

Christmas 2021

“Jesus’ Birthday”

A message by Pastor Phil Ballmaier
12/19/21

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December 25th is only a few days away—the day we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. But is December 25th *really* the day that Jesus was born?

We can be fairly certain that Jesus was not born on December 25th—**how do we know that?**

We know it because in the account of Jesus’ birth in Luke’s gospel we are told that—

Luke 2:8 (NKJV)

⁸ Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

Shepherds in that region of the world, never watched over their flocks by night outside in the open fields—in the *winter*.

From late fall through early spring the shepherds would take their sheep to graze in the surrounding fields of their village—but at night they would bring them back to the village and place them into a common or ‘communal’ sheepfold—and all of the shepherds would then go home for the night.

But from late spring through the fall the shepherds would lead their flocks away from the village in search of greener pastures during the hotter months of the year—and during this time they would live out in the fields and keep watch over their flocks at night.

➤ Now, some of you might be thinking—“***Then how did we come to celebrate Christmas on December 25th?***”

That’s an interesting story which goes back many centuries before the birth of Christ.

In the ancient cultures many pagan religions through the centuries have worshipped the sun as a god—the source of light and life. As the winter solstice approached and the days got shorter and shorter—the peoples in these ancient pagan cultures believed that the sun god was dying.

The ancient Babylonians worshiped Tammuz, the infant son of Semiramis (he was always pictured as an infant in her arms), as the sun god.

Tammuz was thought to be dying during the days leading up to the winter solstice (the day he eventually died)—and so in those days (leading up to the winter solstice) they burned a log in their fireplaces to ‘help’ Tammuz bring light into the world during these shortened days of light when he was thought to be dying.

The log remained burning in preparation for Tammuz’s rebirth once again (the Chaldean word for *infant* is “*yule*”)—this is the origin of the ‘Yule log’.

His rebirth was celebrated starting around December 23rd or 24th by replacing the log with a trimmed tree the next morning. Centuries before the birth of Jesus, Europeans celebrated light and life at the time of the winter solstice.

In the Norse country this winter celebration was known as “Yule” or “Yuletide” as we refer to it (borrowed from the ancient Chaldean/Babylonian practice). It was celebrated on December 21st at the time of the winter solstice.

These people would go out into the forest and drag back to their village the biggest fallen tree they could find, cut the branches off, and set the log on fire to bring light to the darkest days of winter.

They would also bring into their home’s evergreen trees (the only tree that could make it through a Norse winter)—when everything seemed to be dead the evergreen was a symbol of life and fertility. Tradition says that for as long as the Yule log burned (about twelve days which is where the 12 days of Christmas comes from)—feasting and revelry reigned supreme.

The Christian Church has historically celebrated the 12 days of Christmas starting on December 25th (the birth of Christ) and ending on January 6th (the Epiphany).

These 12 days were believed to be the amount of time it took after the birth of Jesus for the magi, or wise men, to travel to Bethlehem for the *Epiphany* when they recognized Him as the Son of God (as we will see next week, this is absolutely incorrect).

In Rome, one week before the winter solstice, Romans began celebrating *Saturnalia*—an orgy of food and drink named for the god Saturn—the god of agriculture. The Romans would decorate their homes in evergreen boughs and candles and would give gifts to one another.

It was a time for visiting with family and friends—and of rowdy merry making. December 25 was also considered to be the birth date of the Iranian mystery god *Mithra*, the god of light whom they called—“*the unconquerable sun.*”

Roman soldiers adopted Mithra as the manly man's hero of fidelity and bravery. To this sect the birth date of Mithra was the holiest day of the year—December 25th.

Early Christians didn’t celebrate the *birth* of Christ—it was the resurrection that was at the heart of the Christian faith and was what the early church celebrated. But by the fourth century the church began to toy with the idea of celebrating the birth of Christ. (Talk about the “conversion” of Constantine the Great)

The fact that Jesus was born wasn’t the problem—it was when?

The Bible doesn’t say specifically when—as I said earlier, we know for sure that Jesus wasn’t born on Dec.25th.

But since pagan Rome was already celebrating Saturnalia and the birthday of Mithra on Dec.25th (the “*unconquerable sun*”)—it only seemed natural in an attempt to merge Christianity with pagan Rome to use the date to celebrate the birthday of Jesus Christ—the “*Unconquerable Son.*”

Pope Julius I officially proclaimed December 25 to be the anniversary of Christ's birth in 440 A.D. giving December 25th Christian significance.

However, historically it has always been understood to have been an effort to help the pagan world embrace Christianity and trade in their worship of pagan gods for the worship of the One True God.

One author said,

“Puritans in England outlawed Christmas for years, and the holiday was not popular in early America. In fact, Christmas wasn't declared a federal holiday in the United States until June 26, 1870. Then, the holiday underwent a conversion. Christmas was 'reinvented' into the more moderate (and secular) holiday we know today.”

