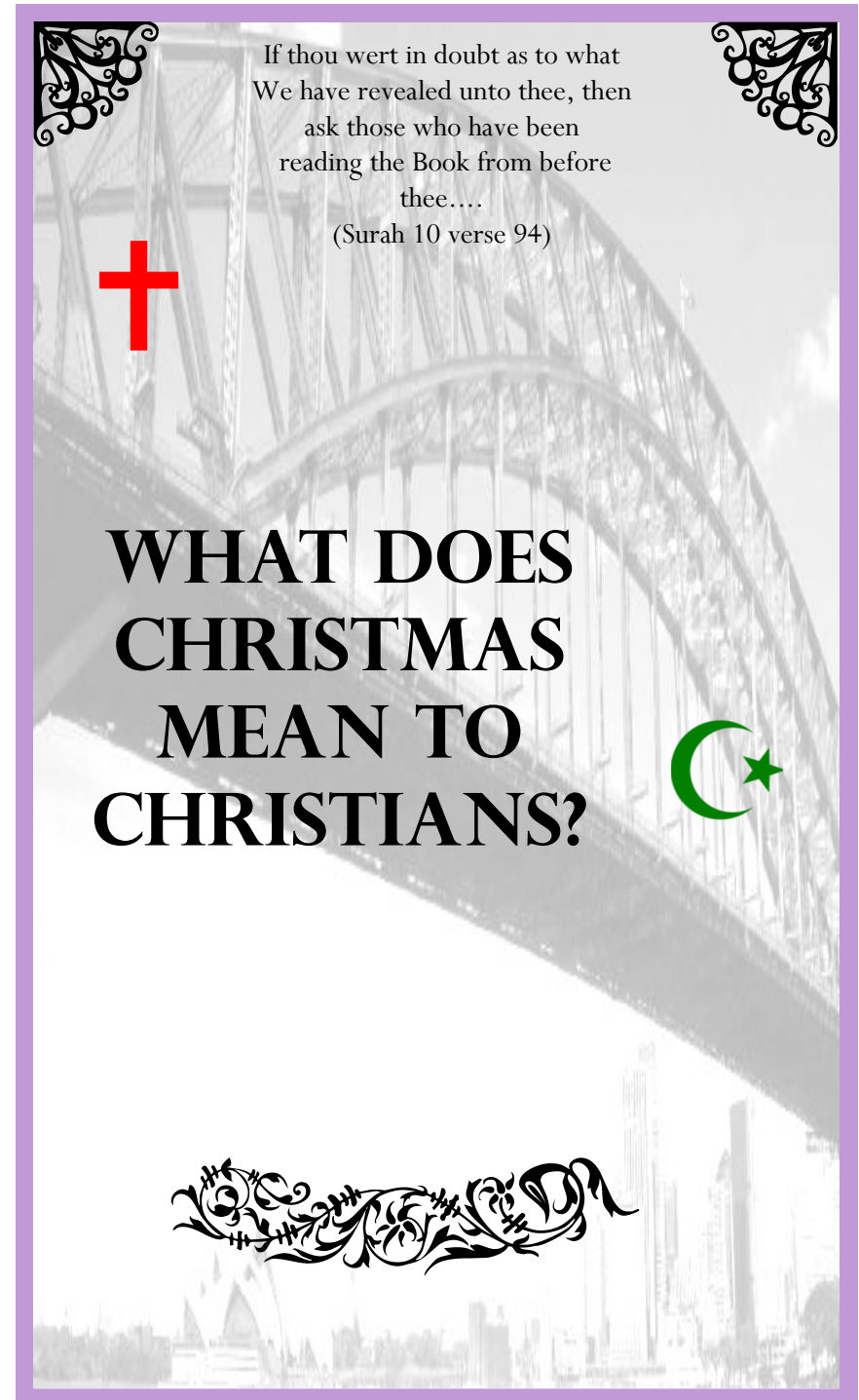


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 other booklets mentioned,  
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Or



*Published by John Saah, Allentown, PA  
 01/14*



*This article was written while we were living in the United Kingdom. Thus, there are references to things local there. However the message is the same whether in the US or UK.*

## **As we try to understand Christmas, we must recognize 3 facts**

1. Even though western nations have many practices in their culture which are derived from Christian principles, there are no such things as christian countries. Christianity is a personal faith bringing about a personal relationship to God. It is not something that comes through ethnic, political, national, or even family relationships. Simply stated, being born in the West does not make a person a Christian. We often distinguish between the two by speaking of social christians with a lower case c and Biblical Christians with an upper case C.

