

needy, and at every Christmas he used to give gifts to the widows and orphans. He was loved by all, especially children. This is how the tradition and practice of gift-giving was started. The folklore fantasy called Santa Claus grew over the centuries and now is the central image of a secular Christmas, where an average of over \$150 each is spent on gifts for every man, woman, and child in the United States alone!

THE TRUE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS

I've heard a lot of talk (especially by Christians) about the *true* meaning of Christmas. I've seen Christians go in for all the trappings and trimmings. They spend hours, even days, in department stores trying to figure out what to buy for friends and relatives who already have everything they need...sitting around the tree and watching nervously while someone opens up the present you got them, as they try to look surprised and squeal with delight...parents teaching their young what they call "a harmless fairy tale"—the story of Santa and how "he's gonna bring you lots of presents, so you better be good." And all the while, a world full of starving, deprived people are silently, invisibly looking in through your living room window begging for a scrap of food, a rag to keep them from shivering to death, and an answer to their misery, suffering, and oppression.

When we consider all the money spent by all of us, during a season that's greatest meaning is the Father

giving us His only Son to come live and die for us, we must cry out against the injustice of an American, Christian people, who have *so much* and do *so little*. The *true* meaning of this season should be to give ourselves to the work of spreading the Gospel. Proclaiming freedom to the captives! Giving them bread to eat, then pointing them to the Bread of Life, to fill their hungry souls.

SOME SUGGESTED ALTERNATIVES

As a part of your Christmas celebration this year, we suggest taking your children to a ghetto, to a hospital, to an orphanage, to an old-age home. Teach them the meaning of giving. Teach them it is foolish for us to spend money on things we don't need, and on things that others don't need. Let them spread joy to those who are miserable! Let them give a smile to an old woman's face, whose own children have forgotten and abandoned her in a convalescent hospital. Let them empty their piggy banks and send the money to missions and the poor. Let there be giving! Costly giving! Let us give our Lord Jesus the whole world for His birthday! *The world and the Lord await our response...*

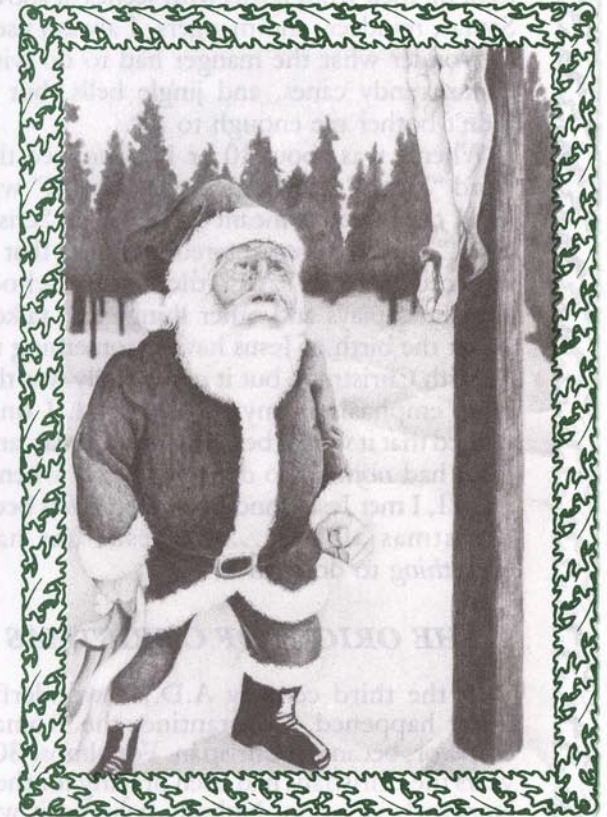


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Christmas Mourning



by Keith Green

I'll never forget the incredible joy and expectation of Christmas. Our house smelled like a Douglas fir. The tinsel and ornaments sparkled in the colored lights. Friends and relatives came to visit...all with smiles and laughter...*and all with presents!!* The season was full of life, warmth, and giving. They are the very best memories of my childhood. The air outside was cold and crisp. And inside, always the smell of something baking. If anyone asked me to describe "joy" in one word, it would have been *Christmas*.

I remember taking a drive to an area of town where a whole street prided itself on their Christmas displays and lights. The whole neighborhood spent thousands of dollars to light up their front lawns with scenes of snow, Santas, reindeer, and mangers. I always used to wonder what the manger had to do with Santa, candy canes, and jingle bells, but it didn't bother me enough to ask.

When I was about 10 or 11, I noticed the word "Xmas." I wondered what the "X" was for. I concluded it meant "criss," as in "criss-cross." It never even entered my mind that it replaced "Christ"! Yes, there were school Christmas plays and other things that talked about the birth of Jesus having something to do with Christmas, but it never really was the main emphasis in my young mind. I only wished that it would be Christmas all year, and Jesus had *nothing* to do with it! But when I was 21, I met Jesus, and since then it *has* been Christmas all year...and Jesus has had *everything* to do with it!

THE ORIGIN OF CHRISTMAS

In the third century A.D., a wonderful thing happened. Constantine, the Roman emperor, became a Christian. For almost 300 years the Christians had been praying for their emperor's salvation. Nobody believed it was true! But then came the royal decree... Christianity was made the religion of the state. Everyone was strongly urged to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and only deity. At the risk of seeming uncooperative (and believing that it would be safest politically and socially), almost everyone in the empire made "professions of faith" in the new religion. This, of course, delighted Constantine.

After a while there arose a great problem. What were they to do with all their other gods? And what about all the great feasts and celebrations, especially the winter solstice and

the spring equinox? Before Constantine's conversion, the whole empire would lustily celebrate these festivals to their gods and goddesses. What would they do now? Constantine knew that, although almost everyone had outwardly confessed Christianity, they were in no way prepared to give up their cherished celebrations. What he had on his hands was a kingdom full of "unconverted converts"!

As the restlessness and dissatisfaction of his people grew, the emperor knew something had to be done. So, in desperation, he declared two major "religious" holidays. They would correspond exactly to the times of the old great celebrations. He declared December 25 (for centuries celebrated as Saturnalia, the birthday of the sun) as the celebration of the birthday of Christ. (Although historians say that Jesus was probably born sometime in October.) A great mass or religious service would be held in honor of Jesus' birth on that day (hence, Christ-mas). He also declared the old holiday of the

spring equinox to be the celebration of Christ's resurrection. (The old emphasis of the festival was the worship of the goddess of fertility—which is where we get the Easter Bunny.) The grumbling masses were thus quieted when they realized that they could once again celebrate their great holidays. Oh yes, the festivals might be called something different, and they might have to go to some "religious ceremonies," but for the most part, things could get back to normal, and their old festivities could again be heartily resumed.

ST. NICK

The history of the man Nicholas (who was later made a saint by the Roman Church) is vague and sketchy. But one thing stands out about his character—he loved the poor and

