

WHAT IS YOUR DESTINY?

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The Question of the Ages

What is your destiny? Why do you exist? Is there a reason, a purpose, for human life? These questions have baffled the greatest thinkers and philosophers down through the ages.

We ponder the meaning of life. A child naturally wonders, “Where did I come from?” As adults we ask, especially in our twilight years: “Is this physical life all there is? Does my life have a purpose?”

Think about your own existence. Can you see a purpose for your own life with its ups and downs, its mixture of joys and sorrows? Do you perceive lasting value in its toil, challenges and uncertainties?

Life's greatest question

Why were you born? That's the question of the ages.

Three thousand years ago King David considered the apparent insignificance of human beings when compared to the vastness of the night sky. As a shepherd he had spent many nights outdoors gazing at the star-studded skies. He recorded some of his thoughts in Psalm 8:3-4: “When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him?”

David wondered why, in the magnificent and vast universe, God is so concerned with human beings and their future.

David realized that, within the larger scope of the vast heavens, we can appear to be insignificant. Yet he perceived that, in the plan of the

great Creator God, no part of God's physical creation even begins to compare with His purpose for human beings. Not even the angelic creation can compare.

Understanding that only God can reveal His purpose for creating us, David continued his reflection on the destiny of man: “For You have made him a *little lower than the angels*, and You have crowned him with glory and honor. You have made him to have *dominion* over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen—even the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea that pass through the paths of the seas” (verses 5-8, emphasis added throughout).

God's supreme creation

David realized that humans are potentially God's supreme creation. He pointed out that God has already granted humans the capacity to manage a good part of His creation—planet earth and its wonders. David concluded that God's purpose for creating humankind, for making us unique among His creatures, must be of overriding importance in His master plan.

Notice how God Himself explains His purpose for creating mankind: “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth’” (Genesis 1:26).

In all of God's physical creation, He made *only man* in the image and likeness of Himself. He gave only man dominion or rule over the creation. Mankind is unique within the creation of God.

Do you grasp what God has in store for those who develop a proper relationship with Him? As the apostle Paul put it: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Corinthians 2:9). The Scriptures reveal that our destiny can exceed anything we could imagine in our wildest dreams. Isn't it time we let God explain—from His Word—what He has in mind for us?

A prophetic passage gives us our first clue to our fantastic future. Speaking of the resurrection of the dead, it tells us that a time is coming when “many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall

awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” It adds: “Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever” (Daniel 12:2-3, New Revised Standard Version).

This is the amazing future God has planned for us: to live eternally while shining like brilliant stars!

What man is

Before we can comprehend man’s eternal destiny, however, we need to clearly understand what man is now. We are physical beings composed of the chemical substances of earth. That is how God created us. “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7).

But almost all ancient religions taught the error that man is more than just a physical being. They taught that man has a dual composition, that a human being is both a physical body and an immortal soul.

Even today most people believe that after our physical body dies our supposedly immortal “soul” will continue as a living and conscious entity apart from the body.

This idea that we have a soul that is immortal is never taught in the Holy Scriptures. It came to us from the superstitions of ancient religions—possibly as far back as Eden, when Satan convinced Eve she would not die if she disobeyed God (Genesis 3:2-4). On the contrary, the Bible clearly tells us that our “soul” is mortal rather than immortal because it is subject to death (Ezekiel 18:4, 20). (For a thorough explanation of what really occurs at death, and the many misconceptions associated with it, be sure to write for our booklet *What Happens After Death?*)

The Bible makes it plain that immortality is not something we already possess. Paul clearly tells us that God alone has immortality (1 Timothy 6:13-16). He explains that we are “corruptible” and “mortal” and “this mortal must put on immortality” by being changed from corruptible to incorruptible when Jesus Christ returns at the last trumpet (1 Corinthians 15:51-53; compare 1 Thessalonians 4:16; Revelation 11:15).

