



# BEYOND TODAY®

November-December 2016

## Did Jesus Christ Really Exist?

Who Was Jesus? 10 • Do We Have Valid Testimony to the Life of Christ? 15  
Does the Truth Really Matter? 19 • How Can You Kick the Christmas Habit? 31

# BEYOND TODAY

## FEATURE ARTICLES

### 4 Did Jesus Christ Really Exist?

Was Jesus Christ real? What does the evidence say? We have compelling historical documentation of His existence. And you need to understand not only *that* He came, but also *why* He came!

### 10 Who Was Jesus?

Who was Jesus, really? Why did He come? Who and what is He now? You need to understand the answers right from your Bible!

### 15 Do We Have Valid Testimony to the Life of Christ?

Have the books of the Bible been faithfully passed on to us? And can we believe what is written? What does the evidence tell us?

### 19 Does the Truth Really Matter?

We live in a world in which, as Isaiah 59:14 says, "Truth is fallen in the street." Is truth that important anymore? Is it important to *you*?

### 21 All Lives Matter

In the United States, the state of race relations has plunged to a low not seen in years. Why, and why now? And what's the solution?

### 28 Would Jesus Celebrate Christmas?

If Christ is truly the reason for the season, would Jesus Christ celebrate Christmas today?

### 31 How Can You Kick the Christmas Habit?

If you've been reading *Beyond Today* magazine or watching the *Beyond Today* TV program for long, you've probably come to see what the Bible says about Christmas. So what do you do now?

### 34 Make Room for the Divine Nature

It's not enough to let God enter our lives. We must open up every area of our lives to Him—surrendering to Him totally for ultimate blessing.

### 38 What I Learned as a Foster Child

Though life can be bleak at times, I learned at a young age that I'm never alone.



10



28



34

## STUDY SECTIONS

### 37 Questions and Answers

Answers to your questions about the Bible and Christian living

## DEPARTMENTS

### 24 Current Events and Trends

An overview of events and conditions around the world

### 26 God, Science and the Bible

Discoveries from the world of science that support the biblical record

### 36 Letters From Our Readers

Readers of *Beyond Today* magazine share their thoughts

### 39 *Beyond Today* TV Log and Office Listing

*Beyond Today* TV airtimes and worldwide contact information





**Scott Ashley**  
Managing editor

# Can We Believe the Gospels?

**M**any people assume that belief in God's Word is matter of blind faith. But is that really the case? *Beyond Today* is dedicated to demonstrating that we have sound reasons and firm evidence for believing God's Word, therefore our faith should be rock-solid in the face of criticism of the Bible.

Since this issue addresses the question of whether Jesus Christ really existed, how do the Gospels stack up with verifiable history and what we know from archaeology? Entire books have been written on the subject, and more is being uncovered all the time, but let's take a brief overview.

First, let's list individuals in the Gospels whose existence has been confirmed by archaeology and history. They include the following, in alphabetical order: Annas (high priest), Augustus Caesar (Roman emperor), Archelaus (ruler of Judea), Caiaphas (high priest), Herod the Great (ruler of Judea), Herod Antipas (ruler of Galilee), James (apostle and half-brother of Jesus), Jesus Christ, John the Baptist, Philip (ruler of Galilee), Pontius Pilate (Roman procurator of Judea), Quirinius (governor of Syria) and Tiberius Caesar (Roman emperor).

What kind of evidence do we have of these individuals? For rulers we have things like coins and statues. For lesser-known persons we have historical writings (other than the Bible) and inscriptions bearing their names in locations and the time setting in which the Bible places them.

Let's consider another form of verification—the cities and towns mentioned in the Gospels that have been identified and confirmed through history and archaeology. These include Aenon, Bethany, Bethlehem, Bethphage, Bethsaida, Caesarea Philippi, Capernaum, Cana, Chorazin, Emmaus, Gadara, Gennesaret, Gerasa, Jericho, Jerusalem, Magdala, Nain, Nazareth, Nineveh, Sidon, Sychar, Tiberias and Tyre.

What is truly astounding is that *80 percent of the cities and towns mentioned in the Gospels have been found*—and only *seven* have yet to be located!

Keep in mind that 2,000 years have passed, and

many of these were destroyed by the Romans almost 2,000 years ago. To be able to identify this many sites is truly remarkable and demonstrates that the Gospel writers knew exactly what they were talking about and were very familiar with the places they mentioned. That kind of accuracy would be impossible if, as Bible critics argue, the biblical writers were making up the story years later or were living somewhere else far removed from these events.


Let's look at a third category of evidence that verifies the Gospel accounts—*specific structures* confirmed by archaeology and history.

Consider this topic for a moment. We would expect some famous people like those named earlier to be mentioned in books, to have statues carved of them or to see them mentioned in inscriptions. But what about *specific buildings and structures*? How many of those are ever mentioned in books, identified in inscriptions and otherwise recorded for posterity? The number is very small.

And of course, time destroys all of them eventually. But it's remarkable how many individual buildings and structures mentioned in the Gospels archaeologists have excavated or found specific evidence for today. Here's a list: the Bethesda Pool (Jerusalem), the Capernaum synagogue, the Gerizim temple (Samaria), Herod's Temple (Jerusalem), the high priest's palace (Jerusalem), Jacob's well (Samaria), Peter's house (Capernaum), the Praetorium (Jerusalem) and the Siloam Pool (Jerusalem).

Again, considering the ravages of time and the total destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70 and again in 135, it's astounding that this many have been found and identified.

The Gospel writers also get many other details right, such as geography, agricultural practices, fishing methods, dining customs, religious practices and much more. If the Gospel writers get so much right, we have no valid reasons to disbelieve the primary thrust of their story—that Jesus Christ was the divine Son of God who lived, died and rose again to make available to us God's astounding promise of salvation.

So let's trust what they were faithful to deliver to us! 



The Siloam Pool of John 9, shown here partially excavated, was discovered in 2005.

*Scott Ashley*



# Did Jesus Christ Really Exist?

Was Jesus Christ real? What does the evidence say? In spite of what you may have heard, we have compelling historical documentation of His existence. And you need to understand not only *that* He came, but also *why* He came!

by Darris McNeely



Was Jesus of Nazareth a real person? Did He really exist? Are the stories written about Him in the Bible true? These are important questions, and it's crucial that you know the answers!

Some argue that Jesus couldn't have existed because there are no first-century historical records that mention Him. Of course, there *are* contemporary biographies written about Him—four of them in fact, by different authors. They're called the Gospels, and they're found in the Bible.

But that's not good enough for those determined *not* to believe in Jesus Christ. They insist on more. They demand written records from contemporary first-century historians who were *not* followers of Jesus.

But in so doing they're requiring a standard few historical figures from the ancient world could possibly meet. After all,

Historians are well aware of a few surviving non-Christian Roman works from early in the second century that mention Jesus Christ and Christianity.

very few surviving histories survive from the first century, and basically the only sizeable and largely complete Roman written works from this time are a manual on agriculture, a comedy from a friend of one of the emperors and a few other miscellaneous works—none of which we would expect to include any mention of Christianity or Jesus Christ.

#### Roman histories that mention Jesus and Christianity

However, historians are well aware of a few surviving non-Christian Roman works from early in the second century that *do* mention Jesus Christ and Christianity. These include:

- *Lives of the First Twelve Caesars*, by Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, a Roman court official and chief secretary to Emperor Hadrian, who wrote around A.D. 120.
- Letters of Pliny the Younger, a Roman governing official in north-central Turkey, who wrote about A.D. 120.
- *Annals*, by the Roman historian Tacitus, who wrote about A.D. 115.

In addition to these, the famous first-century Jewish historian Josephus wrote about Jesus and a number of other figures mentioned in the Gospels. We'll discuss him a little later.

#### Followers of "Chrestus" banished from Rome

Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (commonly known as Suetonius), writing around 120 A.D., records that the emperor Claudius "banished the Jews from Rome, who were continually making disturbances, Chrestus [Christ] being their leader" (*Lives of the First Twelve Caesars: Life of Claudius*).

Claudius reigned from A.D. 41 to 54. At this point in history the Romans didn't see any difference between Jews and Christians, since they largely believed and practiced the same things, so Claudius apparently expelled them all.

What's significant in Suetonius' brief statement, mentioned in passing, is that a number of the Jews in Rome had become

followers of "Chrestus," which seems to be a misspelling of "Christus," the Latinized form of "Christ." So we see that by approximately the year 50 there already were significant numbers of Christians in Rome, and this was leading to conflict with the Roman authorities—exactly why, we're not told.

This expulsion of the Jews from Rome is mentioned in the Bible, in Acts 18:2: "And he [Paul] found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla (because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome); and he came to them."

What is especially interesting is how closely this brief mention correlates with what we read in the book of Acts. At the Feast of Pentecost when the Church was founded as recorded in Acts 2, ca. A.D. 31, we read that "visitors from Rome" were among those who witnessed the miraculous events of Acts 2:6-12. At that time people speaking multiple languages and dialects from more than a dozen different parts of the Roman Empire heard the apostles "speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God."

We're not explicitly told when the first Christian believers appeared in Rome, but it's not a stretch to assume that some of those in Jerusalem for that Pentecost took their astounding report back with them to Rome, where it spread among the Jews and Jewish proselytes there—leading about two decades later to the expulsion of Jews and Christians from Rome.

#### How to deal with Christians who wouldn't worship the emperor as divine?

Around A.D. 120, Pliny the Younger, a Roman governing official in what is today north-central Turkey, wrote to the emperor Trajan requesting advice on how to deal with Christians who refused to reverence the Roman emperor's image. Pliny noted that these Christians met regularly and sang hymns "to Christ as if to a god" (*Letters* 10:96:7).

Two facts are immediately notable about this brief mention of Christians and Christianity. The first is that there were a considerable number of followers of Jesus Christ in northern Asia Minor less than a hundred years after His death. A second notable fact is that these people met together and sang hymns to Christ "as if to a god."

The first fact is notable because this is exactly the pattern we see time and time again in the book of Acts: Early Christian teachers like Paul, Barnabas and Apollos went from city to city in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) and Greece, proclaiming the divinity and resurrection of Jesus Christ and that salvation was available only through Him. Sometimes they met great hostility; at other times they met a receptive audience, and Christianity began to slowly and steadily spread—often in spite of persecution.

The second fact here is notable because Pliny's inquiry to the emperor shows that the Christians he encountered considered Jesus Christ to be divine. And his correspondence shows that they were so firm in this belief that some refused to renounce that belief even under penalty of torture and death!

Again, this is the pattern we see time and time again in the book of Acts—people who were so firmly convinced that Jesus

Christ was a real person who had lived, died and been raised to life again that they were willing to die rather than renounce that belief.

**“Christus . . . suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of . . . Pontius Pilate”**

The most complete information we have from a Roman writer from this period comes from Publius (or Gaius) Cornelius Tacitus, a Roman senator and historian, who was born around A.D. 56 and wrote his works early in the second century. Being a historian, he discussed the devastating fire of Rome in A.D. 64 during the reign of Emperor Nero. Notice what he adds in a side discussion about Nero blaming Christians for the fire:

“Consequently, to get rid of the report [that Nero himself had started the fire to expand his own properties], Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome . . .”

So what do we learn from this account from the historian Tacitus about conditions in Rome in 64 A.D.?

Keep in mind that Tacitus was no friend of Christians. He considered them deplorable.

- There was a group in Rome at that time—barely three decades after Jesus’ crucifixion—known as “Christians.”
- They were called “Christians” after someone called “Christus” (the Latin form of “Christ”).
- Their leader “Christus” was executed during the governance of the procurator Pontius Pilate (A.D. 26-36) and the reign of the emperor Tiberius (A.D. 14-37).
- The Romans thought the Christians believed in “a most mischievous superstition.”
- The Christians were “hated for their abominations.”
- Their movement originated in Judea (the Holy Land) and from there spread to Rome.
- By 64, there was a “vast multitude” of Christians in Rome.

Again, this is astonishing because it verifies exactly what we read in the Gospels and the book of Acts (including the timing of Christ’s crucifixion during the rule of Tiberius and Pontius Pilate, Luke 3:1-2).

What was this “most mischievous superstition” the Christians believed? Tacitus does not say. Could it have been that a man was executed by crucifixion and rose from the dead? Or that the Christians themselves believed they also would rise from the dead? Or that their leader “Christus” would come again as King of a Kingdom that would replace Rome and rule the world?

We don’t know, but Tacitus’ wording about this movement being rooted in “a most mischievous superstition” is quite striking—especially since the Romans, with their great variety of pagan religious beliefs, accepted almost anything *except* the

resurrection of the dead!

**Josephus’ mention of John the Baptist**

Let’s look at another non-Christian writer, and that is the famous Jewish historian Flavius Josephus. He wrote *The Jewish War* and *Antiquities of the Jews* late in the first century. In his *Antiquities*, Josephus refers to many people named in the New Testament, including Jesus, John the Baptist and James the half-brother of Jesus.

Born into a priestly



Marble bust thought to depict Flavius Josephus

The first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus refers to many people named in the New Testament, including Jesus, John the Baptist and James, the half-brother of Jesus.

family in A.D. 37, Josephus was well educated and, as a military commander, led a Jewish detachment in Galilee during the Jewish revolt of 66-70 until his capture by the Romans. At the end of the war he went to Rome with the Roman general Titus, where he lived and wrote until his death around A.D. 100.

Here is what Josephus writes about John the Baptist and his executioner, Herod Antipas:

“Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod’s army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist: for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism . . .

“Now when many others came in crowds about him, for they were very greatly moved by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion, (for they seemed ready to do any thing he should advise,) thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it would be too late.

“Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod’s suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death. Now the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of this army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God’s displeasure to him” (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 18, chap. 5, sec. 2).

Again, this corresponds very closely with what we read about John in the Gospels. Matthew 3:1-10, Mark 1:1-6 and Luke 3:1-14 all mention John's popularity and message of repentance as recorded decades later by Josephus. And Matthew 14:3-12 describes the scene in Herod's palace when John was executed on Herod's orders.

### Josephus and James, "brother of Jesus, who was called Christ"

In addition to various rulers and members of the high priest's family mentioned in the Gospels (and confirmed through archaeological discoveries), Josephus also mentions James, half-brother of Jesus Christ:

"[The Roman governor] Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he [Ananias, the high priest] assembled the sanhedrin of the judges, and brought before them *the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James*, and some others [or some of his companions;] and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned . . ." (*Antiquities*, 20:9:1).

This same James is the author of the book of the Bible that bears his name. Although a half-brother of Jesus, he wasn't initially a believer in His messiahship (John 7:5), but after Jesus' death and resurrection he was among those gathered in Jerusalem at the Feast of Pentecost when the Church was founded ca. A.D. 31 (Acts 1:14).

So here we have three major figures of the New Testament—John the Baptizer, the apostle James and his half-brother Jesus, who was called Christ or Messiah—mentioned by a Jewish historian later that same century. Does Josephus say anything else about Jesus?

### Josephus' account of Jesus Christ

Note this (with **bold portions** for discussion following): "Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, **if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works**, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. **He was Christ.**"

"And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; **for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him.** And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day" (*Antiquities* 18:3:3).

While many scholars dispute parts or all of the passage, it is quoted as above by the historian Eusebius in Greek as early as A.D. 315 and appears this way in all the earliest surviving copies of Josephus' works.

But the boldfaced portions are very odd for a Jewish writer who wasn't apparently a Christian. Most scholars agree that the boldfaced portions were added sometime in the second or third century by a scribe copying this work, which would mean these parts aren't the actual words of Josephus. Supporting this view is an Arabic-language version of this portion of Josephus' writings that was apparently preserved in its more original form. It reads this way:

"At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus,

and his conduct was good, and he was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon their loyalty to him. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive. Accordingly they believed that he was the Messiah, concerning whom the Prophets have recounted wonders."

This leaves out the parts apparently added later about Jesus working miracles, that he was the Messiah foretold by the prophets rather than others believing Him so, and that He was raised from the dead rather than this having been reported. It would appear that this Arabic-language manuscript was copied from what Josephus originally wrote before a scribe added his own thoughts to the text. Most scholars who have looked into this agree that Josephus originally wrote about Jesus, but a later scribe elaborated on Josephus' account, inserting his Christian beliefs.

Regardless, here, in the most extensive preserved history of Judea from the first century, we have confirmation of the existence of Jesus, as well as John the Baptist and James, the half-brother of Jesus!

We also have confirmation of the key points of the Gospels and book of Acts—that Jesus was a wise and virtuous man whom both Jews and gentiles chose to follow as the Messiah, that He was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and that He was reported to have been resurrected to life and appeared to His followers three days after His death.

Those who would deny the existence of Jesus Christ have to explain away not only a number of specific references to Him, but also historic references to His half-brother James and John the Baptist, plus historians' statements confirming the key themes and facts of the Gospels and the book of Acts!

### Yes, Jesus lived—but what of His claims?

The Bible, which declares itself the inspired Word of God, says Jesus lived, died and was resurrected to life again and that He was the divine Son of God and God in the flesh. The Bible can be demonstrated to be a true and accurate history, attesting to the lives of people who really lived and walked with God and to events that occurred in the time and manner stated (see our free study guide *Is the Bible True?*).

As we have seen from the remaining works of the earliest historians who wrote about that period, they testify that Jesus was real and was indeed a historic figure living in the first century. Both history and the weight of tradition affirm this truth.

The next obvious question is, *Was He who He said He was?* That is, was Jesus God? Was He God in the flesh?

As noted theologian C.S. Lewis wrote: "You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to" (*Mere Christianity*, 1996, p. 56).

The first-century witnesses of Jesus' life, death and resurrec-

tion say He was God. Either He was or He wasn't. (Be sure to read "Who Was Jesus?" beginning on page 10.)

### Why did Jesus have to exist as a man?

And this leads us to a critically important question: *Why did Jesus have to live as a man?* Why did the One identified in Scripture as the Word, who was God and was with God (John 1:1), have to become the flesh-and-blood Jesus of Nazareth?

The answer to this question is little understood, but opens up to another dimension of understanding the essential nature of God and His purpose for creating human life here on earth.

Let's begin with what we know about the Word. The starting point is in the writings of the apostle John. John 1:1 says: "*In the beginning* was the Word, and the Word was *with* God, and the Word *was* God. He was *in the beginning with* God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it" (John 1:1-4, emphasis added throughout).

This passage tells us that before Jesus came in the flesh He was *with God from the beginning* and *was* God. Called here "the Word," the Being who became Jesus Christ was of the very essence of God, which means He was divine spirit. He was eternal and co-existed as God in eternity.

We might think of "eternity" as a different dimension of existence apart from the material, time- and space-bound world we inhabit. God dwells in the *spirit* dimension of eternity: "For thus says the High and Lofty One *who inhabits eternity*, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place . . .'" (Isaiah 57:15). Eternity is challenging for our mortal minds to comprehend, yet it is where God exists.

God reveals Himself as without beginning or end. He is spirit. He exists beyond the cosmos He created. God's essence is spirit—*holy* spirit, which is eternal.

John reveals that the Being called "the Word" created this world. Paul confirms this when he writes: "*For by Him all things were created* that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. *All things were created through Him and for Him*" (Colossians 1:16). The One who became Jesus of Nazareth is revealed to be *the One through whom God created the universe*. This fundamental understanding helps us understand the enormity of the decision He made to come in the flesh and live among men.

What else do we need to understand about Jesus having come in the flesh?

### From position of God to position of a servant

God's love for His creation did not stop at setting in motion the sun, moon, stars and planets in their elegant cosmic ballet. He was never to be an absentee Creator.

The plan from before the foundation of the world was that a sacrifice would be necessary. It would first be a sacrifice of *position*—from existing on the same level with God to coming to earth in the likeness of the human creation as a man. It is difficult if not impossible to begin to understand the love of this *self-sacrificing decision*.

The Word emptied Himself of His divine might and glory,

retaining the identity of God, but coming as a servant to perform a deed essential for human salvation.

Notice what Paul reveals in Philippians 2:6-8: "Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God [in terms of sharing divine nature] as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross" (New Living Translation).

