

Christmas 11-12-18a

This is Sunday, the 18th of December, 2011, and we're going to take a look at the season in which we find ourselves, the Christmas season, time of celebration and recognition of the birth of the Lord Jesus and everything that thereunto pertains. And as we do so, we'll dedicate this time of fellowship and meditation and study of God's Word to the Lord Jesus by going to God the Father in prayer.

Father, it is a blessing for us to assemble, to enjoy the fellowship that you have ordained for us, that you have supplied to us, that you have made possible through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, enabling us not only to spend time together, but to be a blessing to others and to be blessed by others in that fellowship, to recognize the central truth about the Lord Jesus, his work on our behalf, his ongoing intercession and demonstration of the validity of your righteousness and your justice as he resides at your right hand, and awaiting the instruction to return and receive us to himself and to move the chronology and progress of your plan forward as the 70th week of Daniel takes place, the millennial kingdom is established, endures, comes to its fulfillment and fruition, and we see the end of all things in this world and the beginning of those that partake of your eternal kingdom.

We thank you for the place that you have assigned us in your plan, the resources that you have supplied to us, the clear truths and instructions that we have in your Word, the ongoing ministry of your Spirit that keeps the Lord Jesus real in our hearts and in our minds, constantly presents his example and his commandments to us, and leaves us with an opportunity day by day to dedicate ourselves afresh to walking the narrow road that leads to the straight gate of life. We pray that as we spend time together in fellowship and in the study of your Word, that God the Holy Spirit will superintend that each one here will be blessed and find pertinent and meaningful application of the things that we look at this morning, that the gifts that you have distributed in our midst will be effective and functional, that there will be ministry, and that in all things the Lord Jesus will be lifted up and his glory will be reflected in us individually and as a group. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, as I said, it is the Christmas season, an appropriate time to sort of take a look at what it is we do at this time. I would like to begin by taking a look at the history of this celebration. Some of these things you know, others you may not, but I would like to pull them all together this morning so that we can gain some perspective on this season we are undertaking and experiencing.

I have gathered this information from a number of different sources, but why is it that we celebrate the birth of the Lord Jesus at this time of year? As most of you know, there is no biblical evidence for December 25th, or December or winter being the time of the Lord's birth. In studies in years past, we have noted that it is likely from a scriptural standpoint that Jesus was born in the spring. Shepherds on the hillsides, watching their flocks at night.

Note, the sheep are on the hillside. They are not in a fold protected from the elements. This argues for spring.

There is also a more theological argument that comes from the picture in the Old Testament of the former and the latter rains, the spring feasts and the fall feasts, etc. So since it is the spring feasts which are harbingers of the first advent, it is the fall feasts in the schedule of Israel, separated by that hiatus in the summer and early fall, it is very likely that the Lord Jesus was born in the spring. Nevertheless, tradition has accrued that we celebrate his birth at this time of year.

How did that come about? Well, there have been celebrations in the middle of winter that go back well before the time of Christ. Not only in your Middle Eastern civilizations and cultures, but even in Europe, your ancient European dwellers had December celebrations. Why is that? Well, everybody watched the skies.

Those people were heavily agricultural in their lifestyle, and they noticed that the days got longer in the summer and shorter in the winter. They quickly developed through observation and understanding of the seasons. So you have your four times of the year marked by the behavior of the sun, where it rises.

As I've mentioned a few times here lately, since we moved downtown and I have a ninth-floor office that looks out to the southeast, I have been impressed with the significant movement of the sun over the course of the seasons. I knew that the sun rises further in the south in the winter and further in the north in the summer, but if you have a fixed point of reference and you can see the sun rise every morning all year long from a high fixed point of reference, it's astonishing. It doesn't just move a little bit, it moves a lot.

It looks to me like more than an eighth of the entire visible horizon. So it's—I can see the Cotton Bowl and the Texas State Fairgrounds out my window. And in the depth of winter, the sun rises so far to the right that I almost can't see it. And in the middle of the summer, it is so far to the left that it rises on the left side of a building that is clear over by the Woodall Rogers Freeway. I mean, it's just very impressive to me.

Well, the ancient people noted this, and you have some engravings in the stone where people month by month would draw a line. They would carve a line in the stone, and so you have these fan-shaped engravings and carvings in a rock. And the ancient civilizations all around the world made note of this, and they would establish their times of planting and their times of harvest based on these celestial observations, these solar observations. So they knew that in ancient, ancient times that the shortest days of the year, the darkest time of the year, was in December, and that at December 21st, you had the winter solstice. They knew at the same time that in the vicinity of June the 21st, you had the summer solstice, and then you've got the spring equinox and the fall equinox, and every three months, you have a change.