At this present time God’s servants are those who “seek for glory

and honor and immortality” (Romans 2:7). They do not already possess immortality. But they do understand that, by sacrificing His life for ours, Jesus Christ “has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:10). Immortality is available only through mankind’s Savior, Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12).

Man’s mortality

What, then, is man?

Man is mortal! Human life is temporary! We are physical beings who can die; we can cease to exist. Our life does not reside in some supposedly immortal soul. No such teaching can be found in the Scriptures. When we die, our consciousness ceases (Psalm 6:5; Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10); it doesn’t continue in some other form. Our only hope for eternal life lies in the gracious mercy of God. “For the wages of sin is death [not immortal life in some other form or place], but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

Eternal life is the *gift* God has in store for those who turn from the way of sin and begin obeying Him from the heart. He “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). He is “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). God desires to give us the precious gift of life forevermore. He will do everything He can to ensure that we receive the eternal destiny He has planned for us.

Man's Destiny Planned Before Time Began

The apostle Paul tells us that God made plans for our marvelous future even before He created our first parents, Adam and Eve. He planned our destiny “according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus *before time began*” (2 Timothy 1:9).

Our eternal future was a part of God's great plan and purpose before He created the universe—before He made the heavenly bodies by which we measure time. Even then, God had determined that only a perfect Redeemer could bring His master plan to completion. Both our future and the role of Jesus Christ in our destiny were planned by God before time began.

Then, at the creation of Adam and Eve, God gave humans a choice of two ways of life. He clearly instructed Adam and Eve to partake of the tree of life. As their Creator, God expected them to develop a close personal relationship with Him. The tree of life in the Garden of Eden symbolized an obedient relationship leading to eternal life (Genesis 2:9; 3:22).

However, God gave Adam and Eve another option—one that could lead to disaster! Instead of choosing life through obedience to God, they could select a life of *deciding for themselves* what is right and wrong. Another tree in the garden symbolized this choice: the tree

of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:16-17; 3:1-6).

By their actions, Adam and Eve rejected the way of living God had commanded (Genesis 3:6). Rather than relying on God to show them the right way to live, they chose to rely on themselves. They set out on a course that is a *mixture* of good and evil.

By their decision, they brought on themselves the penalty of sin, which is death (Romans 6:23). Since their time all of humanity has followed their example and become corrupted by sin (Romans 5:12). *All* have fallen short of God's revealed way of life (Romans 3:23). Humanity to this day continues in that way, which leads to death (*verses* 9-12).

For that reason God's plan includes a Savior, the Messiah—“the [sacrificial] Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8). Through Jesus Christ's sacrifice, human beings can reconcile to God, and God's forgiveness of their sin will remove the death penalty (Colossians 1:20-22). With forgiveness, God's gift of eternal life becomes available (Romans 6:23; 8:11). The destiny of man takes on meaning because of eternal life. (Read how human beings can be reconciled to God in our free booklet *The Road to Eternal Life*.)

The awesome purpose of life

As we have already seen, all human beings descended from Adam and Eve. We are their extended family. Because of his parentage, Adam was literally a son of God (Luke 3:38). Therefore, since we are descended from Adam, we are also children of God. God is our Father because He fathered our first human father. As Acts 17:29 tells us, “we are the offspring of God.”

But God's purpose goes far beyond the creation of mortal, perishable human beings. He is in the process of fashioning and forming a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17), fathering His own spiritual children—immortal and incorruptible children who will enjoy His very nature and character.

Paul describes this new creation by contrasting the “old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires,” with the “new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:22-24, New International Version).

Paul is describing a much-needed spiritual transformation in

humans. It first involves a change in a person's nature and character. This is followed by the resurrection—a literal, total change into a spiritual being with eternal life.

God is accomplishing this transformation through the power of the Holy Spirit. A biblical term for this spiritual transformation is *salvation*. Paul describes those who will receive salvation as the children of God: “The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together” (Romans 8:15-17, King James Version).

