



Minutes With Messiah

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When Is Pentecost?

When is Pentecost? It is named for the prescribed counting of forty-nine days and celebrating on the fiftieth day. That should be pretty straightforward. Whatever the starting date for the counting is, then fifty days later is Pentecost (*Shavuot*). But there is the problem. What is the starting date?

On a web site claiming to refute Seventh Day doctrine I recently saw a statement that Pentecost always falls on a Sunday. And yet the calendar shows Pentecost on Friday, 17 May 2002. Which is right, the web site or the calendar, the date most Jews celebrate the holiday or the Sunday following?

What difference does it make? Probably none. And yet it does affect some of our traditions. Maybe it even affects some of our doctrines. Therefore it is worth taking a look at the different traditions concerning the dating of Pentecost, a difference that dates back at least to the time of Jesus.

The scripture that defines the dating of *Shavuot* can be found at Leviticus 23:15-16, which says,

And ye shall count unto you from the morrow after the sabbath, from the day that ye brought the sheaf of the wave offering; seven sabbaths shall be complete: Even unto the morrow after the seventh sabbath shall ye number fifty days; and ye shall offer a new meat offering unto the LORD.

The Pharisees said that the sabbath in question was the first day of Passover, which was to be a day on which no constructive work was to be done, just as on the other sabbaths. The fiftieth day could fall on any day of the week. The Sadducees, on the other hand, said that Passover is nowhere called a sabbath, so the counting should begin on the Sunday after Passover. The fiftieth day would always be on a Sunday.

For most of my years I have heard from Bible teachers and from the pulpit the contradictory statements that Pentecost came fifty days after Passover and that the Pentecost on which the gospel was first preached was a Sunday. If Jesus was crucified on a Friday, and if that Friday was a Passover, then fifty days after the Passover would be a Saturday. While

there is nothing in scripture to contradict that (Acts 2 never specifies that the following Pentecost was on a Sunday) it makes what I have always been taught impossible. It makes it difficult for those who would like a nice convenient argument that we assemble on Sunday because Jesus arose on that day *and* that was the day on which the church began.

A literal reading of the passage may indicate that Pentecost should always be on a Sunday, and that centuries of Jewish celebrations have been on the wrong day. If so, we should be teaching that Pentecost was fifty days after the Saturday after Passover. Christian teachers, then, need to decide whether the gospel was first preached on Sunday or whether to teach that Pentecost was fifty days after Passover. They can't have it both ways. Jesus, who usually agreed with the Pharisees on similar questions, is, to our knowledge, silent on this matter.

Again, what difference does it really make? To some, like the authors of the web site that I mentioned earlier, it is important to say that the church began on a Sunday. To some of us, that does not matter because we have sufficient evidence otherwise that the church assembled on the first day of the week as their normal practice. Since most Christians do not celebrate Pentecost as a specific holiday this is probably just an academic exercise.

Maybe it will prompt us, though, to be more careful in our study and our traditions. Maybe we ought to be constantly looking at some of those things that we "know," to be sure that what we know is only what the Bible teaches.

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How to Question God

There is a prayer recorded in Jeremiah 32:17-25. Jeremiah has been told by God to buy a plot of land from an uncle of his. The Chaldean army is surrounding Jerusalem. They control most of the countryside of Judah, including the Benjaminite country where the plot of land in question was. Everyone with property is trying to sell it before the Babylonians take it from them. And yet God tells Jeremiah to buy this land when it is offered to him.

Jeremiah's reaction is probably similar to one many of us would have. He asks God why he should do what he says. Never mind that he has been God's prophet for almost forty years. He has been put in prison by his own king and faces the destruction of the entire country at the hands of the invaders about whom he has been prophesying for at least ten years. It doesn't make sense to be buying land. So he prays to God about it.

Jeremiah's Prayer

Sometimes we go into God's presence like we have the upper hand. We have a list of demands and present them to God like hostage-takers to the police. No preliminaries. No negotiations. We call up God and say, "here are my demands; take them or leave them." Not so Jeremiah.

