



SESSION OBJECTIVE: COLOSSIANS 2:16-19

To understand how Jewish festivals point to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Beyond the Finish Line

One of my biggest accomplishments was earning a Master of Divinity. I earned my Bachelor of Arts in Linguistics in 2012, and while it was technically a degree that required more hours (120 hours vs. 96 hours), it was not as demanding as the Masters level courses I was required to take in seminary. The semesters were long and arduous, I never took a summer off, and I wrote research paper after research paper. It seemed like it was never going to end (a regular Masters degree requires an average of 36 hours, to put it in perspective). When I was done, I walked the stage, proudly took my diploma, and celebrated. I had friends and family and church members there, and I felt very honored. How strange, though, would it have been if I had kept signing up for classes after all of that to continue to try and earn my Master of Divinity? If I kept coming back to the actions that had already culminated in a degree?

In Colossians 2:16, Paul encourages the believers to, “let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.” These are all prevalent and important practices in Judaism. Why, all the sudden, does it seem to be no longer as big of a deal? Because they were actions that had already culminated in something greater. Paul says in verse 17: “These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.” Christ is the substance of what these things were pointing to. Let’s look a little more deeply at each of the practices, as well as the rest of the passage.

The Shadow

Verse 16 unpacks four different practices that were important to the Jewish faith, but were no longer as important because of the fulfillment that Jesus brought to them. Below is a brief outline of each of them.

FOOD AND DRINK

This portion of verse 16 begins with likely the most commonly understood restriction for a Jew: food and drink. It's a pretty well-known fact that Israel was forbidden to eat pork. Fewer are aware of the shrimp restrictions. Beyond that, what are they limited to? Leviticus chapter 11 breaks down what is ok to eat and what is not ok to eat, covering land animals, water-dwelling animals, as well as birds and even insects. However, by the time Paul wrote this letter, the food restrictions outlined here were likely settled. Jesus spoke of these things in his teaching (Mk. 7:19). Peter experienced a vision in which God declared that which is unclean, clean (Acts 10:15). Paul even rebuked Peter for momentarily going back to the restrictions in a judgmental manner in Galatians 2:11-21. So why is food and drink brought up?

There was another food issue that had arisen in the early church, and that was the issue of food sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8-10). Paul's contention is that there is nothing wrong with food sacrificed to idols since idols are nothing more than lifeless objects, but that anything that defiles the conscience or causes a brother to stumble should be avoided (1 Cor. 8:13). He also warns believers against judging those who do not abstain (Rom. 14:3). Here, Paul is speaking to both crowds, to those who eat AND to those who abstain, and he is saying, "Don't let anyone judge you." Why? Because they must each be accountable to God (Rom. 14:10).

SACRED DAYS

Another well-known Jewish practice was the observance of special festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths. There are several that were practiced throughout Scripture. Below is an outline of only some of them.

1. Passover (or *Pesakh*)

Passover was one feast central to Judaism, commemorating the angel of death, "passing over" every home in Egypt with the blood of the slain lamb over its doorpost (Ex. 12:12-13). This practice continued every year after the exodus from Egypt and was practiced with slight modifications to the original day (Deut. 16:2). The Passover continued to be a central practice into the New Testament, and three of them are recorded in John's Gospel (Jn. 2:13; 6:4; 12:1). It is also during the Passover that Jesus chose to institute the ordinance of the Lord's Supper (Matt. 26:17-29; Luke 22:7-23).

2. Feast of Unleavened Bread (or *Mathsoth*)

The Feast of Unleavened Bread is intricately connected to the Passover, as it was instituted to remember how the Israelites left Egypt with haste (and as a result, their bread had not properly risen). This was instituted at roughly the same time Passover was as well (Ex. 12:17), and carried on every year after (Deut. 16:6). This feast continued into the New Testament as well (Matt. 26:17; Luke 22:7).

