

SAVORING THE PEACE OF JESUS
IN A CHAOTIC WORLD

The Gospel of
JOHN

articles

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ARTICLE ONE

John and the Synoptics

The New Testament opens with four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, in that order. The first three are designated the Synoptic Gospels because they present similar accounts regarding the story of Jesus. “Synoptic” comes from the Greek word *sunopsis*, which means “a blended view.”¹ While the synoptists each wrote from their own distinctive perspectives, they tell many of the same stories, order events similarly, and often use comparable words or descriptions.

While scholars differ when it comes to dating all four Gospels, most agree that the Synoptic Gospels were in circulation much earlier than John’s account. The general consensus usually puts the synoptics between AD 65–80 and John around AD 90 or even later.² One of the ways to establish John’s timeline includes his references to excommunication from the synagogue (John 9:22; 12:42; 16:2). The Jewish temple was destroyed in AD 70. This moved Judaism from the temple to the synagogues. Christians weren’t excluded from the synagogues until AD 80.³ So we can surmise that the time of John’s writing was certainly after AD 80.

Whether John was familiar with the work of Matthew, Mark, and Luke when he penned his own work has been the subject of much debate. Some have suggested he wrote his account in order to fill in the gaps the synoptics omitted since he included 90 percent unique content.⁴ Others purport that he wrote independent of them.⁵

John’s purpose in writing weighs in on this discussion. If John had read the Synoptic Gospels, part of his purpose could have been to record important details those Gospel writers left out. But we know that wasn’t his main purpose. He spelled that out in his own words in John 20:31: “But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name.”

If we view John’s purpose through this lens, whether or not John had access to the Synoptic Gospels doesn’t impact the veracity of his account. It was inspired by the Holy Spirit and brings a fuller picture of Jesus’s life and ministry on earth.

As we consider John’s relationship to the Synoptic Gospels, let’s consider some other interesting details:

OMISSIONS

John’s omissions include any mention of parables, the transfiguration, the Lord’s Supper, casting out of demons, Jesus’s temptations, or the agony of Gethsemane. The kingdom of God, which is highly emphasized in the Synoptic Gospels, finds considerably less mention in his account.

DISTINCT CONTENT

John's distinctives include but are not limited to the miracle of water to wine, Nicodemus's encounter with Jesus at night, the resurrection of Lazarus, the conversation with the Samaritan woman, and the I AM statements of Jesus.

DUALISM

John also used dualisms not present in the Synoptic Gospels—life and death, from above and below, light and dark, truth and lies, sight and blindness.⁶

LOCATION AND TIMELINE

John focused more on Jesus's time in Judea (other than the short report about the wedding in Cana) and spanned three years while the Synoptic Gospels centered their accounts in the region of Galilee and covered about one year. John saw Jerusalem as the place where the Messiah would either be rejected or accepted, so he concentrated on that place.⁷

FORMAL VS INFORMAL

The Synoptic Gospels focus on the public teachings of Jesus, such as the Sermon on the Mount and the parables. John recorded more of the informal teachings, such as His conversations with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman.⁸

FALSE TEACHING

During the time that John wrote, a teaching known as Docetism was gaining momentum. Docetic teachers set forth Jesus as only seeming to be human, but not fully so. They denied the incarnation.⁹ John's strong opening could have served to counter the false teachings he knew were creeping in among Christians.

EDITORIAL COMMENTS

John often commented on what the disciples understood at the time of Jesus's teaching compared to what they comprehended later. He also added editorial details to help provide context, such as giving locations or defining words. Some translations occasionally use parentheses to set these areas off while others do not. For examples see John 1:38,42; 2:9; 3:24; 4:2; 6:4,10; 7:39; 9:7; 14:22; 18:5,32,40; 19:13,17,31,35,38; 20:16,24; 21:2,7.

We can appreciate how the unique features of John's Gospel add to our understanding of Jesus. One commentator said this of his contribution, "I like the comparison of John's gospel to a pool in which a child may wade and an elephant can swim. It is both simple and profound."¹⁰

John's Gospel may not be "synoptic" like the others, but it has great value in its simplicity and depth. Whether you are wading in the shallows or exploring its depths, the author's

purpose was that you continue to believe in Jesus and by believing you experience life through the power of His name.

1. Merrill F. Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1988), 499.
2. *Ibid.*, 502.
3. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 32.
4. *Ibid.*, 35, 49.
5. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 49.
6. *Ibid.*, 22.
7. Morris, 17; Carson, 22.
8. Morris, 21.
9. Morris, 44.
10. Morris, 7.

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NOTES

ARTICLE TWO

Weddings and Funerals in the Bible

WEDDINGS

We only have veiled references to weddings in Scripture. Yet we know that weddings were significant because Jesus began His public ministry at a wedding (John 2), and at the end of days, we will celebrate at the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19). In this article we'll explore ancient Jewish wedding traditions and see how they give us glimpses of Christ's relationship with His bride, the church (Eph. 5:31-32).

CHOSEN

Most marriages in ancient times were arranged. The groom's father would select a suitable bride (Gen. 24:3-4; 38:6). The bride and groom would enter into a formal betrothal, which was a binding agreement by both families.

The bride of Christ is also chosen. Ephesians 1:4 says, "Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes."

PRICE

As part of the betrothal agreement, a bride price was agreed upon and paid. The worth of the bride and the ability of the groom to provide were topics of conversations.

Christ paid a high price to ransom His bride. First Peter 1:18-19 says, "For you know that God paid a ransom to save you from the empty life you inherited from your ancestors. And it was not paid with mere gold or silver, which lose their value. It was the precious blood of Christ, the sinless, spotless Lamb of God."

