

The Feast of Pentecost

Is this the only "day of salvation"?

Most churches teach that:

- All who ever shall be saved are being saved now, in this present age,
- All who die "unsaved" can never receive salvation,
- God cast away Israel and they are eternally doomed and lost,
- There is a contest in progress between Christ and Satan,
- Christ by means of the world's churches is desperately trying to "get the world saved,"
- Satan is doing all he can to prevent people from being "saved,"
- God has placed a time limit on the contest.

If these teachings are true, then God's plan is an abject failure! To date, only very few have been truly saved. One third of all living on earth today have never even heard the name of Jesus Christ – the only name whereby we may be saved!

Are the majority of all who have lived so far eternally "lost" because they have never been given the opportunity to hear the true Gospel? Are they lost and condemned without having been given a chance? When Christ returns, will He be helpless and unable to save the world from Satan? Will it then be too late? Too late because, as some churches teach, "probation will be closed"?

God teaches us clearly through His Holy Days that this present age is *not* the only day of salvation. The purpose of this article is to show you how the lessons of the Feast of Pentecost fit into God's great plan of salvation.

The answers revealed

The New Testament Church of God was founded on an annual Sabbath called, in the New Testament Greek, "pentekoste;" or in our modern anglicized version, "Pentecost."

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. (Acts 2:1 - Revised Standard Version throughout except where otherwise noted)

We know that Paul and the fledgling church of God continued to keep the Feast of Pentecost:

For Paul had determined to sail by Ephesus, because he would not spend the time in Asia: for he hasted, if it were possible for him, to be at Jerusalem the day of Pentecost. (Acts 20:16)

But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, (I Corinthians 16:8)

In the Old Testament, this Holy Day is variously called "the feast of harvest," "the feast of firstfruits" and "the day of firstfruits":

You shall keep the feast of harvest, of the first fruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. (Exodus 23:16)

And you shall observe the feast of weeks, the first fruits of wheat harvest, (Exodus 34:22)

On the day of the first fruits, when you offer a cereal offering of new grain to the LORD at your feast of weeks, you shall have a holy convocation; you shall do no laborious work, (Numbers 28:26)

It is also called "the feast of weeks":

And you shall observe the feast of weeks, the first fruits of wheat harvest, (Exodus 34:22)

On the day of the first fruits, when you offer a cereal offering of new grain to the LORD at your feast of weeks, you shall have a holy convocation; you shall do no laborious work, (Numbers 28:26)

Then you shall keep the feast of weeks to the LORD your God with the tribute of a freewill offering from your hand, which you shall give as the LORD your God blesses you... Three times a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God at the place which he will choose: at the feast of unleavened bread, at the feast of weeks, and at the feast of booths. They shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed; (Deuteronomy 16:10, 16)

As the duty of each day required, offering according to the commandment of Moses for the sabbaths, the new moons, and the three annual feasts--the feast of unleavened bread, the feast of weeks, and the feast of tabernacles. (II Chronicles 8:13)

The New Testament church of God continued to keep all of God's Holy Days, including Pentecost. But more on that later! God gave the Feast of Pentecost to reveal that the present dispensation is only the first, preliminary "harvest of souls." The purpose of God's Holy Days is to keep God's people in the true understanding of His great plan. The yearly material harvest seasons in ancient Israel symbolize the spiritual harvests of souls. There were two main annual harvests in Israel: the spring grain harvest and the fall harvest.

The Holy Days picture year by year that only those God calls during this age can become His begotten children *now*, and that the members of God's church today are merely the firstfruits of the great spiritual harvest to be reaped later.

The Wave Sheaf Offering

The Feast of Pentecost is like a bridge between God's spring and fall Holy Days. It looks back to the Spring Holy Days and their meanings and it looks forward to the fall Holy Days and their meanings. First, let us look back – to the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and specifically to the instructions for a special ceremony called "the wave-sheaf offering":

And the LORD said to Moses, "Say to the people of Israel, When you come into the land which I give you and reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest; and he shall wave the sheaf before the LORD, that you may find acceptance; on the morrow after the sabbath the priest shall wave it. And on the day when you wave the sheaf, you shall offer a male lamb a year old without blemish as a burnt offering to the LORD. And the cereal offering with it shall be two tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil, to be offered by fire to the LORD, a pleasing odor; and the drink offering with it shall be of wine, a fourth of a hin. And you shall eat neither bread nor grain parched or fresh until this same day, until you have brought the offering of your God: it is a statute for ever throughout your generations in all your dwellings. (Leviticus 23:9-14)

The ancient Israelites were not allowed to harvest any of their early grain crops until this day. In the early evening of the day following the weekly Sabbath that falls within the seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (i.e. on the Saturday evening), the Israelites were to hold this solemn ceremony at which the first sheaf of the year's grain was cut.

