

The Birth of Christ and Christmas

The material in this lesson is time sensitive so we suggest that it is studied in November or December. It has also been prepared more like a Bible Study, so in order for it to make sense you'll need to read through the highlighted scriptures before you read the text that follows. Checking the scriptures in your own Bible will also help you to prove this material for yourself.

We're coming up to the time of year when most people celebrate Christmas, a time that can often be 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 weird or feel sorry for you because you don't get any presents. And some of your friends, who know that you are Christian and go to Church, might even wonder WHY you don't celebrate Christmas when you believe in Jesus Christ!!

So why don't we celebrate Christmas? I'm sure that most of you already know the answer, but this is a good time to remind ourselves so that we know what to say if anyone asks us about it.

The main reasons we don't celebrate Christmas are because Jesus wasn't born then and because God doesn't tell us to.¹ In fact, even though Christmas is supposed to be all about Christ's birth, the actual festival - characterised by Christmas trees, pretty lights, and presents from Father Christmas - doesn't have anything to do with Christ at all! These things are all pagan in origin, as many people today realise.

A Different Story

The true story of Christ's birth is actually quite different to the Christmas story that's 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.

Matthew 1:18-19 — At the time Joseph and Mary lived, being engaged was almost like being married. And one of the ways the engagement could be broken was by a divorce! The man and woman were supposed to be faithful to each other - even though they weren't living together as husband and wife - and if the woman was unfaithful to her fiancé, then according to Jewish law at the time, she could be put to death!! 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.

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".

The Birth of Christ and Christmas

Matthew 1:20-21 — The angel explained that Mary hadn't been with another man - the fact that she was pregnant was a miracle. God had made it happen by the power of His Holy Spirit! The baby was to be named Jesus - actually *Yeshua* in the Hebrew language - which comes from the word *Yoshia*, which means "he will save"! So God gave His Son a name that describes what Jesus came to do: to save His people - and the whole world - from their sins (see 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 turn to Luke 2. And here we find the first clue that Jesus wasn't born in December.

The Census

Luke 2:1-3 — Usually a census or register would be taken at the end of the harvest season - around September/October time - and *not* during the winter when 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 probably in September or October - not in the winter!

Luke 2:4-7 — This tells us that Mary put Jesus in a manger - or a "box where animals are fed" - when He was born. But it DOESN'T say that Jesus was born in a stable, which is what most people believe and how most Christmas nativity scenes are portrayed. Jesus might have been born in a stable but it could have also been a cave, because the Jews used both to house their animals.

Now we come to the second clue that Jesus wasn't born in December:

The Shepherds

Luke 2:8 — This verse tells us that shepherds were out in the fields watching their sheep by night when Jesus was born. But 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. The fact that the sheep were still out in the fields that night is more proof that Jesus wasn't born in December.

Luke 2:9-12, 16-20 — In most nativity scenes, the baby Jesus is pictured with His mother and father, the shepherds AND the wise men (or Magi). But as we've just read, it was only the shepherds who went to see Jesus right after His birth. The Magi didn't come until later on. We read about this in **Matthew 2:1-12**.

The Birth of Christ and Christmas

By the time the Magi arrived to worship Christ, Joseph, Mary and Jesus were living in a HOUSE. And Herod's reaction in verse 16 reveals that Jesus was no longer a baby - He could have been nearly two years old! This proves that the Christmas story of the wise men or Magi coming to a *stable* at the time of Christ's *birth* is simply not true.

How many wise men came? Did you notice? Most people believe that there were three wise men, but the Bible doesn't say that. It just tells us that wise men came and gave gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. So this is another thing that the Christmas story gets wrong.

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,² and if we look at the facts relating to both of their births we can determine when Jesus was born.

The Bible tells us that John's father, Zechariah, was a priest who served in the temple twice a year. His times of service would have been sometime around May/June AND November/December.³ Zechariah's wife became pregnant after he finished his time of service in the temple, so their baby was born about nine months later - in either the early spring OR late summer/early autumn (depending on which time Zechariah was serving and when his wife became pregnant). Jesus was born six months after that, which means he was born either in the late summer/early autumn OR the early spring. But because we know that Jesus was born at the time the census took place (September/October), we can rule out the early spring and late summer as the time of His birth. By putting all these facts together it becomes clear that John was probably born in the early spring and Jesus was born in the early autumn - possibly around the time of the Feast.⁴

² 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.

³ Zechariah 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.

⁴ 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

A Holiday Like 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! The Romans called it Saturnalia and it celebrated the birth of the SUN at the time of the winter solstice (the shortest day of the year), which at that time was on December 25th. 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.

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, decided that December 25th should be kept as the official celebration of Christ's birthday.⁵ It seems he hoped that more Romans might 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, which 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 can also read about it in **Jeremiah 10:1-4** (NKJ, NIV, GNB).

Even though these verses in Jeremiah 10 are talking about an idol (see **verse 5**), it sounds a little bit like a Christmas tree doesn't it? And 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 the idols of the pagan nations are worthless, and that the Lord is the true God - and King for ever (see **verses 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 whole story - from conception to birth -

⁵ There had been a controversy for a number of years about when and IF Christ's birthday should be celebrated.

The Birth of Christ and Christmas

has been recorded in the Bible for all time. Let's read **Luke 2:8-14** again to remind ourselves of what the angel said on the night he announced Christ's birth.

The heavenly host glorified 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 - and that He was destined to rule as King over all the earth. And this is something we should keep in our minds at this time of year. Jesus is not a little baby in a manger - He's our soon-coming KING! Here's what the prophet Isaiah says about Him:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and for ever... (Isaiah 9:6-7, NIV).

The birth of Jesus Christ was a wonderful and glorious moment in God's Plan for mankind. The Saviour and future King of all mankind had just been born. He was the one who would make it possible for human beings to become part of God's Family⁶ - and He IS the one who will finally bring PEACE and HAPPINESS to the whole world. No wonder the angels rejoiced!

⁶ 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.