Can we grasp the significance of Paul's inspired statement? It explains why we are here, the very reason for our existence, *why we were born*. It gives meaning to life itself. It explains why God wants all people to come to the knowledge of the truth. God, the Scriptures tell us, is creating a family—His own family. We have the priceless opportunity to be a part of that family, the *family of God!*

That family relationship—our becoming children of God the Father—is the heart and core of God's incredible plan for humanity. Notice how important that spiritual family is to God: “In bringing many sons to glory [salvation], it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation [Jesus Christ] perfect through suffering. Both the one who makes men holy [Christ] and those who are made holy [human beings in whom God is working] are *of the same family*” (Hebrews 2:10-11, NIV).

That truly converted Christians all have the same spiritual Father means they are members of the same family—God's family. The Scriptures continue: “So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. He says, ‘I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises.’ And again, ‘I will put my trust in him.’ And again he says, ‘Here am I, and the *children* God has given me’ ” (verses 11-13, NIV).

Notice that Jesus is not ashamed to call members of His Church His own brothers (and sisters). That is how wonderfully close and personal this family relationship is.

Created in the likeness of God

From the beginning this purpose has been clearly stated by God. “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ So God created man in His own image; . . . male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:26-27).

Men and women are created in God's image and likeness, to be like God. The Bible often speaks of physical children as “sons” because that was the custom at the time the Bible was written. That custom has continued in many languages, including English, over the centuries. In the Hebrew and Greek languages, in which the Bible was originally written, “sons” was used to refer to “descendants.” When used in this sense, the Hebrew and Greek words for “sons” refer to male and female descendants alike. We use the words *mankind* and *brethren* in a similar sense to include both sexes.

God makes it clear that His family includes people who are now physical men and women, both sons and daughters. “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26-28).

God also tells us, “I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the LORD Almighty” (2 Corinthians 6:18). Men and women are God's children.

Now to the point of Genesis 1:26-27, which tells us we are made in God's image and likeness. How completely can we be like God when all is said and done?

We will be like Jesus Christ

God's purpose is to make us fully like Jesus Christ! In Ephesians 4 Paul makes this clear. He explains that members of God's Church are to “come . . . to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (verse 13). Paul's comment in Galatians 4:19, “My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you,” expresses the same concept in different words.

Do you grasp the significance of what Paul is saying? We can

become fully and completely like Jesus Christ—with His character formed in us. We can say as Paul said in Galatians 2:20, “it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.”

As Jesus is God’s Son, our destiny is also to be the immortal children of God. The apostle John explains what this means: “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! . . . Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is” (1 John 3:1-3).

Human beings who are inducted into the family that God is creating will ultimately be glorified spirit beings like the resurrected Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:20-21), who reigns over the universe in His glorified state at the right hand of God. This is what is meant by Daniel’s description of righteous people in the future “shin[ing] . . . like the stars forever and ever” (Daniel 12:2-3, NRSV). Humans resurrected unto eternal life will be like the glorified Jesus Christ!

The awesome potential of any person, as it is presented to us by Christ and His apostles, seems so incredible that most people cannot grasp this biblical truth when they first read it. Although it is plainly stated in the Bible, people usually read right over it. In fact, this awesome future is the whole purpose and reason that God made mankind. It is why we were born, why we exist.

God has always kept His purpose—that of making human beings His children—as the guiding principle in His relationships with mankind. He gave us His laws to teach us how to treat each other in a godly manner, the same way Christ treated people. God shows no partiality (Romans 2:11). He “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). And Christ came specifically to make it possible for the whole world—all people—to be saved (John 3:16-17).

Israelites to set an example

Many readers of the Bible have wondered why God chose the descendants of Abraham and his wife Sarah—ancient Israel—as a special people if He impartially offers salvation to everyone.

Abraham was a righteous man whom God called His friend (James

2:23; Isaiah 41:8). God chose to build a national family from the descendants of Abraham and Sarah so citizens of that nation could, if they would cooperate, set an example for all other peoples as a model of God’s own family.

