

# Are Birthday Celebrations *Christian*?

Birthday cakes. Lighted candles. Singing “Happy Birthday.” Receiving gifts. In almost every culture and nation on Earth, virtually nothing is as universally celebrated as birthdays. But is birthday-keeping biblical? Does God agree with this practice?

**A**S SURE AS death and taxes, all human beings are born on a particular day. Everyone has a birth date. Since God wants people to celebrate life abundantly (John 10:10), could this include celebrating birthdays? Is birthday-keeping innocent fun—or does God hate it? Does it even matter?

If you bought a new computer, you would expect it to come with an instruction manual. Without a manual, you would have to learn how to use it through trial and error—and possibly delete necessary files and software in the process. The instruction manual saves users many headaches.

Believe it or not, you also came with an instruction manual—the Bible! God’s expressed will and purpose is written throughout its pages. Every word of Scripture is God’s message to you—who you are, what you are, why He created you, and how He expects you to conduct your life. Everything you need to know about the true purpose of life is written in God’s Word (John 17:17; Matt. 4:4; II Tim. 3:16-17).

When you read the Bible, God is talking to you! He shows you how to live a happy, fulfilling, abundant life. Pick up your “instruction manual” and examine what God says about birthdays.

## **Birthdays in the Bible**

Birthday celebrations are mentioned in the Bible on three separate occasions and, in each case, something terrible

occurred. These three accounts bear brief examination.

The first account is in Genesis. Pharaoh, the Egyptian king, celebrated his birthday by executing his chief baker (Gen. 40:1-23). God gave Joseph special understanding of a dream by Pharaoh’s butler and baker, that the baker would lose his life three days after Joseph interpreted the dream. Joseph understood that Pharaoh would use this occasion—his own birthday party—to put his baker to death. As the dream had foretold, the baker was hung at the party.

In the second account, the New Testament figure Herod the tetrarch reluctantly ordered the beheading of John the Baptist (Matt. 14:3-11). Notice verse six: “But when Herod’s birthday was kept...” During the dancing and merry-making at his birthday party, Herod got carried away and eventually made a promise that he did not want to keep. As a result, a great servant of God lost his life.

The final account is found in the book of Job. The Bible says that Job’s seven sons “went and feasted in their houses, *every one his day*; and sent and called for their three sisters to eat and to drink with them” (Job 1:4). These parties were obviously not centered around any kind of celebration related to God, or Job would not have worried that his children may have sinned during these celebration feasts. He was not exactly sure what was going on in their minds, but the very celebration of their birthdays triggered great concern in him (1:5). Apparently, during the birthday party of Job’s oldest son, God allowed Satan to kill all 10 of

Job’s children through what appears to be a tornado (vs. 6-13, 18-19).

Further proof that these birthday celebrations displeased God is found in Job 3. Take time to read the entire chapter carefully. Job spends much time cursing every aspect of the day of his birth. The loss of all of his children, due to a birthday celebration, stunned and sobered him. His words make plain that there is nothing good about the day of a man’s birth. He openly cursed the day he was born. This will be shown to have greater meaning later in this article.

Some who are familiar with these accounts attempt to explain them away by saying that there is no statement contained within them that directly prohibits birthday celebrations. They also ignore Job’s comments described in the previous paragraph. It is true that the above scriptures do not contain a *direct* condemnation of birthdays starting with the phrase “Thou shalt not...” or something similar. But consider for a moment the central lesson of each of these accounts. They represent the only three birthday parties described in the entire Bible. *Absolute disaster occurred on each occasion!* If God felt birthday celebrations were something positive and good, why wouldn’t He have recorded one other account where something either good or positive happened? Yet, there is no such account.

## **What About the Birthdays of Well-known Bible Figures?**

Surely the Bible records the birth dates of its most important figures. Does God not want those who serve Him to recognize these most important birthdays? Let’s search for the birth dates of some of God’s greatest servants.

Abraham is referred to three times in the Bible as God’s “friend” (II Chron. 20:7; Isa. 41:8; Jms. 2:23). He is also called “the father of us all” (Rom. 4:16). Many verses demonstrate that he will

play a very important role when the kingdom of God is established on Earth at Christ's Second Coming. However, the Bible does *not* record the birth date of this truly great servant of God.

Moses was referred to as the meekest man on the face of the earth (Num. 12:3). Many verses describe this Bible figure and virtually everyone is familiar with him. The Bible does not tell us when he was born either.

