

## **Home Page**

### **Birthdays**

#### **Aid to Bible Understanding, 1969 ed., p 237**

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#### **The Watchtower, July 15, 1980, p. 31**

“So even though the Bible does not contain a specific prohibition against birthday celebrations, Jehovah’s Witnesses have long noted the Scriptural indications and have not celebrated birthdays. In this, they harmonize with the pattern of the earliest Christians.”

#### **The Watchtower, September 1, 1992, p. 31**

“Given the known origin of celebrating birthdays, and more important, the unfavorable light in which they are presented in the Bible, Jehovah’s Witnesses have ample reason to abstain from the practice.”

#### **The Watchtower, July 15, 1994, p. 25**

“The celebration of birthdays is regarded by most people today as merely an innocent custom. But the Bible does not paint a positive picture of this tradition.”

#### **The Watchtower, April 15, 1995, p. 30**

“According to *The World Book Encyclopedia*, ‘the Early Christians did not celebrate [Jesus’] birth because they considered the celebration of anyone’s birthday to be a pagan custom.’”

(continued)

**The Watchtower, May 15, 1995, p. 19**

“In time, it was seen that if the most important birth that ever took place could not be celebrated, we should not celebrate any birthday.”

(done)

five silver shekels (c. \$2.38).—Num. 18:15, 16; see **FIRSTBORN, FIRSTLING**.

Many times the Scriptures use terms relating to natural birth in a figurative sense. (Ps. 90:2; Prov. 27:1; Isa. 66:8, 9; Jas. 1:15) The severity of labor pangs well describes inescapable suffering coming from other sources. (Ps. 48:6; Jer. 13:21; Mic. 4:9, 10; Gal. 4:19; 1 Thess. 5:3) In the sense of regeneration and a spiritual birth, Jesus said that one must be "born from water and spirit" in order to enter the Kingdom. (John 3:3-8; 2 Cor. 5:17; 1 Pet. 1:3, 23) Revelation, in symbolic language, describes the "birth of a son, a male," in heaven after a period of agonizing pain.—Rev. 12:1-5; see **LABOR PAINS**.

**BIRTHDAY.** The day or anniversary of one's birth. The Hebrews kept a record of birth dates, as the Bible's genealogical and chronological data reveal. (Num. 1:2, 3; Josh. 14:10; 2 Chron. 31:16, 17) The ages of Levites, priests and kings were not left to guesswork. (Num. 4:3; 8:23-26; 2 Kl. 11:21; 15:2; 16:3) This was also true in the case of Jesus. (Luke 2:21, 22, 42; 3:23) According to the Scriptures, the day the baby was born was usually one of rejoicing and thanksgiving on the part of the parents, and rightly so, for "look! sons are an inheritance from Jehovah; the fruitage of the belly is a reward." (Ps. 127:3; Jer. 20:10; Luke 1:57, 58) However, there is no indication in the Scriptures that faithful worshippers of Jehovah ever indulged in the pagan practice of annually celebrating birthdays. Josephus wrote that Herod Agrippa I celebrated his birthday, like his uncle Antipas, but these supposed Jewish proselytes were notorious for imitating pagan customs instead of conforming to the Hebrew Scriptures.—*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book XIX, chap. VII, par. 1.

The Bible makes direct reference to only two birthday celebrations, those of Pharaoh of Egypt (eighteenth century B.C.E.) and Herod Antipas (first century C.E.). These two accounts are similar in that both occasions were marked with great feasting and granting of favors; both are remembered for executions, the hanging of Pharaoh's chief baker in the first instance, the beheading of John the Baptist in the latter.—Gen. 40:18-22; 41:13; Matt. 14:6-11; Mark 6:21-28.

While the expression "on the day of our king," at Hosea 7:5, may possibly indicate a birthday party for the apostate king of Israel when the princes "sickened themselves . . . because of wine," it could as easily be the anniversary day of his accession to the throne when similar festivities were held.