Those descendants, the people of ancient Israel, agreed to become just such an example nation (Deuteronomy 4:1, 6-8; 5:27). But they still had a carnal, selfish nature, as do all other people (Romans 8:7). Knowledge alone was not enough. God gave the Israelites His laws—the knowledge of right and wrong—but they **did not have** minds that could obey God from the heart. As a nation, they failed to set an obedient example as they had promised.

The example they did set, that of consistently abandoning their commitments to obey God, preserves an important lesson for the rest of mankind. Neither nations nor individuals can produce godly behavior without God’s Spirit dwelling within them—even if God personally gives them explicit knowledge of right and wrong.

Having the Holy Spirit from birth, Jesus Christ never sinned and thus set a perfect example for humanity. Those who truly follow Christ repent of their sins and are led by God’s Spirit. With Christ now living in them (Galatians 2:20), they set a similar though imperfect example, striving to grow in the grace and knowledge of their Savior (2 Peter 3:18). But, when Christians are granted immortality in the resurrection, they will set perfect examples of godliness and righteousness as the spiritual children of God.

God has revealed that He is “bringing many sons to glory” so that He, as our Father, and we, His children, will be “of the same family” (Hebrews 2:10-11, NIV). That astounding truth is the ultimate destiny of human beings as revealed in the Bible.

God is in the process of creating that immortal family. In the next chapter we will examine how you can become a part of it. We all have a vital part to play in God’s plan.

Who Will Be in God's Family?

Who are the children of God? Who will become a part of God's immortal spiritual family?

The Bible explains that those inducted into God's immortal family must first sincerely repent of their sins, be baptized and receive the gift of God's Spirit (Acts 2:38). By receiving the Holy Spirit, they become converted members of Christ's spiritual body (1 Corinthians 12:12-13), which is His Church (Colossians 1:24). They await the resurrection at Christ's return, when they will be given immortality (1 Corinthians 15:51-54).

Receiving God's Spirit is essential to conversion. The apostle Paul makes it clear that you must receive the Holy Spirit to become a part of God's family and Church: ". . . If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His" (Romans 8:9).

Why are those without God's Spirit not the people of God? Because, as Paul explains, only "as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God" (verse 14). Paul clarifies the relationship of God's Spirit to salvation: "But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit . . ." (verse 11). Only those with God's Spirit will inherit eternal life.

How, then, may you receive God's Spirit? The apostle Peter explained that you must "repent" and "be baptized . . . in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive

the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38, New American Standard Bible). (Real repentance and baptism, which open the way into God's family, are thoroughly explained in our free booklet *The Road to Eternal Life*. Request your copy today.)

God's children, then, are those who are led by God through His Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the power and presence of God working within them (2 Timothy 1:6; Psalm 51:11; Philippians 2:13). Those who receive God's Spirit are regarded as the children of God even in this life. "Beloved, now we are children of God; and . . . everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:2-3). But what we are now is nothing compared with what we will be like at Jesus Christ's return.

At that time the faithful children of God will be resurrected to immortality to share eternity with Him. Paul describes the marvelous transformation that will occur when the dead are resurrected: "There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies; and the splendour of the heavenly bodies is one thing, the splendour of the earthly another. The sun has a splendour of its own, the moon another splendour and the stars yet another; and one star differs from another in brightness. So it is with the resurrection of the dead: what is sown as a perishable thing is raised imperishable. Sown in humiliation, it is raised in glory; sown in weakness, it is raised in power; sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is such a thing as a physical body, there is also a spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:40-44, Revised English Bible).

These verses depict an awesome change indeed. That is why Paul says: "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:16-18, KJV).

A future beyond compare

Do you get the picture? Being resurrected into God's family as a very child of God, a part of God's own family, is so magnificent that it is futile to try to compare it to anything we have ever known. No amount of trials, problems and suffering in this life could ever

approach the priceless gift of eternal life as children of God, actually becoming like Jesus Christ. That incredible future is what life is all about. That is *why you were born*.

