

Grace & Truth

Youth

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A pull-out supplement for young people

The Christ of Christmas

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Christmas is almost here and many people are getting ready to celebrate. But why? What is it that makes so many nations around the world spend heaps of money, time and energy on food, parties and presents?

For many, Christmas is simply an excuse for having a good time - it doesn't matter what might lie behind it all. In fact, many have not even considered that an event of real importance may have caused the nations of the West (and many other areas of the world) to place a special significance upon this time of year.

Christians will assert that December 25th is the birthday of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of sinners. But others argue that Christmas originally had nothing to do with Jesus. Both these explanations are actually true!

In the third century AD, the Roman Empire used to celebrate the winter solstice with a festival lasting some days. Food was consumed, gifts were given and even slaves were allowed a holiday! After weeks of shortening days, lengthening nights and cooling temperatures, December 25th marked a turning point, when the "Invincible Sun" began once more to gather strength, and hope of warmer and lighter days returned.

Though it is not known precisely when Jesus was born, the Christians of the fourth century chose December 25th as a day to celebrate His birth. This particular day was used as an alternative to the pagan festival in which the sun was the focus of attention, so that people would not be distracted from worshipping the true God.

Interestingly, for a short time during the 17th century the celebration of Christmas in England and parts of America was banned by the Puritans. They believed the excesses in eating, drinking and partying were inconsistent with the moderation taught in the Bible.

Today, though some of the old practices of feasting and drinking continue, it is the Christian rather than the pagan influence which has made Christmas the worldwide season for giving gifts and showing good-will. Why should this be?

Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ who, according to the Bible, came to "save His people from their sins". For those who feel the suffering that sin brings, the fact that it can be overcome is a reason for celebration. The name 'Jesus' means 'Saviour', and He is able to save completely all those who trust in Him.



Jesus saves from the guilt of sin

Jesus came into this world as a man so that He could be a representative for His people. That is, He would stand in the place of His people, so that whatever He did would be accepted by God as having been done by them. It was like Adam and Eve who had represented the whole human race in the Garden of Eden. When they sinned, all of humanity became guilty. This is exactly what Paul explains in Romans chapter 5, particularly verses 18-19. Jesus had promised His father that He would keep the whole law for His people, and that He would suffer the punishment due to their sins.

Not only are we guilty because of what Adam did as our representative, we have each become sinners by our own actions. James said: "whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. For He who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law" (James 2:10-11). True, we may not have murdered or committed adultery, but James is just using these as examples. We have all lied and stolen, or we've been covetous. And it is certain that we have not worshipped God as we should. Paul puts it like this: "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

But when we believe that Jesus came as our representative, when we trust in His perfect life and His death as our substitute, then God justifies us: He regards us as though we had never sinned and pronounces us 'not guilty'.

Jesus saves from the power of sin

One of the most frustrating things for Christians, is the realisation that though we have been justified by God because of our faith in Christ, we don't suddenly stop sinning. In his letter to the Romans, Paul describes this battle that rages in the life of the believer (Romans 7:15-23). All of us who love Jesus and want to follow Him understand the truth of these words for our own lives. Yet in the closing verses of Romans 7, Paul gives the solution to this problem too: it is Jesus who saves us from the power of sin. It is true that this work will not be completed in this life. It is the work of sanctification in which God makes us holy in heart and conduct - a gradual work throughout our lives.

Yet, there is an important truth that we need to grasp: it is expressed by Paul like this: "with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin." In other words, he acknowledges that he is not yet perfect - that he continues to sin - but knows that he thinks differently now: he loves God's holy law and his desire is to be obedient to Christ. In Romans 12:2 he explains this further when he says that a changed life begins with a change of thinking.

How is all this possible? Again, Paul gives the answer in his letter to the Romans. In chapter 6 he tells the Christians in Rome that in Christ's death for them it is as though they have died with Jesus; and in His resurrection from the dead it is as though they have received new lives. He goes on to explain that in this way they have been freed from slavery to sin, and Jesus as bought them as slaves for God. So he says, "reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts" (Romans 6:11-12). Do you see how similar this is to what Paul wrote in 7:25? He's explaining that since we are no longer sin's slaves we don't



need to obey it as though it were our master, instead we should obey God. And as we grasp this truth in our minds, gradually our actions will become more holy. For Jesus not only saves the believer from the guilt of sin, He also saves us from its power over us.