So December 21st and the days around it were a time of celebration for literally millennia, centuries before Christ. This was a time of celebration. Early Europeans had festivals celebrating light and birth. They felt like the new year is really coming. The reason we celebrate New Year right after December is this is when everything is getting warmer and better and so on around the world. So people celebrated because the worst of the winter, they felt, was behind them, particularly in your northern European climes, and they could look forward to longer days and more sunlight.

The Norsemen up there in Scandinavia celebrated Yule on December 21st. Norsemen up there, they watched the sun, and they would start on December 21st and celebrate for a couple of weeks all the way into January. Fathers and sons would go out into the forest and hew down a log and drag it back, and this is the origin of your Yule log.

Yule is the Scandinavian celebration of the winter solstice, and they would set these logs on fire in a great festivity on December 21st, and then they would watch and see how long the log would burn. The bigger the log you can hew down and haul back, the longer it's going to burn. They wanted this thing to burn as long as possible because they felt like each spark that was given off by the Yule log was a harbinger of the birth of animals in their flocks and herds. A new pig or a new cat or a new dog or calf would be born the more sparks there were.

So they would poke these logs and get the—as surely as sparks rise upward, you remember that out of Job, man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward is what the Bible says—but the Yule tradition said the opposite: sparks are a good thing.

So it was a great time for celebration because in most parts of Europe, those who were maintaining flocks and herds would feed them for as long as they could. They'd keep hay and straw and whatnot, and they would feed their animals up through about half of the winter, and they would start running out of fodder. And so they would slaughter the animals at the end of the year, and then they would live on fresh meat until the spring. So this was a time of literally slaying the fatted calf in many parts of Europe.

And they wouldn't have to feed them through the rest of the winter and watch them start getting skinny. So for many of them, this was the only time of the year that they had fresh meat available. And also, all of the beer and wine that they had put up in casks and whatnot had pretty much fully fermented by this time. So they would break out the beer, break out the wine, slay the animals, and kind of live on that stuff until the spring.

In Germany, there was a strong strand of worship of the god Odin, or Woden. This, by the way, is where you get your middle day of the week, Wednesday. If you ever wondered why it's spelled so funny, Wednesday comes from Woden's day. And just like all the other days of the week, you've got Saturn day, you've got Sun day, you've got Moon day, you've got Thor's day and Freyja day. These are all ancient pagan deities and entities.

Well, Woden's day, we get that from the Germans. And they had a mid-winter holiday celebrating Odin. And they thought that Woden was this terrible guy that would fly around at night seeking whom he may devour, fly through the sky and look around and decide who would prosper and who would perish, Woden. So this is where you get your who's been naughty and nice thing from Santa Claus. It traces back to the German Woden, but he wasn't a jolly man in a red suit. He was sort of a scary boogeyman who would fly around seeing whether or not you were worth delivering or you were going to be cursed. So the Germans would try to mollify and pacify this Woden around this time of year.

In ancient times in Rome, Mediterranean, it's not as harsh there. They've got mild climate. And this was a great time to celebrate the Saturnalia. They had all kinds of alias in Rome. You talk about a partying people, any excuse for a party. They had Bacchus and the Bacchanalia. They had Saturn and the Saturnalia. They had Liber and the Liberalia. Any god they could think of, they would just put an alia on his name and make it a feast and make merry and carouse and debauch and all of this.

So December was the time for the Saturnalia. Saturn was the god of agriculture, and they knew that the seasons were turning and this would be a great time to pacify and glorify him. And so each—the week leading up to the winter solstice and continuing for a full month—they celebrated Saturnalia. And it was a very orgiastic, hedonistic time. I mean, the Romans were pretty much famous for this, and they kind of got some of this from the Greeks.

There was plentiful food and drink, and the normal Roman social order was turned upside down. Slaves would take on the role of masters for this month. A slave could go to the nobility and the upper class and tell them what to do, and they were supposed to do it. Everything was turned on its head. Peasants were in command of the city. Businesses and schools were closed so that everybody could celebrate this.

The Romans also celebrated Juvenalia. You've got Jove, Zeus, the whole Mount Olympus thing. When people say, "By Jove," they're saying, "By Zeus," by the head god of the pantheon there. Well, they wanted to have a Juvenalia. And so this was a feast that honored the children in Rome. And it was a feast that was celebrated by the upper class.

