

The History of Christmas

- General History
 - Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus of Nazareth as a spiritual leader
 - it is a religious and secular holiday with both secular and religious traditions
 - Christmas has religious, cultural, and commercial significance
 - Christmas Day, celebrated on December 25th, has been a federal holiday in the US since June 26, 1870
 - today, in Greek and Russian orthodox churches, Christmas is celebrated 13 days after the 25th (referred to as the Epiphany or Three Kings Day)
 - the word *Christmas* means “mass on Christ’s Day” and is a fairly newer term (formerly known as *Yule*)
 - common customs include: exchanging gifts, decorating Christmas trees, and waiting for Santa Claus to arrive
- Ancient Winter Celebrations
 - the middle of winter has been a time of celebration for centuries
 - in Scandinavia, the Norse celebrated Yule from December 21 through January in recognition of the winter solstice
 - in Germany, they honored the pagan god Oden during the mid-winter holiday
 - in Rome, the festival of Saturnalia celebrated the winter solstice (on December 21st or 22nd) for a full month, in honor of Saturn, the god of agriculture
 - also, members of the upper classes celebrated the birthday of Mithra (the god of the unconquerable sun) on December 25th- for some, this day was the most sacred day of the year
- Christmas Day
 - the Bible does not mention the date of the birth of Christ
 - some evidence suggests that His birth was actually in the Spring
 - in the early years of Christianity, Easter was the main holiday and Christ’s birth was not celebrated
 - the birth of Jesus was instituted as a holiday in the 4th century by church officials
 - Pope Julius I chose December 25th as the date of Christ’s birth
 - the church in Rome only formally celebrated December 25th during the reign of Constantine who made Christianity the official religion
 - it is commonly believed that this date was chosen to adopt and absorb the traditions of the pagan Saturnalia festival and to increase the chances that Christmas would be popularly embraced
 - this was also a political move to weaken the established pagan celebrations
 - celebrating on December 25th was the Christianizing of the “day of the birth of the unconquered sun” (Mithra)- a holiday celebrating the winter solstice and the resurgence of the sun
 - a connection is often made between the rebirth of the sun and the birth of the Son

- Early Christmas Traditions
 - by the Middle Ages, Christianity had replaced pagan religion
 - believers attended church, then, celebrated in a drunken, carnival-like atmosphere (similar to today's Mardi Gras)
 - the poor went to the houses of the rich and demanded food and drink- if rejected, they terrorized the rich
 - religious reform in Europe changed the way that Christmas was celebrated
 - Oliver Cromwell cancelled Christmas when his Puritan forces took over England in 1645, but Charles II later reinstated the Christmas celebration
 - when the pilgrims, who held orthodox Puritan beliefs, came to America in 1620, Christmas was not a holiday
 - from 1659-1681, Christmas was outlawed in Boston; however, it was celebrated in the Jamestown settlement
 - later, English customs, including Christmas, fell out of favor after the American Revolution, until Christmas was declared a federal holiday
 - not until the 19th century did Americans begin to embrace Christmas
 - they changed it from a raucous carnival holiday to a family-centered day of peace
 - old customs from recent immigrants were also included in the holiday
 - as a result, the American celebration of Christmas included unique traditions as well as pieces from other cultures: decorating trees, sending holiday cards, and gift-giving

- History of Santa Claus
 - the legend of Santa Claus can be traced back to a monk named St. Nicholas who was known for his piety and kindness
 - he became known as the protector of children and sailors
 - his feast day is celebrated on the anniversary of his death on December 6th
 - by the Renaissance, he became the most popular saint in Europe
 - after the Protestant reformation, the reverence of saints was discouraged
 - however, St. Nicholas still maintained a positive reputation by many

- History of Christmas Trees
 - Christmas trees have historically been evergreen trees (pine, balsam, or fir) decorated with lights and ornaments
 - plants and trees that remained green all year long held a special meaning for ancient people in the winter
 - for example, many believed that evergreens would keep away witches, ghosts, evil spirits, and illnesses
 - also, many ancient people believed that the winter solstice in December came because the sun god became sick and weak→ they celebrated the solstice with evergreen boughs as a reminder of all of the green plants that would grow again when the sun god was well and summer returned
 - Druids, priests of the ancient Celts, also decorated their temples with evergreen boughs as a symbol of everlasting life
 - the Vikings of Scandinavia thought that evergreens were the special plant of the sun

- god, Balder
- tree worship was common among the pagan Europeans and survived the conversion to Christianity
- in the 16th century, Germany started the Christmas tree tradition as we know it now and decorative trees were brought into homes
- most 19th century Americans thought that Christmas trees were odd even though many German settlers had them
- Christmas trees were seen as pagan symbols and not accepted by most Americans until the 1840s
- Conclusions
 - it is unlikely that Christ's actual birthday was in December
 - also, it is commonly believed that the holiday of Christmas has a pagan origin
 - many aspects of the Christmas celebration are historically pagan
 - in addition, many of the original Christmas celebrations were ungodly in nature
 - often, it is helpful to study the history of something before making a judgment
 - should Christians celebrate a historically pagan and ungodly holiday?
 - also, does the Christmas celebration really glorify Jesus or Santa Claus?
 - in actuality, Christmas is not the only time that you can be kind and giving- this can be done year-round without celebrating the holiday
 - it is better to focus on giving Christ the gift that He really wants- YOU!!!
- Sources
 - history.com
 - britannica.com