

GROW IN GRACE NEWSLETTER

Volume 39, No.50, December 10, 2013 / Southside Baptist Church & Christian School / P.O. Box 1594 / 1028 South Water Avenue, Gallatin, TN 37066 (615) 452-5951 / **The Grow in Grace Newsletter**— a weekly Bible Study, plus news notes— designed first and foremost for members and those attending services at Southside Church... sent forth to aid one and all, (including friends far and wide who receive the Newsletter), in the experience of 2 Peter 3:18. *"But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our LORD and Saviour JESUS CHRIST. To Him be glory both now and forever. Amen."*

BEWARE of SCROOGE and the GRINCH!

When it comes to what is commonly referred to as 'Christmas'— no one has any sound reason to be uncomfortable around me— I am no man's judge. Personally, I enjoy colors, lights, decorations, family, food, sports, and etc. However when it comes to the responsibility of teaching/preaching of the Word of God— I am not allowed to set forth my ideas, to adapt the truth to what is popular, or to please so as to avoid rejection. I am under orders not to add to nor take away from God's Word: Deut. 12:32; Rev. 22:18-19. [But also, as needed, please feel free to be to me as Aquila and Priscilla: Acts 18:24-28.]

REMEMBER: Every genuine Christian is a believer priest indwelt with the Holy Spirit who will faithfully illuminate the Word of God and guide Christians into all truth. Study the Word of God. Seek to live by the Word of God. DO NOT condemn or judge others.

PART ONE: WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT CHRISTMAS

What does the Bible say about Christmas? Like it or not, there is NO mention of Christmas in the New Testament in any shape, form or fashion. NO ONE in the New Testament sought to connect JESUS, in any way, with what was in New Testament times already a 2000 year old holiday system which we now call Christmas. What is revered in 2013 as Christmas — while it is not found in the Bible — did not come to us out of thin air. Thus, what follows is a historical record of this amazing worldwide celebration.

PART TWO: 4000 YEARS OF CHRISTMAS— A HISTORICAL SKETCH

4000 YEARS OF CHRISTMAS is the title of a pro-Christmas book by Dr. Earl W. Count which he dedicated, "To you who have loved Christmas and have made it beautiful."

On page 11, Dr. Count states, "*Christmas is one of mankind's greatest experiences. For more than four thousand years, spreading over the earth, it has drawn loyalties and longings of millions of people...*" Dr. Count says that ancient history tells us, "*of an old, old Babylonian festival that moves westward, dividing its ways as it comes: through Greece into Rome as a festival that remodels itself at every step to fit the people among whom it settles...*" (page 12). (Remember that insight!!)

Alexander Hislop's **THE TWO BABYLONS**, various Encyclopedias, and other readily available sources chronicle these events and reveal that **although different names were used— for 4000 years man has, indeed, had a great December celebration, often on December twenty-fifth.** The Babylonians were among the first who are known to have engaged in huge, merry-making, feasting, gift-exchanging December festivals. They even claimed that their god, Nimrod, would leave them presents under an evergreen tree. {http://philologos.org/__eb-ttb/}

Moving west, when we get to Rome we find that beginning in the middle of December, the Romans, (who worshipped the ancient god, Saturn), celebrated what was called **Saturnalia**.

***** In the third century, something took place that would radically impact the whole world, even to this day!** The Roman Emperor Constantine claimed to become a Christian and he established Christianity as the state religion. **He required all of his armies to be baptized.** Persecution of Christians ceased; and Christendom rushed further and further away from Biblical practices. **Saturnalia**, (rooted in the ancient Babylonian Mystery Religions), **controlled the hearts of the newly baptized masses.** What could be done? How could the state church, Roman Catholicism, overcome the pagan Saturnalia practices?

Pope Gregory had a solution. He believed that the best policy was to let the masses keep their practices, but to change the names of their temples and their traditions; and then to do these same practices to the glory of God. **December twenty-fifth** was the long established high day in both the Babylonian religion and Rome's Saturnalia.

