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FOR HOW MANY DAYS SHOULD WE EAT UNLEAVENED BREAD?

As the Days of Unleavened Bread are approaching, a number of people have asked: for exactly how many days are we instructed to eat unleavened bread? Traditionally the Church has understood that this is to be for SEVEN days. But now some people have been told that we should be eating unleavened bread for EIGHT days.

Which of these is correct ... seven days or eight days?

Let's examine all of the instructions very carefully. In that way we should be able to avoid the confusion that surrounds this question.

THE BASIC INSTRUCTIONS

The basic instructions for the Days of Unleavened Bread are found in Exodus 12:14-20. Let's take note of every factual statement in this section.

And THIS DAY shall be unto you for a memorial; and ye shall keep it a feast to the LORD throughout your generations; ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance for ever. (Exodus 12:14)

My understanding is that this verse is a reference to the First Day of Unleavened Bread, rather than to the Passover day. It seems to be an introductory statement for the verses that follow.

A clearer discussion of this is found in Leviticus 23:5-6.

In the fourteenth [day] of the first month at even [is] the LORD'S passover. And on THE FIFTEENTH DAY of the same month [IS] THE FEAST of unleavened bread unto the LORD: seven days ye must eat unleavened bread. (Leviticus 23:5-6)

Here we are told that:

- the 14th day is the Passover of the Eternal
- the 15th day is the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Mr. Herbert Armstrong himself also used to apply Exodus 12:14 to the First Day of Unleavened Bread. Anyway, this verse itself does not really impact on the instructions that follow regarding the Days of Unleavened Bread.

So let's proceed with Exodus chapter 12.

Seven days shall ye eat unleavened bread; even the first day ye shall put away leaven out of your houses: for whosoever eateth leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that soul shall be cut off from Israel. (Exodus 12:15)

This verse tells us:

- 1) SEVEN DAYS we are to eat unleavened bread.
- 2) By the First Day of U.B. all leaven should have been removed.
- 3) The prohibition is to not eat leaven for THESE SPECIFIC SEVEN DAYS. Clearly a period of SEVEN days is implied.

And in the first day [there shall be] an holy convocation, and in the seventh day there shall be an holy convocation to you; no manner of work shall be done in them, save [that] which every man must eat, that only may be done of you. (Exodus 12:16)

This verse tells us:

- 4) On the First Day of U.B. there is to be a Church Service.
- 5) On the Seventh Day of U.B. there is to be a Church Service.
- 6) On these two Holy Days we are not to work.

And ye shall observe [the feast of] unleavened bread; for in this selfsame day have I brought your armies out of the land of Egypt: therefore shall ye observe this day in your generations by an ordinance for ever. (Exodus 12:17)

This verse tells us:

- 7) We are to observe this First Day of U.B. because on that very day God brought Israel out of slavery.
- 8) This observance is also enjoined on future generations.

In the first [month], on the fourteenth day of the month at even, ye shall eat unleavened bread, until the one and twentieth day of the month at even. (Exodus 12:18)

This verse tells us:

- 9) NOW suddenly the 14th day is mentioned. We are to eat unleavened bread on the 14th day "at even".
- 10) This is to continue until the 21st day "at even".

HERE IS THE POTENTIAL DIFFICULTY!

IF this instruction is to mean that we also have to eat unleavened bread on the 14th, THEN we will clearly end up eating unleavened bread for EIGHT days ... the 14th, 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th, 20th and 21st.

Since this verse could be understood to imply EIGHT days, therefore, to avoid confusion, the next verse states quite categorically:

SEVEN days shall there be no leaven found in your houses: for whosoever eateth that which is leavened, even that soul shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he be a stranger, or born in the land. (Exodus 12:19)

This verse tells us:

11) SEVEN days there is to be no leaven in our houses.

12) This is written from the premise that our houses are "where we eat". And so we are not TO EAT leaven, implied from the first part of this sentence is, for SEVEN days. This is a repetition of the instruction in verse 15.

Ye shall eat nothing leavened; in all your habitations shall ye eat unleavened bread. (Exodus 12:20)

This verse tells us:

13) During this time we are NOT to eat anything leavened.

14) And we ARE to eat unleavened bread.

