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The Birth of Christ — When and Where??

The substance of a sermon preached on Lord's Day 23rd December 2001, in Kilskeery Free Presbyterian Church by Rev. Ivan Foster.

"This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief," 1 Timothy 1:15.

This is a timely topic since we are surrounded by the many evidences of the world's celebration of the birth of Christ.

It has to be said that many people have expressed reservations about the nature of the celebrations and whether they really have any relationship to the coming into the world of the Son of God.

I suppose you do not have to search very far to see the reasons for such concerns. That the police and the various authorities, linked with safety on the roads, should be required to make special appeals at this time of year to try and curtail people from drinking to excess in celebration of Christmas, does raise the question of whether such activity is in keeping with a marking of the birth of the Redeemer of men from sin. Very obviously, it is not.

Whatever we believe about Christ and anything associated with Him must be grounded on the Word of God. We are not to believe anything that cannot be proved from the revelation that God has given us of Himself. That is made clear in the last warning given in the Bible.

"For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book," Revelation 22:18-19.

We cannot add to or take from that which God has revealed about Himself in His Word.

Just what does the Bible say about the birth of Christ, particularly when it took place?

1. The truth is that there is nothing directly stated about when Christ was born.

However, there is a number of circumstances recorded that would give us some clear indications of the time of the year when it did take place.

Let's start with that best known of all events surrounding the birth of Christ — the shepherds watching over their flocks by night near Bethlehem. "And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, 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," Luke 2:8-11.



A wintry scene in Israel, January 2013

Now this we can say: These shepherds would not have had their flocks outside in the dead of winter, so that this suggests that the birth of Christ did not take place in December. The hot summers of Israel tend to deceive us as to the character of its winters. They get much colder than we perhaps imagine. The virtuous woman, extolled in Proverbs chapter 31, is one who is not afraid of the snow for her household: "for all her household are clothed with scarlet," verse 21. Some say that the word "clothed" carries the meaning of double-wrapped. Winters can be severe in Israel.



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Another consideration is the reason why Joseph and Mary had come from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem, at a time when Mary was near to giving birth to the One she knew was the Redeemer. The reason was as stated in Luke 2:1-3. "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city," Luke 2:1-3. This was not so much a paying of money to the government but rather a census, a recording of all the citizens of the land. Tax may be paid anywhere, but in a day when such documentation as passports and drivers' licences did not exist, the only place, where you could be recorded as the person you truly were, was amongst those who knew you and your ancestry — your home town. Thence the requirement to return to his own city. It is unlikely that such a decree, which required people to travel, would be issued in the winter time when travel would have been made difficult, if not impossible, by the weather. Travelling in winter time in Israel was not easy. Note the words of Christ's prophecy of the times of persecution that would come on Jerusalem in the last days and the need to escape from the city when the given sign was manifested. "When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso readeth, let him understand:) Then let them which be in Judaea flee into the mountains . . . But pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the sabbath day," Matthew 24:15-16, 20. These two considerations certainly cast a serious doubt over a mid-winter date for the birth of Christ.



Photo from the Jerusalem Post, December 14, 2013

2. Does the Bible give us any clue to the date of Christ's birth?

Yes, I believe that it does. We are told in the Bible that the Saviour was born 6 months after John the Baptist, Luke 1:36. That information would be important if we can discover when John the Baptist was born.

In Luke 1:5, we read: "There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth." There is an important piece of information contained in that verse. It is the little phrase, "of the course of Abia." The family of Abijah, or Abia, was the eighth in order of the weekly duties allocated to the Levitical priests in the days of David. Please read 1 Chronicles 24:1-19. Especially note verse 10. There we are told of the rota in which Zacharias, of the house of Abijah, would have served in the eighth course. That means, given that the rota began at the beginning of the Jewish year, which is about our Easter time, eight weeks later Zacharias would have been on duty within the temple and it would have been then that the angel announced to him the forthcoming birth of a son to his wife Elisabeth. The date of the conception of Elisabeth's child would have been about the first half of June. Consequently, John the Baptist would have been born about February or March time of the next year according to our calendar.

Again, we do know that the Saviour was born six months later as we have shown from Luke 1:36. Therefore Christ would have been born about September time of the same year.