No wonder Paul exclaimed, “The created universe is waiting with eager expectation for God’s sons to be revealed” (Romans 8:19, REB). God gives us this faithful promise: “He who overcomes shall *inherit all things*, and I will be his God and he shall be My son” (Revelation 21:7).

The wonderful world of tomorrow will be inaugurated at the return of Jesus Christ, who will rule as King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Revelation 19:16). Every kingdom, power and government will be brought under His divine rulership (Revelation 11:15). He will establish the Kingdom of God on earth. This was the heart of His message—the gospel, or good news, that He preached (Mark 1:14-15). (Be sure to request your free copy of *The Gospel of the Kingdom* to better understand this central theme both of Christ’s message and the entire Bible.)

Those sons and daughters of God who have been faithful to Him will share in that rule with Jesus Christ as sons of God. Notice Christ’s promise: “To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” (Revelation 3:21). Those who overcome will be given responsibility as kings and priests of God in that Kingdom (Revelation 1:5-6).

Change to immortality

How can we mere human beings ever hope that Jesus Christ would share with us such incredible responsibility? Certainly we can never do so while we are still weak, imperfect human beings.

That is just the point of these and many other scriptures. We must be *changed*.

“Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be *changed*; in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed” (1 Corinthians 15:50-52).

A vision of our future

The Kingdom of God, under the rule of Christ, will be wonderful. But what will make it so?

It will be wonderful because of the leadership of the children of God, each changed to an immortal spirit being under the leadership of Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself will reign as “the firstborn among many brethren” (Romans 8:29). He will share management of the kingdom with the resurrected, immortal children of God.

The prophet Daniel received from God a vision of the establishment of that Kingdom under Jesus Christ. He saw Christ receiving His Kingdom from God the Father. “I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man [Jesus Christ], coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days [God the Father], and they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed” (Daniel 7:13-14).

Who will share the Kingdom with Jesus Christ? “Then the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, shall be given to the *people*, the *saints of the Most High*. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey Him” (verse 27). Here again we see that people who are the “saints of the Most High” will be kings and rulers with Christ.

But their type of rulership will be vastly different from the rulership this world has usually experienced. They will serve rather than exploit humanity. Jesus Christ described the kind of giving, serving, loving leadership that will characterize those who rule with Him: “Among the Gentiles, kings lord it over their subjects and those in authority are given the title Benefactor. Not so with you: on the contrary, the greatest among you must bear himself like the youngest, the one who rules like one who serves” (Luke 22:25-26, REB).

God is creating not just a family of kings, but kings who are servants, kings who will pass on blessings to those they serve. As Proverbs 29:2 tells us, “When the righteous are in authority, the

people rejoice . . .” The whole world will rejoice under the righteous rulership of the family of God!

Leadership based on love

God’s character is based on love (1 John 4:8-16). The loving character of God is evident in all His children. It is that loving character that distinguishes the true children of God, that reveals who is really a part of His family. “In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother” (1 John 3:10).

Jesus taught the same. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be *sons of your Father* in heaven . . . You shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:43-45, 48).

The practice of godly love by the resurrected, immortal children of God will produce the wonderful world of the future. God is perfecting the attitude of love and mercy in His sons and daughters who are the firstfruits of His spiritual harvest (James 1:18). They will be children befitting His family, children who will demonstrate to the remainder of mankind that obedience to God’s law is the right way of life.

God is creating in His children His holy and righteous character. Those who become like Jesus Christ at the resurrection will be more than just spirit beings *similar* to Him. They will share with Him the very nature of our Creator, Almighty God (2 Peter 1:4).

Never underestimate the value of your life. You were born to become one of God’s children. You were born to receive His very nature and, eventually, eternal life. You were born to become a glorified, immortal member of God’s family. If you surrender your life to God, this is your destiny.

The Key Steps in God’s Master Plan

We have discovered God’s master plan to “bring many sons to glory” (Hebrews 2:10). Now let’s consider the specific steps needed to fulfill that plan. Those steps become clear when we understand the awesome purpose of God’s seven annual festivals and the weekly seventh-day Sabbath.