The upper classes were big on Mithra. And this went way back. The Romans overtook the lands and conquered the peoples that were Mithra worshippers. And Mithra worship went back centuries. Well, the upper-class Romans thought this was a very sophisticated god to pay attention to, so they would honor Mithra. And Mithra was the god of the sun, a solar deity. And of course Mithra is starting to be on the rise after December the 21st. So they would celebrate the birthday of Mithra in the third week of December, the god of the unconquerable sun. And his birthday was actually December 25th.

December 25th is Mithra's birthday. It was celebrated long before the birth of Christ. They thought Mithra, who was an infant god, was birthed out of a rock. And so they talk about people crawling out from under a rock. Well, Mithra sort of got born from a rock. A rock gave birth. And here's Mithra. He's an infant god. And of course he grows and matures all through the year until the following birthday celebration. And a lot of these upper-class Romans, this was their most sacred day of the year. This would be what Resurrection Sunday might be for Christianity. They just thought, wow, Mithra's birthday, this is the be-all and end-all.

Well, of course once Christianity came into existence and the church grew and expanded, the annual celebration that was most recognized and most celebrated in the early church had nothing to do with Christmas. It was Easter. It was Resurrection. And it wasn't until the 4th century AD that the church, the Catholic Church, in somewhat of its incipient mode there, decided to make the birth of Christ a holiday. And they consciously chose this wintertime of celebration because what they wanted to do was try to eradicate these old pagan and pantheonic celebrations, all these other gods.

We need to get this Mithra stuff and this Jove stuff and the Saturn stuff and all these other solstice-related things. We need to supplant that. We want to replace it. We want to overlay it and substitute something that has some Christian meaning. Not a bad idea. But in doing so, they shifted the biblical time of Christ's birth into the winter, which there is no evidence or likelihood for at all. But they just wanted to absorb these traditions and try to convert them and try to divert them into other directions. And they were somewhat successful.

So they called it the Feast of the Nativity, kind of on an Old Testament model. It's the Feast of the Nativity. And this thing had caught on pretty well. It spread down to Egypt. There was the Alexandrian group down there of Christians. And by the 6th century, it had gotten all the way to Anglia, or what we call England today, the far western reaches of the Roman Empire. By the end of the 8th century, it had reached all the way to Scandinavia, where still burning Yule logs and waiting for the sparks and hoping for pigs.

So the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches adopted the thing, but they were on the outs with the Roman church. And so they said, "Well, we're not going to do it on December 25th." And so they went 13 days later. What they figured was the star appeared when Jesus was born, and they figured the minimum time that the wise men could make the trip and get to Bethlehem would be just under two weeks. So they started at December

25th, and they counted 13 days, and they said, “This is what we're going to celebrate. We're going to celebrate when the wise men got there, because we're wise people. We're the Russians and Greek Orthodox, and we're like the wise men. So boo on Rome on the 25th. We're going to do it in the end of the first week of January.”

So that's what they did. And to this day, your Greek and Russian Orthodox celebrate their Christmas, so to speak, in early January.

So when they did this, when the celebration came in the middle of winter, they said, “Well, we're going to celebrate the birth of Christ.” But in trying to amalgamate and incorporate and supplant all these other traditions, what they basically did is kind of mix them all up. And so people said, “Well, we're still going to do our celebration. We'll just think of Christ while we're doing it.” So we're still going to burn the Yule log. We're still going to celebrate and feast and deck the halls with boughs of holly and 'tis the season to be jolly and all of this. And so it all got kind of amalgamated together, and so they kind of lost control of the thing. They said, “Well, this is the time of year,” and that's about as much as they got.

So what happened by the Middle Ages is that although Christianity had largely replaced these pagan religions, the celebrations still had a lot of the old pagan elements. And so Christmas became pretty much Mardi Gras in the Middle Ages. And people were kind of in a rough way of life and didn't have a lot of prosperity. You get your serfs and your poor people. And so they would have this raucous carnival atmosphere where all of the restrictions were off.

And there became a tradition where they would crown a lord of misrule, a king of chaos, if you will. And they would take some fool, they would take the town drunk or something, and stick a crown on him and parade him around. And they would have a parade. By the way, your Christmas parade comes from taking this lord of misrule and celebrating him and hoisting him on high and running him through the town. And everybody would toast him and commit all kinds of mischief.

