



Christmas 2021 – Part 1
Celebrate the Incarnation
Pastor Mike Fabarez

Well, we're back to another Christmas season. We get all the Christmas songs and Christmas decorations out, and you're going to hear a lot of people tell you Merry Christmas and you're going to hear it from us from this platform. Merry Christmas. We want you truly to have that. We mean that to have a very merry and joyful Christmas season. But sadly, there are many who have the merriment of their December impinged upon by guilt. A lot of guilt this time of year. There's guilt every December for some simply for spending too much. Certainly some guilt for saying too much. And a lot of guilt for all of us for eating too much. There's a lot that we can feel guilty about. And unfortunately, in one sermon, I don't know that I can absolve you of all of that guilt. I can't do that.

But there is a kind of guilt that I find increasing among serious Christians. The kind of guilt that people are seeking to impose upon you, a lot of armchair historians and a lot of self-appointed Bible teachers. They want you to feel guilty about the very fact that you are celebrating Christmas. They would like you to feel a kind of guilt about engaging in any of the trappings of a traditional Christmas. And if they haven't gotten to you yet, they will and they are trying because they're the kinds of folks who are going to come on the scene, look at all that you do that reflects a lot of our cultural Christmas traditions, and they're going to start talking about Druid priests, and they're going to talk about the cultic use of evergreen trees, and they're going to talk about the worship of Saturn and the winter solstice.

They've got all kinds of things to say to you that sound very interesting as it relates to history and guilt-inducing as they say to you, if it isn't in the Bible, you shouldn't be doing it. So all this stuff that you're doing that really is reflective of a lot of the commercialism of our culture or maybe some of these ancient practices that we've just thoughtlessly engaged in to think that we're just garnishing our celebrations really have a pagan root, and you should really be thinking twice about doing all that. They try to create in your heart a little apprehension about it.

Now some people I know they're going to hear stuff like that or see it online or they're going to read some article somewhere and they're going, "Well, I'm not interested in listening to that, right? If I want my eggnog and my garland and my Christmas tree, I'm going to have it." And they just go about their merry way. Well, I don't think at least regulars here at Compass are going to respond that way because just because you want to do something certainly isn't any kind of apologetic or defense for doing it. If it is wrong for us to be engaging in any of the cultural trappings of Christmas celebrations, I mean, if it really does not please the Lord. If there's some kind of pagan connection that God sees and says, "Oh, I disapprove of that," then I think most serious Christians here would say, "Well, then I need to stop it. I mean, I don't want to do anything that's displeasing to the Lord. We want to live lives," First Thessalonians 4 says, "pleasing to the Lord. And if it's not pleasing to the Lord, I need to know."



So I think it would be good for all of us at the outset of another December with a lot of lit trees over my shoulder, with lights we put up in the parking lot, with a lot of things that are happening around this campus and in sub-congregations and Christmas parties that certainly look a lot like what you see as you walk through the malls of the modern era. I just want to make sure that if someone comes to you and says, "Hey, that's pagan and it's wrong and it's displeasing to God, and it's not in the Bible, and if you guys are about the Bible, why in the world would you ever engage in any of that?" You better have a response to it.

And the a priori foundation, I mean, the starting place should not be, "Well I like it. So let's try and defend it biblically." That's not the case at all. I really want to stand back and look at the fact, is there any justification for us engaging in a celebration on a calendar and then even having a lot of things engaged in that celebration that reflect a lot of things that come from, I don't know, who knows where? And a lot of times they're going to tell us where it comes from. They're going to say look at the connections here. We need to respond to that.

Well, speaking of paganism, I'd like you to go to a book of the Bible that is seeded in a pagan culture, a pagan context, the stars of the book have pagan names. As a matter of fact, this is such an interesting book, the name of God is never even mentioned in it. There are no prayers. There are no prophets. There are no miracles. It's in a foreign land. And I think it would teach us something about the way God thinks about man-made celebrations. I want to take you to the end of the book, at least the penultimate chapter of the book in Esther Chapter 9. You're already turning there if you're a Sunday school grad because you know there's only one book in the Bible that doesn't mention God's name, doesn't have a prophet, doesn't have a miracle, doesn't have a prayer in it. It's the book of Esther.

Esther is the heroine of the story. She's the one who marries the Persian king. This is in the fifth century B.C., and you remember the biblical flow of history where God takes his people because of their idolatry and sends them into the Babylonian captivity. Well, the Babylonian empire was overcome by the Persian Empire, the Medo-Persian Empire initially, but the Persian became the dominant world leader, and the expanse of the kingdom of the Persian Empire in the fifth century was huge. And here we had a lot of people while there were resettlements in the land of Israel, you had a lot of people who were still scattered all over the Persian Empire, including people like Esther and her uncle named Mordecai to become the heroes of this story because God providentially uses them to save the Israelite people.

Because it's no surprise, as we've seen throughout history, even modern history, that many people put their sights on the Jewish people and they call them out as a group, an ethnic group that they want to exterminate. And sure enough, the threat of genocide was very real in the book of Esther. Now a lot of pieces to this dramatic story, but when Mordecai refuses to bow down to a high official in the Persian Kingdom, a man named Haman, the villain of the story, he gets so hacked off, he says, "I'm going to make sure that not only Mordecai, but his whole ethnic group that really doesn't belong in Persia anyway. I'm going to have them wiped out," and he has the power to do it.



And so he rolls some dice, it's called Pur in the Persian language, to figure out what day they're going to do this, hoping that the gods will bless them in their extermination of these horrible people who are scattered throughout the Persian Empire. And they pick a day. It's the end of the Jewish calendar, a book of Adar and they find a day there, and the Persian calendar was different, but it was the same day on the circuit of the earth around the sun. And they said, "This is the day we're going to go to war against the people of the Jews." Well, Esther, if you know enough about the story from Sunday School, you remember she becomes the queen through a beauty contest. Interesting story. She's in a position now of power.