***** Therefore the Catholic Church simply re-imaged the great celebration day of the masses to be changed to the birth day of Christ.** And, of course, they re-imaged many of the practices. But just how would Catholicism have the birth of Christ to be celebrated?

They would do so by **observing the Catholic MASS**. The Catholic Mass would be the CENTER-PIECE of the holiday. Over time the name was shortened from 'Christ's Mass' to 'Christmass' to Christmas. **Thus, the very first Christmas, (a re-image of ancient Babylonian traditions and the Roman Saturnalia), was around 300AD.**

BUT what is the MASS? The Creed of Pope Pius IV, states: "I profess that in the Mass is offered to God a true, proper, and propitiatory sacrifice [that is, a sacrifice which satisfies the justice of God and so offsets the penalty for sin] for the living and the dead; and that in the most holy sacrament of the Eucharist there is truly, really and substantially, the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ; and that there is a conversion of the whole substance of the bread into the body, and of the whole substance of the wine into the blood, which the Catholic Church calls Transubstantiation."

NOTE: The MASS is utterly contrary to the New Testament. It fully denies the once and for and totally sufficient atoning sacrifice of Jesus on Calvary. (Heb. 7:24-28; 9:1-28; 10:7-18) It presents another gospel, which is no gospel at all.

***** REALITY: Fundamental/evangelical believers will say, "But I do not celebrate the Mass at Christmas!"** I know that and I fully believe you! BUT what we are doing in this article is simply discovering and tracing the historical roots of both the secular and religious aspects of the December twenty-fifth celebration. **Since the massive December celebration — no matter what name it goes by — is foreign to New Testament revelation and practice we have to turn to secular and Roman Catholic historical records to find its roots.** None of the Christians of the New Testament era embraced any of the celebrations of December, which were being practiced in Roman culture in which they lived. **In this article we are simply unveiling how they 'jumped ship' and got mixed up in Christianity!**

Maymie R. Krythe, in her pro-Christmas book, *ALL ABOUT CHRISTMAS*, writes in similar fashion to what has already been stated: "*A celebration at the time of the winter solstice, when all were looking forward to the coming of spring, was not an original idea with Christians.*" She proceeds to speak about the **Saturnalia**; and then says: "When Emperor Constantine established Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire, **the persecution of Christians came to an end.** At first [the first 100+ years of the New Testament Church], Christ's birthday was not observed by His followers. **However, in the third century Roman Catholicism became dominant under Constantine.** Many of the Roman soldiers were adherents of Mithraism. Its most important feast day, Dies Solis Invicti Nati (Birth of the Unconquered Sun) occurred on December 25. Also the Roman Saturnalia came

at this time." **The Roman Catholic church**, (being unable to abolish the customs of the masses she had baptized by force), took over their ancient practices and Christianized them!

***** WE 'FAST-FORWARD'** and it is said that the earliest official celebration of Christmas in England was in 521AD, when King Arthur celebrated the re-capture of York. **During the middle-ages, Christmas** was the most popular holiday— there were tournaments, pageants and plays. Some were religious.

But then came the Protestant Reformation. The Reformers were in revolt against Catholicism. They utterly rejected the Roman MASS. **Therefore it was natural for them to reject the greatest Mass of all— Christmass.** Thus, the Reformers declared that celebrating Christ's birthday was of human invention. **In 1642, under Oliver Cromwell,** the Reformers gained political power. Puritan preachers openly preached against observing Christmass.

In fact, they influenced the British Parliament to pass a law forbidding the celebration of both Christmass and Easter. Parliament decreed penalties of imprisonment for anyone caught celebrating the holiday.