This helps us understand why, during His last night with His disciples before His death, He prayed, "And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, *with the glory which I had with You before the world was*" (John 17:5).

### Supreme sacrifice for us

The next part of His sacrifice was "as of a lamb . . . foreordained before the foundation of the world" (1 Peter 1:19-20).

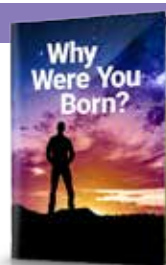
The human race was set on a path away from God with the decision by the first human beings, Adam and Eve, to sin in partaking of the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden, rejecting access to the knowledge and understanding God offered through the tree of life (see Genesis 2:9). That brought about the need for a sacrifice to redeem mankind from sin. The plan called for the shedding of blood of the one and only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of sin, which is ultimately death.

God's Word has a great deal to say about Christ's death and shedding of blood for the forgiveness of sin to redeem mankind. It is a critical and essential part of God's purpose. He intends to "gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and in earth—in Him" (Ephesians 1:10).

Christ's death by the shedding of His blood provides the one sacrifice for sin for all time: "So Christ has now become the High Priest over all the good things that have come . . . With his own blood—not the blood of goats and calves—he entered the Most Holy Place once for all time and secured our redemption forever. Just think how much more the blood of Christ will purify our consciences from sinful deeds so that we can worship the living God. For by the power of the eternal Spirit, Christ offered himself to God as a perfect sacrifice for our sins.

"That is why he is the one who mediates a new covenant between God and people, so that all who are called can receive the eternal inheritance God has promised them. For Christ died to set them free from the penalty of the sins they had committed under that first covenant" (Hebrews 9:11-15, NLT).

Jesus Christ, "after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God . . . For by one offer-



### LEARN MORE

Understanding why Jesus Christ came to earth is crucial to understanding your existence and why you are here. God has an incredible plan for you, and that plan is spelled out in our free study guide *Why Were You Born?* Download or request your free copy today!

[www.BTmagazine.org/booklets](http://www.BTmagazine.org/booklets)



ing He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified” (Hebrews 10:12, 14). His sacrifice, His blood, is the means for mankind to be reconciled to God in an eternal covenant that offers and guarantees salvation, eternal life and the sharing of the divine existence in eternity.

### A God of love

God’s essential character is love (1 John 4:8, 16). Of all the apostles Christ trained, it was John who seemed to detect



God’s Word has a great deal to say about Christ’s death and shedding of blood for the forgiveness of sin to redeem mankind. It is a critical and essential part of God’s purpose.

this critical detail of the One he forsook all to follow. In the well-known passage of John 3:16 he wrote, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

John would also quote Jesus in another far-reaching discourse saying: “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (John 6:63, New Revised Standard Version). The life we anticipate is the eternal spirit life from God, who is Spirit (John 4:24).

It is this great love, told throughout Scripture, that led God the Father and the Word who would become Jesus to determine They would share who and what They were with other created beings beyond the angelic realm—human beings. Created in God’s image and endowed with a mind and nature to which God could confer His Spirit, these would have the potential to inherit eternal spirit life.

(It should be noted that spirit life does not mean existence as formless energy, as some might imagine. Those in the spirit realm will have form and substance as spiritual bodies.)

Human beings are created in the image of God but do not, as first formed, possess the same spiritual essence. Man is physical, created from the elements of the earth (though with a human spirit for intellect, emotion and personality as part of his makeup). Having free will, we can and do sin, but as we have seen, God has provided a means for reconciling human beings to Himself through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Before the foundation of this world the Word and the One who would become the Father conceived the plan of redemption for mankind. A verse quoted in part earlier states: “You were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you” (1 Peter 1:18-20).

The plan would call for the Word to become flesh, thereby showing that the eternal spirit could be joined to a human being. The Word, the eternally existing spirit Being who was God along with the Father, was sent to become Jesus of Nazareth—God in the flesh. He became flesh and then through His resurrection returned to spirit so that human beings created in the image of God would have the path opened to becoming spirit beings in the Kingdom of God.

That is why it is so critically important to know that Jesus really existed and why He came. Jesus Christ’s actual historical existence here on earth in the first century is central to that crucial facet of God’s plan being able to take place.

Without Jesus Christ’s life, death and resurrection we have no hope of eternal life with God. The Bible reveals to us not only that there is a God, but also what His purpose for creat-

ing human life is all about. The great meaning of life is that human beings created in the image of God can become glorified divine spirit members of the immortal family and Kingdom of God.

### What are you to do?

Jesus Christ’s resurrection back to spirit existence makes Him the first of

God’s plan for human salvation (see Romans 8:29; 1 Corinthians 15:20, 23; Colossians 1:18). Christ’s followers who have died and those still alive at His coming will be changed from mortal to immortality in a glorious moment (verses 50-54). Transformed to share spirit existence with Christ and the Father, they will then inherit the Kingdom of God.

This hope of eternal life is revealed in Scripture.

Jesus Christ existed in the flesh as the Son of God. He exists today as your High Priest and soon-coming King. He lives, and He is the means for reconciliation and salvation.

Coming to know this true and compelling picture of Jesus Christ is vital to receiving eternal life in the Kingdom of God. The words of the apostle Peter in Acts 2:38 ring clear today: “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”! **BT**

# Who Was Jesus?

Who was Jesus, really? Why did He come? Who and what is He now?  
You need to understand the answers right from your Bible!

by Scott Ashley

**W**ho was Jesus of Nazareth, really? He is undoubtedly one of history's most famous figures—so famous that history is divided into the period before and after His birth (B.C., or “before Christ” and A.D., Latin *Anno Domini*, “the year of our Lord”). A third of the human race claims to be His followers.

Ideas about Him have ranged all over the map for the last 2,000 years—from madman to Messiah, from Son of God to common criminal. People have wildly varying ideas about what He taught and what His mission and purpose was. Countless forests of trees have been cut down to provide the paper for the millions of books printed about Him, and tons of ink have been poured out on those pages.

But who did *Jesus Himself* say He was? What did *He* say His mission and purpose was? What did He state plainly about Himself?

Most people view Him as a wise man and teacher. However, Jesus claimed to be far more than that—more than a man, more than a teacher, more than a prophet.

He claimed to be *nothing less than God in the flesh!*

Let that sink in for a moment.

## Does it matter if Jesus is what He claimed to be?

It's become something of a cliché for deluded individuals to think that they are Napoleon Bonaparte, George Washington or some other notable historical figure. But not many make the astounding claim that they're God in the flesh!

Yet *Jesus did*. Not once, but *many* times. Some of those occasions were rather oblique. Some were very obvious—so obvious that those who heard were enraged and immediately *wanted to kill Him* for blasphemy.

Does it matter? *You bet it does*. If Jesus wasn't divine, if He wasn't who and what He claimed to be, then the Christian belief means nothing. Yes, it certainly has good principles to follow, but who would want to follow a religion based on the delusions of a liar or madman?

But if Jesus' claims are true—that He is the Son of God and God in the flesh come to earth to live and die and live again to show us the way to life everlasting—then *this is the most astounding event in human history*. It demands *our absolute attention*. It demands that we *consider the*



# The Claim of Jesus' Disciples

**T**he statements of those who personally knew and were taught by Jesus, and who then wrote most of the New Testament, are thoroughly consistent with Jesus' declarations about Himself.

His disciples were monotheistic Jews. For them to agree that Jesus was God, and then to give their lives for this belief, tells us that they had come to see for themselves that the claims Jesus made about Himself were so convincing as to leave no doubt in their minds.

The first Gospel writer, Matthew, opens with the story of the virgin birth of Jesus. Matthew comments on this miraculous event with the quote from Isaiah 7:14, "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). Matthew is making it clear that he understands that this child is God—"God with us."

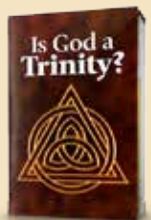
John is likewise explicit in the prologue to his Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:1-14).

Some of the disciples called Jesus God directly. When Thomas saw His wounds, he exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). Some view this as simply an expression of surprise. But such profane use of God's name would have been unacceptable among the Jews of that day.

Paul refers to Jesus in Titus 2:13 as "our great God and Savior Jesus Christ." Peter likewise calls Him "our God and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:1).

The book of Hebrews is most emphatic that Jesus is God. Hebrews 1:8, applying Psalm 45:6 to Jesus Christ, states: "But to the Son He [the Father] says: 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.'" Other parts of Hebrews explain that Jesus is higher than the angels (Hebrews 1:4-13), superior to Moses (Hebrews 3:1-6) and greater than the high priests (Hebrews 4:14-16; Hebrews 5:1-10). He is greater than all these because *He is God*—along with the Father.

—From our free study guide *Is God a Trinity?*



What did this mean? What did Jesus say that made them want to stone Him to death for blasphemy?

Abraham had lived some 2,000 years earlier. Jesus was saying not only that He existed before Abraham, but also that He was *the very God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*. He was revealing His true identity—that He was the Being whom the Jews knew and worshipped as God in the Old Testament period!

A while after Abraham, when the great God revealed Himself to Moses at the burning bush, Moses asked God what His name was. "I AM WHO I AM," was the reply. "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:13-14, emphasis added throughout).

When Jesus startled them by saying, "Most assuredly, I say to you, *before Abraham was, I AM*," the Jews understood exactly what He meant. "Then they took up stones to throw at Him" (John 8:59). They wanted to kill Him because in their minds He was guilty of blasphemy for claiming to be God!

When Jesus claimed to be "I AM," He was saying that He was the God who revealed Himself to Moses and who said His name was "I AM."

The Jews understood exactly who and what Jesus claimed to be—the One whom their nation worshipped as the God of Israel.

## "I and My Father are one"

On another occasion the Jews confronted Jesus, asking, "How long do You keep us in doubt? If you are the Christ [the prophesied Messiah], tell us plainly" (John 10:24). Jesus answered, "I told you, and you do not believe"

(John 10:25). He had previously confirmed His divine identity, as we just saw, as well as on another previous occasion (John 5:17-18).

Jesus then added, "The works that I do

in My Father's name, they bear witness of Me" (John 10:25). These "works" were miracles that *God alone* could do. Jesus' enemies couldn't refute the miraculous deeds Jesus did, many of which are recorded in the Gospels.

Jesus then made another statement that infuriated them: "I and My Father

evidence. It demands that we *act*, for we are *fully accountable* for how we decide we'll respond!

*Nothing could be more important* for you and your life!

## Jesus' astounding claims

So who—and what—did Jesus claim to be?

He made His boldest assertion about His identity in John 8:58. In one of His

If Jesus wasn't divine, if He wasn't who and what He claimed to be, then the Christian belief means nothing.

many debates with those who opposed Him, He stated: "Most assuredly, I say to you, *before Abraham was, I AM*." In English this appears confusing. But Jesus was speaking Aramaic or Hebrew, and those listening understood that He was making a claim that *immediately led them to try to kill Him*.



are one" (verse 30). He claimed that both the Father and He were divine. As before, there was no mistaking the intent of His statement, because "then the Jews took up stones again to stone Him" (verse 31).

Recognizing their murderous intent, Jesus said: "Many good works I have shown you from My Father. For which of those works do you stone Me?" The Jews responded, "For a good work we do not stone You, *but for blasphemy*, and because You, being a Man, *make Yourself God*" (verses 32-33).

Again, they understood exactly what Jesus meant. He was clearly telling them of His divine identity, that He was God as God the Father was God.

### **"My Father has been working until now, and I have been working"**

John's Gospel records yet another occasion when Jesus angered the Jews with claims of divinity. This took place after Jesus healed a lame man at Jerusalem's Pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath.

According to the law of God, no work was to be done on the Sabbath. And the Jewish religious authorities were angry, because they misinterpreted the Sabbath command to include what Jesus was doing. "For this reason the Jews persecuted Jesus, and sought to kill Him, because He had done these things on the Sabbath" (John 5:16).

On this occasion, too, Jesus made a statement that they could take only one way: "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working."

How did they respond to His statement? "Therefore the Jews *sought all the more to kill Him*, because He not only broke the Sabbath [according to their misguided interpretation], but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God" (verses 17-18).

### **The Word was with God and was God**

The Bible clearly reveals two divine Beings, God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son. Yet before Jesus was begotten and born as a human being, the Bible doesn't speak of these two beings as Father and Son. This is understandable, as they were not yet in a father-son relationship at that time.

In a dramatic vision recorded in Daniel 7, some 550 years before Jesus Christ's birth, Daniel describes these two divine beings as "the Ancient of Days" (God the Father) and "One like the Son of Man" (who would become human as Jesus Christ, whose most common term He used for Himself was "the Son of Man").

John 1:1-2 describes a time before the world was created, when two divine Beings existed: "*In the beginning* was the Word, and *the Word was with God*, and *the Word was God*. *He was in the beginning with God*." Here John refers to those two

## **In What Other Ways Did Jesus Claim to Be God?**

Jesus claimed to be divine in various other ways not specifically covered in this article. Let's look at some of them.

### **• Jesus claimed authority to forgive sins**

When Jesus healed one paralyzed man, He also said to him, "Son, your sins are forgiven you" (Mark 2:5). The scribes who heard this reasoned He was blaspheming, because, as they rightly understood and asked, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (verses 6-7).

Responding to the scribes, Jesus said: "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? . . . But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—He said to the paralytic—"I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home" (verses 8-11, New Revised Standard Version).

The scribes knew Jesus was claiming an authority that belonged to God only. Again, the LORD (YHWH) is the One pictured in the Old Testament who forgives sin (Jeremiah 31:34).

### **• Christ claimed power to raise the dead**

Jesus claimed yet another power that God alone possessed—to raise and judge the dead. Notice His statements in John 5:25-29:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live. . . All who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation."

There was no doubt about what He meant. He had said in verse 21, "For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even

so the Son gives life to whom He will." When Jesus resurrected Lazarus from the dead, He said to Lazarus' sister Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25).

Compare this to 1 Samuel 2:6, which tells us that "the LORD [YHWH] kills and makes alive; He brings down to the grave and brings up."

### **• Jesus accepted honor and worship**

Jesus demonstrated His divinity in yet another way when He said, "All should honor the Son just as they honor the Father" (John 5:23). Over and over, Jesus told His disciples to believe in Him as they would believe in God. "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me" (John 14:1).

Jesus received worship on many occasions without forbidding such acts. A leper worshipped Him (Matthew 8:2). A ruler worshipped Him with his plea to raise his daughter from the dead (Matthew 9:18). When Jesus had stilled the storm, those in the boat worshipped Him as the Son of God (Matthew 14:33).

A Canaanite woman worshipped Him (Matthew 15:25). When Jesus met the women who came to His tomb after His resurrection, they worshipped Him, as did His apostles (Matthew 28:9, 17). The demon-possessed man of the Gadarenes, "ran to meet Jesus and fell down before him" (Mark 5:6, New Living Translation). The blind man whom Jesus healed in John 9 worshipped Him (verse 38).

The First and Second of the Ten Commandments forbid worship of anyone or anything other than God (Exodus 20:2-5). Barnabas and Paul were very disturbed when the people of Lystra tried to worship

Beings “the Word” and “God”—specifically stating that “the Word was God” also.

John goes on to explain who “the Word” was: “And *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” (verse 14). Obviously “*the only begotten of the*

## John reveals that the Being who became Jesus Christ was actually the One through whom the universe was created as recorded in the book of Genesis.

*Father*” who “*became flesh and dwelt among us*” is the Being who became Jesus Christ. And “God” In John 1:1-2 is referring to the Father—though “the Word [who became Jesus Christ] was God” also.

### Jesus was the Creator of all things

Immediately after stating that “the Word was God” and that “He was in the beginning with God,” John makes a startling statement: “*All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made*” (verse 3).

Yes—astonishingly, John reveals that the Being who became Jesus Christ was actually the One through whom the universe

was created as recorded in the book of Genesis! Several other Bible passages confirm this truth. Notice:

“For *by Him* [Jesus Christ] *all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth*, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. *All things were created through Him and for Him*. And He is before all things, and *in Him all things consist*” (Colossians 1:16-17).

“God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets,

has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, *through whom also He made the worlds*” (Hebrews 1:1-2).

While God the Father is the supreme authority, it was Christ who actually did the work of creating. “God . . . *created all things through Jesus Christ*” (Ephesians 3:9). Colossians 1:17 verifies that the Being who became Jesus Christ had to exist “before all things,” since He created “all things . . . that are in heaven and that are on earth.”

These passages make it abundantly clear that Jesus Christ was not only divine, but was the God who created the entire universe!

them after their healing of a crippled man (Acts 14:13-15). In Revelation 22:8-9, when John the apostle fell down to worship the angel, the angel refused to accept worship, saying, “You must not do that! . . . Worship God!” (Revelation 22:8-9, NRSV).

Yet Jesus accepted worship and did not rebuke those who chose to kneel before Him and worship.

### • Jesus’ instruction to pray in His name

Jesus not only tells His followers to believe in Him, but that when we pray to the Father, we are to pray in Christ’s name. “And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son” (John 14:13). Jesus made it clear that access to the Father is through Him, telling us that “no one comes to the Father except through Me” (verse 6).

The apostle Paul states of Jesus: “Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-11).

Paul is telling us that God the Father Himself is upholding the fact that Jesus is God, by exalting His name to the level of the One through whom we make our requests and the One before whom we bow. Jesus also assures us that He will be the One who will give the answer to our prayers (“ . . . that I will do,” John 14:13).

In so many ways Jesus revealed Himself as the God of the Old Testament. The Jews saw Him do many things that only God would or could do. They heard Him say things about Himself that could only apply to God. They were angered and responded with outrage and charged Him with blasphemy. They were so infuriated by His

claims that they wanted to kill Him on the spot.

### • Jesus’ special relationship with God

Jesus understood Himself to be unique in His close relationship with the Father in that He was the only One who could reveal the Father. “All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him” (Matthew 11:27).

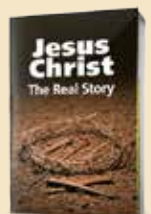
Dr. William Lane Craig, author of many books and articles defending Christian belief, says this verse “tells us that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God in an exclusive and absolute sense. Jesus says here that his relationship of sonship to God is unique. And he also claims to be the *only one* who can reveal the Father to men. In other words, Jesus claims to be the absolute revelation of God” (*Reasonable Faith*, 1994, p. 246).

### • Christ’s claims to hold people’s eternal destiny

On several occasions Jesus asserted that He was the One through whom people could attain eternal life. “This is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:40; compare verses 47 and 54). He not only says that people must believe in Him, but also that He will be the One to resurrect them. No mere man can take this role.

The conclusion is inescapable: Jesus understood Himself as divine along with the Father and as possessing the right to do things only God has the right to do.

—Condensed from our free study guide *Jesus Christ: The Real Story*





"God . . . has in these last days, spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds."

### "No one has seen the Father"

But John 1 contains another astounding statement that helps us understand who and what Jesus Christ really is. John, concluding his explanation of Jesus Christ's existence from the beginning with the Father, states: *"No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son . . . He has declared Him"* (verse 18).

Jesus Christ Himself makes the same point in John 5:37: *"And the Father Himself, who sent Me, has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form."*

Jesus confirms this in John 6:46: *"No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father"* (New International Version).

The apostle Paul also states that no human being has ever seen the Father, speaking of *"God . . . whom no man has seen or can see"* (1 Timothy 6:13, 16).

And John, last surviving of the original apostles, says plainly that *"no one has seen God at any time"* (1 John 4:12).

Yet the Bible specifically records that many individuals saw and heard God, among them Jacob (Genesis 32:30), Moses (Exodus 3:6; 33:17-23; Numbers 12:6-8), Joshua (Joshua 5:13-6:2), Gideon (Judges 6:12-14), Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-3) and Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:26-2:4).

Putting all of these scriptures together—some saying that no one has ever seen God and others showing that the God of the Old Testament many times visibly appeared and audibly spoke to individuals, we are left with one inescapable fact: *The God who appeared to these individuals was not God the Father, but the Being who became Jesus Christ.*

This explains why John stated that *"No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son . . . He has declared Him"* (John 1:18). This also helps us understand Jesus' statement in Matthew 11:27, that "no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

To summarize: No human being has ever seen God the Father. The God who appeared to various individuals in Old Testament times was actually the Being who would later come in human form as Jesus Christ. Jesus now reveals the Father to those whom He chooses and whom the Father calls (John 6:44, 65).