This concludes these instructions God gave through Moses. The context then proceeds to explain that Moses relayed these instructions to the people.

THE CONTEXT OF THESE INSTRUCTIONS

The context of this chapter is as follows:

First God gives specific instructions for observing the Passover.

Next God gives specific instructions for the Days of Unleavened Bread.

Next Moses communicates these instructions to the people.

Next the people carry out these instructions.

Next the death angel passes through the land, ... etc..

The point to notice is that GOD gave very specific instructions pertaining to the observance of the Passover in Exodus 12:3 - 13. Exodus 12:13 concludes the discussion of the Passover.

Then, in Exodus 12:14, God focused on the First Day of Unleavened Bread, which is to be a Holy Day. Then in Exodus 12:15 - 20 God gave very specific instructions pertaining to the observance of the seven Days of Unleavened Bread. In these verses (i.e. 15-20) the Passover is NOT discussed; God had already CONCLUDED the discussion of the Passover instructions with the words "and when I see the blood, I will pass over you ..." in Exodus 12:13.

Thus, from the context of this whole section, it would be somewhat unexpected if in verse 18 God gives an instruction that actually applies to the Passover day. The Passover is not really discussed anywhere in verses 15 - 20. It seems clear to me that the instruction in verse 18 is NOT about how to observe the Passover but about how to observe the SEVEN Days of Unleavened Bread, which is the context from

verse 15 right to the end of verse 20.

THE EXPRESSION "IN THE EVENING"

The expression "the evening" is used with TWO meanings in the Old Testament. Firstly it refers to A SPECIFIC POINT IN TIME. Secondly it refers to A PERIOD OF TIME.

As a specific point in time "evening" refers to SUNSET, when one day finishes and another day starts.

As a period of time "evening" refers to "the period of transition" between day and night; the period that STARTS WITH SUNSET AND CONCLUDES WITH THE START OF DARKNESS. Before sunset it is still "day"; once full darkness has arrived it is "night" and the period of time between these two points is "the evening".

When God wanted to very specifically delineate this PERIOD of time called "evening", as opposed to only one specific point in time, then God used the expression "BETWEEN the evenings". In this case the two extremities of this period of time are each considered as "an evening" ... sunset becomes "THE FIRST EVENING" and the arrival of total darkness becomes "THE SECOND EVENING". Thus the expression "BETWEEN the evenings" makes clear that a period of time is referred to rather than only one specific point in time. But the expression "IN the evening" refers to a specific point in time ... sunset.

IN ENGLISH WE TODAY tend to think of "evening" as a period of time. We generally tend to not use the word "evening" with the specific meaning of "sunset". Rather, our understanding of "evening" is the same as the Old Testament meaning of "BETWEEN the evenings", the period of time we also refer to as "dusk".

This understanding that the expression "BETWEEN the evenings" refers to the time between sunset and the onset of total darkness is also conveyed in the Jewish translation of the Old Testament. In the Jewish Publication Society Translation the instruction in Exodus 12:6 to kill the passover "BETWEEN the evenings" (the Hebrew text) is rendered into English as "... and the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it AT DUSK". Thus this Jewish Translation equates "between the evenings" to refer to the period we call "DUSK".

WHEN "THE EVENING" REFERS TO SUNSET

With God days start and end at sunset. Thus sunset can refer to the start of one day or it can refer to the end of the previous day. We need to beware of the assumption that sunset "MUST" always refer to the start of a day, OR that sunset "MUST" always refer to the end of a day.

Understand that a day STARTS at sunset. This tells us that sunset certainly can refer to the start of a day. But a day also ENDS at sunset. Therefore it follows that sunset can equally well refer to THE END of a day.

In the Old Testament when the word "evening" (also rendered in the KJV as "at even") is used to refer to a specific point in time, then it is really synonymous with "SUNSET".

THE MISTAKE many of us have made is to assume that in the Old Testament "at even" or "in the evening" must always refer to the START of a day. That assumption is not correct!

- WHEN "evening" refers to "A PERIOD OF TIME", THEN it does indeed always refer to the start of a day! The period of dusk is at the start of a day.

