

“The Customs of the People are Vain”

JER. x. 3.

AN ADDRESS

ON

“Christmas”

(With a Few Additions)

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At the Bible Study Centre, Forest Gate,

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**“Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of
darkness”** EPH. v. 11.

“The Customs of the People are Vain.”



Gal. iv. 1-20—read first.

IN Jer. x. the prophet speaks thus “Hear ye the word which the Lord speaketh unto you, O house of Israel. Thus saith the Lord, learn not the way of the heathen, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the heathen are dismayed at them. For the customs of the people are vain: for one cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman with an axe. They deck it with silver and with gold, they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not. They are upright as the palm tree and speak not, they must needs be borne, because they cannot go. Be not afraid of them for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good. Forasmuch as there is none like unto Thee, O Lord, Thou art great, and Thy Name is great in might. Who would not fear Thee O King of nations? for to Thee doth it appertain, forasmuch as among all the wise men of the nations, and in all their kingdoms, there is none like unto Thee.”

I think, dear friends, that it is to the glory of God this passage should be before us this evening. At first sight some may think, “What has it to do with Christmas?” We will accordingly consider its wider bearing first. Here we have a *general* Divine principle, which applies to a number of actions and a number of circumstances of our daily life. The heathen, as we know, had a system of idol-worship which not only worshipped gods of gold and silver, but was largely affected by the wondrous display that God has made in the starry heavens. We know how the stars were worshipped, even all the host of heaven, we know how men in their folly imagined all kinds of things as to the stars, they saw visions and images in the heavens, and they called them often by names as they pleased,

unmindful of the fact that the mighty God led forth the stars, —all being "parts of His ways." But men honoured the creature more than, or rather instead, of the Creator. In reference to such iniquity the prophets said, "Do not be dismayed at the signs of heaven, do not be those who are falling in with the customs of the people, whether the people worship the sun, moon and stars, or the idols which their hands have made." God is to be worshipped, God is to be exalted, and the general principle is this, that the people of the living God are to be a contrast with those among whom they are found. They are to be a contrast because of their relationship to God, and they are to avoid the various actions of folly which ignore Him. At the present time men have manifold manifestations of their iniquity and foolishness. The one who, settling down on this earth, leaves God out of his life is foolish. We think, for example, of that rich foolish one in the parable. But there are many others. And so this passage applies in its far-reaching extent, and says to the people of God, "Do not be like those who are so foolish, honour God, fear Him, trust Him, and be separate from the world." The principle is a wide one, and it affects the whole of our daily life, but beyond its general application, I think it specially refers to that which is now before us. We shall see later that Christmas is associated with the signs of heaven, associated with the heathenish worship of the heavenly host. We shall see, moreover, that in its origin it is entwined with a foolish and wicked idolatry, which included the very sin that is here mentioned prominently:—One cutteth a tree out of the forest, the "yule log" is the relic of this. Further, I am persuaded that in connexion with this subject, and all subjects, a stress on verse 7 is deeply important. People will say to us "What if Christmas is not the birthday of the Lord Jesus? There is no harm in keeping it." Beloved friends, that argument is peculiarly dangerous, because of its fascinating attractiveness. The man of this world delights to say, "I have done nobody any harm," and as to various customs and habits people are ever inclined to say, "There is no harm in them." The believer never has authority to degrade himself thus. I am not now dealing with the fact that there *is* harm in them—I want to go a step beyond that. A believer cannot degrade himself simply to think, "Is there no harm in this or that?"—It is his to look for positive good. He must find in the

action something that he can do to the glory of God, because it is so entirely in accord with the mind and will of God. When we realize God's greatness, as brought before us for example in verses 7, 10 and 12, do we not feel the awful iniquity, whereby men have dared to introduce into their professed worship of God things which He has not appointed, things which He has not approved, things which are out of harmony with His revealed character and revealed will? "Nadab and Abihu . . . offered strange fire before the Lord, which HE COMMANDED THEM NOT" (Lev. x. 1). Mark how the evil is described.

