

The Birth of Jesus

It is that time of year that people look to celebrate the birth of Christ, who, as they say is the reason for the season. When I began researching this material, I can't truly say I was surprised, but I was disturbed by the depth of Satan's influence in what I found. It is disturbing how this celebration has come about. According to scholar's research...

Christmas, the day on which the world celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ, is in fact connected to the pagan festival known as Saturnalia, but not, however, for the reasons some skeptics assume. Scholars have always been aware that December 25 is certainly not the actual date of Jesus' birth. The early church did not celebrate or commemorate the birth of Jesus, let alone keeping December 25 as a day of any significance, and that day wasn't connected to the birth of Jesus until sometime during the reign of Constantine, several hundred years later. That said, Saturnalia was a week-long Roman festival honoring the god Saturn; since it started on December 17, it fell within what is now called the Christmas season. Interestingly, historical accounts differ about whether Saturnalia celebrations were examples of debauchery or charity. Some accounts mention the rich paying rent for the poor, masters and slaves exchanging clothes, and so forth on Saturnalia. Yet, for most historians, debauchery seems to dominate celebrations of this holiday; in fact, the word Saturnalia has become synonymous with immorality and carousing.

During the period of the celebration, Roman courts were closed, and Roman law dictated that no one could be punished for damaging property or injuring people during the weeklong celebration. The festival began when Roman authorities chose "*an enemy of the Roman people*" to represent the "*Lord of Misrule.*" Each Roman community selected a victim whom they forced to indulge in food and other physical pleasures throughout the week. At the festival's conclusion, December 25th, these Roman authorities believed that they were destroying the forces of darkness by brutally murdering this innocent man or woman, basically a human sacrifice to appease the gods. The ancient Greek writer, poet, and historian Lucian, in his discourse entitled Saturnalia, describes the festival's observance in his time. In addition to human sacrifice, he mentions these customs...

- I) A) Widespread intoxication
- B) Going from house to house while singing naked
- C) Rape and other sexual license
- D) Consuming human-shaped biscuits
Still produced in some English and most German bakeries during the Christmas season.

Then in the 4th century, the Roman Catholic Church appropriated the Saturnalia festival hoping to bring the pagan masses in with it. One of the thoughts that is often put forth is that the Roman Catholic Church introduced Christmas as a way to get people to quit celebrating Saturnalia and return to mass. Religious leaders succeeded in converting to Catholicism large numbers of pagans by promising them that they could continue to celebrate the Saturnalia while being faithful to God, thus essentially combining the Christmas holiday with the paganism of the Saturnalia festival.

You can see the difficulty with this, there was nothing intrinsically scriptural about Saturnalia. To remedy this, these religious leaders named Saturnalia's concluding day, December 25th, to be Jesus' birthday and changed the name of the celebration to Christmas. The origin of the name should be obvious, Christ-mass.

When you look at what historians have to say about the true origins of the Christmas holiday it becomes rather disturbing.

Stephen Nissenbaum, a professor of history at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, writes...

2 *“In return for ensuring massive observance of the anniversary of the Savior’s birth by assigning it to this resonant date, (meaning a specific date), the Church for its part tacitly agreed to allow the holiday (The debauchery of Saturnalia) to be celebrated more or less the way it had always been.” The earliest Christmas holidays were celebrated by drinking, sexual indulgence, singing naked in the streets (a precursor of modern caroling), etc.*

Again, interestingly, because of its known pagan origin and association, Christmas was banned by the Puritans and its observance was illegal in Massachusetts between 1659 and 1681. However, Christmas was even then as it still is today, celebrated by most people of the world.