GIFTS

During the betrothal, gifts such as money, a ring, and wine were given to the bride so that she would have tangible reminders that the groom would be coming for her.

Jesus, our Bridegroom, left us with the gift of His Holy Spirit as we await His return. In 2 Corinthians 1:22 it says, "he has identified us as his own by placing the Holy Spirit in our hearts as the first installment that guarantees everything he has promised us." (See also John 14:16-17.)

PREPARATION

A groom would often use the betrothal period to build an addition onto his parent's house or build his own home to prepare for his bride.

Jesus also talked about preparing a place for His bride. He said in John 14:2, “There is more than enough room in my Father’s home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you?”

CELEBRATION

Usually, weddings took place at the home of the bride’s parents but other times the groom’s family hosted the party (Matt. 22:2). Neighbors and friends were invited to celebrate the couple and the occasion, with the festivities lasting typically seven days (Gen. 29:22,27; Judg. 14:12). Weddings involved dressing up. The bride wore a veil (Song of Sol. 4:3) and was adorned with jewelry (Ps. 45:14-15; Isa. 61:10; Jer. 2:32). The groom wore a crown or garland on his head (Song of Sol. 3:11; Isa. 61:10). The bride and groom sat under a decorated canopy upon arriving at the feast. Much time was spent eating and drinking. There was also singing and likely dancing. In wealthy families, guests were provided with “wedding clothes” (Matt. 22:12).

When Christ returns for His bride—the church—there will be a celebration including eating, drinking, and fine clothes. Revelation 19:7-8 says, “‘Let us be glad and rejoice, and let us give honor to him. For the time has come for the wedding feast of the Lamb, and his bride has prepared herself. She has been given the finest of pure white linen to wear.’ For the fine linen represents the good deeds of God’s holy people.”

PROCESSION

At the end of the festivities, the groom would lead a procession to retrieve his bride from her parents’ home. Then the procession set out from the bride’s home to the new couple’s home and the guests would hold oil lamps to light the way.¹ This is reflected in a parable Jesus told about the ten virgins who waited with their lamps for the groom to come (Matt. 25:1-13).

Only the father of the groom could give the word for the procession to begin. Only our heavenly Father knows when Jesus will return for His bride. First Thessalonians 4:16-18 says, “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. First, the believers who have died will rise from their graves. Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we will be with the Lord forever. So encourage each other with these words.”

As we consider ancient Jewish weddings, we get a glimpse into Christ’s relationship with us—His bride, the church!

FUNERALS

Attending a wedding seems more exciting than a funeral. A marriage marks the beginning of a new family while a funeral grieves a loss. However, the writer of Ecclesiastes spoke about the value of funerals: “Better to spend your time at funerals than at parties. After all, everyone dies—so the living should take this to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for sadness has a refining influence on us. A wise person thinks a lot about death, while a fool thinks only about having a good time” (Eccl. 7:2-4).

While the Bible doesn’t reveal many details about funerals, it does speak to burial, mourning, and ceremony surrounding the loss of a loved one. By understanding how people lamented in Scripture, we can normalize our own need to grieve and contemplate death.

BURIAL

In Bible times, the burial of a deceased person was a top priority. Interments had to take place soon after death because the hot climate of the ancient Near East hastened decomposition. A body was typically washed, wrapped loosely in linen cloth, and prepared with spices and paste and tied with layers of “roller bandages.”² When the paste hardened, a cocoon formed around the body. This would likely have been done by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus to Jesus’s body (John 19:40) as it had been done to Lazarus’s body (John 11:44). To be left unburied and exposed to wild animals could be seen as a severe form of judgment (1 Kings 14:11; 16:4; 2 Kings 9:10; Isa. 14:19-20; Jer. 22:19).

Most people were buried outside a city, except kings who had special sepulchers within a city for burial. The most common type of burial place was in caves hewn out of rock. Archaeological evidence points to these being communal graves—likely family groups. To make room for more people, the bones of a body that was fully decomposed was transferred to a stone jar called an ossuary and stored in a corner of the cave.³

However, a marked change in burial customs occurred in Judea around 100 BC when shared sites were replaced with individual graves.⁴ These were long narrow areas in the walls of caves that could be sealed with a stone slab. Several of these single graves were housed in a system of caves closed with a heavy rolling stone. Scholars speculate that the family tomb of Joseph of Arimathea was of this type (Matt. 27:57-60).

MOURNING

While we don’t know much about funeral services in ancient times, we do know that people mourned the death of their loved ones. Abraham wept when his wife, Sarah, died (Gen. 23:2). King David told his men to tear their clothes and wear burlap to mourn the death of an officer (2 Sam. 3:31). The prophet Micah wept for his people by walking around barefoot and naked and howling like a jackal and moaning like an owl (Mic. 1:8).

Traditionally, mourning lasted seven days (Gen. 50:10). However, a person of importance might be mourned for up to seventy days. Both Aaron and Moses were

mourned for thirty days (Num. 20:29; Deut. 34:8). At times professional mourners were invited in to increase the atmosphere of grief (Jer. 9:17; Amos 5:16; Matt. 9:23).

CEREMONY

Little details are afforded about the actual ceremony associated with a burial. When Samuel died, Scripture tells us that “all Israel gathered for his funeral” (1 Sam. 25:1). We can assume there was some sort of commemoration by the community.

King Asa’s death gives us another glimpse into the ceremonies associated with death. He was laid on a bed that had been anointed with perfume, spices, and ointments and a huge funeral fire was built in his honor (2 Chron. 16:14). While prophets or kings likely had a special service, we do not know if this practice prevailed among the common people.