Jesus saves from the presence of sin

For Christians, it is a wonderful thing to know that Jesus has saved us from the guilt of sin, and even from its power. But we still live in a world where we are surrounded by sinners. In fact, this is one reason why it is so hard for us to remember that Jesus has saved us from sin's power. We don't like to be different and so we feel the pressure to live like those around us - people who are doing all kinds of little things and big things that God hates.

It is great to know, therefore, that when Jesus came into the world to save His people from their sins, part of His purpose was to save them from the presence of sin as well as its guilt and power. Jesus told his disciples, "I go to prepare a place for you... that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:2-3). It's a place where no unbelievers will be allowed, so there will never be anyone to put pressure on us to disobey God. Everyone will be perfect and we will live in paradise, as Jesus told the thief on the cross (Luke 23:43). I'm really looking forward to that time, because I really struggle to live a godly life when there are so many ungodly influences around me. To be saved from the presence of sin will be a wonderful thing.

Jesus saves from the results of sin

For salvation to be perfect, being saved from sin's guilt, power and presence isn't enough. True, it would be a wonderful salvation, but it would not be a perfect salvation.

God is perfect, so we should not be surprised therefore that the salvation He has planned and provided is perfect too. Because Jesus not only saves from sin's guilt, power and presence, He also saves his people from its results.

Think about some of the results of sin in this world. We live in a world where there is physical as well as moral corruption. We feel pain and hunger, life is full of trouble, our bodies age, weaken and become sick, and sooner or later we die. All around us are the sights, sounds and smells of death. All the result of sin.

Jesus came not only to save us from the moral corruption of sin, but also from its physical corruption. He tells us that this world will pass away, and there will be a new heaven and earth. He will give us new bodies which will not age, feel pain or hunger, and to which work will not be a burden but a blessing. As John tells us in the book of Revelation, "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

Conclusion






Jesus came into the world to save sinners, and what a salvation He provides! What is more, it isn't something we have to buy at a great price, there is no feat of bravery to be accomplished, no pilgrimage to be made. He gives this salvation as a free gift to all who will turn from their sins and from following their own ideas of right and wrong, and who will entrust themselves to His care and guidance.

No wonder Christians like to celebrate the birth of Jesus!



YOUTH CAMP 2001

All who went on the 2001 Youth Camp had a great time filled with fun activities, and left having made new friends. However, if you were there, perhaps some of those memories are beginning to fade and you may wish you had something to remind you of the good times. A CD-ROM of the camp is now available, containing all the information on the camp web site:

-  Over 130 photos
-  A diary of each day's activities
-  Comments from many of the campers
-  A copy of Laura Turner's report published in *Grace & Truth Magazine*
-  Fast access to the pictures compared with the web site




The CD-ROM will work on a PC with a CD drive and a web browser (no access to the internet is required, but a web browser is needed to view the information on the CD-ROM).

The CD is available from the address at the foot of this page and is priced at \$5.00 including postage (cheques payable to *Grace and Truth Ministries*).



YOUTH CAMP 2002

The camp is for young people of secondary school and university age, aiming:

-  To provide an enjoyable, interesting and stimulating holiday
-  To present the Gospel, and encourage Christians in their walk with Jesus
-  To provide an opportunity for friendships to be formed with young people drawn primarily from the Reformed Baptist churches of New Zealand

The 2002 Youth Camp is planned for 4-9 April 2002 at Camp Sladdin, Clevedon, South Auckland. If you were on the 2001 Youth Camp you will receive further information soon, brochures will also be sent out with the next issue of this magazine. otherwise you may be added to the mailing list by contacting:

Grace & Truth Youth Camps, P.O. Box 8979, Christchurch
e-mail: camps@graceandtruth.rbc.org.nz

or visit the web site at <http://www.graceandtruth.rbc.org.nz>