The apostle Paul confirms this. Writing of ancient Israel's sojourn in the wilderness after the Exodus, he states that *"they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ"* (1 Corinthians 10:4).


### Where does that leave us?

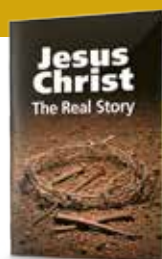
Jesus' claims as to His identity are indeed staggering. Some who heard those claims wanted to kill Him. Others were bewildered. Some put His claims to the test, followed Him, and became part of a movement that *"turned the world upside down"* (Acts

17:6). Those who were closest to Him were so convinced that they willingly followed Him down the pathway to death, never wavering in their convictions.

This understanding of who and what Jesus Christ was and is today is why His sacrifice is so enormously important. It took nothing less than the death of the Creator of all mankind to pay the penalty for all the sins of all mankind for all time!

And what is Jesus Christ today? In His last hours with His disciples before He was arrested and crucified, He prayed to His Father: *"And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was"* (John 17:5). Resurrected from the tomb, He now sits in glory at the Father's right hand, awaiting the time of His return to earth to establish His Kingdom and to reward His faithful flock.

What about you? Do you have the courage and conviction to surrender your life to the God who not only made you, but surrendered His life for you? The choice is yours! 

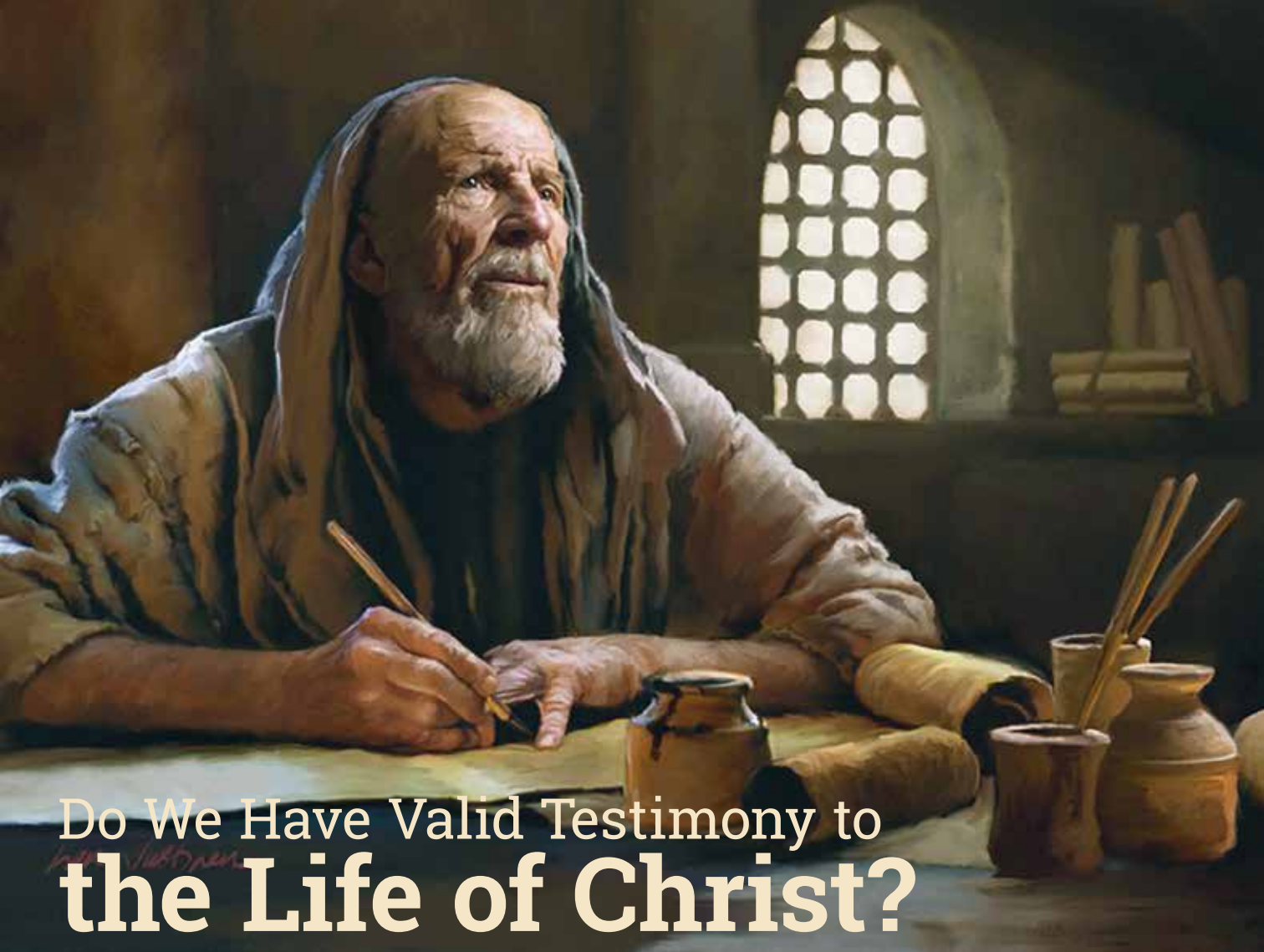


### LEARN MORE

The true story of Jesus Christ is astonishing! Most people are familiar with some of the pieces, but few grasp the amazing overall picture of who and what He was and is! Read our study guide *Jesus Christ: The Real Story*. Download or request your free copy today!

[www.BTmagazine.org/booklets](http://www.BTmagazine.org/booklets)





# Do We Have Valid Testimony to the Life of Christ?

The story of Jesus Christ and His early followers is found in the New Testament. But has this source been faithfully passed on to us? And can we believe what is written? What does the evidence tell us?

by Peter Eddington

**T**he collection of ancient books and letters known as the New Testament or Apostolic Scriptures presents the amazing story of the birth, life, ministry, teachings, miracles, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, proclaiming Him the long-awaited Messiah or Christ foretold in Old Testament prophecies.

Note this bold claim from one of its writers: “For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but *were eyewitnesses* of His majesty” (2 Peter 1:16, emphasis added throughout).

But can we trust this statement and the rest of the Apostolic Scriptures? Bible critics have long criticized the New Testament, along with the rest of the Bible, arguing that there’s no way its accounts and teachings as we have them today accurately reflect what was originally written, and even that these weren’t accurate to start with or written by whom they were claimed to be. But is there substance to such criticisms? Is there a way to really know?

The short answer is that no, the criticism does not prove substantive, and yes, there are *many* valid reasons to accept that the New Testament we have today has been faithfully

preserved and passed on to us from Jesus’ early followers. This is very important to establish if we are to believe *what the Apostolic Scriptures actually say* about Jesus, His life and His resurrection.

We will briefly go through just *four* reasons to support the position that we do have an accurate copy of the New Testament along with some other factors to consider. (You could easily research this yourself and come up with more than four.)

## Many early manuscripts of the Bible

To quote from biblical scholars Norman Geisler and Frank Turek in their book *I Don’t Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*: “At last count, there are *nearly 5,700 hand-written Greek manuscripts of the New Testament*. In addition, there are *more than 9,000 manuscripts in other languages*, (e.g., Syriac, Coptic, Latin, Arabic). Some of the nearly 15,000 manuscripts are complete Bibles, others are books or pages, and a few are just fragments . . .

“There is nothing in the ancient world that even comes close in terms of manuscript support. The next closest work is the *Iliad* by Homer, with 643 manuscripts. Most other ancient

works survive on *fewer than a dozen* manuscripts, yet few historians question the historicity of the events those works describe” (2004, p. 225).

So we see that there are numerous manuscripts of the New Testament—*thousands more* than any other writings from the

extent—when the earliest copies of their works are upwards of *1,400 years from the originals*, and only a handful of manuscripts have been found. Scholars have only found seven copies of Plato’s work and only 10 of Caesar’s—yet they are considered authoritative and accurate. Remember, there are *15,000* manuscripts of New Testament writings.

Remarkably, it’s been claimed that a recent manuscript fragment of Mark’s Gospel dates all the way back to the first century (see

“Earliest New Testament Manuscript Fragment Discovered?” on page 17).

God’s Word has a great deal to say about Christ’s death and shedding of blood for the forgiveness of sin. It is a critical and essential part of God’s purpose.

ancient world. For example, people believe that Alexander the Great existed, even though the historical record is relatively sparse. Why not believe that Jesus existed and that we have a reliable record of His life, considering there is so much more evidence for Him than for anyone else in ancient history?

### Very early manuscripts

As Drs. Geisler and Turek further state: “Not only does the New Testament enjoy abundant manuscript support, but it also has manuscripts that were written soon after the originals. The earliest undisputed manuscript is a segment from John 18 . . . Scholars date it between A.D. 117-138, but some say it is even earlier” (p. 226).

Some even earlier fragments have been dated to as early as A.D. 50 to 70, although some dispute these claims. *Even the most conservative estimates* on early New Testament copies of the Bible are dated within 100 years of the original books being penned by the authors.

Geisler and Turek point out: “The time gap between the original and the first surviving copy [of the New Testament] is still vastly shorter than anything else from the ancient world. The *Iliad* has the next shortest gap at about 500 years, most other works are 1,000 years or more from the original. The New Testament gap is about 25 years and may be less” (p. 227).

Thus, the earliest known New Testament manuscripts are copies made of the original apostolic manuscripts very soon after they were first written—just a couple of decades or so. For other ancient works the earliest copies we have are usually from *1,000 years or more* after the original.

And so we begin to ask, why would skeptics question the veracity of the story of Jesus Christ and the New Testament teachings, when so many early manuscripts can verify the accuracy of what was written? And yet skeptics don’t question Plato, Herodotus or Caesar, or even Homer to the same

### Manuscripts abundantly supported by other early writers

Early in the fourth century, the Roman emperor Diocletian gave three separate edicts ordering the persecution of Christians. He called for the destruction of church meeting places, manuscripts of the New Testament and later Christian writings, as well as the murdering of Christians. He didn’t succeed in wiping out all copies or all Christians. But even if he had, there is enough written *by other early authors* quoting the New Testament that almost the whole collection could be reconstructed from these quotations.

Geisler and Turek explain: “Hundreds if not thousands of manuscripts were destroyed across the Roman Empire during this persecution, which lasted until A.D. 311. But even if Diocletian had succeeded in wiping every biblical manuscript off the face of the earth, he could not have destroyed our ability to reconstruct the New Testament.

“Why? Because the early church fathers—men of the second and third centuries such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, and others—quoted the New Testament so much (36,289 times, to be exact) that all but eleven verses of the New Testament can be reconstructed just from their quotations . . . So we have not only thousands of manuscripts but *thousands of quotations* from those manuscripts. This makes reconstruction of the original text virtually certain” (p. 228).

### Few significant manuscript variations, accurate reading evident

Some scholars claim that there are 200,000 errors in the New Testament manuscripts. But, first of all, these are not errors, but *variant readings*—the vast majority of which are

## How your subscription to *Beyond Today* magazine has been paid

*Beyond Today* is an international magazine dedicated to proclaiming the true gospel of Jesus Christ and to revealing the biblical solutions to so many of the problems that plague humanity. It is sent free of charge to all who request it.

Your subscription is provided by the voluntary contributions of members of

the United Church of God, an International Association, and our extended worldwide family of coworkers and donors who help share this message of hope with others.

We are grateful for the generous tithes and offerings of the members of the Church and other supporters who voluntarily contribute to assist in this effort to proclaim

the true gospel to all nations. While we do not solicit the general public for funds, we welcome contributions to help us share this message of truth and hope with others.

The United Church of God, in accordance with responsible financial stewardship, is audited annually by an independent accounting firm.

strictly grammatical, like spelling and punctuation. And, because these variations are spread throughout more than 5,000 manuscripts, a variant in spelling of just one word that appears in 2,000 manuscripts is counted as 2,000 errors of that same word. The actual differences are far fewer than the 200,000 some skeptics claim.

Textual scholars estimate that only 1 in 60 variations is of any significance at all, with only 50 of real significance, and that the New Testament text we have can be relied on to be 99.5 percent accurate. Researching the conclusions that historians and textual experts reach in this regard, considering actual textual examples, makes for an interesting study.

There are *no new disclosures* that have cast any doubt on the essential reliability of the New Testament. Only about one percent of the manuscript variants affect the meaning of the text to any degree, and not a single Christian doctrine is at stake. The *variety and multitude* of New Testament manuscripts actually enhance the credibility of the Bible's portrayal of Jesus, not make us worry about errors.

Where there are differences, widespread agreement among vast numbers of manuscripts reveals the accurate reading.

### Extrabiblical attestation

In a *Beyond Today* article earlier this year, I pointed out that there are 10 known non-Christian writers who mentioned Jesus within 150 years of his lifetime—compared to just nine that mention Tiberius, the Roman emperor of Christ's day (and if you include Christian sources, authors mentioning Jesus outnumber those mentioning Tiberius 43 to 10).

I recommend going back and taking a look at that article, which lists a number of specific details about Christ's life from non-Christian authors—details that corroborate the New Testament accounts (see "Was Jesus Really Resurrected?" in the March-April 2016 issue).

Adding to that, here's a quote from an anti-Christian author about Jesus' crucifixion—the Roman historian Tacitus writing that Christ "suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius." The Jewish historian Josephus wrote that Pontius Pilate "condemned him to be crucified." Lucian of Samosata, a Greek satirist, mentioned the crucifixion, and Mara Bar-Serapion, a pagan, confirmed Jesus was executed. Even the Jewish Talmud reports that "Yeshua was hanged" on a tree. More on this can be found in *The Case for the Real Jesus* by Lee Strobel (2007, p. 113). And see "Did Jesus Christ Really Exist?" beginning on page 4 of this magazine.

### Admissions from atheists and liberal scholars

Looking back from modern times, even many academics who reject the claims of the New Testament recognize it as historical in large part.

The atheist historian Gerd Lüdemann is forced to admit that Christ and His disciples existed and that there was a genuine experience of Christ's resurrection, but he claims it must have been hallucinatory. He wrote: "It may be taken as *historically certain* that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus's death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ" (*What Really Happened?*, p. 80, quoted by William Lane Craig, "Visions of Jesus: A Critical Assessment of Gerd Lüdemann's Hallucination Hypothesis").

## Earliest New Testament Manuscript Fragment Discovered?

**C**hristianity Today reported in 2012 about findings announced by Dallas Theological Seminary professor Daniel Wallace regarding a very intriguing manuscript. The article was titled "Earliest Manuscript of Gospel of Mark Reportedly Found" (Stoyan Zaimov, Feb. 20). This manuscript of the Gospel of Mark would have been copied in the first century A.D.—when some of Jesus' early followers were still alive.

As the article stated, "The most remarkable aspect about this find, if it is indeed confirmed to be from the first century, is that it will be the first ever manuscript discovered dated within the lifetime of some of the eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection, according to Wallace."

Noted New Testament scholar Craig Evans commented: "If authenticity and early date are confirmed, this fragment of the Gospel of Mark could be very significant and show how well preserved the text of the New Testament really is. We all await its publication" (ibid.).

The publication was supposed to come the next year, but it has been delayed, reportedly until sometime in 2017, apparently because several other fragments are being studied, and the intention is to publish them all together in book form. Thus we will have to wait to see the fragment itself. But we do have the attestation of Daniel Wallace, a reputable scholar who stands behind what he publicly disclosed—that this fragment dates to the 80s or 90s A.D.

In any case, we already have not *quite* so early attestation to Mark and other books of the New Testament.

If the events of Jesus' life recorded in Mark's Gospel, including the resurrection, never happened, then the book would have been ridiculed by all those who read it. Obviously, it was believed to be true, not discredited. So copies of Mark's work—and the other New Testament documents—were made early on for distribution through the first-century Church and for posterity.

So many thousands of people witnessed events in Christ's life, including hundreds who saw Him after He was resurrected, that no sane author would write something like the Gospel of Mark while eyewitnesses were alive—if it wasn't true. Otherwise, it would easily be discredited. And it would be foolish to copy such lies, as copying such manuscripts involved skill, time and effort—and for what?

On the contrary, it was an accepted fact that Jesus lived—and it was widely recognized that He was resurrected, or at least that He was believed to have been by multitudes of people.

—Tom Robinson



2nd century biblical text fragment from Egypt



Others have made this claim too. But a mass hallucination seems itself supernatural, so why not just take the New Testament account at face value, which is much more reasonable?

Liberal scholar Paula Fredriksen of Boston University said this about what the disciples witnessed: “I know in their own terms what they saw was the raised Jesus. That’s what they say and then all the historic evidence we have afterwards attests to their conviction that that’s what they saw. I’m not saying that they really did see the raised Jesus. I wasn’t there. I don’t know what they saw. But I do know that as a historian that they must have seen something” (quoted by Strobel, p. 119).

In fact, Fredriksen also stated that “the disciples’ conviction that they had seen the risen Christ . . . is [part of] *historical bedrock, facts known past doubting*” (ibid.).

Of course, if one would accept the genuineness of what the disciples reported, why not just accept that they knew what they were seeing as a group? That makes by far the most sense.

### An orderly account—for certainty

The men who wrote the New Testament were deeply thoughtful concerning what they recorded. Consider the physician Luke, who traveled with the apostle Paul. He began his Gospel about Jesus’ life with these words, writing to a supportive patron named Theophilus:

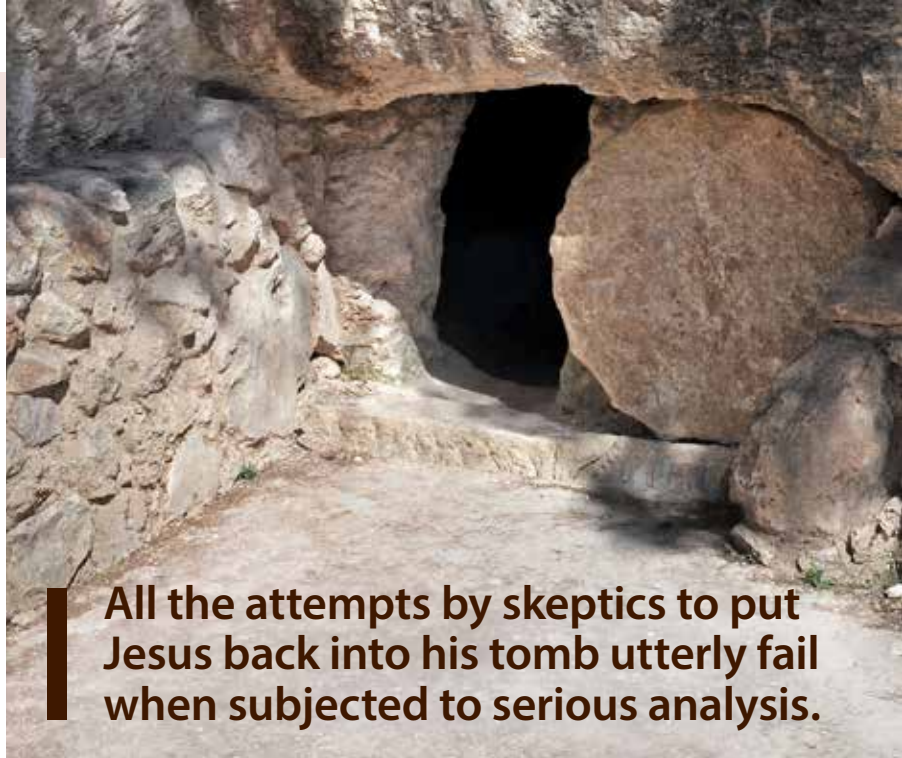
“Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, *just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word* delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, *that you may know the certainty* of those things in which you were instructed” (Luke 1:1-4).

Does this sound like some manufactured account—especially in an ancient context? Does it sound like it was written by someone who would have been duped by others involved in some mass hallucination? Luke interviewed multiple eyewitnesses to make sure that what he wrote was accurate. He was in fact a tremendous historian—as well as a writer inspired of God. (See “A Historian Comes to Faith by Luke the Historian” on page 19.)