2. We need to distinguish between cultural traditions and Biblical teaching concerning Christmas.

3. When we talk about Jesus as the Son of God and the birth of Jesus, we are not saying that God the Father entered into a physical union with Mary and from that started a new god who was born on Christmas Day. What Christians believe is that God miraculously created in Mary a baby who would be the physical body of God the Son. We can give you a booklet entitled "Is Jesus God?" which explains this in more depth.

So, it is not really accurate to think of Christmas as the birthday of the son of god. It is more accurate to think of it as the Advent or the coming of Christ in the flesh. This is what Christians refer to when we use the term Incarnation.

## **Why 25 December?**

The practice of Christmas being observed on 25 December dates back to 221 AD. This date was arrived at based on the Jewish tradition that a prophet was conceived and died on the same day. Early Christians observed 25 March as the date

Iran, Holland, Malaysia and we spent the evening with Muslim friends whose families were far away in Iran. Also, many Christians will use this time as an opportunity for a special expression of care for those less fortunate.

A significant segment of our community will think of God at this time of year and consider going to a church service. While there may be many motivations for this, churches will schedule special services at times which will be convenient or traditional. At many churches, in addition to their normal Sunday Services, they will have a Christmas Eve Service and a Christmas Day Service. The content will be aimed at those who do not normally attend church and will contain instruction about the truth behind Christmas and a challenge to respond to God's claim on their lives.

Christmas is a special time for Christians. We enjoy the traditions. We appreciate the family times together. We marvel at the excitement of young children as they anticipate all the events of the season. We feel fulfilled when we have opportunity to express kindness and compassion to others. But we do it all in the context of the awareness that the Advent was a momentous step forward in God fulfilling His promises made through the prophets that He would provide a sinless and perfect sacrifice that would be sufficient to defeat sin and Satan and redeem sinners from judgement to eternal life in Heaven.

when Jesus was crucified. Thus, 9 months later is 25 December. There have been many other theories and dates suggested. But, over history, dates from late December to early January have become the most recognized. From the early years of Christianity, a church calendar developed which traced through important events in the life of Jesus. This was done as a teaching aid to help people learn the life of Christ and it also provided a rota so that there was a regular progression in teaching about and observing the events of His life.

Does it matter? We are not viewing the day in a superstitious manner. Nor are we relegating the meaning and impact of the event to just one day. There is no special blessing or merit gained merely by an observance of it. A social christian may think about Jesus, attend a special church service or two, give gifts, and sing songs about peace on earth during the Christmas season. A Biblical Christian will constantly think about the impact on his life of Christ coming to earth, will worship regularly, and work and live to see the peace of God spread through the earth. It is probably best that we do not know the exact date otherwise superstition and empty formality would be even more of a problem.

### **So, according to the Bible what is the Christmas story?**

Mary, a young virgin, is engaged to a man named Joseph.

Mary receives a visit from the angel Gabriel telling her that she would have a child.

It is a miracle since she has not known a man.

It is a fulfilment of events foretold by the prophets.

Joseph finds out she is pregnant and plans to put her away quietly.

An angel appears to Joseph and tells him "do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will

bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

He is reminded of the Prophet Isaiah’s message "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" which means, God with us.”

We can see that this made sense to Joseph because Matthew writes -“When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.”

But, why did it make sense? It was because there are many prophecies in the Old Testament concerning the Advent of the Christ and Joseph was aware of them.