Mordecai is able to utilize that relationship to turn the heart of the king and ends up flipping all of this threat from Haman to having Haman actually killed in the very gallows that he had built for Mordecai and the law of the Medes and the Persians, even if you read your Daily Bible Reading this morning that Daniel could not be reversed, so though the decree in the Persian Empire was already in place to exterminate the Jews because the favorable disposition of the Persian king was that we not see them exterminated, he then puts another law in place to have them be able to be militarized and defend themselves. And while most people backed down because the king didn't want it to happen, there were sons of Haman and a bunch of people who hated the Jews who were ready to go to war against them in the middle of the month of Adar, which is the modern-day springtime in March or the April timeframe.

So they're going to go to war and they're going to kill them. But there are not many left, but those that are left to fight the Jews really hated them. And so the day came and because of the favor that was granted through Esther to the king, they were able to mount a defense and wipe out those who were rising in the Persian Kingdom against the Jewish people, and they find victory. So there's a short synopsis of the first eight chapters. In Chapter 9 they celebrate this victory. The victory takes place in the first half of the chapter.

Drop down to verse number 20, and I just want to study just a few verses here near the end of Esther Chapter 9. I want to find a template in this particular book, a book that I think will play into the argument that, hey, maybe we shouldn't be so quick to believe the YouTube historians when it comes to their impinging of our merriment with guilt. We should maybe think about even what the reality of this particular celebration is that ended up becoming a holiday on the Jewish calendar, one of the nine feasts of Israel called Purim, and I just want to think through this as a paradigm and see if we can't take that paradigm and take a look at the modern practice of Christmas and find any transferable concepts and principles that will rightly and accurately and fairly apply to what we're dealing with today when we think about putting up stockings by the fireplace. OK?

So let's look at this in verse 20. Mordecai after this victory is going to write a letter. The Persians, by the way, had perfected the postal service in that day. It was known for that in that century, and so a lot of discussion about letter writing and letter delivery throughout this book. But it says, "Mordecai recorded these things and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus," who was also known as Xerxes in the Old Testament, so he's the Persian king, "both near and far," which is thrown in to remind us of how efficient the postal service was. And what was the letter all about? Well, they were already rejoicing

because they had won this war. They were slated for obliteration and slated for genocide, and they end up winning, and now they're at peace. Now he obliges them to continue to do what they're already doing, and that is they're having ticker-tape parades and they were celebrating.

He was "obliging them," these Jewish people who were saved, "to keep the 14th day of the month of Adar and also the 15th day of the same," same month, and to do that "year by year, as the days on which the Jews got relief from their enemies." Wow. Victory, they were saved. "And as the month that had been turned from sorrow into gladness," naturally it was, "and from mourning," they were afraid they're going to be killed, "into a holiday," a special day, a holy day, a day of victory, "that they should make them days of feasting and gladness." Instead of burying their dead and saying, we're, you know, we're all dead. No. "It should be days for sending gifts of food to one another and gifts to the poor." And how did they respond to that? The Jews accepted what they had started to do. They were already celebrating. And now it was codified as a holiday what Mordecai had written to them.

So this is not a prophet. This is not a leader. This is not Moses. But becomes one of the feast days of Israel in the calendar. I talked about nine feast days. There are nine feast days on the Jewish calendar throughout the 12 months of the year. Two of them were man-made. Right? Seven of them were commenced and sanctioned by God, and all were obligated to do it because God said. But then there were two that were not and this is one of them. It goes on to explain a little bit more about that if you drop down to verse 26. It says, "Therefore they called these days Purim, after the term Pur," which means a lot. At least that's the Persian name for it. A different word in Hebrew, and it's in the plural. Any time you see a word transliterated from the ancient near eastern languages and has an "im" at the end of it, that's like putting an "s." We would say "Purs," but they would say "Purim." So these days were Purim.

It reminds us, by the way, of Proverbs 16:33, which talks about the fact that, "The lot is cast into the lap." In other words, the dice, you might roll the dice as they often did in various things that they would try to decipher. But the decision, it all comes from the Lord. In other words, there might have been a die that was rolled to figure out when to kill the Jews. But you know, God was, quote unquote, rolling another die. And the dice ended up being the combination that ended up saving Israel in such a dramatic way that you don't even need to mention God's name and it was clear that God was saving these people, not Purim. So the dice, if you will, and some people would probably say that's some weird thing. You can go back into archeological finds, dice even back then look like dice. And it may be that the Purim of the ancient Near East here in Susa of Persia may look just like something you can buy at Target for your board game. That doesn't really matter, but it's interesting to me.

Pur, they called it Purim. "Therefore, because," middle of verse 26, "because of all that was written in this letter," that Mordecai had written, "and if what they had faced in this matter, and what had happened to them, the Jews firmly obligated themselves and their offspring, and all who joined them, that without fail," every single year, "they would keep these two days, according to what was written at the time, appointed every year, that these days should be



remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every clan and province and city, and that these days of Purim, which should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants."

And I would say on what authority? And I'm going to say it isn't Moses, and it's not the law of God. There's not even a mention of God in the book by name. This is a human decision by a human leader for a human celebration of a victory that of course was crediting God. But this was something that was so incorporated into the calendar of Israel, in part because God chose this book that didn't even mention God's name as a reminder of how the sanctioning, the human sanctioning of a celebration was something appropriate for them to practice. And so they did. So much so that you can go down to Temple Beth El in March, near the end of March, and you can see them celebrating with costumes for their kids and candies and the reading of the book of Esther. They still celebrate Purim as they do throughout the world in the Jewish communities, and all of that not instituted by the Torah. This wasn't Yom Kippur. This is not the Passover. It is not the Feast of Booths. This was something that they decided to do because God had given them victory.

