



The Secret of Christmas

By

Mark McGee

It's almost Christmas. People are running around trying to find just the perfect gift for friends and family. The alcohol flows from one party to another. The stress grows as each person tries vainly to fulfill their desires for the "happiest" time of the year. The goal is ever elusive.

Is this what Christmas is really all about? Why do we do this to ourselves? Is there something more? Something better? Something we're missing?

The answer is a resounding YES! There is something more; something much better. There's a **secret** about the holiday that can make every day the "happiest" time of the year.

The History of Christmas

Even though no one really knows the precise date of Christ's birth, people have celebrated Christmas on December 25 since at least AD 336. Historians believe this particular date was fixed because of year-end celebrations of ancient pagans to honor Saturn, the harvest god, and Mithras, the god of light. It slowly became part of Christian celebrations after the Roman Empire made Christianity its official religion. The pagans prepared special foods, decorated their homes with greenery, and joined in singing and gift giving; much the same as we celebrate Christmas today. By the 12th century AD, Christmas had become the most important religious festival in Europe. Saint Nicholas, a 4th century humanitarian bishop of Asia Minor, became a symbol of gift giving in many European countries. Artists of the 1400s

and 1500s painted many of the now-famous nativity pictures we enjoy today. Most of our traditional Christmas carols came from the 1700s and 1800s. The 1900s saw Christmas become big business with consumers spending millions of dollars on toys and decorations.

The Prophecy of Christmas

How sad but fascinating that most people have missed the whole point of Christmas during the 2,000 years since Christ was born. Jesus, that tiny baby in the borrowed manger, came to earth with the greatest secret of all time: a secret that has literally changed the world. It was not a secret that Christ would be born. God promised that a woman would give birth to One who would crush the head of Satan (Gen. 3:14). God repeated His promise of a Savior many times during the centuries before Jesus Christ was born. God told Isaiah to prophesy, “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder: and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.” (Isa. 9:6)

God was so specific about the birth of Israel’s Savior that He told His chosen nation where Messiah (Hebrew word for “Christ”) would be born: “But thou Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth unto me that is to be ruler of Israel; whose going forth have been from of old, from everlasting.” (Micah 5:2)

God told anyone who would read the Book of Isaiah that Messiah would be born to a virgin: “Therefore the Lord Himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel.” (Isa. 7:14)

The Old Testament prophets also wrote about how kings would give gifts to Messiah; how Messiah would be of the family line of Jesse, the house of David, and the tribe of Judah; how Messiah would be a prophet, priest, judge, and king; how a messenger would precede Messiah crying out: “Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” (Isa. 40:3) They further foretold how the Holy Spirit would anoint Messiah for ministry, how Messiah’s ministry would begin in Galilee, and how Messiah would work miracles and be a teacher of parables.

Indeed, the Virgin Birth and amazing life and ministry of the Messiah was no secret. It was a well-documented and expected future event. Everyone in Israel should have seen how clearly Jesus Christ met all Messianic prophecies, even to the smallest detail.

It was also not a secret that Messiah would die violently. God inspired Old Testament prophets to write that Messiah would be betrayed by a friend, sold for thirty pieces of silver and the money thrown in God’s house and used to buy a potter’s field. The prophets also wrote that Messiah would be forsaken by His disciples, accused by false witnesses, wounded and bruised, struck and spit upon, mocked, and crucified with thieves.

The details about the Messiah's crucifixion are quite remarkable since the prophets wrote about something of which they had never heard. It was hundreds of years later that the Romans introduced crucifixion as a way of executing criminals. Nonetheless, the prophets wrote that Messiah's hands and feet would be pierced, He would be given gall to eat and vinegar to drink, His bones would not be broken, and His side would be pierced. The prophets also wrote that Messiah would make intercession for His persecutors, that His own people would reject Him, hate Him without a cause, stare at Him, and shake their heads at Him. The prophets wrote that people would divide Messiah's garments and cast lots for His clothing, that His friends would stand apart from Him, that He would cry out "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me," that darkness would cover the land beginning at noon, and that He would be buried in a rich man's tomb.

The prophets also wrote about Messiah's resurrection from the grave, His ascension into heaven, and His seating at the right hand of God. So, where's the secret of Christmas I referred to earlier? Anyone who wants to see can see that Jesus Christ fulfilled every prophecy about the Savior of Israel. The prophets told about His coming and His death. When Jesus ministered on earth, He Himself told His disciples about His death and resurrection. They didn't understand, but they heard. Jesus did not keep what He was going to do a secret.