The story goes on with the trip to Bethlehem

The inn being full and the birth in a manger

The visit of the shepherds

The visit of the wise men

The flight to Egypt

The coming of Jesus was a crucial part of God’s plan to deal with mankind’s sin. To fully understand the significance of Christmas, we must start in **Genesis**, at the beginning of creation.

*Genesis 1:27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. He said “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” 31 And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good..*

## How do we celebrate?

Many of our culture’s current traditions had their origins as teaching examples of great truths concerning the advent of Jesus. Unfortunately, secular society has shown their disregard for God by perverting or diluting the message. We were in Windsor and I saw a Christmas shop. A shop opened just for this time of year. I went in and to my dismay, but not my surprise, I found there was not one single item or reference concerning God. This year millions of pounds will be spent on Christmas presents by people who do not give the slightest thought to how the giving of presents originated. Truths such as the wise men bringing gifts to Jesus or the gift of God to mankind were taught in the giving of gifts and charity to the poor. This developed into the giving of gifts to loved ones as a token of God’s love expressed to us.

Will we participate in many of the other traditions of Christmas? Yes, as far as they do not violate Biblical principles and we will do it seeking to be mindful of the spiritual significance of Christmas. Will we have a Christmas tree? Yes, a few years ago a Muslim friend gave us a 2 foot tall artificial tree as a token of his friendship. When I put it out it decorates the house, but more importantly it is a sign of our mutual respect for one another even though we are from greatly different faiths.

Our society makes a public holiday out of Christmas. This affords the opportunity for extended family to gather for meals and time together. Often church members at great distances from biological family will gather as a spiritual family. Last year our parents and children were 3500 miles away, but, we were joined by members of our church family representing

*our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned--everyone--to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors. Isaiah 53:1-12*

### **To Summarize**

Christians believe that Jesus being born in human form was a crucial part of God's plan to restore the relationship between man and God which had been broken by sin. It was vital so that a perfect sacrifice could be made to make forgiveness and eternal life in Heaven with God possible for the human race which was dead in sin. The Old Testament contains prophecies which in increasing detail make clear how God was going to solve the problem.

*Genesis 2:16 And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."*

*Genesis 3:1 Satan tempts Eve, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" and tells her "You will not surely die.*

*Eve eats and gives fruit to Adam who eats as well, 7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin-cloths. 9 But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" 10 And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." 14 The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you 15 I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."*

*Childbearing and strife between husband and wife 17 And to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;. 19 By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."*

*Adam and Eve are exiled from the Garden of Eden and angels put there to guard it from man.*

In this account of creation we are introduced to six important points which are emphasized and developed over time as the Bible is revealed:

Creation was good

Man was created to be in relation to God  
 Sin brought a curse upon creation  
 Sin brought death  
 Sin disrupted mankind's relationship with God  
 God promised to provide a means to restore the broken relationship

As history progresses and God sends prophets to warn and instruct His people, we see these themes developed. They remind us that God created all things and therefore all things belong to Him and He has the right to expect obedience and praise. He also has the right to expect that their goal in life would be to accomplish His purposes.

Isaiah prophesied *Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it: "I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.* Isaiah 42:5-7

The Bible also contains the record of man's continued rebellion towards God. The prophets make very clear statements about sin

Jeremiah - *The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?* Jeremiah 17:9

Isaiah - *We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. - We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.* Isaiah 64:6

Paul - *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Romans 6:23

This leads us to consider God's promises to provide a means to restore the broken relationship between mankind and God.

There are pictures given to us in the lives of the patriarchs. Abraham is commanded to sacrifice his son. Abraham not knowing how trusts that God will provide, and He does provide. We see pictured in God's provision of a ram to take the place of Abraham's son a promise of a greater sacrifice that will provide for not just the life of one, but for all who will trust in God. Significant too is Abraham's recognition that one of the names of God, in the context of sacrifice and redemption, is Jehovah Jirah, the God who will provide

Through Jeremiah the prophet God declares: *I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me.* Jeremiah 33:8

Through Isaiah the prophet God declares:

*I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no saviour.* Isaiah 43:11

But Isaiah also speaks God's message

*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.* Isaiah 9:6  
*Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for*