I say there were seven feasts that were established by God in the Old Testament. One that was established by human beings here, Mordecai in a book that doesn't even mention God's name that became an established, recognized holiday that they bound themselves to keep. With God's favor, I would argue, because the book itself is in God's divine library. The other, which I haven't mentioned yet, was the one that we see created by people to remember the retaking of the temple in 164 B.C. in the inter-testamental period, when Judas Maccabeus is able to fight off the armies of Antiochus Epiphanes and to win back the temple during a great war. And they said, "We're going to always celebrate this victory from our enemies." And they celebrated it, it was called the Feast of Dedication. You know of it as the Hanukkah celebration that happens in Kislev, which is our equivalent of roughly December. And of course, they still celebrate that now today, Israel does. And the Israeli calendar, the Jewish calendar, they're celebrating Hanukkah and they're celebrating Purim along with the other seven biblically and divinely sanctioned holidays. They also recognize these two man-made holidays.

Well, Jesus would never do that. Well, he did, and that's my point. We see the Feast of Dedication, Jesus celebrating it with the masses on the Temple Mount. He was so much in the center of it, it says in the book of John that at the Feast of Dedication, he was walking around in Solomon's colonnade. I mean, right in the middle of all the festivities, and he starts talking about himself because he was the fulfillment, not only of the seven mandated, divinely sanctioned festivals, but also these two humanly sanctioned festivals. And God gives it honor and sanction, saying hey, when they decided in the Maccabean revolt to say, "We're going to celebrate this," Jesus is all about it, he's all in favor of it. Well, it wasn't a God-made thing. I understand that. Just like I'm going to say, a man-made celebration of Purim for God giving victory to the Jews is also sanctioned by God, just by the very fact that the book is in the Bible and it becomes among God's godly people, devout people, a celebration.



Now you can read for me, Hebrews Chapter 10 or Colossians Chapter 2 or several passages that remind us that all of that is all fulfilled in Christ. And I get that. I get that. And Jesus was making that point in the gospel of John. He's the fulfillment of all of that. And you say, "Well, we have no Jewish holidays that we are obliged to follow." I get that. We don't, we don't have to. But because we see that humanly sanctioned celebrations of God's intervention and victory in the historical work of God throughout history, because God shows us that not only divinely sanctioned ones are the ones that you must, but humanly sanctioned celebrations are ones that you can, and I even think should, that I know this, the church isn't devoid of the opportunity to do the same thing they were doing then.

I should be able to with the paradigm of Scripture, the pattern of Scripture, of establishing a human celebration of God's intervention, I should be able to say, "Hey, we can sanction humanly celebrations to remember God's work. And guess what? The Church's been doing that from the beginning. I think the church is doing a good thing, the right thing. Now you got so much to celebrate in terms of New Testament truths we can make every day a holiday, but by so doing, it ceases to be, by definition, a holiday. Right? A holiday is a holy day, a special day, a set-apart day. So we can only have so many and we do have some. In the Church we have them and we can't open the Bible and say, "Here is Easter and here's Christmas." We can say, "Oh, here's the resurrection, here's the birth of Christ."

But for us to say we're going to celebrate those with festivities, humanly devised festivities, we are going to take those examples of Old Testament humanly devised activities in celebration of God's work and say, "Hey, nothing wrong with that." Jesus did it. He celebrated humanly sanctioned celebrations of thanksgiving to God and we see it in the Old Testament as well. Both Old and New Testament, all I'm telling you are giving us a pattern, a sanctioned paradigm for us to sanction celebrations. And if you want to talk about a celebration that makes Mordecai and Esthers' victory over Haman look like a small, small thing, Let's talk a little bit about the coming of Christ to gain victory over your sin and death. I think that's a lot bigger thing, and I think it warrants a humanly sanctioned celebration.

So, number one, if you're taking notes, just on the concept here in Esther Chapter 9, the whole passage that I'm looking at today, verses 20 through 23, let us, number one, "Sanction Incarnation Celebrations." I'm fine with that. I'm good with that. And I don't think there's any way to argue that just because it's not in the Bible we shouldn't do it. We should be able to celebrate God's victories and we have been doing it in the Christian Church for centuries, from the beginning. Have those celebrations changed? Sure, they have. The cultural expressions? Yes, of course.

Turn with me real quick. Just a couple of passages throughout this morning's study of Esther 9. Can you turn with me to Hebrews Chapter 2? Because if we're going to talk about, you know, the story of Esther, you might be tempted to go back and read the story and you should, just check it out. There are a lot of great twists and drama in it. It's an amazing story. But all of it will pale by comparison to what we have decided to sanction as a celebration on our calendar and to say this is what we're going to do. We're going to do this every year. We're going to oblige ourselves to do this and make it a special celebration. Well, Hebrews

Chapter 2 gives us the reason why. I mean, here's the thing we're celebrating. Look at verse 14. "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood." Children, by the way, you can glance back up at verse 13, the quotation there, "Behold, I and the children God has given me." That's an Isaiah 8 quotation, but Jesus said it a lot like, "the Father has given me this group of people. I am the shepherd. He's given me these sheep. These are my people."