3. Feast of Firstfruits/Weeks (or *Pentecost*)

This feast marked the end of the cereal grain harvest, and called the Israelites to bring all of their tithes and gifts to the central sanctuary (Lev. 23:9-14). The significance of this feast in the New Testament is great; it is the day on which Pentecost fell. The pouring out of God's Holy Spirit onto His people marked a momentous occasion. It has been suggested that this day was chosen because of its fulfillment of Joel 2:28-31. Joel speaks of a time when God will pour out His Spirit on His people, and this passage is even referenced on

Pentecost in Acts 2:17-21. The context of Joel, however, falls after a *failed* harvest, hence the Feast of the Firstfruits connection.

4. Feast of Trumpets (or *Yom Tiruah*)

It is not completely clear what this festival pointed to, but it likely marked the end of the agricultural and festival year. Trumpets play a role in several places in the Scripture. They are associated with God's appearance on Sinai (Ex. 19:16, 19). Trumpets were also blown prior to the destruction of Jericho (Josh. 6:16), and soldiers did so after battle (2 Sam. 2:28).

5. The Day of Atonement (or *Yom Kippur*)

The Day of Atonement, is a day of sacrifice for the purification of Israel as outlined in Leviticus 16:1-34; 23:26-44, and Numbers 29:7-11. The days leading up to the sacrifice allowed for the high priest to go through an intense purifying ritual, that would then allow for him to make atonement for the people of Israel. This day was crucial to Jewish life and faith.

6. The Feast of Booths/Tabernacles (or *Sukkoth*)

This feast took place 5 days after the Day of Atonement, and was the most lavish of all the feasts. It celebrated the end of their slavery in Egypt, and symbolized reconciling fellowship with Yahweh. The sacrifices for the offering were very high: the first day included thirteen bulls, two rams and fourteen sheep. Everyday after, the number of bulls was reduced by one. The total offering came in at 71 bulls, 15 rams, 105 lambs and 8 goats. In the New Testament, the final day of this festival ended with a priest taking water from the pool of Siloam and taking it to the altar where he would pour it out

There are many other feasts or festivals that are practiced, beginning in the Old Testament and continuing into the New Testament. Some of the festivals were newer and established in the so-called, "inter-testamental period" (the period between Malachi and Matthew). One such festival is known as the Feast of Dedication (or *Hanukkah*) found in John 10:22. This particular feast celebrated the rededication of the Temple after Antiochus Epiphanes IV was run out of Jerusalem during the Maccabean revolution. The point is that there were a great many festivals, sacred days, and rituals that were woven into the fabric of Jewish life, and the pressure to continue these festivals from hostile Jews was high. The idea here is not that all of these festivals are bad (as we will see in a moment, they point to a greater substance), but that they are also not the substance itself and thus no one should pressure them to practice such things.

The Substance

The central focus of the Christian faith is Jesus. Paul has already argued that Jesus is, "the image of the invisible God," (Col. 1:15), "the head of the body, the church," (Col. 1:18), and that, "in Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col. 2:9). He is not only the preeminent figure of history, but the author of history (Col. 1:16). When Paul says that all of these things listed in verse 16, "food and drink, festivals, new moons, or Sabbaths," are a shadow and that Christ is the substance, he is connecting the two things together. In other words, the festivals and rituals point towards and signify something greater, namely, Jesus. This is an example of something known as *typology*. But how so?

Passover is perhaps the easiest connection to make to Jesus, for a variety of reasons. For one, the Passover requires the sacrifice of an unblemished lamb, and Jesus is called, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world" (Jn. 1:29). Paul says, "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Cor. 5:7). Just as

the Passover signified God's wrath, "passing over" the Israelites who had the blood of the lamb over the doorpost of their homes, God's wrath, "passes over" our sin when the blood of Jesus is applied to us. We remember His broken body and shed blood every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, an ordinance originally commanded on the Passover.