Some of the most depraved customs of the Saturnalia carnival were intentionally revived by the Catholic Church in 1466 when Pope Paul II, for the amusement of his Roman citizens, forced Jews to race naked through the streets of the city. An eyewitness account reports, *“Before they were to run, the Jews were richly fed, so as to make the race more difficult for them and at the same time more amusing for spectators. They ran while the pope watched from a balcony and laughed heartily.”*

Now please don't panic, this is not a lesson that is going to discuss this holiday. That's not the point. The point is that we understand where this celebration came from and what it has been transformed into. It came from a pagan celebration of debauchery and was turned into a celebration of the birth of Christ to try and draw people away from the celebration of Saturnalia to doing something better. The problem is that many people have come to believe that December 25th is, in fact, the date of the birth of Christ and that the scriptures command that faithful Christians are to celebrate that birth at Christmas.

Nothing is further from the truth. Jesus was not born on December 25th. The scriptures give no date or time frame for His birth, other than to say that there were shepherds in the fields...

Luke 2:8-11

3

8 In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. **9** And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. **10** But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; **11** for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

Shepherds didn't take their flocks out into the wilderness to graze during the freezing cold of December. And that's just one indicator that Christ was not born in December. There are others.

And most importantly, nowhere does the Word of God command that believers are to celebrate the birth of Christ in any way, shape, or form. It is never mentioned in relationship to any part of any worship service, and there is no tradition of the early Church indicating that it celebrated it. But that is not to say that the scriptures ignore the birth of Christ. They most assuredly do not. So because the scriptures speak of His birth, we are going to take a few moments in this lesson to talk about the birth of Christ and what the scriptures **do** say about it. **4** In...

Matt 1:18

5

18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows:

He speaks of it briefly in **Matt 1** beginning in **verse 17** and continuing into **chapter 2** but does not go into a lot detail. We do see the interaction between Herod and the wise men that followed the star to worship the child and bring Him gifts. Note what the magi tell Herod...

Matt 2:5-6

6

5 They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: **6** **"AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS**

LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL."

This is a quote from **Micah 5:2**. What I find interesting is that these magi from the east knew the scriptures well enough to recognize that the fulfillment of the prophecy was taking place and where it was taking place, and they came to worship the child. I think it obvious that we see the hand of God working in this.

Luke gives the most detail of the events that surrounded His birth and in **chapter 2** he says...

Luke 2:4-7

7

4 Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, **5** in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. **6** While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. **7** And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Joseph and Mary had to go to Bethlehem to fulfill the decree of Caesar Augustus that all people were to return to their ancestral home for a census. Bethlehem was the ancestral home of Joseph who was of the tribe of Judah. While there Mary gave birth to Jesus. It was here, in the stable where they were staying, that the mage, the wise men from the east, found Him. There are some who argue that the magi didn't come the Jesus in the stable but came to Him as much as two years later, but I find the fact that they quote from Micah about Bethlehem to be telling.

Luke records the account of the angel appearing to the shepherds...

Luke 2:8-11

8

8 In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. **9** And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. **10** But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; **11** for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

The angel proclaims to these simple shepherds in the field...

9

11 for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord

What a revelation. The messiah that the Jews had been waiting for, for so long, had been born.

Then to support and confirm that proclamation...

Luke 2:13-14

10

13 And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, **14** "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."

This thought that the Father is pleased with Christ His Son is a thought that follows the accounts of Jesus as He goes through His life. A quick aside, please note that the scriptures tell us that the angels said, not sang as is the tradition of the world. His pleasure is also seen at His baptism...

Matt 3:17

11

17 and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased."

And it is seen at His transfiguration...

Matt 17:5

12

5 While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!"

The whole purpose of God coming in the form of man, Jesus, was to accomplish the purpose that the Lord had, to give Himself as the perfect sacrifice so that man might be saved.

Luke relates how that the shepherd decided to go to Bethlehem to see this miracle for themselves...

Luke 2:15-16

13

15 When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, "Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us." 16 So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger.

This is an important point, I think. Note what they do when they see the child in the manger...

Luke 2:17-19

14

17 When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. 18 And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. 19 But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart.