These special sacred days are listed in Leviticus 23. They give us a concise view of God’s master plan. Each festival focuses on one major facet of that plan. By observing these festivals we can gain a much deeper understanding of the essential steps in God’s plan for the salvation of humankind (Psalm 111:10).

God’s feast days

In Leviticus 23 we find God’s command to observe the weekly Sabbath and specific festivals throughout the year. This command still applies. God said, “These are the feasts of the LORD, holy convocations [sacred assemblies] which you shall proclaim at their appointed times” (verse 4). Notice that they are God’s feasts, not just Israel’s national holidays. However, God gave them first to the people of Israel. God’s intent was that should they set the example for all other nations (Deuteronomy 4:6).

What is even more important to us is that Jesus Christ kept these days (Matthew 26:17; Mark 1:21; Luke 4:16, 31; John 7:8-10, 14, 37). The early Christians also kept these festivals and the seventh-day

Sabbath (Acts 2:1; 12:3-4; 16:13; 18:4, 19, 21; 20:6; 27:9; 1 Corinthians 5:7-8). They are vital reminders of God's plan for us.

Prophecy shows that, after Jesus Christ's return, all nations will keep these festivals to honor and worship God (Zechariah 14:16-19). Speaking of that time, Isaiah 66:23 records the words of God Himself: ". . . From one Sabbath to another, all flesh shall come to worship before Me." This shows that the entire world will be required to observe these days once Christ returns. They will be part of the laws of His Kingdom.

Therefore, we need to seriously consider the significance of these feasts in their proper sequence. We need to understand their relationship to the fantastic destiny God has planned for us.

The weekly Sabbath

The listing of God's festivals in Leviticus 23 begins with the weekly Sabbath—the seventh day of the week, which begins Friday at sunset and lasts until Saturday at sunset. One of the Sabbath's purposes is to remind God's people every week that the God they worship is the Creator of the heavens and earth (Exodus 20:8, 11).

But it also has a prophetic aspect. In Hebrews 4:4-9 the weekly Sabbath rest is related to the 1,000-year time of peace during Jesus Christ's reign on earth (Revelation 5:10; 11:15; 20:4-6). That will be the time salvation will be made available to all mankind. The comparison of the weekly Sabbath to Christ's millennial reign concludes with "There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God" (Hebrews 4:9, NIV).

God commands His people to keep the Sabbath so they will never forget He has promised a time of international peace when Christ will offer salvation to the whole world. The Sabbath is also a special time, sanctified by God, during which His children are to learn and grow in the knowledge and character that is expected from the members of His family. (For further understanding, please request our free booklet *Sunset to Sunset: God's Sabbath Rest*.)

The meaning of the Passover

In addition to the weekly Sabbath, God commands the observance of His annual festivals. The first, in sequence, is the Passover (Leviticus 23:5). It was first instituted at the time of Israel's exodus from Egypt,

when all the firstborn not protected by the blood of a lamb died. Only the households that had sacrificed a lamb and placed its blood on their doorposts were spared from death (Exodus 12:12-13).

The lambs slain by ancient Israel represented the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for humanity (1 Peter 1:19). That sacrifice of Christ as our Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7) is the first and most important step in God's plan for mankind's salvation.

But why is the Passover so important for us to remember and observe? It is because our sins separate us from God (Isaiah 59:2), and the "wages of sin" is death (Romans 6:23). Jesus, as the "Lamb of God" (John 1:29), sacrificed His life to pay that death penalty for us so we can be reconciled to God (Ephesians 2:16; Colossians 1:20). Reconciliation with God is the first step toward salvation.

The plan of God could not exist as we know it without Christ's atoning sacrifice. The events pictured by subsequent festivals depend on Jesus Christ's sacrifice, symbolized by the New Testament Passover.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread

The Feast of Unleavened Bread, lasting seven days, immediately follows the Passover. God commands that, during this feast, no one eat bread containing leaven (such as yeast), nor even allow it into his home (Leviticus 23:6-8; Exodus 12:15-20).

