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The Real Miracle of Christmas

BY RICHARD JORDAN

It seems that with each passing year the Christmas season begins earlier and earlier. We noticed this year that as early as October merchants were trying to generate the Christmas buying spirit. While such commercialism certainly gives the thoughtful observer pause, for believers there are other more basic considerations which should govern our attitudes concerning the celebration of the winter holidays.

Frankly, once we come to an appreciation of the *real miracle* of this universally observed season, we will be liberated from its false emphasis and pagan trappings and find the real cause of rejoicing.

A BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION?

December 25 was observed by ancient pagans for centuries before the birth of Jesus Christ to worship the birth of a new sun. For example, *Collier’s Encyclopedia* identifies December 25 as “the day the Romans celebrated the Mithraic feast of the sun god (*natalis solis invicit*, the birthday of the unconquerable sun).” Placing the birth of Christ on a date to harmonize with the pagan birthday celebration of the sun-god is a case study in how far apostate religious leaders will go in their efforts to merge truth with error.

The early Christians did not celebrate Christmas—or even the birth of Christ. Thus they had little interest in the actual date of His birth. In fact, Origen spoke for a lot of early Christians when he said in 254 A.D. that celebrating Jesus’ human birth would be sinful. It would be, he declared, like celebrating the birth of a Pharaoh of Egypt instead of the Son of God.

By the fifth century there were a lot of different dates given for the Savior’s birth: January 6, March 25, April 9, May 20, November 17 to mention a few! So, says the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, the bishop of Rome asked his scholars to decide what the official date would be. They settled on December 25.

Most historians agree that December 25 was chosen mainly because that date was the winter solstice under the Julian calendar.¹ The winter solstice is the day the sun begins moving back to the northern skies; days begin to lengthen again and people start hoping for spring, warmth and the rebirth of vegetation.

“Solar monotheism”—the worship of the sun-god presiding over many lesser gods—was prevalent in the Roman Empire. The Emperor Aurelius had proclaimed the old Persian sun god, Mithra, to be the principle patron of the empire. Very popular with the Romans, they celebrated Mithra’s birthday on the date of the winter solstice.

This pagan sun-worship of Mithraism was the “largest pagan religious cult which fostered the celebration of December 25 as a holiday throughout the Roman and Greek worlds.” This winter festival was called “the Nativity”—the “nativity of the *sun*.” In fact, the winter solstice was the time at which all the sun gods from Osiris to Jupiter and Mithra had celebrated their birthdays, the celebration being adorned with the evergreens² and wreaths of Adonis (symbols of life), the holly and mistletoe of Saturn (symbols of fertility and eternal life), along with the drinking of toasts from Wassail bowls (forerunner of our eggnog), exchanging gifts, the general feeling of generosity, and so forth.

Emperor Constantine helped bring December 25 into Christendom by choosing Jesus over Mithra as the one to celebrate. The festival of the sun god’s birth—with all its trappings—was transformed into a celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ.

1. In 1582 the Gregorian Calendar—the one we use today—was adopted. It was a little different from the earlier Julian Calendar and the date of the winter solstice was changed from December 25 to December 21.

2. Today’s use of the “Christmas tree” is in reality a carry-over from paganism—in a modified form, of course. See Jer. 10:1-5. Cf. Deut 12:2, I Kings 14:23, II Kings 16:4; 17:10..

Thus Christmas—literally, “Christ’s-Mass”—was adopted by the Roman church during the fifth and sixth centuries as part of Rome’s consistent pattern of assimilating pagan religious ideas, changing their meanings and absorbing them into the developing church’s life.

WHEN WAS CHRIST REALLY BORN?

Often we hear the almost sheepish admission that December 25 is not actually the Savior’s birthday. This is generally followed by the declaration that we do not really know when He was born. But is this latter assertion correct?

Does the Scripture in fact reveal when Jesus was born—is there information that actually sheds light on why December 25 has been so universally a part of pagan celebrations and, indeed, what part it really plays in the purposes of God? Let’s see!

The first chapter of the Book of Luke contains information concerning the conception and birth of both John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus. Luke’s record is characteristic of his stated determination to be an exacting historian. As he is inspired by the Spirit to record these events, he includes precise dating information as sign posts to guide us. Follow these passages closely:

1. Luke 1:5-9:

“There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth.