The famous King David is called "a man after My [God's] own heart" (Acts 13:21-22). Much of the Bible describes the life of this man. God used him to record a great many of the Psalms. When the kingdom of God is established on Earth, prophecy records that he will rule the tribes of Israel (Ezek. 34:23-31), called there the house of Israel. Surely the Bible records the date that this towering figure was born. It does not!

There is not one verse of Scripture describing anyone celebrating the births of these righteous men. In fact, the Bible is silent on the exact dates of the births of *all* God's faithful servants—Jacob, Sarah, Noah, Abel, Samuel, Job, Esther, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Peter, Paul, James (Christ's brother), and the rest of the apostles. Even the birth date of Jesus Christ goes unrecorded in the Bible!

### **The Christmas "Birthday Party"?**

But what about Christmas? It is in the Bible, isn't it? Doesn't it celebrate Christ's birth? Didn't the wise men bring presents to baby Jesus because it was His birthday?

Study any reputable encyclopedia or visit a well-stocked public library and you will discover that Christmas was celebrated by immoral, pagan idol worshippers—people who many times sacrificed their children to pagan gods—2,000 years before Christ was born! December 25th originally marked the time of the winter solstice. These idol worshippers held pagan festivals to celebrate the "rebirth" of the sun when the days began to lengthen.

Let's briefly examine the subject of the "wise men" who gave gifts to Christ. The scripture that describes this is in Matthew 2:1, 11: "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,

saying, Where is He that is born *King of the Jews*?...And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: *and when they had opened their treasures*, they presented unto Him *gifts*; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh."

It is commonly supposed that these were birthday presents for "baby Jesus." But is this what the Bible actually says? Absolutely not! Also, they arrived well after His "birthday." Notice that it refers to Christ as a "young child" rather than a baby. This is one more reason that the gifts brought to Him could not have been "birthday presents."

A long-standing, ancient custom of the East was to present gifts when one came into the presence of a king. These men understood that they were in the presence of the "King of the Jews." The Bible has many examples of people sending gifts to kings or presenting them upon arrival into the king's presence. This custom is common today when ambassadors or others come into the presence of a world leader.

Finally, notice what the *Adam Clarke Commentary*, volume 5, page 46, states about what really happened on this occasion: "Verse 11. They presented unto him gifts. The people of the east never approach the presence of kings and great personages, without a present in their hands. This custom is often noticed in the Old Testament, and still prevails in the east, and in some of the newly discovered South Seas Islands." Gifts were customarily presented to kings. The real intent behind this example should now be clear.

God does not even *record* the exact day His Son was born. And nowhere in the Bible can you find examples of Christ's disciples or the New Testament Church celebrating His birthday. However, God does tell us the exact month and day when His Son died (Ex. 12; Lev. 23:4-5; Num. 9:1-5; Matt. 26:1-2; John 18:28; I Cor. 5:7). He expects all true Christians to observe *that* day annually, in the same month, on the same date (I Cor. 5:7-8). (Read our booklets *The True Origin of Christmas*, *The True Origin of Easter*, *How Often Should the Lord's Supper Be Taken?* and *Christ's Resurrection Was Not on*

*Sunday* to learn more about these pagan holidays and *why* the Bible states we are to remember Christ's death instead of His birth.)

Think for a moment! Every year, millions of professing Christians celebrate the supposed birthday of Jesus Christ. Yet they do not properly observe the day that Christ *died*, which God clearly identifies and records in great detail in His Word. He *commands* His followers to observe this memorial annually. Jesus warned about such misguided professing Christians, saying, "This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. Howbeit in vain do they worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men" (Mark 7:6-8). Each year, during the Christmas and Easter seasons, Jesus' warning is proven right!

### **How God Views Your Birthday**

We have now established that the Bible records negative examples of birthday celebrations, while it is silent on celebrating, or even identifying, the birthdays of all of God's faithful servants—including Christ.

But what does the Bible specifically say about *your* day of birth?

Most people think that the day of one's birth is special. Celebrating it certainly does *seem* and *feel* like the right thing to do. Yet, Solomon was inspired to write, "A good name is better than precious ointment; *and the day of death than the day of one's birth*" (Ecc. 7:1).

Like Job, Jeremiah also cursed the day of his own birth: "*Cursed be the day wherein I was born*: let not the day wherein my mother bare me be blessed...Wherefore came I forth out of the womb to see labor and sorrow, that my days should be consumed with shame?" (Jer. 20:14, 18).

If the day of our death is better than the day of our birth, and some of God's greatest servants said that their birth date was far from being a special day, then how special can this day be? According to Scripture, it is not a time to express joy, sing and expect gifts, simply because one is born into the world on a specific date.

