

The Birth of Christ and Christmas

The material in this lesson is time sensitive and we suggest that you read it to your children in November or December. You may also want to read it in stages as it is slightly longer than usual.

At this time of year people are getting ready for Christmas, the day the world celebrates Christ's birthday. It looks like a fun holiday, doesn't it? The Christmas trees, pretty lights and presents from Father Christmas (or Santa Claus) all seem so exciting. So why don't we keep it?

Well, it's because it's not a holiday that God tells us to celebrate!¹ And Christmas trees, pretty lights, and Santa Claus don't have anything to do with Jesus! In fact, Christmas isn't really His birthday!² And the Bible even gives us some clues that He wasn't born then!

Clue 1 - The Census

The first clue has to do with WHEN Jesus' parents went to Bethlehem, the town where Jesus was born. Most people think that Joseph and Mary travelled to Bethlehem in December. But they didn't! They travelled to Bethlehem in September or October.

We know this because the Bible tells us that they went to Bethlehem because a census was being taken (Luke 2:1-5). A census was a way of finding out how many people lived in the land. And when a census was taken, people had to go back to their home town.

However, the census wasn't taken in December because it was too hard for people to travel then. The census was normally taken in September or October. So that's when Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem. And that's when Jesus was born. Not in December!

¹ You can find out about the days God tells us to celebrate in the Holy Day Lesson "The Holy Days and God's Plan".

² The versions of this lesson for older children contain more information about this.

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Clue 2 - The Shepherds

The Bible also tells us that when Jesus was born, the shepherds were out in the fields watching their sheep at night (Luke 2:8). And this gives us another clue that Jesus wasn't born on Christmas day. You see, the sheep weren't kept out in the fields at night at Christmas time!³ It was too cold then. During the winter the sheep were brought in from the fields at night and kept undercover! So if the sheep were still out in the fields that night, it wasn't winter yet. And this means that Jesus wasn't born at Christmas time!

So if Jesus wasn't born on Christmas day, when WAS He born? From the clues the Bible gives us, we know that it was probably in the early autumn, possibly around the time of the Feast.⁴ So WHY do people celebrate His birthday on December 25th?

A Holiday Like Christmas

Well, it's because there was ALREADY a holiday around that time like Christmas. People decorated their houses with lights and greenery from trees. They gave gifts to children and to poor people. Just like people do today. But they weren't celebrating a Christian holiday or one of God's Holy Days. They were celebrating a pagan (non-Christian) festival called Saturnalia,⁵ which celebrated the birth of the SUN.

This pagan holiday was turned into Christmas hundreds of years AFTER Jesus was born! It was turned into a "Christian" holiday to celebrate the birth of God's SON, Jesus Christ!

³ The flocks were in the fields between April and October, but during the winter the shepherds brought them home at night and sheltered them undercover.

⁴ The versions of this lesson for older children contain more information about when His birthday might have been.

⁵ This festival, kept by heathens or Gentiles (people who worshipped false gods and idols) around the time of the Winter Solstice (the shortest day of the year), had been celebrated for thousands of years under different names. The Romans called it Saturnalia.

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But God doesn't want us to keep pagan festivals that have been turned into Christian festivals! He doesn't want us to learn to live the way that pagan (non-Christian) nations do. He tells us this in His Word, the Bible (Deuteronomy 12:29-32; Jeremiah 10:1-4).

A WONDERFUL Thing

BUT even though we don't celebrate Christmas, we do need to remember that the birth of Jesus Christ was a WONDERFUL thing! In fact, His birth was SO important that God sent an angel to announce it to the shepherds who were in the field that night.

The angel said: "Don't be afraid, I'm bringing you GOOD NEWS. Today Christ, the Lord, was born. He will be your Saviour and bring happiness to all people."

Then a large group of angels joined the first angel and they all began to praise God because Jesus, the Son of God had been born. They were full of joy because they knew that one day Jesus would rule over this earth and be the most wonderful King this world has ever had! (Luke 2:10-14; Isaiah 9:6-7).

And THIS is something to remember when we hear people talking about Christmas at this time of year and see pictures of baby Jesus in a manger. Jesus isn't a little baby any more! He is a KING!! In fact, He's the King who will soon come to bring PEACE and HAPPINESS to the WHOLE world. No wonder the angels rejoiced when He was born!