

AMERICA'S CHRISTIAN HERITAGE

As taught by Pastor Ron Baity

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For these two weeks before Christmas, we have noted the part Christmas has played in our history. Today we continue that thought.

I. SOME INTERESTING STATS ABOUT OUR CHRISTMAS HERITAGE

A. In Colonial America, there was a difference in Christmas celebrations in the northern and southern regions.

1. In the southern regions, Christmas was more fully celebrated.
2. Early on in the northern regions, Christmas was hardly celebrated.
 - a. They associated the pomp and grandeur of Christmas celebrations directly with the autocratic leaders and monarchs in Europe.
 - b. Since they opposed Europe with a passion, they did not want to be associated with them.

B. In 1659, Massachusetts passed an anti-Christmas law.

1. As late as 1870, a student missing school on Christmas Day in Boston public schools could be punished or expelled.
2. Finally, in the 1830s and 1840s, Christmas celebrations became acceptable in the New England states.

II. CHRISTMAS CELEBRATIONS BEGAN APPEARING IN THE WHITE HOUSE

A. In 1889, the first indoor decorated tree was placed in the White House.

B. In 1895, President Grover Cleveland placed the first electrically lit tree in the White House.

C. In 1923, the first National Christmas Tree lighting ceremony was held under President Calvin Coolidge.

D. In 1969, a legal controversy over the use of religious symbols erupted.

1. In 1973, the nativity scene that had always been part of the celebration was removed.
2. In 1984, under President Ronald Reagan, the manger scene returned.

E. In 1953, under President Dwight Eisenhower the first White House Christmas card was created.

1. Eisenhower was an artist in his own right.

2. Eisenhower allowed six of his own paintings to be used as Christmas gifts and on Christmas cards.
- F. In 1963, President Kennedy included an explicitly religious element featuring a photo of a nativity scene for the first time.
- G. In 2001, the first White House Christmas card to contain Scripture was chosen by First Lady Laura Bush.
1. She used a Scripture she had chosen five days after 9/11.
 2. The Scripture was based on a sermon she had heard at Camp David.
 3. The Scripture she chose was Psalm 27:13: "I had fainted, unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living."

III. WHAT SOME PRESIDENTS HAVE SAID ABOUT CHRISTMAS

- A. On December 16, 1982, at the National Community Christmas Tree, President Ronald Reagan said:

"My fellow Americans, the Christmas and Hanukkah decorations are up around the country, and in a moment we'll be lighting the National Christmas Tree here in the Nation's Capital.

In this holiday season, we celebrate the birthday of one who, for almost 2,000 years, has been a greater influence on humankind than all the rulers, all the scholars, all the armies and all the navies that ever marched or sailed, all put together. He brought to the world the simple message of peace on Earth, good will to all mankind.

Some celebrate the day as marking the birth of a great and good man, a wise teacher and prophet, and they do so sincerely. But for many of us it's also a holy day, the birthday of the Prince of Peace, a day when "God so loved the world" that He sent us His only begotten son to assure forgiveness of our sins."

- B. Three years later on December 12, 1985, again at the lighting of the National Christmas Tree, President Reagan said:

"Tonight we're drawn in warmth to one another as we reflect upon the deeply holy meaning of the miracle we shall soon celebrate. We know that Mary and Joseph reached the stable in Bethlehem sometime after sunset. We do not know the exact moment the Christ Child was born, only

what we would have seen if we'd been standing there as we stand here now: Suddenly, a star from heaven shining in our eyes, shining with brilliant beauty across the skies, a star pointing toward eternity in the night, like a great ring of pure and endless light, and then all was calm, and all was bright. Such was the beginning of one solitary life that would shake the world as never before or since. When we speak of Jesus and of His life, we speak of a man revered as a prophet and teacher by people of all religions, and Christians speak of someone greater—a man who was and is divine. He brought forth a power that is infinite and a promise that is eternal, a power greater than all mankind's military might, for His power is Godly love, love that can lift our hearts and soothe our sorrows and heal our wounds and drive away our fears. He promised there will never be a long night that does not end. He promised to deliver us from dark torment and tragedy into the warming sunlight of human happiness, and beyond that, into paradise. He's never been a halfway giver; His generosity is pure and perfect and sure. This, then, expresses the true meaning of Christmas. If each of us could give but a fraction to one another of what He gave to the whole human family, how many hearts could heal, how much sorrow and pain could be driven away?"

- C. At the lighting of the National Christmas Tree on December 4, 2003, President George W. Bush stated:

"The story of Christmas is familiar to us all, and it still holds a sense of wonder and surprise. When the good news came first to a young woman from Nazareth, her response was understandable. She asked, "How can this be?"

The news would bring difficulty to her family and suspicion upon herself. Yet, Mary gave her reply, "Be it unto me according to Thy word." The wait for a new king had been long, and the manner of his arrival was not as many had expected. The king's first cries were heard by shepherds and cattle. He was raised by a carpenter's son. Yet this one humble life lifted the sights of humanity forever. And in His words we hear a voice like no other. Across the generations, the poor have heard words of hope, the proud have heard words of challenge, and the weak and the dying have heard words of assurance. And mankind has been given a message first delivered by angels on a shepherd's field: 'Fear not.'"

- D. On December 24, 1935, President Franklin Roosevelt said:

“Around the Manger of the Babe of Bethlehem “all Nations and kindreds and tongues” [Revelation 7:9] find unity... The spirit of Christmas breathes an eternal message of peace and good-will to all men. We pause, therefore, on this Holy Night and... rejoice that nineteen hundred years ago, heralded by angels, there came into the world One whose message was of peace, who gave to all mankind a new commandment of love. In that message of love and of peace we find the true meaning of Christmas. And so I greet you with the greeting of the Angels on that first Christmas at Bethlehem which, resounding through centuries, still rings out with its eternal message: ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good-will to men.’”

E. Again on December 24, 1939, President Franklin Roosevelt said:

“In the happiness of this Eve of the most blessed day in the year, I give to all of my countrymen the old, old greeting – ‘Merry Christmas – Happy Christmas.’

Let us rather pray that we may be given strength to live for others – to live more closely to the words of the Sermon on the Mount and to pray that peoples in the nations which are at war may also read, learn and inwardly digest these deathless words. May their import reach into the hearts of all men and of all nations.”

IV. OUR HISTORY PULSATES WITH CHRISTMAS TRADITION

- A. In our lifetime, some have touted that Christmas is deeply offensive.
- B. We believe that those who propagate such heresy are deeply offensive.
- C. In spite of the heretics, Jesus still looms at the reason for the season!