

The Most Wonderful Time of the Year?

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Tis the season to be jolly! Lights are hung, gifts are wrapped, and the count down has begun towards the most anticipated date of the calendar – Christmas.

December 25th is etched in the mind of mankind as the day that Santa Clause comes to town with toys and joy for children of all ages. Jolly Old Saint Nicholas ushers in winter with Christmas carols, delightful food, and traditions that have brought families together for years.

And who can forget the trees? Oh Christmas tree, oh Christmas tree, how lovely are your branches! Trees of all shapes and sizes are cut down, hoisted inside, and decorated with bright lights, beautiful ornaments, bows of silver, and ribbons of gold. What is Christmas without an evergreen Christmas tree? And, it's the most wonderful time of the year, especially for retail stores who post record sales during the Christmas season. Grinches are hard to find, as under the tree are gifts for every member of the family (including mean and grumpy Uncle Bob).

However, polls suggest that many people think that Christmas has become too commercialized. It is a fact that this year, American Christmas spending will total half of the national annual defense budget, a whopping 205 billion dollars! Isn't this a bit much?

With all the excitement of Christmas, it is easy to forget the real reason for the season. But, let's not. Let's look past the luminescent sleigh and reindeer, to see the light

up manger scene displayed in the front yard. Christmas isn't just about presents and fruitcake. Christmas is more than just a retail holiday. It's all about the birth of Christ. Christmas is a time to remember the past. Right?

In remembering we cannot forget that tree decorating, gift giving, and even the date of December 25th were part of winter celebrations long before Christ came. Christmas before Christ? Though the celebration of Christmas seems "harmless" and modern, it has actually evolved from ancient times. The Encyclopedia Britannica reports that "The traditional customs connected with Christmas have developed from several sources as a result of the celebration of the birth of Christ mixed with the pagan agricultural and solar observations at midwinter. In the Roman world Saturnalia was a time of merrymaking and exchange of gifts. December 25 was also regarded as the birth date of the Iranian mystery god Mithras, the Sun of Righteousness."

On their website, www.christmas-tree.com, The Christmas Tree Farm Network reveals, "The Romans celebrated the winter solstice with a feast called Saturnalia in honor of Saturnus, the god of agriculture. They decorated their houses with greens and lights and exchanged gifts. They gave coins for prosperity, pastries for happiness, and lamps to light one's journey through life. Centuries ago in Great Britain, woods priests called Druids used evergreens during mysterious winter solstice rituals. The Druids used holly and mistletoe as symbols of eternal life, and place evergreen branches over doors to keep away evil spirits. Late in the Middle Ages, Germans and Scandinavians placed evergreen trees inside their homes or just outside their doors to show their hope in the forthcoming spring. Our modern Christmas tree evolved from these early traditions. Legend has it that Martin Luther began the tradition of decorating trees to celebrate Christmas. One crisp Christmas Eve, about the year 1500, he was walking through snow-covered woods and was struck by the beauty of a group of small evergreens. Their branches, dusted with snow, shimmered in the moonlight. When he got home, he set up a little fir tree indoors so he could share this story with his children. He decorated it with candles, which he lit in honor of Christ's birth." The idea sounds ridiculous, but the truth of Christmas is a part of history. The Pilgrims who first settled in America understood this. History records that the Pilgrims actually outlawed any celebration of Christmas, from 1620 to 1681. And England's parliament outlawed Christmas in 1643.

Just open up any encyclopedia or browse the Internet, to see the proof that Christmas is an ancient pagan day of worship. But, does its origin really matter? When a person celebrates Christmas, surely they are not worshipping trees, nature, and the sun?

Today, most people are more concerned about checking off their wish list than learning about the history of Christmas. The majority of parents are guilt-free while they mislead

their children with stories of Santa and flying reindeer. Surely the excitement of gifts and the family traditions outweigh the truth of any ancient customs? Proverbs 19:2 says differently, "It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor be hasty and miss the way." The excitement and good feelings of Christmas does not outweigh its pagan roots. The knowledge of Christmas past taints the celebration of Christmas present and future. The end does not justify the means. For fundamental believers, the holiday of Halloween is often forsaken because of its witchcraft and pagan roots. Why then is the origin of Christmas glossed over by visions of sugarplums dancing in our heads?

Every single tradition of this holiday can easily be traced to ancient rituals. The same exact practices that were once used in cultic worship to conjure up evil spirits are now being repeated in schools, churches, and homes as part of Christmas celebrations. Many Pastors and Priests defend Christmas traditions by stating that these actions now point to Christ. "Put Christ back into Christmas," they say. Can believers conquer the pagan influences of ancient times, by giving these customs Christian religious meanings? The Scriptures emphatically answer 'No.' Consider this passage from the Prophet Jeremiah (10:2) speaking six centuries before the Savior came: "Do not learn the practices of the heathen." What did the heathen do that was so despicable? What practices are believers to stay clear from? What custom was so horrible that it should never be repeated? "Do not learn the practices of the heathen... For the customs of the people are vain: for one cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman with the axe. They deck it with silver and gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not," Jeremiah 10:2-4.