And it is really the origin of a lot of your trick-or-treat stuff isn't so much from Halloween as from Christmas. Because poor people would go to the rich and demand the best food they had in the house. Got any, you know, roast prime rib? Have you got any brisket? Have you got, you know, whatever the best is in the house, give me that. Give me your T-bone steak.

Well, the rich people had to comply during the season. If they didn't, well, all kinds of mischief and mayhem would be perpetrated on them by these people who were celebrating the lord of misrule. So, you know, Jesus being born, that's all well and good, but it was kind of a mayhem time.

And it was thought that this was a time when the rich could do beneficence to the poor. And it was partly out of self-defense and partly feeling like, you know, here's, I'm going to show that I'm not a Scrooge before the night of visits. I'm Scrooge after the night of visits. I'm a big benefactor. And so this whole Scrooge idea that Dickens put together in A Christmas Carol really goes back centuries to this tradition. He just kind of distilled it into a story.

In the 17th century, Europeans, there was a great wave of revival and reform and return to fidelity of Scriptures, you know, the Reformation and so on. So Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans took over England in 1645. If you know your history, you know about Cromwell. Well, they said, “We got to get rid of the decadence. We're going to get rid of all of this chaotic debauchery, and we're Puritans. We want Christians to be pure.” So they canceled Christmas.

The first Grinch is Oliver Cromwell. He is the archetypal Grinch. No Christmas. Boo on Christmas. So they canceled it.

Well, this is one of the reasons Cromwell and the Puritans didn't last. People didn't like their Christmas being canceled, and so they gave the heave-ho to Cromwell and the Puritans, and Charles II was on the throne. And when Charles II came, why, Christmas was made legal again.

But the pilgrims, of course, came from this time. And your pilgrims coming over to America in 1620, they were even tighter on this kind of thing than were Cromwell and the English Puritans. And this is why—and you'll see people bringing this up when people are saying, “Hey, why can't we have a nativity on our courthouse lawn? Why can't we have a city Christmas tree or something?”—you'll have your naysayers and your atheists and your, you know, civil liberties people saying, “What are you talking about? Why are you arguing for it? Even

the Puritans thought Christmas was a bad idea,” because the Puritans did not celebrate Christmas as a holiday from 1659 to 1681.

The celebration of Christmas was outlawed in Boston, Massachusetts. It was against the law to give any kind of Christmas manifestation whatsoever in December. You could be jailed for saying Merry Christmas. And it was because this thing had gotten so out of hand and was so excessive. Anyone exhibiting the Christmas spirit was fined five shillings. And, of course, if you wouldn't pay the fine, why then they would lock you up?

But it wasn't true throughout the New World. In Jamestown, Captain John Smith reports in his diary that they celebrated Christmas and it passed without incident. They had a nice, quiet, little modest Christmas.

But after the Revolutionary War, when everybody was kind of down on the British and they were not going to do British stuff much more, Christmas went along with it. And in the colonies, which were now the United States, and in the westward expansion and so on in those years, Christmas kind of got forgotten. It wasn't really celebrated. In fact, Christmas did not become a national holiday in this country until 1870, almost a hundred years after the Revolution.

And the reason it became a holiday is that it gradually started gaining some traction. And this began, oddly enough, through—in the early 1800s, Americans kind of came up with their own notion of Christmas. And they harked back and pulled some elements. But Christmas, as it is celebrated today, is really an American thing. It's kind of like jazz. It took a lot of other elements and just made something new out of it.

And one of the first guys to rehabilitate Christmas was Washington Irving. Washington Irving is a great guy. You should look into him if you haven't already. I've got a great biography of George Washington by Washington Irving.

But he, you know, economic conditions weren't good in the early 19th century. There was a lot of turmoil. There was unemployment. There was gang violence. And this, by the way, you know, at 9-11, you saw your New York police and your New York firemen really brought to the fore. And they're very noticeable.

The New York City Police Department was founded in 1828 specifically to control Christmas rioting. That's why you have the New York City Police. Their first job was to put down Christmas rioting in 1828. City Council put them together. And this made the upper class say, you know, we really need to do something about this time of the year. It's starting to get out of hand again.

So in 1819, Washington Irving wrote a book called *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* You know, gentleman. This was a series of stories about the celebration of Christmas in an English manor house. The sketches are about this guy who is a squire and he invites in the peasants and he's real nice to them and they celebrate him as being a great gent and he's beneficent to them. And this book became quite popular. These stories circulated.

