

The Big Easter

Various

January, February, March, May, and June are all named after Roman gods or goddesses. The word “Easter” is similar. **The Venerable Bede**, a 7th century monk in England, tells us that Eosturmonath was the Germanic calendar’s equivalent to April. He writes, “Eosturmonath, which now is taken to mean Paschal month, once had its name from their goddess who was called Eostre, and to whom they celebrated a festival in that month. Now they call the Paschal season by the name of this month, calling the joys of the new rite by the old observance’s customary name” (Bede, *The Reckoning of Time* 15). You can see in this quote that what the northern people’s referred to as Easter, southern Christians called Paschal.

Paschal is the Latin word that translates *Pesach*: **Passover**. God told Israel to hold the Passover on the 14th day of the first month called Nisan (**Lev 23:5**). You may have always wondered why Easter day changes days every year. The answer is that the Passover changes days every year, not the day itself, but the start of the year. The Jewish Calendar is what they call a Lunisolar calendar. That means it is divided primarily by the cycles of the **moon**, yet it also takes into account solar cycles called **equinoxes** (an equinox is the day when daylight and nighttime are equal, because the sun of directly over the equator). There are two equinoxes in a year. March 21 is the spring equinox. Nisan does not begin until after the spring equinox, meaning that it takes place sometime after March 21 all the way through April, depending on the year. For example, this year Nisan 1 was March 16, but last year Nisan 1 was March 26 and the year before Nisan 1 was April 6. This is the problem with having a lunar calendar, your months get all out of sync, and you sooner or later you have to have leap months to make up for it. Things only get more complex from here. That’s why I have a calendar, or better yet my wife does. I figure, why not let other people figure these things out and I’ll just go with the flow.

Now, the history of Easter in the church, or what older Christians called *Paschal*, is really quite interesting. As far back as **Polycarp** (69-155 AD), the martyr who was also the disciple of John the Apostle, Christians have celebrated this day. Polycarp celebrated it on the Jewish Passover (Irenaeus tells us that Polycarp did only what he received from the Apostles),¹ while others chose to fast until the Sunday after. In fact, Polycarp had a confrontation with **Anicetus**, the bishop of Rome (150-168 AD) over this very issue, but they left friends even though neither one convinced the other. Anicetus’ spirit is quite different from a later Bishop of Rome named **Victor** (ca 186-201 AD), whom **Irenaeus** (ca 115-200), the disciple of Polycarp, wrote a letter (190-191 AD) about this and other issues. The author of the introduction of Irenaeus’ greatest work in the Protestant edition of the Ante-Nicene Church Fathers writes that Victor had a

¹ Irenaeus writes that Polycarp “always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles, and which the Church has handed down, and which alone are true” (*Against Heresies* 3.3.4.).

“turbulent spirit” and would not accept the compromise of the predecessor. Thus, Irenaeus reproves (“remonstrates”) Victor in a unifying (“catholic”) spirit, and “overrules his impetuous temper.”²

I find both of these stories fascinating, because in the first you have the Bishop of Smyrna and the so-called “Pope” of Rome agreeing to disagree, while in the second you have a Bishop of Lyons in France reproving the so-called “Pope,” with no fear of excommunication for going against the will of the Mother-Church. In fact, it was Irenaeus’ example which led the ecumenical church council (that is a council of the whole church, and not a fiat of Rome) of Nicea to come to a compromise so that the whole church would finally observe the day on the same day. This was done so that unity in the church might prevail in the churches. So much for early Christianities popes telling everyone else what to do!

All of this is what I refer to as “The Big Easter.”³ Now, I believe that it is perfectly fine to celebrate Easter even though it is not expressly commanded in the church, because by good and necessary consequence we know that Jesus himself celebrated Hanukkah ([John 10:22](#)) and possibly the Feast of Purim ([John 5:1](#)), neither of which are prescribed in the OT. But of course, personal observance is different corporate observance. And even though it has been celebrated yearly since the very earliest days of the church, The Big Easter has not been celebrated corporately by all Protestants.

Nevertheless, I always make it a point to preach on the Christian meaning of this day on Easter, and I am not ashamed of it. However, I also love to point out to you that God gave us 51 “little easters” by which we are to celebrate the death and resurrection of Christ in one form or another. In fact, if the NT church is any indication, it was on these little easters that the church *always* celebrated the resurrection, and that would go for the Big Easter as well! This is why it really is better to call all of these “easters,” “The Lord’s Day.” If you really want a special day to celebrate, then start learning that God gives you one every single week. Its not that it is a bad thing to take one of those to celebrate on a yearly basis the same resurrection, but rather as a Christian you need to start recognizing the holiness and specialness of the Lord’s Day. Too few Christians want holy days and yet treat the Lord’s Day as if it were just another day of the week.