David’s refusal to eat after the death of Abner hints at the possibility that shared meals were sometimes part of the grieving process (2 Sam. 3:35). The prophet Jeremiah also alluded to the fact that sending food or wine to comfort a family after a death was common (Jer. 16:7).

We don’t know if people sang songs, shared stories, or preached sermons at funerals in Bible times. Those things happened at my father’s celebration of life service and are typical at most funerals today. However, the Bible gives us glimpses, even specific places in John’s Gospel, of what took place in families and communities after the death of family and friends.

1. Ralph Gower, *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times* (Chicago: Moody, 1987), 66.
2. *Ibid.*, 73.
3. *Ibid.*, 72.
4. Geoffrey Wigoder, *Illustrated Dictionary and Concordance of the Bible* (Jerusalem: G.G. The Jerusalem Publishing House LTD., 1986), 198–199.

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NOTES

ARTICLE THREE

Jewish Leaders

In the time of Christ, several political and social groups existed, including the Essenes, Zealots, and Herodians. These groups functioned from the last centuries BC until the destruction of the temple in AD 70 with some continuing on in new capacities as Judaism moved to the synagogues. In John's Gospel, we see Jesus mainly interacting with two of these type groups: Pharisees and Sadducees. To better understand these encounters, we will explore the distinctives of the Pharisees and Sadducees, and examine the ruling council mainly composed of members of these groups: the Sanhedrin.

PHARISEES

ORIGIN

The Pharisees first emerged during the Maccabean period (sometimes referred to as the silent years or the intertestamental period). The Maccabees were a Jewish family who led a revolt from 167–160 BC against Antiochus IV Epiphanes and his Seleucid (Greek) oppression of Judaism.

Initially, the Pharisees aligned with the Maccabees in their desire to lead Jews back to the Mosaic laws and away from Hellenistic blending of Greek and Jewish tradition. They ultimately ended up in opposition to the Maccabees, whose focus centered more on political power and less on following religious law.

The origin of the name *Pharisees* is debated, coming from either the Hebrew *perushim*, which means “those who separated,” or *perishut*, which is translated “those who sanctify.”¹

Pharisees made clear distinctions between what was clean and unclean and believed that failure to follow the letter of the law precipitated the Babylonian exile. “They emerge as successors to the group which tried from the time of Ezra onward, to make the Torah central to the life of the entire people, rather than confine it to the priests alone.”²

POSITION

Pharisees interpreted the law in accordance with Mosaic tradition. They called for prayer in synagogues along with worship in the temple and tried to encourage personal responsibility for individual and community life. Scribes were a related group of experts who drafted legal documents such as certificates of marriage, divorce, loans, land deeds, and so forth. Some Pharisees were scribes, but not all. However, all Pharisees served as specialists in Jewish oral and written laws.

They ruled the public life of the nation. Even through the changing of the guard—from Greek to Roman rule—Pharisees held the spiritual authority in the Jewish communities.

While the Sadducees held priestly offices, the Pharisees had the support of the people.³ “They had the bulk of the nation as their ally, and women especially were in their hands.”⁴ Their influence with the crowds gave them power that caused the Sadducees to adhere to their demands.

There were two schools of thought within the group of Pharisees, based on the teaching of two scholars, Shammai and Hillel. Shammai came from a wealthy family and his followers held a stricter interpretation of the law. The school of Hillel adhered to a more lenient application, being influenced by his middle-class family upbringing and his understanding of the people.⁵

INTERACTIONS WITH JESUS

In Jesus’s time, there were about 6,000 Pharisees.⁶ Often, they overfocused on minute concepts and used the law as a weapon to oppress people. They promoted behavior modification rather than heart change, prompting Jesus’s accusation toward them of straining a gnat and swallowing a camel. He said they had lost sight of important provisions of the law—like justice and mercy (Matt. 23:23-24).

An example of this in John’s Gospel was the Pharisees’ criticism of Jesus for healing on the Sabbath (John 5:9-10; 9:16). They missed the significance of the healings while getting stuck on an apparent Sabbath violation. Jesus disputed the Pharisees more in regard to practice than principle. He rebuked them for their focus on appearances: wanting the best seats in the synagogues (Luke 11:43), looking down on others (Luke 18:9), and for their hypocrisy—saying one thing but doing another (Matt. 23:1-3).

Two Pharisees who took a positive approach to Jesus were Nicodemus (John 3:1; 19:39) and Joseph of Arimathea (Matt. 27:57; Mark 15:43; Luke 23:50-51). Both Pharisees showed their devotion to Christ by taking an active role in His burial.⁷

SUMMARY

Pharisees were a religious group focused on enforcing all the oral and written laws associated with Judaism. They were considered experts in the law and some of them served as scribes. They exercised spiritual authority over the people, yet failed to live up to their own high standards. Because they often majored in the minors, many of them missed the Messiah—persecuting His followers instead of welcoming God’s anointed.

SADDUCEES

ORIGIN

The name *Sadducees* either comes from the Hebrew word *Tzaddikim*, which means *righteous men*, or from the name Zadok, who was a high priest in the day of Solomon (1 Kings 1:39). The connection with Zadok the priest makes sense since Sadducees

belonged to the priestly class and were wealthy aristocrats. They were heavily influenced by Greek thought from the line of Hellenistic Jews.

