

## MAKING THE MOST OF CHRISTMAS

**Tinsel**

The word Christmas is derived from the old English *Cristes maesse*, “Christ’s Mass”. We have seen elsewhere in these studies (see especially Chapter 13) that there is no completely certain history of when the festival became commonly observed, but that the first written record of a feast associated with Christ’s birth was in Rome in the year AD 336. This was twenty-four years after the emperor Constantine’s conversion to Christianity in AD 312. From the ancient Roman pagan festivals of Saturnalia (December 17) and New Year have evolved the merrymaking and the exchange of gifts. Christmas has today become the most popular of the Christian festivals among believers and non-believers alike.

Old Germanic midwinter customs were progressively grafted onto the Roman celebration, so that the lighting of a Yule Log and the adornment of evergreens are now common features. The Christmas tree comes from the medieval German mystery plays centred on the tree of life (see Genesis 2:9), and Francis of Assisi popularised the Christmas crib in his celebration at Greccio, Italy, in 1223.

Another popular medieval feast was that of St Nicholas of Myra (c. 340) on December 6th, when the saint was believed to have visited children with gifts and admonitions, in preparation for the gift of Jesus at Christmas. It was through the Dutch that the tradition of St Nicholas (Sinter-klaas, hence Santa Claus) was brought to the USA in their colony of New Amsterdam, now New York. The sending of greetings cards at Christmas began in Great Britain in the 1840s and was introduced to the United States in the 1870s.

The Christmas carol is a largely Victorian invention, although the origin of some carols goes back hundreds of years. A *carole* was originally a form of dance rather than a Christmas hymn and, as people often dance as part of their celebrations, there grew up a

tradition of simple popular songs suitable for celebrating the birth of the Lord Jesus. One of the most famous carols is *Stille Nacht* (Silent Night) which was, goes the story, composed in a single evening. On Christmas Eve in 1818 the organ in the village church of St Nicholas-in-Obendorf was found to need repairs — mice had eaten into the bellows and the organ was unusable! This meant that planned musical arrangements could not take place the following day. The curate Joseph Mohr wrote a poem and asked the organist if it could be set to an arrangement by guitar, which it duly was. So was born one of the most famous carols of all time!

Mid-winter feasting has a long history. The Romans and other ancients celebrated the shortest day of the year with feasting. It kept them warm and in good cheer and helped them forget for a few days the long winter nights past, giving them instead the encouraging prospect of shorter nights and the advent of spring a few months ahead. The original Roman mid-winter festival lasted from 17 December until the Kalends of January — the Roman new year when business accounts were settled. Kalends is the word from which our modern word ‘calendar’ is derived. So in our modern Christmas celebrations and traditions there is much ‘tinsel’ — a great deal that is showy but, for all too many, has little substance.

### **The gospel**

Contrast these Christmas traditions with the underlying reason for them: “Christ’s mass”. Should we celebrate joyously or look to a more subdued remembrance of Christ’s Nativity? No hard and fast rule is possible – it is very much up to the individual – but practising Christians often wish for a little space in their own lives over the Christmas period in which to reflect and offer their own worship to God for the gift of His Son. In Western societies, most struggle quite hard to find that space amongst all the festivities!

We have referred many times in this series of studies to the *Gospel writers* and *Gospel witnesses* - but what is this gospel, exactly? The word gospel comes from the old English *god* = good, and *spell* = news or, ‘good news’ and is simply the good

news of salvation in Christ, available to all who genuinely seek Him, and who turn to Him in faith and repentance. There are many good books and pamphlets which set out the gospel in a clear and concise manner. Rather than emulate these in the next few pages, the reader may wish to see what the Bible itself says about the gospel. This will take the form of a short Bible excursion to examine what God's word lays down on this vitally important matter. These are not, it should be added, 'proof texts' —they are the author's own selection and ideally should be read as part of a wider reading of an entire Gospel. Many think that the Gospel of Luke is a good one to start on.

The whole Bible, Old and New Testaments, is a gospel. It shows how we humans were created for a relationship with our Creator God, who loves us with a love we frankly do not deserve. It shows how humans rebelled against God, something that is true for each individual as well as society as a whole. The Bible calls this rebellion 'sin'. To show humans that there is only one way to peace and a right relationship with God, He gave us His law against which we again rebelled. So God proved to us that we cannot earn our way to a right relationship with Him. We are by nature rebels —sinners.