“The Lord’s Day” is a term referred to by John in [Revelation 1:10](#), when he was “in the spirit.” The *Apostolic Fathers*, which refers to letters written by the earliest church, talk about the “Lord’s Day” as the first day of the week, the day of resurrection.⁴ The same holds true in the

² Roberts, A., Donaldson, J. and Coxe A.C. (1997), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* Vol. 1, p. 310.

³ A play on “the Big Easy” which refers in pop-culture to New Orleans, a 1986 movie starring Dennis Quaid, and Ernie Els the professional golfer. Coming to this “Big Easter” was anything but easy.

⁴ “And after the observance of the Sabbath, let every friend of Christ keep the Lord’s Day as a festival, the resurrection-day, the queen and chief of all the days [of the week]. Looking forward to this, the prophet declared, ‘To the end, for the eighth day,’ on which our life both sprang up again, and the victory over death was obtained in Christ” (Ignatius, *Letter to the Magnesians* 9:4-5 (Long Version; cf. 9:1 short version); “But every Lord’s day you do gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure” (*Didache* 14:1).

early church fathers.⁵ The first day of the week was the day that the NT church met together for the breaking of bread ([Acts 20:7](#)), the weekly celebration of the New Passover, as well as the collecting of money for missionaries ([1 Cor 16:2](#)). Of course, we also know that when they broke bread, they gathered around the word: read, sung, preached, and prayed. And thus, following the general pattern of synagogue worship, the early church used the first day to celebrate the Word made flesh and who died and was raised again on the first day of the week.

In a statement that would get him kicked out of any contemporary Seeker-Sensitive seminar, [Tertullian](#) said about this that [Pagans would dare not celebrate with us for fear that they should seem to be Christians. . . heathens have festive days but once annually, we have a festive day every eighth day](#) ([Tertullian, On Idolatry 14](#)). And so, following that idea, the 19th century English poet—John Keble—wrote *Easter Day*,

Oh! day of days! shall hearts set free
No “minstrel rapture” find for thee?
Thou art this Sun of other days,
They shine by giving back thy rays:

Enthroned in thy sovereign sphere,
Thou shedd’st thy light on all the year;
Sundays by thee more glorious break,
An Easter Day in every week.

It has only been in the past 20 years or so, and that really only in America, that Christians have dumped the Lord’s Day in favor of meeting on any other convenient day of the week. You can only attribute that to our own ignorance of Scripture and history, and it is to our shame. “An Easter Day in every week”. . . [little easter](#), the day we set aside to think about the resurrection, where God also comes to us to renew the covenant through the covenant meal, that Christ’s shed blood guarantees the forgiveness of our sins, and his resurrected life guarantees our own resurrection into eternal life. There is nothing more special or sacred than that.

But why did Christ rise on the first day of the week? I thought, it might be interesting to think about that. On the first day, God said “[Let there be light, and there was light](#)” ([Gen 1:5](#)). In paganism, it was the day of the Sun, a time to worship the creation (either natural or supernatural). But in Christianity, Christ is the light of the world, the one who makes his light shine in our dark hearts.

On the “first day” (of the 10th month) [the mountains became visible](#) ([Gen 8:5](#)), and on the first day of the first month, [the water was dried up from the earth. So Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looks, and behold, the surface of the ground was dried up](#) ([Gen 8:13](#)).

⁵ For example, “For what great thing is it, if a man restrains himself in what he knows not? He, in fulfilment of the precept, according to the Gospel, keeps the [Lord’s day](#), when he abandons an evil disposition, and assumes that of the Gnostic, glorifying the Lord’s resurrection in himself.” (Clement, *Miscellanies* 7.12); “And on the day of our Lord’s resurrection, which is the Lord’s day, meet more diligently, sending praise to God that made the universe by Jesus, and sent Him to us, and condescended to let Him suffer, and raised Him from the dead” (*Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* 2.59; ANF VII: 423).

Thus, the world was re-created after all living flesh was destroyed from the face of it because of its sin. Life from death began on this new “first day,” the day of new creation. And you are new creations in Christ, you who have faith in God’s Son.