The Wave Sheaf Offering:

- Was to be kept on the day after the Sabbath that fell within the Feast of Unleavened Bread,
- Contained a sheaf (Hebrew "omer") of grain which, in today's measure equals approximately 2.087 quarts (1.98 litres),
- Was to be brought to the priest,

- Was to be solemnly waved before God,
- Was to be accepted for them the following morning (Sunday),
- Pictured the resurrected Christ ascending to heaven, to be accepted by His Father as the first human being born of God,
- Pictured Jesus Christ as the First of the firstfruits of the first harvest of souls:

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. (I Corinthians 15:20)

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. (Romans 8:29)

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. (Colossians 1:15, 18)

Jesus Christ, our High Priest, presented Himself, the First of the firstfruits, to His Father on the Sunday morning after His resurrection the previous evening. How do we know that Jesus returned, briefly, to His Father that Sunday? By comparing these two scriptures:

Jesus said to her, "Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." (John 20:17)

And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Hail!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. (Matthew 28:9)

The timing of Jesus' resurrection is exactly the same as that of the Wave Sheaf offering which symbolized it. In that particular year, the fulfillment of the Wave Sheaf Offering took place on Nisan 18, the day after the Sabbath which fell during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. However, as the date of the weekly Sabbath that falls within the Feast of Unleavened Bread will vary from year to year, so will the date of the Wave Sheaf Offering.

How to calculate

As already mentioned, the word "Pentecost" is the anglicized version of a Greek noun used only in the New Testament. The word signifies "count fifty" or "fiftieth (day)." Here is the entry from the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament about this word:

Pentekoste {pen-tay-kos-tay'}: AV - Pentecost: "the fiftieth day": the second of the three great feasts, celebrated at Jerusalem yearly, the seventh week after the Passover, in grateful recognition of the completed harvest

As mentioned previously, in the Old Testament the Feast of Pentecost is called the "Feast of Firstfruits" and the "Feast of Weeks," the latter because, in the calculation for the Feast of Pentecost, God's people are instructed to count seven weeks:

And you shall count from the morrow after the sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering; seven full weeks shall they be, counting fifty days to the morrow after the seventh sabbath; (Leviticus 23:15-16a)

That Sunday, that fiftieth day, is the Feast of Pentecost! God then continues by instructing the Israelites on how they should keep this Feast:

Then you shall present a cereal offering of new grain to the LORD. You shall bring from your dwellings two loaves of bread to be waved, made of two tenths of an ephah; they shall be of fine flour, they shall be baked with leaven, as first fruits to the LORD. And you shall present with the bread seven lambs a year old without blemish, and one young bull, and two rams; they shall be a burnt offering to the LORD, with their cereal offering and their drink offerings, an offering by fire, a pleasing odor to the LORD. And you shall offer one male goat for a sin offering, and two male lambs a year old as a sacrifice of peace offerings. And the priest shall wave them with the bread of the first fruits as a wave offering before the LORD, with the two lambs; they shall be holy to the LORD for the priest. And you shall make proclamation on the same day; you shall hold a holy convocation; you shall do no laborious work: it is a statute for ever in all your dwellings throughout your generations. (Leviticus 23:16b-21)

Pentecost is the only Holy Day that must be determined by counting. All the others are on set dates of the sacred year. It is very important for us to calculate the right day. Only this day was made holy by God. Suppose the apostles had miscounted!

And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. (Acts 2:1 KJV)

If the disciples had counted wrongly, instead of being "with one accord in one place," they might have rather been in discord – some coming together on the preceding day and some on the following day. But Jesus, who had originally initiated the Feast of Pentecost, had taught them which was the right day! They had been keeping the Holy Days with Him for three and a half years so they knew how the day was to be counted.

