

Why Christmas?

Did Jesus Really Come at Christmas?

Dr. Jim Denison
Video series: Session One

Did Christmas really happen?

We all have childhood memories of manger scenes, angels, shepherds and Wise Men. Is Christmas like Frosty the Snowman, a nice story that we adults know isn't really true?

The Bible says that Christmas is real, of course. It claims that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, where his mother "wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). But what if you're not sure the Bible is true? Muslims believe the Qur'an; Mormons believe the Book of Mormon. Believing something doesn't make it true.

Is there historical evidence for Christmas? Actually, there is. A great deal of it, in fact. Here's what ancient, non-Christian historians tell us about the historical Jesus.

Tacitus, the greatest Roman historian, recorded in A.D. 115 that "Christus suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate" (*Annals* 15.44). From his record we know that Jesus existed and that he was crucified by Pilate.

In A.D. 52, a scholar named Thallus the Samaritan wrote the history of Greece from the Trojan War to his day. In it he attempted to explain the darkness of Jesus' crucifixion as an eclipse of the sun.

The Roman historian Suetonius (AD 65-135) recorded, "Punishments were also inflicted on the Christians, a sect professing a new and mischievous religious belief" (*Nero* 16.2). The Empire would not punish people who followed a religious teacher, only one who made him Lord in place of Caesar.

And that's just what the first Christians did. Pliny the Younger, Roman administrator and persecutor of Christians, recorded in A.D. 112 that Christians "were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ as to a god."

Finally, we need to hear from Josephus, the most famous first-century Jewish historian. He records, "Now, there was about this time, Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works,--a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was Christ; and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had

condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him, for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day" (*Antiquities* 18.3.3).

While most historians do not believe that this paragraph represents Josephus's own faith commitment, it does document the beliefs of early Christians regarding Jesus. And note that it was written before the end of the first century.

The location of Jesus' birth has been known with certainty since the second century; the world's oldest church stands at that site today. Without a Bible, we can know that the child born there was a real person of history, that he was crucified by the Romans, and that his first followers believed that he rose from the dead and worshiped him as God.

Does this evidence prove that Jesus is God's Son? Of course not. No relationship can be proven, only experienced. If my wife waited until I could prove I would be a good husband, she would never have married me. If you waited until you could prove that a job was right for you, you'd never take it. With all relationships, we examine the evidence, then step beyond it into a personal experience that becomes self-validating.

I'm talking with you outside this office building in downtown Dallas, Texas. I know that there are Christmas trees and decorations inside, because I went in shortly before taping this video. The people driving up and down this street can't see what's behind these walls. They don't know if the office building has been decorated for Christmas or not. They could examine the evidence—they could listen to eyewitnesses like me, look at pictures taken from the building lobby, and so on. But the only way they could know for sure would be to step inside.

It's the same with Jesus. Examine the evidence for Christmas, then ask Jesus to forgive your mistakes and become your Lord and King. You'll meet him for yourself. And you'll know forever that Christmas is real.