



**HAPPY  
CHRISTMAS!**

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‘Happy Christmas!’  
by  
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# *HAPPY CHRISTMAS!*

What does Christmas make you think about? There are so many possible answers - lots of lovely food, an excuse to drink a lot, spending time with family, the children, decorating the home, receiving or giving presents, stress, expense, putting up with relatives you don't like, parties, last-minute shopping, regrets, money worries, loneliness, exhaustion, debt, arguments, sadness, pressure.

Let's see what's behind how we celebrate Christmas and then explore what it's really about - the celebration of the birth of Jesus.

# *Why December 25<sup>th</sup>?*

The exact date Jesus was born is unknown and there are various ideas about why December 25<sup>th</sup> was chosen. It was a date pagan worshipers in Rome held festivals, and it is likely that by establishing a Christian festival on this date, the church was trying to steer people away from paganism and turn them to Jesus and Christianity. Christians first celebrated Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup> in any numbers in 336AD. There are still things connected with paganism in the celebration of Christmas today.

# *The Holly and the Ivy and the Mistletoe*

Decorating homes and churches with greenery was part of pagan worship. Holly, ivy and mistletoe were all used, but an evergreen plant in winter can also be seen as a symbol of the eternal life Jesus made possible when He was born on earth as a baby.

The holly's thorns can represent Jesus's crown of thorns and its red berries, His blood as He died. Because of this, most Christians today are happy to use holly as a Christmas decoration.

Ivy was a symbol of eternal life to pagans. It can also represent eternal life in Jesus to Christians. It can't support itself - so it

represents faithfulness and our need to cling to God.

Mistletoe was very significant in pagan rituals. It was considered to have the spirit of fertility in it, which is probably where the modern practice of kissing under the mistletoe comes from. Most Christians today would not use it as a decoration.

## *The Christmas Tree*

The Christmas tree may well have come from paganism too. But there is a legend that a missionary in the 8<sup>th</sup> century challenged Germany's pagan gods by cutting down a 'sacred' tree and declaring it to be a new Christian symbol.

Another explanation is that it grew out of the medieval 'paradise' tree which was used

by the Catholic Church in their pageants to represent forgiveness. And another story is that a Christian called Martin Luther, marvelling at the beauty of the night sky above snow-covered evergreen trees, brought one into his house and decorated it with candles, telling his children that it represented the light of Jesus.

We know that by the 17<sup>th</sup> century Christmas trees were popular in Germany. In 1841, Prince Albert, brought a tree from Germany and set it up in Windsor Castle. A newspaper published a photograph of him and Queen Victoria decorating the tree with their children and the nation took it up.

## *Poinsettias*

The Mexican Poinsettia became significant at Christmas after a legend became known

about a Mexican girl's offering to the baby Jesus of some weeds miraculously turning into beautiful red flowers. There is no known pagan association with it.

## *Candles and the Advent Wreath*

Candles are often used in carol services. The Advent Wreath is decorated with greenery and four candles. A new candle is lit on each of the last four Sundays before Christmas. They remind us of the coming of Jesus, the light of the world; the wreath itself is an ancient symbol of victory; and the evergreen foliage represents everlasting life.

## *Origin of Christmas Cards*

Christmas cards were a British invention. People used to send handwritten greetings, but in 1843 Sir Henry Cole found he had more greetings to write than he could manage. He asked an artist friend, John Horsley, to help him design a card which could be printed and sent to everyone. The tradition had begun, and because of the new 'Penny Post', which meant people without much money could post items, it soon became widespread.

## *Origin of Father Christmas*

Father Christmas developed from the real St Nicholas, a bishop in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. He used to give secret gifts to people who were in need. A legend says that he dropped a bag

of gold down the chimney of a poor family and it fell into a stocking hanging by the fire to dry. The father managed to find out who it was from and the news was out. So when anyone got a secret gift, they thought it was from St Nicholas. The popularity of Father Christmas greatly increased in Victorian times. Present giving is now such a huge part of Christmas. It can bring much pleasure, but it can also lead to stress and debt. The most important gift of all was Jesus – born for you.

## *The Nativity*

The traditional Nativity story tells of Mary and Joseph travelling to Bethlehem, Mary riding on a donkey. Joseph couldn't find a room in any of the inns, but eventually one innkeeper said they could have his stable. So Jesus was born in a stable among the

animals and Mary put Him in the manger, or feeding trough, to sleep. There was a bright star over the stable. Angels, shepherds, and three kings on camels came to visit Him. The kings brought Him special gifts. So we have the typical nativity scene of Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, a star, animals, angels, shepherds and kings all together in a stable. Many of our Christmas carols, Christmas cards and Nativity plays present a very sentimentalised view of Christmas with cute animals and figures in a lovely stable. The reality will have been very different. So what was the real story?

## *The Real Story*

To find out what really happened, let's look at the story in the Bible. You'll find it in Luke 1:26 – 2:20 and Matthew 1:18 – 2:12. God

sent the angel Gabriel to tell Mary that, even though she was a virgin, she was to have a special baby, God's own Son, and she was to call Him Jesus. Her fiancé, Joseph, found all this very difficult and was considering quietly breaking off the engagement, but an angel explained everything to him in a dream and he married Mary.

Mary and Joseph travelled from Nazareth to Bethlehem for a census, but there is no mention of a donkey in the Bible. There was no room for them in the inn, so when Jesus was born Mary wrapped Him in some cloths and laid Him in a manger. Jesus was born in a place where animals ate, but it could have been an open shelter or a cave. It would have been draughty and cold and not pretty. And we don't know if any animals were there, and if so, what they were. No star is mentioned here and no angels.