And in Irving's world, these people mingled with great harmony. It was sort of a model. This is what Christmas ought to be in this time of year. Christmas should be peaceful, warm-hearted, bringing groups together. They pulled in some ancient customs. They also crowned a lord of misrule, but he was kind of a nice guy and they didn't do any destruction of property or personages.

But it was a fiction. He just made this up. It was kind of an idealized thing, but it really caught on and people started saying, “Yeah, that's what we ought to do.” And they actually started doing these things.

Also, it was around this time that Dickens over in England wrote *A Christmas Carol*. And he also had this idea that charity and goodwill ought to be something that characterized the season. And of course, this thing came over to America and was hugely popular. Dickens was quite popular. And so members of Victorian society quickly kind of adopted this attitude in that pattern.

There was also a syndrome that people noticed in those years where families were less disciplined, meaning that there wasn't this real Puritan strictness where you put the child in the grip of handlers who raise them and, you know, “I'll see you in 12 years when you're a young man. In the meantime, the butler and the nursemaid are going to raise you.” People started taking more of an interest in their children. And so Christmas became sort of a family thing where the parents could show their affection and their love for their children.

And so they started doing this gift-giving sort of a thing and they could get away with it without being accused of spoiling them. And so in this family emphasis, they started looking around for traditions that they could resurrect from the past. And so you had immigrants come into this country from the old country, from Scandinavia, from Germany. And so these customs of the Yule log—and by the way, one of the most common celebrations of Christmas in the early years in this country was the Christmas fire. You know, chestnuts roasting on an open fire actually harks back this Yule log idea. People really, before they thought of a tree, they thought of a Christmas fire.

You know, light the darkness. It's the darkest, shortest day of the year. And let's brighten it up. More about that in a minute. But so you got bits and pieces of all of these traditions.

Here's a little bit of trivia for you. Every year there's about 35 million real Christmas trees that are harvested and sold to put in people's homes in the United States. There are 21,000 Christmas tree farms in this country. It takes about 15 years to grow an evergreen to the standard living room size. Most of your trees are 12 to 15 years old that are sold. So of course, you know, these guys have to plan ahead and do crop rotation kind of a thing.

The first eggnog recorded in the United States as a part of the Christmas celebration was in Jamestown, Captain John Smith, 1607. These poinsettia plants with the green and red leaves and so on is actually fairly recent. They're named after Joel R. Poinsett, who was the United States ambassador to Mexico. And while he was down in Mexico, he saw these pretty red and green plants and he brought them back to this country around 1828 or so. And that's where your poinsettias come from, is Mr. Poinsett bringing them up here.

Salvation Army started sending red-suited Santa Claus-like individuals out for donations around 1890. So this set of traditions is largely inherited. It is largely amalgamated. It is a mix of things. And if you trace their roots back, they don't have a lot to do with Mary, Joseph, Bethlehem.

Of course, you have your major scenes. By the way, the first—the first living nativity, the first little creche made of live people, is older than you might think. Apparently, St. Francis of Assisi back in the year 1224 was trying to teach his parishioners there, his little congregation, about the birth of Christ. And so he dressed people up and actually acted out the nativity with real people. And that was quite a long time ago. But you can credit Francis of Assisi with that.

But here's—here's the point, and this is the background that will lay the foundation for our second session where we're going to be in our Bibles. How legitimate is it for believers in the Lord Jesus Christ who do have a strong biblical faith and a desire to honor God? How much of this can or should we incorporate into our lives? And if we do it, what is the basis?

Should we say, “Well, Christmas trees are a pagan symbol of fertility. The Yule log is a Scandinavian thing. It's all the wrong time of year. It's for the wrong reasons. It smacks of Bacchanalia and Saturnalia and Juvenalia. And it's got all these raucous, evil, unchristian components.” By the way, I didn't want to quote any of this, but if you want kind of a chuckle, you can look on the Internet somewhere and find the rant that somebody has posted about how Santa is just Satan with the names rearranged and they both wear red. Somebody really doesn't like Santa. There's like 24 points of comparison between Santa and Satan in this thing.

But how far do we go in that direction and say, “Well, I'm going to repudiate and refuse to do this”? I mean, everything from wreaths with candles in them is an ancient celebration that has similar roots to these other traditions. So how much of this can we legitimately partake of before we start departing from our biblical faith?

Well, we're going to pause and take our break. And when we come back, we're going to look at the Bible and figure this thing out. At least, I'm going to suggest to you what I think the Bible has to say about it. So we'll pause and take our break. When we come back, we'll look back at all of these things and say, “Well, should we do this stuff or not?”