So he's got people, a gift from the Father to the Son, and those are his disciples, his people, including us through the ages. John 17 makes that clear. He has got these children now. He's got to somehow expiate their sin, he's got to get rid of the blot of their transgression. He has to somehow cancel out their sin. Well, "since the children are our flesh and blood, he himself likewise," you want a definition of the incarnation, here it is, takes on flesh. "He partook of the same things." What things? Flesh and blood. The Son of God, existing eternally in an eternal triune fellowship takes on now flesh and bone. He's got metatarsals, he's got a femur, he's got a radius and an ulnar, he's got a cranium. Takes on all the bones, all the blood, all the sinews, all the nerve endings, all the vascular system, lungs. He takes on all the things that are like us to do something. Right? To represent us before God in righteousness and to absorb the penalty of sin, in human sin. "He's likewise partook of the same things, that through death," his ultimate expiation of sin, his propitiation on the cross, "might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death, were subject to lifelong slavery."

Listen, here's the thing, when you die your heart, because you reflect the eternity of God in your heart, you're going to stand here at the threshold of death and you're going to go "Gulp" and you're going to start quoting one way or another Hamlet if you don't know God and say "to be or to not be, I don't know whether I'm going to suffer the arrows of the slings and arrows of this mortal life or cast off the..." I'm quoting it poorly here, sorry, lit majors. But as Shakespeare writes of that fear of what lies beyond? I don't know? Right? To sleep, perchance to dream. I mean, what's going to happen? I don't know. That fear of death completely eradicated by the fact that you can make peace with your creator through trust in Jesus Christ. How did that happen? Christ, the eternal Son of God, had to take on flesh and bone, live the righteous life I couldn't live, die the death I should have died, have God's wrath absorbed in that death so that I now can face death and say with Paul, "For me to live is Christ, to die is gain." To say the fear of death is gone.

Even the grieving of Christian death is now tempered with hope, and I know that this has all been victoriously overcome. To use the word "victory." It's used over and over in First Corinthians 15, "This victory that is granted to us in Christ," right? "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory," over what? "Over death." Right? "O death, where's your victory?" It's gone. We no longer fear that because Christ has come and taken on human form, lived in our place and died in our place. Mordecai and Haman, it's nothing compared to Satan who would love as a thief, as a murderer from the beginning Jesus says, "who comes to kill, steal and destroy." He would love to have you have the same experience in eternity that he is going to have and have you destroyed and to be punished for your sin, just like he's going to be destroyed and punished for his sin, he would love to have that experience for you. And he wants you like a roaring lion. He'd love to devour you. He'd love to see more and more people



in a place of God's righteous judgment. But you have had that reversed because our victor has come and put on human flesh.

When God sent his Son to do that and the beginning of this whole redemptive process, Christ taking on the same flesh and blood, I think that incarnation of having the righteous payment of sin taking on humanity, I think it's probably worth celebrating. I mean, I think that's something we should celebrate. Do you think maybe we should close our shops for a little bit of time and do some things and give some gifts and make some extra food? I think that might be a good thing to do. And because I see that God has given favor to the sanctioning of those things from a human perspective, when in our human mind, our human culture, we say, "Let's do this," and God goes, "Yes." Thumbs up, Old Testament. Thumbs up, New Testament. I'm going to say he's going to give us thumbs up to us celebrating the incarnation.

And I think we ought to sanction that. In our minds we ought to say we are going to do that. They obliged themselves to keep this year after year, year after year on the calendar in a 365-day cycle. We're going to come back to this and celebrate it again and again and again and again. And to follow the pattern of the Old Testament ceremonies, whether it was Yom Kippur or whether it was the Feast of Tabernacles or whether it was the Feast of Unleavened Bread. All of these were annual celebrations. I think every year in our lives we need to have that sense that here comes another reminder of the connection to something God has done.

Some reply, "OK, maybe, Pastor Mike, but still, the whole thing you got going on on the stage there, that's just pagan. You need to know that. Pagan, pagan, pagan, pagan." Again, if you want to connect anything in this life to paganism and say because there is a connection in definition or history or use to paganism, you therefore must avoid it and not be a part of it, then I would take you back in your minds to the book of First Corinthians and remind you of this: that we in this world are always going to make use... Matter of fact, let me turn you to one passage, right? First Corinthians. Let me take you to First Corinthians and just deal with this concept here of how we cannot live with this sense of detachment from not utilizing anything in the world with a pagan background.

First Corinthians Chapter 9. I don't know why it's not in my notes. I said 9, I meant 10. I didn't mean 10, I meant 9 when I said it, but I should have meant 10. Paul had already talked about you can't leave the world, right? I mean, you can, but you shouldn't. You should stay in the world as long as God wants you in the world and you're going to be in the world, you're not going to be able to avoid interaction with pagan-rooted things. Well, they had a lot of paganism going on in Corinth including a lot of things that were happening to take their food and sacrifice to idols. And because idols don't eat them you had all of this dedicatory and mystical, prayerful giving over of things that were sacrificed to the idols of the day. Cities like Athens, full of idols, and in Corinth all kinds of idolatry. And so if you were going to go to the meat store, the butcher, you were going to have things there that had already been ceremonially sacrificed to idols. And so there are pagan connections is what I'm saying.

Drop down on this passage to verse 23. "'All things are lawful,' but not all things are helpful. 'All things are lawful,' but not all things build up." OK? That's the concept, and we've got to

decide what is lawful, what isn't. Well, if you think about it when it comes to my concern for others, verse 24, "Let us seek not his own good, but the good of his neighbor." I still want to deal with the fact, though, but is it inherently wrong? So he deals that in verse 25. "Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising questions on the grounds of conscience." Now, we could spend the rest of our Sunday looking up online all the things that might raise questions of conscience regarding everything that relates to Christmas traditional American Western celebrations. And you could say I could spend all day doing that. And you're right, you could do that. But here's Paul's response to people who are going, "I don't think we ought to do this because of a pagan connection."

