

# Tree Of Christ



As you look at the picture on the cover (above), you may wonder what a cross is doing in the middle of the tree of lights. However, the question that should be asked is, what is the tree doing around the cross.

For many years, Christmas has become more commercialized with each year yielding a greater focus on the secular and less on the real reason for the season. Many Christians have lost sight of the purpose of the celebration participating more in the worldly view of the holiday. Christ has been shifted to the side making way for Santa, reindeer, elves, and presents. I recently heard an interview with a star from the new movie, *The Polar Express*, in which he states "Finally the true meaning of Christmas can be understood, it is about a child's imagination and dreams"; what a lost statement! So this is our attempt to put Christ back in Christmas, center stage with no one else but Jesus in the spotlight.

As we look back to the origin of the Christmas tree, we find that there are debates whether it was Saint Boniface or Martin Luther who introduced the first Christmas tree; but I will put it all to rest by saying it was Jesus Christ. It was NOT brought into the home as a depository for presents; but as a reminder that though we are celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, His ultimate reason for becoming man was to be hung on the tree of Calvary, so that each one of us can receive forgiveness and eternal life. This is the reason we have placed a Christmas tree of lights around the Cross to remind everyone who sees it that the Christmas tree is all about the Tree of Christ (Tree of Calvary).

Candles were later put on the tree to represent the Light of Christ, reminding all who saw them that the light of Christ shines through; no matter how dark or far, His light is the greatest of all (candles have long been the icon of the light of Jesus Christ). Candles were later replaced by light bulbs, for obvious reasons. This is why the Christmas tree, placed around the Cross, is made from lights, to remind us that the light of Christ will always lead us from the darkness of sin and temptation.

So as you gaze upon the many Christmas trees you see this year, remember that they represent the Tree of Christ, the Tree that Jesus hung upon so that each of us can have eternal life and the forgiveness of sins. Share this information with everyone so that we can change the focus from commercialism to that of the Coming, the Birth, the life, the Death and Resurrection, and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. As the lights catch your eye, remember Christ is the Light of the world. Without Him there would be nothing but darkness.

Also, since gifts have become such a focus for Christmas, give the gift that was given to all of us, by God the Father, to be shared with one and all, the gift of Jesus. Share Him with everyone you meet. Proclaim Him so that each and every person knows what our Savior means to you. Let Christmas be all about Christ.

We will next take a look at the Christmas season, from Advent to Christmas day, to the 12 Days of Christmas and finishing up on Epiphany.



## Christmas Season

What is Christmas all about? Is it simply about the birth of Jesus? Is there any more to it than merely the birth of a child? When we look at Christmas we can first look at it as the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, but then we must go deeper. We need to first think about those who, for centuries waited for God's promise of the Savior to materialize. We need to think, not only about the birth, but of the meaning behind it; Jesus was brought into this world to be sacrificed for each of us, the sacrificial Lamb. We also should look at how this fulfilled the many prophecies from hundreds of years before and the prophecies of events still to come. It is also critical that we look at the second coming, when Jesus will come again to claim this world as His own. So there is much to think about and yet also be thankful for each time we celebrate the season of Christmas.

Let's take a look at Advent and the 12 Days of Christmas, or the Christmas Season. First, if you peel back the commercialism, you will see we have two primary seasons, Advent which is followed by the 12 Days of Christmas. When I was younger, I thought, as I was taught in the church, the Christmas season started after Thanksgiving and went through Christmas day. I then learned more and have since celebrated the different aspects of the Christmas season.



## Advent

The First aspect of the Christmas season is Advent. Advent means "The Coming", when Christ first came and the anticipation of when he comes again. Advent is the beginning of the Church Year for most Christian churches. It begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas day, which is the Sunday nearest November 30, and ends on Christmas Eve (Dec 24). If Christmas Eve is a Sunday, it is counted as the fourth Sunday of Advent, with Christmas Eve proper beginning at sundown. It is important to remember that celebrating the Second Coming of Christ is essential for all Christians, for just as the people then drew strength and excitement looking towards the birth of the Messiah, we must do the same for when He returns again; if not more so, for those who do not know Jesus will be lost for eternity.

The beginning of Advent is a time for decoration the church and home with evergreen wreaths and trees that help to symbolize the new and everlasting life brought through Jesus the Christ. Some churches have a special weekday service, or the first Sunday evening of Advent, or possibly the first Sunday morning of Advent, in which the church is decorated and the Advent wreath put in place.