POSITION

Sadducees were in charge of the Jewish temple but didn't have the common people on their side. Their doctrines were based exclusively upon the Torah—the first five books of Scripture for both Jews and Christians. The Torah (sometimes referred to as the Pentateuch) contained the written law of Moses. However, Sadducees did not treat the oral law as binding. (The *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* states that “traditional Jews believe that a second law was given to Moses in addition to the first or written word; this second one was given orally, and handed down from generation to generation in oral form.”⁸) Eventually these oral laws were written down in the third century AD in a document referred to as the Mishnah. While Sadducees often observed oral laws and religious traditions not found in the Torah, they didn't see them as obligatory.⁹

While the contents of the Mishnah and Talmud were not written until the third century AD, understanding their contents will help us delineate the differences between doctrines held by the Sadducees as opposed to those held by the Pharisees. The Mishnah contains six books (or orders) that record the oral laws passed down through Jewish tradition. It was compiled by numerous scholars over the course of two centuries. It includes sayings, arguments, and rules for virtually every area of life and is organized by subject. The Talmud contains commentary by hundreds of rabbis detailing how the Mishnah is to be interpreted and applied. The Pharisees positioned the contents of the Torah, Mishnah, and Talmud on the same level. All was to be strictly observed. The Sadducees would only have seen the Torah in the same light.

The Greek influence on the Sadducees produced a focus on reason. They had a more naturalistic worldview, rejecting the idea of afterlife and resurrection. They believed the soul perished with the body and they didn't believe in angels.

Their attitude toward the common people also distinguished them from the Pharisees. As elitists who moved in circles with the wealthy and powerful, they sought to ingratiate themselves to Roman rulers by collaborating with them in keeping the population compliant. This made them less popular with the people than the Pharisees.

INTERACTIONS WITH JESUS

Though Jesus did not interact with Sadducees as much as Pharisees during His ministry years, the Sadducees played a crucial role in His arrest, trial, and death. The high priest and the elders supervising temple worship were Sadducees. When Jesus began causing a stir among the Jews, they wanted to keep peace and appease the Romans so they participated in the plot to kill Him. We see this reflected in John 11:45-53 after the raising of Lazarus.

SUMMARY

Sadducees were a religious group who held positions of authority as priests and elders. They tended to be wealthy and set themselves above the common people. They didn't believe the oral law was compulsory but did ascribe to the Mosaic law as required for the Jew. Hellenistic culture influenced them to reject immortality and angelic beings so that they did not believe in the resurrection.

SANHEDRIN

ORIGIN

The Sanhedrin was the supreme Jewish political, religious, and judicial body in Judea during the Roman period. This ruling body is first referenced during the time of Greek rule in the intertestamental period. However, rabbinic tradition links the seventy members of the Sanhedrin with the seventy elders who led alongside Moses (Num. 11:16).¹⁰ It's believed that a person served on the Sanhedrin for life and that new members were appointed by existing members or political authorities.¹¹

The Sanhedrin met in the Chamber of Hewn Stone in the Jerusalem temple. While some argue they met daily, others believe it was less frequent. We do know they met only between the hours of the two daily sacrifices and never at night, on Sabbaths, during festivals, or on the eves of those festivals.

POSITION

The Sanhedrin was made up of both Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees strongly influenced the composition and structure of the Sanhedrin, but the high priest (who would have been a Sadducee) was the head of the ruling body and wielded much power within it.¹² Caiaphas was the high priest in the time of Christ (Matt. 26:3,57) and Ananias in the time of Paul (Acts 23:2; 24:1).

Many of the conflicts between the Pharisees and Sadducees took place within the Sanhedrin. According to the Mishnah, the members of the council sat in a semi-circle so they could see one another. In cases of a trial, two clerks of the court stood in front tallying votes of innocent or guilty. The prisoner would be dressed in mourning clothes taking a humble posture.¹³ In capital cases, arguments for acquittal were made first, followed by arguments for conviction. The Sanhedrin could acquit the day of the trial but had to wait until the next day to issue a conviction.

Rome allowed these councils for spiritual and religious oversight but limited their power. The Sanhedrin could charge and arrest people for crimes against the Mosaic law. They charged Jesus with blasphemy (John 19:7), Peter and John as false prophets (Acts 4–5), and Paul with disobeying Mosaic law (Acts 23).

INTERACTIONS WITH JESUS

The jurisdiction of the Sanhedrin at the time of Christ included eleven districts within Judea. This means the council had no power over Jesus in Galilee, but only when He entered Judea. However, their authority was respected and observed by most Jewish communities—even those technically outside their prerogative.

The Sanhedrin broke many of their own rules for Jesus's trial—including meeting at night and possibly on the eve of Passover.

SUMMARY

The Sanhedrin was the supreme Jewish court of justice. It was made up of Pharisees, Sadducees, and other important community leaders. Rome granted this ruling council the ability to govern the Jewish people when it came to issues of their own laws and religious practices.

CONCLUSION

ORIGIN

When the Jewish temple was destroyed in AD 70, the Sanhedrin was undoubtedly abolished. Much in the same way, the Sadducees disappeared from history after the destruction of Jerusalem.¹⁴ The Pharisees continued to wield power for a little longer than the other two groups and shaped Jewish life and practice during the Jewish Diaspora.

Examining how these groups originated and their positions in the Jewish community gives us added context and clarity when seeking to understand their interactions with Jesus during His earthly ministry.

1. Geoffrey Wigoder, *Illustrated Dictionary and Concordance of the Bible* (Jerusalem: G.G. The Jerusalem Publishing House LTD., 1986), 782.
2. *Ibid.*, 783.
3. Merrill F. Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1988), 998.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Ralph Gower, *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times* (Chicago: Moody, 1987), 257.
6. *Ibid.*, 256.
7. "Joseph and Nicodemus Bury Jesus," Ligonier, Dec. 3, 2018. Available online at www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/joseph-and-nicodemus-bury-jesus.
8. Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, Tyndale Reference Library (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 1237.
9. Unger, 1110.
10. *Ibid.*, 1126.
11. *Ibid.*, 1127.
12. www.blueletterbible.org/faq/don_stewart/don_stewart_1317.cfm
13. Unger, 1128.
14. *Ibid.*, 1112.