The Bible shows how God determined on a plan of salvation from the earliest of times, and that His plan would be most costly to Himself, as it involved surrendering His own greatly beloved Son to our needs and interests. And as Jesus is a person of the 'godhead' it ultimately means that God *Himself* paid the price. Only by costly sacrifice could we humans begin to see the enormity of the crime of our rebellion against our Holy and spotless Creator. The only sacrifice that could possibly be acceptable to God was His own dear sinless Son. That is why Jesus had to die in our place (for the 'wages' of sin is death —Rom 6:23). The cross of the Lord Jesus now stands between us and God's wrath. By accepting the free gift of salvation earned for us by the Lord Jesus, we become part of His family —*saved from* the consequences of our sin and *saved to* a new life of worship and service as His Own people.

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### **A one verse Gospel**

A one verse Gospel is Acts 16:31 — **“Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.”** You cannot get more straightforward than that! There are a few points to note about it:

#### **1. An act of faith: “Believe in....”**

What is faith? It is not just saying that you believe. It is believing “in” —an act of will, surrender, commitment and real trust.

#### **2. The object of faith: “the Lord Jesus....”**

To whom do we trust and commit our lives? —Jesus. He was a human being and His name means Saviour. The Lord —His title is a divine title; He is God’s Son.

#### **3. The outcome of faith: “...and you will be saved.”**

What does it mean to be saved?

**NOW** it means:

- \* forgiveness of all our sins and a clear conscience
- \* friendship instead of enmity with God
- \* being a member of God’s kingdom and family, instead of Satan’s
- \* the gift of His Spirit and His power to be different

**THEN** it will mean:

- \* going to heaven instead of hell when we die
- \* having a new body in heaven
- \* being made perfect
- \* seeing Christ and worshipping God face to face

**ETERNAL LIFE** is the term that links the NOW and the THEN together.

## Some key Bible Passages which explain the Gospel

### 1. **Born again**

New life in Christ is so radical that it is not *like* being born again, it *is* being spiritually reborn. See John 3:1-21. (See also Ephesians 4:22-24; 1 Peter 1:23; Colossians 3:3).

### 2. **Salvation**

We are ‘saved’ by God’s gift – the Bible calls this grace – and grace is God’s free unmerited favour. It cannot be earned in any way. This, frankly, is a stumbling block to many. See Romans 3:21-26. Note that grace cannot be effective *apart* from a seeker’s personal faith in Jesus Christ. (See Acts 2:38-41; Acts 8:36; 1 Corinthians 11:29; Hebrews 4:2).

### 3. **Atonement**

To ‘atone’ for some wrong done to another means to make amends for that wrong. In the Christian sense the idea of atonement is that we humans have wronged God by sinning against Him, and it is the Lord Jesus who makes atonement for that sin by taking our guilt upon Himself. So, Jesus’ death on the cross in our place is *the* atonement —the acceptable sacrifice to God. Once our sins are atoned for by Jesus, we become ‘at-one’ (by no means a definition of the word *atone*, but quite helpful, nevertheless!) with God —see Ephesians 2:1-10. (See also 1 John 2:2; Colossians 1:13; Hebrews 9:24-29).

### 4. **How to be saved**

No matter how sinful we have been, God, in the person of Jesus Christ, died for us and if we repent (i.e. genuinely turn away from our rebellion against God in our lives), God will forgive us. What do we need to do in order to accept God’s free gift of salvation? As someone once said, we need to go through three simple steps, A, B and C:

**A** – Admit our need of salvation. **B** – Believe in the Lord Jesus. **C** – Commit our lives to Him.

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At a practical level, this means consciously praying to God, asking His forgiveness for past sins and asking Him for His power to live a new life for Him.

