

## **The Birth and Death of Christmas**

Before Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem some two thousand years ago, the entire world was immersed in deep darkness. Only in Israel did the light dispel the darkness, but even there the light was dimmed by the traditions of men. With the rising of the Sun of Righteousness (Malachi 4:2), the Light of the World (John 1:9; 3:19; 8:12; 9:5; 12:46) dawned not only on those sitting in the darkness of Galilee (Isaiah 9:1-7), but on the whole pagan world (Colossians 1:6).

The Old Testament looked forward to the hallowing presence of God extending throughout the whole world. There would come a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31ff.; Ezekiel 36:24ff.), and all of life would become sacred. Instead of the Levitical principle of the unclean defiling the clean (Leviticus 7:19-21; Haggai 2:12-14), a fountain for cleansing would be opened (Zechariah 13:1). From under the threshold of the Temple, the river of God's presence would flow, deeper and wider as it went, transforming all before it (Ezekiel 47:1-12). What had been inscribed on the miter of the high priest (Exodus 28:36-38), would now be inscribed on the bells of horses, and the work of mothers toiling over meals would now become as sacred as the work of the priests in the Temple (Zechariah 14:20, 21).

As the Apostles took the message of the Messiah to the Jews of the Diaspora, they had a point of contact in the Scriptures of the Old Testament. Upon arrival in a pagan city, Paul sought out the gatherings of the Jews on their Sabbath (Acts 13:14; 16:13; 17:2). Then he would open the Scriptures and proclaim the good news of Jesus the Messiah (Acts 13:42; 18:4). Many non-Jews, hungry for more than their pagan religions offered, assembled with the Jews and were won to the Messiah of Israel (Acts 13:44).

On those occasions when there was no Jewish point of contact, Paul sought out things within the pagan world that hinted that there was more to life than what the ancient gods offered them. Even though God had given the nations over to the demonic principalities and powers (Deuteronomy 4:19, 20; 1 Corinthians 10:20; Galatians 4:8), he had done so with his treasure, Israel, in view (Deuteronomy 32:8): that in the fullness of time (Galatians 4:4) all nations might be blessed in the Seed of Abraham (Galatians 3:13-16). He did not leave himself without witness, doing good to the pagans, giving them rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling their hearts with food and

gladness (Acts 14:16, 17). He made all nations from one and had determined their epochs and borders in order that they should seek him (Acts 17:26).

While an all-encompassing depravity marked the whole family of humankind, the gnarled and broken remnant of the divine image remained as part of the very essence of human existence. All of humankind not only retained a basic sense of right and wrong, their consciences bearing witness to the work of God's moral law on their hearts (Romans 2:14-15), but they also held a repressed knowledge of the true God (Romans 1:18-25). Because God's temporal kindness extends to the whole world, pagans spoke truth, such as that articulated by the poets Aratus, Epimenides, Cleanthes and Menander (Acts 17:28; 1 Corinthians 15:33; Titus 1:12). It was an imperfect thing, this pagan truth, and almost always distorted away from God and his Word, but it formed a backdrop against which the Apostles displayed the victory of Jesus over the dark powers.

The Apostles had the Old Testament as a model. The old Prophets had used pagan myth to proclaim the power and majesty of the one true God. What are the "gods" of chaos, the dragons of the deep, such as Tiamat (Leviathan, Rahab), compared to Yahweh (Job 9:13; 26:12; 38:8-11; Psalm 74:12ff.; 87:4; 89:10; Isaiah 30:7; 51:9; Ezekiel 29:3)?

It was in such a tradition that Saint Paul stood one day on Mars Hill and preached the good news of the dying and rising God to the Athenians. He took as his starting point a pagan altar: "Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23). He began with the nugget of truth that was implicitly preserved within their pagan worship and used that to preach the victory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

As centuries came and went, the ancient torchbearers of the truth told the old, old Story, ever adapting the timeless message to the pagan cultures around them. They pointed to the longings of sinful people -- longings that could only be satisfied at the foot of a cross -- in the shadow of an empty tomb. Sometimes they took objects of nature, as Saint Patrick is said to have done with the shamrock to present the nature of the one true God. Sometimes they expropriated the pagans' own nature celebrations to present the great truths about Jesus: his virgin birth, sinless life, substitutionary death and triumphant resurrection. Schaff commented about the ancient Roman, late December festivals that were held "in honor of the sun, who in the winter solstice is, as it were, born anew and begins his conquering

march. This phenomenon in nature was regarded as an appropriate symbol of the appearance of the Sun of Righteousness dispelling the long night of sin and error" [Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Volume I, (Scribner's Sons, 1916)].