On the *first day* of Passover, Israel was to purge the leaven from its houses (Ex 12:15) and “hold a holy assembly” (12:16). A little leaven leavens the whole lump, Paul tells the Corinthians. “Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Cor 5:6). Drawing directly upon the purpose of the ceremony in Exodus, the Apostle explains that gathering together now as then is about purity of body and heart. Thus, the early church forbade all but baptized Christians from taking part in the feast (and sometimes from even coming to the more general gathering itself, though the Apostle allows for this; cf. 1 Cor 14:22-23). Yet, they did more than this. They taught that when we come together we are to confess our sins, because proper worship is a matter of the heart as David and others teach us. The Didache is a very early example, “But every Lord’s day you do gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure” (Did 14:1). There are ancient reasons, brothers and sisters, why we do that which we do in our church on the Lord’s Day.

On the *first day* of the first month, Israel was commanded to erect the tabernacle of the tent of meeting for the first time (Ex 40:2). Thus she did in accordance with the law (40:17). Why? Because many years later, the “Word” would become flesh and would “tabernacle” among us (John 1:14). Christ is our tabernacle, our place of worship, where the glory of God shines in our heart, where we are filled with grace and truth.

On the *first day* (of the eleventh month), after God had defeated the giants Sihon and Og, Moses spoke to the people of Israel according to all that the LORD had given him in commandment to them (Deut 1:3-4). On this *first day*, the covenant was reenacted on a grandiose scale. He recounted all of the events that had transpired since coming to Sinai, of how the people had rebelled and how God made them wander for 40 years. Yet, he also told of God’s faithful execution of his promises, how he protected Israel, fought for Israel, and fed Israel (Deut 1:4-4:49). Then, the stipulations for covenant life were repeated. The Ten Commandments were read and other laws were enumerated (Deut 5-26) for what must have been several hours at least. Afterwards, the covenant sanctions were delivered, including blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience (Deut 27-28). The covenant was renewed (Deut 29-30). Finally, songs were sung, blessings were enumerated, and benedictions were given (Deut 31-34). While the law came early, the gospel came last, as a means of renewing the people who slain by Moses, who were now in need of new life through Christ.

Perhaps this is why Hezekiah decided to make a covenant with the LORD on the “*first day*” of the first month (2 Chron 29:17), because he understood the significance of covenant

renewal and the need for the people to gather near the temple to be cleansed and washed by a forgiving God. Perhaps this is also why Zerubbabel and Jeshua began to offer burnt offerings on the “*first day*” (of the seventh month) after Cyrus had let the captives return to Jerusalem.

And so it is that out of all of these “first days” that God chose in his infinite wisdom to raise Christ from the dead on the first day of the week. Resurrection day is the culmination of intent of all the OT first day types. And so it was that Luke tells us, “On the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus” (Luke 24:1-3). And so it was that Matthew tells us “after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. The angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said’” (Matt 28:1-3, 5-6a). And so it was that John remembers, “On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord” (John 20:19—20).

But the first day has a complimentary day in the OT, which is important to also understand. This is called the “*eighth day*.” Of course, if you are observing a seven day week, the eighth day starts the week over, so that the first day and the eighth day are both Sunday or the Lord’s Day, or little easter. (I find it fascinating that music and chemistry typify this repetition of 7 and start over on 8, i.e. the musical scale has 7 whole notes [do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti] which start over on the 8th note [do, the octave], in fact, “upon the eights” *pro octava* is a Latin musical term [*super octava* is used in Psalm 6];⁶ the atomic mass of the elements follow in repetitions of seven).⁷

On the *eighth day*, an Israelite male was to be circumcised (Gen 17:12; cf. Lev 12:3). This certainly signifies starting over, as can be seen in the spiritual reality to which circumcision points: circumcision of the heart. It is a cutting away of the old, and therefore an anticipation of that which is new.

On the *eighth day*, the firstfruit of the harvest, the firstborn son, the oxen and sheep were to be dedicated to Yahweh, after seven days with their mother (Ex 22:29). The idea is similar to circumcision. Here, being set apart for Yahweh is explicitly in view. No more do we belong to the old world. Now we belong to Christ himself.

⁶ Hamilton, *Genesis vol. 1*, NICOT: Gen 17:12 n. 16, 472.

⁷ See E.W. Bullinger, *Number in Scripture*, 11-15.

On the *eighth day* Aaron was **dedicated to the priesthood** (Lev 9:1). Again, the idea is similar. Now, with his whole life, Aaron is set apart to service God in the temple. In the NT “priesthood of believers,” all Christians are set apart in this way. Sanctification means being set apart to serve in a new and holy way, the way of the eighth day.