Examining the origin of Christmas isn't a ploy of political correctness. Instead, this is a natural quest for any believer that seeks to walk in the truth. The fact is, that Christmas is full of pagan practices. From wreaths and jolly old elves, to even the date of December 25th, it's all plainly pagan. Let's be serious here - most people don't really believe that Christ was born on December 25th. This date was obviously chosen as a day to recognize the advent. Chosen by who and why? Any Encyclopedia can answer these questions..."after the triumph of Constantine, the church at Rome assigned December 25 as the date for the celebration of the feast, possibly about A.D. 320 or 353. By the end of the fourth century the whole Christian world was celebrating Christmas on that day, with the exception of the Eastern churches, where it was celebrated on January 6. The choice of December 25 was probably influenced by the fact that on this day the Romans celebrated the Mithraic feast of the Sun-god (natalis solis invicti), and that the Saturnalia also came at this time," says Colliers Encyclopedia.

Even the respected "History Channel" supports the claim of Christmas's pagan past. To learn more, visit the History Channel's main website and surf to the page called "The Real

Story of Christmas." (To get there easily, double click on the following link:
<http://www.historychannel.com/exhibits/holidays/christmas/real3.htm>)

Those who are searching for truth can easily see that Christmas is tainted with evil. Followers of the Savior have been called to "come out and be separate." 1 Thessalonians 5:21,22 says it best, "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil."

The principle here is that one should abstain from all practices of evil origin, including Christmas. But, does that mean that the month of December must be spent in solitary confinement? Should a person give up all winter celebrations? No. There is a holy day for believers who want to follow the example set by the Savior.

The world celebrates Christmas. The Messiah celebrated Chanukah in John 10:22-23, "And it was at Jerusalem during the Feast of Dedication, and it was winter. And the Messiah walked in the temple in Solomon's porch." Chanukah isn't just a Jewish holiday. It is a set apart time of rejoicing and reflection for all followers of the Bible. Believers are to follow the Savior's every example. The Savior celebrated Chanukah and so should we. Remember that the Savior was a Hebrew-speaking Jew. What Jew would be at the Temple during Chanukah and not join the celebration? John 10 clearly indicates that He rejoiced at Chanukah and thus put his seal of approval upon this day.

The Hebrew word "Chanukah" literally means "dedication." Chanukah celebrates the dedication of the Temple, after the Greek army desecrated it. While history recounts Christmas's pagan past, the account of Chanukah is a military story. Chanukah is based upon an actual military battle won by a group of Hebrews. It is an eight-day celebration, commemorating the historic victory of the Maccabee family over the Syrian tyrant, Antiochus, in the 2nd century B.C. Chanukah is NOT the "Jewish Christmas," but an altogether separate celebration of victory over paganism.

After conquering Jerusalem, Antiochus showed his utter contempt for the Holy One of Israel, by sacrificing a pig on the altar. Antiochus outlawed the Biblical faith and put to death any person who dared to observe it. He declared that everyone had to become Greek and succumb to worldly ways. The Greek / pagan worldview was, and is, based upon intellectual knowledge and a pursuit of self-interest. The Greek oppression placed upon the Hebrews was not physical slavery or political embargos. It was spiritual bondage. The Greeks introduced and forced their culture upon the Hebrews. Many Hebrews changed their faith. For many others, assimilation did not set well. Judah Maccabee, son of Mattathias, a Hasmonean priest, led a revolt. Noted for courage and

military genius, Judah led an outnumbered, unskilled guerilla army to a decided victory over superior Syrian forces. Upon entering Jerusalem, the Hebrews cleansed and rededicated the Temple. In honor of this victory, an eight-day festival was begun. (A guide for celebrating Chanukah can be found at www.emetministries.com)

Judah Maccabee has become a popular folk hero; a symbol of religious freedom and national liberation. Indeed, the resolve of Judah is something to consider. Though threatened with imprisonment and even death, Judah would not trade his faith for worldly ways. When confronted with compromise, do we follow suit?

Judah fought for freedom from the Greeks and the Greek way of life. The Greek mindset and worldview of ancient times is the same held by the majority today. This credo cries out to "satisfy self, do what feels good, and knowledge is everything." The Greek way is to increase learning and blend in with everyone else. 1 Corinthians 1:22 explains, "the Greeks seek after knowledge."

One fundamental difference between the Hebrew way and the worldly or Greek mindset is between knowing and doing. While the ancient Greeks (and the modern person) is concerned with knowledge and belief, the Hebrew wants to do right. Society's accommodation of differences says we can separate what we believe from what we actually do. We are told, "the soul and the body are separate worlds without restraint." According to the Scriptures, faith is proved through action and doing. "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?" Our actions in the physical are directly connected to the spiritual. This is why our deeds must be from pure, and not from pagan influences.

The Greek oppression was a direct opposition to the Hebrew way of life; a life focused on learning and living the Scriptures. The battle Judah Maccabee faced is similar to the struggle each believer wrestles with today. Instead of being tempted to wear a toga, we are enticed to stick with the status quo. A recent poll shows that 92% of Americans, including atheists and Muslims, celebrate Christmas. Everywhere we turn we are faced with parades, cards, and mistletoe. Plus there are Christmas memories of our little children or departed loved ones. Let's face it; it is not easy to forsake Christmas. This is a hard decision, but a decision that must be made. Will we violate the Scriptures and act like the pagans, by decorating trees and celebrating Mithras? Or, will we follow the Savior's example and enjoy the blessing of Chanukah?

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