When Job's sons "held a banquet at the house of each one on his own day" it should not be supposed that they were celebrating their birthdays. (Job 1:4) "Day" in this verse translates the Hebrew word *yohm*, possibly from a root meaning "to be hot," and therefore meaning a period of time from sunrise to sunset. On the other hand, "birthday" is a compound of the two Hebrew words *yohm* (day) and *hul-le'dheth*, from *ya-ladh'*, a Hebrew root meaning "to bear young," hence referring to the day of one's birth. This distinction between "day" and one's birthday may be noted in Genesis 40:20, where both expressions appear: "Now on the third day [*yohm*] it turned out to be Pharaoh's birthday [literally, "the day (*yohm*) of the birth (*hul-le'dheth*) of Pharaoh]." So it is certain that Job 1:4 does not refer to a birthday, as is unquestionably the case at Genesis 40:20. It would seem that Job's seven sons held a family gathering (possibly a spring or harvest festival) and as the feasting made the week-long circuit, each son hosted the banquet in his own house "on his own day."

With the introduction of Christianity the viewpoint of birthday celebrations did not change. Jesus inaugurated a binding Memorial, not of his birth, but of his death, saying: "Keep doing this in remembrance of me." (Luke 22:19) If early Christians did not celebrate or memorialize the birthday of their Savior, much less would they celebrate their own day of

birth. Historian Augustus Neander writes: "The notion of a birthday festival was far from the ideas of the Christians of this period." (*The History of the Christian Religion and Church, During the First Three Centuries*, translated by Henry John Rose, New York, 1848, p. 190) "Origen [a writer of the third century C.E.] . . . insists that 'of all the holy people in the Scriptures, no one is recorded to have kept a feast or held a great banquet on his birthday. It is only sinners (like Pharaoh and Herod) who make great rejoicings over the day on which they were born into this world below.'"—*The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1911, Vol. X, p. 709.

Clearly, then, the festive celebration of birthdays does not find its origin in either the Hebrew or the Greek Scriptures. Additionally, M'Clintock & Strong's *Cyclopaedia* (Vol. I, p. 817) says the Jews "regarded birthday celebrations as parts of idolatrous worship . . . and this probably on account of the idolatrous rites with which they were observed in honor of those who were regarded as the patron gods of the day on which the party was born."

Astrology teaches that the life and fortune of a person largely depend on the position of the heavenly bodies at the time of birth, hence the need to observe annually the return of the stars to that position. The horoscope is accordingly consulted by such cultists to learn of one's future. Astrology, however, is emphatically condemned by the Scriptures.—Deut. 18:10-12; Job 31:26-28; Isa. 47:13.

Certain primitive societies view birthdays as danger periods when one is susceptible to attack by evil spirits. Hence, parties and good wishes of friends, bringing gifts to appease the evil spirits, and offering sacrifices to "their protective spirits" are all part of the birthday celebration. (Funk and Wagnalls *Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend*, Vol. One, p. 144) "Every Egyptian attached much importance to the day, and even to the hour of his birth; and it is probable that, as in Persia . . . each individual kept his birthday with great rejoicings, welcoming his friends with all the amusements of society, and a more than usual profusion of delicacies of the table."—M'Clintock & Strong's *Cyclopaedia*, Vol. I, p. 817.

**BIRTHRIGHT.** The right that naturally belonged to the father's firstborn son. Under the patriarchal system the oldest son became the head of the family upon the death of the father, with authority over the others as long as they were in the household. He was responsible to care for the members of his father's household. He also succeeded to the father's position in representing the family before Jehovah. The firstborn generally received the father's special blessing. (Gen. 27:4, 36; 48:9, 17, 18) Moreover, he was entitled to two parts of the father's estate; that is, he received twice as much as each of his brothers. Under the Mosaic law a man with more than one wife could not take the birthright from the oldest son and give it to the son of a specially loved wife.—Deut. 21:15-17.

In patriarchal times the birthright could be transferred by the father to another son for a cause, as in the case of Reuben, who lost his right as firstborn due to fornication with his father's concubine. (1 Chron. 5:1, 2) The firstborn could sell his birthright to one of his brothers, as did Esau, who despised his birthright and sold it to his brother Jacob in exchange for something to eat. (Gen. 25:30-34; 27:36; Heb. 12:16) There is no record that Jacob asserted his purchased birthright in getting a double share of Isaac's property (which was movable or personal property, for Isaac owned no land, except the field of Macpelah, in which was a cave for a burial place). Jacob was interested in the passing on of spiritual things to his family, that is, the promise given to Abraham concerning the seed.—Gen. 28:3, 4, 13-15.

