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THE CHRISTMAS SERIES – PART 3

THE ORIGIN OF DECEMBER 25TH AS CHRISTMAS – PART 2

As promised yesterday, today we will see how this holiday came into being and its pagan roots.

Roman Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity in 313 A.D. (fourth century A.D.) resulted in his decree that Christianity would now be the official religion of the Roman Empire. He called the prominent leaders of the faith to a council in 325 A.D. at Nicaea (present day Turkey). It was here that church doctrine was uniformly set forth and all other doctrines declared as heresy. It concentrated religious power and authority in the Roman Catholic Church.

Constantine faced a problem with Roman society. Most people were still pagans. Their highest holiday celebration of the year was at the Winter Solstice. No work of any kind was to be done on that day. Normal social activities ceased in favor of special celebratory activities.

Constantine's solution was to create a holiday for Christians to be celebrated at that same time in order to avoid conflict and keep the peace. December 25th was the winter solstice on the Julian calendar used by Rome, not December 21st as on our Gregorian calendar instituted more than 1,000 years later. When the Catholic Church switched to the Gregorian calendar, they kept December 25th still as Christmas as it had been established for over twelve centuries. The name "Christmas" was condensed from "Christ Mass," the church mass in honor of Christ's birth. In 336 A.D. Christmas was officially declared as December 25th.

What exactly was the pagan holiday that prompted the creation of Christmas? How was it celebrated? Were any of its features incorporated into our Christmas celebration?

The pagans had a week-long celebration that culminated on December 25th in honor of the Roman god Saturn, their God of time and agriculture. It was called Saturnalia. All work ceased. Businesses, schools, and courts closed. Normal social patterns were suspended. The people decorated their homes with wreaths and other greenery. Evergreens were used to decorate the temples. They dressed colorfully. Wax taper candles were used to signify the light returning following the darker days of winter. It was a time of merriment with gaming, singing, music, feasting, socializing, and exchanging gifts. It was the jolliest time of the year above all other holidays. The poet Catullus described it as "the best of times." It was also around the time period (4th century A.D.) that a brand-new Temple of Saturn was built to replace the older temple.

Does any of this sound somewhat like the way Christmas is celebrated? Wreaths? Greenery? Evergreen Trees? Candles (or tree lights)? Singing (carols)? Music (Christmas songs)? Feasting (special foods, family dinners)? Socializing (gathering)? Exchanging gifts? A "jolly" time?

Those were all features of Saturnalia that are now incorporated into the typical celebrations of Christmas.

The one true reason to celebrate Christmas on the 25th is to commemorate the birth of Messiah, the Anointed One sent by Almighty God, Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the only begotten of God. I do not denigrate the other celebratory features of our holiday. I see no harm in it as long as we keep Jesus Christ at the center of it. Millions do not do that; they only see the features borrowed from Saturnalia. That is sad.

I celebrate Jesus, God's gift to the world. It was His love gift.