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NOTES

ARTICLE FOUR

The Festivals

John's Gospel shows us that Jesus engaged in the regular rhythm of Jewish life. He attended events like weddings and funerals as well as several Jewish festivals. The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) mention only one feast—Passover—and only in connection with the passion narrative. However, John records a handful of references to holy days of celebration:

SCRIPTURE	HOLY DAYS
John 2:13–23	PASSOVER Jesus cleansed the temple.
John 5:1	UNNAMED FEAST Jesus healed a man at the pool of Bethesda.
John 6:4	PASSOVER John gave an editorial comment that it was nearly time for Passover at the feeding of the 5,000.
John 7:2,37	TABERNACLES Jesus taught about living water.
John 10:22	DEDICATION This feast was the backdrop for Jesus's teaching about sheep listening to His voice.
John 11:55	PASSOVER This was the Passover before Jesus's crucifixion.

Jesus may have attended other festivals but these were the only ones mentioned. Attendance at these celebrations would have been normative for all Jewish men—including the disciples.

While Christians are no longer under obligation to observe any of the Old Testament festivals (Col. 2:16), they provide context to shape our understanding of Jesus's life and ministry. The festivals provided a platform for Jesus, postulate the pace of Jesus's ministry, and point to Jesus as fulfilling the intent of each festival.

THE FESTIVALS PROVIDED A PLATFORM

As Jewish people gathered to practice their regular patterns of celebration, Jesus was able to connect with a large group of people at one time. Holy days brought people from outlying regions together as they pilgrimaged to Jerusalem to worship and remember.

THE FESTIVALS POSTULATE THE PACE

While we don't know the exact timeline of Jesus's ministry on earth, John's mention of three Passovers in chapters 2, 6, and 11 helps us frame it to three years. "Half the Gospel (chapter 1–12) seems to cover three years of Jesus's ministry, judging from the three Passovers, while the second half (chapters 13–21) is concentrated on his Passion alone."¹

THE FESTIVALS POINT TO A PERSON

These holy assemblies were instituted to help God's people look back at His faithfulness and look forward to future deliverance. They were important to the Jews, but also to the overall message of the Bible. Each one foreshadowed the coming Messiah. He tabernacled among us (Tabernacles). Through His blood, the wrath of God passes over us (Passover). Sabbath rest was intertwined with each festival, and Jesus is our Sabbath rest (Heb. 4). So, Jesus attended gatherings that He fulfilled.

With these principles in mind, let's explore some background on the festivals. Leviticus 23 refers to seven festivals which were to be celebrated once the people of Israel entered the promised land:

1. Passover (v. 5)
2. Unleavened Bread (v. 6)
3. First Fruits (v. 10)
4. Pentecost (v. 16)
5. Trumpets (v. 24)
6. Day of Atonement (v. 27)
7. Tabernacles/Booths (v. 34)

God instituted these holy convocations to remind His people each year of His past deliverance and future promise of a Messiah. Several of these festivals coincided with Israel's spring and fall harvests. In the Jewish calendar each festival began at sundown the evening before and ended at sundown on the day of celebration.

In addition to the seven feasts listed in Leviticus, Jews living at the time of Jesus would have also celebrated Purim and Dedication. The chart below will give you a quick summary of what the festival calendar would have looked like in Jesus's day:²

FESTIVAL/ FEAST	DESCRIPTION	DURATION	SEASON
Purim	Remembering God's deliverance of the Jews during the time of Esther	One day	Spring (February or March)
Passover	Remembering the death angel passing over Israelites with blood on their door (Ex. 12)	One day plus seven days of Unleavened Bread	Spring (March or April)
Unleavened Bread	Remembering the hardship in Egypt and quick exit without time for bread to rise.	One week (starting the day after Passover)	Spring (March or April)
First fruits	Celebrating the first harvest	One day (first day of the week after Passover)	Spring (March or April)
Weeks (Pentecost)	Gratitude for the grain harvest and Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai	Two days	Summer (May or June) the 50th day after Passover
Trumpets (Rosh Hashanah)	Celebrating the end of the agricultural and festival year	Two days	Fall (usually September)
Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur)	High priest went into the holy of holies to make an offering for sins of Israel	One day	Fall (September or October - ten days after Trumpets began)

Tabernacles (Shelters, Booths)	Remembering the time their ancestors lived in the wilderness before the Israelites entered the promised land	Seven days— five days after the Day of Atonement	Fall (September or October— five days after the Day of Atonement)
Dedication (Hanukkah, Festival of Lights)	Commemorating the revolt of the Jews under the leadership of the Maccabees family in the second century BC and the rededication of the temple	Eight days	Winter (November or December)

Again, Christians are not required to observe these biblical celebrations that the Lord instituted for the Israelites. However, since they all point to Jesus’s death and resurrection, studying and better understanding them can give us a greater appreciation for the work of Christ on our behalf.

