

Yuletide Traditions: and the Winter Solstice

*“The angel said
unto them, Fear
not: for, behold, I
bring you good
tidings of great
joy, which shall be
to all people. For
unto you is born
this day in the city
of David a
Saviour, which is
Christ the Lord.”
—Luke 2:10,11*

THESE JOYFUL WORDS

were spoken by God’s angel to the shepherds who had come to worship the birth of our Lord Jesus more than two thousand years ago. They were announcing God’s greatest gift to his poor, sin-sick and dying human creation. The full impact and realization of Jesus’ earthly ministry and redemption for mankind,

however, will not be made manifest to the world until his future kingdom of righteousness that will soon be established over all the earth.

UNTO US A CHILD IS BORN

Many centuries before our Lord Jesus was born into the world as a perfect human child, the Prophet Isaiah was moved by the Holy Spirit of God to

foretell this great future event. He wrote, “Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.”—Isa. 9:6,7

The prophecy speaks of Jesus as the antitypical King David, and that he would in due time assume the several and distinct offices of his yet future kingdom as outlined in the prophecy. At that future time, our loving Heavenly Father would entrust the glorified Jesus to exercise the great power and authority that would be given him to bless all the families of the earth as promised to the true and faithful “seed” of Abraham.—Gen. 22:15-18

THE HOLIDAY SEASON

As we approach another holiday season, and the world’s attention once again is drawn to the birth of our dear Lord Jesus, we must acknowledge that he left us with no instructions to celebrate his birth date. However, he did give us explicit instructions to remember his death. It was through Jesus’ sacrificial death that his Heavenly Father could carry out his ultimate plan and purpose for the reconciliation of the human family.

Jesus gave us the instructions to memorialize his death when he had gathered with his disciples in the upper room to observe the Passover. These

were the final hours of his earthly ministry, and just before he was to give his life as the price for the world's sins.

It was at that time that he substituted his own life for the antitypical lamb of sacrifice, and instituted the Memorial. He then invited his followers to partake of the emblems and to remember his death as recorded by Luke in his gospel. We read, "He took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, Take this, and divide it among yourselves: For I say unto you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine, until the kingdom of God shall come. And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me."—Luke 22:17-19

JESUS' BIRTH AND DEATH

Although many Christian people continue to observe December 25th as the proper date of Jesus' birth, there is no scriptural evidence to prove this assumption. Many students of the Bible have come to the conclusion that the blessed event took place around the beginning of our present month of October, which we believe is more accurate.

To put this in its proper context, Jesus began his ministry when he was thirty years old, according to the Law. (Luke 3:23) His ministry was 3 1/2 years in length, based on Daniel's prophecy of the 70 weeks. (Dan. 9:24-27) Messiah's appearance was to take place at the start of the seventieth week of years. His sacrificial death in the middle of the final week of seven years marked the period as being 3 1/2 years.

Our Lord's death took place when the Jews were preparing for the Passover season during the Jewish

month Nisan. This occurs at the time of the Spring Equinox, and corresponds to our months March or April, depending on the position of the moon. The typical lamb was to be selected on the 10th day of Nisan, and killed on the 14th day.—Exod. 12:1-6

According to the scriptural record, Jesus' death took place on Friday, Nisan 14, about the ninth hour, or 3:00 P.M. (Luke 23:44-46) The following day was always a Sabbath Day, but that particular year it also coincided with a "great Sabbath" (John 19:31) which further establishes that his death took place in the springtime. Thus, counting backwards 33 1/2 years, he would have been born in the early part of October.

THE WINTER SOLSTICE

Many ancient cultures chose the Winter Solstice as a special time for celebration. This particular season of the year was significant because it was the terminal point between the darkest days of the year, and the time when the sunlight would begin to increase. Using very primitive and imprecise methods, the time of the Winter Solstice was often determined by measuring the length of the shadow created by a stick or a standing stone. It also depended on clear weather to create a shadow and to make their calculations as accurate as possible.

In pagan times, the Winter Solstice was seen as part of an annual cycle of the earth's seasons known as "the wheel of the year." They celebrated eight festivals including the spring, midsummer, fall, and Yule seasons. Four others were spaced midway between each of them. These festivals have origins in Germanic and Celtic pre-Christian feasts.

The word “solstice” literally means “the sun stands still.” During the Winter Solstice, the path of the sun has reached its furthest southern position, which has taken six months since it was at its most northern point. This results in the shortest period of sunlight during the entire year, and before the path of the sun turns northward once again. For those who live in the southern hemisphere, the opposite is true and indicates the longest period of daylight in the year. For regions north of the Arctic Circle, the sun will not rise on this day. Those living near the Arctic Circle will see only a twilight glow in the noontime sky, and at the North Pole the day will signify Midnight.

