

# 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. The highlighted passages of scripture and highlighted referenced scriptures are part of the story flow and should be read aloud as part of the lesson.*

We're coming up to the time of year when most people celebrate Christmas. And this can be a difficult time for those of us who don't celebrate it. Some of your friends might think you're strange because you don't keep Christmas. And some of your friends might feel sorry for you because Father Christmas doesn't come to your house and you don't get any presents! So why don't we celebrate Christmas? Have you ever wondered?

Well, it's mainly because Jesus wasn't born then and because God doesn't tell us to celebrate it.<sup>1</sup> And even though Christmas is supposed to be all about Christ's birth, it's not really. The Christmas trees and pretty lights, and presents from Father Christmas, don't have anything to do with Christ at all! These things all come from pagan - or unchristian - festivals, as many people now realise.

## A Different Story

The true story of Christ's birth is very different to the Christmas story that is told at this time of year. In fact, there are even three clues in the Bible that show us Jesus WASN'T born on Christmas day! So let's find out what the Bible really says about the birth of Jesus Christ and what it tells us about WHEN He was born. The story begins in **Matthew 1:18-19**.

When Joseph and Mary lived, being engaged was almost like being married - and the couple were supposed to be faithful to each other. If the woman was unfaithful to her fiancé, then she could be divorced or even put to death!<sup>2</sup> When Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant, he thought she had been with another man, so that meant he could "divorce" her. But he didn't want her to be disgraced - OR put to death - so he decided to divorce her secretly, so no one would find out about it. But before he did, something happened to change his mind.

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

<sup>2</sup> According to Jewish Law at the time.

## The Birth of Christ and Christmas

An angel appeared to Joseph and explained that Mary hadn't been with another man. The fact that she was pregnant was a miracle! God had made it happen by His Holy Spirit. The angel also told Joseph that Mary's baby would grow up to be a Saviour. He would save His people - and the whole world - from their sins (Matthew 1:20-21; Luke 2:11; John 3:16-17; Acts 4:12; Acts 5:31; 1 John 4:14).

The Bible tells us that just before Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary travelled to the town of Bethlehem (Luke 2:4-5). And the reason WHY they went to Bethlehem gives us our first clue that Jesus wasn't born on Christmas day.

### Clue 1 - The Census

You see, the ruler at the time had ordered that a census (or register) should be taken (Luke 2:1-3). This was a way of finding out how many people lived in the land. But when a census was taken, people had to return to their home town. This was why Joseph and Mary travelled to Bethlehem. However, the census wasn't taken during the winter because the weather was bad then and travelling could be difficult. The census was normally taken at the end of the harvest season - sometime around September or October! So if Jesus was born when the census was taken, His birth was in September or October - NOT in December.

After Jesus was born, Mary put Him in a manger - or a "box where animals are fed". So this part of the Christmas story is true. You can read about this in **Luke 2:6-7**. But notice that the Bible DOESN'T say that Jesus was born in a stable, which is what most people believe. Jesus MIGHT have been born in a stable, but it could also have been a cave, because the Jews used to shelter their animals in stables AND caves!

### Clue 2 - The Shepherds

When Jesus was born, the shepherds were out in the fields watching their sheep by night (Luke 2:8). And this brings us to the second clue that Jesus wasn't born on Christmas day. You see, the sheep weren't kept out in

## The Birth of Christ and Christmas

the fields at night in December! They were kept in the fields from April to October, but were brought in from the fields during the winter and sheltered undercover at night. So if the sheep were still out in the fields that night, Jesus' birth couldn't have been in December! It had to have been sometime BEFORE the end of October.

In most nativity scenes, the baby Jesus is pictured with His mother and father, the shepherds, AND the wise men (or Magi). But the Bible tells us that it was only the shepherds who came to see Jesus right after His birth (see Luke 2:8-12, 16-20). The Magi didn't come until later on! You can read about this in **Matthew 2:1-12**.

By the time the Magi arrived to worship Jesus, Joseph and Mary were living in a HOUSE. And Jesus was no longer a baby - He could have been nearly two years old!<sup>3</sup> These verses also show us something else the Christmas story gets wrong. Did you notice? Most people believe that THREE wise men came to see Jesus, but the Bible doesn't say that! It just tells us that WISE MEN CAME and gave gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. So the truth is that when the wise men came, (and we don't know how many there were), they didn't go to a *stable* to see *baby* Jesus, they went to a *house* and saw a *little boy* nearly 2 years old!

### Clue 3 - John the Baptist

So far, we've seen two clues that show us Jesus wasn't born in December. We discover the third clue when we look at the birth of John the Baptist. John was related to Jesus (probably His cousin) and he was born six months BEFORE Jesus.<sup>4</sup> When we look at what the Bible tells us about both of their births, it becomes clear that John was probably born in

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<sup>3</sup> Herod's reaction in verse 16 reveals this.