### Evidence we can trust

The reality is, we can have confidence that the New Testament we have is an accurate copy of the original manuscripts penned by the apostles and their companions. And we can trust that what they tell us is the truth—including the awesome fact of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead.

As we’ve seen, there are thousands of manuscripts, including very early manuscripts, with enough quotes by other ancient writers to actually reconstruct almost the entire New Testament. The variations in the thousands of manuscripts are quite minimal and do not substantively alter what is being communicated. Nothing else from the ancient world has such




**All the attempts by skeptics to put Jesus back into his tomb utterly fail when subjected to serious analysis.**

manuscript verification. Indeed, nothing else even comes close.

Yet faced with this, many still resort to dismissing what the manuscripts say—for example, trying to explain away the accounts of Christ being resurrected.

Strobel writes: “Have new explanations refuted Jesus’ resurrection? No, the truth is that a persuasive case for Jesus rising from the dead can be made by using five facts that are well-evidenced and which the vast majority of today’s scholars on the subject—including the skeptical ones—accept as true: Jesus’ death by crucifixion; his disciples’ belief that he rose and appeared to them; the conversion of the church persecutor, Paul; the conversion of the skeptic James, who was Jesus’ half-brother; and Jesus’ empty tomb. All the attempts by skeptics and Muslims to put Jesus back into his tomb utterly fail when subjected to serious analysis” (p. 266).

Yes, Jesus Christ *did* exist. He was born of a virgin. He taught His disciples. He preached to and miraculously fed the multitudes. He walked on water. He healed the sick. He raised the dead. He died by crucifixion. And that wasn’t the end. He rose from the grave. He continued to instruct His disciples. He ascended to heaven. And He promised to come back. His disciples continued in His teachings, proclaiming the Kingdom of God.

Yes, all of it happened—all of it—just as the New Testament accurately presents it. You have every reason to believe it—and no genuine reason to disbelieve, whether the New Testament or the Old, to which the New attests. Trust the Word of God. For that’s what it is! Start reading it. Start believing it. Start obeying it. There is nothing more vital in life! 



**LEARN MORE**

In addition to those covered in this article, there are many more evidences for the truthfulness and accuracy of the Bible. We’ve prepared a thoroughly researched study guide titled *Is the Bible True?* that covers this critical issue. Request your free copy today!

[www.BTmagazine.org/booklets](http://www.BTmagazine.org/booklets)

# A Historian Comes to Faith by Luke the Historian

Sir William Ramsay, an English historian and prolific writer, was a product of a mid-19th-century education and of pervasive antibiblical bias. He believed the historical accounts in the book of Acts had been written not in the time of the apostolic Church, but considerably later—in the mid-second century. If this were true, the biblical book of Acts could not have been written by Luke, the traveling companion of the apostle Paul, and could only be a fabricated history.



Scholar Sir William Ramsay

Luke claimed to have been with Paul as the two men trudged over the cobblestoned roads of the Roman Empire. He wrote as one who watched as Paul was used by God to bring a young convert back to life after a fatal fall (Acts 20:8-12). Ramsay was skeptical of the historicity of Luke and the historical record of Acts and set out to disprove it.

After many years of detailed study of the archaeological evidence, Ramsay came to a disconcerting conclusion: The historical and archaeological evidence came down solidly in favor of Luke's having written the book of Acts in the first century, during the time of the apostles. Rather than Luke being a historical fraud, Ramsay concluded that there are "reasons for placing the author of Acts among the historians of the first rank" (*St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*, 1925, p. 4).

Ramsay became convinced of Luke's reliability because Luke wrote about the work of the early Church as it was intertwined with secular events and personalities of the day. In Luke's Gospel account we are introduced to Pontius Pilate, Herod the Great, Augustus and other political players. In Acts we meet an even larger assemblage, including Sergius Paulus, Gallio, Felix, Festus and Herod Agrippa I and II.

Luke not only writes about these people, but he mentions details, sometimes relatively minute facts, about them. "One of the most remarkable tokens of [Luke's] accuracy is his sure familiarity with the proper titles of all the notable persons who are mentioned . . . Cyprus, for example, which was an imperial province until 22 BC, became a senatorial province in that year, and was therefore governed no longer by an imperial legate but by a proconsul. And so, when Paul and Barnabas arrived in Cyprus about AD 47, it was the *proconsul* Sergius Paulus whom they met" (F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* 1981, pp. 82-83).

Luke mentions other particulars about the offices and titles of officials of the Roman Empire. In every case he gets it right, as confirmed by archaeological discoveries *many centuries later*.

As Ramsay discovered, to show such accuracy required that the author be well versed at the time in the intricacies of politics of the day over a wide region—with no readily accessible reference works to check. Few of us could do as well if quizzed about the exact official titles of national and international political figures today.

Such fine details of the historical setting make the Bible interesting, but they also put an author, such as Luke, to the test—and the Bible along with him. If he makes a mistake in his reporting, then his work loses credibility. How does Luke survive the test? F.F. Bruce, professor of biblical studies, says of Luke's work: "A writer who thus relates his story to the wider context of world history is courting trouble if he is not careful; he affords his critical readers so many opportunities for testing his accuracy. Luke takes this risk, and stands the test admirably" (p. 82).

—From our free study guide *Is the Bible True?*



[ucg.org/learnmore](http://ucg.org/learnmore)

## Discover more online

You'll find much more great biblical material on our website!



## Beyond Today television



## Bible study guides



## Video Bible studies

plus video sermons,  
our 12-part *Bible Study Course* and lots more!



# DOES THE TRUTH LIES REALLY MATTER?

We live in a world in which, as Isaiah 59:14 says, “Truth is fallen in the street.”

Is truth that important anymore? Is it important to *you*?

by Rudy Rangel

I believe I was in junior high the first time I heard the term *perjury*. It must have been civics class, and we were learning about the branches of the U.S. government.

Specifically, that day we were discussing the judicial branch and how the court systems worked. I don’t remember how it came up, but I was surprised when I heard there was a law against lying under oath. I was shocked. I couldn’t imagine that we needed a law against putting your hand on the Bible, swearing to tell the truth in front of an audience of witnesses and then lying through your teeth. Who would dare?

It turns out that *many* would dare. That’s the problem, so we have laws against it. It seems that we have come to expect people to withhold, stretch and bend the truth—especially for self-preservation.

Consider what we have seen in the news over the last few months—mud-slinging elections at all levels when candidates said whatever was necessary to undermine their opponents. On the morning after every speech or debate, news sources would analyze the statements made and give a report on what was true and which statements were lies. Of course, you often can’t trust the news analysts to present matters truthfully either. Still, we’ve all seen that politicians will say whatever it takes to reach office, and they always have. This past year is even bigger proof of that.

Also in the news this summer, Olympic swimming medalist Ryan Lochte told reporters that he was mugged at gunpoint during the Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. It didn’t take long for investigators to discover that a drunken Lochte and several of his fellow swimmers vandalized a gas station bathroom and that the owner was demanding payment for the destruction.

It was embarrassing. I was embarrassed as an American

to have a representative of our nation be a guest in another country and act like a child—then lie about it to cover up his bad behavior. It’s shameful.

Does the truth matter anymore? These high profile people don’t seem to think so. We can see it by their actions and their lies. Can we live successfully in a world where everyone is telling their own versions of the truth? What is the negative impact of this reality? How does it affect our personal relationships if we are comfortable with a world full of half-truths?

Most importantly, how does this affect our spiritual growth and relationship with our Father in heaven?

## God commands us to be truthful

God has much to say about the importance of speaking the truth. The Israelites shook with fear while God boomed from the mountain as He spoke the Ten Commandments. God, with all authority, gave the foundation of the law and then personally wrote the commands on stone tablets for Moses to bring to the newly freed nation.

One of those commands deals with speaking the truth: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:16).

God’s command on the subject is clear and concise concerning lying against your neighbor. As you study God’s Word you realize that it is an all-encompassing command. God’s plan for you and me is *transformation*. God wants our Christianity to be a *total* effort. This command about not bearing false witness is so much more than avoiding lying. It’s about *living a life of truth*.

King David asked in Psalm 15:1-2: “LORD, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill?” He then answered: “He who walks uprightly, and works righteousness, *and speaks the truth in his heart.*”





Those who will become part of the Kingdom of God will speak the truth in their hearts. Truth in your heart means that *you embrace truth to the very core*. Truth should be *deeply a part of us*.

Those who will be in God's Kingdom will spend a lifetime of pursuing purity—a *lifetime of seeking and living out a life of truth*.

What makes this process so difficult is that *we live in a culture that doesn't value the truth*. We have come to accept half-truths, spin and misinformation as normal. Consider broadcast and cable news as an example. We have become completely fine with *versions* of truth. Whether conservative or liberal, we can choose the flavor of truth that is most pleasing to us. We have to understand that even half-truths also include a portion of deceit.

### Can we choose our own truth?

In the Bible we see that the people of the Kingdom of Judah were tired of the condemnation that the prophets of God were proclaiming to them. They didn't want to hear the truth or God's judgment. In fact, they wanted to keep living a life contrary to God's instruction and ignore what He had to say about it. "They tell the seers, 'Stop seeing visions!' They tell the prophets, 'Don't tell us what is right. Tell us nice things. Tell us lies'" (Isaiah 30:10, New Living Translation 2015).

When we pick only the flavor of the truth we want to hear, we are essentially doing the same thing. There are different sides of a matter. Of course, it's okay to have strong opinions once we have deeply sought truth while investigating all sides. Consider the various sides, yes, but know that *what God has to say* in a matter is supreme.

So can we ever get to the bottom of what is true? Because it's not just the news media that provides a slant. A slant can creep into all aspects of our lives. Ryan Lochte gave a heavily slanted version of events to keep his image intact. Two presidential candidates have spent months telling their slant of who they are and what they want to do as leader of the United States.

Who, really, believes every word they said? Probably no one. No one believed them because we have become familiar and perhaps even comfortable with the fact that we are lied to on a daily basis. From a little child to the leaders of our nations, we know and understand that what we are receiving is a *version* of "truth" that may or may not be accurate.

Proverbs 22:1 tells us, "Choose a good reputation over great riches; being held in high esteem is better than silver or gold" (NLT 2015). There was a time when honesty and integrity were highly valued characteristics. But now bullying your way to the top, stepping on others and saying whatever gets you there is what we see in our society. Characteristics that once seemed good and wholesome can now come across as weak and complacent. Honesty, humility and patience aren't characteristics of a go-getter.

### Are you willing to seek and live the truth?

I remember watching the first season of the TV show *Survivor*. It was the only season that I watched. I've caught

a few episodes here and there since then, but that first season we saw something new. It was a game show like no other. *Survivor* showcased human nature, deception and greed as contestants competed to win. It took cunning to win, not honesty. The honest people are among the first booted from the show. The honest person doesn't make the cut in a cutthroat world.

So why isn't a good reputation held in high esteem like the proverb says? The winner of *Survivor* was given a million dollars and touted around all of the talk shows as a champion. We have slowly conditioned ourselves into a way of life that is tolerant of the fact that dishonesty is a part of how to get ahead in life.

We have lost sight of and even rejected the source of truth. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). The ultimate truth is of God. It's His realm. God speaks truth. But that's not what people want to hear. Everyone wants their own perspective or version of the way things are or should be to be truth.

Man has not always appreciated the truth of God. "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

"Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised" (Romans 1:21-25, New International Version).

What about our relationship with God? Do we value the source of truth? Do you worship Him in a spirit of truth? That's what is required from you (John 4:23).

The fact is, real truth is out there. If we are following God and seeking to live a life acceptable to Him, *we have to seek out His truth*. The Bible says that God cannot lie (Titus 1:2). *His very being* is truth.

He sent His Son to live a perfect life for our example. We too should be seeking to live a life of truth. Leaving God out of our lives doesn't lead to a life of truth. *The opposite* will eventually happen if we're not careful. We should look to God because He is truth. He sets the bar for us—the signpost of truth. Truth should be an ever-growing part of us. Truth should be in our hearts, to our very core. It's a highly valuable characteristic. Truth *does* matter. Truth matters to God, and it should matter to us. BT



### LEARN MORE

What would it be like to live in a world of truth, compared to the world of today? What kind of difference would it make if everyone lived by God's laws? Request or download our study guide *The Ten Commandments*. A free copy is waiting for you!

[www.BTmagazine.org/booklets](http://www.BTmagazine.org/booklets)

BLACK PALESTINIAN MONGOLIAN FILIPINO ISRAELI YAZIDI  
WHITE INDIAN LATINO SYRIAN TURKISH KURDISH JAPANESE  
BROWN IRAQI GERMAN PAKISTANI TUTSI CHINESE UNBORN  
INDIGENOUS UKRAINIAN HUTU RUSSIAN KOREAN ENSLAVED  
ARAB ROHINGYA SUDANESE AUSTRALIAN PERUVIAN SWEDISH

# LIVES MATTER

Tension, rioting, shootings, violence and unrest not seen in decades is ratcheting up. What's behind all this division, what's a Christian to think and what's the way forward?

by Mitchell Moss

**T**he world is divided on nearly every front. We see sharp divides in the different solutions offered on issues like immigration, trade and Middle East policy. In the United States, Americans have a choice between two candidates for president who each are widely despised—and supporters of either sling insults at supporters of the other. They are divided on policy issues, social welfare programs and taxation, as well as moral issues like gay marriage and abortion.

Cultural norms are shifting in real time every day, with the tone of the conversation about these issues being molded above all by political correctness. Issues like transgender restroom choice and gay marriage are framed as civil rights—and those who oppose these on moral grounds are painted as backward and filled with hate. And the troubling specter of racial hostility is beginning to crescendo once again.

What's behind all this division, what's a Christian to think and what's the way forward?

First, it's critical to realize that the increase of division is driven by a *spiritual* force—Satan the devil. Satan is the author of lies (John 8:44). He incites hatred. He is the accuser of God's people (Revelation 12:10). His purpose is to thwart God and His followers at every turn. Whatever good things mankind might do, whatever peace they may create, you can be certain Satan is there seeking to tear it down.

In our world today, you can see his influence in the dramatically shifting attitudes about morality over the past half-century. As God's morals are ignored, the casualties are strong families, respect for the rule of law (both civil and religious), and basic human decency toward our fellow man. The result is a spiral downward of crime, violence and death.

With this in mind, we must assess what's going on with a grounding in the truth, a heart for understanding and a conviction for being agents of change for God's purpose.

## Black Lives Matter protests

The recent Black Lives Matter movement gained momentum in the wake of what was touted as a proliferation of shooting deaths of unarmed black men at the hands of police. The prevalence of high quality smartphone video cameras and the instant publishing capability of social media means these incidents can be shared right away and spread virally.

Many responded with alarm at these videos, and protests began, with calls for indictments of the officers involved. But when indictments often didn't come, or officers went on trial and were acquitted, many decried this as "the system" protecting its own, and any involved in the movement who might have had more rational and peaceful voices were all but swallowed up in the more divisive elements.

The loudest and most radical voices command atten-

tion with extreme rhetoric, turning protests into riots while spewing vitriol and hate. In city after city, protests have turned violent, with protesters transformed into rioters. (Be sure to read “The disturbing roots of the Black Lives Matter movement” on page 24.)

One of the most shocking disasters was at a rally in Dallas in June. One attendee, Kellon Nixon, described the protest as being primarily peaceful, with police officers joining the protesters: “We marched peacefully . . . the police and the people were unified.”

But it was suddenly thrown into chaos as army veteran Micah Xavier Johnson opened fire from a nearby building, killing five officers and injuring more. He was ultimately killed in a firefight after law enforcement surrounded his position and he refused to negotiate or surrender. The Dallas Police Department quoted him as saying he “wanted to kill white people, especially white officers.”

Nixon, a 34-year-old black pastor, explained that he worried that the shooting would be used to justify worse, more racist and more violent actions on both sides of the racial divide.

Black lives absolutely do matter, and it is imperative that we get at the root of the problems facing the black community—and work on solving them.

When asked what was going through his head during the attack, he recalled thinking, “What is this going to prove? . . . Any amount of progress that we may have made from marching, from assembling peacefully . . . we just set ourselves back, because now the racism increases, now the hatred increases, now the segregation increases, now there is a sense of proof that this group is this, and [that] group is that.”

He worried about both sides, that both would use the attack to justify their prejudiced views (video street interview with Craig Melvin, MSNBC, July 8, 2016).

### Peeling back the bias

As more protests have turned riotous since then, and as the rhetoric on both sides becomes more divisive, it’s important to stay grounded in the truth.

Journalist Heather Mac Donald, author of the 2016 book *The War on Cops*, analyzed federal crime statistics and *The Washington Post*’s police shooting database. She found that of all black people who die by homicide, only four percent of those are caused by police officers—compared with 12 percent for whites and Hispanics—debunking the claim that the shootings are overwhelmingly racially motivated.

She also clarifies a common claim: “But isn’t it a sign of bias that blacks make up 26 percent of police-shooting victims, but only 13 percent of the national population? It is not, and common sense suggests why. Police shootings occur more frequently where officers confront armed or violently resisting suspects. Those suspects are disproportionately black” (PragerU.com, “Are the Police Racist?” September 2016).

The sad fact is that, according to Bureau of Justice Statistics,

violent crimes are committed by black people seven to ten times more often than white people, and black people who die by homicide are overwhelmingly killed by other black people—93 percent.

Given these facts, why are things so bad? If it’s not what the current narrative tries to suggest, what are the reasons for this surge in riots and the breakdown of race relations? Economist Thomas Sowell, a senior fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution, explains: “We are told that such riots are a result of black poverty and white racism. But in fact . . . black poverty was far worse, and white racism was far worse, prior to 1960. But violent crime within black ghettos was far less.

“Murder rates among black males were going down—repeat, *down*—during the much-lamented 1950s, while it went up after the much celebrated 1960s, reaching levels more than double what they had been before. Most black children were raised in two-parent families prior to the 1960s. But today the great majority of black children are raised in one-parent families.”

Dr. Sowell also lays blame at the feet of welfare programs that are designed with good intentions, but which have the negative effect of rewarding wrong behavior. For instance, for many young women who get pregnant out of wedlock, it may be financially in their best interest to stay unmarried—as they receive more assistance from the government.

I have witnessed this happen personally in more than one instance. This makes it easier for the man who gets a woman pregnant to evade the responsibility of providing for his newly created family and to continue living whatever irresponsible lifestyle he wishes. Many get multiple women pregnant, never owning up to their actions.

Black lives absolutely do matter, and it is imperative that we get at the root of the problems facing the black community—and work on solving them. As Dr. Sowell writes, “You cannot take any people, of any color, and exempt them from the requirements of civilization—including work, behavioral standards, personal responsibility, and all the other basic things . . . without ruinous consequences to them and to society at large” (“The Inconvenient Truth About Ghetto Communities’ Social Breakdown,” *National Review*, May 5, 2015).

### What’s a Christian to think and, even more, *do*?

We must remember and be encouraged that the largest advocates for equality and social justice in history have been people who worshipped God and believed His Word, the Bible. They have been in the forefront of efforts ranging from abolishing slavery, to helping addicts turn their lives around, to providing help to the homeless.

As Christians we must continue that tradition. We must continue to strongly advocate for the sanctity of life. We must expand the definition of the work of the “pro-life” movement to continue *beyond* birth—black lives, white lives, yes, *all* lives matter.

We must continue to advocate for a strong family, for children to be born to a mother *and* a father—beginning with rejecting divorce ourselves—and demonstrate how to have strong and godly marriages.

We must be listening in order to hear the needs of those we may know or come in contact with who are in perilous



# Who's Behind Beyond Today?

situations. We must allow our hearts to be open to serving them with our time, attention and love. We must be a demonstrable force for good—through our examples, through mentoring, through volunteering.

And we must advocate decisively for the rule of law. Not only for maintaining civil law and order, but for the law of God to be written on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33), which happens when we come under the New Covenant and receive God's Spirit (Hebrews 8:8-13).

However, if we allow ourselves to be drawn into the divisive spirit many are agitating for, we stop being agents of change for good.