With respect to the kings of Israel, the birthright seems to have carried with it the right of succession to the throne. (2 Chron. 21:1-3) However, Jehovah,

The second, some 1,800 years later, was the birthday of Herod Antipas. The account in Mark 6:21-24 reads:

"But a convenient day came along when Herod spread an evening meal on his birthday for his top-ranking men and the military commanders and the foremost ones of Galilee. And the daughter of this very Herodias came in and danced and pleased Herod and those reclining with him. The king said to the maiden: 'Ask me for whatever you want, and I will give it to you.' Yes, he swore to her: 'Whatever you ask me for, I will give it to you, up to half my kingdom.' And she went out and said to her mother: 'What should I ask for?' She said: 'The head of John the baptizer.'"—See also Matthew 14:6-11.

Regarding the account of Herod's birthday, Dr. Richard Lenski comments: "The Jews abhorred the keeping of birthdays as being a pagan custom, but the Herods even outdid the Romans in these celebrations, so that 'Herod's birthday' (*Herodis dies*) came to be a proverbial expression for excessive festival display."

How are we to look at these two birthday celebrations? Is it just coincidental that they are mentioned and that both were for persons not having God's approval? Or could it be that Jehovah deliberately had these details recorded in his Word, which he says is "beneficial for teaching, for reproof, for setting things straight"? (2 Tim. 3:16) At the very least it can be said that these two accounts Biblically put birthday celebrations in a bad light, as a practice of those estranged from God.

Also, it is worth noting that God did not record the exact date of Jesus' birth, which certainly would be the most important birthday if God's servants were to celebrate birthdays. Instead, the Bible indicates the date of Jesus' death and instructs Christians to commemorate that as an anniversary each year. (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:23-26) This harmonizes with the fact that the Bible says that the day of a person's death is more significant than the day of his birth if he has made a good name with God during his lifetime.—Eccl. 7:1, 8.

Consistent with the Scriptural indications, the early Christians did not hold birthday celebrations.

"The notion of a birthday festival was far from the ideas of the Christians of this period in general."—*The History of the Christian Religion and Church During the First Three Centuries*, by Augustus Neander.

As time passed and there was a falling away

from pure Christianity, what began to be commemorated was the death, not the birth.

"The reverence in which the martyrs were held led to an undue attachment to the scene and day of their death. By a happy thought the day of a martyr's death was called his birthday. The places where the martyrs had died were regarded with a holy awe. . . . On the anniversary days the services [in the churches] were largely devoted to recalling his services and character. . . . It must be remembered, however, that these [annual] memorial services were no part of the general order of the Church."—*History of the Christian Church*, by Dr. John F. Hurst, Vol. 1, pp. 350, 351.

So even though the Bible does not contain a specific prohibition against birthday celebrations, Jehovah's Witnesses have long noted the Scriptural indications and have not celebrated birthdays. In this, they harmonize with the pattern of the earliest Christians.

Also, while there is no Bible justification for annually celebrating the date of a Christian's death, we can agree that the day of death is better than the day of his birth. Thus we should concentrate, not on the day of birth but on each day imitating Christ and reflecting God's image. Should we die, then we will have glorified God by our way of life, and he will surely remember us.—Heb. 5:9; 11:6; Phil. 3:8-11.

#### "WATCHTOWER" STUDIES FOR THE WEEKS

August 17: The "Fine Shepherd" and the "Little Flock." Page 17. Songs to Be Used: 41, 1.

August 24: The "Fine Shepherd" and His "Other Sheep." Page 22. Songs to Be Used: 29, 65.

evil fairies. Everyone was afraid of these spirits, that they would cause harm to the birthday celebrant, and so he was surrounded by friends and relatives whose good wishes, and very presence, would protect him against the unknown dangers that the birthday held. Giving gifts brought even greater protection. Eating together provided a further safeguard and helped to bring the blessings of the good spirits. So the birthday party was originally intended to make a person safe from evil and to insure a good year to come.'—*Birthday Parties Around the World*, 1967.