“And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

“And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years.

“And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest’s office before God in the order of his course,

“According to the custom of the priest’s office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.”

Zacharias was a priest. When his “course” of ministry in the temple at Jerusalem came, he was found there faithfully discharging his duties. It was at this point he learned he and Elisabeth would be the parents of a special child—one who would “*be great in the sight of the Lord*” and who would “*go before him in the spirit and power of Elias [i.e., Elijah]*” (vs. 15-17).

2. Luke 1:23,24:

“And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house.

“And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months...”

After his service in the temple, Zacharias traveled home with the good news. He lived in “the hill country” some 30 miles south of Jerusalem (v. 39). It would have been interesting to have been present as he sought to explain all this to Elisabeth, especially since he could not speak (v.20)! At any rate, in an obvious venture of faith, Elisabeth conceived John at this time.

3. Luke 1:26-27,35-36:

“And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth,

“To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary.

“And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.

“And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and THIS IS THE SIXTH MONTH WITH HER, who was called barren.”

Six months after the conception of John, the angel Gabriel announced to Mary the supernatural conception of the Messiah—“*Behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call His name Jesus*” (v. 31).

From these facts we discover that Jesus was conceived—and thus born—*six months after John*. Clear. Concise. Obvious. And if we can fix the time of John’s conception, everything would fall into place with ease! But how can this be done?

It was as a young believer—almost five decades ago now!—that my friend and mentor, Clyde Reynolds, superintendent of the *Mobile Rescue Mission* with whom I labored, pointed out to me this chronology. I can still remember the delight of my young heart at the possibility of locating precisely *from Scripture* just when Christ was born! And the information needed to date John’s conception was also right there in front of me all the time!

“There were in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, OF THE COURSE OF ABIA...”

“And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest’s office before God IN THE ORDER OF HIS COURSE” (vs, 5,8).

Clearly, Zacharias was in Jerusalem ministering during “*the course of Abia*.” But just when is this? The answer is to be found in I Chronicles 24—and in remembering that names are often spelled differently in the Old Testament because it was written in Hebrew, rather than Greek.

In I Chronicles 24 we learn of the arrangement set in place by King David for the ministry of the priests in the temple. There were to be twenty four “courses,” or “divisions,” when each priestly family would serve in the temple at Jerusalem. Each course lasted one week (II Kings 11:9, II Chron. 23:8). Thus each priest would serve “*in the order of his course*” for one week every six months.

Each Israelite male (including the priests) was required to travel to Jerusalem for the three great pilgrimage feasts: Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles (Deut. 16:16). Thus David instructed that each week between these feasts a different family of priests would serve in the temple. Then, three times each year all the priests served together—during Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles.

When was it, then, that Zacharias served? According to I Chronicles 24:10, the “course of Abijah [the Hebrew spelling of the Greek “Abia”] was the *eight* in order. Eight weeks after the Passover (the “beginning of months”) puts this course in *the middle of June*. This would be when Zacharias was serving in the temple and had the conversation with the angel about the birth of John.

After his week of service, he then traveled the some thirty miles to his home in Juda and at this time Elizabeth became pregnant. This put the *conception* of John in *late June*.

In the *sixth* month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy Gabriel announced to Mary the conception of Jesus. Consequently we would count six months from late June and arrive at the date for the *conception* of Jesus—*late December!*

Thus the *birth* of John would have been in *late March* (nine months after his June conception) and the *birth* of Jesus would have been in *late September* (nine months after his late December conception).

A most fascinating thing in all this is the connection between the *conception* of Christ and *late December*—the very time of the winter solstice! The im-

portance of this becomes all the more revealing when we consider

THE REAL MIRACLE.

It may be startling to consider, but the *real* miracle does not center around the actual birth of Jesus. The birth process itself was perfectly *natural*—a normal delivery like so many others! The surroundings and circumstances were, of course, touching and instructive, but there was nothing unusual in the birth itself.

What was miraculous, however, is found in the wondrous fact that Christ was *conceived* by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a virgin:

“Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying,

“Behold, A VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call His name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us” (Matt. 1:22,23).

