

# Festivals

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## WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson covers religious festivals and what they mean for some religions. Generally, festivals function to pass on religious beliefs and structures from one generation to the next. They recreate religious meaning, and they provide community cohesion. In this way, participants are given the opportunity to be connected with the sacred. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. [Saturnalia](#)
2. [Passover Seder](#)
3. [Ramadan](#)
4. [Diwali](#)

## 1. Saturnalia

Within various traditions, festivals may be seasonal to celebrate harvest or planting season or the birth of a deity or other important figures. Other times they are annual events that don't have any direct or noticeable link with the seasons. Often, the festival will tie into the mythology of the tradition.

In ancient Roman culture, there were many polytheistic and pagan festivals where nature and the cosmos played a big role. One such festival is the celebration of **Saturnalia**, and it honors the deity Saturn, the god of renewal, plenty, and liberation.



### DID YOU KNOW

Saturnalia took place in mid- to late-December and some scholars think that the Christian holiday of Christmas contains echoes of this ancient celebration.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### **Saturnalia**

An ancient Roman festival honoring the deity Saturn.

## 2. Passover Seder

A festival may be observed with acts of worship, offerings to deities, fasting, feasting, vigils, rituals, fairs, charity, and other celebrations. Often religious festivals are annual events marking something that happened in the history of the religion.

In Judaism, every year for a week in late March or early April, observant Jews commemorate the Passover Seder. This festival recognizes the liberation of the Jewish people from Egypt. In the Hebrew Bible in the book of Exodus, it is said that this annual ritual observance must be passed on and shared from one generation to the next. Participants share in a time of relaxation, drinking special wine, and eating matzoh. Matzoh is unleavened bread, and it symbolizes the Exodus, or the rapid departure, from captivity in Egypt. They left so quickly that they had no time to wait for their bread to rise.

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## 3. Ramadan

In Islam, Muslim people celebrate a special holiday called Ramadan. It commemorates the prophet Muhammad receiving the Qur'an, and it honors and acknowledges the one god of the Abrahamic faiths. For one month, practitioners fast—abstain from food and water—between the hours of sunrise and sundown. Officially, it's the appearance of the waxing crescent moon that signifies the beginning of the month of Ramadan.

As one of the five pillars of the faith, most observant Muslims honor the codes of conduct, such as fasting and abstaining from certain intimacies from sunrise to sundown, until the end of the lunar month. At that point, there's a big celebration and festivities. It's called the Eid al-Fitr.

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## 4. Diwali

The Eastern religions, generally with more gods to honor, have many festivals and celebrations. One important Hindu celebration is called **Diwali**. It's commonly known as the Festival of Lights. It's a five-day festival that involves the lighting of small clay oil lamps, and the light signifies the triumph of good over evil. These lamps are kept on during the night, and one's house is cleaned. The intention is to make the goddess Lakshmi feel welcome, although other Hindu deities may be honored in different regions of India.

Each day has a special significance, and honoring this allows the tradition to be integrated with daily life and transmitted from one generation to the next. During the festival of Diwali, all the celebrants wear new clothes and share sweets and snacks with family members and friends.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Diwali

A five day Hindu festival, also known as the “festival of lights”.



## SUMMARY

Religious festivals are an opportunity for people to feel connected to the sacred and for religious meaning and significance to be transmitted from one generation to the next. **Saturnalia** is an ancient Roman festival honoring Saturn. Often religious festivals occur in annual cycles, and we used the example of the **Passover Seder** in Judaism that usually happens in late March or early April. It's a commemoration of the exodus of the Jewish people from captivity in Egypt. In Islam, the major celebration is the festival of **Ramadan** every year, which is a celebration and commemoration of the prophet Muhammad receiving the Qur'an. **Diwali** is a Hindu festival that honors the goddess Lakshmi. It's a five day festival that is also called the Festival of Lights. The idea is that with the lighting up of the oil lamps, there's a recognition of the triumph of good over evil.

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## TERMS TO KNOW

### Diwali

A five day Hindu festival, also known as the "festival of lights".

### Saturnalia

An ancient Roman festival honoring the deity Saturn.