It is out of that milieu where the gospel of Christ first dispelled the demonic darkness of the ancient, pagan world that so many things that we do as Christians have come. For over a millennium and a half, the pagan festivals have been superseded by those of Christ. The ancient winter festival came to point to the incarnation of our Lord Jesus. Even though the eleventh century division of the Church into East and West separated the day for Christmas, the pageant itself was never dislodged, not even by the Protestant Reformation. As he did with so much of the rest of the traditional clutter that buried the gospel, Luther sought to refine Christmas into a truly Christian holy day. Calvin, too, generally the more thoroughgoing of the two great Reformers, still kept Christmas in Geneva (<http://www.rbvincent.com/BibleStudies/calvinxmas.htm>), much to the consternation of the Scots, who seeing that it had no explicit biblical warrant, banned it altogether.

Two thousand years have come and gone since the birth of our Lord. Ever since the ancient Brumaliae were baptized into Christmas, the believer has been confronted with the conflict: instead of the triumphant Sun of Righteousness, the Risen Lord, Jesus Christ, pagan humankind turns to the beatific, ever-Virgin mother, the Queen of Heaven (Jeremiah 7:18; 44:17ff.). But ours is a still darker time. Satan appears to have been released from the pit, once again to deceive the nations and turn them back to their ancient roots (Revelation 20:1-3, 7-9). The overthrow of Christian civilization is proceeding apace, and we are reverting to our pagan roots, roots that were soiled through with demonic things. Christ is being sanitized from Christmas altogether, and the old pagan roots quickly rise to displace the biblical Christ with one made according to human imagination. The nations that once comprised Christendom will no longer tolerate the public mention of Jesus' name, but a supernatural figure, a fat elf, clad in red who winks at sin and gives gifts to those who are good, Santa Claus, is worshipped throughout the world on Christmas.

Christmas is our blessing and our curse. To the extent that we use Christmas truly to present the Lord Jesus, we follow in the footsteps of those who first brought the gospel to many of our ancestors. But it is a thing that unbridled

by Scripture takes on a power of its own and leaves in its wake a mountain of debt, depression and debauchery.

Bob Vincent

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Scripture cited above (English Standard Version)

Malachi 4:2 But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.

John 1:9 The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

John 3:19 And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

John 8:12 Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

John 9:5 As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

John 12:46 I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.

Isaiah 9:1-7 ...1 But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. 2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. 3 You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. 4 For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. 5 For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. 6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Colossians 1:6 which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing -- as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth,

Jeremiah 31:31-34 ...31 Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, 32 not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. 33 For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

Ezekiel 36:24-27 ...24 I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. 25 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. 26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

Leviticus 7:19-21 ...19 Flesh that touches any unclean thing shall not be eaten. It shall be burned up with fire. All who are clean may eat flesh, 20 but the person who eats of the flesh of the sacrifice of the LORD's peace offerings while an uncleanness is on him, that person shall be cut off from his people. 21 And if anyone touches an unclean thing, whether human uncleanness or an unclean beast or any unclean detestable creature, and then eats some flesh from the sacrifice of the LORD's peace offerings, that person shall be cut off from his people.

Haggai 2:12-14 ...12 "If someone carries holy meat in the fold of his garment and touches with his fold bread or stew or wine or oil or any kind of food, does it become holy?" The priests answered and said, "No." 13 Then Haggai said, "If someone who is unclean by contact with a dead body touches any of these, does it become unclean?" The priests answered and said, "It does become unclean." 14 Then Haggai answered and said, "So is it with this people, and with this nation before me, declares the LORD, and so with every work of their hands. And what they offer there is unclean."

Zechariah 13:1 On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness.