He now quotes Psalm 24:1. What's the next verse? "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." Guess what? The butchered meat that was there filleted by a priest or a priestess, or who knows, maybe a temple prostitute to give that to an idol and then did it in the ceremony, now has it leftover and sells it for a decent price at the meat market in Corinth. All of that, guess what? All of that belongs to God anyway. There's nothing mystical or magical that somehow makes it inherently and in of itself wrong. Matter of fact, you got to remember "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." And you can say, "Well, I read something about the pagan connections of this, that or the other as it relates to Christmas celebrations." And I'm saying, if you want to get into the place of finding pagan connections, you can find them. And if you do, you're going to be stuck.

Do you like cake? Do you like cake? Do you like cake? I like cake. Chocolate cake. Definitely the best. Think about that. Do you understand cakes? A big part of idolatry was cakes, the making of cakes in the Greco-Roman world, of giving cakes and offering cakes to their gods and goddesses. Not only that, to decorate them and to even have candles upon them. The case for the pagan origins of cakes and especially birthday cakes, you can find it all over the place. If you look for it, you can find it. You can find the pagan roots of just about everything. But I'll bet you probably when your seven-year-old was having a birthday party, a bet you burned a few waxed wick things on the top of a decorated sugar pod with icing on it. Right? And I bet you didn't feel like a pagan until someone like me gets on the stage and goes, "that's a pagan thing you're doing there." Right?

And I think you should respond with Psalm 24, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof," including rich, deep chocolate cake with burning flames on the top of it. And if I want to utilize that to celebrate the life and the gift of life in my child, listen, here's the deal, back off. You need to stop with all of that. Some respond, "Well, I read Jeremiah 10 talks about decorating a tree and pulling a tree out of the forest and setting it up." Keep reading. That's about an idol. That's about building an idol and decorating it with silver and gold after you fashioned it into a picture into some kind of image and you bow down and you worship, you trust in it because you think it's going to do evil if you don't appease it or bad in your life if you do it. There's not one single moment of worship or fear that I have over the divine power of the tree that I was forced to put up on the week of Thanksgiving. Not a single... Sorry, that defies a little bit of what I'm getting at, (audience laughs) but I'm trying to get over it myself.



I'm getting at the fact that there's no engagement at all with whatever you might see as some connection. That's a complete misuse by the way of Jeremiah Chapter 10. But you want to talk about Druids or Summer Solstice and all that... Which, by the way, some say, "he wasn't even born in the wintertime December 25th." Do you know the first reference to the date of Christ's birth by Hippolytus in the second century, born in the second century, 165 A.D., died in 235 A.D. Hippolytus said when they were..., I mean, it's the earliest extant copy of anything we have dating the birth of Christ, December 25th. By the time Chrysostom came around in the East, doing research and obviously a masterful leader of the Church in terms of his resources to study and all that. Date? December 25th.

I'm just saying, have there been disputes about the time of the birth? Yeah, there have been. But I mean, it would be really funny for all the armchair historians and self-appointed Bible teachers to find out when it's all said and done and the dust settles, that he was actually born on December 25th. But even if we're wrong, for me to set aside a day and even like the fact that Adar the day in the celebration of Purim would shift it a little bit, and it's an interesting discussion to find out why it went from one day to two in there are answers to that, this two-day celebration. I'm just saying I can find pagan connections. It might be on the day of the solstice. It might be on the day of the worship of Saturn. It might be on the day of who knows what? Right? Of Ted's drunken stupor. But it doesn't matter to me.

What matters to me is setting aside the victory celebration in my calendar to do what God asks us to do in celebrating the good that God has done. And I'm going to utilize human means like when I need to eat a good steak, I'm going to get it wherever I get it. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof," verse 27. If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you're disposed to go, well then eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the grounds of conscience. What are you talking about? If someone says to you, "those have been offered in sacrifice, then don't eat it if he's freaking out for the sake of the one who has informed you and for the sake of conscience." "Not your conscience," verse 29, but for his. "Why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience?" Well, that is the job of a lot of people today when it comes to Christmas celebration.

Verse 30, "If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?" Now this verse you know, verse 31. "So, whatever you eat or drink, whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." You understand that passage that you often quote about doing things for the glory of God is in the context of someone getting meat that might have been sacrificed by a temple prostitute at a shrine in Corinth and bringing it home and having a barbecue. And it says eat it to the glory of God. And stop asking questions. And stop your YouTube searches on this. Just stop it, right? Eat the stupid meat and enjoy it and do it to the glory of God. And so if I'm going to hang a tree because that's the cultural expression to me celebrating the goodness of God or hanging stockings and putting Snicker bars in it for my kids, then I'm going to do that for the glory of God. And you're not going to say pagan connection.

You want to start talking about pagan connection. Let's talk about the pagan connections of your laptop or your smartphone or the pagan connections of your shoes or your socks or the



Kleenex you use. We could go on and on. Like there are pagan origins of coffee tables, right? We could ruin everything for you if all we want to do is bring up matters of conscience. Do you understand how that game is played? And of course, they only want to play it so far as they can sit back and go, "See how smart we are and we know more than you about it." Stop. People, I'm teaching to you, not them. Stop listening to them, please. Right? Recognizes "the earth is the Lord's the fullness thereof." We are celebrating in a humanly mandated celebration. I get it. It's not in the Bible in terms of when we should, but the victory that was accomplished when he took on flesh and blood, that's in the Bible. And guess what we're going to do? We're going to celebrate that. We're going to humanly sanction that celebration.

Now, two ways to do it. (audience clapping) That's good. Someone's glad that there's Christmas. And for those of you that didn't clap, I've got two more things to say. Back to Esther Chapter 9. Because they've already revealed what a hassle Christmas can be. Right? There's a lot to it. It's a lot of work. Go back to Esther Chapter 9, look at verse 22 again. Here's how this description... Again, this is just a DEscription, not PREscription, but what I'm thinking about sanctioning some celebrations. I think I ought to do it kind of like they did there in the Bible. And whenever they're celebrating the victory that God has accomplished on a holy day, a special day, an exceptional day, well then I'd like to do some exceptional things and here's what the Bible says we ought to be engaged in, at least if we're going to celebrate the good that God has done.

