

The Surprising Origin of Christmas

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Instructions: The format of these mini-studies is similar to that of the Bible On-Line Study Course. Look up and read in your Bible the scripture references given in answer to the questions. Comments following the questions further explain the scriptures just read. That's all there is to it! (These studies are based on the King James Version of the Bible, unless otherwise stated.)

Hundreds of millions of people around the world are now preparing for the Christmas holiday season. Little children, filled with anticipation and excitement, are wondering what Santa Claus will bring them this year.

Entire families will soon be busy putting up Christmas decorations. Holly, mistletoe and evergreen will deck the house. And just the right tree will be chosen and decorated with tinsel and ornaments.

Christmas is the season for giving and receiving presents. A time to sing carols, admire colorful twinkling lights, roast chestnuts in the fireplace, to burn the Yule log. It's the season when family and friends get together for a sumptuous meal.

Yet, paradoxically, Christmas is also the time of year when murders, suicides, family fights, depression and drunkenness reach a peak!

Stop and think for a moment. Very few have ever reflected on why they believe what they do – why they follow the customs they do, or where those customs came from. Having been born into this world, we naturally accept the customs and beliefs of society without question.

Have you ever wondered how and when Christmas originated? Does it really celebrate the birthday of Christ? Was Jesus really born Dec. 25? Did the original apostles, whom Jesus taught personally, celebrate His birthday?

But before you read further, be sure to get your Bible, a pen or pencil, and a notebook. Look up and read in your Bible the scripture references given in answer to the questions. Then write them down in a notebook so you can review your studies later. Writing out the scriptures will also help you to remember what you have learned. Now let's begin.

1. First, let's consider the date of Christ's birth. What does the Bible tell us about conditions surrounding the time when Christ was born? Luke 2:6-8, especially verse 8.

This biblical account is referred to in many encyclopedias and other historical sources to point out that Christ's birth could not have occurred in the month of December. The shepherds in Judea always brought their flocks in from the mountainsides and fields and corralled them no later than mid-October! They did this to protect the sheep and themselves from the cold rains

that followed. The Bible itself shows that winter in Judea is the rainy season (Song of Solomon 2:11; Ezra 10:9, 13).

Check an encyclopedia in your library and you'll find that the exact date of Christ's birth is unknown. If Jesus Christ had intended for us to celebrate His birthday, then He would have told us to do it and given us the exact date in the Bible – which He didn't.

You will also find no biblical record of Christ, His apostles or His Church observing His birthday. Rather, we are told to commemorate the date of His death! (1 Corinthians 11:24-26).

Since Jesus was not even born in December, do we dare assume that the customs of this most-observed religious holiday stem from "Christian" origins?

Shocking as it may sound, Christmas customs and practices date long before Christ! According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: "Christmas customs are an evolution from times that long antedate the Christian period – a descent from seasonal, pagan, religious and national practices, hedged about with legend and tradition" (15th edition, article on "Christmas").

The *Encyclopedia Americana*, 1944 edition, further explains: "It was, according to many authorities, not celebrated in the first centuries of the Christian Church, as the Christian usage in general was to celebrate the death of remarkable persons rather than their birth... A feast was established in memory of this event [Christ's birth] in the fourth century. In the fifth century the Western Church ordered it to be celebrated forever on the day of the old Roman feast of the birth of Sol [the sun], as no certain knowledge of the day of Christ's birth existed."

These authoritative reference works further state that many familiar Christmas trappings such as the holly wreath, mistletoe and the Yule log are relics of pre-Christian times!

2. A common custom during the Christmas holidays is to cut down an evergreen tree and decorate it. Does the prophet Jeremiah make reference to such a practice occurring during his time – hundreds of years before Christ? Jeremiah 10:2-5. Whose custom was this? Verses 2-3.

God's word shows it is the custom of the heathen to cut down trees, decorate them and put them in their homes! And God warns His people not to learn that way or follow it.

3. One of the traditional customs of Christmas is the buying and exchanging of gifts. Many believe they are following an example set by the wise men who presented gifts to the infant Jesus. But why did they present gifts to Christ? Matthew 2:1-11.

The wise men were not starting a new Christian custom of exchanging gifts with friends to honor Christ's birthday. They were following an ancient Eastern custom of presenting gifts to a king when they came into his presence. They were approaching Christ – "King of the Jews" (verse 2).

These gifts obviously were not given on Christ's birthday because the wise men came a number of days, or even weeks, after Christ was born.

4. Many who understand Christmas evolved from pagan customs originally honoring the sun god will tell you they observe it to “honor” Christ. But what does God say about following the customs and traditions of the heathen? Deuteronomy 12:29-31.

God plainly warns His people not to adopt the practices of pagan nations. God will not accept this kind of worship, even though intended in His honor!

5. Did Christ say it is possible to worship Him and still do it all in vain? Matthew 15:9. What did He tell his disciples about following man’s ideas about how to worship God? Mark 7:7-9.

God does not want people trying to honor Christ by following traditions and customs devised by men. Notice again God’s command, “You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way (Deuteronomy 12:31, New King James Version).

6. Those who celebrate Christmas end up breaking many (if not all) of God’s commandments. What are these commandments? Read Exodus 20:1-17.

Christ’s name is used in vain because He certainly never put His name on Christmas; lying is involved by telling youngsters about Santa Claus; and coveting material things seems to be the true “spirit” of the holiday. More murder, suicide, drunkenness and a host of other sins are committed during the Christmas season than at any other time of year!

7. Are there specific days of the year that God does command His people to observe and keep holy? Read Leviticus 23:1-26. Is there evidence that Jesus kept these very same days? Luke 2:41-43; John 7:1-2, 14, 37.

These and other scriptures show that Jesus Christ and the Church He founded kept God’s festivals. These annual feasts were given to teach us how God is accomplishing His great master plan for mankind. It is through the knowledge of these days that we can understand what man is, the purpose of life and all about the soon-coming Kingdom of God!