1. Eli Lizorkin-Eyzenberg, *The Jewish Gospel of John: Discovering Jesus, King of All Israel*, 2015-2019, ix.
2. Information from the following websites was used to compile this chart: www.britannica.com/topic/jewish-religious-year; www.chabad.org/holidays/default_cdo/jewish/holidays.htm; www.angel.com/blog/the-chosen/posts/feast-of-tabernacles; www.chosenpeople.com/celebrate-the-passover/

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NOTES

ARTICLE FIVE

Shepherding in the Bible

Most of the original audience of the Bible lived in an agrarian society. They would have been familiar with sheep and goats. They saw them, smelled them, and utilized their wool, meat, milk, and horns. So when Jesus talked about the sheep and shepherd in John 10, the listeners would have easily related.

That's not the case today. Since the closest that most of us will get to a sheep is wearing a wool sweater, let's take a deeper dive into both sheep and shepherds in the Bible and hopefully come out with a greater appreciation for Jesus's statement: "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11,14).

SHEEP

When the Bible mentions sheep, usually it can mean either a sheep or a goat. Both were often herded together by shepherds.

The sheep's value came from their wool (which was used for clothing), meat (which was usually boiled or roasted), milk (which could be used to make butter, cheese, or yogurt), and horns (which could be used as containers for oil—see 1 Sam 16:1; 1 Kings 1:39—or as a trumpet or shofar—see Lev. 25:9; Num. 29:1; Josh. 6:4).¹

Goats were usually herded ahead of the sheep and provided milk, yogurt, and cheese. They could provide up to six pints of milk per day. Goat hair was used to make tent coverings, coarse clothing, and pillow stuffing. Their skin provided leather for items such as water carriers. Goat meat was not as tasty as lamb but was still part of the Mediterranean diet. Both sheep and goats were included in the sacrificial system as sin offerings and burnt offerings.

Scripture sometimes compares these animals to people. Here's a couple of reasons why:

- They showed mob instincts—fearful, timid, stubborn, and stupid.²
- They had a tendency to be gentle, obedient, and quiet.

Before sheep would lie down, they must be free of fear, tension, and hunger.³ Aggravations like flies and ticks also prevented sheep from being able to rest.⁴ Both sheep and goats needed constant protection in Bible times because they were vulnerable to attacks from wild animals like lions and bears. Like humans, sheep develop pecking orders and disturb each other. They have foolish rivalries among themselves.

Sheep need a shepherd to restore them when they get upside down. Sometimes they turn over on their backs and cannot get up again.⁵ Some sheep have gotten themselves stuck in this awkward position from either being overconfident in where they stepped, lazy in resting and rolling, or being too fat to right themselves.

Sheep need guidance. Left to their own devices, they will gnaw a pasture all the way to the roots and destroy the grass. They will also spend too much time in a favored spot and wear it down so that it is more susceptible to parasites.

Do you see the similarities that make sheep a good metaphor for people? Our predators may not be lions and bears, but we live in a world full of danger. Jobs are lost, people die, accidents happen, and relationships end. At times we can be paralyzed by what happens.

And while you may not be plagued by buzzing insects today, perhaps you can relate because of situations or circumstances that have been bugging you and keeping you from God's rest. I certainly feel turned upside down at times! Maybe you feel like you're in that position today or can recall a time when you needed the Lord to restore you. Notice the sheep metaphor employed by both the psalmist and the prophet Isaiah:

Acknowledge that the LORD is God!
He made us, and we are his.
We are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

PSALM 100:3

All of us, like sheep, have strayed away.
We have left God's paths to follow our own.
Yet the LORD laid on him
the sins of us all.

ISAIAH 53:6

Even though we sometimes display a sheep's less desirable qualities, God chooses us, calls us by name, and takes care of us.

SHEPHERDS

There are several shepherds mentioned in Scripture, with Abel being the first one recorded (Gen. 4:2). Jacob tended sheep for Lamech, and used unique breeding techniques to grow his flock (Gen. 29–30). King David had shepherd experience as the youngest son in his family. In his day, poorer families often used the youngest brother to look after the family sheep (1 Sam. 16:11; 17:34-36). The prophet Amos was also a shepherd by trade (Amos 1:1).

In the relationship between sheep and shepherd, it's easy to see the parallel with our relationship to Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

Shepherds protected and cared for their sheep. They often carried them on their shoulders when the sheep were tired or sick. When a sheep got lost, a shepherd went to look for it. Living and working in nomadic isolation forged a close relationship between sheep and shepherds. Shepherds didn't drive the sheep, but led them. The sheep knew their shepherd's voice and followed him. When the shepherd appeared, sheep would often forget their pecking order conflicts and rivalries to turn their attention to him.

In Psalm 23, David expressed how the Lord is a shepherd to us, providing protection, care, rest, and everything else we need.

Through the dry pasture lands in the Middle East, a shepherd kept his sheep moving and worked to clear rocks and dead foliage to pasture his sheep near water. Our Good Shepherd provides spiritual food and water.

When sheep got themselves in a dangerous position, such as upside down, the shepherd rolled the sheep over and rubbed the extremities to encourage circulation. He then would help them stand again. This reminds us of how the Lord longs to rescue us. Jesus illustrated that in a parable about a lost sheep in Luke 15. He said that the shepherd will leave the ninety-nine to go after the one who is lost. Jesus pursues and restores.

Sometimes a shepherd had to lead his sheep through the dark valley to find water or fit pasture. Though the valley might contain danger or threats, the shepherds didn't abandon the flock, he protected it.

A shepherd carried a rod and a staff. The rod was a weapon of authority, defense, and discipline. The shepherd might use it to correct a sheep who is going off course or fight off a predator.⁶ The staff was a rounded looking stick that could be used to lift a newborn lamb to its mother or draw a sheep close for examination.

As our good shepherd, the Lord will defend us and protect us, not only from enemies, but also from our own tendency to stray. His rod of protection and staff of compassion are meant to comfort us.