If we allow facts and statistics that dispel the loudest narrative of black oppression to harden our hearts against the more urgent and consequential scourge of single-parent homes, a culture of crime and the grind of cyclical poverty, we have lost the meaning of what it means to be a Christian. One of the sins for which God condemned Sodom was that the city's inhabitants "were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy" (Ezekiel 16:49, New International Version).

Kellon Nixon poignantly described how in the turmoil of the Dallas shooting, he defaulted to a mode of self-preservation: "You start to think 'It's me against the world.' With that type of mentality we'll implode as a people . . . I was thinking, 'maybe it's not black lives matter or all lives matter, maybe it's just my life matters. Maybe it's just my family's life matters."

"I had to recover from that spiritually. I had to be reminded that God hasn't given us a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power, love and a sound mind. I had to be reminded that love conquers all. Because if I let that mentality overwhelm me, then who can I help and how can I teach [my son]? How can I raise him?" (MSNBC video).

We must come to understand that Jesus Christ shed His blood for all—white, black, brown and every other color. In that capacity, we must be part of the solutions to the problems of racism, inequality, injustice, crime, and cyclical poverty. Truly ending all those problems will require the intervention of Jesus Christ at His second coming, but that does not abrogate our responsibility to do good to all in this age (Galatians 6:10).

What is the way forward, then? We must turn to God and come to understand His great love, care and concern for *all* peoples. We must open the pages of our Bibles and earnestly seek God's way and His wisdom in dealing with the great issues of life. We must surrender our way of thinking to submit to His lead in every aspect of our lives.

May we all follow King Solomon's wise advice in 1 Kings 8:61: "Let your heart therefore be loyal to the LORD our God, to walk in His statutes and keep His commandments." **BT**



**W**ho's behind the *Beyond Today* magazine and television program? Many readers have wondered who we are and how we are able to provide *Beyond Today* free to all who request it. Simply put, *Beyond Today* is provided by people—people from all walks of life, from all over the world, as enabled by God.

And those people have a common goal—to proclaim



the gospel of the coming Kingdom of God to all the world as a witness and to teach all nations to observe everything Christ commanded (Matthew 24:14; 28:19-20).



We are dedicated to proclaiming the same message Jesus Christ brought—the wonderful good news of the coming Kingdom of God (Matthew 4:23; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:43; 8:1). That message truly is good news—the answer to all the problems that

have long plagued humankind.

Through the pages of this magazine, on our TV show, and in dozens of helpful study guides (also free), we show the biblical answers to the dilemmas that have defied human solution and threaten our very survival.

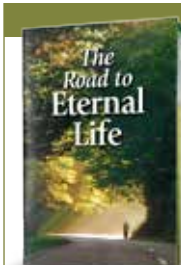
We are committed to taking that message to the entire world, sharing the truth of God's purpose as taught by Jesus Christ and His apostles.

The United Church of God has congregations and ministers around the world. In these congregations believers assemble to be instructed from the Scriptures and to fellowship. For locations and times of services nearest you, contact us at the appropriate address on page 39. Visitors are always welcome.

**For additional information, visit our website:**

[ucg.org/learnmore](http://ucg.org/learnmore)

## LEARN MORE



There is only one way to get past the divisions so common in today's world. That is through forgiving others and humbly seeking God's forgiveness and will in our lives. Where can you start? Request our free study guide *The Road to Eternal Life* to begin to learn the answers.

[www.BTmagazine.org/booklets](http://www.BTmagazine.org/booklets)

## The disturbing roots of the Black Lives Matter movement

In September, the fatal shooting of a black man by a police officer in Charlotte, North Carolina, was followed by claims the man was unarmed and that the shooting was racially motivated—that the man was killed because he was black. Protests began almost immediately, with the “Black Lives Matter” movement in the forefront.

These escalated into violent riots, with injuries to police officers, vehicles destroyed and looting. It turned out that the man was armed with a handgun after all and that police had told him to drop his weapon, as verified by witnesses. And agitators ignored the fact that the police officer who shot the man is black.

But what exactly is “Black Lives Matter”? Who is behind it? Is it really a spontaneous movement or is something else at work?

Accuracy in Media reports: “The Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) casts itself as a spontaneous uprising born of inner city frustration, but is, in fact, the latest and most dangerous face of a web of well-funded communist/socialist organizations that have been agitating against America for decades . . .

“BLM launched in 2013 with a Twitter hashtag,

#BlackLivesMatter, after neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman was acquitted in the Trayvon Martin killing. Radical Left activists Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi claim credit for the slogan and hashtag. Following the Michael Brown shooting in August 2014, Dream Defenders, an organization led by Working Families Party (ACORN) activist and Occupy Wall Street anarchist Nelini Stamp, popularized the



phrase ‘Hands Up—Don’t Shoot!’ which has since become BLM’s widely recognized slogan. Garza, Cullors and Tometi all work for front groups of the Freedom Road Socialist Organization (FRSO), one of the four largest radical Left organizations in the country . . .

“FRSO/BLM organizations are generously supported by a universe of wealthy foundations” (James Simpson, “Reds Exploiting Blacks: The Roots of Black Lives Matter,” aim.org, Jan. 12, 2016). The astonishing report goes on to give a lot more details on this background.

The Black Lives Matter Twitter feed has shown photos of activists with shirts saying “Assata Taught Me.” As Katie Pavlich notes at Townhall.com: “They’re referring to infamous cop killer Assata Shakur . . . who shot and killed a New Jersey State Trooper back in 1973 . . . [She] escaped and has been a fugitive in Cuba. She’s

also on the FBI’s most wanted terrorism list.

“BLM glorifies Shakur as a hero and uses her writings and materials during training sessions . . . ‘At a recent event for female bloggers, BlackLivesMatter leaders had a crowd of thousands repeating lines from a letter written by Shakur that include an explicit reference to the Communist Manifesto’” (“Exposing the Black Lives Matter Movement for What It Is: Promotion of Cop Killing,” Sept. 2, 2015).

On the “Guiding Principles” page of BLM’s website (blacklivesmatter.com/guiding-principles), we find this objective stated under “Black Villages”: “We are committed to disrupting the Western-prescribed nuclear family structure requirement by supporting each other as extended families and ‘villages’ that collectively care for one another, and especially ‘our’ children to the degree that mothers, parents and children are comfortable.”

Other statements on the same page proclaim their support for other leftist causes that in previous years would’ve been considered anathema to the black community: “We are committed to fostering a queer-affirming network” . . . “We are committed to embracing and making space for trans brothers and sisters to participate and lead. We are committed to being self-reflexive and doing the work required to dismantle cis-gender privilege and uplift Black trans folk, especially Black trans women . . .”

So there you have it. A radical leftist, pro-communist organization that lionizes cop killers and aims to destroy the nuclear family and replace it with collective community parenting. This organization is not truly about helping the plight of inner city blacks. It is about using them as pawns—stirring them and many others into a frenzy to destabilize the country in order to advance the radical left agenda. (Sources: Various news agencies, Accuracy in Media, Townhall.com.)

## Freedom measured against security

In September a man placed bombs at several locations in New Jersey and Manhattan. After collecting fingerprints, police used the cell phone alert system to get word out about the main suspect. A tip came in, and the suspect was captured after a shootout. A few police were injured, and the man was ultimately captured.

Following this situation, police in other major American cities began making a plea for more involvement from its citizens in reporting suspicious activity.

A major part of maintaining the freedoms enjoyed in Western nations is these freedoms not being abused. With increasing numbers of individuals committing terrorist acts, freedom as we know it is questioned. The value of freedom begins to be measured against the value of security.

Many Western nations have had decades of relative internal peace. Immigration and the spread of ideas counter to Western freedoms raises the question: How valuable is freedom when an individual can cause so much harm working alone?

The apostle Paul foretold that the last days would be “brutal” (2 Timothy 3:3). Will that brutality cost us our freedom? (Source: *The Wall Street Journal*.)

## North Korea continues missile testing

In September North Korea conducted another nuclear test. Many nations have already placed sanctions on North Korea for its previous four tests, and it seems more sanctions will follow in yet more attempts to discourage their testing program.

A Reuters article summarized the situation: “The United States said it would work with partners to impose new sanctions, and called on China to use its influence as North Korea’s main ally to pressure Pyongyang to end its nuclear program” (Jack Kim and Michelle Nichols, “North Korea’s Nuclear Test Prompts U.S. Calls for More Sanctions,” Sept. 9, 2016).

It doesn’t seem that, beyond force, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is going to allow any punitive action to halt his progress in making North Korea a nuclear power.

“North Korea, which labels the South and the United States as its main enemies, said its ‘scientists and technicians carried out a nuclear explosion test for the judgment of the power of a nuclear warhead,’ according to its official KCNA news agency” (ibid.).

It’s easy to become fearful when we see what’s going on in the world. Fear of war, danger and the unknown is common to man. Hearing about rogue nations and their nuclear aspirations can be scary. But God doesn’t want us to live a life of fear. He foretold that the time of the end will be a time of great trouble but that ultimately He will usher in His Kingdom—a Kingdom of peace that will reign forever.

Now is the time to be trained in faithfulness and righteousness. God gives us prophecy to help in our faith. When we see world events that align with God’s Word, we don’t have to fear. We can be encouraged that all things are ultimately under God’s authority. Fear not—He is in control. (Source: Reuters.)



## Suicide bombers and the promise of paradise

To Western minds the bloodshed and destruction witnessed on a daily basis in Syria are unfathomable. People stare numbly at news reports of chaos and images of bombed-out cities and orphaned children. “How can people do this to others?” they ask in incomprehension at the mindset that allows such violence.

What is behind jihadist thinking?

In Professor Roland Tiersky’s editorial for RealClearWorld, he explains the religious underpinnings of radical Islamic terrorism:

“Death, in the minds of ISIS fighters, is not the end of life. It’s the way to an eternal life of bliss in Heaven, to a Paradise depicted in the most extravagant, sensual terms in certain Muslim writings that are accepted as literal truth. The Quran itself has many, and many more are found in the Hadith, which are later commentaries on the Quran that claim to report, verbatim, what [the] Prophet Muhammad said on various matters. For an Islamist fundamentalist, Heaven is a real place, a Garden full of sensual delights” (“ISIS’s Deadliest Weapon Is the Idea of Heaven,” Sept. 19, 2016).

The war against terrorism isn’t a traditional war of one nation against another. It’s a war of ideas and beliefs. Philosophies that devalue human life and lead people to commit atrocities have a spiritual dimension that is too often ignored or misunderstood.

The apostle Paul made it clear that these struggles are against the author of such lies, Satan the devil, and



his demonic minions: “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness” (Ephesians 6:12). It’s important to remember this in understanding what’s really behind the tragic headlines of today’s world. (Source: RealClearWorld.)

## Retaliatory murders intimidate critics of Islam

Following the 2004 assassination of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a Dutch radical Muslim of Moroccan descent, we have seen an increased



fear of publicly criticizing Islamic beliefs or culture. Van Gogh’s film *Submission* took to task Islam’s treatment of women, and it cost him his life.

More recently French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* saw radicals storm its offices and murder 11 following its publishing of a string of offensive cartoons featuring Muhammad. Now a Jordanian Christian writer has been murdered under similar circumstances.

“A gunman shot dead Jordanian writer Nahed Hattar on Sunday [Sept. 25] outside the court where he was to stand trial on charges of contempt of religion after sharing on social media a caricature seen as insulting Islam” (“Christian Writer Who ‘Insulted Islam’ Murdered in Jordan,” *The Jerusalem Post*, Sept. 25, 2016).

While those in the United States and other Western nations with the freedom of speech have the right to criticize any group within reason, retaliatory violence has created an atmosphere in which individuals and groups are afraid of offering even reasoned, respectful criticism.

However, it is a responsibility of the Church to promote godly principles and point out where a society or culture—any culture—doesn’t meet God’s standards. We shouldn’t give in to the aims of terrorists and succumb to fear, nor should we keel to societal pressures to not be bold in preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God and God’s laws. As the apostle Paul wrote, “I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). *Beyond Today* and its sponsor church, the United Church of God, are committed to doing the same. (Source: *The Jerusalem Post*.)

## Putin’s party elected again: More voter fraud?

In Russia, Vladimir Putin’s party was recently reelected, as reported by the German broadcast service *Deutsche Welle*: “The official result of Russia’s parliamentary election on Sunday [Sept. 18] comes as no surprise: President Vladimir Putin’s United Russia now claims a two-thirds majority in the Duma [Russian parliament]” (Ingo Mannteufel, “Opinion: Clear Voter Fraud in Russia,” Sept. 19, 2016).

Voter turnout was low (only 48 percent), showing Russian apathy toward an increasingly thin democracy. Reuters broke down some of the suspicious activity: “In the Bashkortostan region’s capital Ufa, in the foothills of the Urals, Reuters reporters counted 799 voters casting ballots at polling station number 284. When officials tallied the vote later in the day, they said the turnout was 1,689” (Olga Sichkar, Jack Stubbs and Gleb Stolyarov, “Phantom Voters, Smuggled Ballots Hint at Foul Play in Russian Vote,” Sept. 20, 2016).

Corrupt leadership hurts everyone. The cover story of the last issue of *Beyond Today* was about leadership and the sad situation in which the world finds itself in terms of corruption.

The biblical prophet Micah lamented the moral state of affairs in his day: “The godly people have all disappeared; not one honest person is left on the earth. They are all murderers, setting traps even for their own brothers. Both their hands are equally skilled at doing evil! Officials and judges alike demand bribes. The people with influence get what they want, and together they scheme to twist justice” (Micah 7:2-3, New Living Translation).

Bad leadership is not new to our world, but the globalization of economies has linked us all together in ways not possible in the past. The world needs *righteous* leaders (Proverbs 29:2), not those we see on the world scene today. God’s government of peace will usher in a new style of governance that is righteous and just. Join us in praying, “Thy Kingdom come!” (Sources: *Deutsche Welle*, Reuters.)

## How can you make sense of the news?

So much is happening in the world, and so quickly. Where are today’s dramatic and dangerous trends taking us? What does Bible prophecy reveal about our future? You’re probably very concerned with the direction the world is heading. *So are we*. That’s one reason we produce the *Beyond Today* daily TV commentaries—to help you understand the news in the light of Bible prophecy. These eye-opening presentations offer you a perspective so badly needed in our confused world—the perspective of God’s Word. Visit us at [ucg.org/beyond-today/daily](http://ucg.org/beyond-today/daily)!





# Found: Remnants of the Temple From Jesus Christ's Day?

During His ministry on earth, one of the places Jesus Christ regularly taught was at the temple in Jerusalem, with its massive complex of buildings, chambers, colonnades and porticos begun by Herod the Great (the same Herod who tried to kill Jesus as an infant at Bethlehem).

The Gospels record that Jesus regularly taught

the entire temple complex was renowned for its beauty and the exquisite workmanship of its construction. On one of Jesus' last visits to the temple, one of His disciples exclaimed, "Teacher, see what manner of stones and what buildings are here!" (Mark 13:1). Others "spoke of the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and donations" (Luke 21:5). The

the Holy of Holies of the temple had been—an area forbidden to all but the high priest.

Fast forward another six centuries. The armies of Islam, having captured Jerusalem in 638, constructed the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount in 692 in the area where Herod's temple had stood. Except for a brief period of control by the Crusaders from 1099 to 1187, the Temple Mount would remain under Muslim control to this day.

In recent decades, officials of the Palestinian Authority have denied that a Jewish temple ever stood on the Temple Mount, in spite of the obvious Herodian-period architecture of the remaining platform and various temple-related artifacts and inscriptions discovered surrounding it. While the Temple Mount is one of the most archaeologically significant locations in the entire world, the Muslim authorities who control the area have ardently resisted any attempted scientific exploration of the site.

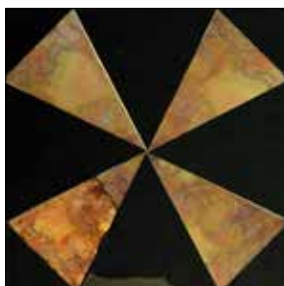
Starting in 1999, Muslims who control the Temple Mount embarked on efforts that seem designed to erase any physical evidence that might remain of Herod's temple on the spot. Over three days they brought in heavy earthmoving equipment and bulldozed an estimated 400 truckloads of dirt and debris from the Temple Mount while carving out a huge underground mosque, dumping the material in a nearby valley. Little did they know that in doing so, they would inadvertently bring to light remnants from Herod's temple complex not seen for almost 2,000 years!

Some Israeli archaeologists, recognizing where the dumped material came from, established what came to be known as the Temple Mount Sifting Project to painstakingly examine every minute particle dumped from the illegal construction. Over the years since, volunteers from all over the world have sifted out thousands of artifacts ranging from clay pottery and lamp fragments to jewelry to coins to religious medallions that had been lost and become buried on the Temple Mount over the centuries.

Then, in September 2016, archaeologists unveiled their most intriguing finds to date—a series of elaborate stone floor tiles that likely adorned the courtyards and porticoes surrounding Herod's temple before its destruction when the Romans invaded.

"This represents the first time that archeologists have been able to successfully restore an element from the Herodian Second Temple complex," stated Zachi Dvira, co-founder and director of the Temple Mount Sifting Project in a Sept. 9 press release. "It enables us to get an idea of the Temple's incredible splendor," added Dr. Gabriel Barkay, co-founder and co-director of the project.

The stone tiles were created in a style called *opus sectile*, Latin for "cut work." The technique, never seen



**Photos, top row from left:** Temple Mount Sifting Project researcher Frankie Snyder shows some of the reassembled cut stone tile section patterns recovered from material illegally removed from Jerusalem's Temple Mount; some of the many fragments that have yet to be assembled in reconstructed patterns. **Second row:** These three reassembled tile sections show some of the exquisite colored stone tile sections that decorated the temple complex in Jesus Christ's day.

there when He traveled to Jerusalem. Luke 19:47 says of Jesus, "He was teaching daily in the temple."

After His death and resurrection, the temple remained the focal point for the early Church, with members "continuing daily with one accord in the temple" (Acts 2:46). "Peter and John went up together to the temple at the hour of prayer," at which time they healed a lame man, amazing the crowds (Acts 3:1-11). Although their teaching led to the apostles being beaten and thrown into prison, "daily in the temple . . . they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ" (Acts 5:40-42).

The temple proper—a small part of the enormous 35-acre complex—was off-limits to all but the priesthood, but the surrounding courts were thronged by thousands of worshippers, a number swelling to a million or more at the annual religious festivals of Passover, Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles. Surrounding the courts and bordering the entire complex, massive 100-foot columns supported huge colonnades where worshippers could find shade from the hot Jerusalem sun. Jesus and the apostles likely taught in areas like this.

temple was no doubt a magnificent sight!

Fast forward some 40 years to A.D. 70. The Jews, having rebelled against the Roman occupiers several years earlier, were surrounded and besieged in Jerusalem. The temple complex, with its massive walls and elevated position above the city, was a key defensive position for Jewish fighters. After a long siege the Roman legions broke through, and the Temple Mount itself became a battleground.

Rome's might prevailed. The Jewish population was slaughtered or sold into slavery. The temple itself was destroyed, as were all the beautiful and elaborate halls and porticoes atop the Temple Mount. By the end, the entire top of the Temple Mount had been razed into oblivion. As Jesus had foretold, not one stone of the temple and its beautiful surroundings stood atop another (Matthew 24:2).

The Temple Mount lay abandoned for years. There is some historical and archaeological evidence of a Roman shrine to Jupiter and a Byzantine church being built atop the giant platform where the temple once stood. Most Jews who returned to Jerusalem refused to set foot there lest they inadvertently step where

in the Holy Land before the reign of Herod the Great (who had earlier lived in Rome and was a great fan of Roman architecture and engineering), involved cutting and polishing colored stone pieces and cementing them in geometric patterns. Similar floors were laid in some of Herod's other construction projects, including his palaces at Jericho, Masada and Herodium.

"The tile segments were perfectly inlaid such that one could not even insert a sharp blade between them," said Frankie Snyder, a researcher for the sifting project and expert in flooring from the Herodian period. So far approximately 600 colored stone floor

fragments have been recovered, more than 100 of which date to the time of Herod's temple.

