

# Advent and Christmas

## Part 3 – Are the “12 days of Christmas” Scriptural too?

In their original intent and meaning Advent and Christmas were designed by Christians in the 4<sup>th</sup> century to “set our hearts” and “set our minds,” **Colossians 3:1-2**, “on things above, not on earthly things.” They served as anchors for Christians under pressure from the culture - and from so-called Christians - to compromise and pervert the gospel. They also provided opportunity for Christians through all the centuries since to “tell the old, old story” of “the mystery of God’s will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ,” **Ephesians 1:9**.

Advent did that by setting Christians’ hearts and minds on the END result of all Christ’s work which God “purposed” in him, of “the hope that is stored up for you in heaven,” **Colossians 1:5**, the hope “you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel,” that God’s “grace and peace,” **verse 2**, have been extended to everyone “through him (Jesus) to reconcile to himself all things,” **verse 20**. In other words, God has it all worked out, for everything and everybody, through Christ.

And it’s this wonderful hope, that God “stored up in heaven” for all humanity “before the creation of the world,” **Ephesians 1:4**, that Advent focuses on, “For in this hope we were saved,” **Romans 8:24**. That’s what “rescued (or “saved”) us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves,” **Colossians 1:13**. It was the realization that what we see going on around us, and all the misery in the world and the mounting problems that nobody, it seems, can solve, is not the only life in existence, or the only dimension. What we see with our eyes is merely the “earthly” dimension that’s been “subjected” for now “to frustration” and helplessness, **Romans 8:20**, but ABOVE all this is “the kingdom of the Son he loves” that Jesus is relentlessly drawing everyone and everything into, so that one day “the (entire) creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay,” to experience instead “the glorious freedom of the children of God,” **verse 21**. These are the “things above” that Advent zeroes in on, to keep our hope alive that one day this entire world will be completely cleaned up and healed by Jesus Christ.

Christmas, meanwhile, zeroes in on HOW Jesus went about his Father’s business of cleaning up our mess. He went straight to the heart of the problem. Which is? Our inability as human beings to fulfill what God designed us for. So Jesus came as a human being to be the human we couldn’t be. He lived what we couldn’t live ourselves. He and the Father then sent the Spirit to live that life in us. So in Advent we get the end of the story, and in Christmas how it began.

But where do the “12 days of Christmas” from December 25<sup>th</sup> up to Epiphany on January 6<sup>th</sup> fit in? How do **they** focus our hearts and minds “on things above” and “the mystery of God’s will which he purposed in Christ”? What part of the Father’s plan through his Son do they picture?

A peek back at how Christmas came to be celebrated on December 25<sup>th</sup> gives us a clue. It stemmed from the pressure, both inside and outside the Church, to hide what the Father had purposed in Christ. From inside the Church it was Arianism, and from outside the Church it was the worship of Sol, the sun god.

Arianism was deadly, in that it reduced the Son of God to the level of a “creature,” or created being. And that not only hid God’s purpose in Christ, it destroyed it, because if Jesus hasn’t been the Father’s Son for eternity he’s in no position to make US into sons of God for eternity either. And where’s our hope then? The Father’s ultimate plan for us is to adopt us as his children forever, but how can a **created** being lift us into an **eternal** relationship with God the Father? Only a being who’s BEEN in that eternal relationship with the Father can do that. Which is why we put our hope in Christ, because he really HAS been the Father’s Son for eternity, and therefore he really is in the position to fulfill the Father’s plan for us. And that’s the hope that sustains us in this world, that one day Jesus Christ will lift all humanity into “the glorious freedom” that comes with being “**children of God**” - just like he is - forever.

The birth of Christ, therefore, became a subject of major discussion in the Church in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Was he born only as a created being, or was he of “the same substance” as God himself? What was at stake was our ability as Christians “to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason **FOR THE HOPE** that you have,” **1 Peter 3:15**. What gives us reason for hope is that “God was pleased to have **all his fullness** dwell in him (Christ) and through him to reconcile to himself ALL things, whether things on earth or things in heaven,” **Colossians 1:20**. What gets us through this human lifetime of ours is the hope that everything, eventually - “ALL things in heaven and on earth,” **Ephesians 1:10** - will be brought together “under one head, even Christ,” **because CHRIST IS FULLY GOD**. We are, therefore, “the first to hope in Christ,” **verse 12**, because we realize that Jesus was, is and always will be the eternal Son of God, under whose power, wisdom, brilliance and love, everything that we see in creation and beyond will be brought together in perfect harmony, peace, and freedom.

There was pressure from outside the Church, however, to put all one’s hopes of perfect harmony, peace and freedom in Sol, the sun god, instead. And that was just as deadly because, like Santa Claus today, Sol was a very attractive and appealing **SUBSTITUTE** for Christ. And his appeal to both non-Christian and Christian alike was much the same as the appeal of Christmas today too, with its festive atmosphere, lights, decorations, bloating oneself on food and drink, and everyone joining in.