JESUS

When Jesus revealed Himself as our Good Shepherd, He communicated that He would protect, restore, guide, and care for us. But He promised something else in John 10—to lay down His life for His sheep (John 10:11). The death of a Palestinian shepherd meant death for the sheep, but the death of the Good Shepherd meant life for the sheep.⁷ Jesus knew He would die but also that He would rise again. He laid His life down to take it up again.

In John 10:16, Jesus also referenced other sheepfolds. Most commentators believe this is a reference to the inclusion of Gentiles. The end result would be one flock and one Shepherd—not a Jewish way to God and a Gentile way to God, but one united flock!⁸

Like sheep, we need a shepherd. I'm so grateful Jesus is our Good Shepherd! Rather than listen to the destructive and deceptive voices of our culture or our own logic and emotion, let's tune our ears to Him.

1. Ralph Gower, *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times* (Chicago: Moody, 1987), 132–133.

2. Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 7.

3. *Ibid.*, 24.

4. *Ibid.*, 31.

5. *Ibid.*, 48.

6. *Ibid.*, 81.

7. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 510.

8. *Ibid.*, 512.

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ARTICLE SIX

The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit can be a divisive topic among Christians. We can fall into two extremes: (1) only relate to Him in mystical ways or emotionally ecstatic moments, or (2) acknowledge Him as a part of the Trinity, but neglect His ministry. Those on the latter extreme might treat the Holy Spirit like their thyroid—they know He’s essential but don’t pay much attention to Him.

First, let’s remember that the Holy Spirit is a Person. He is a He, not an it. He is complex, but not complicated. Understanding how the Holy Spirit worked in the Old Testament and His role in our lives as New Testament believers will help us interact with Him authentically and biblically.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Holy Spirit isn’t a new Person of the godhead. Like the Father and the Son, He has always been. According to Genesis 1:2, “... the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.” The Hebrew word for “Spirit” is *ruwach*, which means, *wind, breath, mind, spirit*. So, we can look back and see the Holy Spirit at work from the very beginning of creation. Here are just a few ways we observe the Holy Spirit at work in the pages of the Old Testament:

- The Spirit of God filled Bezalel for the work of building the tabernacle according to God’s instructions (Ex. 31:1-5).
- God’s Spirit “came upon” Othniel, Gideon, and Samson so they could fight physical battles (Judg. 3:9-11; 6:33-35; 15:14).
- The Spirit of the Lord came “powerfully upon” both King Saul and King David, but also departed from Saul (1 Sam. 10:6-10; 16:13-14).
- Ezekiel the prophet said the Spirit “came into” him as He spoke to Ezekiel (Ezek. 2:2).
- The prophet Joel promised that a day was coming when God would “pour out” His Spirit on all people—men and women alike (Joel 2:28-29).

We could summarize the work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament as coming for a specific purpose to help individuals with specific tasks. However, there was coming a time when the Holy Spirit would reside inside of God’s people.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Jesus promised His disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit in His final teachings before His crucifixion. In John 14:16-17, He said, “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth.

The world cannot receive him, because it isn't looking for him and doesn't recognize him. But you know him, because he lives with you now and later will be in you."

John was the only Gospel writer who used the Greek word *paraclete* to describe the Holy Spirit. The word is translated "Advocate" in both the NIV and NLT. "In antiquity, a paraclete was an attorney, basically a defense attorney . . . The prefix *para* means 'alongside or beside' and the verb *kletos* means 'to call.' So the paraclete was someone you called to come alongside you and help you in your defense."¹

The King James translators chose to translate the word *paraclete* as "Comforter." Today, we probably think of this word in the context of soothing sufferers. But many scholars today argue that the word has evolved in modern usage from its original meaning. Our English word, *comfort* comes from two Latin words which mean "with strength." In that case, the Holy Spirit brings comfort less in the style of a fuzzy warm blanket, and more in the sense of strengthening and advocating for us.

In Genesis 11, the Lord confused languages and dispersed people when they attempted to build the Tower of Babel. After that event, we find references throughout the Old Testament to a coming day when God's people would again be united through His Spirit (Isa. 11:1-5; Ezek. 36:27; Joel 2:28-32). God progressively revealed His plan in shadows and hints that came together on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 when instead of languages separating people, languages unified them.

The Holy Spirit's appearance at Pentecost was marked by three Old Testament signs of God's presence. Wind (Ezek. 37:9-14), fire (Ex. 3:2-5), and inspired speech (Num. 11:26-29) confirmed the validity of the Spirit's miraculous work.² Jesus performed miracles to get people's attention and authenticate His ministry. The coming of the Holy Spirit was also marked by supernatural events the Israelites would have associated with their spiritual history.

From Acts 2 on, followers of Jesus have seen His words about the Holy Spirit living in them come to fruition. Believers are now indwelt permanently by the Spirit and sealed by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13-14). In biblical times, a seal communicated ownership, protection, and commitment in a relationship. The Holy Spirit provides believers with inward assurance that we belong to God (Rom. 8:16). The Holy Spirit produces spiritual fruit (Gal. 5:22-23) and supernaturally gifts believers for ministry (1 Cor. 12). Here are some other ways the Holy Spirit works in the lives of New Testament believers:

- He fills our hearts with God's love (Rom. 5:5).
- He frees us from the power of sin that leads to death (Rom. 8:2).
- Allowing Him to control our minds leads to "life and peace" (Rom. 8:6).
- This same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead lives in us (Rom. 8:11).
- He helps us pray and intercedes for us (Rom. 8:26-27).
- He reveals the wisdom and truth of God (1 Cor. 2:6-16; John 16:13; 1 John 2:27).
- He regenerates us and renews us (Titus 3:4-6).