I am persuaded that a large number of the sins of the present day cannot be fought merely upon the question of their own character, but that we must go beneath the surface, and bring before those who are really bearing the Name of Christ, His *greatness* and His *glory* in such a way that they will dread to add to His Word, and dread to take from that Word. In an atmosphere of reverence toward God, half the difficulties which we encounter would be removed at once. There is too little of reverence for God. He is levelled down. Among many there is such a levelling down that they put the decrees of councils upon the level of the Word of God. Others dare to exalt their own opinions to the level of what God has said. Let the believer once realise that God is so much above man that there is no way from man to God except the way God has marked out in mercy, but that otherwise there is only an absolute contrast—let the believer realise this, and when he is dealing with worship, and the wondrous arrangements of daily life before God, he will feel he is on holy ground, and there is no room for speculation, curiosity, or human originating. We are not entitled to our own opinions when we are dealing with Him, Who is the Living God and the Everlasting King, before Whom the earth shall soon tremble, and Whose indignation the peoples of this earth shall not be able to abide. In the light of this, surely the customs of the people are vanity. I do not mean now that they are merely vanity in the sense in which everything *beneath* the sun is vanity of vanities, but, in a twofold degree, human religious appointments are vanity, the customs or the statutes of the people are vanity—and, remember this, that customs soon become statutes. If you conscientiously do not keep Christmas, you will soon find a sword of public opinion

against you. Opinions are a tyranny: and those who say they are entitled to their own opinions will tolerate everything except Truth. Truth is the most exclusive thing, and Truth is therefore the most excluded; but Truth stands—and Truth is the only important thing to the child of God. The statutes of the peoples are vain. Who are we that we should bow down to the theories of men? We will not worship the image which a Nebuchadnezzar or a Constantine has set up. We recollect how God marks out clearly in the Scripture the awful iniquity of following men, "for the statutes of Omri are kept, and all the works of the house of Ahab, and ye walk in their counsels, that I should make thee a desolation and the inhabitants thereof an hissing; therefore ye shall bear the reproach of My people." Furthermore, in the matter of worship, God is very definite. "In vain do they worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men." They worship: but if they are led by men in their arrangements, the worship is worthless. "IN VAIN" can be written across much of the gaudy ceremonial—aye, all the gaudy "ceremonial" of religious centuries. IN VAIN—because there is only One Who can teach that worship which is in Spirit and in Truth. Except a man be born from above, he cannot please God, any more than enter the Kingdom of God. God is a Spirit—and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth. But, beloved friends, the thought may be in some minds, "How can we know all these facts to which you allude with regard to Christmas?" I trust that the Lord will enable us to take a Scriptural view of them. An encyclopædia will doubtless indicate the evil origin, but I want to put history and experience quite secondary to-night. God teaches us by history, and teaches us by our own life-history, but, beyond all, we have the Scripture of Truth. "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, there is no daybreak for them."

May I, at the outset, urge that Christmas cannot be a matter of indifference to us. Either it is something precious to be kept, or something unholy to be refused. Such an arrangement cannot be unimportant. The believer must therefore ask himself, Is Christmas of God? or is it against God? In such a circumstance, there cannot be another alternative. We cannot have the unconcern of a Gamaliel, or the truthlessness of the priests in Matt. xxi. Is Christmas from