What was the Church to do? It couldn't turn a blind eye because as Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 10:20-21**, "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."

Well, Sol the sun god was clearly of demonic origin because HE was being looked to for all the things that only CHRIST could provide. And that smacked of SATAN's ultimate plan to get people to worship him, not God. Satan himself made that obvious in **Matthew 4:9** when he told Jesus, "All this I will give you, if you will bow down and worship me." Because that's what Satan wants. He wants worship. And what more obvious god reflects Satan's desire for worship than the sun god, the source of life and light? It cleverly deflected people's attention away from Christ, the TRUE source of life and light (**John 1:4, 9**), just as Santa Claus very cleverly deflects people's attention away from Christ as the true Giver of all good gifts today.

The very same thing is happening today, then, that was happening in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. And as Christians we're faced with the same challenge. How much of this Christmas stuff do we go along with when it's obvious what's behind it? Everything about Christmas in the way it's being celebrated today is no different to the way the sun god was worshipped in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The similarities are too remarkable to ignore. Santa Claus, for instance, is a perfect replica of the sun god, pictured in his sleigh flying across the sky pulled by reindeer, just as the sun god was pictured in the 4<sup>th</sup> century flying across the sky in his chariot pulled by griffins, later changed to stags! But it all helps us relate to the predicament the church in the 4<sup>th</sup> century found itself in, because we're in exactly the same predicament today. The true meaning of God's plan purposed through Christ is being buried under a pile of Satanically-inspired rituals directing people's worship to himself and off Jesus Christ. And it set off alarm bells in the 4<sup>th</sup> century Church - just as Christmas, in the way it's celebrated today, raises serious doubts and questions in the minds of many Christians.

But what could the Church do about it? And 16 centuries later we're faced with the same question. What do WE do when we've got non-Christian relatives (and possibly Christian relatives too) who LOVE Christmas and apply all kinds of pressure to get the whole family involved in "the spirit of the season" and joining in with everything?

Well, we could quote **1 Corinthians 8:6** that "there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live," and from that verse decide we're having nothing to do with Christmas because it has nothing to do with Christ. "BUT," verse 7, "not everyone knows this." Paul took into account that most people have no clue as to who Christ is and what God purposed through him. Nor do they have any clue as to what Satan is up to either.

So what's the best way of dealing with such people? Is it to condemn and judge them for what they're doing? Is it to make a stand and say "No" to Christmas and stay away from all family celebrations? Or is it to join in as much as our conscience allows for the sake of peace and unity in the family? It's a tricky line to walk, because on the one hand it looks like we're condoning all the Christmas paraphernalia if we go along with it, but on the other hand we sound very condemning of people who love Christmas if we don't.

So what did Paul advise? It was simple, **1 Corinthians 10:24** - "**Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.**" Paul's ultimate goal in all his dealings with people was to "**try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved,**" **verse 33.**

And what did he mean by "saved"? He meant what Jesus meant in **Acts 26:18** when Jesus told Paul he was sending him to "**open people's eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God.**" Go be a light in the darkness, Paul, and switch people's affections to God. How? By showing people **who the true source of light and life is** - which is exactly what Paul did: "**I stand here and testify to small and great alike,**" **verse 22**, "**that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim LIGHT to his own people and to the Gentiles,**" **verse 23.**

The best thing Paul could do for others, then, was to get "the lights on" in people's minds about Christ - and Satan - because, **2 Corinthians 4:4**, "**The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.**" Satan hides the truth about Christ, because it's in Christ, **verse 6**, that "**the light of the knowledge of the glory of God**" - or "**the best picture of God we'll ever get,**" as The Message phrases it - is clearly seen. But how do you GET "the lights on" about Christ and Satan in people's minds?

Well, the 4<sup>th</sup> century Church came up with this idea: You take the day and the season dedicated to the worship of the sun god and **use it to shed light on CHRIST**, the true "**SUN of righteousness,**" **Malachi 4:2.** It opens people's eyes to who the REAL source of light and life is - and to Satan's counterfeit. And it didn't require any condoning or condemning either. Christians didn't need to go along with all the sun god rituals to get the point across, and nor did they need to condemn people for blindly following Satan either. They simply took the titles and terms that people applied to the sun god - like "Light of the World" - and applied them (accurately, John 8:12) to Jesus Christ instead, just like Christians today take "the spirit of giving" that people so love to talk about at Christmas-time and apply it to **Jesus** being the great Spirit Giver of all gifts.

And people don't seem to mind Christians doing that either. When we don't judge or condemn but simply use Christmas to put the spotlight on Christ, people happily hum along with the carols being played in the stores as they shop - carols which blatantly preach the gospel and proclaim Christ as their Saviour!

