

**Where Did  
The Celebration  
Of  
Christmas Come  
From?**

## FESTIVALS—CHRISTMAS

About two thousand years ago God gave his one and only son, Jesus, to the world. He chose a young woman named Mary to bear this unblemished male child: (Luke 2:6) “And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.”

The Redeemer was presented in the humble setting of a shepherd’s cave and was laid in a manger, where animals went to be fed. It was the perfect place for the Savior to appear.

Everyone loves a new baby. This infant was no exception. With relatives in town for the census, many from the village of Bethlehem would have gone to see Jesus, but the Bible, for a significant purpose, mentions only two groups of visitors: humble shepherds and foreign kings. The prophecies concerning the Messiah focused on his dual mission, redeeming us from our sin and returning to reign in glory.

From the very moment Adam and Eve stepped out of perfection and walked into the darkness of the world, they needed to be redeemed. Israel lived with God’s promise that he would send a savior. The period of waiting must have seemed endless. People of faith continued to assure the Israelites that one day the Messiah would come. Certainly there was enough evidence that God always keeps a promise!

### **Advent**

The word *Advent* is derived from a Latin root meaning “to come.” Early Christian leaders recognized the need to set apart a special time to remember those long years of waiting and to provide time for people to prepare spiritually for the coming of Christmas. They acknowledged that getting ready

for Jesus' coming has more than one meaning. Not only is it an annual celebration of an event that took place many years ago; it is a celebration of his coming to us each day as well as each year during the holy season. It is also a time to remember Jesus' promise to come again. True preparation for the coming of Christmas includes all of these elements.

The celebration is to begin on the fourth Sunday prior to Christmas Day, allowing four weeks for spiritual preparation. This decision was in keeping with Old Testament festivals, which often included a number of days of preparation prior to the holy day. In the tenth century the beginning of the Christian year was advanced to the first Sunday in Advent.

### **The Festival of Christmas**

No one knows the exact day when Jesus was born (it is believed by some that the actual date of Jesus' birth was late August or early September). December 25, the date assigned to remember the birth, was introduced to counter the pagan feast of the sun god—the popular winter solstice festival held in Rome—the birthday of the Invincible Sun. This was a significant celebration in the cult of Mithras, the Persian god of light who was often identified with the sun. Long before the birth of Christ ancient people living in the Northern Hemisphere, observing the disappearance of the sun, expressed their fears in annual superstitious rituals.

The climax of the pagan festival Saturnalia came on the 25th of December. It was after the shortest day of the year, the time of the winter solstice, and was celebrated as the “birthday of the unconquered sun.” The drinking and fertility orgies practiced were revolting to Christians.

The Christian celebration was intended to be a theological corrective. The season was chosen to recognize and proclaim that Christ was born into a dark

world and that he is the true source of light. Christians wanted to mark the birth of the Son of God, who is the Light of the World, at a time when others were celebrating the mystery of the physical light coming back into the dark sky. The observance was intended to draw people away from superstition and myth and to help them focus on the deeper truth.

The theological corrective and observance of the birth of Jesus did not happen immediately after his life and death. For three hundred years after the ascension of Jesus to heaven, people remembered his death and resurrection. It was not until the early part of the fourth century that Christians felt a need to honor the birth of the Savior. In keeping with Old Testament feasts and festivals, it was designated a feast day, called the Feast of the Nativity. The celebration featured a special mass in honor of the remembrance of his coming. It was thus called *Christ's Mass* and became known later as simply *Christmas*. This in itself is significant, for it was Christ who was being celebrated, not Christmas.

### **The Twelve Days of Christmas**

Who celebrates a birth before the child arrives? What family stops celebrating the day after the birth? In the sixth century Christian leaders declared Christmas a twelve-day festival. December 25 to January 5 were designated feast days to remember the birth of Immanuel, which means "God is with us." The incarnation, God's becoming human in order to be at one with us, is a worthy reason to continue the celebration beyond December 25.

### **Epiphany**

The focus of Christmas is on Jesus, the Lamb of God. Epiphany celebrates Christ the King! The word *Epiphany* comes from the Greek and means “appearance,” “manifestation” or “showing forth.” Epiphany, January 6, remembers the arrival of the kings who journeyed a long distance, guided by a special star, to honor the birth of the Christ Child. They said, “For we saw His star in the east, and have come to worship Him” (Matthew 2:2 NASB). The adoration of the Magi represents the manifestation of Christ’s glory to the Gentiles. The wise men clearly recognized who he was and worshiped him.

### **Celebrating Christmas**

If you had never practiced any tradition in relation to Christmas, how might you celebrate the good news of the birth of the Savior? What might you do to show your appreciation for God’s gift? An old Hebrew proverb is helpful as you contemplate your answer: “Put something where you can see it so your eye will remind your heart.” The Christmas season is filled with myriad visual opportunities. Carefully choose the images you want your heart to remember.

### **References and Resources**

G. M. Nelson, *To Dance with God* (New York: Paulist, 1986) 59-126; R. E. Webber, ed., *The Services of the Christian Year*, vol. 5 of *The Complete Library of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Star Song, 1994) 157-222; M. Zimmerman, *Celebrating the Christian Year* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1993) 19-91.

—Martha Zimmerman

## **Did You Know?**

### **Why Fir Trees Are Decorated**

A legend explains why fir trees traditionally are decorated. On the night of Jesus Christ's birth, it is said, all creation, including the trees, went to the stable to pay homage to the Holy Child. Every tree burst into bloom and gave forth its fruit except the poor fir tree, which had no fruit or blossom to bear.

Seeing its sorrow, the stars took pity on the tree and came down to alight on its branches, setting the whole tree aglow and winning delightful coos from the watchful baby.

### **Early Christmas Celebrations**

Back in the early 1700s, when the United States were the Colonies, the settlers in Williamsburg, capital of Colonial Virginia, celebrated Christmas with customs they had brought from England. There was no Santa Claus (a Dutch tradition), no Christmas trees (a German tradition), no Nativity creche (an Italian tradition), and no chimney stockings (an American tradition).

Christmas in Colonial Williamsburg was primarily a holy day, but the atmosphere was not solemn. Churches and homes were decorated with greens, while candles burned in all the windows to welcome carolers.

There was a public celebration, too. Musicians played special concerts, and fireworks and cannon were exploded to heighten the general merriment. Feasting was in order with dishes of roasted fowl and hare, narrow pudding, ham, oysters, sausage, shellfish, often capped by whole roast boar on a platter. Some gifts were given then as part of the Christmas celebration, but not nearly on the present-day scale.