Maybe it is because of forty years of presenting unpopular messages. Maybe it is his priestly background. Maybe it is because he regularly deals with kings. Whatever the reason, Jeremiah seems to know

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that you don't just walk up to the king and say, "Hey, King, this is what I want." He has seen that you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.

The prayer, as recorded, consists of 308 words. He uses 279 of those words before he even gets to his question.

Ah Lord GOD! behold, thou hast made the heaven and the earth by thy great power and stretched out arm, and there is nothing too hard for thee: Thou showest lovingkindness unto thousands, and recompensest the iniquity

of the fathers into the bosom of their children after them: the Great, the Mighty God, the LORD of hosts, is his name, Great in counsel, and mighty in work: for thine eyes are open upon all the ways of the sons of men: to give every one according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings: Which hast set signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, even unto this day, and in Israel, and among other men; and hast made thee a name, as at this day; And hast brought forth thy people Israel out of the land of Egypt with signs, and with wonders, and with a strong hand, and with a stretched out arm, and with great terror; And hast given them this land, which thou didst swear to their fathers to give them, a land flowing with milk and honey; And they came in, and possessed it; but they obeyed not thy voice, neither walked in thy law; they have done nothing of all that thou commandedst them to do: therefore thou hast caused all this evil to come upon them: Behold the mounts, they are come unto the city to take it; and the city is given into the hand of the Chaldeans, that fight against it, because of the sword, and of the famine, and of the pestilence: and what thou hast spoken is come to pass; and, behold, thou seest it.

Over ninety percent of Jeremiah's prayer is praising God before he gets to the meat of his inquiry. Some might say that he spends most of his time trying to "butter up" God. In a sense they might be right. He spends his time saying, in essence, "God, I know you know what you are doing. You have always been right before." In fact, one can almost hear the next, unrecorded word after all the flattery: "but" We will look at that "but" in a moment.

Some people I know say we should never tell God anything He already knows, as if there is anything He doesn't know. They say we shouldn't quote scripture in our prayers because, after all, God wrote it in the first place. They say we shouldn't give God the background of a situation because He already knows it. They would reduce our prayers to the bare bones. "Tell God what you want, and then shut up," they seem to say. But look at what Jeremiah spent his time praying. About 230 words are used just to recount to God the history of the Jewish people from the creation to the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem. Surely God already knew this history. After all, he concludes that section of the prayer with

the words, “and you see it.” He tells God all this history, then says it is just as God worked it out.

God doesn’t need to be reminded of his power, his role in history, or his majesty. On the other hand, it could never hurt for us to let God know that we are aware of those things. Particularly when it directly impacts, as in this prayer of Jeremiah, the question or request we are bringing to God, maybe we should let God know that we understand the background, that we have researched and considered the history of the problem. It may not make God any more willing to grant our request; he is willing already. It will show him that we are not being frivolous, but have looked for His side of the issue first.

After all those words giving God the background, Jeremiah finally gets to his question, the “but” mentioned before. In this case it is worded as a statement, but it is really a question. “And thou hast said unto me, O Lord GOD, Buy thee the field for money, and take witnesses; for the city is given into the hand of the Chaldeans.”

After telling God he understands that all things are in His control, he asks why God wants him to buy this land. After all, wouldn’t it be a waste of money? Isn’t he buying something that is soon to be almost worthless? On top of all that, God wants him to spend extra money to get the deed notarized, then seal it in an airtight jar and hide it in a safe place. What is the point, if God is going to deliver the country over to the Babylonians? They won’t recognize land deals.

Jeremiah was a man of great faith. He preached God’s word in the face of persecution and ridicule for forty years. He had heard, and believed, when God promised to be a pillar of iron and brass walls for Jeremiah, to protect him (Jer 1:18-19). He received the word of God, apparently directly from the source. And yet he is now confused. He knows God is trying to tell him something, but his faith or his knowledge just isn’t enough for him to figure out what it is. Jeremiah is, after all, just a man. Sometimes he needed for God to remind him of that. This was his reminder.