What Jesus told Paul to do in Acts 26:18, then, is happening today. As people stumble around in the darkness, the lights come on about Christ at Christmas. As they careen through life in total blindness under the devil's influence, God's rescue from their blindness through Christ is being preached openly wherever they go for at least a month at Christmas-time. So the gospel isn't being compromised one bit by Christians using the day and season dedicated to the worship of the sun god to shed light on Christ. Quite the opposite, in fact. Even in this atheistic, Christian-ridiculing world, **"the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ"** is out in the open and acceptable.

And we can thank the 4<sup>th</sup> century Church for that, for following Paul's advice exactly and not condemning and judging people for their blindness. And that was the key. Their focus was on SAVING people, not condemning them. When they saw people stumbling around in the darkness, they felt compassion, not ridicule. And like Paul, they wanted to do whatever they could for people **"so that they may be saved"** - or rescued - from their blindness.

They realized something else Paul said too, that Christ has given the Church **"the ministry of reconciliation," 2 Corinthians 5:18**. We operate on this Earth like Jesus did in **his** ministry. And in everything he said and did he was thinking about and motivated by his Father's plan to **"RECONCILE to himself all things"** - and it's in that spirit that Jesus is now **continuing his work through us**, his Church. **"We are, therefore, Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us," verse 20**. God is APPEALING to people through us. Our job, therefore, is not to condemn people, but to **"implore (them) on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God."** Like Paul, we try to **"please everybody in every way,"** we **"appeal,"** we **"implore,"** we do whatever we can to reconcile people to God and win them over, in the hope that they too **"see the light,"** the TRUE light **"of the glory of Christ."**

And it was that approach in the 4<sup>th</sup> century that led to Christianity becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire replacing sun worship, to Sunday becoming the day of worship of Christ not the worship of the sun, and to December 25<sup>th</sup> being celebrated as the birth of Jesus Christ, not the birth of Mithras, the sun god.

It didn't change the world, any more than Christmas changes the world today, and there were problems too. Pagans kept their old sun god rituals and Christians got caught up in them just as they do today, where instead of using the season to put the spotlight on Christ, they get swamped by the pressure of the world (and other Christians) to comply with all **its** rituals and obligations at Christmas-time. But the Church has always taken that risk, that in trying to be all things to all people in the hope of saving them, some Christians might go too far in trying to please and discover, rather embarrassingly, that they too have had their hearts and minds deflected off Christ and onto worship of the sun god! So the Church in the 4<sup>th</sup> century came up with a calendar of annual reminders to keep their hearts and minds **firmly fixed** on Christ.

And the 12 days of Christmas leading right into Epiphany on January 6<sup>th</sup> did exactly that. Epiphany meant “revealing,” to describe exactly what Paul wrote in **Ephesians 3:3, 5-6** about “the mystery made known to me **by revelation** .... which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise of Christ Jesus.”

Paul realized that the arrival of Jesus marked the beginning of a totally new era, the dawning of a new day, when the promise held in waiting for 500 years of the Messiah coming to save his people was now open to everyone. ALL HUMANITY could now share in what God had purposed in Christ. It was an “epiphany” to Paul, in the original meaning of the word, when something of huge significance suddenly dawns on you.

It was also hugely significant when the same epiphany dawned on the 4<sup>th</sup> century Church when they realized what the Wise Men from the East were all about. They’d **come as Gentiles** to Jesus, and as Gentiles they knew who Jesus was. They knew he was a King (represented by the gold), a Priest (by the frankincense, used in the Temple) and a Saviour (pictured by the myrrh, used as an embalming fluid). They were proof that what Simeon had cried out when holding the baby Jesus in his arms, about Jesus being “a light for revelation to the Gentiles,” **Luke 2:32**, was true. God’s salvation through his Son was now available to everyone.

And that changed everything because now the Church could preach openly and confidently that Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the whole world, that all humanity is being reconciled to God, that we’re all being drawn relentlessly into “the kingdom of the Son he loves,” and that all those marvelous prophecies like **Isaiah 60:2-3** are now being fulfilled. “See, darkness covers the earth,” Isaiah cries in **verse 2**, “and thick darkness is over the peoples,” made so clear at Christmas-time with all its rituals to the sun god, “BUT” - but, but, but - “the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”

And that’s why the Church came up with the 12 days of Christmas leading up to Epiphany on January 6th, because they could see that God is now revealing to the world through the Church what he revealed through the Wise Men from the East in their gifts for Jesus, that “the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you” - “you” meaning everyone - because Jesus is now drawing ALL people to himself and bringing “ALL things in heaven and on earth together” under him. The lights will be going on in people’s minds, therefore, and epiphanies will be happening to people all over the world!

It may not look like it because of all the muddle at Christmas-time, but we “fix our eyes **not on what is seen, but on what is unseen**,” **2 Corinthians 4:18**. Above it all God is relentlessly fulfilling his purpose through Christ, and **that’s** what **we** fix and hearts and minds on at this time of year.