We should realize that those days are days for celebration, not sorrow. Look at it. "In the days in which the Jews got relief from their enemies, as the month that had been turned for them, from sorrow into gladness, from mourning into a holiday." Literally in Hebrew, a meal day, a feast day. Then he goes on to unpack that, they should then feast. "There should be days of feasting and gladness." Let's just start with that. If I say to you "Be happy." Right? Which is what I'm saying when I say, "Merry Christmas. Have a great Christmas. Be happy. Be joyful. Be glad." You're going to go, "Well. OK. Easy for you to say. Hard for me to do." I understand that. It may be hard for you, but what I'm hoping that you do that helps accomplish the goal and the greeting, the salutation of saying Merry Christmas is setting everything up in your life in a way, if we're going to celebrate the victory that God has performed and accomplished in the incarnation of Christ, I want to position everything so that I'm more likely to experience gladness and joy, then if I wouldn't.

Now here are two things. Just for the sake of showing the pattern, go to Leviticus Chapter 23 with me real quick. When God expands upon his sanctioned feast in the Old Testament for Israel, he says one thing over and over again and you'll see this in all the celebrations if they're given any explanation in Scripture. There's always this added element to it, if it's a holy day, a holiday. Matter of fact, by definition, even in our calendar, when you see a holiday on the calendar, you're hoping, you know, that your banker, you know, because you get all the holidays off. Sorry. If in your bank or you don't or your investor, whatever. I'm sorry. But our federal worker, how about that? You get holidays plus. I don't want to get into that.

So what's the idea? The idea is holiday means I'm not going to do my normal work. That's always a part of this, by the way. Look at verse 39 Leviticus 23. The Feast of Booths. It's a



camping celebration, a camping celebration, a lavish camp. I mean, this is a glamping celebration. Trust me. You are going to pull out all the stops, but one thing you can't do is ordinary work. You're not supposed to do any regular work. It's called a solemn rest. "On the fifteenth day," verse 39, "of the seventh month, when you've gathered in the produce land, you shall celebrate the feast of the Lord for seven days. On the first-day shall be a day of solemn rest on the eighth day a solemn rest. So you've got these Sabbath days between this week of feasting, but that you'll see is a pattern throughout the explanations of God's feast days when you're celebrating something good that God has done like this celebration, the Feast of Booths or the Feast of Tabernacles was God brought us through the wilderness, our forefathers. And we're never going to forget that by that, we're going to keep celebrating this as the Feast of Booths. And one thing we're going to do is we're not going to do any ordinary work.

That's a phrase you'll find, by the way, in the Bible regarding his feasts. No ordinary work, solemn days of rest. I'm going to stop doing the things that would be promised in Scripture to bring me problems. I say that because in Genesis 3, work to earn a living is supposed to be, but we try to mitigate it, but it's supposed to be "thorns and thistles" and sweat. That's how it's described. Your work as you work it, like the field, you can have thorns and thistles. So nothing's going to go well in your job the way you'd like it to go. You're going to have barriers and problems, and it's going to be about the sweat of your brow you're probably going to earn your food.

So what you're supposed to do on a feast day, if you're going to celebrate God's victory or the good things that God has done, you're supposed to stop doing things that you know generally are going to cause the headaches that you're going to have in earning your bread. So no regular work. We stop doing it. Now is there going to be work involved? Lots of work involved. Right? And if you do do festive celebrations, you know how much work it is, but no regular work. The work that you go through normally that brings you the kind of grief and the scabs of thorns and thistles, that needs to stop. You need to take that time and say, I'm not going to focus on the pressure of the spreadsheets, the board meetings or any of that, and I'm going to take a break from all of that. Solemn rest. No ordinary work.

And then I'm going to do things that position my heart that I think are going to be helpful, right? Stopping short of anything sinful. I'm going to do whatever I can to make that a joyful celebration. Like what? Well, this helps. Decorations, verse 40. "You shall take on the first day fruit of splendid trees, branches of the palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before your God for seven days. You shall celebrate, celebrate it as a feast to the Lord for seven days. It's going to be a statute throughout your generations, you will celebrate it in the seventh month. You can dwell in these," tents, "dwell in booths," for seven days. "All the native Israelites shall dwell in booths, your generation that they know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am Lord your God." And so Moses said, "That's what we're going to do." And they celebrate with feasting, just like they did in Purim.



Everyone knew, you know, you want to make me happy, let's have a big meal and sit on the couch stuffed when we're done. That is a good feeling. It's a good thing and you need to get off your diet. You need to stop with all your lame excuses about not engaging in things that God says this is part of what makes life good, right? Being a person who receives the good that God provides in food and receiving it with thanksgiving and doing that thing that makes the heart glad. And doing that in a way that is all in memory of and in honor of what Christ has done for us. In this case, that he put on flesh and blood, the Son of God, to be our savior. And we do things like we feast and we stop working.

Number two, I'm saying this, we've got to "Aim at Uncommon Joy." I hope you're joyful and work to be joyful all the time. I hope you come home after work, put your feet up and you get a little rest and that's great. But you ought to have a special time to celebrate. And when you celebrate some victory that God has accomplished, you ought to aim for some uncommon joy, which means you're going to do things in the surrounding environment of your life, whatever it might be, that's going to help you short of sinning, short of crossing lines of transgression, into festivity, into food, into decorations, into things that make things more joyful than they normally would be. And you should have that as a seasonal thing. It should come and go on your calendar as a part of a dedication and obligation in your mind to say, we're going to work to celebrate with gladness. That's the goal. That's the point.