Initially this festival was instituted as a memorial of Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Today its significance is far greater. It teaches us that Christians, who are delivered from their sins through the sacrifice of Christ, with God's help must purge wickedness from their lives and replace it with righteousness.

Paul compares sin to leaven, noting that, as leaven spreads to affect a lump of dough, so sin spreads to affect many areas of one's life as well as the lives of others. Then he concludes: "Therefore let us [Christians] keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Corinthians 5:6-8).

This feast symbolizes the Christian's commitment to put sin out of his life. It also calls his attention to the forgiveness of sin that is possible through baptism. Paul wrote that the Israelites' crossing through the Red Sea (at the end of the Feast of Unleavened Bread) was their

symbolic baptism and an example for Christians today (1 Corinthians 10:2, 6).

Once our sins are forgiven, we must move forward to build in our lives the same character that our Deliverer, Jesus Christ, showed us by His personal example (Ephesians 2:10; Philippians 2:5; 1 John 2:6). Jesus said that He is the “bread of life” (John 6:35). Observing the Days of Unleavened Bread represents a Christian’s commitment to emulate the “unleavened” or perfect, sinless life of Jesus Christ.

The Day of Pentecost

The next commanded festival is Pentecost, observed 50 days from the weekly Sabbath during the Days of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23:15-16). Its significance is clear from Acts 2. Having waited in Jerusalem as they were commanded (Acts 1:4-5), His disciples received God’s Spirit as promised on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).

The Holy Spirit filled the disciples with power from God. Through their inspired preaching, others repented, were baptized and received God’s Spirit (verses 37-41). That was the beginning of the New Testament Church. Calling a body of converted believers out of the sins of this world is the third step in God’s master plan of salvation.

The Feast of Pentecost represents God’s people—the Church of God—being transformed and revitalized by His Spirit. The Holy Spirit guides believers into God’s truth (John 16:13), leading them into a transformed life (Romans 8:4-14). Without that Spirit, we cannot belong to God and Christ (verse 9) and cannot be a part of God’s Church (1 Corinthians 12:12-13). Receiving God’s Spirit is an essential step to fulfilling our destiny as members of His family: “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God” (Romans 8:14).

The Feast of Trumpets

The Feast of Trumpets, so named because it was marked by the special blowing of trumpets, is commanded in Leviticus 23:24-25. This festival heralds the second coming of Jesus Christ to earth at the sounding of the “last trumpet,” described in the book of Revelation.

At that time those who have died in Christ will be resurrected and, along with those Christians still living, will be changed into immortal spirit beings (1 Corinthians 15:51-52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17; Revelation 11:15). Revelation 20:6 says, “Blessed and holy is he who

has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years.”

Although the Feast of Trumpets heralds the return of Jesus Christ as the Prince of Peace, the process of peacemaking won’t be complete until God restrains Satan the devil, the author of confusion, chaos and war, from influencing humanity for 1,000 years. That brings us to the fifth step in God’s master plan.

The Day of Atonement

The Day of Atonement, observed by fasting and assembly as commanded in Leviticus 23:27-32, marks another milestone in God’s plan. It relates to the Passover, since Jesus Christ as our Passover is also our Atonement. In ancient Israel the emphasis for this festival was on cleansing the nation of its sins (Leviticus 16:32-34); its future application is for the world in general.

To cleanse humanity from sin, God must first depose Satan, who constantly tempts us to sin. Then all men and women can receive the atonement of Jesus Christ to cleanse them from their sins. For this reason, one of Christ’s first acts at His second coming will be to bind Satan for 1,000 years (Revelation 20:1-3). Then the reconciling of the world through the atoning sacrifice of Christ can begin in earnest. Once Satan and his deceptions are out of the way, all people can be reconciled to God.

The Feast of Tabernacles

The next commanded festival, in Leviticus 23:33-36, is the Feast of Tabernacles. It pictures the 1,000-year rule of Christ as King of Kings to continue the harvest of human lives into eternal life (John 4:35-36). This is the sixth step in God’s master plan.