“*Emmanuel—God with us!*” The one whom Jehovah calls “*the man that is My Fellow [i.e., equal]*” (Zech. 13:7). Thus we read that “*unto the Son He saith, THY THRONE O GOD, is forever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness....therefore GOD, EVEN THY GOD, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness*” (Heb. 1:8,9).

God came down “*in the likeness of sinful flesh*” (Rom. 8:3)—“*came into the world to save sinners*” (I Tim. 1:15). Thus Jehovah declared through the prophet: “*They shall look upon ME WHOM THEY HAVE PIERCED*” (Zech. 12:10), for “*God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself*” (II Cor. 5:19).

Jesus Christ is the unique person of the universe. He is the manifest person of the Godhead. He is the “*one mediator between God and men*”—the bridge between God and men, between heaven and earth.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

“The same was in the beginning with God.

“All things were made by Him; and without Him was not anything made that was made.”

“AND THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND DWELT AMONG US...” (John. 1:1-3,14).

Little wonder Thomas bowed before Him, declaring, “*My Lord and my God*” (John 20:28).

What a joy to worship a God Who can be touched by the feelings of our infirmities! The incar-

nation of Jesus Christ demonstrates that our God is a God of history and event, for God Himself has stepped into time and has set forth in the bold relief of His Son the profound truth that He is a God Who enters into the events of human history—into the events of our lives. And He does it all through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Many sincere believers have been rightly troubled over the use of the birthday of pagan gods—December 25th—to honor the birth of the Savior of the world. After all, Paul clearly exhorts: “*Wherefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry*” (I Cor. 10:14).

Once we recognize, however, that the central truth—the real miracle—of the incarnation of Christ is the *conception*—a conception which took place on or about December 25th!—it becomes obvious that the pagan winter festivals are only Satanic corruptions of a marvelous truth. Thus we are free to use this time of year to give thanks for the genuinely stupendous miracle which is a foundation stone of the Christian faith.

“This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners...” (I Tim. 1:15).

“For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich” (II Cor. 8:9).

Because Jesus came we can...

...have peace with God,
be filled with all joy,
abound in hope,
be justified freely,
be alive unto God,
have the spirit of wisdom,
be under grace,
know the hope of His calling,
be conformed to His image,
be a child of God,
be His heir,
have victory,
know the riches of the glory
of His inheritance...

...because Jesus came
we have so many reasons to rejoice!

THE TREASURE WITHIN

“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us” (II Cor. 4:7).

This is an effective verse about the dynamic of the Christian life. It demonstrates that when we get frustrated with our “earthiness,” we need to remember “*the treasure*” within us—the Lord Jesus Christ.

A recent note demonstrates this in an instructive way:

“In my early days I had a really bad temper. I tried all sorts of anger management techniques but I never got very far. When I got married, it only escalated. The teaching on grace—on “*Christ in you the hope of glory*”—has transformed my life. Now when I feel impatient, I don’t pray, ‘Lord, give me patience...now!’ No, I look to Jesus and say, ‘Lord Jesus, I thank you that you are my patience—I rest and depend on you.’

“Not too long ago my wife commented, ‘You have improved in the area of your temper.’ I thought about what she said and realized I was not even conscious of the change in me. When family members can see the patience of Christ manifesting itself through me, a naturally impatient person, God gets the glory.”

Perhaps you are frustrated with your anger, failures, bad habits. Maybe you’re discouraged by your feelings of jealousy, distrust, bitterness, depression, defeat. Don’t condemn yourself for being “earthen.” Don’t try to “cast off” your earthiness. Just realize that you have “the treasure” of *Christ in you*. Relax and let Him live His life through you as you depend on Him.

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WE WOULD EXPECT

If anyone had an excuse to be depressed and defeated by overwhelming circumstances and problems, it was Paul. After he had been condemned and almost assassinated in Israel, then shipwrecked in the Mediterranean, washing up on the small island of Malta, he found himself under arrest in the capital of the empire waiting his trial before Caesar. Would he be executed? Left a prisoner? Released?

While in chains, he wrote four letters which demonstrate that he never thought of himself as a prisoner of Rome! Instead he saw himself as *"the prisoner of Jesus Christ."* And what a wonderfully clear and convincing difference this made in his outlook.

