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MINISTRIES

“The following is a direct script of a teaching that is intended to be presented via video, incorporating relevant text, slides, media, and graphics to assist in illustration, thus facilitating the presentation of the material. In some places, this may cause the written material to not flow or sound rather awkward in some places. In addition, there may be grammatical errors that are often not acceptable in literary work. We encourage the viewing of the video teachings to complement the written teaching you see below.”

Is it Wrong to Celebrate Birthdays?

When believers begin investigating the roots of their faith, and they start seeing the value in God’s commandments contained in the Torah, there are a lot of questions that come up.

For instance, one of the first things people notice is that Christmas isn’t listed among God’s holy days in the Torah. In fact, Christmas isn’t even in the Bible at all. It wasn’t even celebrated among Christians until centuries after the time of the apostles. So a logical question becomes, “Why do we celebrate this holiday?”

In addition to Christmas not being in the Bible, there’s a possibility that some of the customs associated with it come from pagan false god worship. Therefore most Torah observant believers decide not to celebrate it, which is understandable. After all, God didn’t command us to celebrate Christmas—in fact, He warns us against worshiping Him in the ways that pagans worship their false gods—so we shouldn’t celebrate Christmas and should just stick to the biblical holidays instead, right?

For most of us who love God and yearn to worship Him in Spirit and Truth, that seems pretty reasonable. And it’s from that desire that some believers extend this logic further to other common observances—like birthday celebrations.

Some believers will argue that a birthday celebration, like Christmas, is not something we’re told to do in the Bible; therefore, it’s somehow “adding to the Word” to celebrate birthdays. It’s also argued that birthday celebrations are rooted in paganism, and therefore it’d be offensive to God to partake in them.

What should we think about birthdays? Is it okay to celebrate birthdays, or should we give up those observances? Let’s consider this issue.

In this teaching, we’ll make the case that it’s *not* wrong to celebrate birthdays. Unless your celebration includes something that goes against God’s commandments, it’s not offensive to God.

To be clear, it’s also not wrong *not* to celebrate birthdays if you don’t want to. We don’t care whether or

not people celebrate birthdays. We're not told to celebrate birthdays in the Bible, so if someone chooses not to celebrate them, that's fine. Our argument is simply that it's not *wrong* to celebrate birthdays if you decide to do so.

So why do some people say that it's wrong to celebrate birthdays? One reason that's offered is that celebrating a birthday would be adding to the Word of God, which is forbidden (Deuteronomy 4:2). But is there any validity to this claim?

Well, not really. As we mentioned, nobody says that we *must* celebrate birthdays, so nobody is adding a commandment to the Word of God. Nobody insists that birthdays ought to be celebrated the same as the holy days of Leviticus 23 ought to be celebrated.

Adding to the Word of God occurs when someone elevates a manmade rule or tradition to the same status as God's commandments.

Furthermore, there are other holidays mentioned in the Bible that are clearly endorsed as celebrations commemorating important events in Israel's history, such as Hanukkah and Purim. The Bible doesn't command us to celebrate these holidays, but they are nevertheless endorsed in the Bible, and it isn't thought of as adding to the Word of God.

A positive argument in favor of birthday celebrations would be that God has given you life—isn't that a good reason to celebrate and praise Him? And if God has allowed other such celebrations commemorating important events, surely that permission can be applied to an event as important as your being brought into existence!

The bottom line is that it is good to celebrate and praise God in the good things He's given us, and that applies especially to our very lives, which are a gift from Him. If we take the idea that we can praise God *only* through the commanded festivals to its logical conclusion, there's literally no reason to get out of bed until a commanded feast day. God accepts all praise as long as it is not prohibited in Scripture.

Again, we aren't saying that you *have* to celebrate birthdays. But if you decide you'd like to commemorate a certain day out of the year to celebrate and praise God for giving you life, then there's nothing wrong with that; it's not against the Torah.

In fact, since there's nothing in Scripture prohibiting birthday celebrations, ironically it *would* be adding to the Word of God to condemn other believers as sinners over the issue!

Some have argued that God is against birthday celebrations based on the fact that the two times they are mentioned in the Bible they are connected to terrible events. One instance is found in Genesis 40:20-22, where Pharaoh evidently considered his own birthday party to be the perfect occasion to have his baker hanged. The second instance is in Matthew 14:3-11 where, on his birthday party, King Herod ordered the beheading of John the Baptist.

“When birthdays are mentioned in the Bible, they are connected to murder and sin! God is trying to send us a message that birthdays are displeasing to Him!” Some might argue.

