

## Should Christians Observe Easter?

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by Ferrell Jenkins

Easter is a widely observed annual celebration commemorating the resurrection of Christ. You probably have noticed that Easter comes at a different time each year. "Easter is the first Sunday after the first full moon that falls on or next after the vernal equinox (Mar. 21 in the Gregorian calendar); if the full moon happens on Sunday Easter is celebrated one week later. Easter Sunday cannot be earlier than March 22 or later than April 25; dates of all over movable church feasts depend on that of Easter" [Webster's].

### **The Origin of Easter**

Some church historians assert that Easter observance began in the first century, but they must admit that their first evidence for the observance comes from the second century [Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, II:207; Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, I:137]. There soon arose a bitter controversy over which day Easter was to be celebrated. Some were observing it on any day of the week, and others were celebrating it only on the nearest Sunday. This indicates that they had no instruction from the Lord on this matter. By AD 325 the council of Nicaea decreed that it should be on Sunday, but did not fix the particular Sunday. The exact time of observance was determined by later councils.

### **Is Easter in the Bible?**

The word Easter is only found one time in the English translation of the Bible and there it is a mistranslation. The KJV rendering of Acts 12:4 used the phrase "intending after Easter." Albert Barnes, a noted Presbyterian commentator who wrote in the nineteenth century when the KJV was widely used, said: "There never was a more absurd or unhappy translation than this. The original is simply after the Passover. The word Easter now denotes the festival observed by many Christian churches in honor of the resurrection of the Savior. But the original has no reference to that, nor is there the slightest evidence that any such festival was observed at the time when this book was written. The translation is not only unhappy, as it does not convey at all the meaning of the original, but because it may contribute to foster an opinion that such a festival was observed in the times of the apostles" [Barnes' Notes on the NT, XI:190].

The word translated Passover, and the one used in Acts 12:4, is pascha. It means "a passing over" and is used with reference to the Jewish festival of Passover which was celebrated on the 14th of the month Nisan. This same word is used in Matthew 26:2; Mark 14:1, Luke 2:41; 22:1; John 2:13, 23 and other places, and in every instance is translated Passover in the King James Version except Acts 12:4. More recent versions correctly use the term Passover in Acts 12:4. It is absurd to think that Herod Agrippa I wanted to celebrate the resurrection of Christ. The Scripture says that he "laid hands on some who belonged to the church, in order to mistreat them. And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword . . . he proceeded to arrest Peter also" (Acts 12:1-3).

### **New Testament Christians Did Not Observe Easter**

The famous fourteenth edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica* says, "There is no indication of the observance of the Easter festival in the New Testament, or in the writings of the apostolic fathers. The sanctity of special times was an idea absent from the minds of the first Christians" [VII:859].

The apostle warned against the observance of feast days, new moons, etc. (Gal. 4:10-11; Col. 2:16-17). Another reliable source says, "In apostolic times the Christians commemorated their Lord's resurrection every Sunday, by meeting on that day for worship. When Paul refers to Christ as our passover (1 Cor. 5:7), his language is metaphorical and cannot be regarded as containing any allusion to a church function [A Dictionary of Religion & Ethics, 140].