We would expect a prisoner to say something like: "I am poor and miserable!" *But Paul said* to the Ephesians, "I am rich and blessed with more blessings than I can even count" (Eph. 1:3). This is the message of Ephesians!

We would expect a prisoner to say something like: "I am the most unhappy and discontented person in the whole world!" *But Paul said* to the Philippians, "I can rejoice at all times and I can be content in whatever state I am in, even when I am in prison" (Phil. 4:4,10-13). This is the message of Philippians!

We would expect a prisoner to say something like: "I am in desperate need. Life is terrible!" *But Paul said* to the Colossians, "Christ is everything I need! Christ is my life!" (Col. 2:10; 3:4). This is the message of Colossians!

We would expect that if a Christian were thrown into jail he might say: "Lord, I need to get out of here so that I can start serving you again!" *But Paul* served the Lord even during his time in bonds. He even preached the gospel to a runaway slave named Onesimus who got saved and became profitable to him in the ministry. This is the message of Philemon!

The grace of the Living God had captured Paul. Has it captured you? The victory that is in the Christ-life does not ignore problem situations or default on any responsibilities we may have to make things better. Rather it conveys the note of living in the reality of our current identity in Christ, no matter what the situations and circumstances life brings our way.

"Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ; and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place" (II Cor. 2:14).

BE SURE TO CHECK OUT our newly redesigned web site for updates and free video/audio studies.
www.GraceImpact.org

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FORGOTTEN TRUTHS IS AIRING IN CHICAGO each Saturday at 6:00 a.m. over ION (Channel 38). Check out the web site and on-line store at **ForgottenTruths.com**, as well as the listing times for cities like Detroit, Albuquerque, New Orleans, Colorado Springs, Denver or Indianapolis. The program is also on **DirectTV channel 367** each Saturday evening at 9:00 Eastern Time.

THE 18th ANNUAL CHICAGO SOUTHSIDE GRACE CONFERENCE will be held **March 22, 2014** at the *Clarion Hotel Midway*, 7353 S. Cicero Ave., Chicago. This one day event is always an outstanding time of fellowship and instruction. For details, call our office at 888.535.2300. Put this on your calendar today!

GREAT LAKES GRACE BIBLE CONFERENCE is scheduled for **May 23-25, 2014**. The meeting will again be held at the *Amish Door Inn*, Wilmot, Ohio. Reservations should be made directly with the hotel at 888.264.7436. For further information visit **OhioGraceMinistries.org** or call 330.265.5155.

OUR SOLDIERS TRAINING FOR SERVICE meeting will be held **April 25-27, 2014**. This is a special time of refreshing and instruction designed especially with "the work of the ministry" in mind. Perhaps you should plan to attend!

ALL OF OUR 2013 SUMMER CONFERENCE SESSIONS are available for viewing at **GraceImpact.org**. This is an opportunity for you to enjoy the blessing over and over again!

WE THANK GOD FOR OUR FAITHFUL FRIENDS who continue to pray for us and give of their finances to see that this ministry is able to press forward. In these uncertain days, we rejoice in your *"fellowship in the gospel."*

FOUR WAYS TO GIVE

This ministry is a campaign *"to make all men see."* As such, it is a work of faith supported by the prayerful giving of its friends. There are four ways you can partner with us with your contributions:

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2. *By phone:* call our office at **888.535.2300** and use your charge card.
3. *By Online giving:* go to **graceimpact.org** and use your charge card or PayPal account. You can also find instructions for electronic transfers, auto drafts, etc.
4. *By contributing things other than money:* stocks, vehicles, real estate, charitable trusts, etc. Contact us for details about how to proceed. And remember that estate planning allows you to continue to give even after you've moved to heaven!

The *real question*, of course, is not *how* but *why* give to the work of getting the unadulterated, undiluted message of grace out to others. But if you haven't come to grips with the answer to that question, you aren't ready to be a generous giver yet. Keep growing! Your time may come.

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Christ Jesus came into the world
To seek and save the lost;
Full well He knew before He came
How great would be the cost.
For He was in the form of God
Before He here was Man;
So He knew of Calvary's cross
Before the world began.
—J.C. O'Hair

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