During the year 1647, popular riots broke out in various places demanding the legalization of Christmas. But the Puritan government stood firm and proceeded to break up Christmas celebrations by force of arms. **People were arrested and in many instances jailed.** However, in the next elections the Puritans were **thrown out of power and Christmas was back on the march!"**

***** CRITICAL NOTE: There is NO place in New Testament Christianity for trying to FORCE adherence to religious or Biblical practices or doctrines— regardless if the practices and doctrines are right or wrong.** **In contrast, the powerful New Testament 'weapons' to wield so as to effect godly change are the Gospel, love and blessing— Love, bless, pray, do good, do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good, etc. The Puritans were DEAD WRONG in their methods.**

PUSHING FORWARD to the 'new world' with our 4000 year sketch of Christmas history, we find that when the Puritans came to the shores of America, they celebrated Thanksgiving but not Christmas. In fact, there was a 5 shilling fine for any pilgrim found observing Christmas! Again, they may have been well intended; **but, again, their method was wrong.**

***** Certainly,** volumes could be written about the varied ways in which the world has celebrated Christmas. **However, we move to America and the twentieth and the twenty**

first century and note the Modern Day Commercialization of Christmas. James H. Barnett, in *The American Christmas: A Study in National Culture*, writes: "The studied exploitation of the festival did not develop fully until the third decade of the present century. (Note: He wrote this in the last century, I don't have the date.) At the close of the war in 1918, the American economy was geared to a high level of output and a host of new products were ready to be sold. However, the consumer demands were shrinking, and there was a serious danger of a stagnant market. In this dilemma business leaders sought some means of increasing normal peace-time buying, and turned to promotion and high-pressure methods. Both merchants and advertizing agencies recognized the commercial possibilities of the folk festivals, and began to exploit these occasions shortly after 1920. **This was immediately successful and has continued unabated to the present.**" Mr. Barnett, if you could only see us now! The commercialization of Christmas is now not only unabated, but at least from the 1970s until this day it has exploded! **Our very national economy depends on a BIG CHRISTMAS!**

*** MOREOVER, church growth experts know the power of the holiday system; and so they guide churches in how to 'use Christmas' and other holidays to grow their churches. **They use Pope Gregory's method: LET THE MASSES HAVE AND KEEP THE TRADITIONS THEY LOVE... AND ADD JESUS!**

*** REALITY: TO HAVE A BIG CHRISTMAS in a home and/or in a church takes a lot of money! Here in 2013, we are STILL in national financial stress. MANY people with heavy hearts say, '*We have no money for Christmas!*' Fear, sadness, and pain are in their faces. **Stealing always increases** as folks try to provide Christmas for their families. AND YES, in the midst of all this there are many kind-hearted Americans, (Christians or not), doing what they can to help others '*have Christmas.*'

*** We conclude our 4000 year 'sketch' of Christmas by noting the **growing CULTURE WARS!** How dare others commercialize Christmas or remove the public display of manger scenes, etc... How dare they not call the tree, a Christmas tree, etc! This leads us back to the insightful quote of Dr. Earl W. Count:

"Christmas is one of mankind's greatest experiences... as a festival that remodels itself at every step to fit the people among whom it settles..."

PURE AND SIMPLE: We are in a re-modeling, re-imaging stage of the December holiday in America because our society is becoming more and more SECULAR.

PART THREE: Biblical Revelation of the Birth of Christ and the Earliest Responses to His Birth. TRAGIC REALITY: TODAY, multitudes in the churches dearly love Christmas; yet they are strangers to the joy and wonder of those who first welcomed Christ! The first Christians could not stop rejoicing! Their **JOY** was 100% rooted in and focused on **THE SAVIOUR WHO SAVES FROM SIN!**

1. **BEHOLD** the wonder and **JOY** in the angel's words, when speaking unto Joseph, *"...that which is conceived in her (Mary) is of the Holy Ghost...thou shalt call his name JESUS: for He shall save His people from their sins."* (Matt. 1:20-21) Note: The angel did not announce or set up the beginning of a big secular and/or religious holiday. He announced that Jesus was coming to *'save His people from their sins!'* In the Biblical 'snap shots' of joy and celebration at Christ's birth— the joy is this: Jesus comes to save His people from their sins! Surely that is reason enough for the joy and rejoicing! **Or is it!? Just how excited am I about JESUS who saves from sin!?**

***** Beware of the massive holiday religious and commercial GRINCH system which BLINDS millions to the profound JOY of a SAVIOUR who saves from sin!**