These tiles may be what the first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus referred to when he described the temple courtyard as being "completely paved with stones of various types and colors." Later the Talmud described the temple complex as having rows of colored stones.

Leen Ritmeyer, archaeologist and likely the world's foremost expert on the Temple Mount, suggests that the pieces were originally part of ornate floors in some of the other buildings and/or from the many colon-

naded areas surrounding the temple itself.

"Now, as a result of Frankie Snyder's mathematical skills, we have succeeded in recreating the actual tile patterns," said Dr. Barkay. "This represents the first time that we can see with our own eyes the splendor of the flooring that decorated the Second Temple and its annexes 2,000 years ago.

"Though we have not merited seeing the Temple in its glory, with the discovery and restoration of these unique floor tiles, we are now able to have a deeper understanding and appreciation for the Second Temple, even through this one distinctive characteristic."

## Tel Gezer Discoveries Support Biblical Account of Solomon's Reign

**T**he Bible lists several major construction projects of King Solomon: "Here is the account of the forced labor King Solomon conscripted to build the LORD's temple, his own palace, the terraces, the wall of Jerusalem, and Hazor, Megiddo and Gezer" (1 Kings 9:15, New International Version).

The significance of most of these projects is self-evident: He built a magnificent temple to God in Jerusalem, constructed his own palace, reinforced what is thought to be supporting walls and terraces along the steepest side of the city facing the Mount of Olives, and beefed up the city's defensive walls. All were fitting enhancements to the capital city of the growing Israelite empire.

But what about the other three cities mentioned—Hazor, Megiddo and Gezer? While their significance is not readily apparent to most people today, anyone at the time of Solomon, nearly 3,000 years ago, would've immediately recognized their importance.

From ancient times, the Holy Land was bisected by a major trade route running between Egypt and Mesopotamia. Known as "the Way of the Sea,"

In the 20th century, archaeological excavations were conducted at all three of these sites, and archaeologists noticed a striking parallel. The city gates—the most vulnerable point of attack for an enemy—constructed in the 10th century B.C. (Solomon's time) were identical at all three. All shared a unique design, obviously working off the same "blueprints" of the same fortification designer.

This was powerful support for the statement recorded in the Bible, that Solomon had fortified all three cities at the same time during his reign. Although some critics have questioned the dating of the construction of the gates, the hard facts on the ground are evidence of exactly what we read in the Bible.

After a decades-long hiatus, excavations at Gezer resumed in 2006. In the most recent excavation season, the summer of 2016, yet more evidence has come to light there supporting the biblical account.

Although it is not mentioned in the biblical record, excavators uncovered an enormous palatial building dating to the time of Solomon adjacent to the city gate. The structure featured a large central courtyard, as with similar large



**Photos, from left:** This overhead view of excavations at Tel Gezer in Israel shows the six-chambered city gate at left (matching near-identical gates at Hazor and Megiddo) and an enormous palatial building to its right, dating to King Solomon's reign in the

10th century B.C.; an excavator carefully removes dirt from a clay juglet found in the city's ruins; broken shards of Philistine pottery found underneath the level of the palatial building show the city was previously occupied by Philistines as described in the Bible.

it ran from Egypt along the Mediterranean Sea before going inland through the territory of ancient Israel. It was also the major invasion route between the ancient superpowers of Egypt and Mesopotamia, which is one reason we see so many wars recorded in the Bible involving the kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

The cities of Hazor, Megiddo and Gezer lay at strategic choke points along this route, and Solomon converted them into strong fortress cities. In doing so he was able to both protect the northern and southern approaches to his kingdom as well as control—and tax—the trade caravans that used this ancient superhighway. Through this strategy wise King Solomon was able to both provide military security for his kingdom and add to its economic growth.

buildings found in Hazor and Megiddo dating to the same time. While there is no record or evidence of Israelite kings living there (they lived in Jerusalem), these structures demonstrate the importance of these cities to the Israelite kingdom at the time.

Further support for the biblical record came from a layer of Philistine pottery predating the palatial building. The Bible shows that Philistines occupied Gezer (2 Samuel 5:25; 1 Chronicles 14:16) until it was captured by the Egyptian pharaoh and given to Solomon as a dowry when Solomon married his daughter (1 Kings 9:16-17). Excavations have shown that the city was indeed destroyed, with a new city, new fortifications, a new gate and the now-revealed palatial complex constructed atop the earlier ruins.



# Would Jesus Celebrate Christmas?

If Christ is truly the reason for the season, would He celebrate Christmas today?

by Jerold Aust

**M**ost Christians assume that Jesus Christ was born on Christmas Day. Most also accept that Christmas traditions like a brightly ornamented tree and a red-suited Santa are acceptable ways of honoring our Savior. Does your Bible agree with these assumptions? There's one way to prove it: Check your Bible and the many secular sources about Christmas.

Historical and biblical evidence clearly proves that Christmas is a pre-Christian festival. It's not biblical, and it's not of God. Ironically, the early Catholic theologian Origen repudiated as sinful the very idea of keeping the birthday of Christ (*The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed., 1910, vol. 6, p 293).

If Christmas came from a **pre-Christian, pagan festival**, would Jesus honor that? Should we?

The inarguable fact is that Christmas isn't supported by your Bible. There is one quintessential question that remains: Would Jesus Christ participate in the observance of Christmas? And if He wouldn't, why not?

## Was Jesus born on Christmas Day?

The first question to ask is whether Jesus was even born on the traditional date of Dec. 25. Luke's Gospel records the event: "And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night" (Luke 2:7-8). No mention of date so far. And does this scene fit with a winter birth?

Alexander Hislop wrote in his book *The Two Babylons*: "There is not a word in the Scriptures about the precise day of His birth, or the time of

the year when He was born. What is recorded there implies that at what time . . . His birth took place, it *could* not have been on the 25th of December.

"At the time that the angel announced His birth to the shepherds of Bethlehem, they were feeding their flocks by night in the open fields. Now, no doubt, the climate of Palestine is not so severe as the climate of this country [England]; but even there, though the heat of the day be considerable, the cold of the night, from December to February, is very piercing, and it was *not* the custom for the shepherds of Judea to watch their flocks in the open fields *later* than about the end of October. It is in the last degree incredible, then, that the birth of Christ could have taken place at the end of December" (1959, pp. 91-92).

Consider the highly improbable fact that a pregnant woman would travel a long distance, in wet and cold winter conditions,

to be registered for a census to be taxed. ". . . The middle of winter was not fitting for such a business, especially for women with child, and children to travel in. Therefore, Christ could not be born in the depth of winter . . .

"And if any shall think the winter wind was not so extreme in these parts, let him remember the words of Christ in the gospel, 'Pray that your flight be not in the winter.' If the winter was so bad a time to flee in, it seems no fit time for shepherds to lie in the fields, and women and children to travel in" (ibid, p. 92, quoting scholar Joseph Mede). The better argument is that Jesus was likely born in late September through mid-October.

## Where did Christmas come from?

If it can be shown that the historical birth of Jesus wasn't the real root of the holiday, where did it come from?

Hislop explains this as well: "Long before the



fourth century, and long before the Christian era itself, a festival was celebrated among the *heathen* [that is, the pagans], at that precise time of the year, in honour of the birth of the son of the Babylonian queen of heaven; and it may fairly be presumed that, in order to conciliate the heathen, and to swell the number of the nominal adherents of Christianity, the same festival was adopted by the Roman Church, giving it only the name of Christ. This tendency on the part of Christians to meet Paganism half-way was very early developed" (ibid., p. 93).

Secular and biblical evidence shows that the modern Christmas traditions came from the ancient winter solstice or Mithraic festival, adopted and celebrated by the Romans.

"Christmas has its origin in two ancient festivals, the great Yule-feast of the Norsemen and the Roman Saturnalia. During the Saturnalia, gifts were made by the wealthy to the poor in honor of the golden age of liberty when Saturn ruled the known world, and slaves were allowed to change places and clothing with their masters. They even elected their own king who, for the period of the festival, ruled as a despot. The Saturnalia involved

and the ceremonies with which it is still celebrated, prove its origin" (ibid.).

The bottom line: Christmas came from a pre-Christian, pagan festival.

### Why was Christmas set on December 25?

Consider this surprising admission in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia's* explanation of why Christmas was set on December 25: "According to the hypothesis suggested by H. Usener, developed by B. Botte, and accepted by most scholars today, the birth of Christ was assigned the date of the winter solstice (December 25 in the Julian calendar, January 6 in the Egyptian), because on this day, as the sun began its return to the northern skies, the pagan devotees of Mithra celebrated the *dies natalis Solis Invicti* (birthday of the invincible sun).

"On Dec. 25, [A.D.] 247, Aurelian had proclaimed the sun-god principal patron of the empire and dedicated a temple to him in the Campus Martius. Christmas originated at a time when the cult of the sun was particularly strong at Rome. This theory finds support in some of the Church Fathers' contrasting the birth of Christ and the



The Roman Saturnalia celebration as depicted in a detail from *Les romains de la décadence* by Thomas Couture, 1847, Musée d'Orsay.

the wildest debauchery, and was a festival of Pan himself" (Richard Cavendish, *Man, Myth and Magic*, 1983, Vol. 2, p. 480).

The Catholic writer Tertullian complained around A.D. 230 about the ancient festival period that led to Christmas: "By us . . . who are strangers to [Jewish] Sabbath and new moons, and festivals, once acceptable to God, the Saturnalia, the feasts of January, the Brumalia, and Matronalia, are now frequented; gifts are carried to and fro, new year's day presents are made with din, and sports and banquets are celebrated with uproar; oh, how much more faithful are the heathen to *their* religion, who take special care to adopt no solemnity from the Christians" (quoted by Hislop, p. 93).

"Upright men strove to stem the tide, but in spite of all their efforts, the apostasy went on, till the Church, with the exception of a small remnant, was submerged under Pagan superstition. That Christmas was originally a Pagan festival, is beyond all doubt. The time of the year,

winter solstice; indeed, from the beginning of the 3rd century 'Sun of Justice' appears as a title of Christ.

"Though the substitution of Christmas for the pagan festival cannot be proved with certainty, it remains the most plausible explanation for the dating of Christmas" ("Christmas and Its Cycle, History," 1967, Vol. 3, p. 656).

The famed British anthropologist Sir James Frazer (1854-1941) adds to our understanding of the establishment of Christmas:

"Mithraic religion proved a formidable rival to Christianity, combining as it did a solemn ritual with aspirations after moral purity and a hope of immortality. *Indeed the issue of the conflict between the two faiths appears for a time to have hung in the balance.* An instructive relic of the long struggle is preserved in our festival of Christmas, *which the Church seems to have borrowed directly from its heathen rival.*

"What considerations led the ecclesiastical authorities to institute the festival of Christmas? . . . *It was a*

*custom of the heathen to celebrate on the same twenty-fifth of December the birthday of the Sun, at which they kindled lights in token of festivity. In these solemnities and festivities the Christians took part.*

*“Accordingly when the doctors [theologians] of the Church perceived that the Christians had a leaning to this festival, they took counsel and resolved that the true Nativity should be solemnized on that day and the festival of the Epiphany on the sixth of January . . . The heathen origin of Christmas is plainly hinted at, if not tacitly admitted, by Augustine when he exhorts his Christian brethren not to celebrate that solemn day like the heathen on account of the sun, but on account of him who made the sun.*

*“Thus it appears that the Christian Church chose to celebrate the birthday of its Founder on the twenty-fifth of December in order to transfer the devotion of the*

*century, persuaded them to exchange it for the Christmas tree, a young fir-tree adorned in honour of the Christ child . . . It was the German immigrants who took the custom to America” (L.W. Cowie and John Selwyn Gummer, *The Christian Calendar*, 1974, p. 22).*

### Would Christ participate in Christmas today?

Would Jesus Christ take part in a festival that, while stated to be in His honor, actually diametrically opposes Him by celebrating the worship of false gods? If He did, He would be violating the laws of God He Himself had proclaimed—thus sinning (see, for example, Deuteronomy 12:29-32). If He sinned, we have no Savior and no salvation.

God is the Author of life-saving truths—not of immaculately coiffed falsehoods. “And you shall know the truth,

and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). Lies are of Satan: “The devil . . . does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own

resources, for he is a liar and the father of it” (verse 44).

Christmas blinds well-meaning people to its false narrative. We can’t put Christ back in Christmas, as many seek to do, *because He was never there in the first place*. Misguided people put Him there. What does that mean for us?

Jesus asked the religious leaders of His day: “Why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?” (Matthew 15:3, New International Version). And He further said: “These people draw near to me with their mouth, and honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. And in vain they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (verses 8-9).

Satan wants to destroy you and me. He presents himself as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14-15) but lives in and creates spiritual darkness (Ephesians 6:12). He promotes lies instead of truth, glittering lights instead of the true light of God, and mesmerizing music and false platitudes instead of the truth of salvation. He hopes to deceive humanity through holidays that honor a lie, not God.

Certainly Christmas is an intoxicating elixir, but you can break free from its debilitating addiction (see “How Can You Kick the Christmas Habit?” beginning on page 31). You now have a choice to follow God’s instruction or to follow a holiday that originated in worship of ancient false gods. May God lead you to obey His holy will and honor Him always! **BT**

**We can’t put Christ back in Christmas, *because He was never there in the first place*. Misguided people put Him there. What does that mean for us?**

*heathen from the Sun to him who was called the Sun of Righteousness . . .*

*“Taken altogether, the coincidences of the Christian with the heathen festivals are too close and too numerous to be accidental. They mark the compromise which the Church in the hour of its triumph was compelled to make with its vanquished yet dangerous rivals” (The Golden Bough, 1963, pp. 416-419, emphasis added).*

### A red Santa and a green Christmas tree

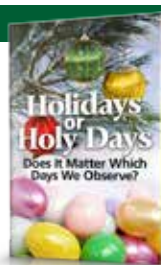
Among many today the central figure of Christmas is not Jesus but the man in the red suit. “Santa Claus, probably the most widely accepted of all the symbols of Christmas, arrived in Britain sometime during the 1880s from America, where he had long reigned as the gift-bringing St. Nicholas of the German and Dutch settlers.

“By the 1890s the English Father Christmas, originally a minor character in a mummer’s play, had been absorbed into the personality of his American counterpart [Santa Claus], and become the jovial figure that he is today . . . Santa Claus was accompanied and associated with ghosts and demons . . . Children are solemnly warned that only if they are very good will they receive their presents” (Cavendish, p. 483).

Why would Christian parents lie to their children in telling them Santa delivers gifts from the North Pole on Christmas Eve? How can Christians correlate the wise men’s meaningful gifts for the future King of Kings to Santa’s gifts for their children?

And what of the tradition of the Christmas tree? “Equally old was the practice of the Druids, the caste of priests among the Celts of ancient France, Britain and Ireland, to decorate their temples with mistletoe, the fruit of the oak-tree which they considered sacred. Among the German tribes the oak-tree was sacred to Odin, their god of war, and they sacrificed to it until St Boniface, in the eighth

### LEARN MORE



Would you like to learn more about the Christmas holiday’s unusual origins? We’ve created an eye-opening study guide, *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?*, to help you learn the truth! Download or request your copy today.

**[BTmagazine.org/booklets](http://BTmagazine.org/booklets)**

# How Can You Kick the Christmas Habit?

If you've been reading *Beyond Today* magazine or watching the *Beyond Today* TV program for long, you've probably come to see what the Bible says about Christmas. So what do you do now?

by Melanie Morris

**M**aybe you've heard that Christmas isn't all that Christian. Maybe you're wondering if you should celebrate it at all this year. If you're not sure, read "Would Jesus Celebrate Christmas?" beginning on page 28 and read more at [ucg.org/learnmore](http://ucg.org/learnmore) (search for "Christmas"). And then prove to yourself whether or not you should keep Christmas.

Go on—kick the tires, tug on the seams, look behind the curtain, pull out the microscope. The truth can withstand scrutiny. You won't hurt its feelings.

If you've considered the evidence and have decided to kick the Christmas habit, your next question is likely to be, "Well, now what?" That's what mine was. How do you not celebrate Christmas when everyone around you has put on a Santa hat and put up a tree? How do you keep your relationships with family and friends when you don't celebrate Christmas anymore? Will they understand?

It can feel like a lonely road with only the strength of your convictions for company, but you are not alone. I too walk this path, as do many others. And most importantly, God the Father and Jesus Christ will be with you. If God is leading you to step out on faith and leave Christmas behind, I'd like to share with you three principles to practice as you take this step: Prepare yourself, honor God and love your family.

## Prepare yourself

You're about to raise some eyebrows, my friend. Breaking with tradition, especially one infused with family and loved by millions, is going to lead to questions and probably disapproval. How are you going to handle this?

First, know *why* you're doing this. You're choosing the road less traveled, and you'll turn around and go home if you're motivated by anything other than love of the truth. Carefully examine your reasons and the evidence you use to support your conclusions so you can have confidence in the truth (consider 2 Timothy 2:15).

When Christmas comes around, don't delay following your newfound conviction to not participate. Don't tell yourself, "Not right now—just one more year . . ." In Luke 9:57-62, Jesus told people to follow Him. Their excuses were basically: "Not right now. I just need to do this or that first." His response? "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." If you know what is good to do and choose not to do it, it's sin (James 4:17).

In breaking from celebrating Christmas, especially for the first few years, you'll find it easier if you don't just sit at home alone on Christmas Day. Make intentional plans involving activities you enjoy. You may need to be creative, as most businesses will be closed, but planning ahead can help you to see and take advantage of your many choices. If you're social, be sure your plans include other like-minded people.

If Christmas is very important to your family, expect some resistance to your decision. After all, your family members love you and want you to be with them. Anticipate questions—they'll probably be many of the same ones *you* initially had—and think through your answers ahead of time. Be sure your answers are genuinely "you." Canned responses aren't going to cut it when your heart's not in it.

Your choice to not celebrate Christmas may be tested soon after deciding, so begin preparing right away. The questions may not come for a while, but then again, they may come tomorrow.

Several years ago I decided not to celebrate Christmas that year. That was on a Thursday. On Friday, the very next day, my mother called to ask what I would like for Christmas. Knowing your reasons and having an answer will help the conversation to proceed more gently and with less defensiveness (especially on your part), whenever it occurs. "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15, New International Version).

## Honor God

Just as the apostles declared, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29), we must obey God over the desires of our family and friends. What will you do when you're stuck between the Rock and a hard place?

Pray and, if you can, fast before talking with your family. Prayer and fasting helps us to seek God's way instead of our own. Our way may seem right to us, but only God sees the whole picture (Proverbs 21:2). When we submit our plans to God and trust in Him, He establishes the best paths and helps us to follow them (consider Proverbs 3:5-6 and Proverbs 16:3).

God has good plans for us, and He will come through for us. He reminds us in Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope." God promises to give us the words to say when we need them, just as Jesus



Christ told His disciples in Matthew 10:19-20. When we sincerely submit our will to God, we are less likely to speak rashly (consider Proverbs 16:1).

Ask God for wisdom in your interactions with family and friends. When we ask for wisdom, He promises to give it generously (James 1:5) He expects you to do good to all (Galatians 6:10) and to love them as you love yourself (Mark 12:31). God knows how to help you in your relationships with others. *Ask Him.* Your Father is waiting to help you.

### Be “all in”

Don’t be wishy-washy. You might think you’re being nice to your family and friends by “kind of” participating a little to spare their feelings. However, you may just be prolonging their hope that you’ll “come to your senses” and change your mind.

Jesus told His disciples that “he who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me” (Matthew 10:37). Yes, we are to love our family, but we are to love God and His way more. When the two conflict, God must come first, even when it’s difficult.

God wants us to love Him with our whole heart, not just part of it. Immediately before Jesus reminded the scribes that they must love their neighbor as themselves, He explained how they are to love God first: “And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ This is the first commandment” (Mark 12:30).

You cannot keep both Christmas and God’s law (consider James 4:4 and Luke 16:13), as the former breaks the latter. Breaking God’s law is sin (1 John 3:4)—even just “kind of” breaking it a little (James 2:10) to spare someone’s feelings.