But no matter how sincere and well intentioned the motive—when the Church decided to partner with the world in the celebration of Christmas—it gave up the authority to control how the holiday would be celebrated.

The early Church knew it couldn't outlaw the pagan traditions that were practiced at this time of year, so it decided to adopt and “Christianize” them. Evergreen trees were brought inside and decorated with apples symbolizing the Garden of Eden.

Apples would eventually be replaced by round, colored ornaments hung on Christmas trees. Holly, which had always been a part of pagan celebrations, was recast to symbolize Christ's crown of thorns.

Yule logs were burned in Christian homes to remind them of the Light of God coming into the world as an infant, etc.

So, when was Jesus actually born?

We don't really know for sure but by studying some of the ‘clues’ given to us in the New Testament Scriptures—we can put forth an educated guess.

The first clue has to do with John the Baptist, who was the forerunner of Christ. John also had a miraculous birth—not as miraculous as Jesus' birth of course—but incredible none the less. John's father, Zacharias, was a priest who, along with his wife Elizabeth, was well advanced in years.

They were a godly couple who loved the Lord but had been unable to have any children. Even though they had no doubt prayed about it for many years—they had probably long since given up any hope of ever having a child.

But one day Zacharias was in the Temple offering incense to God when an angel appeared to him and said—

Luke 1:13-14 (NKJV)

¹³ ..."Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.

In Luke 1:5 it says that Zacharias was of the division of Abijah—but **what does that mean and how does it help us in our quest to discover Jesus' birthday?** Well, it's another clue in helping us pinpoint when Jesus was actually born. In those days the priests were divided up into divisions or groups.

You see there were too many priests for all of them to serve at the same time, so they were divided into 24 divisions and each group served in the Temple for two consecutive weeks each year.

The Abijah division, named after one of the priests who lived centuries earlier—was the division that Zacharias belonged to.

Scholars who have studied this tell us that this particular division was the 8th cycle and served from June 30th through July 13th.

That means it was sometime between June 30th and July 13th when Zacharias was serving in the Temple that the angel came and announced that Elizabeth was going to become pregnant and would have a son whom they were to name John.

I believe that as soon as Zacharias finished his service in the Temple he returned home, told Elizabeth the incredible news, had relations with her—and she got pregnant immediately. That means that John would have been born 9 months later which would put his birth around the third week in April.

The Feast of the Passover often takes place in the month of April at that time.

At the Passover meal (Seder) back then, as they still do to this day—every orthodox Jewish family keeps an empty seat at the table for the prophet Elijah—why?

Because of the prophecy given thru the prophet Malachi (Mal. 4:5-6—paraphrase)

At one point during the meal the youngest child would run to the front door, fling it open hoping to see Elijah standing there—which, if he was (standing there) would indicate that Messiah would soon be coming also.

Notice what the angel said to Zacharias about the child that would soon be born to him and Elizabeth—

Luke 1:17 (NKJV)

¹⁷ He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, *'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,'* and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

John the Baptist symbolically represented Elijah—listen to what Jesus said about John:

Matthew 11:14 (NKJV)

¹⁴ And if you are willing to receive *it*, he is Elijah who is to come.

It could very well be that John was born on the Feast of Passover when people were talking about Elijah, were looking for Elijah—and even had a place at the table reserved for Elijah!

Now if John was born on or very near the Passover (it would be just like the Lord to do something like that) then that would give us a big clue as to when Jesus was born—you say **"How so!?"**

In Luke Chapter 1 when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, he told her that she was going to conceive without having physical relations with a man, and that the child she would give birth to was going to be the Son of God.

But Gabriel also said to her—

Luke 1:36 (NKJV)

³⁶ Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren.

➤ This means that John would have been born 6 months before Jesus.

If John was born sometime in April, possibly on the Feast of Passover, and Jesus was born 6 months later—it would put the birth of Jesus sometime at the end of the month of September (the Jewish month of Tishrei).

I believe that Jesus was most likely born in September—but when in September—can we know what day?

Here again I believe that we are given a clue in helping us solve this mystery—this time it is given to us by John the Apostle—

John 1:1-3, 14 (NKJV)

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made...¹⁴And the Word 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.

The Greek word for ‘dwelt’ in v.14 literally means ‘tabernacled’—“**And the Word became flesh and tabernacle among us...**”

In September there are 3 feasts that the Jews celebrate—Trumpets, Yom Kippur and the Feast of Tabernacles.

The feast of Tabernacles was a time when they would live in booths or *tabernacles* for a week.