2. **LET US Be Still! Stand in Awe!** The celebration began long before the Angelic announcements to Mary and Joseph! **To a prophet**, who had been the bearer of so much sad news and warnings of impending judgment and wrath, awesome prophecies give reason to CELEBRATE— *"Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the LORD by the prophet, saying, Behold a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name, EMMANUEL, which being interpreted is, GOD with us."* (Matt. 1:22-23; Isa. 7:14; 9:6-7; 11:1-9) **EMMANUEL! GOD with us!**

3. **LET US ASK** the Holy Spirit of God to teach us from Gabriel's **announcement** to Mary! *"Hail, thou that art highly favored, the LORD is with thee: blessed art thou among women....Fear not, Mary: for thou has found favor with God. And, behold, thou shalt bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS... 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... For with God nothing shall be impossible."* (Luke 1:28-36)

Note: There is no worship of Mary. The total focus is on the coming of Jesus, the Son of God, and the need for a response of FAITH! This announcement fills every enlightened, saved sinner with profound joy and celebration; and gives hope to those yet lost.

4. LET US OBSERVE and WONDER! The very first one on earth to CELEBRATE the Advent (Coming) of Jesus Christ was John Baptist, six months in Elisabeth's womb! Elisabeth became the second one on earth to CELEBRATE as she loudly proclaimed, *"...Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb... For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe (John) leaped in my womb for joy. And blessed is she that believeth: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the LORD."* (Luke 1:41-45)

Note: Christ was in the womb of a virgin! John was in his mother's womb— and much more than a mere fetus! **John leaps for joy, in gratitude to God for the Saviour!** This is total, focused, undiluted celebration. Let us learn from six-month-still-in-the-womb John: **JOY at Christ's coming is exclusive!** Jesus is not merely 'Center Stage'— No one else is on stage and He needs no props or creative scenery from us!

5. LET US ENTER INTO THE SPIRIT OF Mary's magnificent Celebration! *"...My soul doth magnify the LORD, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour... For He that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is His name..."* (Luke 1:46-55) Like all of us, Mary was a sinner! She knew it and thus rejoiced in, **"God my Saviour!"** The birth of Christ is exclusively about REJOICING IN THE SAVIOUR! When JESUS is not enough, we have a problem! **The birth of Christ is God coming down to rescue His enemies from the wrath we all so richly deserve. It is the ultimate rescue operation from the ultimate disaster.** When eyes of faith see and receive the Saviour— no artificial stimulation, no dazzling sights and sounds are needed in order for the saint to be greatly motivated to go forth in **glorious celebration, rejoicing in GOD MY SAVIOUR!**

6. LET US MEDITATE DEEPLY— for as we go forward AWESOME CELEBRATION lights up the sky as the Angel of the LORD and a great multitude of HEAVENLY HOSTS burst forth in praise, giving **grace-filled revelation to lowly shepherds**, *"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... and suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, **Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.**"* (Luke 2:10-14)

LET US BE INSTRUCTED, as from heaven's angels to earth's lowly shepherds— they are all celebrating the **coming of the Saviour**, Christ the LORD! **And God is shouting to us** from the CELEBRATING Shepherds who quickly became evangelists, preachers— making known what they had heard and seen! *"And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God*

*for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.” (Luke 2:15-20) LET US DARE to focus on the amazing: Jesus Christ came in the flesh, (1) to save undeserving rebels from the just and eternal wrath of God in hell; (2) to set the rebels free from self, sin and satan; (3) and to make them His own sons and daughters, servants, friends, saints and co-laborers! **The Birth of Christ is about salvation from SIN and eternal destruction!***

***** THOUGHT:** *Certainly there is nothing wrong with having times, places, and settings in which we focus on and rejoice in family, friends, and so much more as we seek to live Christianly at all times. BUT WHATEVER HAPPENED to rejoicing in the birth of THE SAVIOUR who came to deliver us from our sins?*