### Observe God’s Holy Days

Did you know that God has set aside special festivals and Holy Days of His own, to teach us about His plan for you and me and all people? (See Leviticus 23 and our Bible study guide *God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind* for more information about these days.)

When you keep God’s festivals instead of man’s holidays like Christmas and Easter, you can make these days special times for you and those of your family who share your beliefs. God wants you to understand His plan for you and all humanity, why you exist, and what the purpose of life is, and He teaches us about these things every year through His annual festivals and every week through His Sabbath.

One of the strongest appeals of Christmas is found in your senses—glowing decorations, special foods, smells of pine and cinnamon, sounds and music. Incorporate all of your senses into how you keep the Sabbath and God’s festivals to help make them a delight to you and your like-minded family. God’s weekly and annual Sabbaths are special times set aside by God for you. Consider preparing for them as you might an honored guest, and enjoy them as the blessing God intends.

### Love your family

Christmas is all about family, right? But family is *not* all about Christmas. There is so much more to family than any one holiday, and you have many opportunities to show those

of your family that you love them.

But you may not find acceptance with some family and friends on this issue no matter what you do. Realize that Jesus said that His truth would often lead not to peace but to division even in families—and that He must come first in our lives no matter what (Matthew 10:34-39).

So accept that some people will be offended or disapproving. You should honor the role they have in your life by being sensitive to them and doing what you can to minimize their perceived offense (Romans 12:18), but there may come a point where you can genuinely do no more. You are not responsible for how they choose to feel and respond after that. Keep in mind that they won’t understand until God helps them to understand in the time that is best for them (consider 2 Corinthians 3:14-16 and Luke 24:45).

Until then, you will have to be patient and gentle, and sometimes even a little thick-skinned. You should try to not take it personally and be forgiving, as they are misguided for now (consider Jesus’ example in Luke 23:34), but expect that it’s still going to sting.

A friend shared some treasured advice that helps when my feelings are hurt by my family’s disapproval. She encouraged me to remember that, when they do eventually understand, my parents will be proud of me for standing strong and true, even in the face of their own disapproval. In the meantime, my job is to continue standing strong and true and to honor them, so that I can keep a clear conscience before my God and my family (consider 1 Peter 3:16).

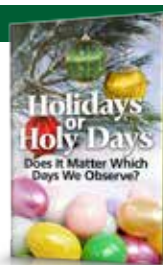
People may still feel offended, but it can be eased somewhat by agreeing on expectations outside of the heat of the moment. Do what you can to help avoid situations that could cause bitterness (see Hebrews 12:14-15). For example, don’t surprise them with your news in the middle of the family Christmas dinner!

As early as possible and at a reasonable opportunity, have a respectful conversation with the people who share Christmas traditions with you. Very simply—this is not the time for all your reasons and details—share with them that you are choosing not to celebrate Christmas but that spending time with them is important to you, and work out how to accomplish both goals.

If you can have these conversations before you receive invitations to holiday parties and before the family gatherings are planned, it can help to separate your decision not to keep Christmas and your response to their event.

### It’s your job to love them, not convince them

It is not your job to convince them to give up Christmas. (Don’t try it. It doesn’t end well.) You are not likely to change their minds with an abundance of passionate words. But you



### LEARN MORE

There’s a vast difference between God’s Holy Days revealed in the Bible and the man-made holidays so popular today. Have you looked into them? You’ll be surprised! Download or request our free study guide *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?*

[BTmagazine.org/booklets](http://BTmagazine.org/booklets)

do have a very serious responsibility to be able to give an answer, which is why you need to know why you're doing this and have proven it to yourself ahead of time.

You may be the only one another person meets who doesn't observe Christmas. That person may well ask you why, and yours might be the only explanation he or she ever hears about why someone wouldn't celebrate it.

Understand and respect that others feel as strongly about observing Christmas as you now do about *not* observing it. Don't look down on them for not understanding what you previously didn't understand either. Instead, be intentional about maintaining connections with family and friends for whom Christmas is important.

They may feel personally rejected, and explaining to them that you're rejecting Christmas, not them, probably isn't going to convince them—especially as your choice to not celebrate Christmas will likely be taken as judgment on their observance. When it comes to continuing love and respect, your *actions* will speak louder than your words. In John 13:35, Jesus reminds us that the mark of being His disciple is that we love each other. Love is shown by your actions.

Consider taking 1 Peter 3:8-9 as a personal mission statement when interacting with your family and friends: "Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tender-hearted, be courteous; not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing."

### Find common ground

How can you and your family and friends make this work, especially if you share a home with people who want to celebrate Christmas?

Start out by acknowledging that you don't have the same beliefs about Christmas but that you all have the same desire for every person to feel comfortable in their own home. Communicate about expectations and set mutually agreed-on boundaries

well ahead of time so that everyone feels heard and considered.


Accept that you are likely to misstep at some point—this is new for you as much as it is for them. Ask for forgiveness when you have caused undue offense. And finally, be patient (James 1:19-20) and forgiving (Matthew 6:14-15)—this is new for them as much as it is for you. As Paul encouraged in Ephesians 4:2, "[bear] with one another in love . . ."

Seek counsel from others who have gone through situations similar to yours (consider Proverbs 19:20). They will likely be willing to share what did and didn't work well for them.

Your relationships with family members and friends involve far more than Christmas celebrations. Instead of focusing on the few events related to Christmas, actively focus on all the other days of the year. Go overboard for other events that you can share—Thanksgiving, Independence Day, anniversaries, reunions and other special occasions—or create new traditions with your family and friends.

Support activities that are important to your friends and family, such as encouraging them in their work or attending their children's sporting events. Be intentional about contacting and visiting with your family and friends more often, investing in your relationships throughout the year.

I'd like to share one final piece of advice from another traveler on this path: Stay convicted, and be kind. You have the awesome responsibility and privilege of representing God's way of life to your friends and family, and you will be known by what your life produces (Matthew 7:20). As you prepare yourself, honor God, and love your family, don't lose heart. "Let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart" (Galatians 6:9).

God's plans for family—*your* family—far exceed what Christmas could ever hope to represent. I encourage you to study God's festivals, to know the awe-inspiring good that God wants for you and your family. By kicking the Christmas habit, you are taking a step of faith toward trusting God and His plan for your life. 

## Advice From Those Who Have Kicked the Habit

**H**ere are suggestions from others who have walked this path before you. They offer them with love and understanding and the hope that you and your family may benefit from their experiences.

- If the family Christmas dinner is an important tradition, you could join the family for dinner (offering even to help with cooking or cleaning)—as long as family members understand you are there for family dinner and not Christmas observance—and leave before presents are exchanged.

- Maybe suggest having the family dinner at a restaurant instead of in a decorated home, if the decorations would bother you or if the family would feel the need to take down the decorations while you're there.

- If you live with people who celebrate Christmas—a spouse, parents, children, roommates—you may be able to negotiate that some areas be free of decorations and that Christmas movies and music be limited to certain times.

- If you share a bank account with a spouse who celebrates Christmas, agree on an amount he or she can spend on presents for family and friends.

- If someone gives you or your children a gift, do not hand or send it back. Just say thank you, simply and with gratitude instead of grimaces, and explain your preferences at a later time.

- Focus on the beliefs that you have in common, such as Jesus' example and the need for a Savior.

- If someone pits part of the family against the other part (for example, saying, "We have to do this because of so-and-so,") deal with it quickly, privately and respectfully (consider Proverbs 15:18).

- Accept that the Christmas season will be tense, at least for a while. As much as you can, keep the peace (Romans 12:18).

- Remember that God has a plan for your family and friends, too, in the time that is best for them (consider 2 Peter 3:9 and 1 Timothy 2:4).



# Make Room for the Divine Nature

It's not enough to let God enter our lives. We must open up every area of our lives to Him—surrendering to Him totally for ultimate blessing.

by Robin Webber

**I**n the Asiatic-Pacific Theater of World War II, the United States waged a systematic campaign of conquering a line of islands that led eventually to the doorstep of Japan, the ultimate goal. Island by island, the Navy would soften up the Japanese defenses by continual bombardment. The Marines (my father being one) would then be sent onshore to establish a beachhead. Once secured they would radio back to the ships offshore, “Mission accomplished!”

But that was true in only a limited sense. Most of the island was still under Japanese control! It would take time till every vestige of the island was secure under one command. And that doesn't even include the overall operation, with many more islands to go. Thus the landing was but one juncture in an unfolding journey towards victory.

This historic episode has relevance to the calling God has set before us. As people of faith, we can sometimes operate under two false allusions that can hinder God's desired activity in us. The first false notion is that once we have repented of our sins, accepted Jesus Christ as our Savior and been baptized, the greatest challenges are then behind us. After all, we have arrived just like the Marines on the beach—mission accomplished!

The second false notion comes when the fog of spiritual warfare envelops us while we are hunkered down in the crossfires of life, projecting blurred internal messages that we are alone and that what we need to “fight the good fight of faith” (1 Timothy 6:12) is out of reach.

Both misconceptions are clearly torpedoed by clear biblical statements and additionally coming to understand and appreciate what God alone can do and what our own responsibility is in grateful response to His intervention in our lives as we strive to live by Christ's call of “Follow Me.”

## A spiritual wake-up call

In my previous “Follow Me” column in the Sept.-Oct. 2016 issue of *Beyond Today*, it was explained that the Holy Spirit isn't merely some spiritual screwdriver or wrench that we reach for when needed, but is the abiding inward presence of God and Christ, which allowed Paul to proclaim that Christ lived through him (Galatians 2:20).

The reality is that God has elected to work from the

“inside out,” which is just the opposite of how humanity operates. Consider Adam and Eve, who reached outward for something to put them on par with God—when God had intended a completely different avenue for them to travel toward transformation to His spiritual likeness.

A fundamental question to ponder is this: If Christ dwells in us, and we are offered salvation by God's grace and not by our own merit or human endeavor, then what's left for us to do?

Are we to merely sit back and, as it were, follow the old Greyhound Bus advertisement of “leave the driving to us”? Or are we called to an active and dynamic partnership with God to advance from His initial landing into our lives to something even grander in which ultimately His Spirit lovingly occupies every last element of our existence? Paul alludes to this process when he writes of looking forward to the time when “Christ is formed in you” (Galatians 4:19).

## What are we still holding onto?

There is no question what God desires. There is no question that He and Christ literally reside in those who have accepted His calling and received the Holy Spirit (see John 14:23). The only question is: How much personal territory in our lives we are still holding onto that we haven't willingly handed over to God?

Yes, territories not yet fully occupied by His Spirit such as our marriages, child rearing, challenges with coworkers, neighbors and fellow church members, alcohol, gambling, financial responsibilities and whatever other personal valley of decision we have been keeping off limits to God's saving power.

Let's be real for a moment: Most of us have rooms at home that I call “stuff rooms.” Oh no, you won't find them on an architect's blueprint, but we all know they exist—don't we? That's where we put everything we haven't had time to get to or don't know how or want to deal with—so it's hands off.

Some things are in boxes. Others are just scattered on the floor. Some of the toughest stuff is crammed into the *closets* of the stuff rooms. We lock the door when company comes over so we can project to everyone a well-ordered life—when we know down deep that we have unfinished business.



This scenario parallels our lives. There are rooms of spiritual stuff that we need to open up to God, yielding to His entry and cooperating with His work on our behalf.

God already knows about your stuff. He's just waiting for the invitation to continue to expand His operation in you—not by constraint but according to your heartfelt desire.



“Stuff rooms” are where we put everything we haven't had time to get to or don't know how or want to deal with.

Paul is not the only New Testament author who speaks of God dwelling in us. The apostle Peter echoes Paul's expression and anchors us into the reality that we are to be “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4).

Here was the individual to whom Jesus offered the invitation of “Follow Me” from the start of discipleship (Matthew 4:19) to their last recorded conversation (John 21:19). It's essentially the same ongoing invitation and admonition that Christ offers each of us as we step forward from His initial beachhead incursion into our lives and begin to allow Him to occupy every element of our existence.

How, then, do we make room for the divine nature?

### Embracing God's blueprint of making room

Peter supplies the blueprint, commencing by describing himself not only as an apostle, but a slave of Christ.

We can easily focus on the incredible apostolic call to preach the gospel and quickly overlook this other self-disclosure of servitude. Some English Bible versions translate the original Greek word *doulos* here as “servant.” But it means more than that. It means *slave*.

A slave was bought and paid for, and his life was not his own. The master's will and bidding was ever his task to perform. Every fiber of his being and every moment of the day was dedicated to one purpose—responding to his master's

bidding in faithful obedience.

Peter's self-description should be the same as ours, as further defined by Paul when he stunningly reminds us that “we have been bought with a price” and are now “slaves of righteousness” (1 Corinthians 6:20; Romans 6:16-18).

But this servitude to a good God comes with incredible blessing. Peter refers to God as a loving Master of “divine power that has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue” (2 Peter 1:3). This knowledge is not earthbound, but heaven sent. It's divinely given and not humanly generated.

He is not speaking of a knowledge of  $1+1=2$ , but that which came from his personal encounter with Christ when asked by Him, “But who do you say I am?” Peter had responded, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus then answered, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 16:15-17).

Understanding who God is and what He's done and is doing in us through Christ is a revelation. Let me put it bluntly: It's a miracle, and a gift. We can't generate this ourselves. We can't buy it. We can't earn it by human merit. It comes from God through His Spirit and His Word.

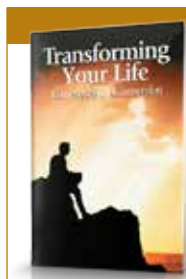
But we must yield and cooperate, with a great appreciation for God's work in our lives. We can show God that we understand what He's done through Christ, that we truly “get it,” by how we respond in loving obedience in allowing His Spirit to ultimately occupy every facet of our lives—again, not by constraint but according to our heartfelt desires.

Is it a little scary to let go and allow God to enter some of those closed-off rooms of our lives? Sure it is! But that's where living faith comes in, with the Spirit of God the Father and Jesus Christ personally dwelling in us. The gospel was always intended to be

the means to a personal encounter with God and not merely acquisition of successful living techniques.

It's noteworthy that when reflecting on His own calling Paul stated, “For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that day” (2 Timothy 1:12). Notice the emphasis was not on *what* Paul knew, but on *whom* he knew!

As spiritual soldiers of Jesus Christ (2 Timothy 2:3), we are not alone on the beach, and we don't have to succumb to the fog of war. The next “Follow Me” column will be devoted to opening up some of those currently closed-off rooms in our lives—one by one—as we consider more of Peter's insights on how to make room for the divine nature. **BT**



### LEARN MORE

How do we begin to live a life of submission to God, a life pleasing to Him, a life transformed by the Spirit and power of God? You need to read our study guide *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*. Download or request your free copy today!

**[BTmagazine.org/booklets](http://BTmagazine.org/booklets)**



## Thankful for free literature

Thank you for offering such wonderful literature! I requested your study aid *Is God a Trinity?* and was elated to see that the truth of Scripture that has been revealed to me in my personal study was not unique to me! I have ordered other booklets and I look forward to reading them!

*Reader in North Carolina*

We have two children—a 12-year-old girl and a 13-year-old boy. The children read your booklets, and then discuss them in a family setting. Our son said he wished he lived in Jesus' time so he could walk with Him, and our daughter has said the booklets are more interesting to her than any other novel she has read. They are written so well, and make the subject come alive!

*Reader in Florida*

I have been studying the Bible for about 30 years, and I preach the good news of the soon-coming Kingdom of God every time I have the opportunity. The things that I teach are very close—actually identical—to the message in your publications. I would like to thank you and encourage you to persevere in the faith of our Lord, who is our only shield. As for myself, I will continue to read your publications with great interest.

*Reader in France*

I have been receiving your magazine for quite some time now. As someone who suffers from depression and suicidal thoughts, I wanted to express how touched and encouraged I have been by your church, its publications and its television programs. Please continue these services, knowing you are bringing people to God and changing lives—at least, you have changed mine. Thank you.

*Subscriber in Oregon*

## Excited to observe God's biblical festivals

I ordered your study guide *God's Holy Day Plan* and look forward to learning more about God's holy feasts. I also sent a message through your website to a congregation that is somewhat close to us, requesting that they inform us of when and where they plan on celebrating the feasts so that my husband and I might be able to join them.

*From the Internet*

Thank you so much for all of your wonderful reading material. I've shared your study guide on the festivals of God with others. We are deeply trying to follow them instead of other holidays.

*Reader in New York*

I'd like to receive your booklet about God's biblical festivals. I had heard of them but I didn't know anything about them. I've been a "born again" Christian for 40 years; it's about time I know what God wants.

*Reader in Australia*

*We're so glad to hear of your enthusiasm for God's biblical festivals—they are truly a joyous experience to observe. With the completion of the annual festivals just behind us, we now look forward to next year. If*

*you'd like to observe God's festivals next year, begin planning now—a good first step is reading our study guide *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*, which explains these biblical feast days, their meaning, and why we should keep them. From there you can find more information about festival locations and dates, beginning with Passover next April.*

## Cancel my subscription, I must throw away your magazines

I didn't know that *Beyond Today* was produced by a non-Christian organization—I recently learned that you deny the Trinity and thus deny God. My question is: Why are you doing this? I'm a long-time subscriber to your magazine, but I ask that you please unsubscribe me. I must throw away your magazines.

*Subscriber in the United Kingdom*

*We're sorry to see you go. But we must state that we do not deny God in any way, shape, or form. We believe in God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit as the power and essence of God. Where we depart from the teaching of the Trinity is that we don't see any scriptural support for the belief that the Holy Spirit is a distinct person like the Father and Son.*

*Instead, we find in the Bible that God the Father and Jesus Christ are the two divine beings of the God family, with the Holy Spirit as their shared essence and power and presence with us. You can read a much more thorough explanation in our free study guide *Is God a Trinity?* by downloading or requesting a copy at [ucg.org/booklets](http://ucg.org/booklets) or from the offices listed on page 39. You'll also learn the history of the Trinity doctrine—that it wasn't formulated until several centuries after Jesus Christ and the apostles, long after the Bible was completed.*

## Sending a donation in gratitude

I am extremely interested in your magazine, as you cover all the questions I have wondered about for many years, including why we exist! It is amazing how you have explained the world's creation and its universe with a "higher power," which of course is God! I look forward to every issue and want to collect every Bible study guide you print! Thank you! Please accept my small donation to your cause.

*Reader in Nevada*

## Seeking a local congregation to worship with

I have followed you for years and agree with your doctrines 100 percent. I've looked at your meeting locations online and I would like to attend one of your services, but I would first like to talk with someone about the meeting place and time. Thanks.

*Reader in Tennessee*

*We're glad to hear you're excited to join us in worship! The entire list of congregations is online at [ucg.org/congregations](http://ucg.org/congregations). The website for each congregation lists the contact information for the local pastor, so you can reach out to him to discuss your questions.*

---

Published letters may be edited for clarity and space. Address your letters to Beyond Today, P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027, U.S.A., or e-mail [BTinfo@ucg.org](mailto:BTinfo@ucg.org) (please be sure to include your full name, city, state or province, and country).

**Q: I disagree with your position on not celebrating Christmas. If a person celebrates the birth of Jesus on Dec. 25 with the intent to worship Him as the Son of God, I believe they are not revering a pagan god. God knows our hearts. To worship pagan gods is sinful, but to use symbolism to aid in the understanding of the Lord's purpose is not contrary to the Lord's teaching. Shouldn't we dwell on what unites us rather than what may divide us?**

*From the Internet*

A: We at *Beyond Today* use the Bible—the written Word of God—as the basis of our teachings. Therefore, it is not up to us to judge people—it is God's Word that does so. Notice what Jesus said: "The word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day" (John 12:48). The word that Jesus has spoken is the entire Bible, as He was the living Word through whom the Father acted and spoke even in Old Testament times.

Our position on not celebrating Christmas is not motivated by a divisive spirit, but by a strong desire *to obey the Word of God and be unified with Him*. We genuinely desire to share the blessing that comes from following Him the way He wants to be followed. And as you'll read below, His instructions on how to worship Him simply do not square with Christmas and its traditions.