The Secret of Christmas

We come now to the "secret" that only God knew when He sent His Son to earth "in the likeness of men." (Philippians 2:7)

“For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles— if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel, of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power. To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all see what *is* the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ.”
(Eph. 3:1-9)

The secret of Christmas is that Jesus came to save Gentiles as well as Jews and make them part of the SAME BODY! The Jews believed Gentiles would receive a blessing through Israel’s Messiah becoming King over the entire world. The Jews had no idea Messiah (Christ Jesus) would treat Gentiles and Jews as equals.

“Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands— that at that time you were without

Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, *that is*, the law of commandments *contained* in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man *from* the two, *thus* making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.” (Eph. 2:11-18)

The Old Testament prophets knew nothing about this plan of God, a plan the apostle Paul called “the dispensation of the grace of God.” The disciples of Christ in the Gospels knew nothing about it either. Their entire mission was to preach the nearness of Messiah’s earthly kingdom. They had no idea God was going to build a spiritual body made up of Gentiles and Jews. They never dreamed God would remove the ordinances of the Mosaic Law from a believer’s life. They were shocked to hear that Paul told Jews and Gentiles the laws and ceremonies of Judaism were unnecessary and even unwanted in God’s new way of dealing with His new people of faith. It was only after strong arguments and debates that the Hebrew disciples came to an understanding of the secret of Christmas. Paul wrote:

“But on the contrary, when they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, as *the gospel* for the circumcised was to Peter (for He who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles), and when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we *should go* to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.” (Gal. 2:7-9)

Remember, this is God’s choice, not Paul’s – “by revelation He made known unto me the mystery.” It’s very important for students of the Bible to watch what God does. That’s a key to rightly dividing the Word of Truth – correctly interpreting Scripture.

When Jesus came to earth in the form of a baby boy, He knew He would die on a cross and rise from the grave for Gentiles as well as Jews. He knew Israel would reject the offer His apostles would make about an earthly Messianic kingdom. Jesus knew His death on the cross would reconcile Jew and Gentile unto God in one body (Eph. 2:16). But Jesus told no one. He kept the secret of Christmas to Himself. He walked and talked, healed the sick and raised the dead, preached, prophesied, and prayed, but told no one the secret of Christmas. Why? Because it wasn’t the time or place to reveal the secret.

Even after Jesus ascended to heaven, He still told no one. The disciples of Christ spent years presenting the truths and commands of the kingdom to Jews only. They kept the Mosaic Law and all the ordinances and ceremonies of the Law. They continued ritual circumcision and followed the Davidic Kingdom teachings to the letter.

It wasn't until after the leaders of Israel rejected Stephen's message and stoned him to death (Acts 7) that Jesus began to reveal His secret. He started by choosing an angry, hate-filled Jew from Tarsus named Saul. Jesus revealed His plan to Saul (Paul) on his way to arrest Messianic believers in Damascus. On that road, the Son of God struck down and blinded Saul. Then Jesus told Saul to go into the city and wait to be informed about what he must do. Jesus told a Jew named Ananias to find Saul and speak these words: "But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake.'" (Acts 9:15)

A key change in this pronouncement is that Jesus spoke of a ministry to Gentiles first. Before this time Jesus had told His disciples not to go to the Gentiles at all (Matthew 10:5-7). The disciples had obeyed Jesus and never gone to Gentiles. To even have suggested such a mission would have been ludicrous. They went only to the house of Israel, just like Jesus commanded them. But Jesus changed all that when He converted Saul on the Damascus road. Jesus also gave a vision to the Apostle Peter (Acts 10) so he would understand Paul's

special calling to Gentiles and support him at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15).

This is how Paul explained to King Agrippa his meeting with Christ on the road to Damascus. Notice to whom Jesus sent Paul and what the Lord would do for them.

“Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against *them*. And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled *them* to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted *them* even to foreign cities. ‘While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, at midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? *It is hard for you to kick against the goads.*’ So I said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And He said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you. I will deliver you from

the *Jewish* people, as well as *from* the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes, *in order* to turn *them* from darkness to light, and *from* the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.” (Acts 26:9-18)

The Ministry of Christmas

The secret of Christmas is our ministry today: our message of Jew and Gentile together in one Body, the Church of Jesus Christ. It's what God wants us to explain clearly to a confused world; a world in great need of His love and grace. The more we understand “the dispensation of the grace of God,” the better prepared we are to lead sinners to salvation and believers to take a bold stand for the truth.

Copyright © 1990-2015 GraceLife Ministries

“Scripture taken from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.”