The book explains, too, the origin of many birthday customs. For example: "The reason [for using candles] goes back to the early Greeks and Romans who thought that tapers or candles had magical qualities. They would offer prayers and make wishes to be carried up to the gods by the flames of candles. The gods would then send down their blessings and perhaps answer the prayers." Other such background information is collected on pages 69 and 70 of *Reasoning From the Scriptures*, published by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc.

As mentioned, however, more is involved in this question than whether celebrating birthdays was or still is religious. The Bible brings up the matter of birthdays, and mature Christians wisely are sensitive to any indications it gives.

God's servants of old noted when individuals were born, which allowed them to figure ages. We read: "Noah got to be five hundred years old. After that Noah became father to Shem, Ham and Japheth." "In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, . . . all the springs of the vast watery deep were broken open."—Genesis 5:32; 7:11; 11:10-26.

As even Jesus mentioned, among God's people childbirth was a blessed, happy event. (Luke 1: 57, 58; 2:9-14; John 16:21) Yet, Jehovah's people did not memorialize the date of birth; they kept other anniversaries but not birthdays. (John 10: 22, 23) *Encyclopaedia Judaica* says: "The celebration of birthdays is unknown in traditional Jewish ritual." *Customs and Traditions of Israel* observes: "The celebration of birthdays has been borrowed from the practices of other nations, as no mention is made of this custom among Jews either in The

Bible, Talmud, or writings of the later Sages. In fact, it was an ancient Egyptian custom."

That Egyptian connection is clear from a birthday celebration related in the Bible, one that true worshipers were not observing. It was the birthday feast of the Pharaoh who ruled while Joseph was in an Egyptian prison. Some of those pagans may have been happy over the feast, yet the birthday was linked to the beheading of the chief of Pharaoh's bakers.—Genesis 40:1-22.

A similar unfavorable light is shed on the other birthday celebration described in the Scriptures—that of Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great. This birthday celebration is hardly presented in the Bible as just innocent festivity. Rather, it occasioned the beheading of John the Baptizer. Then, "his disciples came up and removed the corpse and buried him and came and reported to Jesus," who 'withdrew from there into a lonely place for isolation.' (Matthew 14:6-13) Do you imagine that those disciples or Jesus felt drawn to the practice of birthday celebrations?

Given the known origin of celebrating birthdays, and more important, the unfavorable light in which they are presented in the Bible, Jehovah's Witnesses have ample reason to abstain from the practice. They do not need to follow this worldly custom, for they can and do have happy meals any time during the year. Their gift giving is not obligatory or under the pressure of a party; it is spontaneous sharing of gifts at any time out of generosity and genuine affection.—Proverbs 17:8; Ecclesiastes 2:24; Luke 6:38; Acts 9:36, 39; 1 Corinthians 16:2, 3.

## In Our Next Issue

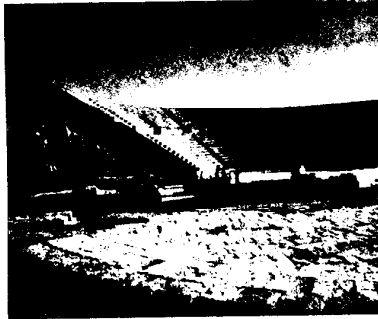
Why Do Good People Suffer?

Jehovah Forgives in a Large Way

You Can Cope With Frustration!

# Birthday Celebrations Have Left a Trail of Death

**T**HE celebration of birthdays is regarded by most people today as merely an innocent custom. But the Bible does not paint a positive picture of this tradition. For one thing, the Scriptures contain no indication that any of God's faithful servants celebrated birthdays.



Arena at Caesarea

The only two birthdays the Bible does mention were for rulers who were enemies of God. Each celebration included an execution, so that the guests could gloat over the death of one who had displeased the king. In the first instance, Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, executed his chief baker. (Genesis 40:2, 3, 20, 22) The Egyptian ruler did so during the feast because he had grown indignant with his servant. In the second instance, Herod, the immoral ruler of Galilee, beheaded John the Baptizer as a favor to a girl whose dancing at the party had pleased him. What repulsive scenes!—Matthew 14: 6-11.

Yet has not the Bible focused on two very exceptional birthdays? Not really. The ancient Jewish historian Josephus reveals that these incidents were not unique. He records other instances of the practice of birthday executions for entertainment.