This would fit in with the shepherds still being in the fields for the weather would still be warm. I must state that this reckoning depends upon the same rota being followed by the priests as was commenced in David's time. I am of the opinion that it was, since the Jews were most meticulous about such matters. (See also 2 Chronicles 35:4.)

Does all this matter?

What we believe regarding the date of the Saviour's birth will not have any bearing upon our soul's salvation. But do not get the idea that we may be careless or indifferent about all matters related to Christ. There are some who would tell us that it does not matter what you believe as long as you are sincere. That is not so. There are some matters revealed about Christ that must be believed if we are to be saved.



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That brings us to the matter of WHY Christ was born.

This is easily answered for us by the apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 1:15. "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief."

This glorious statement, of a truth that lies at the very heart of the gospel, tells us a number of important things.

I. MEN ARE SINNERS.

1. Because there are differing degrees to which men may engage in sin, some suppose that not everyone is really a sinner. That is not so. Were we to visit a leprosy hospital, our untrained eyes could tell some were very ill. Others we might well consider unaffected, though the specialist could tell that that was not so. So it is with sin. The plague is much more obvious in some than in others. As Paul said: "Some men's sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment; and some men they follow after," 1 Timothy 5:24. Some men are obviously corrupt and depraved, while in others it does not at first appear to be so with them. Was there any amongst the apostles who suspected Judas of being the traitor that he was? But he was, just the same.

2. All men therefore need salvation. Little sins will bring a person to hell just as surely as great sins. The difference will be in the degree of punishment that differing sinners will endure throughout eternity. The evil men of Sodom will not suffer to the degree that those who rejected Christ's words will suffer, for the latter sinned in the face of greater privileges. (See Matthew 11:21-24.)

3. Each one of us has a corrupt and corrupting heart. "There is no man that sinneth not," 1 Kings 8:46. (See Matthew 15:19 and Romans 3:23.) Note the specific terms employed in these statements. They apply to all men without exception.

II. CHRIST HAS COME TO SAVE SINNERS.

The word save means to rescue, to preserve from harm and danger.

It was first used in the New Testament by the angel who spoke to Joseph about the birth of Christ. "Thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins," Matthew 1:21. Here is the central purpose of Christ's coming into the world.

1. How does Jesus save sinners?

Let us remember what it is that sinners need saved from.

Being sinners, they are guilty of breaking God's law and are thereby subject to the penalty of a broken law which is eternal damnation, John 3:18, John 3:36.

We are born into this world under condemnation and each day we but add to that condemnation by our continuance in sin. For sinners to be saved therefore means:—

Escaping the penalty of the broken law;

Having a means of fully keeping the law since we are duty bound to perfectly fulfil it.

As well as this, needing to have our natures changed so that we no longer are the slaves of our depraved natures and continue to defy God by our disobedience.

2. The Lord Jesus Christ undertook to accomplish all these things on behalf of His elect. "But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons," Galatians 4:4-5.

"But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption," 1 Corinthians 1:30.

"And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith," Philippians 3:9.

"For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth," Romans 10:4.

So Christ, as the federal head and representative of His people, fulfilled the holy requirements of the law for them. He lived for them!

3. But what of the penalty of the broken law?



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"For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him," 2 Corinthians 5:21.

"Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed," 1 Peter 2:24.

Christ took the place of His guilty people and died for them.

4. But what about the new nature?

"Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new," 2 Corinthians 5:17.

The grafting of a branch from one tree into that of another, so that the branch partakes of the life and vitality of the new tree, is a wonderful example of how the sinner is made a partaker of the life of Christ.

"Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live," 11:25.

"Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust," 2 Peter 1:4.

III. NOTICE THAT THE MESSAGE OF CHRIST IS TO BE RECEIVED BY FAITH.

"This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief."

This is a trustworthy statement that may and should be believed by all, for thereby they will be saved. Have you received from Christ the gift of eternal life, for this is the reason for the Saviour's coming to this world so long ago? How sad that amidst all the hullabaloo at this time of the year, so many miss this vital point!

A believing of the gospel message is what is required if men are to be saved. Faith is an accepting of God's Word as true.

What is God's promise in this matter? "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life," John 3:16.

Will you take God at His word right now and believe on Christ?