The date for celebrating our Lord’s birthday on December 25th, was officially set by the Roman Emperor during the fourth century of the Christian era. It thus coincided with pagan rituals and celebrations surrounding the Winter Solstice, and the time when the sun had reached its turning point. Light symbolizes life and happiness. It drives the gloom away and raises the spirits of men. The darkness had been halted, therefore the day of the Winter Solstice marks the beginning of a new solar year.

YULETIDE CELEBRATIONS

The Yuletide festival was one of the ancient traditions that was observed in many areas of Europe, the British Isles, and elsewhere. The word Yule relates to the Christmas season and the time when the sun reverses its downward path and begins to shine longer each day. The actual time may vary a few days over the course of years, but usually occurs sometime between December 21st-23rd.

The Yule ritual consisted of burning a large log on the hearth, called the Yule log. It was brought into a home where songs were sung and stories were told. Offerings of food and wine and decorations were often placed on it. The personal faults and mistakes of the homes inhabitants were burned in the fire so that they could begin the New Year with a clean slate. The fire represented the light of the world's Savior.

The log was the center of the annual Yule celebration, and was usually lighted on the eve of the Winter Solstice. It was to be kept burning throughout a previously designated period of time. In some cultures, it was held over to become a part of the entire "Twelve Days of Christmas" celebration which began on Christmas Eve and continued to the evening of January 5th. This was then followed by the "Feast of Epiphany" which was celebrated on January 6th.

The Yule log was never allowed to completely burn, and a portion of it was carefully stored in the house to start the following year's fire. The log was believed to bring good luck to the occupants of the dwelling. Ashes from the log were placed in wells to keep the water pure and they were also placed at the roots of fruit trees and vines to help them bear an abundant harvest during the following year.

The observance of Yuletide had connections with the pagan celebrations among the Scandinavian, Germanic, and other people who lived in the northern hemisphere. It also had a religious character, and it is noted how some aspects of the pagan era tradition have been gradually absorbed into the Christian traditions that also surround December

25th and the celebration of Christmas. There are certain similarities in connection with observing the annual “Rebirth of earth’s Sun” and the “Birth of the Son of righteousness.”

MITHRAISM

Even before Jesus was born, certain pagan rituals were already being observed during the time of the Winter Solstice. There were many variations, but they usually represented the death of the old life, and the birth of a new one. Some festivals were associated with the birth of a particular god who would bring life to the world in the new year. In some instances, the observance was extended until springtime when new life and vigor were actually brought forth with the increasing light and warmth of the sun.

The celebration of Mithra was one of these Winter Solstice festivals, and was annually observed by the people of ancient Persia. The celebration was in honor of the Persian god Mithra who was the deity of light, wisdom, and moral purity. He was one of three principal pagan deities whose attributes were later absorbed by a supreme deity Ahura-Mazda whose birthday was also celebrated on December 25th.

The celebration of Mithra was a popular pagan ritual in the east, and was later introduced into Europe from Persia and other areas of Asia Minor. This took place more rapidly after the conquests of Alexander the Great. Mithraism’s influence also spread throughout the Roman Empire at the beginning of the Christian era. It reached its prominence during the third century after our

Lord Jesus' First Advent, but began to lose much of its influence by the end of the fourth century. With the rise of Constantine the Great in the fourth century, Christianity was then elevated to the prominent position as the official religion of the Roman Empire. Therefore, the ancient traditions and various observances of the old pre-Christian era gave way to the new Christian religion and its festivals.

THE CHRISTIAN ERA

During the early centuries of the Christian era, many attempts had been made to reach a common consensus regarding the exact date that our Lord Jesus had been born. The religious leaders of the time wished to establish a fixed date to celebrate the mass of Christ, which was called Christmas. It was decided that calendars should also reflect the birth of Jesus as a major turning point in the history of the world. The terms B.C. and A.D. were to designate whether an event had occurred before Christ's birth, or afterward.

A cycle of festivals gradually emerged around the observance of a special day of nativity, and included Christmas Eve vigils. These became important celebrations because they were to establish the official designated time that our Lord's birth had taken place. They knew it had occurred at nighttime in accordance with Luke's gospel account. "There were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night." (Luke 2:8) The four Sundays before Christmas were to be known as Advent Sundays in preparation for the approaching special festival.

EVERGREENS' MAGICAL POWERS

Trees are the largest plants on earth, and have been the focus of certain religious cultures from ancient times. They have been invested in all cultures, and with a dignity unique to their own species. In some cases, a single tree or a grove of trees is the object of worship. Deciduous trees, bushes, and crops die, or hibernate, during the winter months, but the evergreen trees are unique because they continue to remain green.

It was believed that because they stayed green throughout the year and could withstand the rigors of an extreme winter, they had magical abilities to ward off the life-threatening powers of darkness and cold. They were also seen to possess powers over the dark and foreboding spirits. Some ancient pagan civilizations that inhabited the northern regions of Europe believed that the Winter Solstice also brought with it numerous evils and malicious spirits that stalked the eerie shadows of the winter-time forests.

