in the tomb was fulfilled precisely. Because most people do not understand the biblical high days kept by Jesus Christ and His followers, they fail to understand the chronological details so accurately preserved for us in the Gospels.

### Learn More

The conflict between Easter customs and Passover is only part of the story. God created an entire system of Holy Days that tell us His plan of salvation. Mankind, on the other hand, celebrates many holidays rooted in paganism. You can learn more about the difference between man's holidays and God's Holy Days by reading our free booklet *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?*



Download it from our website or request it at the address on the back page.



## We need a Savior

A main theme in the Bible is sin, which is defined in the Bible as the violation of God's law (1 John 3:4, King James Version), and our need for forgiveness and reconciliation to God (the theme of the biblically commanded Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread). We must realize that our own personal sin is what necessitated Christ's death. And only by repenting of our sins and being reconciled to God by the death of Christ can we be assured of eternal life (Acts 2:38; John 5:29; John 11:25). →



*The process of our coming out of sin is pictured in the biblical feast immediately following Passover, the Days of Unleavened Bread, during which Christ's resurrection occurred.*

This is not to minimize the importance of Christ's resurrection. It, too, is a crucial step in the salvation process (1 Corinthians 15). After being reconciled to God the Father by the death of His Son, ultimately we are saved by Christ's life as He pleads for us in the role of our High Priest and lives in us through the Holy Spirit, helping us to overcome sin (Romans 5:10; Hebrews 4:14-16; 1 John 2:1; Galatians 2:20). The process of our coming out of sin is pictured in the biblical feast immediately following Passover, the Days of Unleavened Bread, during which Christ's resurrection occurred.

Yet the Bible nowhere instructs Christians to keep a special celebration of Christ's resurrection like Easter, nor is there a biblical record of early Christians doing so. Instead it's clear that both Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul expected Christ's followers to commemorate His sacrificial death on our behalf in a special ceremony (Matthew 26:26-28; 1 Corinthians 5:7; 11:23-28).

Nonetheless, the celebration of Easter prevailed. Those who remained faithful to Christ's example of keeping the Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread decreased in number and were persecuted by those favoring Easter.

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## What's the rest of the story about Easter?

**A**s we have seen, Easter and its customs did not come from the Bible, but from 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 backgrounds of two major religious holidays, 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.

What's wrong with Easter traditions? They fail to tell you the true path to eternal life through Jesus Christ the Son of God. They obscure the truth of the Passover, which symbolizes Jesus' sacrifice through which we can be saved. Easter is based on false worship of ancient pagan deities. Its traditions celebrate *physical* rebirth and sexual rituals, not the *spiritual* reality of Jesus' life, suffering, death and resurrection. Joining the truth of Christ's resurrection to such a myth turns the truth of God into a lie. Easter with all its traditions is a lie.

We challenge you to look into your Bible to see what God tells us about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Instead of observing a humanly-devised holiday rooted in myth, why not keep the Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread? These God-given festivals explain the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in full and proper context. These days give us hope in the redeeming power of Jesus' sacrifice in overcoming sin in our lives.

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