I have always wondered what Joseph's reaction to all these things was. Mary kept them in heart and treasured them, pondering them, thinking about them.

Luke goes on to give the account of Joseph and Mary taking Jesus to a priest to fulfill the commandment of the Law that He was to be circumcised.

Luke 2:21

15

21 And when eight days had passed, before His circumcision, His name was then called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.

There He was given His pre-ordained name, Jesus. Then Luke tells how that they go to Jerusalem to present Him at the Temple. Again, this is in accordance with and to fulfill the Law...

Ex 13:1-2

16

1 Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 2 "Sanctify to Me every firstborn, the first offspring of every womb among the sons of Israel, both of man and beast; it belongs to Me."

On the occasion of the tenth plague, the killing of the first born throughout Egypt, the Lord commands that the first-born of every womb, man and beast, were to be sanctified to Him...

Ex 13:15-16

17

15 'It came about, when Pharaoh was stubborn about letting us go, that the Lord killed every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of beast. Therefore, I sacrifice to the Lord the males, the first offspring of every womb, but every firstborn of my sons I redeem.' 16 "So it shall serve as a sign on your hand and as phylacteries on your forehead, for with a powerful hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt."

The first-born of the beasts were to be sacrificed, while the first-born of each family was to be redeemed before the Lord with a sacrifice.

Joseph and Mary take Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem to fulfill the Law...

Luke 2:22-24

18

22 And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "EVERY firstborn MALE THAT OPENS THE WOMB SHALL BE CALLED

HOLY TO THE LORD"), 24 and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord, "A PAIR OF TURTLEDOVES OR TWO YOUNG PIGEONS."

Luke gives the account of Anna, the prophetess...

Luke 2:38 19

38 At that very moment she came up and began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Also at the Temple they encounter a man, Simeon, who had been told by the Lord that he would live to see the Messiah...

Luke 2:29-32 20

29 "Now Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace, According to Your word; 30 For my eyes have seen Your salvation, 31 Which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, 32 A LIGHT OF REVELATION TO THE GENTILES, And the glory of Your people Israel."

The birth of Jesus was not a very well-kept secret. The news of His birth spread rapidly. Note...

Luke 2:33 21

33 And His father and mother were amazed at the things which were being said about Him.

Let's go back now to another point the account gives concerning what the shepherds did after seeing the baby and telling Joseph and Mary what had happened to them...

Luke 2:20 22

20 The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.

Faithful followers of God, Christ, and the Word know that they are not commanded to celebrate the birth of Jesus anywhere in the scriptures. So why is it important. Pay attention the reaction of the wise men, Simeon, Anna the prophetess, and here, the shepherds.

The birth of Jesus, when believed, demands an acknowledgment of the power and majesty of God who, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ has provided for man the opportunity to be saved. That is what we see with the shepherds who went away glorifying and praising God for what they had heard.

Do we? Do we glorify and praise God for sending Jesus to die on the cross for our sin? Do we see the importance of the celebration, the commemoration, of that sacrifice when we partake of the emblems of that celebration in the Lord's Supper?

Make no mistake, the birth of Jesus the Christ was an earth-changing event, a "Force Majeur," but it is not to be commemorated as a response to the commandment of the Word. There is no such commandment.

Many faithful believers have difficulty with the concept of Christmas because of where it came from. Last week we talked about the idea of holiday spirit and how that the faithful follower of God should have Godly spirit in their lives every day of the year, in the same sense, a Biblical Christian of today, does not, cannot, celebrate this holiday season as the birth of Christ. It is not. It might be a convenient time to get together with relatives and exchange pleasantries, maybe have a great meal, and that can and should be enjoyed, but it cannot be celebrated or even condoned as the birth-date of our Lord and Savior.

I don't want to appear to be a Scrooge bah-humbugging Christmas. I just think it important that we have an understanding of it and what the scriptures do command us to do, and that's to celebrate the sacrifice of Christ for our sins, and not His birth.