For example, some occurred after Jerusalem's destruction in 70 C.E., when 1,000,000 Jews perished and 97,000 survived to be taken prisoner. En route to Rome, Roman general Titus took his Jewish captives to

the nearby seaport of Caesarea.

Josephus writes: "While Titus remained at Caesarea, he celebrated his brother Domitian's birthday with great splendor, putting over 2,500 prisoners to death in games with beasts and flames. After this he moved to Berytus

[Beirut], a Roman colony in Phoenicia, where he celebrated his father's birthday by killing many more captives at elaborate exhibitions."—*The Jewish War*, VII, 37, translated by Paul L. Maier in *Josephus: The Essential Writings*.

It is no wonder that *The Imperial Bible-Dictionary* comments: "The later Hebrews looked on the celebration of birth-days as a part of idolatrous worship, a view which would be abundantly confirmed by what they saw of the common observances associated with these days."

Faithful first-century Christians would not have felt like joining in a custom so darkly presented in the Bible and so gruesomely celebrated by the Romans. Today, sincere Christians realize that the Bible accounts about birthdays were among the things written for their instruction. (Romans 15:4) They avoid celebrating birthdays because such observances bestow undue importance on the individual. More significant, Jehovah's servants wisely take into account the unfavorable presentation of birthdays in the Bible.

## DO YOU REMEMBER?

Have you appreciated reading the recent issues of *The Watchtower*? Well, see if you can answer the following questions:

□ **Why did early Christians not celebrate Jesus' birthday?** According to *The World Book Encyclopedia*, "the Early Christians did not celebrate [Jesus'] birth because they considered the celebration of anyone's birthday to be a pagan custom."—12/15, page 4.

□ **Should prayers be directed to Jesus?** No, because prayers are a form of worship that belongs exclusively to Almighty God. By addressing all our prayers to Jehovah God, we indicate that we have taken to heart Jesus' direction to pray: "Our Father in the heavens." (Matthew 6:9)—12/15, page 25.

□ **Why was a different judgment rendered for the serious sin of King David as compared with the sins of Ananias and Sapphira? (2 Samuel 11: 2-24; 12:1-14; Acts 5:1-11)** King David's sin was due to fleshly weakness. When confronted with what he had done, he repented, and Jehovah forgave him—although he had to live with the results of his sin. Ananias and Sapphira sinned in that they hypocritically lied, trying to deceive the Christian congregation and thus to 'play false to the holy spirit and to God.' (Acts 5:3, 4) That turned out to be evidence of a wicked heart, so they were judged more severely.—1/1, pages 27, 28.

□ **What can help us to serve Jehovah with a joyful heart?** We should cultivate a positive and appreciative view of our blessings and God-given privileges of service, and we ought never forget that by following God's Word, we are pleasing him.—1/15, pages 16, 17.

□ **What two things must we keep in mind if we are to give effective encouragement?** First, think about what to say so that the encouragement is specific. Second, look for the opportunity to approach a person who deserves commendation or who needs to be built up.—1/15, page 23.

□ **Why do the "great crowd" have "palm branches in their hands"?** (Revelation 7:9) The waving of palm branches indicates that the "great crowd" joyfully hail Jehovah's Kingdom and his

anointed King, Jesus Christ. (See Leviticus 23:39, 40.)—2/1, page 17.

□ **What valuable lessons are found in the book of Job?** The book of Job shows us how to handle problems. It provides striking examples of how someone who is facing trials should—and should not—be counseled. Furthermore, Job's own experience can help us to react in a balanced way when we find ourselves buffeted by adverse circumstances.—2/15, page 27.

□ **What do the miracles of Jesus teach us?** Jesus' miracles glorify God, setting a pattern for Christians to glorify God. (Romans 15:6) They encourage the doing of good, the showing of generosity, and the displaying of compassion.—3/1, page 8.

□ **What purpose is served by the elders' reviewing prepared questions with newly dedicated ones?** This confirms that each candidate fully understands the basic teachings of the Bible and is aware of what is involved in being a Witness of Jehovah.—3/1, page 13.

