

Counting to Pentecost when the Passover Occurs on Sabbath

By Art Braidic and Terry Moore

© 2010, 2025 the Eternal Church of God

All Scriptures are from the New King James translation unless otherwise noted.

Ten to eleven times a century, the Passover ceremony occurs on the same day as the weekly Sabbath. When this rare event takes place, the “morrow after the Sabbath” is the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and therefore the last holy day also falls on a Sabbath. In such a case, there is no weekly Sabbath that falls between the two high holy days. How then should we begin the count to Pentecost when this occurs?

There are some Churches of God that believe, when the Passover occurs on a Sabbath, the count must start on the day following the last holy day which will also be the seventh day of the week. The Eternal Church of God does not agree with that conclusion for several reasons.

Nearly all believe that Jesus was represented by the wave sheaf offering. That means we can be certain that His observance Passover before the crucifixion is accurate in both the way it was kept and the timing of the proceeding events. Jesus observed the Passover meal after sundown on a Wednesday. His crucifixion occurred the following afternoon, and that day was also the preparation for an annual Sabbath—the first high day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (John 19:31). His body was in a tomb for three nights and three days. He was then raised from the dead just as the weekly Sabbath ended, and yet He did not ascend to the Father until Sunday morning (John 20:1-18, Mat. 28:1-10). For more on the timing of this, read our booklet—The Day of Christ’s Resurrection. That Sunday is the same day that God commanded the sheaf to be waved, and that is the same day that He ascended to heaven. This is one of the ways we can know that the count to Pentecost begins on the Sunday that falls within the parameters of the spring Feast. It is exactly what the Scriptures command:

Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'When you come into the land which I give to you, and reap its harvest, then you shall bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest. He shall wave the sheaf before the LORD, to be accepted on your behalf; on the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it... 'And you shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering: seven Sabbaths shall be completed. Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath; then you shall offer a new grain offering to the LORD (Leviticus 23:10-16).

Because the command is to count from the “the day after the Sabbath,” the Scriptures tell us that the target day for beginning the count is the first day of the week, and not the Sabbath itself. The day beginning the count is the day the sheaf is waved which is the first Sunday after the Feast has begun, but not a Sunday after the Feast has ended. Some conclude otherwise because they believe the Passover ceremony is not to be included within the parameters of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. But they are mistaken, and we will explain why.

The Passover ceremony is intimately linked to the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It is not something entirely separate and disconnected from what these days represent. If it was to be considered a ceremony detached from the Feast, then God would not have placed it right next to the days of unleavened bread. This is something that scholars who have studied the Hebrew calendar recognize. Notice the following quote from F.F. Bruce:

In general, the Jewish calendar in NT times (at least before AD 70) followed the Sadducean reckoning, since it was by that reckoning that the Temple services were regulated. Thus the day of Pentecost was reckoned as the fiftieth day after the presentation of the first harvested sheaf of barley, i.e., the fiftieth day (inclusive) from the first Sunday after Passover (cf. Lv. 23:15f.); hence it always fell on a Sunday, as it does in the Christian calendar. The Pharisaic reckoning, which became standard after AD 70, interpreted 'sabbath' in Lv. 23:15 as the festival day of Unleavened Bread and not the weekly sabbath; in that case Pentecost always fell on the same day of the month (an important consideration for those in whose eyes it marked the anniversary of the law-giving) but not on the same day of the week (The Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Inter-Varsity Press, 1980, Vol. 1, p. 225).

In this article, Bruce points out that it originally was the first Sunday after Passover that began the count. This includes both the Passover ceremony and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. In fact, both terms are frequently used interchangeably in the Scriptures. Notice some examples:

Therefore you shall sacrifice the Passover to the LORD your God, from the flock and the herd, in the place where the LORD chooses to put His name. You shall eat no leavened bread with it; seven days you shall eat unleavened bread with it, that is, the bread of affliction... (Deuteronomy 16:2-3).

In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, you shall observe the Passover, a feast of seven days; unleavened bread shall be eaten (Ezekiel 45:21).

Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread drew near, which is called Passover (Luke 22:1).

Now on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying to Him, "Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?" (Matthew 26:17).

In addition to using both terms to speak of the same days, notice something interesting about God's original instructions:

In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread, until the twenty-first day of the month at evening (Exodus 12:18).

When we count the number of days we are told to eat unleavened bread (from the 14th to the 21st) we arrive at a total of eight days. That also shows us that the Passover ceremony occurring on the 14th is an inseparable part of these days. Even though it is not a high day, the Passover ceremony is connected and therefore included as a part of the Feast. It is considered one of the days where unleavened bread is eaten for religious reasons. Therefore, we are to include Passover as an intrinsic part of the count. This means that we are to begin our count from the morrow after the Sabbath that falls between the Passover and the last day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. We are not to begin the count outside the parameters of these days.

Another point is that the count to Pentecost has historically begun on the first day of the week that occurred during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. If we used the last day of the Feast to determine the count, wave sheaf Sunday, as commanded in Leviticus 23, would have to occur after the Feast was over. The Jews and all Biblical encyclopedias, dictionaries, and commentaries say that this never occurred. Even the Hebrew calendar that was altered after 70 AD did not place the count to begin outside of the Feast.

An additional point is that this issue came up in 1974 and the only known apostle of our age, Herbert Armstrong, held a conference of elders much like the council in Acts 15. The judgment was that the Scriptures require us to count from the day after the weekly Sabbath. Elders of the Eternal Church of God were not present during that conference, but we firmly believe that their conclusion was correct.

A final reason not to begin the count outside the parameters is that Christ's resurrection took place just as the weekly Sabbath that occurred during the Feast ended. His ascension to the Father was the first day of the week at the same time the command says to wave the sheaf. That is what God designed the wave sheaf to represent. This occurred during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It is a divinely orchestrated fulfillment showing us that the sheaf was always to be waved before the last day of the Feast. Therefore, our count to Pentecost must always begin on that day, and that day will always occur on the "the day after the Sabbath" that falls within the parameters of the Feast of Unleavened Bread—which includes the day of the Passover ceremony.