Once we are saved, do we stop sinning? Sadly we do not completely stop sinning this side of heaven. The old sinful nature tries to reassert itself as God's enemy (and our enemy), the devil, tries to make us rebel against God. But being a Christian in the sense of John 3:16 does help us to *sin less*. As we go on in the Christian life, God graciously and patiently reveals to us areas of our lives where we need specifically to yield to Him. So God slowly and surely and perceptibly makes us more like Himself. The process is ultimately completed when we are called to our permanent home—heaven. When, after having become a Christian, we sin, we need to repent of (turn away from) that sin and ask His forgiveness. We might think of this in terms of a child and its parent: although a child might rebel against its parent, this does not alter the fact that the child is, and always will be, the child of its parent. Jesus promised that those who are part of His family will never be lost (see for examples, John 6:37; John 10:28; Matthew 28:20).

The Lord Jesus Himself referred to the fact that His followers would continue, from time to time, to sin (see John 13:10) and would therefore need to be 'washed' in respect of these later sins. Plainly, it is not His desire that Christians sin, but He has recognised that we are 'flesh' and therefore weak and will sometimes yield to temptation. This is not the same, it should be added, as living in a state of complete and permanent rebellion against God. It is difficult to see how a true believer could continue to live in this way, but Christians can become misled, or have wrong notions—or simply be weak. These deficiencies the Lord Jesus has made provision for. Once we have been saved (i.e. our whole being is 'clean' and does not need to be cleaned again—which is the meaning of John 13:10), which Jesus likens to having been bathed, we will continue to journey through life during which our 'feet' will become soiled (i.e. we occasionally sin). We do not need to be bathed again, but we do need to 'wash

our feet’ —or repent of particular, known sins. Once we repent of such known sins, God has made wonderful provision for us to be restored (see Lamentations 3:22-23; Gal 6:1; 1 John 1:9 and Proverbs 28:13).

Exactly how do we go through steps A, B and C? There is no ‘approved’ form of words for a prayer asking the Lord Jesus to save us and make us part of His family. God looks more on the heart than any precise words used. But the following prayer may be helpful to those who truly want to commit their lives to the Lord Jesus:

***Dear Heavenly Father, I sadly recognise and acknowledge that I have rebelled against you. I am a sinner. I do believe that Jesus came to this world to be my Saviour and He has died in my place. Please forgive me for all my past sins. I turn from them to you, now. Please take me into your family, and may Jesus now be my Lord, as well as my Saviour. From now on I will acknowledge you publicly as my Lord and ask your strength to follow you each day. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for hearing my prayer and saving me. I ask this in the Lord Jesus’ name, and for His sake. Amen.***

Anyone who has prayed such a prayer for the first time (and it may be good, though by no means necessary, to do this with a trusted Christian friend) should do two things. Firstly, find a good church, one that will help to build you up as you grow in the Christian faith. Ask God to help you find such a church, quickly. Second, let at least one other person know that you are now a Christian, preferably someone who will not be hostile to the idea! It is important that you learn to let other people know about your new life, and it will help to make the step more real to you. And don’t feel overwhelmed by the step you have just taken —the God who planned from pre-history to bring His Son into the world to be our Saviour is more than a match for any opposition you may face or any inadequacies you may feel!

This book has examined the biblical account of the Nativity

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of the Lord Jesus and shown, it is hoped, that we have excellent grounds for believing that the accounts we have been given are complete and trustworthy. There is a real poignancy in the Christmas story. God willingly surrendered His beloved Son to be the seal of salvation, completed on the cross at Calvary —once for all. The birth in Bethlehem some two thousand years ago was the beginning of a life like no other. Perhaps this is what we need to reflect upon each Christmas. We can take real joy in and mightily celebrate the fact of the birth of the Lord Jesus! But His birth was only the beginning of the most wonderful story ever told! And the story will not be completed until Jesus returns again in glory!

We began this book with the opening verse of H. J. Gauntlett's famous carol *Once in Royal David's City*. (See Chapter 1). Hopefully, by this stage, we will have a clearer grasp of the 'Christmas story' and where it fits into God's great plan of salvation. It is possible to intellectualise and theorise about the Christian faith, but ultimately, if it is to be accepted at all, it must be accepted with the simple faith of a child, as Jesus Himself made clear. (See Luke 18:16-17.) Perhaps, then, it is especially appropriate that we should finish with the last verse of Gauntlett's famous carol:

Not in that poor lowly stable,  
With the oxen standing by,  
We shall see Him; but in heaven,  
Set at God's right hand on high;  
When like stars His children crowned.  
All in white shall wait around.