- WHEN "evening" refers to "A SPECIFIC POINT IN TIME, SUNSET", THEN it can refer to either the end of one day or to the start of the next day. It is THE CONTEXT of each specific usage that will make clear what is intended. The same is true in English. When we say that "a day goes from sunset to sunset", then the context makes clear that we mean the first usage of "sunset" to refer to the start of the day, and the second usage of "sunset" to refer to the end of the day.

A BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATION OF THIS POINT

In Leviticus 23:27-32 we have the instructions for the Day of Atonement. In Leviticus 23:27 we are told very clearly that the Day of Atonement is to be THE TENTH DAY of the seventh month. After carefully explaining how we are to observe this day, we are then told the following in verse 32:

It [shall be] unto you a sabbath of rest, and ye shall afflict your souls: IN THE NINTH [DAY] OF THE MONTH AT EVEN, from even unto even, shall ye celebrate your sabbath. (Leviticus 23:32)

There are two things to notice in this verse:

- 1) This Sabbath (and all others likewise) is to be observed "FROM EVENING UNTO EVENING".
- 2) We are told to afflict our souls (i.e. to start fasting) "in the NINTH DAY AT EVEN".

Think this verse through very carefully.

All three uses of the word "evening" here refer to sunset, rather than to a period of time.

Think about the statement that a Sabbath is to be observed "from evening to evening". This tells us that the Sabbath STARTS with "the evening" (sunset), and that it also FINISHES with "the evening" (sunset). Therefore right here we have clear proof that "the evening" also applies to THE END OF A DAY!

In this expression "from even unto even" the second "evening" CANNOT refer to the start of the next day, because once the next day has actually started you have already gone too far. You cannot include any part of the next day in the definition of the previous day. A Sabbath is ONE day and it cannot include any part of the next day. The instruction to observe the Sabbath "from even unto even" MUST mean that the word "evening" can be applied EQUALLY to the start of the day and to the end of the day, even as we can apply the word "sunset" to both, the start and the end of a day.

Next, the instruction that we are to afflict our souls "IN THE NINTH DAY AT EVEN" makes equally clear that here "at even" refers to THE END OF THE NINTH DAY!

In plain English, this instruction tells us to start fasting AT SUNSET AT THE END OF THE NINTH DAY. And the introduction of this topic (the Day of Atonement) in verse 27 it tells us that we are dealing with the TENTH DAY. Therefore the only possibility is that "sunset on the ninth day" (i.e. the ninth day at even) refers to sunset AT THE END of the ninth day.

It is NOT the word "evening" itself that makes this clear, but all the other instructions in this context, specifically the opening statement in Leviticus 23:27.

To summarize: Leviticus 23:32 makes quite clear that the expression "at even" and the word "evening" can refer to BOTH, the start of a day and also the end of a day. It is always the context that determines whether the start or the end of the day is meant.

EXODUS 12:18 RE-EXAMINED

With this understanding in mind, let's look again at Exodus chapter 12. We noted 14 specific points in the instructions for these Days of Unleavened Bread. Note all those points again.

In Leviticus 23:6 we saw that the 15th day is the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Exodus 12:15 speaks about the 1st day and the 7th day. This makes quite clear that the 7th day **MUST BE THE 21ST DAY OF THE MONTH!** (Counting 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th, 20th, 21st.)

The clear instruction in Exodus 12:15 is to eat unleavened bread **SEVEN DAYS**. No subsequent statement in this context is intended to negate or to contradict this clear instruction! Understand this!

Now look at Exodus 12:18.

We are to eat unleavened bread "UNTIL the 21st day of the month **AT EVEN**". What does "at even" here refer to ... **THE START** of the 21st day **OR THE END** of the 21st day?

It **CANNOT** refer to the start of the 21st day, because then you would **NOT** be eating any unleavened bread on the 21st day at all! Can we understand this?

In order to eat any unleavened bread at all on the 21st day, the expression "until the 21st day **AT EVEN**" simply **MUST** refer to **THE END** of the 21st day! There is no other possibility! Again it should be clear that "at even" **CAN** refer to the end of the day.

THEREFORE in the whole expression:

"from the 14th **AT EVEN** until the 21st **AT EVEN**"

... the words "**AT EVEN**" must **IN BOTH CASES** refer to **THE END OF THE DAY!** It really cannot mean "from sunset **AT THE BEGINNING** of the 14th until sunset **AT THE END** of the 21st".