When people were sad for many reasons, they had to be sad in Nehemiah Chapter 8. Nehemiah kept getting up there and saying, "We're going to celebrate, don't mourn, don't weep. Eat the fat, drink the sweet wine, send portions to everyone who has nothing. Do not be grieved. Go and eat and drink and send portions to each other. And rejoice." When Hezekiah was watching the northern tribes to be taken by the Assyrians in Second Chronicles, and they had not been practicing the celebration of the Passover, it had fallen into disuse. Like they said Purim was never supposed to. And of course, Passover is never supposed to. Celebrating God's redemption of the children of Israel out of Egypt.

Twelve generations from Solomon, here is Hezekiah going, "We need to reinstitute the celebration of God's Passover." And so he does, and he calls everyone together, including, you know, the remnant from the northern tribes and he says it's time for us to celebrate. I just got to read just a tiny bit of that. The punch line there in Second Chronicles 30. It says there was so much great joy in Jerusalem. "Such great joy in Jerusalem, for since the time of Solomon the son of David, King of Israel, there had been nothing like it in Jerusalem. And the priests and the Levites," here's the picture of great joy and feasting, they "blessed the people," saying the good things.

A lot of thought to complain about, right? The Syrians were on the throne. They were threatening the southern tribes as well as the northern tribes. But "They blessed the people, and their voice was heard, and their prayer," the rejoicing, all that they were saying, "came to his holy habitation in heaven," which is an interesting way to put it. The rejoicing in Jerusalem was so great. Of course, God can hear every whisper, every thought of your mind, but it's like heaven was paying attention to your joy over what you should have been rejoicing in every single year, which does a lot to calibrate our thinking, to safeguard our minds but you should



be doing it to remember what God has done. Hezekiah does it, and he pulls out all the stops, and I would recommend the same to set yourself up for whatever it takes to extract the thorns and thistles, but just for a few days, to feast and to celebrate, to do all that you can to engage in uncommon joy. I hope you're a joyful person all the time, but you have to do all you can to be extra joyful in a time that we're celebrating the victory, in this case, of the incarnation of the victor over death.

Secondly, one last phrase there in the bottom of verse 22. It comes in two categories, but one verb governs it there in Esther Chapter 9 verse 22, "They should be days for sending gifts of food to one another and for sending gifts to the poor." Let's put it this way, number 3, I'm supposed to be someone who is "Engaged In Exceptional Generosity." God has always told the people of God to be generous. You see a person in need then you ought to meet the need. The Jew who fell to the robbers on the road to Jericho, what you should always learn from that, do to your neighbor, do good your neighbor. Be generous. All that's good all year round. But there ought to be times when we set apart special days, special times to celebrate the greatness of God. And one of the things that we do is we make sure everyone feels a sense of that by you engaging in this great generosity of giving gifts. OK?

Two categories here. Let's start with the obvious one, the last one, giving to the poor. When in Israeli villages in Persia, they were thinking, yes, we weren't exterminated, but I don't have a lot of money to celebrate, and here comes the letter from Mordecai. You're supposed to go out there and celebrate that we didn't get killed. They're going, "Well. I don't really have much to... I mean, I can pull out my can of SpaghettiOs or make a pineapple sandwich" or whatever they were going to do. Right? This is like they don't have much. Well, if you had Jews down the street who had more, they were supposed to give gifts to make sure that you could celebrate the thing that you were supposed to celebrate to make your heart glad and joyful. So these gifts were supposed to be given and you're supposed to be giving gifts to people to help them celebrate.

Now, the Persians didn't care, and they didn't celebrate much, the overcoming of the genocide of the Jews, although some did, as we learned later in Chapter 9. So even they were engaged in this. But the real purpose was for the Christians, I'm thinking now about the incarnation, to celebrate the incarnation, I want to make sure that my Christian brothers and sisters have what they need and those who are less endowed with economic advantages, I'd like to give to them so that they can have a very merry Christmas. One of the things that they get is the generosity of those who are better off than them to make their holiday great. That's the picture of giving to the poor.

Then preceding that is sending gifts of food to one another, and that's an indiscriminate thing. It's, of course, among the people of God and that's the idea, though I'm saying you should certainly send gifts to whoever you'd like to at Christmas. But there are the people of God giving gifts to each other when they think, "Well, I don't really need that. You don't need to send me a casserole because I can make one myself." I understand that. But the giving of gifts is part of the celebration that you see all throughout the festivals of Israel, including the man-made one here. They're just following the pattern. Give gifts, give gifts to each other.



When there's joy, there ought to be that kind of expressed and exceptional generosity that overflows.

I mean, there's stuff that I could buy for myself, but there's something about the joy that is received that you get when you're the recipient of those things and you're like, I didn't expect that and you gave that freely and joyfully and extravagantly. And that's a trigger, an impetus, a motivation of joy. And if that's the point, in other words, for me to aim at joy and do everything I can within my environs to set myself up for joy and gladness, to celebrate the victory of God, in this case the incarnation of Christ, then I ought to be making sure that I'm doing all I can laterally to make that happen around me. The giving of gifts.

When Paul talks about giving gifts in Second Corinthians Chapter 9, all the things that they were talking about there, which was not the support of the church. He talked about that earlier in the book. Of course, you're supposed to support your church, but he's talking about giving to other Christians in that passage. And he ends it with "Thanks be to God for his," indescribable gift, "his inexpressible gift." A gift that you can't even contain. Even if you think about Mordecai and Esther risking their lives. Think about that, right? The giving that you give is in the shadow of that great giving that they gave of their well-being and they risked their own health, their own life for that.