On the *eighth day* those with **unclean diseases** and discharges were to **offer their sacrifices** publically (Lev 14:10 etc). After being washed with water, these sacrifices were thank offerings, for the cleansing which had been given to the one who was filthy. And so our offerings and firstfruits which we give on the Lord’s Day are not merely out of duty, but gratitude for the cleansing which we have received through the washing of the word as God is preparing us a spotless bride for his the Beloved Son.

The *eighth day* was the last day of the feast of Tabernacles. Not Sabbath, but Sunday (Lev 23:36). We have seen the *first* day associated with the erecting of the tabernacle. The feast of Tabernacles begins on the first day, but ends on the eighth day. This points you past the seventh day, the day of rest for the Jews that there is something else, something beyond, something eternal. Today, you have entered Christ’s rest, yet we look forward to the rising of the sun on the heavenly Tabernacle which is made new in the new heavens and new earth. Rest is not the end, but the anticipation of that which is coming.

On the *eighth day* Solomon sent the people away with a blessing, and they went back to their homes “**joyful and glad of heart for all the goodness that the LORD had shown to David his servant and to Israel his people**” (1 Kgs 8:64). And thus the eighth day signifies reflection of all that which has happened in the past. It is reflection through blessing and the goodness of God. Our looking ahead is built upon the promises of God in the past. And so we are joyful and full of gladness because this is the day that the Lord has made.

One of the earliest Christians to comment on this outside of the Bible is Barnabas.⁸ In his letter he writes, “**Your new moons and your Sabbath I cannot endure.**’ You perceive how [the prophet] speaks: it is not the present Sabbaths that are acceptable to me, but the one that I have made; on that Sabbath, after I have set everything at rest, I will create the beginning of an eighth day, which is the beginning of another world. This is why we spend the eighth day in celebration, the day on which Jesus both arose from the dead and, after appearing again, ascended into heaven” (Barn 15:8-9). Another Apostolic Father Ignatius (not the 16th century Roman Catholic priest, but a first through second century early Christian who wrote as he was travelling to Rome to be put to death) wrote, “**And after the observance of the Sabbath, let every friend of Christ keep the Lord’s Day as a festival, the resurrection-day, the queen and chief of all the days. Looking forward to this, the prophet declared, ‘To the end, for the eighth day,’**”⁹ on

⁸ The biblical Barnabas is probably not the author of this letter, though that cannot be ruled out.

⁹ This fascinating reference is to Psalm 6:1 and 12:1 inscription which is the LXX reads, “**To/For the End, a Psalm of David among the Hymns for the eighth.**” Seeing “on the eighth” as a musical designation (cf. Hamilton, Genesis vol. 1, NICOT, Gen 17:12 n. 16, 472), Ignatius also sees this as a prophetic utterance in the very title of the Psalm.

which our life both sprang up again, and the victory over death was obtained in Christ” (Ignatius, *Letter to the Magnesians* 9:4-5 long version).

And so it is, dear friends, that God gives us 51 little easters, where each Lord’s day we celebrate Christ’s death and resurrection on the first day of the week. It is supposed to be a previous to you as the Big Easter, just as it was to the early Christians. In doing so, we also remember all of the works of God which point forward to this climactic event in human history. At the same time, we also consider that the first day is the eighth day, and thus we look forward to the time when we ourselves will be resurrected from the dead and given immortality by the one who even now lives in his resurrected body and sits at the right hand of the Father in heaven. In doing so, we likewise remember the eighth day legislation that God put into the Law to point us ahead to these very things.

Yet, once a year God also gives us a Big Easter, the Easter of easters whereby we consider the turbulent events in the final week of our Lord Jesus, who entered into Jerusalem on the first day of the week to celebrations of Hosanna and palms. Who was betrayed just four days later by one of his own disciples, after having supped with the Savior at the Passover. Who was put convicted of crimes he did not commit, so that he might be put to death by Jews and Gentiles, so that by his sacrifice, we might have the forgiveness of sins. Who slept in the belly of the earth for three days, until on the eighth day God raised him from the dead and vindicated this man before the whole of creation as the only one able to save and worthy to be worshipped among men. What a glorious day this is. Celebrated by the first Christians with charity over different points of view, we could learn a lot from them. Yet, they always had the little easter in mind every time they gathered to break bread. May this be a joyous day for you, where you glory in and glorify a living Christ. But may this only be a start. May you look as forward to the next Lord’s Day just as much as you have to this one. May all Lord’s Days become for you a Big Easter, for God is very good to give us so many holy days to feast and rejoice and be glad in him.