

Halloween is an annual celebration, but just what is it actually a celebration of? And how did this peculiar custom originate? Is it, as some claim, a kind of demon worship? Or is it just a harmless vestige of some ancient pagan ritual?

The word itself, "Halloween," actually has its origins in the Catholic Church. It comes from a contracted corruption of All Hallows Eve. November 1, "All Hollows Day" (or "All Saints Day"), is a Catholic day of observance in honor of saints. But, in the 5th century BC, in Celtic Ireland, summer officially ended on October 31. The holiday was called Samhain (sow-en), the Celtic New year.

One story says that, on that day, the disembodied spirits of all those who had died throughout the preceding year would come back in search of living bodies to possess for the next year. It was believed to be their only hope for the afterlife. The Celts believed all laws of space and time were suspended during this time, allowing the spirit world to intermingle with the living.

Naturally, the still-living did not want to be possessed. So on the night of October 31, villagers would extinguish the fires in their homes, to make them cold and undesirable. They would then dress up in all manner of ghoulish costumes and noisily paraded around the neighborhood, being as destructive as possible in order to frighten away spirits looking for bodies to possess.

The Romans adopted the Celtic practices as their own. But in the first century AD, Samhain was assimilated into celebrations of some of the other Roman traditions that took place in October, such as their day to honor Pomona, the Roman goddess of fruit and trees.

The custom of trick-or-treating is thought to have originated not with the Irish Celts, but with a ninth-century European custom called "souling." On November 2, All Souls Day, early Christians would walk from village to village begging for "soul cakes," made out of square pieces of bread with currants. The more soul cakes the beggars would receive, the more prayers they would promise to say on behalf of the dead relatives of the donors. At the time, it was believed that the dead remained in limbo for a time after death, and that prayer, even by strangers, could expedite a soul's passage to heaven.

The Jack-o-lantern custom probably comes from Irish folklore. As the tale is told, a man named Jack, who was notorious as a drunkard and trickster, tricked Satan into climbing a tree. Jack then carved an image of a cross in the tree's trunk, trapping the devil up the tree. Jack made a deal with the devil that, if he would never tempt him again, he would promise to let him down the tree.

According to the folk tale, after Jack died, he was denied entrance to Heaven because of his evil ways, but he was also denied access to Hell because he had tricked the devil. Instead, the devil gave him a single ember to light his way through the frigid darkness. The ember was placed inside a hollowed-out turnip to keep it glowing longer.

The Irish used turnips as their "Jack's lanterns" originally. But when the immigrants came to America, they found that pumpkins were far more plentiful than turnips. So the Jack-O-Lantern in America was a hollowed-out pumpkin, lit with an ember.

So, although some cults may have adopted Halloween as their favorite "holiday," the day itself did not grow out of evil practices. It grew out of the rituals of Celts celebrating a new year, and out of Medieval prayer rituals of Europeans. And today, even many churches have Halloween parties or pumpkin carving events for the kids. After all, the day itself is only as evil as one cares to make it.

# The Pumpkin Prayer

Cut off the top of the pumpkin and talk about how God helps us to learn about Him and how we need to be open to what He wants to do in our lives. "Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth." Colossians 3:2

**Dear God, open my mind so I can learn about You;**

Clean out the "guts" and tell them that God takes away our sins and forgives us. Talk about the importance of telling God our sins every day. Show them how clean the inside of the pumpkin is and talk about how clean we feel after God forgives us. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." 1 John 1:9

**Take away all my sin and forgive me for the wrong things I do.**

Cut out heart-shaped eyes. How can we see that God loves us? We see how much God loves us when we read the Bible, when we look at our families and when we see everything God has created! "Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good; Blessed are those who trusts in Him!" Ps. 34:8

**Open my eyes so Your love I will see;**

Cut out a cross-shaped nose. What does it mean to turn our nose up at something: It means we don't like something. Sometimes we don't like certain foods, or a shirt or dress. We may even think we know what we need better than God does! But when we remember that Jesus died on the cross for us, we know that God gave us all we really need. "It is good to give thanks to the LORD, And to sing praises to Your name, O Most High" Psalm 92:1

**I'm sorry for turning up my nose to all You've given me.**

Cut out ears that are shaped like the Bible. Do your parents ever have to tell you two times to do something? Sometimes we don't listen very well. Just like our parents, God wants us to listen to Him. In the Bible God tells all about how much He loves us, how He wants us to live and how He will help us. We need to listen to God's word. "Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live..." Isaiah 55:3

**Open my ears so Your word I will hear;**

Cut out a fish-shaped mouth. Jesus told His disciples that they were not going to catch fish anymore, but that they were going to be fishers of men by telling others about God's love. A long time ago, Christians would greet each other by drawing a fish in the dirt when they met so they would know that they were believers too. We can use our mouths to tell others about Jesus. "I shall... declare the works of the LORD." Psalm 118:17

**Open my mouth so I can tell others You're near.**

Light a candle and place it in the pumpkin or turn on the flashlight. Turn out the lights if possible. Look how bright the light shines through the pumpkin! The light stands for the Holy Spirit that lives in us. When we let God open up every part of us, He can shine through us so others will see Jesus in us. Then our friends will want to have Jesus in their lives, too! "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." Matthew 5:16

**Let your light shine in all I say and do. Amen.**