Whatever "at even" means when applied to the 14th, it must mean the same thing when applied to the 21st. And that way you have exactly **SEVEN DAYS!**

The people who feel that there are **EIGHT DAYS** on which unleavened bread is to be eaten, possibly do the following:

- they reason that **AT EVEN** refers to **THE START** of the 14th;
- they reason that **AT EVEN** refers to **THE END** of the 21st.

In doing this they ignore that the discussion of the 14th day, and what is to happen on it, was concluded in Exodus 12:13. No further instructions for the 14th day are given in this context. They also ignore the very basic statement in verse 15 that unleavened bread is to be eaten for **SEVEN DAYS**.

A correct understanding of Exodus 12:18 is as follows:

AT THE END OF THE 14TH DAY of the first month we are to eat unleavened bread until **THE END OF THE 21ST DAY** of this month!

Understand that this does not in any way affect the meaning of "evening" when **A PERIOD OF TIME** is

intended. When a period of time is intended by the word "evening" (i.e. "between the evenings"), then such a period of time can only start at sunset, and therefore such a period of time MUST always be at the start of a day.

THE PURPOSES FOR EATING UNLEAVENED BREAD

There are TWO different purposes for eating unleavened bread. They should be clearly distinguished.

AT THE PASSOVER we eat a small quantity of unleavened bread. This unleavened bread pictures THE BROKEN BODY OF JESUS CHRIST! Jesus Christ was without any sins and therefore His body is symbolized by UNLEAVENED bread. Specifically, at the Passover our eating of unleavened bread does NOT picture "putting sins out of OUR lives". It is NOT a question of whether we should put sins out of our lives before the Passover or not. Yes, certainly all true Christians SHOULD put sins out even before we take the Passover. But the point is that at the PASSOVER THAT IS NOT WHAT EATING UNLEAVENED BREAD PICTURES! There it pictures the broken body of Christ.

FOR THE SEVEN DAYS OF UNLEAVENED BREAD our eating of unleavened bread does NOT picture the broken body of Christ! For those seven days eating unleavened bread pictures PUTTING SINS OUT OF OUR LIVES!

Now it is GOD who has attached a meaning to the number "SEVEN". Therefore it is GOD who has attached a symbolism to eating unleavened bread for SEVEN days. There is NO MEANING attached to eating unleavened bread for eight days, or for nine days, or for ten days.

By eating unleavened bread for LONGER than God commands us to do, we are NOT doing God a favour; we are NOT showing God that we are putting EVEN MORE sins out of our lives than those who eat unleavened bread for only seven days. There is no symbolism attached to eight days or to nine days!

To conclude that "we are more zealous and diligent" if we eat unleavened bread for eight or for nine days, is pure human reasoning. There is no meaning attached to "eight" days of eating.

By eating a small quantity of unleavened bread at the Passover, that does NOT make the Passover one of the seven days of "Unleavened Bread". At the Passover the eating of unleavened bread pictures a totally different thing.

In actual practice there have been years when I myself have not eaten any leavened bread for nine days. Because we de-leavened our home ahead of time, there simply was no leavened bread to eat the day before the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and since the Feast of Unleavened Bread happened to finish on a Friday evening, we didn't have any leavened products on the Sabbath, the day after the last day of Unleavened Bread. So when we then did shop on the Sunday, that was for us after nine days of unleavened bread. But that was purely circumstantial. And there was no religious significance to being unleavened for eight, or even nine, days.

Understand this!

To eat only unleavened bread OUTSIDE OF THE SEVEN DAYS GOD HAS DESIGNATED does not picture anything at all! ("Only unleavened bread" is contrasted to "also eating leavened products" and I do not mean subsisting exclusively on unleavened bread!)

It is GOD who has determined the symbolism for these days ... and GOD decided that "SEVEN DAYS" perfectly picture what He has in mind. And it is GOD who has decided when that period of SEVEN days is to start and when it is to conclude.

PREPARING FOR THE DAYS OF UNLEAVENED BREAD

When God first instituted the Passover and the Days of U.B., the Israelites had very little de-leavening to do. As the sun set at the end of the 14th day, they WALKED AWAY FROM THEIR HOMES. They didn't clean out their dwelling places; they simply walked away from their homes and their leaven, never to return.