During this time, they would be remembering and talking to each other about how 1500 years earlier, “*God was with us*”, “*God fed us with bread from heaven*”, “*God was a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night all those years our ancestors were in the wilderness.*”

The Feast of Tabernacles was one of the three major Jewish feasts of the year—the others being Passover and Pentecost. Tabernacles, along with Passover and Pentecost, attracted Jews from all over the known world to Jerusalem. During these feasts the city swelled to between 2 and 3 million people.

Jerusalem couldn’t accommodate all of these pilgrims so many would stay in the surrounding towns and villages until every available room in house and inn was filled to capacity.

Could this be the reason why when Joseph and Mary finally arrived in Bethlehem, a suburb of Jerusalem—there was no room for them in the inn and she had to give birth to the Son of God in the stable out back?

Could John the Apostle, by telling us that the Word became flesh and *tabernacled* among us—be indicating that Jesus was born during the Feast of Tabernacles? But how would John have known what day Jesus was born on?

- You might be thinking—“*That’s easy, Jesus probably told His disciples when His birthday was.*”
- I don’t think so—that doesn’t sound like Jesus to me—“*Hey guys, tomorrow’s my birthday, what are you getting me...?*”

So then, how would John have known when Jesus’ birthday was?

Remember that as Jesus hung from the cross, He wanted to make sure His mother Mary would be taken care of—we read:

John 19:26-27 (NKJV)

²⁶When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, “Woman, behold your son!” ²⁷Then He said to the disciple, “Behold your mother!” And from that hour that disciple took her to his own *home*.

From that day on Mary moved in with John who took care of her for the rest of her life.

Mary was a typical Jewish mother who loved to talk about her children, especially her sons—and I think she shared with John all sorts of stories about Jesus growing up and probably the story of His birth including what day He was born on.

Think of the significance of Jesus being born during the Feast of Tabernacles—the time each year when the Jewish people were remembering, how 1500 years earlier, God had been with them—Jesus is called “*Immanuel*” in Matthew 1:22-23.

It was a time when the Jewish people were remembering how God fed them with bread from heaven in the wilderness—Jesus called Himself the *Bread of Life* (John 6).

During the Feast of Tabernacles 4 huge menorahs were placed in the courtyard of the Temple, several stories high. Every day a young priest would climb a ladder and pour buckets of olive oil into the large basin or bowl at the top of each menorah branch—seven in all.

Each basin contained a giant wick made from garments that the priests had worn—garments that had worn out the year before. The light from these menorahs burned so brightly that Josephus, the Jewish historian, records for us that the light could be seen from 100 miles away!

How significant that during the Feast of Tabernacles when each night the darkness was pierced with the incredible light from these giant menorahs that Jesus, the Light of the world, would have been born!

John the Apostle in speaking of the birth of Christ calls Jesus the “True Light” who, coming into the world, gives light to every person.

John 8:12 (NKJV)

¹² Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness but have the light of life."

John 1:4-5 (NKJV)

⁴ In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. (“could not extinguish it”)

The darkness in our culture has tried for years to extinguish the light of Christ—but they never have nor ever will!

So then what about this whole December 25th thing?

- *“Pastor, you’ve gotten me depressed since I celebrate the birthday of Jesus on December 25th and you’ve removed from it any and all meaning! I mean if it’s not the day that Jesus was really born, and it actually has pagan roots—why bother with it?”*

Well, let me show you one more thing about this.

If Jesus was actually born in late September during the Feast of Tabernacles, if you go back 280 days (the gestation period of a fetus from conception to birth)—it would mean that Jesus was conceived in the womb of Mary on or close to December 25th.

So, all of a sudden Christmas day which we celebrate on December 25th—has a whole new, richer, deeper and fuller meaning to us.

Because during the time of year when it is darkest, coldest, and everything is dead—that was the time when God said, *“I’m going to move, I’m going to act, I’m going to bring hope and light to a world trapped in hopelessness, darkness and despair. In that day I will conceive My Son in the womb of the virgin Mary—and He will be the Light and Hope of the world!”*

And although the Light in Mary’s womb wouldn’t be born for another 9 months, and no one could see any evidence that the Savior had come to earth—God was at work—and the same is true in your life this morning.

When things look their blackest and darkest; when your life seems cold and dead and hopeless—remember Christmas.

**Remember how God was at work during mankind’s darkest hour
and the Light, the answer to all of man’ problems,
was about ready to be revealed!**

The same could very well be true for your life.

God hears your prayers, He knows what you’re going thru and has promised never to turn a deaf ear to the cries of those who know Him, love Him and are desperate before Him.

But it all begins by receiving the Light of the world, Jesus Christ into your heart!

Merry Christmas!

If you would like to know more about what it means to be a Jesus-follower— ***you can experience the richest Christmas of your life!***

Please, reach out to us. It would be our greatest privilege to lead you into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

Reach out to us [here](#).

Want to know more? Click [here](#).