Ezekiel 47:1-12 ...1 Then he brought me back to the door of the temple, and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar. 2 Then he brought me out by way of the north gate and led me around on the outside to the outer gate that faces toward the east; and behold, the water was trickling out on the south side. 3 Going on eastward with a measuring line in his hand, the man measured a thousand cubits, and then led me through the water, and it was ankle-deep. 4 Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water, and it was knee-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water, and it was waist-deep. 5 Again he measured a thousand, and it was a river that I could not pass through, for the water had risen. It was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be passed through. 6 And he said to me, "Son of man, have you seen this?" Then he led me back to the bank of the river. 7 As I went back, I saw on the bank of the river very many trees on the one side and on the other. 8 And he said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, and enters the sea; when the water flows into the sea, the water will become fresh. 9 And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish. For this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh; so everything will live where the river goes. 10 Fishermen will stand beside the sea. From Engedi to Eneglaim it will be a place for the spreading of nets. Its fish will be of very many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea. 11 But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they are to be left for salt. 12 And on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water

for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing."

Exodus 28:36-38 ...36 You shall make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it, like the engraving of a signet, 'Holy to the LORD.' 37 And you shall fasten it on the turban by a cord of blue. It shall be on the front of the turban. 38 It shall be on Aaron's forehead, and Aaron shall bear any guilt from the holy things that the people of Israel consecrate as their holy gifts. It shall regularly be on his forehead, that they may be accepted before the LORD.

Zechariah 14:20-21 ...20 And on that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, "Holy to the LORD." And the pots in the house of the LORD shall be as the bowls before the altar. 21 And every pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be holy to the LORD of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and take of them and boil the meat of the sacrifice in them. And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day.

Acts 13:14 but they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia. And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down.

Acts 16:13 And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together.

Acts 17:2 And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures,

Acts 13:42 As they went out, the people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath.

Acts 18:4 And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.

Acts 13:44 The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.

Deuteronomy 4:19-20 ...19 And beware lest you raise your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, things that the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven. 20

But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are this day.

1 Corinthians 10:20 No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons.

Galatians 4:8 Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods.

Deuteronomy 32:8 When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God.

Galatians 4:4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,

Galatians 3:13-16 ...13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us -- for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree" -- 14 so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith. 15 To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. 16 Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ.

Acts 14:16-17 ...16 In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. 17 Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.

Acts 17:26 And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place,

Romans 2:14-15 ...14 For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. 15 They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them

Romans 1:18-25 ...18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. 21 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. 24 Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, 25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

Acts 17:28 for "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we are indeed his offspring."

1 Corinthians 15:33 Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals."

Titus 1:12 One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons."

Job 9:13 God will not turn back his anger; beneath him bowed the helpers of Rahab.

Job 26:12 By his power he stilled the sea; by his understanding he shattered Rahab.

Job 38:8-11 ...8 Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb, 9 when I made clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band, 10 and prescribed limits for it and set bars and doors, 11 and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed'?

Psalm 74:12-15 ...12 Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth. 13 You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters. 14 You crushed the heads of

Leviathan; you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. 15 You split open springs and brooks; you dried up ever-flowing streams.

Psalm 87:4 Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon; behold, Philistia and Tyre, with Cush -- "This one was born there," they say.

Psalm 89:10 You crushed Rahab like a carcass; you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.

Isaiah 30:7 Egypt's help is worthless and empty; therefore I have called her "Rahab who sits still."

Isaiah 51:9 Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD; awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago. Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon?

Ezekiel 29:3 speak, and say, Thus says the Lord GOD: "Behold, I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great dragon that lies in the midst of his streams, that says, 'My Nile is my own; I made it for myself.'

Acts 17:23 For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

Jeremiah 7:18 The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes for the queen of heaven. And they pour out drink offerings to other gods, to provoke me to anger.

Jeremiah 44:17-19 ...17 But we will do everything that we have vowed, make offerings to the queen of heaven and pour out drink offerings to her, as we did, both we and our fathers, our kings and our officials, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. For then we had plenty of food, and prospered, and saw no disaster. 18 But since we left off making offerings to the queen of heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have lacked everything and have been consumed by the sword and by famine." 19 And the women said, "When we made offerings to the queen of heaven and poured out drink offerings to her, was it without our husbands' approval that we made cakes for her bearing her image and poured out drink offerings to her?"

Revelation 20:1-3 ...1 Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. 2 And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, 3 and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.

Revelation 20:7-9 ...7 And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison 8 and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. 9 And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them,