7. LET US DRINK deeply from the CELEBRATIONS of **Simeon and Anna!** *“Then took he Him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said, LORD, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou has prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.” (Luke 2:28-38) PRAISE THE LORD: In the midst of the harsh realities of life in a fallen world, God sends salvation and the result is peace and CELEBRATION! Not as the world gives; but peace and joy that surpasses all comprehension! **Behold as blessed Anna** joins the mighty chorus of those who GIVE THANKS for the Saviour who brings redemption! ***** GOD- ORDAINED celebrations are NEVER an escape from reality; and they never cater to the rich, or to the talented, or to those who feel themselves righteous!***

***** THIS IS TRUE:** To escape sadness, the typical American Christmas requires lots of money and no broken down lives or families. **In radical contrast, the Birth of Christ shouts — BRING NO MONEY!** Bring all your broken down lives! Bring a hungry, humble heart; and enter into every day CELEBRATION and an eternity with JESUS!

8. LET US BE UTTERLY AMAZED! ALMOST 2 YEARS LATER, the celebration of the Coming of Messiah continues! Jesus, almost two years old, was now residing in a *house*. **Gentile Wisemen**, after much journeying, we see them worshipping at the feet of Jesus! They had left the long entrenched but empty celebrations of Babylon in search of the King of the Jews. By Divine revelation they had learned of ONE WHO WAS WORTHY OF WORSHIP AND PRAISE! *“...they....fell down, and worshipped Him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented UNTO HIM gifts....” (Matt. 2: 1-11) Here it is again— Exclusive worship of and to Jesus!* With a total FOCUS ON JESUS— the Wisemen had no gifts for Joseph and Mary and none for each other. **ALL WORSHIP WAS FOR THE KING OF KINGS!**

After Jesus died, arose, ascended and as He reigns in and from Heaven— the fact of the coming of God in the flesh continued to bring forth ongoing CELEBRATION from New Testament Christians! Here is How they Continued to Celebrate the Birth of Christ:

1. *"And the Word (Jesus) became flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth."* (John 1:14) 2. **"Thanks be to God for His unspeakable Gift."** (2 Cor. 9:15) 3. **"...Jesus Christ: Who being in the form of God,...took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men...he humbled Himself ...unto death, even the death of the cross."** (Phil. 2:1-11) 4. **"And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: GOD WAS MANIFEST IN THE FLESH....."** (1 Tim. 3:16)

Let us give CLEAR focus to the absolutely astounding: God came in the flesh to save undeserving rebels (That's us!) from the just and eternal wrath of God in hell! He came to set rebels free from self, sin and satan. He gives us new hearts and makes us His own sons and daughters; and makes us His servants, His friends, His saints and His co-laborers! JOY! WONDER! Giving Thanks! Praising and CELEBRATING Jesus Christ! TELLING THE GOOD NEWS into all the world till He comes back— **these are proper responses** from those who have been rescued from sin, self, satan, and a doomed society! And there is a great cloud of witnesses who are calling for us to follow in their steps— "O Come, let US adore HIM!"

***** BY THE WAY: Most folk in the first century found no reason to rejoice in the Advent, the Coming of Messiah. But they did find reason to crucify Him! Why?** Because He exposed their sin, which they loved! Those who do not believe that they need to be saved from their sins and from the holy wrath of God will never welcome and celebrate the Saviour! *However, for those who have been broken over their sin— they never GET OVER the Coming of Christ!*

***** AS AN OVERFLOW OF DELIGHTING in JESUS CHRIST our LORD—** Let it also be seen in setting aside EXTRA LOVE OFFERINGS for the work and ministry of MISSIONARIES AROUND THE WORLD! Jesus left heaven and came to earth on the GREATEST, most costly missionary journey of all time— to save sinners!

In Christ we have the high calling of God in Christ Jesus to LIVE and TAKE the gospel to the world, from Gallatin/Sumner County to the ends of the earth. LET US COME TOGETHER to PRAY and to GIVE for the furtherance of the Gospel!

Grace to all! James Bell / www.southsidegallatin.org