The Pharisees, who did not take control of the timing of the holy days for the Jewish people until the middle of the first century AD, calculated incorrectly. They had the wrong starting point. Instead of starting their count after the weekly Sabbath that fell within the Feast of Unleavened Bread, they began their count after the first annual Sabbath – the First Day of Unleavened Bread. Before the Pharisees took over, the Boethus family, who were Sadducees, had control of the timing of the Holy Days. They correctly began the count for Pentecost the day after the weekly Sabbath. Here's what the Mishna (which was written in approximately AD 200) has to say about this:

The Boethusians say: ‘The cutting of the sheaf does not take place at the end of the day of the feast [*i.e. the First Day of Unleavened Bread*], but only at the end of the next regular Sabbath’ (Menahoth, 10, 3).

This correct calculation from the weekly Sabbath was handed down among the priests and this proper method was used as long as the Boethus family remained in control of the Temple and its rituals. The Samaritans and Karaites (a Jewish sect dating from the eighth century AD) also count Pentecost starting from the weekly Sabbath.

On a Sunday

So if the Sunday of the Wave-sheaf offering is Day One, then Day Fifty will always fall on a Sunday. It will not, however, always fall on the same day of the month each year. The Feast of Pentecost needs to be "counted" every year. It can never be a set day of the month in Hebrew or Roman calendars. Again, quoting from the Mishna:

[The Boethusians say:] Pentecost always falls on the day after the Sabbath (Chagigah, 2, 4).

The Boethusians agreed with the Holy Scriptures:

Seven sabbaths shall be complete: even unto the morrow after the seventh sabbath shall ye number fifty days; (Leviticus 23:15b-16a - KJV):

God also gave a second and, for some, a simpler instruction:

You shall count seven weeks; begin to count the seven weeks from the time you first put the sickle to the standing grain. Then you shall keep the feast of weeks to the LORD your God with the tribute of a freewill offering from your hand, which you shall give as the LORD your God blesses you; (Deuteronomy 16:9-10)

The time that the sickle was first put to the standing grain was on the evening of the Wave Sheaf Offering. Again, because seven weeks were counted, Pentecost was known as the "Feast of Weeks":

On the day of the first fruits, when you offer a cereal offering of new grain to the LORD at your feast of weeks, you shall have a holy convocation; you shall do no laborious work, (Numbers 28:26)

The Meaning

But what is the meaning of the Feast of Pentecost?

We know that Passover symbolizes Christ's sacrifice for the remission of our sins, and that the Feast of Unleavened Bread symbolizes the putting away of sin. Pentecost pictures the next step in God's plan: the first part of God's spiritual harvest, and the calling out of God's people – His Church – His called-out ones. In the Old Testament Pentecost celebration, two leavened "wave loaves" – baked with flour ground from the first grains of the early harvest – were offered as the firstfruits to God. The New Testament Church is comprised of people gathered out of the world to be the firstfruits of salvation.

You shall bring from your dwellings two loaves of bread to be waved, made of two tenths of an ephah; they shall be of fine flour, they shall be baked with leaven, as first fruits to the LORD... And the priest shall wave them with the bread of the first fruits as a wave offering before the LORD, with the two lambs; they shall be holy to the LORD for the priest. (Leviticus 23:17 & 20)

We are still physical human beings – part of the New Testament church of God – part of what was symbolized by those leavened wave loaves. The leaven-free Wave Sheaf being lifted up into the air and waved symbolized Jesus Christ's journey to heaven and His return. The Pentecost wave loaves being lifted up into the air and waved symbolized the time – still future – when God's people shall temporarily leave the earth to meet Jesus as He returns:

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. (I Thessalonians 4:16-17)

Most not now called

It is important to note that God has not permanently cast away physical Israel. He has merely blinded them temporarily. Through their fall, God made possible His offer of salvation to the Gentiles and, through Jesus Christ, Gentile believers may be grafted into the family of Israel. The eleventh chapter of Romans gives the details on this. God is now calling human beings to train to be kings and priests who will reign with Jesus Christ in the Millennium:

And hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on earth. (Revelation 5:10)

Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, as it is written, 'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up, that the rest of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name. (Acts 15:14-17)

