

## Christmas Unwrapped Part 1

When Is Christmas

*Isaiah 7:14*

*Memory Verses: Isaiah 7:14*

### MANUSCRIPT

#### Introduction (Me, We, & the Struggle)

Do you remember the best gift you ever unwrapped? Perhaps it was a small box that you thought was insignificant. Perhaps you thought it was a new toothbrush or underwear but then it turned out to be a new video game or a diamond necklace. For me it was 1988 and it was a brand new original Nintendo Entertainment System! Before it was unwrapped it was just another box, probably filled with socks. But after unwrapping, it became a beacon for all that was happy and good in the world.

\*Unwrapping a gift. The thing about wrapping paper is that it hides what the real present is. You can shake it, you can weigh it, you can try to figure it out, but until you take the wrapping paper off of it you will never know what it is. “Mom, this is amazing... I thought it was socks.”

Not trying to blow your mind or anything, but did you ever stop to think that perhaps the Christmas you know may actually just be the wrapping? Perhaps what we've been told about Christmas or what we think Christmas is all about is really a false facade hiding the greater, more exciting truth within? And if that's the case then we should probably try to figure out what exactly is the wrapping paper and what is the reality. Over the next four weeks we are going to be exploring the truth of Christmas. When is it? What is it? Who is it? And Where is it? What is Christmas when you tear away the exterior wrapping. In a way, we are going to be unwrapping Christmas.

Let us start today by examining, when is Christmas. **Isaiah 7:14** is a 3 thousand year old prophecy letting us know when Christmas would begin. “the Lord will give us a sign, the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they shall call him Immanuel which means God with us. Now we just have to find out when this prophecy came true.

Using the “present in wrapping paper” illustration, when asking, “when is Christmas,” many of us have merely seen the wrapping paper; December 25<sup>th</sup>. Each year, December 25<sup>th</sup> is universally recognized and celebrated as the day of Christ's birth and what has become known as Christmas day. Each year, in the weeks, or if you are Candace Pierce, the months leading up to December 25<sup>th</sup> we decorate our homes in anticipation of this amazing day. For some it's the day after Thanksgiving, for others, it's the day after Halloween. For Candace it's...

what is it now, the 5<sup>th</sup> of July?

In fact, this day is so special, that some of us, rather than keeping a regular calendar, simply know the current day simply as \_\_\_\_\_ days until Christmas. “Shevi, what's the date? It's 17 days til Christmas. 17 days until December 25<sup>th</sup>.”

But what if we've been fooled? What if December 25<sup>th</sup> isn't the day that Jesus was born on and we've been celebrating Christmas on the wrong day all of these years? Don't you think that's something we should unwrap?

This morning we are going to get down to the truth of when is Christmas. When was Jesus really born, and when should we really celebrate his birth? And in answering these pivotal questions and unwrapping this important aspect of Christmas, we will see this eternal truth; **it doesn't really matter when Jesus was born, we can celebrate Christmas anytime.**

#### Teaching (Expand on the Problem, God)

In getting to the truth of when Christmas really is, the first thing we need recognize is that... **The Birth of Christ Is Most Certainly A Day Worth Celebrating.** **Isaiah 7:14** predicted the birth of Christ. Let's look at how it played out in **Luke 2:1-7**. As you can tell, in what we just read, two things; first, Jesus was born just as the Bible prophesied for thousands of years that he would be, and second, there is no mention of a date. So, in trying to discover the date of Christ's birth we must first recognize that this date is not specifically stated in the Bible nor any other historical reference. But, that doesn't mean there aren't any clues though.

The Gospels of Luke and Matthew associate the birth of Christ with the time of Herod the Great. Herod is believed to have died in the year 6 BC and so many scholars hold to the theory that Jesus was born anywhere from 4 to 6 BC. We can also work back from when Jesus began his ministry. In **Luke 3:23** the Bible says that Jesus was ABOUT 30 years old when he began his ministry. We also know from **Luke 3:1-2** that John the Baptist began baptizing people in the “fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar” which scholars place around AD 28-29; meaning that if you do the math Jesus couldn't have been born any later than 1 BC. But, if “ABOUT 30” could mean 32 or 33, which many scholars think is possible, then it is very possible that the 4-6 BC year is right on the money. Science even helps prove this date. Astronomers argue that there was a very visible comet in the sky around this time that was likely the “star of Bethlehem” and that would've put the birth of Jesus at or around April of 5 BC.

So we have a pretty good idea that the year of His birth was around 5 BC, but how sure are we about April? Some scholars think that April makes sense arguing that shepherds would not have had their sheep grazing during the winter months. Others argue that because of the mild winters in Judea and breeding patterns of the Awassi Sheep, which are most common

in the region, that a winter birth for Christ makes sense. So it could have been April or it could have been December, or it could have been anytime between. In short we have a good idea of the year, 5BC, but the month and the day is anyone's guess.

How then did we arrive at a December 25<sup>th</sup> date? Historian Alexander Murray argues that it is based on the date of two Roman feasts. The first being Saturnalia; a celebration of the Roman god Saturn which ran from December 17<sup>th</sup> to the 23<sup>rd</sup> and the second being Natalis Solis Invicti; a Roman celebration of the birth of the Sun God on December 25<sup>th</sup>. Both of these also are associated with the Winter Solstice, which according to the Roman calendar is on December 25<sup>th</sup>. In case you didn't know, the Winter Solstice is the day with the least amount of sunlight. It is likely that Christmas was chosen as a contrast to these pagan holidays and as a symbol emphasizing the light of Jesus entering into the world since the days after the solstice grow longer in light.