The Feast of the Unleavened Bread could be celebrated by remembering Jesus words in John 6:35: "Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.'" *Pentecost*, or *Firstfruits*, is a bit more challenging to practice today because the grain harvest is not a central part of our culture. However, Pentecost is celebrated in some denominations of churches that hold a liturgical calendar. Pentecost falls on the 49th day after Easter Sunday, and commemorates the coming of the Holy Spirit. *The Feast of Trumpets* could be seen as a shadow of the eventual second coming of Jesus (Matt. 24:31). The trumpets, as mentioned previously, signify a great deal of things, but the greatest of these are the eventual coda of human history in which Christ judges evil and restores shalom to creation.

The Day of Atonement is another easy connection made to Jesus, because the book of Hebrews makes the connection for us. Jesus is able to enter the Most Holy Place, not by the blood of goats or bulls, but by His own blood, which provides an eternal solution to sin (Heb. 9:11-12). Jesus purifies our conscience before God because He is without blemish (Heb. 9:14). Christ is offered as the perfect sacrifice, once and for all (Heb. 9:23-28). Hebrews also reveals that the former sacrificial system was faulty and flawed and merely served as a shadow pointing to the final sacrifice of Jesus that is eternally sufficient to save (Heb. 10:1-18). The Day of Atonement is not to be celebrated any longer as it is outlined in the Old Testament, because the work is done; Jesus said, "it is finished" (Jn. 19:30).

Finally, the Feast of Booths is also connected in the New Testament. As mentioned above, the final day of Booths included a priest taking water from the pool of Siloam and pouring it out at the altar. It is in the context of this feast that Jesus stands up and speaks of the coming Holy Spirit: "Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, 'If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'" But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified" (Jn. 7:37-39). Jesus used the water imagery of the ritual at the end of the Feast of Booths to illustrate the deeper significance of believing in Him.

Festivals, sacred days, and rituals do nothing but point to the deeper substance, and the substance IS Christ. Jesus is the fulfillment of these things. He enacts the final day of atonement. He is the living water. He is the bread of life. He comes to the sound of the trumpet. He IS our Passover Lamb. His Spirit has come! Believers are not to be troubled, judged, or condemned for not participating in such festivals, but there is significance in them as well. The point is to remain focused on Jesus. To not be drug into asceticism, the worship of angels, or detailed visions (Col. 2:18), but rather to, "hold fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God" (Col. 2:19).

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Colossians 2:16. What two things could Paul be addressing with regard to food and drink? (Hint: See above notes)

2. Of all the festivals listed in the study guide, which are you the most familiar with? Which are you the least familiar with? What was the most interesting aspect of a festival that you learned?

Day Two

1. Read Colossians 2:17. What things are the shadow, and what is the substance?

2. Where else have you come across typology in your study of the New Testament? (Hint: Think back to the study through the Gospel According to Matthew)

Day Three

1. Read Colossians 2:18. What things does Paul warn the Colossian Christians against? Make a list.

2. What are other things that could potentially, “disqualify you?”

Day Four

1. Read Colossians 2:19. Who is the Head? Describe what you think of when you read this passage? What does this bring to mind, visually speaking?

2. Read Ephesians 2:19-22. How is this passage similar to verse 19?

Week 8 Discussion: Christian Holidays

In Colossians, we are told not to be judged (and by implication, not to judge others) for abstaining from ritual practice and observation of sacred days that are unique to Judaism. Talk as a group about the value of understanding these festivals, and also talk about other modern celebrations we have and what they signify.

1. Icebreaker: What is your favorite holiday, and why? Is there any significance to this holiday with regard to your faith?
2. How many of these festivals were you familiar with? How does understanding their purpose help you understand why Jewish Christians might still practice them in light of Jesus?
3. Are there particular holidays that you have a problem with? Why?
4. Have you ever celebrated the Passover with a meal with close friends or family? If so, share your experience.
5. Are there any, “church holidays” you celebrate? (i.e. Lent, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, etc.)

Takeaways:

1. Many of the Jewish festivals have deep significance for Christians as well, because they point to Jesus.
2. We are not to be judged nor judge others for their participation or lack of participation in these kinds of holidays.