An essential symbol of the Advent season is the Advent Wreath. The circle of the wreath (advent or any other) reminds us of God Himself, His eternal and endless mercy, which has no beginning or end. The green of the wreath speaks of the hope that we have in God, the hope of newness, of renewal, of eternal life and was chosen because of its strength and durability over every other tree. The candles symbolize the light of God coming into the world through the birth of His son. The four outer candles represent the period of waiting during the four Sundays of Advent, which

themselves symbolize the time between the prophet Malachi prophecy of His birth and the birth of Christ.

Candles:

Three Purple

One Pink

One White (The Christ Candle)

The four outer candles represent the 400 years from Malachi's prophecy of the coming of Christ till His arrival. (Though there were prophecies made around 700 years before Christ's birth, by Isaiah and Micah, Malachi's had a different affect on the people of Israel. Since the earlier prophecies the years had brought a widespread doubt of the coming of the Messiah and it was the prophecy of Malachi which refueled the vivid portrayal of the love of God as well as His gift for the world yet to come through His son Jesus Christ.) Just as their anticipation grew stronger the closer the fulfillment of this prophecy came near, so ours grows stronger as we near the day we celebrate Jesus' birth, and with the lighting of each candle the Light of Christ grows stronger.

The first candle is traditionally the candle of Expectation or Hope. This draws attention to the anticipation of the coming of a Messiah that weaves its way through Old Testaments history. As God's people were abused by power hungry kings and led astray by self-proclaimed prophets there arose a longing among those who believed, to have a new king who could show them how to be God's people. They yearned for a return of God's dynamic presence in their midst.

The first prophecies of the Birth of the Messiah or Jesus came about 700 BC from the prophet Isaiah, **"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace". (Isaiah 9:6) And also "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel". (Isaiah 7:14)** Then a few years later Micah share this, **"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."** (Mic 5:2) And next, around 400 years before the birth of Christ, the earlier prophecies were reinforced by Malachi, **"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. (Mal 3:1)**

And so God revealed to some of His prophets this message; He would not leave His people without a true Shepherd. While they expected a new earthly king, their expectations fell far short of God's revelation of Himself in Christ. And yet, the world is not yet fully redeemed. So, we again with expectation and hope, await the prophecies of the future, the Second Advent or Coming, in which Jesus will again reveal Himself to the world. And we understand in a profound sense that the best, the highest of our expectations will fall far short of what our Lord's Second Advent will reveal!

The remaining three outer candles, of Advent wreath, represent Peace, Joy, and Love. The candle for the Third Sunday of Advent is traditionally Pink or Rose, and symbolizes Joy at the Advent of the Christ. The center candle is white and is called the Christ Candle. It is traditionally lit on Christmas Eve or Day. However, since many Protestant churches do not have services on those days, many light it on the Sunday preceding Christmas, with all five candles continuing to be lit in services through Epiphany (Jan 6). The central location of the Christ Candle reminds us that Jesus is the heart of the season, giving light to the world.



## Participating in Advent

Advent, like many Christian holidays, can be observed in the home as well as church. With its association to Christmas day and Epiphany, Advent is a natural time to involve children in activities at home that directly connect with worship at church. At home the Advent Wreath can be a valuable icon for teaching your family about the First and Second Coming of Christ along with all of the other aspects of this season. Position the Advent Wreath in a central location and encourage involvement from each member of the family. Place responsibilities on your younger children; from assigning them a candle to reading scriptures. Older children and adults can have research assignments to bring scriptures and events of the season together to be shared with the family as a whole. Set aside this special time, in the morning or evening; when the family will come together and light the appropriate candle, read scriptures, and share about the good news of Jesus.

In congregational worship, the Advent wreath is the central teaching symbol of the season, the focal point for drawing the congregation into the beginning of the story of redemption that will unfold throughout the church year. For this reason, members of the congregation are often involved in lighting the Advent candles and reading the appropriate Scriptures each Sunday. While in some churches it is customary for this to be done by families, it can also be an especially good opportunity to demonstrate the unity of the entire community of Faith by including those without families, such as those never married, divorced, widowed, elderly who live by themselves, or college students away from home. I have always felt that worship has changed its focus in many groups; it should be a time where all worshippers participate.