In this New Testament era, the descendants of ancient Judah and Israel are blinded to the Truth. In the World Tomorrow after Jesus Christ's return the rest of mankind – blinded Israel and Gentiles alike – will seek God:

Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brethren: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved; as it is written, "The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob"; and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins." (Romans 11:25-27)

The Firstfruits of God's spiritual harvest – then immortal – will reign as kings and priests with Jesus Christ and will help build a new and wonderful civilization. The people of Israel will then repent and will be saved from sin through God's mercy and forgiveness. In this dispensation – our New Testament era – the vast majority of the people of Israel have not believed. But through His church – the Firstfruits – whom God has picked out in this age and who will then be kings and priests with Christ, Israel and other presently unconverted peoples shall obtain mercy:

So they have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may receive mercy. For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all. (Romans 11:31-32)

Only the first harvest now

The saints of this dispensation, our New Testament era, are called the "firstfruits of God's salvation":

Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures. (James 1:18)

And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8:23)

This dispensation and this picking out of God's people began on that first New Testament Feast of Pentecost. Note that the Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Feast of Pentecost fall at the beginning of God's sacred year, and that the events they picture occur at the beginning of God's plan of salvation. Likewise the Fall Holy Days fall in the seventh month of the year, they symbolize future events of His great plan and their fulfillment introduces the seventh millennium of man's time on earth.

It is not the job of God's Firstfruits to convert everyone in the world in this age. It is part of our job to declare the gospel of the Kingdom of God. Herbert W. Armstrong wrote that "Many have been called during this time, but only few actually chosen, and still fewer have remained faithful to the end!"

Again, the purpose of this dispensation, this era of God's Church is for the picking out only of the few "Firstfruits" of those millions who are eventually to be saved. The Firstfruits are being tried and tested to qualify for positions as kings and priests in the Kingdom of God and to assist Him in the salvation of the world as a whole.

When Christ returns

It is not during this era but rather at the time of the return of Jesus Christ that God will do these things:

In that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant which is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea. (Isaiah 11:11)

For behold, the LORD will come in fire, and his chariots like the stormwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire will the LORD execute judgment, and by his sword, upon all flesh; and those slain by the LORD shall be many... and I will set a sign among them. And from them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Put, and Lud, who draw the bow, to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands afar off, that have not heard my fame or seen my glory; and they shall declare my glory among the nations. (Isaiah 66:15-16, 19)

Then every one that survives of all the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the feast of booths. (Zechariah 14:16)

And many nations shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and we may 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 many peoples, and shall decide for strong nations afar off; and 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 any more... In that day, says the LORD, I will assemble the lame and gather those who have been driven away, and those whom I have afflicted; and the lame I will make the remnant; and those who were cast off, a strong nation; and the LORD will reign over them in Mount Zion from this time forth and for evermore. (Micah 4:2-3, 6-7)

These prophecies do not apply to the Church of God now, but to the time of the Kingdom of God, after Jesus Christ returns. In this era, God is permitting men to prove what sinners they are – helpless of themselves. Mankind must learn its final lesson: that only when God sends Jesus to rule with a rod of iron can the world really be saved. Those now being saved, the Firstfruits of salvation, will then be given the honour of being Christ's assistants in His great work of redemption. God's true plan of redemption is pictured by the Holy Days which are taught in God's Word from Genesis to Revelation – contrary to popular teaching. If the world's churches had continued to keep God's Holy Days they never would have lost sight of His wonderful plan.

Pentecost observed by the New Testament Church of God

The original New Testament Church of God kept all of God's Holy Days - including the Feast of Pentecost:

But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, (I Corinthians 16:8)

For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he might not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost. (Acts 20:16)

If the apostles had claimed – as so many professing Christians do today – that the Holy Days were abolished as "Old Covenant rituals" after the death of Jesus Christ, then they would never have kept that first New Testament Feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit would not have come, and the New Testament Church of God could not have been started. But the apostles did keep the Feast of Pentecost! It was NOT nailed to the cross! It was NOT abolished!

They kept it and they knew its meaning. Their brothers and sisters in the fledgling church of God kept it and knew its meaning. We are part of the end-time church of God. We too keep the Feast of Pentecost. We too know its very great meaning!

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