The earliest source stating December 25<sup>th</sup> as the date of Christ's birth is likely a book by Hippolytus of Rome in the early 200s. Hippolytus based his date on the assumption that Christ was conceived on March 25<sup>th</sup> and then added nine months to calculate the date of his birth. The date of March 25<sup>th</sup> was chosen as the day of his conception because it was also thought of as the day of his crucifixion. Many ancient Christians assumed that great prophets were conceived into the afterlife on the same day they were conceived into the world.

So, could December 25<sup>th</sup> have been the date Jesus was born? Absolutely. But, based on the evidence we have can we conclusively determine that it was? Not by a long shot! In fact, if you want to believe that Jesus was born on December 25<sup>th</sup> you can do so only by faith. But know that your faith isn't grounded in anything except a hope that this traditional date has been preserved supernaturally by God. It by no means can be considered an orthodox belief because it lacks the necessary biblical support. **Knowing that Jesus was born is way more important than knowing the exact date He was born.**

When we celebrate the birth of Christ is not important... celebrating it is. The birth of the promised Messiah, God with us, Jesus the savior, Holy redeemer, prince of peace is worth celebrating because God keeps his promises (2 Cor. 1:20). Because God came down and walked with us (John 1:14). God wants to sympathize with us in every way (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus was the lamb which would and did take away the sins of the world (John 1:29). There is no name except the name of Jesus by which men can be saved (Acts 4:12).

And, none of that has anything to do with the exact date he was born on or the date that we celebrate it. The date is merely the wrapping paper for the greater celebration inside. **It doesn't really matter when Jesus was born; we can celebrate Christmas anytime.**

Secondly, **The Birth of Christ Must Never Be Forgotten**. The first ever recorded celebration of the nativity was on December 25<sup>th</sup> 336 AD. The prominence of the holiday waned from the fourth century to the 9<sup>th</sup> century when Charlemagne was crowned emperor on Christmas day in 800 AD. During this time of prominence the holiday was first called Christmas in 1038. But, later on, because of its association with drunkenness and other misbehaviors, it was banned in England until 1660, where it remained a disreputable holiday in the minds of the people until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when it regained popularity mainly due to the writings of men like Charles Dickens. So, at least two separate times since its inception, Christmas was basically put on hold and forgotten for hundreds of years.

But that makes sense because even Herod himself tried to erase Christmas barely after it began. Read with me at **Matthew 2:13-16**. Herod didn't like Christmas. He didn't like the fact that Jesus was born and so he tried to erase it from history.

Listen, pagan culture will always try to destroy celebrations meant to praise and worship the one who came down to us, and if they can't destroy them they will do their best to corrupt them. But we must never stop celebrating! We must never forget why we celebrate them! **We may have forgotten the exact date of Jesus' Birth, but we must never forget to celebrate it! It doesn't really matter when Jesus was born; we can celebrate Christmas anytime.**

Lastly, when unwrapping the truth of when Christmas really is, we must understand that... **The Birth of Christ Is Something We Should Celebrate Everyday**. It amazes me how often we as Christians wander from the life giving promises of Christ. How often do we say we love Jesus and yet do very little to show that love. How often do we say we love the people of God and yet we do very little to build one another up and encourage one another in walking with Christ? How often do we say we love being with our faith family yet make every excuse to avoid being with them?

Christmas, perhaps more than any other date, brings this to the forefront. Even though we don't know the exact date of Christ's birth, millions of people will cram into church buildings on the Sunday before this date as a way of showing reverence to the birth of Christ. How awesome is it to see so many people recognizing this celebration and worshipping our God. But then the real truth of our commitment to Christ becomes clear when on the following Sunday those same people are no where to be found. What does this mean? It means they care more about the date, then what the date stands for! They care more about making an appearance than they do about making a difference. It means they want to be counted among the saints but not transformed by the savior.

And that's the point. If it weren't for the overwhelming significance of

what God did in sending Christ to this earth to die for our sins, the date of December 25<sup>th</sup> would mean nothing! **Romans 5:10** reminds us that we have life in Christ. All because he was born, killed, and resurrected again, we can have a new life in Him. He was born into the world so that one day he could be born into our hearts! That's why we celebrate. And that shouldn't just be celebrated one day of the year! **Stop celebrating the date and start celebrating God with us!**

When is Christmas? Christmas is everyday! Everyday we should be filled with awe and worship as we ponder the fact that the God of the universe came down to us. We couldn't go to Him so He came to us, and gave his life as a living sacrifice for us, so that we could have Him in our lives forever. Because of Christmas, God is with us right now, living inside those who have put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ! **When is Christmas? Everyday that you celebrate your personal relationship with Christ is Christmas. It doesn't really matter when Jesus was born; we can celebrate Christmas anytime.**

### **Application**

December 25<sup>th</sup> is the wrapping paper. It's a date that we have chosen to celebrate the birth of Christ. But the real present underneath is the fact that God is with us! When is Christmas really? Christmas is everyday, because everyday we worship Him for being born for us, living for us, dying for us, resurrecting for us, and now living in us!

### **Conclusion**

Don't get caught up in the wrapping paper... don't get caught up in the date. Enjoy the gift all the time! **It doesn't really matter when Jesus was born; we can celebrate Christmas anytime**