For us today it is appropriate that we prepare for these days. We should be meticulous and conscientious without becoming fanatical. This means that we should make a diligent effort to clean all leaven out of our homes. It is not expected that we go to extremes by taking furniture items and electrical appliances apart in order to find "the last little crumbs". That is NOT what de-leavening is all about. All of us are no doubt aware of some of the extremes some people have gone to in the name of "de-leavening". We should just remove all leavened products and clean out our homes as thoroughly as possible.

Now in the process, it may very well be the case that some families complete the de-leavening process even before the Passover day. Rather than bring new leavened products into their homes, they prefer not to eat anything leavened for an extra day or two, saving themselves the effort of having to again clean out all the new leaven.

Thus they may not eat any leaven on any part of the 14th day. That's fine and certainly not a problem in any way. BUT neither are they somehow "more righteous" before God because they were de-leavened one day earlier and they didn't eat any leaven for one extra day.

Their planning ahead is to be commended! But apart from that there is no religious significance to their actions over and above those people who are only de-leavened by the end of the 14th day.

It has been mentioned that at the time of Christ's ministry it was a common custom in Judea to collect all the leaven on the 13th day and then to destroy it on the morning of the 14th day, that being the morning after the Passover.

That's basically the same thing most of us do today. We prepare, in many cases for more than just one day, and then on the morning of the 14th day, or up until the late afternoon of the 14th day, we dispose of all the leaven. Whether we also EAT any leavened products during the day portion of the 14th is not really an issue in the Bible. If we don't eat any leaven on the 14th, that's fine ... but there is no significance attached to not eating. With God days go from sunset to sunset. Thus there is, before God, no difference as to whether we dispose of all the leaven "IN THE MORNING" or only later in the day ... as long as it is before sunset.

Does it "honour God" if we observe the Passover day as an additional day of Unleavened Bread? NO! "Eight" days of Unleavened Bread are not what God has instructed. The number "eight" does not carry the same symbolism as the number "seven". In those years when I did not eat any leaven for an extra day or two, because of circumstances rather than by design, this was not somehow more pleasing to God than when I did not eat any leaven for only seven days.

The instructions for observing the Days of Unleavened Bread are found in the Old Testament. They are NOT found in the New Testament. And, as we have seen, in the Old Testament these instructions are QUITE CLEAR! We are instructed to observe the Days of Unleavened Bread for SEVEN days! IF people in New Testament times found it more convenient to already be fully de-leavened by the end of the 13th day, that's fine! And it is certainly not wrong to be de-leavened earlier than required. Similarly, it is obviously not wrong to also fast the day BEFORE the Day of Atonement, thus doing a two day fast. But that is not "expected" by God.

But there is no indication anywhere in God's Word that the Passover day (i.e. the whole of the 14th day) should be a complete day of being totally unleavened. To claim that it should be so is simply a personal opinion ... and there is obviously nothing wrong with doing this. However, doing this out of a motivation of wanting to please God is based on a misunderstanding of the Scriptures. That misunderstanding is a failure to recognize that God determined that SEVEN days of putting out leaven and of abstaining from all leaven would picture exactly what God wishes to convey. It may also include a lack of discerning the difference in the use of unleavened bread during the Passover ceremony and then during the subsequent seven days.

To eat unleavened bread for eight days has nothing at all to do with "doing more than we are commanded to do" or with "obeying the spiritual intent of the law" or with "doing those things that are pleasing to God". God simply does not attach any meaning or significance to EIGHT Days of Unleavened Bread. If anything, the number "eight" would be inclined to obscure the meaning that is brought out by "seven".

Thus:

God commands us to observe SEVEN Days of Unleavened Bread. These days are from the 15th to the 21st day of the first month, inclusive counting. There is no instruction from God to observe eight days as "unleavened". Such ideas are simply based on human reasoning. And while it is certainly not wrong to be unleavened for longer than seven days (however long people may choose), there is no significance attached to such a longer period of time and it is not a way we can choose to express our desire to please God by going above and beyond the call of duty ... no more than we can decide to please God by voluntarily abstaining from eating any meat on certain days.

Being unleavened for eight days or longer has nothing to do with being "a profitable servant" to God.

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