The reign of Christ will begin at Jerusalem and spread to every nation. Isaiah calls it the time during which “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 2:3-4).

During this time of worldwide peace, every living person can learn God’s ways and have the opportunity for salvation. “No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (Jeremiah 31:34). The knowledge of God will cover the earth as the waters cover the seas (Isaiah 11:9).

The Last Great Day

Finally, as commanded in Leviticus 23:36-39, a separate one-day festival immediately follows the Feast of Tabernacles. This day depicts the Great White Throne Judgment, the seventh step in God’s plan as described in Revelation 20:11-13. People who have died having never heard about their incredible potential will have their true destiny revealed to them at that time.

Here is how it will happen. All the dead who have ever lived—people like the queen of Sheba, inhabitants of ancient Nineveh and the people of Christ’s own time—will be resurrected together (Matthew 12:41-42). That resurrection of thousands of millions of people back to physical, temporal life is detailed in Ezekiel 37:1-14. These are the “rest of the dead” spoken of in Revelation 20:5. Billions of humans will repent of their past sins and receive the gift of everlasting life, attaining their ultimate destiny.

God’s plan is all-encompassing. During this time the vast majority of human beings will receive the opportunity for everlasting life. Remember, God “desires all men to be saved” and is “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). Through His wondrous plan, all of humanity will be given the opportunity to learn God’s truth, come to repentance and receive salvation. (For a more-complete explanation of the festivals, be sure to request our free booklet *God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*.)

What a marvelous plan! It unveils the incredible destiny of all who,

through Jesus Christ, surrender to God and receive eternal life—who will share God’s nature as children in His own family. God has promised, “He who overcomes shall *inherit all things*, and I will be his God and he shall be My son” (Revelation 21:7).

Just think! God had it all planned before the beginning of time.

Act on what you have learned

This brings us back to where we began, to King David’s reflections in Psalm 8:3-4: “When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him?”

The Bible has shown us why God is mindful of mankind: He planned our awesome future. We have seen that our ultimate destiny, the purpose of our physical existence, is to become the immortal children of God, who is our Father. The keys to understanding our destiny, and that of all humankind, are revealed step by step through God’s annual festivals.

This is where you and I—and all of humanity—are headed. God will not permit His perfect plan to be foiled by human or satanic manipulation. The Bible, backed by the guarantee of Almighty God and Jesus Christ, promises us it will all come to pass.

Here is a final scripture regarding our astounding future: “Many of those who sleep [are dead] in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever” (Daniel 12:2-3, NRSV).

This is your destiny! May God grant you a heart willing to surrender your will to Him so you may receive the wonderful gift of eternal life in His family.

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If You'd Like to Know More...

Who we are

This literature is published by the United Church of God, *an International Association*, which has ministers and congregations throughout much of the world.

We trace our origins to the Church that Jesus founded in the early first century. We follow the same teachings, doctrines and practices established then. Our commission is to proclaim the gospel of the coming Kingdom of God to all the world as a witness and to teach all nations to observe what Christ commanded (Matthew 24:14; 28:19-20).

Free of charge

Jesus Christ said, "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8). The United Church of God offers this and other publications free of charge. We are grateful for the generous tithes and offerings of the members of the Church and other supporters who voluntarily contribute to support this work.

We do not solicit the general public

for funds. However, contributions to help us share this message of hope with others are welcomed. All funds are audited annually by an independent accounting firm.

Personal counsel available

Jesus commanded His followers to feed His sheep (John 21:15-17). To fulfill this command, the United Church of God has congregations around the world. In these congregations believers assemble to be instructed from the Scriptures and to fellowship.

The United Church of God is committed to understanding and practicing New Testament Christianity. We desire to share God's way of life with those who earnestly seek to worship and follow our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Our ministers are available to counsel, answer questions and explain the Bible. If you would like to contact a minister or visit one of our congregations, please feel free to write to us at the address nearest you, or contact us by telephone.

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