## Birth of our Savior

The Day of Jesus Christ birth is a joyous occasion, one that should be focus on Him and what His life represents. Rather than allowing the focus in our families to be that of the gifts we receive, turn the focus on the gift of Christ and what we can give to others. Instead of watching our children sit in dismay because they did not receive the toy they wanted, help them to see the children who, if they receive a warm meal that day, feel that they have been truly blessed. Christmas or the birth of Christ should not focus on material gifts, but rather the gift that our Heavenly Father so graciously gave to the world. Take some time on this day to gather the family together and share about Jesus. Read about the events which lead up to His birth, the day of His birth, and the days to follow. Make it a practice each day to learn about the life of Jesus. Then find

somewhere your family can go to share Jesus with other. Go to a care center, homeless shelter, food kitchen, or possibly an orphanage and share Jesus the Love He has for you and for everyone.

I have been asked why I have worship services on Christmas day; I should be home with my family opening gifts. I simply ask them how they can be at home on this day when it is about Jesus and we should be out sharing the good news with others. I long for the day that all churches will be open on Christmas, celebrating the birth of Jesus and Praising His name. To me this is what it is all about.

Also during this time of refection, take some time to look at the birth of Christ from the many different angles. We have the main perspective from God's word on the actual birth; however, take some time and imagine the joy of the angels who where present from the conception to the birth and what excitement they must have had, from the view of the shepherds who had possibly heard that this would come about, but had no idea it was happening now, to the wise men who traveled so far, first with one agenda, then coming to the realization that this was Jesus, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. These are the things we can do to encourage a constant spiritual growth within ourselves and our family.

The story of the birth of Jesus is told in two of the four gospels; Matthew and Luke. It is not that this event was not important to the other Apostles; it is that each had their assigned task and view that they wrote from. **John** centers his gospel on the Christian faith in relation to the person of Christ as its central point; and in this representation there is a picture on the one hand of the antagonism of the world to the truth revealed in him, and on the other of the spiritual blessedness of the few who yield themselves to him as the Light of life. **Mark** is essentially a transcript from life. The course and issue of facts are imaged in it with the clearest outline. His Gospel is a rapid succession of vivid pictures loosely strung together without much attempt to bind them into a whole or give the events in their natural sequence. This pictorial power is that which specially characterizes this evangelist, so that 'if any one desires to know an evangelical fact, not only in its main features and grand results, but also in its most minute and so to speak more graphic delineation.'" The leading principle running through this Gospel may be expressed in the motto: "Jesus came...preaching the gospel of the kingdom". **Matthew** sets forth the kingly glory of Christ, and shows him to be the true heir to David's throne. He focuses on, the genealogy, the birth, and the infancy of Jesus, actions of John the Baptist preparatory to Christ's public ministry, actions of Christ in Galilee, and the sufferings, death and resurrection of our Lord. **Luke's** Gospel has been called "the Gospel of the nations, full of mercy and hope, assured to the world by the love of a suffering Savior;" "the Gospel of the saintly life;" "the Gospel for the Greeks; the Gospel of the future; the Gospel of progressive Christianity, of the universality and gratuitousness of the gospel; the historic Gospel; the Gospel of Jesus as the good Physician and the Savior of mankind;" the "Gospel of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man;" "the Gospel of womanhood;" "the Gospel of the outcast, of the Samaritan, the publican, the harlot, and the prodigal;" "the Gospel of tolerance." This Gospel contains twenty-eight distinct references to the Old Testament, 17 parables of Jesus, along with seven miracles omitted by the other Gospels. With this in mind it is good to read the events from all four and see the separate focuses of each.

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"-which means, "God with us." When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: "'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'" Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. (Matt 1:18-2:12)

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her. At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she

entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me- holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers." Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home. When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John." They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name." Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him. His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace." And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel. In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because

there was no room for them in the inn. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. (Luke 1:26-2:20)



## 12 Days of Christmas/Epiphany

Next we have the 12 Days of Christmas that begin on Christmas day and goes for 12 days until Epiphany eve or January 5th. **January 6th** is known **Epiphany** or sometimes called Three Kings Day or Christmastide. Epiphany is the highlight of the Christmas season because it celebrates the day when Jesus was proclaimed, or introduced to the world, as King of Kings. Most remember the story of the birth of Jesus and the three wise men who traveled to see this baby lying in a manger, but what they fail to realize is that it took some time for the wise men to travel to Bethlehem to see Jesus. It actually took 12 days for them to make their way, thus we have the 12 days of Christmas which are celebrated with the final day of Epiphany, a term which means "to reveal" or "to make know". And this is exactly what happened; the Three Kings introduced Jesus to the world by proclaiming Him King of Kings. (Until this time the news of the birth of our Savior was not known throughout the world) It is also the first day in which Jesus was worshipped, as the kings fell to their knees praising Jesus.