Therefore, many people shored up their homes as a protection from the darkness and evil spirits by hanging evergreen wreaths and other forms of greenery over their doors and windows. In many cases, the evergreen décor was brought indoors during the winter months. The scent of the boughs would freshen the dark and dismal dwellings from the otherwise stagnant odor of thresh and straw. Sometimes, even large evergreen trees were brought inside to inhabit the home and to bless its occupants. The needles and cones could also be burned as a form of incense. The smoke and fragrance thus filled their dwellings, they believed, with the

protective and magical spirit of the evergreens during the darkest time of the year.

CHRISTMAS TREES

The origin of the Christmas tree had its roots in ancient times, and was sometimes connected to religious rituals. Many ancient cultures revered evergreen trees, which stayed green in the winter while other trees were bare. Thus, the evergreens served as a reminder that the rigors of winter would pass, and that the land would once again be fruitful.

As far back as ancient Rome, evergreens were used as a part of the Saturnalia festival, which was a New Year celebration. Romans exchanged branches and twigs of evergreens as a good luck blessing. Many historians believe that the pagan people of Scandinavia were among the first to actually bring evergreen trees indoors, which served as a mid-winter symbol of the promise of the coming warmth of spring. German Saxons are believed to have been the first to light their trees with candles, and to adorn them with decorations and trinkets for good fortune. The tradition of the indoor evergreen tree became popular in Germany, and it is believed that the first use of Christmas trees by Christians was developed in that part of Europe. Some historians have suggested that its origin may reach back as far as the eighth century.

In England, the first recorded Christmas tree was in 1841. At that time, Queen Victoria was married to Prince Albert of Germany, and he brought the tradition with him and set up the first Christmas tree in Windsor Castle. German immigrants to

America also brought the tradition with them and were celebrating Christmas with evergreen trees as early as the 1830s. The custom took several decades to catch on in the United States. During that period of time, most religious people correctly assumed that it had pagan origins. However, by the 1890s the indoor decorated Christmas tree had become popular in the majority of homes in America.

A JOYFUL SEASON

The Christmas season is the most enjoyable time of the year for many people. It is a festive time when families gather to exchange gifts and to eat a sumptuous meal. The attention of many is directed to our Lord Jesus as a special gift to the human family, but his redemptive work is perhaps seldom appreciated in its full sense. Our Lord Jesus left his heavenly home and was born a perfect human being for the purpose of giving his life as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole human creation.

A RANSOM FOR ALL

The true reason for Jesus' birth was that he would give his life as a ransom price for sin. Paul wrote to Timothy, "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time."—I Tim. 2:1-6

GOD'S TRUE COMMISSION

When Jesus turned thirty years of age, he presented himself to his Heavenly Father in total consecration and obedience to do his will. After his baptism, he was anointed with the Holy Spirit of God, and commissioned for the great work that lay ahead. Turning to the Hebrew Scriptures, he found what the Psalmist David had written concerning him. "Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart. I have preached righteousness in the great congregation: lo, I have not refrained my lips, O LORD, thou knowest. I have not hid thy righteousness within my heart; I have declared thy faithfulness and thy salvation: I have not concealed thy lovingkindness and thy truth from the great congregation. Withhold not thou thy tender mercies from me, O LORD: let thy lovingkindness and thy truth continually preserve me."—Ps. 40:7-11

At the Nazareth synagogue where Jesus had gone to preach on the Sabbath Day, he read from the prophecy of Isaiah concerning his commission to preach the wonderful message of Truth. He told those who were gathered to hear him, "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears." (Luke 4:21) From the prophecy, he read, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord."—Luke 4:18,19

Various aspects of our Lord's authorization by God are outlined in this prophecy. He was to preach the gospel to the "poor" and, in his sermon on the mount, he said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 5:3) He was to heal the brokenhearted, and he said, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."—chap. 11:28

Jesus was commissioned to "preach deliverance to the captives." Isaiah's account reads, "To proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound. (Isa. 61:1) When he quoted Isaiah's prophecy, he used the word "bruised" which means to crush, as in death. The reference to "captives" points to the prison house of death. In his sermon on the resurrection of the dead, he said, "The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live."—John 5:25

The anointing to preach the "acceptable year of the Lord" speaks of the special invitation which has been extended to those who are being called by God during this present Gospel Age. They are laying their lives down in sacrifice which is acceptable to God. In his letter to the church at Rome, the Apostle Paul wrote, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God."—Rom. 12:1,2

OUR COMMISSION

The anointing of the Holy Spirit of God is also available for those who have accepted the narrow way of sacrifice and are members of our Lord's body. We, too, are commissioned to preach the Gospel to the poor, groaning creation. If we are faithful unto death, we will have the great privilege to share with our glorified Lord in his future kingdom of righteousness over all the people of earth. Let us renew our efforts to serve him as we approach another new year.

May we continue to give thanks to our loving Heavenly Father for his gift of Jesus, in whom the whole human family will be blessed under the provisions of his future kingdom of life and righteousness. ■