## The Day of a Man's Death

We have just read that the Bible explains the day of a man's death is better than the day of his birth. This is a stunning statement. Most people do not think of death as particularly wonderful. When it happens to a family member or close friend, it is usually a day of terrible sadness and emotion. No matter how or when death comes, no one celebrates the event. The Bible describes death as an *enemy* and a *defeat*. Consider some of the following verses describing death. Keep in mind that the Bible still says this day is better than the day of birth.

Solomon also wrote, "As he came forth of his mother's womb, naked shall he return to go as he came, and shall take nothing of his labor, which he may carry away in his hand. *And this also is a sore evil*, that in all points as he came, so shall he go: and what profit has he that has labored for the wind?" (Ecc. 5:15-16). Does this sound like a day to look forward to? The Bible still states that the day this verse describes is better than the day of one's birth.

The apostle Paul was inspired to write, "For the wages of sin [that you earn by breaking God's laws] is *death*" (Rom. 6:23). Death is the *penalty* for sin. It is not pictured in the Bible as a day of triumph or, as so many like to picture, "as a *friend* one meets at the end of life's highway." Paul also wrote, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23) and "...it is appointed unto men once to die" (Heb. 9:27). Sin leads to death. John was inspired to write the definition of sin: "Whosoever commits sin transgresses also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law" (I John 3:4). The penalty—the wages—of sin is death. This is not an event to look forward to.

But there is hope!

Jesus Christ is returning to this Earth to rule—to put all things, including His enemies, under His feet. This includes the enemy called death. Notice: "Then comes the end, when He shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when He shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign, till He has put all *enemies* under His feet. The *last enemy* that shall be destroyed is death...So when this corruptible has put on incor-

ruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. *O death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*" (I Cor. 15:24-26, 54-56).

So this life is a physical, temporary existence. Once it is gone, it is gone forever. Considering this, what is so "happy" about a "birthday" into an ungodly, carnal-minded world, only to die and never see life again? Why celebrate being born into a world that is cut off from God's divine guidance—a world of misery, confusion, poverty, ignorance, famine and disease—that could erupt into violence at any time?

God can and will give you eternal life. He wants you to have it. He wants you to live life to the fullest and experience the way of life that produces real peace, joy, abundance and security. But life has to be lived *His way*, according to *His rules*.

Paul wrote, "For since by man [Adam] came death, by Man [Jesus Christ] came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive... The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening [living] spirit...The first man is of the earth, earthy: the second Man is the Lord from heaven. As is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy: and as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly" (I Cor. 15:21-22, 45, 47-49).

When compared to the awesome future God has in store for us—becoming spirit beings who will never taste death and will not be limited to the physical laws of this material universe (read all of I Corinthians 15)—celebrating one's physical birthday seems foolish.

## Origin of Birthdays

Then where *did* birthday celebrations come from? The astonishing answer is from the pagan practice of *astrology*! Thousands of years ago, when men looked up into the night sky and charted

the stars, they invented calendars and calculated the birth dates, to the very hour, of kings, rulers and their successors. These ancient pagan astrologers meticulously examined horoscopes and birthday omens because they believed that the fate of the rich and powerful might affect an entire society. Even to this day, men have been putting their trust in horoscopes instead of God.

In ancient Egypt, the pharaohs ordered businesses to close on their birthdays and gave enormous feasts for hundreds of servants. In ancient Greece, wealthy males joined birthday clubs composed exclusively of men who shared their birth date. Once a month, the club celebrated with a feast. When a member died, he left money to help pay for future parties. In Persia, noblemen observed their birthdays by barbecuing an ox, a camel and a donkey and serving hundreds of small cakes to the celebrants.

In ancient Rome, the emperor gave huge parties in honor of his own birthday, which included parades, circuses, and gladiatorial combat. The celebration of days was so important to the average Roman citizen that the Roman calendar designated a majority of days for some form of celebration—including many birthdays of gods and famous men.

The Roman calendar, with its emphasis on continual celebration, has had great influence on modern society. Consider the following quote about the origin of the Roman calendar:

"Our [Roman] *calendar is not Christian in origin*. It descends directly from the *Egyptians*, who originated the 12 month year, 365 day system. A pagan Egyptian scientist, Sositogenes, suggested this plan to the pagan Emperor Julius Caesar, who directed that it go into effect throughout the Roman Empire in 45 B.C. As adopted it indicated its pagan origin by the names of the months—called after Janus, Maia, Juno, etc. The days were not named but numbered on a complicated system involving Ides, Nones, and Calends. It was not until 321 A.D. that the seven-day week feature was added, when the Emperor Constantine (supposedly) adopted Christianity. Oddly enough for his weekdays he chose pagan names which are still used" (*Journal of Calendar Reform*, Sept. 1953, p. 128).