Anyone with access to the Internet can easily learn the origins of Christmas and its associated customs, such as the Christmas tree, Santa Claus, kissing under mistletoe and celebrating on Dec. 25. These have nothing to do with true biblical Christianity and everything to do with the worship of other gods.

For example the website *Witchology.com*, which bills itself as "a research and education provider specialising in the areas of Witchcraft, Wicca, Paganism, Magic (Magick) and the Occult," says this regarding Christmas:

"What is the Pagan secret that Christianity has tried to keep from you? The truth about Christmas is that it is not Christmas at all. It is the Winter Solstice, a Pagan holy day observed around the world and since time immemorial from the Native American tribes, to the Norsemen, to the ancient Romans, and today by modern Pagans, Witches and Wiccans." The witches behind this site are quite right about the pagan origins of Christmas.

God specifically commands that His people not get mixed up in or follow the false religious practices of other people. Note His clear instructions in Deuteronomy 12:30-31:

"Do not fall into the trap of following their customs and worshipping their gods. Do not inquire about their gods, saying, 'How do these nations worship their gods? I want to follow their example.' *You must not worship the LORD your God the way the other nations worship their gods*, for they perform for their gods every detestable act that the LORD hates. They even burn their sons and daughters as sacrifices to their gods" (New Living Translation, emphasis added).

This passage deals with more than just not sacrificing sons

and daughters to pagan gods. That practice was merely one of the worst examples among all the abhorrent things done in the false religions of the world. God tells us that whatever He commands is what we are to do: "So be careful to obey all the commands I give you. You must not add anything to them or subtract anything from them" (verse 32, NLT 2015).

This is a serious matter, and that is why the apostle Paul wrote: "The sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons" (1 Corinthians 10:20-22, New International Version).

Paul was pointing out the origin of pagan worship in the demonic realm (compare Leviticus 17:7; Deuteronomy 32:17; Psalm 106:37) and warning Christians against involvement in pagan practices, as in the other scriptures quoted above.

Since Christmas clearly has pagan roots and its symbols revolve around the worship of foreign gods, we should avoid

**LEARN MORE** Search: "Christmas origins" at [ucg.org/learnmore](http://ucg.org/learnmore)

celebrating it and instead focus on the holy celebrations of the Bible (be sure to read "Would Jesus Celebrate Christmas?" beginning on page 28).

For example, Jesus celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles (John 7:2, 8, 14). Some think these days are only for the Jews and argue He only kept them because He was a Jew. But we see in 1 Corinthians 5:8 that even the gentile (non-Jewish) Christians in Corinth were told by Paul to observe another biblical festival—the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Here he said, "Therefore, let us keep the feast."

It logically follows that since Christ kept these festivals and the Church in the time of the apostles kept them, we should keep them too. If God outlined special days of worship in the Bible, why would we even consider using religious holidays that human beings, deceived by demons, celebrated to worship other gods?

And consider it from one more angle. Imagine a woman giving a gift to her husband on his birthday. Only it isn't his birthday; it's the birthday of an old boyfriend. And the gift is something she used to give that other person. It would be natural for the husband to doubt the genuineness of her love—in fact, it would be highly insulting! If you really loved someone and were trying to do something he would appreciate, you would never throw in your face such reminders of an old flame.

But Christmas is doing *this very thing* with Jesus—supposedly honoring Him when this birthday and celebratory elements were formerly used to honor false gods!

If we want to honor God, we can't presume to just take it on ourselves to invent whatever way we think we should honor Him or blindly follow common tradition. We must read and follow what *His Word says*. Christmas (and Easter, Halloween, Valentine's Day and others), with its pagan origins and traditions, simply does not square with the calling that Christians have to be a holy people who follow God above all.





*My brother and me just before being sent to our first foster home.*

# What I Learned as a Foster Child

Though life can be bleak at times, I learned at a young age that I'm never alone.

by Janet Treadway

**M**ay has been proclaimed “National Foster Care Month.” In the United States today, approximately 400,000 children are in foster care at any given time. Each year about 20,000 of these young people “age out” of foster care, which means that when they become 18 they are on their own.

National Foster Care Month sure brought back memories for me, as I experienced living in foster care. I still remember as a little girl of 4 standing there watching my mother as she hurriedly gathered things and placed them in an open suitcase on the couch. My mother carefully buttoned up my coat and took my tiny hand into hers.

She picked up the suitcase with her other hand and walked me out to a strange car, where a strange lady waited. My mother placed the suitcase in the car, slowly bent down with tears in her eyes, placed me in the car, and walked away.

As we drove away, I looked back to see my mother fading into the distance. I would not see her again for 10 years.

I sat there looking at the suitcase beside me, thinking about how she carefully packed my favorite dress and even placed my favorite stuffed monkey, Curious George, in it. Then I stared ahead at this strange woman driving me away to the strange unknown.

## Bouncing from home to home

The only stabilizing things throughout my childhood and teenage years were my twin brother Jim and God. They were the two who remained with me as I traveled from home to home. Our journey would include 11 families and two children's homes before I became an adult.

I cannot describe how it felt to go into a strange home, complete with new parents, sisters and brothers. Faces I had never seen were to become my new mom and dad. I would face a new school and try to make new friends.

When difficulties came or the foster parents got tired, they would pack my suitcase and send me on my way because, of course, I did not belong to them. The foster parents had no life-time commitment to love me, care for me, and be concerned for me. I would always cry the night before I moved to another home, knowing I would be leaving one family that I had grown used to and heading to another house, another family, another school.

The hardest part was just getting used to calling them Mom and Dad, and then it would be time to go.

That's how Jim and I lived for the next 10 years. Everything was temporary—the home, parents and friends. Everything, that is, except God. It was He who saw my tears at night and heard my cries. He understood my fear and my great sense of not belonging anywhere, with no parents to call my own. He especially knew the emptiness I felt not having a dad.

## I never walked alone

God was there to pick me up and keep me going through each change of my life. He became my greatest Dad, the One who said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Hebrew 13:5). My greatest Dad kept that promise.

God was there when I walked down the halls of a new school alone. He was there when I sat down for dinner for the first time with a new family. He was there when I left with my packed suitcase and said goodbye to the family I had gotten used to. My greatest Dad never let me walk alone when I carried my suitcase in to greet my new set of parents and siblings. He was there to fill my loneliness. I knew He was there, because I couldn't have survived had He not been.

Yes, there are many broken children, as I was, because the parents are broken. But the good news is, *we do not have to stay broken*. We do not have to use this as a crutch to stop us from getting beyond the emotional trauma we suffered. I believe that when my mother let go of my small hand after leading me to the car is when God reached down His hand and took hold of mine.

Look what God says to you and me in Luke 11:9: “So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.” And in Psalm 68:5: “God is the Father to the Fatherless” (New International Version).

What do you seek? What do you need? Ask your Father in heaven. Other things may be temporary, but God has invited us to an eternal relationship with Him. You may be, or may have been, a temporary foster child, but God wants you and me to be His child forever. He will heal whatever is broken in us.

One day the whole world will be healed, and there will never be a need for a foster care system again. No more broken families will exist in God's coming Kingdom! **BT**

# BEYOND TODAY®

## Worldwide Television Airtimes

**For the most current airing times, or to download or view new and archived programs online, visit [BeyondToday.tv](http://BeyondToday.tv)**

### UNITED STATES NATIONWIDE CABLE TV

#### The Word Network

View on cable at the following times:

Sun 11 a.m. ET, 10 a.m. CT, 9 a.m. MT, 8 a.m. PT;  
Fri 4 p.m. ET, 3 p.m. CT, 2 p.m. MT, 1 p.m. PT

The Word Network is available in over 200 countries, reaching viewers in Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia and the Americas. It reaches 86 million homes in the United States alone through DirecTV, Comcast, Time Warner Cable, Bright House Networks, Cox, Cablevision, Charter and other

cable operators—and another 9 million homes on Sky TV in the United Kingdom.

### BROADCAST TV

#### Alaska

Anchorage ch. 18, Tue 9 p.m.

#### California

San Diego ch. 18, 19, 23, Mon 5 p.m.  
San Francisco ch. 29, Sun 6:30 p.m.

#### North Carolina

Durham ch. 18, 97-3 Wed 7:30 a.m.

#### Ohio

Toledo ch. 69, Sun 5 p.m.

#### Oregon

Gresham/East Portland ch. 22/23, Sun 7:30 p.m.  
Milwaukee ch. 23, Sun 6 a.m.; Mon 11:30 p.m., Wed 4:30 p.m.; Thu 7 a.m.; Fri 5:30 a.m.; Sat 8:30 a.m. & 4:30 p.m.

Oregon City ch. 23, Sun 2:30 p.m.; Thu 10:30 a.m. & 2:30 p.m.; Fri 4:30 a.m.; Sat 3 a.m. & 4 p.m.

#### Washington

Everett ch. 77, Wed 5 p.m.

#### Wisconsin

Kenosha ch. 14, Sun 7:30 p.m.; Mon 7:30 p.m.  
Milwaukee ch. 96, Mon 2 p.m.; Tue 7 p.m.; Wed 2 p.m. ch. 55, Sun 8 a.m.

### CANADA NATIONWIDE CABLE TV

Vision TV Sun 6 p.m. ET

Hope TV Sun 1 p.m. ET

See local listing for the channel in your area.

### AUSTRALIA

9GEM Sun 7:30 a.m. nationwide

### The Word Network

View on cable at the following times:

Sat 6 a.m., Sun 8:30 a.m., Mon 1 a.m.

### NEW ZEALAND

#### Prime Television

(simulcast on Sky satellite platform) Sun 7 a.m.

### SOUTH AFRICA

#### Cape Town DSTV

Sun 8:30 a.m. ch. 263 and open ch. 32, 67

### ST. LUCIA

Sun 9 a.m. ch. DBS

### TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

2nd, 4th Sundays CCN TV6 at 9:00 a.m.

# BEYOND TODAY®

November-December 2016

Volume 21, Number 6

Circulation: 300,000

*Beyond Today* (ISSN: 1086-9514) is published bimonthly by the United Church of God, an International Association, 555 Technecenter Dr., Milford, OH 45150. © 2016 United Church of God, an International Association. Printed in U.S.A. All rights reserved. Reproduction in any form without written permission is prohibited. Periodicals Postage paid at Milford, Ohio 45150, and at additional mailing offices. Scriptural references are from the New King James Version (© 1988 Thomas Nelson, Inc., publishers) unless otherwise noted.

Publisher: United Church of God, an International Association

Council of Elders: Scott Ashley, Bill Bradford, Jorge de Campos, Aaron Dean, Robert Dick, John Elliott, Mark Mickelson, Mario Seiglie, Rex Sexton, Don Ward (chairman), Anthony Wasilkoff, Robin Webber

Church president: Victor Kubik Media operation manager: Peter Eddington

Managing editor: Scott Ashley Senior writers: Jerold Aust, John LaBissoniere, Darris McNeely, Steve Myers, Gary Petty, Tom Robinson Copy editors: Milan Bizic, Tom Robinson Art director: Shaun Venish Circulation manager: John LaBissoniere

To request a free subscription, visit our website at [BTmagazine.org](http://BTmagazine.org) or contact the office nearest you from the list below. *Beyond Today* is sent free to all who request it. Your subscription is provided by the voluntary contributions of members of the United Church of God, an International Association, and others.

**Personal contact:** The United Church of God has congregations and ministers throughout the United States and many other countries. To contact a minister or to find locations and times of services, contact our office nearest you or visit our website at [ucg.org/churches](http://ucg.org/churches).

**Unsolicited materials:** Due to staffing limitations, unsolicited materials sent to *Beyond Today* will not be critiqued or returned. By their submission authors agree that submitted materials become the property of the United Church of God, an International Association, to use as it sees fit. This agreement is controlled by California law.

### NORTH, SOUTH AND CENTRAL AMERICA

**United States:** United Church of God, P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027

Phone: (513) 576-9796 Fax (513) 576-9795 Website: [BTmagazine.org](http://BTmagazine.org) E-mail: [info@ucg.org](mailto:info@ucg.org)

**Canada:** United Church of God—Canada, Box 144, Station D, Etobicoke, ON M9A 4X1, Canada  
Phone: (905) 614-1234, (800) 338-7779 Fax: (905) 614-1749 Website: [ucg.ca](http://ucg.ca)

**Caribbean islands:** United Church of God, P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027

Phone: (513) 576-9796 Fax (513) 576-9795 Website: [BTmagazine.org](http://BTmagazine.org) E-mail: [info@ucg.org](mailto:info@ucg.org)

**Spanish-speaking areas:** Iglesia de Dios Unida, P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027, U.S.A.  
Phone: (513) 576-9796 Fax (513) 576-9795 Website: [ucg.org/espanol](http://ucg.org/espanol) E-mail: [info@ucg.org](mailto:info@ucg.org)

### EUROPE

**Benelux countries (Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg):** P.O. Box 93, 2800 AB Gouda, Netherlands

**British Isles:** United Church of God, P.O. Box 705, Watford, Herts, WD19 6FZ, England

Phone: 020-8386-8467 Fax: 020-8386-1999 Website: [goodnews.org.uk](http://goodnews.org.uk)

**Eastern Europe and Baltic states:** Head Sõnumid, Pk. 62, 50002 Tartu Postkontor, Estonia

**France:** Église de Dieu Unie—France, 127 rue Amelot, 75011 Paris, France

**Germany:** Vereinte Kirche Gottes/Gute Nachrichten, Postfach 30 15 09, D-53195 Bonn, Germany

Phone: 0228-9454636 Fax: 0228-9454637

**Italy:** La Buona Notizia, Chiesa di Dio Unita, Casella Postale 187, 24121 Bergamo Centro, Italy

Phone and Fax: (+39) 035 4523573 Website: [labuonanotizia.org](http://labuonanotizia.org) E-mail: [info@labuonanotizia.org](mailto:info@labuonanotizia.org)

**Scandinavia:** Guds Enade Kyrka, P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027

E-mail: [norden@ucg.org](mailto:norden@ucg.org)

### AFRICA

**Cameroon:** United Church of God Cameroon, BP 10322 Bessengue, Douala, Cameroon

**East Africa, Madagascar and Mauritius:** United Church of God—East Africa

P.O. Box 75261, Nairobi 00200, Kenya E-mail: [kenya@ucg.org](mailto:kenya@ucg.org) Website: [ucgeastafrica.org](http://ucgeastafrica.org)

**Ghana:** P.O. Box AF 75, Adenta, Accra, Ghana E-mail: [ghana@ucg.org](mailto:ghana@ucg.org)

**Malawi:** P.O. Box 32257, Chichiri, Blantyre 3, Malawi Phone: +265 (0) 999 823 523

E-mail: [malawi@ucg.org](mailto:malawi@ucg.org)

**Nigeria:** United Church of God—Nigeria, P.O. Box 2265 Somolu, Lagos, Nigeria

Phone: 8033233193 Website: [ucgnigeria.org](http://ucgnigeria.org) E-mail: [nigeria@ucg.org](mailto:nigeria@ucg.org)

**South Africa:** United Church of God—Southern Africa, P.O. Box 1181, Tzaneen 0850, South Africa

Phone: +27 79 725 9453 Fax: +27 (0)86 572 7437 Website: [south-africa.ucg.org](http://south-africa.ucg.org)

E-mail: [UnitedChurchofGod.SA@gmail.com](mailto:UnitedChurchofGod.SA@gmail.com)

**Zambia:** P.O. Box 23076, Kitwe, Zambia Phone: (0026)0966925840 E-mail: [zambia@ucg.org](mailto:zambia@ucg.org)

**Zimbabwe:** P.O. Box 594, Mutare, Zimbabwe Phone: +263 773 920 614

E-mail: [zimbabwe@ucg.org](mailto:zimbabwe@ucg.org)

### PACIFIC REGION

**Australia and all other South Pacific regions not listed:** United Church of God—Australia

GPO Box 535, Brisbane, Qld. 4001, Australia Phone: 07 55 202 111 Free call: 1800 356 202

Fax: 07 55 202 122 Website: [ucg.org.au](http://ucg.org.au) E-mail: [info@ucg.org.au](mailto:info@ucg.org.au)

**New Zealand:** United Church of God, P.O. Box 22, Shortland St., Auckland 1140, New Zealand

Phone: Toll-free 0508-463-763 Website: [ucg.org.nz](http://ucg.org.nz) E-mail: [info@ucg.org.nz](mailto:info@ucg.org.nz)

**Tonga:** United Church of God—Tonga, P.O. Box 518, Nuku'alofa, Tonga

### ASIA

**All except Philippines and Singapore:** United Church of God, P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027, U.S.A. Phone: (513) 576-9796 Fax (513) 576-9795 E-mail: [info@ucg.org](mailto:info@ucg.org)

**Philippines:** P.O. Box 4774, MCPO, 1287 Makati City, Philippines Phone: +63 (2) 804-4444

Cell/text: +63 918-904-4444 Website: [ucg.org.ph](http://ucg.org.ph) E-mail: [info@ucg.org.ph](mailto:info@ucg.org.ph)

**Singapore:** United Church of God, GPO Box 535, Brisbane, Qld. 4001, Australia

Website: [ucg-singapore.org](http://ucg-singapore.org) E-mail: [info@ucg.org.au](mailto:info@ucg.org.au)

### ALL AREAS AND NATIONS NOT LISTED

United Church of God, P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027

Phone: (513) 576-9796 Fax (513) 576-9795 Website: [BTmagazine.org](http://BTmagazine.org) E-mail: [info@ucg.org](mailto:info@ucg.org)

Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement Number 40026236.

Canada return address: *Beyond Today*, 2835 Kew Drive, Windsor, ON N8T 3B7.

Address changes: POSTMASTER—Send address changes to

*Beyond Today*, Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027.





## Watch the *Beyond Today* TV program!

The Word Network

**On Cable:** Friday 4 p.m. ET, 3 p.m. CT, 2 p.m. MT, 1 p.m. PT

Sunday 11 a.m. ET, 10 a.m. CT, 9 a.m. MT, 8 a.m. PT

*The Word Network is available in over 200 countries, reaching viewers in Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia and the Americas. It reaches homes in the U.S. through DirecTV, Comcast, Time Warner Cable, Bright House Networks, Cox, Cablevision, Charter and other cable operators—and homes on Sky TV in the U.K.*



## What does this have to do with the birth of **THE SON OF GOD?**

**W**here did the Christmas holiday come from? How did it begin, and why? Does it really honor Jesus Christ and celebrate His birth, or is there more to the story that most people don't know?

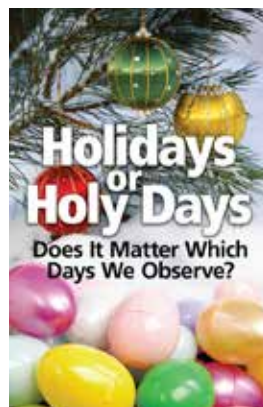
Did you realize that historians (and the Bible) agree that Jesus Christ wasn't born anywhere near Dec. 25?

Did you know that this particular date was well known for its pagan religious celebrations long before Jesus Christ was born?

What does a jolly old man in a fur-trimmed red suit (who supposedly lives at the North Pole and is assisted by elves!) have to do with the birth of the Son of God? And what's up with the flying reindeer pulling a sleigh?

How much do you know about the origin of the Christmas tree? How did holly come to be connected with the holiday, and why is mistletoe supposedly good for kissing?

Few people know why they believe or do the things they do—especially when it comes to their religious beliefs and practices. If you want to discover the real facts about the strange history of this



popular holiday, request your free copy of *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?* This eye-opening study guide is waiting for you!

In this free study guide you can discover the shocking truths about several of the world's most popular holidays. Perhaps even more surprising is how they came to be connected with Jesus Christ! For your free copy, visit our website or contact any of our offices listed on page 39.

Request or download your free copy at **[BTmagazine.org/booklets](http://BTmagazine.org/booklets)**

### Reader Updates

Go to [ucg.org/btupdate](http://ucg.org/btupdate) to sign up for e-mail updates including breaking news, important announcements and more from the publishers of *Beyond Today*.