In the fields, there were shepherds looking after their sheep through the night, when an angel came and told them about Jesus's birth and that He was wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. He said Jesus was the Saviour and Christ the Lord. Then lots more angels appeared and praised God. The shepherds decided to visit the baby. They found him with Mary and Joseph. They then told everyone they met what they had heard and seen.

It was about six months later that some Magi, or wise men, from the East went to visit Jesus. The Bible doesn't say they were kings or how many there were. Nor does it say they rode on camels. And they were never with Jesus at the same time as the shepherds. The Magi had seen a special moving star and set out to follow it so they could worship the new baby King. In

Jerusalem they asked King Herod where the baby was. He was disturbed at the thought of a new King. Having consulted his men, Herod told the Magi the baby was in Bethlehem and asked them to report back to him when they'd found Him. The star led the Magi to the house where Mary, Joseph and Jesus now were and it stopped over it. The Magi gave Jesus special gifts of gold, incense and myrrh. An angel warned them not to go back to Herod and they went home another way.

## *Why Was Jesus Born?*

The first people God made, Adam and Eve, brought Him great joy and they lived in a perfect world in a close relationship with Him. God only gave them just one rule to obey, but they broke it and everything went

wrong. People began to do, say and think things which were wrong – what the Bible calls sin.

God is a just God and had to deal with sin – He couldn't just ignore it. So He gave His people 'the law' explaining in detail how they should live. He also established a system of animal sacrifices through which they could gain God's forgiveness. No-one could keep it perfectly, of course, but it helped people realise they could never earn God's forgiveness by their own behaviour. It showed them that they needed a Saviour.

And God sent a Saviour – Jesus. He wasn't half God and half human. He was totally man and totally God. He spent the last three years of His life on earth telling people about God and healing the sick and disabled. And then He was put to death on a cross. The

people who did it thought they were getting rid of Him, but it was all part of God's plan, because it was on the Cross that God dealt with sin once and for all. Jesus became the one final sacrifice, taking all the punishment for all sin, and making forgiveness possible for everyone.

When the angel told the shepherds about Jesus's birth in Luke 2:14, he used the words, '*on earth peace.*' This didn't mean Jesus was going to bring peace on earth between people as is often thought. He didn't do that. God was proclaiming that peace was going to be possible between people and Himself once again, just as it had been with Adam and Eve before they sinned. Sin was going to be dealt with once and for all.

God had to provide a perfect sacrifice. There was only one way to do it – He had to send His own Son, Jesus. Colossians 1:20 says that God was pleased – *‘to reconcile all things to himself, by him (Jesus), whether things on the earth or things in the heavens, having made peace through the blood of his cross.’* Jesus took all your sin, guilt and shame on Himself. It wasn’t just for those who would believe in Him, but for everybody! 1 John 2:2 tells us that Jesus – *‘is the atoning sacrifice ... for the whole world.’* It was a once-for-all sacrifice. Jesus died for all people. It stands in history at a specific time and was for all time. And it was for all sins - past, present and future.

So God isn’t holding your sins against you. They’re not written up on a list which He will confront you with one day. They have been punished through Jesus and are now

forgiven and forgotten. That doesn't mean its ok to sin – it isn't. It will hurt you and others. There is an important thing to add. Your forgiveness has been won on the Cross, but it is only as you are born-again and receive it through faith in Jesus that it will become real in your life.

The Cross was enough – there is nothing you can do to add to it. It's all about what Jesus did, not what you do – how you measure up or how you perform. It's all about God's love for you. And it was only possible because God sent His Son to be born in Bethlehem all those years ago.

## *Being Born-Again*

When you acknowledge Jesus as God and decide to follow Him, you make Him your Lord. When you accept His sacrifice on the

Cross for yourself personally, you make Him your Saviour. You are then born-again and have a new perfect spirit. God becomes your Father and you His child, and you can start to enjoy your personal love relationship with Him.

Romans 10:9 says – *‘If you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.’* Tell God you are sorry for the wrong things you do, say and think. Choose to believe that Jesus is Lord, that He died for you and is now alive. Accept Him as your Lord and Saviour. Say it with your voice and believe it in your heart.

If you’ve done that sincerely, you are now born-again and Jesus has come to live in you in your new spirit. Everything you’ve ever done wrong or ever will do wrong is

forgiven, and after this life is over, you'll live in peace and joy with your loving Father God for ever.

As a child of God, you now have a whole new family of brothers and sisters. Tell a trusted Christian that you are now born-again so they can help you in your new life in Jesus. And you have the Bible to help you understand and experience more of God's love for you and all Jesus has done and won for you. It will help you to live your life in the best possible way – His way.

*Happy Christmas!*

Have a great Christmas. Enjoy a good wholesome celebration. But remember what it's really about and why it happened. And if your Christmas is going to be difficult for whatever reason, know that God sent

Jesus because He loves you so much. Find in Him all you need – He will never let you down. 2 Corinthians 9:15 – *‘Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift!’*

# *Life in Jesus*

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and all He has done and won for us  
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Christmas is supposed to be a happy time  
but it can also be very stressful.

Why do we do the things we do at Christmas?  
What happened on the very first Christmas  
and what's it really all about?

This booklet will help you find the answers  
so you can enjoy Christmas more  
and have a more fulfilling celebration.



**Katherine Hilditch** has been teaching in local churches for many years. In 2013 she wrote her first booklet and since then has written many more. She created her website to make all the

booklets freely available to everyone. They can be read online or printed out. Katherine's threefold purpose is to help people understand more about Jesus and all He has done and won for them, to encourage them to go deeper in their relationship with God and to provide material to help them share their faith with others. To read her story and find all the booklets go to –

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