□ **How can Biblical prayers benefit us?** By looking closely at Scriptural prayers, we can identify those said in situations similar to our own. Finding, reading, and meditating on such prayers can help to enrich our own communication with Jehovah.—3/15, pages 3, 4.

□ **What is godly fear?** Godly fear is an awe of Jehovah, a profound reverence for him, coupled with a wholesome dread of displeasing him. (Psalm 89:7)—3/15, page 10.

□ **What are three ways in which the Bible shows that we are precious in God's eyes?** The Bible teaches that each of us has worth in God's eyes (Luke 12:6, 7); it clarifies what Jehovah values in us (Malachi 3:16); and it relates what Jehovah has done to demonstrate his love for us. (John 3:16)—4/1, pages 11, 12, 14.

□ **Why is Hebrews 10:24, 25 more than just a command that Christians meet together?** These words of Paul set a divinely inspired standard for all Christian meetings—really, for any occasion when Christians associate together.—4/1, page 16.

### Christmas—A Pagan Holiday

<sup>13</sup> Shortly thereafter, a flash of light caused the Bible Students to stop celebrating Christmas. Before that time Christmas had always been celebrated by the Bible Students worldwide, and its celebration at Brooklyn headquarters was a very festive occasion. But then it was discerned that the observance of December 25 was actually pagan and was chosen by apostate Christendom to make it easier to convert pagans. Moreover, it was found that Jesus could not have been born in the winter, since at the time of his birth, shepherds were grazing their flocks in the fields—something they would not have been doing at night in late December. (Luke 2:8) Rather, the Scriptures indicate that Jesus was born about October 1. The Bible Students also realized that the so-called wise men who visited Jesus about two years after his birth were pagan magi.\*

### A New Name

<sup>14</sup> In 1931 a bright flash of truth revealed to those Bible Students a fitting Scriptural name. Jehovah's people had understood that they could not accept any of the nicknames that others had given them, such as Russellites, Millennial Dawnists, and "no

\* In time, it was seen that if the most important birth that ever took place could not be celebrated, we should not celebrate any birthday. Besides, neither the Israelites nor the early Christians celebrated birthdays. The Bible mentions only two birthdays, one of Pharaoh and the other of Herod Antipas. Each celebration was marred by an execution. Jehovah's Witnesses do not celebrate birthdays because these observances have pagan origins and tend to exalt the ones having a birthday.—Genesis 40:20-22; Mark 6:21-28.

13. (a) What light was shed on Christmas celebrations? (b) Why were birthdays no longer celebrated? (Include footnote.)

14. Why did the name Bible Students not do justice to Jehovah's people?

hellers."\* But they also began to appreciate that the name that they themselves had taken—International Bible Students—did not do them justice. They were far more than just Bible students. Besides, there were ever so many others who were students of the Bible but who had nothing in common with the Bible Students.

<sup>15</sup> How did the Bible Students come to have a new name? For years *The Watch Tower* had been making the name of Jehovah prominent. Therefore, it was most appropriate that the Bible Students should adopt the name found at Isaiah 43:10: "You are my witnesses," is the utterance of Jehovah, 'even my servant whom I have chosen, in order that you may know and have faith in me, and that you may understand that I am the same One. Before me there was no God formed, and after me there continued to be none.'"

### Vindication and the "Great Crowd"

<sup>16</sup> In the second volume of *Vindication*, published by the Watch Tower Society in 1932, a flash of light revealed that the restoration prophecies recorded by Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and other prophets did not apply (as once thought) to the fleshly Jews,

\* This was a mistake made by a number of Christendom's denominations. Lutheran was a nickname that enemies of Martin Luther gave his followers, who then adopted it. Likewise, the Baptists adopted the nickname that outsiders had given them because they preached baptism by immersion. Somewhat similarly, Methodists adopted a name given them by an outsider. Concerning how the Society of Friends came to be called Quakers, *The World Book Encyclopedia* says: "The word *Quaker* was originally meant as an insult to Fox [the founder], who told an English judge to 'tremble at the Word of the Lord.' The judge called Fox a 'quaker.'"

15. What name did the Bible Students adopt in 1931, and why is it appropriate?

16. Why could the restoration prophecies not apply to the natural Jews' return to Palestine, but to whom do they apply?