<sup>4</sup> This can be deduced from Luke 1:34-36 and our understanding that pregnancy lasts 9 months. Elizabeth was 6 months into her pregnancy when Mary became pregnant, so when her baby, John the Baptist, was born (3 months later), Mary would have been 3 months into her pregnancy. Jesus was born 6 months later.

## The Birth of Christ and Christmas

the early spring<sup>5</sup> and Jesus was born six months later - in the early autumn, possibly around the time of the Feast.<sup>6</sup>

So if Jesus wasn't born on December 25<sup>th</sup>, why is that the day people celebrate His birthday? Well, it's because that was the day the Roman Church decided it should be kept. And they chose that day because there was **ALREADY** a festival around this time that people celebrated - a festival that had been celebrated for thousands of years **BEFORE** Jesus was even born!

### A Holiday Like Christmas

The Romans called it Saturnalia and it celebrated the birth (or rebirth) of the **SUN** on the shortest day of the year, which at that time was on December 25<sup>th</sup>.<sup>7</sup> During the festival the Romans decorated their homes with lights and greenery from trees, and gave gifts to children and the poor! But Jesus didn't celebrate Saturnalia, and the early Christians didn't celebrate it either, because it was a pagan (non-Christian) festival.<sup>8</sup>

Several hundred years after Jesus died, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire - and it was at this time that the leader of the Church in Rome decided that December 25<sup>th</sup> should be celebrated as Christ's birthday. It seems he hoped that the pagan Romans would become Christian if they stopped celebrating the birth of the **SUN** and began to celebrate the birth of the **SON** of God instead. So the pagan festival of Saturnalia was turned into the "Christian" festival that we now know as Christmas. However, God doesn't want us to keep pagan festivals,

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<sup>5</sup> The Bible tells us that John's father, Zechariah, was a priest who served in the temple. His times of service would have been sometime around May/June AND November/December. (See footnote in the version of this lesson for 10-12 year olds for more information about this.) Zechariah's wife became pregnant AFTER he finished his time of service in the temple and their baby was born about 9 months later - either in the early spring OR late summer/early autumn (depending on which time Zechariah was serving and how soon afterwards his wife became pregnant). Jesus was born 6 months later, which brings us to either the late summer/early autumn OR the early spring. But we can rule out the early spring and late summer as the time of Christ's birth because we know that He was born at the time the census took place (September/October). This means that John was born sometime in the early spring.

<sup>6</sup> There is a tradition that John was born around the time of the Passover, which would place Christ's birth during the Feast of Tabernacles. You can discover more information about this on the Internet.

<sup>7</sup> This can be verified by using the Internet to check the dates of the Winter Solstice in the first century.

<sup>8</sup> A pagan festival was one that non-Christian heathens or Gentiles (people who worshipped false gods and idols) kept.

## The Birth of Christ and Christmas

even if they have been turned into Christian festivals! He doesn't want us to learn to live the way that the pagan or Gentile nations do (see Deuteronomy 12:29-32 and Jeremiah 10:1-4).<sup>9</sup>

### A WONDERFUL Event

But even though we don't celebrate Christmas, we DO need to remember that the birth of Jesus Christ was a WONDERFUL event. In fact, His birth was SO important that God sent an angel to announce it! Read **Luke 2:10-14** to see what the angel said.

The angels rejoiced and praised God when Jesus was born because they knew that Jesus was the Son of God and Saviour of the world. They also knew that one day He would rule as King over all the earth. And this is something we should remember, especially at this time of year. Jesus isn't a little baby in a manger - He's our soon-coming KING! Here's what the prophet Isaiah says about Him:

**A child will be born to us. God will give a son to us. He will be responsible for leading the people. His name will be Wonderful Counsellor, Powerful God, Father Who Lives For Ever, Prince of Peace. Power and peace will be in his kingdom. It will continue to grow. He will rule as KING on David's throne. He will make it strong, ruling with goodness and fair judgment. He will rule it for ever and ever... (Isaiah 9:6-7, NCV, emphasis added).**

The birth of Jesus Christ was a WONDERFUL and GLORIOUS moment in God's Plan for mankind. The one who would make it possible for human beings to become part of God's Family<sup>10</sup> - and the one who will finally bring PEACE and HAPPINESS to the whole world - had just been born. No wonder the angels rejoiced!

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<sup>9</sup>Jeremiah is talking about idols here (see verse 5), but what he describes sounds a little bit like a Christmas tree, doesn't it? Perhaps this gives us a clue about where the custom of decorating Christmas trees might have come from!

<sup>10</sup> The Bible reveals that God is creating a "family" and that His Plan is to make us part of that family. You can find more information about this in "The Holy Days and God's Plan" lesson in the Holy Day series.