God’s Answer

The rest of chapter 32 is God’s response to Jeremiah. In format it is very similar to Jeremiah’s prayer. He starts out with an account of Jewish history and justification for the Babylonian captivity. He reminds Jeremiah that the Babylonians are come upon them because of Judah’s rejection of his ways. In their sin, Judah even thought of something that God had not thought up, sacrificing their own children to Molech, “the King of the gods.” He seems to be telling Jeremiah that his analysis of the situation is correct, as far as it goes.

To tell Jeremiah this, God repeated much of what Jeremiah had said. He acknowledged that history was in His power. He acknowledged that Jeremiah was right in attributing the current situation to Judah’s rejection of God. Sometimes we may be right in telling God a lot of what he already knows; but when we do it we should expect God to repeat it back to us.

Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh: is there any thing too hard for me? Therefore thus saith the LORD; Behold, I will give this city into the hand of the Chaldeans, and into the hand of Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon, and he shall take it: Because of all the evil of the children of Israel and of the children of Judah, which they have done to provoke me

We see only as far as historical midnight; God sees historical dawn.

to anger, they, their kings, their princes, their priests, and their prophets, and the men of Judah, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. But they set their abominations in the house, which is called by my name, to defile it. (Verses 27-28, 32, 34)

Then he tells Jeremiah that his view had been incomplete, that God sees farther than man. Jeremiah had ended with the siege of Jerusalem, and said that that was where God’s power and holiness had brought Judah. God tells him that it will bring them farther.

Like as I have brought all this great evil upon this people, so will I bring upon them all the good that I have promised them. And fields shall be bought in this land, whereof ye say, It is desolate without man or beast; it is given into the hand of the Chaldeans. Men shall buy fields for money, and subscribe evidences, and seal them, and take witnesses in the land of Benjamin, and in the places about Jerusalem, and in the cities of Judah, and in the cities of the mountains, and in the cities of the valley, and in the cities of the south: for I will cause their captivity to return, saith the LORD. (Verses 42-44)

Jeremiah, you are missing the whole point. When God says to buy land and secure the deed to it, He is promising that your descendants will need that deed when they come home. Jeremiah, you are looking only as far as historical midnight; God sees the next historical dawn.

What to Do for Terrorists

I recently saw a bumper sticker that expressed the feelings of many Americans. The first word was a four-letter word, in this case with asterisks representing the two middle letters, depicting a particular act. The other words on the bumper sticker were the name, Osama bin Laden. While recent events may cause some people to have that sentiment, Christians should substitute another four-letter word and a three-letter word in the place of that unrepeatable first word: Pray for.

In the wake of countless deaths due to terrorism on both sides in the Holy Land we could possibly add to Mr. bin Laden's name those of Yasser Arafat and Ariel Sharon. Perhaps we could also add the leaders of the Irish Republican Army, and of other terrorist organizations in the Philippines, Indonesia, and throughout the world.

I know the tendency of man is to take the attitude expressed on the bumper sticker. But Christians should be different from the world. We follow a higher standard.

But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matt 5:44-45)

Our standard is God. It's a high standard to live up to, but He has always asked His people to try to do

just that. Here Jesus says to pray for those that injure us, not because it is the natural thing to do, or even the right thing to do. He says to do it in order that we may be God's children. Without praying for Messrs. bin Laden, Arafat, and others we can not be God's chosen people. Not even if those others are killing God's people.

Perhaps another recent event points out the possibilities when we follow Jesus' advice. Andrea Yates was convicted for drowning her own children. When the news of the killings broke in Houston, the congregation of the church of Christ near the Yates home took an active role. They arranged to answer all phone calls to the family's home. They arranged and held the funerals for the children. And most of all, they prayed, and prayed some more. They prayed for a woman accused of killing those whom she had delivered into the world. They prayed for a husband who was accused of driving her to do such an unspeakable act. They "did" a lot, but they also prayed a lot. The husband began attending Bible studies. It wasn't long before he chose to be baptized for the remission of his sins. Some may say it was because of the activities of the church. Some may reasonably say it was a result of the Bible studies. But it was certainly a result of countless prayers offered for people that others may have seen as not somebody to pray for.

If prayer helped change the life of Rusty Yates, or of Jeffery Dahmer, what might it do for Osama bin Laden or Yasser Arafat! What might it do for me, or for you!

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