

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The True Meaning of Christmas

Before another *Truth for Today* broadcast takes place much of the world will have celebrated Christmas Day. Ostensibly this is the day which commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ but, sad to say, vast numbers of men, women, boys and girls are ignorant of this fact. I have heard of children asking their parents why Christmas cards always have a picture of a baby in a cot surrounded by sheep or shepherds or kings with crowns. Then, too, of older people complaining that there is too much religion attached to Christmas.

Why then is so much made of Christmas? How did this annual festival, as we know it today, come into being? Some might answer it is in the Bible. No, they are mistaken: that is not true. The birth of Christ is certainly recorded there. Matthew tells us that the Angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said to him "Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary, thy wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost and she shall bring forth a son and thou shalt call His name Jesus, for He shall save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21). And Luke adds Luke 2:7, "And Mary brought forth her first born son and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn."

That Christ was born is a blessed, glorious and divine truth, but nowhere are we told that it took place on 25 December. In point of fact it could quite easily be proved that 25 December was certainly not the birthday of our Lord, but rather that of Mithras, the Persian God of Light.

Christmas as a festival was not introduced into the Christian calendar until late in the third century. In those days Christianity was a flourishing religion, but much of the world was still pagan and pagan festivities abounded. The Christians of those days were somewhat envious of what they saw these other, heathen, people enjoying and so began to introduce similar practices into their own system of religion. The ancient Roman festival of Saturnalia was associated with the Winter Solstice and included a great feast over the period 17-24 December when merry-making and domestic celebrations were a prominent feature. In an endeavour to counteract the pagan festivities and to make Christianity compatible with its rivals, the birth of Christ was linked to this occasion. 25 December became the day on which the Lord was born, and the celebrations naturally took on the characteristics of the pagan festival. Feasting and merry-making became the order of the day.

In later centuries the Teutonic tribes, the Germans and the Celts, added to this. They went out into their northern forests and brought in Yule logs for their fires, they decorated their homes with the green branches and red berries of the holly tree, and they collected mistletoe from the oak and brought it in to hang over the doorways of their houses to ward off the evil spirits. Fir trees - the evergreen - would be brought into the homes, symbols of long life. Gifts and greetings became a prominent characteristic. Fire and light, symbols of warmth and life, were introduced. All these are associated with pagan festivals and were incorporated into that of Christmas. St. Nicholas, a Russian saint whose day was 6 December became Santa Claus. In Holland he was the protector of children and so Christmas became a time for the children and the family. He was supposed to come riding in from Spain to bring presents for the children and it was the custom there to leave a shoe in the hearth to receive their gifts. This is now, of course, Santa Claus coming from the North Pole down the chimney and leaving presents in the stockings hung up for his convenience.

So you can see that what we now know as Christmas is really based on superstition and has its origin in pagan practices. But it does, and this is what I would emphasise this morning, it does commemorate a true event - the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, and this is what I want to say a little about.

But first, may I interject a brief word. Scripture nowhere exhorts or commands us to remember the birth of the Lord. But today, the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, in thousands of places all over the world, there will be companies of believers gathered around a table on which there will be a loaf of bread and a flagon of wine. These two elements will remind them of the body of Christ, the body in which He bore our sins, and the wine, symbol of His shed blood, will remind them of His death. They will be responding to His request, as recorded in Luke 22:19-20: "And He took bread, and gave thanks, and break it, and gave unto them saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me. Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood which is shed for you." They will eat the bread and drink the wine in remembrance of Him and His death. This the Lord Himself bids us do, not once a year but every week.

To introduce what I have to say, I would first of all like to read just a few verses from the Hebrews 10, a somewhat unlikely passage you may think, for a Christmas address, but I think that you will see the pertinence of it later.

Verse 4: "For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins. Wherefore, when He cometh into the world, He saith "Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not but a body hast thou prepared me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin thou hast had no pleasure. Then, said I, lo I come. In the volume of the book it is written of me to do Thy will, O God. Above, when He said 'sacrifice and burnt offerings and offering for sin thou wouldest not, neither has pleasure therein, which are offered by the law, then said He lo I come to do thy will, O God,' He taketh away the first that He may establish the second." If I were to give a title to these words of mine today I would call them "The true meaning of Christmas" and for a text I would take two verses from the passage that we have read where the same words are repeated. In verse 7 and in verse 9 we read "Then said I, lo I come to do Thy will O God."

Here we are privileged to listen to a conversation that took place between God the Father and His Son as the Son was born into the world.

In verse 5 we read: "Coming into the world He saith." And how did He come into the world? He came into the world as you and I came into the world. He was born into the world, as a babe. He had a supposedly human father and a human mother, but He was not conceived as we were conceived.

