

The Birth of Christ and Christmas

The material in this lesson is time sensitive so we suggest that you read it in November or December. Please also be sure to read through the passages of Scripture that have been quoted and look up any highlighted scriptures - these are part of the story flow.

We're coming up to the time of year when most people celebrate Christmas, a time that can be quite difficult for those of us who don't celebrate it. It can cause problems at school (depending on where you live) and your friends might think you're strange or feel sorry for you because you don't get any presents. And some of your friends, who know that you go to Church, might even wonder WHY you don't celebrate Christmas if you believe in Jesus Christ!!

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

A Different Story

The true story of Christ's birth is actually quite different to the Christmas story that is told at this time of year. The Bible even gives us three clues that show Jesus couldn't have been 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**.

At the time 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!² 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.

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

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 According to Jewish Law at the time.

The Birth of Christ and Christmas

happen by the power of His Holy Spirit! The angel also told Joseph that Mary's baby would be a Saviour - He would grow up to 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). To find out the rest of the story we need to read the account of Christ's birth in Luke. Let's begin by reading **Luke 2:1-5**.

Clue 1 - The Census

And this is where we find the first clue that Jesus wasn't born in December. You see, a census or register³ would be taken at the end of the harvest season - sometime in September or October. It wasn't taken during the winter months because the weather was bad and travelling could be difficult. So if Jesus was born at the same time a register was being 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". You can read about this in **Luke 2:6-7**. But the Bible DOESN'T tell us that Jesus was born in a stable, which is what most people believe and what you see in most Christmas nativity scenes. Jesus MIGHT have been born in a stable, but He could also have been born in a cave, because the Jews used to keep their animals in both.

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 in December. You see, the sheep weren't kept out in the fields at night in December! They were kept in the fields from April to October, but during the winter they were brought in from the fields at night and sheltered undercover. So, if the sheep were still out in the fields at night, Jesus was obviously born sometime BEFORE the end of October - and NOT in the middle of winter!

In most nativity scenes the baby Jesus is pictured with His mother and father, the shepherds AND the wise men (or Magi). But Luke's account shows us that it was only the shepherds who came to see Jesus 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**.

³ A record of how many people lived in the land.

The Birth of Christ and Christmas

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! (Herod's reaction in verse 16 reveals this.) All of this shows us that the Christmas story of the wise men or Magi coming to a *stable* at the time of Christ's *birth* is not true.

These verses also show us something else that 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 true story 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, a man who was related to Jesus (probably His cousin). John was born six months BEFORE Jesus,⁴ and if we look at the circumstances and timing of John's birth and compare that with what we know about Jesus' birth, it becomes clear that John was probably born in the early spring.⁵ Jesus was born six months later - in the early autumn, possibly around the time of the Feast.⁶

⁴ 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.

⁵ The Bible tells us that John's father, Zechariah, was a priest who served in the temple twice a year. He belonged to "Abijah's" group (Luke 1:5), the 8th division of 24 (1 Chronicles 24:7-19). The divisions or courses started at the beginning of God's *first* month, which, based on the Hebrew calendar, began just before the Spring Holy Days. (This corresponds to our March/April.) Six months later, in God's *seventh* month (our September/October) all the priests served together during the Feast of Tabernacles, and then after that, their second cycle of weekly service began. Zechariah's first week of service, therefore, would have been at the end of God's *second* month (our May/June) - 8 weeks after the first cycle began. His second week of service would have been around the beginning of God's *ninth* month (our November/December) - 8 weeks after the second cycle began. Zechariah's wife became pregnant AFTER he finished his time of service in the temple, so 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 when 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 places John's birth sometime in the early spring.

⁶ 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.

The Birth of Christ and Christmas

So if Jesus wasn't born on December 25th, 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 25th.⁷ 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.⁸

Some 350 years (or so) AFTER Christ's birth, Christianity was accepted as the official religion of the Roman Empire. And it was at this time that the Bishop of the Church in Rome, Julius 1st,⁹ decided that December 25th should be kept as the official celebration of Christ's birthday.¹⁰ It seems he hoped that more 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 a "Christian" festival - the one that we now know as Christmas.

But of course, God doesn't want us to keep pagan festivals, even if they are dressed up to look like Christian festivals! We are not to learn to live the way that the pagan or Gentile nations do. This is something that God warned the nation of Israel about before they entered into the land that God had promised them (see Deuteronomy 12:29-32). We also read about it in **Jeremiah 10:1-5** (NKJ, NIV, GNB).

The idols that Jeremiah describes here sound a little bit like Christmas trees don't they? Perhaps this gives us a clue about where the custom of decorating Christmas trees might have come from! In the next few verses Jeremiah tells us that these pagan idols are worthless, and that the LORD is the true God - and

⁷ This can be verified by checking the Internet for the dates of the Winter Solstice in the first century.

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

⁹ Julius 1st was bishop from February 6, 337 to April 12, 352.

¹⁰ There had been controversy for a number of years about when and IF Christ's birthday should be celebrated.

The Birth of Christ and Christmas

KING for ever (see Jeremiah 10:6-10a). This is something that we should always remember - especially as we live in a world that is full of "idols" and pagan customs.

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, and the story of His birth has been recorded in the Bible for all time. Read **Luke 2:10-14** to find out what the angel said when he announced that Jesus had been born.

The angels rejoiced and praised God when Christ's birth was announced because they knew that Jesus was the Son of God and the Saviour of the world. They also knew that He was destined to rule as King over all the earth. And this is the picture that we should keep in our minds, particularly at this time of year. Jesus isn't still 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 momentous and vitally important part of God's wonderful plan for mankind. The one who would be our **SAVIOUR** and make it possible for human beings to become part of God's Family¹¹ - and the **KING** who will finally bring **PEACE** and **HAPPINESS** to the whole world - had just been born. No wonder the angels rejoiced!

¹¹ 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.