Modern birthday parties and celebrations by children take their form mainly from Germany, where the birthday child received gifts, chose a menu, and received a candle-ringed butter or jam cake. The book *The Lore of Birthdays*, by Ralph and Adelin Linton, gives a brief look at the history of birthday celebrations: “The Greeks believed that everyone had a protective spirit or daemon who attended his birth and watched over him in life. This spirit had a mystic relation with the god on whose birthday the individual was born.”

The book continues: “The Romans also subscribed to this idea... This notion was carried down in human belief and is reflected in the guardian angel, the fairy godmother and the patron saint... The custom of lighted candles on the cakes started with the Greeks... honey cakes round as the moon and lit with tapers were placed on the temple altars of [the god Artemis]... Birthday candles, in folk belief, are endowed with special magic for granting wishes... Lighted tapers and sacrificial fires have had a special mystic significance ever since man first set up altars to his gods. The birthday candles are thus an honor and tribute to the birthday child and bring good fortune.”

Saying “happy birthday” to friends and loved ones was society’s superstitious way of protecting them from evil spirits. Birthday thumps, bumps, pinches, etc., were said to bring luck and send away evil spirits. Party snappers, horns and other noisemakers were also intended to scare off bad-luck spirits.

It should now be clear that birthdays are not only unbiblical, *they are pagan!*

### God’s Sacred Calendar

It is important to note that God has His own calendar. Much could be said about this subject. This brief explanation is vital. Typically, the number of days in God’s year is not the same from year to year. They are based upon the moon—not manmade calculations that include leap years.

God’s calendar includes seven extra 30-day months in each 19-year cycle. This calendar rule, alone, ensures that birth dates would vary widely from year to year throughout one’s lifetime. It is as though the sacred calendar was designed by God to make birthday celebrations impossible to observe, while the Roman calendar was specifically designed to make celebrating birthdays more convenient.

The date of February 29, which only occurs once every four years, creates a special problem for all those with this birth date. However, only one person in every 1,461 is affected by this “leap year” problem. The irregularities of God’s sacred calendar, with its extra 30-day month, occurring seven times in a 19-year time cycle, would affect one person in every *eight!*

### Why It Matters to God

Why does God care whether or not you celebrate birthdays? After all, it is a chance for you to give presents to someone and make him or her feel good. What could be wrong with this?

Here is what God commands: “Learn not the way of the heathen, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the heathen are dismayed by them. For the customs of the people are vain” (Jer. 10:2, 3).

After God freed Israel from slavery, He clearly instructed them, “After the doings of the land of Egypt, wherein you dwelt, *shall you not do*: and after the doings of the land of Canaan, where I bring you, *shall you not do*: neither shall you walk in their ordinances” (Lev. 18:3). God commanded that they not defile themselves with the practices and customs of the surrounding nations (vs. 24-29). “Therefore shall you keep My ordinance, that you commit not any one of these abominable customs, which were committed before you, and that you defile not yourselves therein: *I am the LORD your God*” (vs. 30).

This is an emphatic command from God. He does not want His servants dabbling in the customs of this world.

But what about those who reach age 80, 90 or 100 years old—should we ignore altogether the many years of life experiences they have gained? No. In our current society, where senior citizens are routinely ignored and considered to be a burden, it is certainly permissible to *acknowledge* someone who has reached a considerable number of years. Someone who has lived through two world wars, the Great Depression, the Atomic Age, the creation of the modern nation of Israel, the Cold War, men walking on the moon, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Kennedy assassination, civil rights marches, race riots, the rise and collapse of the Berlin wall, and the worldwide growth of the Internet, has reached an age where special honor should naturally be conferred upon them.

Proverbs 16:31 states, “The hoary [white or gray] head is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness.” People who have lived to great age, sometimes reflected by pure white hair, often have great wisdom and experience to share with younger generations. Simple *acknowledgment* that they have reached age 70, 80, 90 or 100 shows them honor and appreciation. It is not wrong to *acknowledge* that one has reached a milestone in a long life.

What we have described above is far different than *celebrating* birthdays with all of the usual pagan traditions! Celebrating the day of one’s birth, as though it were a special occasion, is *wrong*. It violates God’s command. It keeps people selfishly focused on their *temporary*, physical lives, when God’s purpose is to give mankind *eternal* life in His Family. True Christians should be focused on how their lives are preparing them for rulership on this Earth at the Return of Jesus Christ.

*Realize that God hates all pagan customs and traditions—birthday celebrations are not an exception!* □

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