The Holy Spirit's presence is permanent and personal for every believer.

Our relationship with the Holy Spirit doesn't require our perfection, but it does require participation. We must submit to Christ's lordship and listen for the Spirit's voice. If we do that, the Spirit can help us understand and apply Scripture. He will provide discernment to recognize false teaching. Our relationship with the Holy Spirit works as we read, listen, and meditate on God's truth. Then we ask questions and receive direction as the Holy Spirit helps us process and utilize that understanding.

When it comes to experiencing, hearing, and yielding to the Holy Spirit, we can:

Ask expectantly. We can ask Him to do what God's Word says He will do. We can request power, guidance in prayer, comfort, direction, for the mind of Christ, to fill our hearts with God's love, and anything else the Bible reveals as the Spirit's role in the lives of believers. We can ask with expectation when we pray in alignment with what God's Word reveals about Him.

Listen attentively. If we want to hear the Holy Spirit's guidance, we must have ears to hear. God can speak to us anywhere, but in my experience, it doesn't happen when I'm distracted by the world or focused on myself. Instead, we need to put ourselves in a position and posture to hear by pursuing stillness and quiet, especially as we meditate on God's Word.

Surrender intentionally. We ask the Spirit to fill us and guide us. By allowing the Holy Spirit to control our minds (Rom. 8:6) we can set aside our own wills and surrender to the One who leads us to life and peace.

"Christ said it is better for us that the Spirit came, and I want to live like I know that is true. I don't want to keep crawling when I have the ability to fly."³

1. R.C. Sproul, *John: An Expository Commentary* (Sanford: Ligonier Ministries, 2009), 255.
2. Merrill C. Tenney, *John-Acts, vol. 9 of The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 270.
3. Francis Chan, *Forgotten God: Reversing Our Tragic Neglect of the Holy Spirit* (Colodao Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), 37.

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NOTES

ARTICLE SEVEN

Defining Greatness

The acronym GOAT, stands for the Greatest of All Time. It's used to identify exceptional athletes, musicians, or other public figures. But what's the standard for greatness in our society? People define it in many different ways—immense talent, excessive wealth, outstanding accomplishments, and so forth.

Jesus, however, defined greatness differently. He certainly didn't define it by achievements. In John's gospel, we witnessed Jesus performing seven miraculous signs including healings, multiplication of food and wine, and the raising of a dead person to life. Combined with the recorded miracles of Jesus in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), there are about forty in total. However, we know that Jesus probably did many more. John 20:30 says, "The disciples saw Jesus do many other miraculous signs in addition to the ones recorded in this book."

Yet Jesus often discouraged people from telling others about healings and downplayed the crowd's preoccupation with miracles (John 6:26-29). In John 14:12, Jesus made this astonishing statement: "I tell you the truth, anyone who believes in me will do the same works I have done, and even greater works, because I am going to be with the Father."

In light of Jesus's many incredible miraculous works, it's hard to wrap our minds around this statement. Surely Jesus didn't mean this literally. But when you consider the reach of the apostles' ministry, it's accurate. When the Holy Spirit came in Acts 2, about 3,000 people turned from sin and turned to God. There were more converts that one day than what's recorded during Jesus's entire career.¹ By AD 250, it is estimated that over a million people identified as Christians across the globe.² If the promise of greater works meant the spread of the gospel message, those first disciples would see that take place. But greater works did not mean greater personal glory for them.

One of those disciples was Peter. He denied Jesus three times, yet Jesus restored him and set before him the task of shepherding His people. There was no glory, riches, or fame attached to this call. In fact, in John 21:18-19 Jesus revealed Peter's future: "I tell you the truth, when you were young, you were able to do as you liked; you dressed yourself and went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and others will dress you and take you where you don't want to go." Jesus said this to let him know by what kind of death he would glorify God. Then Jesus told him, "Follow me."

Jesus didn't define greatness as having no struggles. He didn't define greatness as living a comfortable and long life. Instead, greatness meant humble obedience.

In Philippians 2, Paul said Jesus exemplified that:

You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross.
Philippians 2:5-8

Jesus certainly qualifies as the G.O.A.T. of all humanity. John's Gospel shows us how He lived out Philippians 2. He put on flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). He revealed Himself as the bread of life (6:35, 48, 51), light of the world (8:12; 9:5), door (10:7,9), good shepherd (10:11,14), the resurrection and the life (11:25), the way, the truth, and the life (14:6), and the true vine (15:1). He performed signs and wonders to authenticate His divinity and always pointed people toward dependence on the Father. It was never about Him or His glory, but accomplishing the purpose for which He was sent.

Perhaps Jesus displayed the most defining standard of greatness at the last supper, when the King of glory wrapped a towel around Himself and washed the feet of His friends (John 13:1-15). He exemplified what He said in Matthew 20:

Jesus called them over and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high positions act as tyrants over them. It must not be like that among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

MATTHEW 20:25-28, CSB

In Jesus's upside-down kingdom, greatness is most clearly displayed in servanthood. He calls us to follow Him. This is our greatest pursuit as Christians. As Christ's followers, greatness is not defined by accolades and trophies. Rather it's characterized by words like faithful, obedient, humble, dependent, yielded, servant. We won't always get it right, but as we realign our definition of greatness, we will enjoy communing with Jesus as we seek to faithfully follow Him.

1. Merrill C. Tenney, *John-Acts, vol. 9 of The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 145.
2. www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/evangelical-history/how-many-christians-were-there-in-200-a-d/

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