Think about Christ. Christ gave his all. God had him lay down his life for us. First John 3 says, then "I ought to lay down my life for each other." And now I'm picking a special day to say now I'm really putting that into turbocharge and I'm going to give even more than I normally would. That's the picture in the Purim celebration. I think it's a good pattern for us if we're going to sanction celebrations of God's victory, particularly through the incarnation of Christ to deliver us from our sins. We ought to celebrate it. We ought to aim at joy and uncommon joy. We should always be joyful but extra joy and we ought to always be generous, but we ought to aim at a kind of exceptional generosity. And I should engage in that for the good of the celebration itself in honor of Christ.

I'm not saying you got to, you know, put the elf on the shelf or, you know, there are a lot of things where you say, "I don't even see how that fits." Fine. Fine. Great. But for you to pull out a few of the stops and make Christmas festive, that's a good thing. And I would say one of the things you need to do, and it's interesting that Santa Claus has become such a feature in American pop western culture and we've often forgotten and I preached on this and you can find these sermons about St. Nicholas, who was a pastor in a city of Myra in the fourth century on the Mediterranean coast, born in Patara, moved there to Myra as a pastor. He was known for his generosity. Matter of fact, it is the historical precedent for the picture of the fat guy coming down the chimney and giving gifts.

Now I'm not in to lying to my kids about a fat kid in the chimney. But I am certainly about saying one of the things we need to be doing at a festive time of commemorating God's victory is giving gifts and he's not a bad example. Matter of fact, when I have preached on this, I've truncated his life into three phrases, six words actually. The first one is just to remember this is not about license to do whatever you want. Pastor Nick in Myra in the fourth



century, I put it this way, he was hard-nosed and he was, theologically hard-nosed. He was unyielding in his theology. So I'm not asking you do anything... I'm not asking you to get drunk. I'm not asking you to steal, to go in debt or anything. I'm just asking you to know the biblical parameters that you don't lose sight of.

He goes to the Council of Nicaea. He stands up for what's true. Methodius a couple of centuries later, writes of Pastor Nick and says the whole arena, the whole area was poisoned by the Aryan heresy, but except for in Myra and thanks be to God for Pastor Nick, St. Nicholas as we know him, for keeping that church from veering off into that heretical nonsense, right? He called it poison as it's translated. Methodius knew that Pastor Nick was a hard-core Christian, right? He was not going to compromise on doctrine. But he was also extremely compassionate. Matter of fact, the story that comes and ends up being the precedent of the foundation for the whole stocking thing is him giving gold coins to some gals who were going to be conscripted to a life of prostitution because they didn't have a dowry and they were poor. His heart was moved and he did anonymously, apparently, this is part of the story, gave money to make sure that that didn't happen, so they could up a dowry and they would have a normal life there in the 4th century. He was moved by people's stories.

You looked at people who didn't have what he had and he was engaging in that. He was soft-hearted. Hard-nosed, soft-hearted. And then I love this and is the whole point of why he got enlisted to be an embodiment of what should be happening at Christmas among God's people celebrating victory, and that is being generous. He was amazingly open-handed. Those are the six words I've used and taught in the past. He was hard-nosed, he was soft-hearted and he was open-handed. He gives to people. And like it says in First Corinthians Chapter 9, you start giving, you start being generous. God loves to be generous to the generous so that you can be enriched in every way for every good work. But God is able to grant seed for the sower. He's able to give more. And he gave a lot to Pastor Nick, and he was very wealthy, partly because according to the story in his past, his parents had died, he had a big inheritance. Nevertheless, he had money and he used that money all the time open-handedly.

Not only anonymously in compassion for people who needed his help, but just he was giving gifts. He was just a generous man. And even in that you think, OK, I'm not into all these weird things they do at Christmas. Well, there are some of them that at least should get our minds thinking about why they're even in a tradition in Christmas. Now some, you know, don't have any connection. And some are just for you to bring the leafy boughs and decorate your house and you may not even understand why there's a connection. I've tried to draw connections historically in things like the lights on your house and things, clearly. It doesn't even matter. What matters is that you aim at real joy and real gladness. That you are one who is expressing generosity, which always comports with the idea of celebrating God's good, and that you keep God in view and you do it all to the glory of God. That's what Christmas time should be about.

And when we say Merry Christmas, we should say OK, positioning everything I can to have that experience because we're doing it in honor of Christ and because they obliged



themselves in man-made celebrations to do this and they keep doing it, even down to today, I think it's not a bad thing for our kids, our grandkids, our great-grandkids until Christ comes back to celebrate the incarnation of Christ and to do with a lot of the cultural trappings of our expressions of Christmas joy as long as your mind and your kid's minds and your grandkid's minds stay focused on what this is really all about. Jesus Christ who came to conquer death for us. So in that regard, I do wish you a Merry Christmas. I want you to have one, a celebratory Christmas this year.

Let me pray for you. God, I do ask that you allow our minds to be anchored in what matters the most when we're decorating our houses or wrapping presents or even going shopping, thinking about just the right gift for the right person, or hanging stockings, we're drinking eggnog. Whatever it is, God just help us to keep our minds focused on the fact that these festivities are all because we're remembering something so significant that it makes Mordecai and Esther's victory over Haman seem like nothing, so small. Because it's one thing to be exterminated physically, it's another thing to hear "Depart for me, I never knew you," and thankfully we'll never have to hear that from you because of our trust in your Son our victor. This is the victory: our faith has overcome the world, it's overcome our sin, putting our trust in Christ, the one who is worthy of our trust and because of his great love, was willing to take on flesh and blood and live among us so that he could live and die in our place. Let us celebrate that incarnation this December in a profound and sincere and even extravagant way.

In Jesus name. Amen.