We see that there are different aspects of the Christmas season that we can celebrate and will hopefully now have a better understanding of their meanings; however, there are some other very important items we should look at. Satan would like nothing more than to change the focus of Christmas away from the Birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. And he has been very busy and somewhat successful. Santa, reindeer, snowmen and all of the other commercialism of the Christmas season have worked their way into many homes, even the homes of many Christians. This does one thing, takes the focus off of Jesus, which is something we should not do, nor be a part of or support it in any way. Instead of having our children making list of what they want santa to bring them or sit there on Christmas morning unhappy because they did not receive what they really wanted, let's teach our children about giving to others and have them take gifts to those less fortunate. I was recently preaching on this subject when someone in the congregation asked if it was wrong to tell a small child the gift they received was from santa. My answer was; why not tell

the child this gift is from Jesus, because everything we have truly comes from Him; this way we are not taking the focus off of Him, nor are we supporting a fictitious character designed to take the focus from Christ Jesus. And then as this child is out showing his friend what he has received, and they ask him if it was from Santa, he can reply “Santa who”, this is from Jesus; thus planting a seed in others. How excited and proud Jesus will be!



### A little more

As you look at the season of Christmas, and all that is tied to it, we can look past the commercialism and see the beauty of God’s Hand in every aspect of it. Here are a few examples other than the ones given earlier (the meaning of the Christmas tree, lights, and wreaths):



### **The Candy Cane**

Years ago a candy maker in Indiana wanted to make a candy that would help us remember who Christmas is really about. So he made a candy that incorporated several symbols for the birth, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ. He began with a stick of pure white, hard candy. White to symbolize the virgin birth and sinless nature of Jesus, and hard candy to symbolize the solid rock; the foundation of the Church, and firmness of the promises of God. The candy maker made the candy in the form of a "J" to represent the name of Jesus. It also represented the staff of the "Good Shepherd". The candy maker then included red stripes. He used three small stripes and a large red stripe to represent the suffering Christ endured at the end of his life. The candy became known as a Candy Cane -- a decoration seen at Christmas time. The meaning has faded, but still gives joy to children young and old, whom Jesus loves and treasures. It is not about a decoration for the tree or a tasty treat, but about Jesus.



### **The Song “The Twelve Days of Christmas”**

The very popular Christmas song, "The Twelve Days of Christmas" is sung with joy at Christmas. It's a fun song and though it isn't considered a religious carol, its history has a religious basis. The song was written as a catechism song for young Catholics, between the period of 1558 and 1582 when Roman Catholics were not allowed to openly practice their faith in England.

The song had both a surface meaning and a hidden meaning; each element in the carol is a code word for a religious reality, which the children could memorize.

The partridge in a pear tree was **Jesus Christ**.

The two turtle doves were the **Old and New Testaments of the Bible**.

The three French hens stood for the **Virtues of Faith, Hope and Love**.

The four calling birds were the **Four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.**

The five golden rings recalled the **Torah, or Law, the First Five Books of the Old Testament.**

The six geese-a-laying stood for the **First Six Days of Creation.**

The seven swans-a-swimming represented the **Sevenfold Gifts of the Holy Spirit.**

The eight maids-a-milking were the **Eight Beatitudes.**

The nine ladies dancing were the Nine **Fruits of the Holy Spirit** (Gal. 5:22)

The 10 lords-a-leaping were the **Ten Commandments.**

The 11 pipers piping stood for the **Eleven Faithful Disciples.** (Judas betrayed Jesus and is not considered faithful)

Finally, the 12 drummers drumming symbolized the **12 Points of Belief in the Apostles' Creed.**

We need to look at each aspect of the Christmas season and see that it is all about Jesus. From the Christmas Tree to the poinsettias, which were introduced at Christmas because of their likeness to the North Star, we must take the time to see God's hand in all of this.

**Jesus is the reason for the season**

**All the Praise and Glory to the Father and the Son**

**Pastor Scott Jones**