However, these examples do nothing to prove that a birthday celebration itself is inherently wrong. To insist that these passages constitute proof that God is against birthday celebrations is to commit a conflation fallacy. God definitely prohibits murdering people, but that can happen any day, not just on

one's birthday. And obviously most people do not celebrate their birthday by murdering people, so the logic of this argument breaks down.

What about the idea that birthday celebrations have pagan origins? Wouldn't celebrating your birthday therefore be offensive to God?

A few things to consider here: Nobody knows the exact origins of birthday celebrations. Interestingly the earliest known reference of a birthday celebration is in the Bible, in the passage we mentioned earlier:

Genesis 40:20

On the third day, which was Pharaoh's **birthday**, he made a feast for all his servants...

Does this mean that birthday celebrations originated with the Egyptians? Maybe. We don't know. All we know is that this is the earliest reference to a birthday party in Scripture. And it's actually unclear whether this is in fact a *birthday* celebration. It might have been, but some historians, like Egyptologist Dr. James Hoffmeier, argue that it's more likely referencing the Pharaoh's coronation date—whereby the Pharaoh would have been “born” as a god, as believed in Egyptian culture. Benjamin Scolnic writes:

Hoffmeier's brilliant and plausible suggestion is that the celebration of Pharaoh's birthday recorded in Gen. 40:20 is a celebration of his coronation. We would thus have plenty of evidence for the celebration of such a festival in the 2nd millennium BCE, the time of Joseph. The Biblical narrator did not distinguish between the anniversary of the pharaoh's actual birth date (which might not have been a cause for celebration) and the anniversary of his birth date as a god-king (which we know was a cause for celebration.)

-Benjamin Edidin Scolnic, "If the Egyptians Drowned in the Red Sea Where Are the Pharaoh's Chariots?: Exploring the Historical Dimension of the Bible," p. 56

We do know that later Romans celebrated birthdays, and they even involved cake. But there was nothing about their celebrations connected to false god worship, so there's really nothing to say that celebrating your birthday is participating in a “pagan” custom.

And just because pagans do something does not automatically make it wrong—if it did, we literally wouldn't be able to do anything...ever.

Pagans had temples, so is it wrong for Israel to have a temple?

Pagans had harvest festivals, so is it wrong for Israel to have a harvest festival?

Pagans sacrificed animals, so is it wrong for Israel to sacrifice animals?

You see how absurd this line of reasoning can get?

Furthermore, we don't know whether there is even any sort of causal connection between Roman birthday celebrations and our modern birthday celebrations. The closest link to our modern birthday celebration is *Kinderfeste*, which came out of late 18th century Germany. In their book, “An Uncommon History of Common Things,” Bethanne Patrick and John Thompson writes:

The modern birthday cake, however, may have begun in medieval Germany, where a *Kinderfeste* was held in celebration of the birthday of a young child. Early in the morning, the child was presented with a cake topped by lighted candles. During the day the candles were kept burning (and replaced when necessary); the cake was eaten after dinner. The candles numbered one more than the child's age. What we now call "one to grow on," they called the "light of life."

-Bethanne Kelly Patrick, John Milliken Thompson, "An Uncommon History of Common Things, Vol. 1," p. 121

If you decide to celebrate birthdays, the only thing we would recommend *not* doing is the custom of blowing out candles while making a wish. This likely came out of *Kinderfeste* as well, so it's not rooted in some sort of pagan custom. Nevertheless, making wishes and believing they'll come true if you blow out all the candles on your birthday cake is a superstitious practice.

That doesn't mean it's wrong to have cake or candles on your birthday. Just don't involve them in some superstitious ritual.

One last argument against birthday celebrations is that it promotes self-centeredness. "It's a day to celebrate the all-important ME because I'm just so awesome!"

Our response to this is simply to say, not necessarily. It all depends on your heart. While some people could be self-centered on their birthday, others can celebrate their birthday with humility and gratitude toward God for giving them another year of life.

In conclusion, the reasons offered for why birthday celebrations should be prohibited fall short. Since there is nothing in the Bible concerning birthday celebrations, we can judge them in light of Romans 14:5:

Romans 14:5

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.

While this verse is specifically referring to traditional Jewish fast days, a principle can be derived from this passage and applied to other types of days unaddressed in the Bible.

The bottom line is that the Bible neither promotes nor condemns the practice of birthday celebrations. Therefore, each of us can determine for ourselves whether or not this is a custom that we'd like to participate in.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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