

In many countries right now, special celebrations are being prepared for a holiday called "Halloween" or "The Day of the Dead" - usually around October 31st each year. Maybe where you live you see special decorations like carved pumpkins or lanterns; wreaths of brightly colored flowers to be taken to cemeteries; or maybe even altars decorated with the photos of family members who died. Sometimes people make masks or costumes to dress up in and there is special candy or food prepared for a party. Most people just enjoy these customs as time to have fun with friends, and never think about what the celebration was originally for!

The origin of Halloween lies in the traditions of the Celtic people about 800 years before Christ, who mostly lived in what is now called **Ireland** and the **United Kingdom**. They held a major celebration near the end of our month of October, which they called "Samhain", a festival to recognize the end of summer. The Celts believed that the veil between this world and the next was thinnest at this time of year and friends and relatives who had died would often return, with their souls inhabiting an animal - often a black cat. Black cats have remained a symbol of Halloween down to the present time. In celebration of the recently completed harvest, Celts would go from door to door to collect food to donate to their gods. This is the possible origin of present day "trick or treating" where children in costumes visit homes and businesses asking for candy or food, sometimes saying that if they do not receive it they will play a harmful trick, such as throwing eggs at the house!



Through the centuries many customs developed - in some rural areas, turnip lanterns were placed on gateposts to protect homes from the spirits who roamed on Halloween night. Another custom was to toss objects such as stones, vegetables and nuts into a bonfire to frighten away the spirits, and many stories and superstitions developed that often involved frightening themes such as ghosts, monsters, witches and skeletons. For the most part however, the English ceased celebrating Halloween with the spread of Martin Luther's Protestant Reformation. Since followers of the new religion did not believe in Saints, they saw no reason to celebrate the Eve of All Saints' Day. As one of the world's oldest holidays, Halloween is still celebrated today in several countries around the globe, but it is in North America and Canada that it maintains its highest level of popularity.



In **Russia**, blue cats, such as the Russian Blue, Burmese, and British Blue, are said to bring good luck on this day. In **Austria**, a lamp alongside bread and water are left on a table in the home, as a gift for the spirits of dead family members as they return home that night. In **Spain**, a pastry shaped like skulls and named "Bones of the Holy", is eaten on Halloween day. It contains anise seed and is covered with an orange glaze. Children play tricks for treats and later on, families go to the cemetery to visit the graves of family members. Among Spanish-speaking nations, Halloween is known as "El Dia de los Muertos." It is a joyous and happy holiday...a time to remember friends and family who have died. Officially commemorated on November 2 (All Souls' Day), the three-day celebration actually begins on the evening of October 31. Designed to honor the dead who are believed to return to their homes on Halloween, many families construct an altar in their home and decorate it with candy, flowers, photographs, fresh water and samples of the deceased's favorite foods and drinks. Candles and incense are burned to help the departed find his or her way home. When we lived among Aztec Indian people in **Mexico** about 10 years ago, many would leave a trail of petals from the grave site to the house, as they believed the spirits of the dead family members would follow the petals to their home. Also ladies from the local Catholic church would parade around the town to visit and bless the altars in each home!



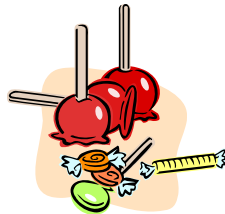
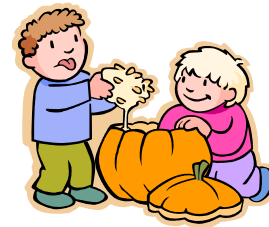
In some countries although Halloween is not celebrated, there are similar festivals at other times of the year. In **Japan**, water and food is placed in front of a photo of the dead; then lanterns are lit and set afloat in the water or next to a body of water to light the way of the dead souls back to Earth and to show them where their families can be found. It is called the "Obon Festival", and it is a celebration in memory of the dead that takes place in July or August. **India** celebrates "Mahalaya", which is a religious ritual believed to awaken dead spirits. Following Mahalaya, it is believed the souls go back to a peaceful rest for the remainder of the year. When night falls, the people pray for help against evil spirits. In **Korea**, the festival similar to Halloween is known as "Chusok." It is at this time that families thank their ancestors for the fruits of their labor. The family pays respect to these ancestors by visiting their tombs and making offerings of rice and fruits. The "Chusok" festival takes place in the month of August.



Every year, 65% of Americans decorate their homes and offices for Halloween...a percentage exceeded only by Christmas. Halloween is the holiday when the most candy is sold and is second only to Christmas in terms of total sales - and yet most people do not really know why Halloween is celebrated! In 2 Corinthians 5:10 we read that we are accountable to God for all that we do, so as Christians it is important that even though everyone around us may follow certain customs, we stop and consider if those customs are pleasing to God.



Why don't you make a list of all the things that are involved in Halloween celebrations? The pictures below may give you some ideas. Then read Philippians 4:8 and decide which of them are pleasing to God!



Often in the USA at Halloween, people dress up to frighten others, or they like to visit a "Haunted House" or "House of Horrors". Many TV programs show horror movies and there is a lot of focus on the devil and evil things. It is a shame that much of this is now spreading around the world to other countries - when as Christians we are trying to spread the Gospel! A group of children that I was teaching decided for themselves that the only GOOD things about Halloween are eating candy, dressing up and having parties - and that these things can be done at ANY time of the year, so we really don't have to celebrate Halloween at all if we don't believe in promoting fear and focusing on the things of the devil!

Even if you live in a country that does not celebrate Halloween, maybe there is a custom or tradition that is really NOT pleasing to God when you compare it to what the Bible says. Will YOU just continue to do what everyone else does, or can you be bold and tell others what the Bible says about it? Remember that the HOLY Spirit will help you! 'Til next time,

Your friend, Shirley