Again we hear the voice of the Angel as, this time, he speaks with Mary: "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." (Luke 1:35)

The Lord Christ was born a true man, but He was also born a perfect sinless man. He had come to do the will of God and that will could not be accomplished by a sinner. There are those today; even those in high religious circles, who deny the virgin birth of Christ and in so doing they sweep away the whole foundation of the Christian faith. The sacrifices of old had to be without blemish and if man was born in the ordinary, human way, then he was blemished from birth and himself would have needed a saviour. David was speaking for the whole race when he said "Behold, in iniquity was I brought forth, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Psalm 51:5). The virgin birth of Christ is fundamental to the very basis of Christianity. So the Son of God is born a man in this world, but a man totally untainted by sin and thus one able to become a saviour. He came to do the will of God. He, the only one who never did His own will, is the instrument to carry out the will of God.

Now, what was the will of God? What is the will of God? It is stated in verse 10 of Hebrews 10, part of which we read: "By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." By which will we are sanctified - that is, made holy. We are made fit for the presence of God. Certainly we are not fit for the presence of God now. We are sinners, steeped in sin. The early chapters of Genesis tell us how it came about: Adam and Eve were disobedient to God. And so we read that "as by one man sin entered into the world and death by sin, so death passed upon all for all have sinned" (Romans 5:12). No man is outside that all-embracing judgment. Heaven is closed to us. Sin and the sinner can never enter such a realm as that - the very presence of God. But the will of God is the restoration of man, from sinnership to sainthood. Then the will of God incorporated the replacement of the Old Testament ordinances; we read of this in verse 9: "I come to do Thy will, O God." And then the comment: "He taketh away the first, that He may establish the second."

God's ancient people, the Jews, were under the Law of the Covenant the essence of which was "This do, he saith, and thou shalt live." But they were completely unable to obey His law, to keep His covenant. What man has ever been able to love God with all his heart, with all his soul, with all his mind, with all his strength? Or who has ever been able to love his neighbour as himself? This was a summary of the Law as given by the Lord Jesus, Himself. The will of God which the Lord Jesus came to make possible was that that should all be set aside and that the old covenant be replaced by a new - the principle of which is not do this but it is done. Those Old Testament sacrifices that were made, all those rivers of blood that were shed, were but a figure of what Christ would do when He Himself gave His life and paid the penalty for our sins. The will of God was that the old covenant of works would be abolished and acceptance by God would be wholly on the principle of grace. And then the will of God is that all men should be saved. In 1 Timothy 2:4 we read of "God our Saviour who will have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." And then again in 2 Peter 3:9: "The Lord is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."

If, then, it is the will of God that all men should be saved, why is it that all men are not saved? The answer is that whilst it is the will of God that we should be saved, he does not impose that will upon us. Indeed, we too have a will and it is possible for us to exercise it to the exclusion of our own salvation. The Lord said to those around him: "Ye will not come unto me that ye might have life" (John 5:40). On another occasion Christ had declared that He had come

that men might have life - eternal life (John 10:10). Such life was available for all to accept - it was the will of God that they should. But those men would not and sadly today thousands follow in their steps.

Now we come to consider what the will of God involved. We have seen from the word of God that all men are designated under the one heading - sinners. God's warning right at the very beginning was to Adam and Eve: "The day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2:17). And so the New Testament confirms that the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23), so death is the penalty of sin. And of course, dear friends, that does not mean the cessation of existence on this earth. Man has an immortal soul and that soul will live forever, either in the presence of God in heaven, to which we have already referred, or away from God and in the company of the Devil and his angels in the place that the Lord Jesus himself described: Where their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched (Mark 9:48).

So you can see that if our sins are to be forgiven, if we are to have an eternal place with God in heaven, then the penalty of our sins must be paid and the will of God for our Lord Jesus Christ was to do that, to pay the penalty of our guilt. That penalty is death, and so He went into death. He gave His life. When he was upon the cross the whole earth was covered in darkness for three hours (Matthew 27:45) and at the end of that three hours the Lord cried from the cross: "My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). There at that time he was paying the price for our sins, all the holy indignation, all the judgment of God that should have fallen upon us, was falling upon him. He exhausted God's wrath to the utmost. So Isaiah of old prophesied "With His stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

Dear friends, this morning I would like to suggest to you that this is the true meaning of Christmas. It is a fact that the Lord Jesus was born of the virgin Mary; He was laid in a manger; shepherds keeping their sheep by night were told of His birth by an angel accompanied by a praising heavenly host; wise men from the east were led by a star to the child in Bethlehem and brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The fact that Christ was born is a truly marvellous truth. But He was born to die. And for what reason? That your sins and mine might be righteously forgiven by God.

And so we, the Truth for Today team, do indeed wish you a very happy Christmas. We do trust that, despite its dubious origin, you do have a happy time with your family today, that you do enjoy your turkey and your plum pudding, but we trust that each one who is listening to this broadcast will know the far superior joy of owning Christ as Saviour.

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