heaven, or of man? Let us not put aside the problem. Now the first thing we feel in this connexion is that if believers are to keep Christmas, God will have indicated it in the Scripture. Where is the name? Where is the date? Where is the observance? We can find God's plan for His people keeping the first day of the week in the present dispensation. Where is the authority for Christmas? Let it be produced, otherwise the words linger in our ears, that, if one adds to God's Book, there is peril ahead. It is not a light matter, it is not a matter of indifference, let me repeat it, we want Scriptural evidence, if we cannot find Scriptural evidence, we are afraid that there has been a tampering with God's revelation. It is a privilege to go back in our arrangements to the early church. It is fairly evident, from the pages of Scripture, that Christmas was not kept in the early church. Here then is a wedge of traditionalism. Do we desire something beyond the early church as to our arrangements in a matter like this? Here is something suspicious. We shall see, a little later on, *when* Christmas was originated, but the silence of Scripture is primarily eloquent to the child of God. But someone will say, "Is it not possible that though we have the absence of the exact keeping of Christmas, we have a principle that will guide us in favour of keeping it?" Not a word would I say against Scripture principles—rightly applied they are as strong as Scripture precepts, but we need great care in finding the principles, and applying the principles. Self's wishes must not have a voice first. We ask then—what principles govern us in the matter of worship? In the old dispensation they had days, weeks, months, years—not only did they have special feasts in the year, but sevens of years, and a jubilee in the 49th year. When we come to the later Scriptures, do we find Jubilees? Nay, do we find Sabbatical years for the Lord's people of the present time? Nay. Do we find yearly festivals? By no means. What do we find? Nothing of a grand temple, nothing of a grand ritual, but a gathering of God's dear people on the first day of the *week*. No other day can be found marked out as a special day, apart from the general command "Exhort one another daily." Every day to a child of God is a day for encouragement in the things of the Lord and of opportunity for witness. But when we come to a marking out of days, as Judaism had, there is only one day marked out. Surely, then, the first principle that meets us is that God, in

the present dispensation, is not dealing with long periods like a year. He is not dealing with a number of festivities and of days, but only with one. The first principle we have tells against Christmas. Do any Scriptures confirm our interpretation of the principle? Undoubtedly. Paul writing to the Galatians says, "Ye observe days and months and seasons and years, I AM AFRAID OF YOU." This at once suggests to our mind, "Have we any Scripture places where people observed unappointed days, and God approved of this?" We think of Christmas as nominally a birthday. Are there any Scripture birthdays? Yes, Pharaoh's birthday, and Herod's birthday—both stained with blood. Any other birthdays? Nay. These are the only ones so celebrated. Have we any anniversaries, not exactly birthdays? Yes. Paul emphasizes being in Jerusalem at the time of the feast of Pentecost. Now what was the feast of Pentecost? You will have noticed, beloved friends, that whereas Passover comes before us in the Gospels, Pentecost is specially emphasized in Acts, and Paul hastes, if possible, to be at Jerusalem the day of Pentecost. It was the anniversary of the birth of the church. On his journey to keep this anniversary, he is warned by the Holy Spirit not to go, but proceeds. On arrival, he compromises in a temple sacrifice, and is, for a long season, shut up from much active service. This is no recommendation for keeping anniversaries. Jeroboam in the earlier dispensation wanted a feast. His reason was this. The Jewish people went up to Jerusalem, he desired that the ten tribes should be kept from so doing, he would therefore appoint a feast of his own, which we are told was ordained from his own heart. The month he selected for himself, we are expressly told this, indeed there is a great stress upon the fact he chose the month (1 Kings xii. 33). He chose the 15th day, probably thinking of the temple arrangements at Jerusalem (Lev. xxiii. 39), but the 8th month. He had a seemingly good reason, doubtless, for this, he thought it would consolidate the kingdom. It was linked with his own priesthood, and his own arrangements. But, he may have argued, did not the Jews at Jerusalem, if they were a month late for Passover through not being clean, keep it the second month; why should he not have his Feast of Tabernacles the 15th day of the eighth month instead of having it in the seventh month? The idea had a seeming foundation, but the Holy Spirit speaks against THAT anni-

versary with no uncertain sound, and how often we are told of those who followed the way of Jeroboam, who "made Israel to sin." But the passage in Galatians to which I have referred, compared with that of Colossians ii., is the more striking because the days which the Galatians wished to observe were Jewish feasts, which had been originally appointed by God. Surely these would have a far stronger support than a Gentile feast appointed in demon worship.

If anything could be sanctified to the service of God now, surely the Jewish anniversaries would be more suitably adopted in the present dispensation, than the heathenish anniversaries, and yet the Holy Spirit condemns the so-called sanctifying of those Jewish anniversaries to-day. So the extension of the first principle that we meet is definitely against Christmas. I have already referred to John iv. and would like to say in this connexion that the Lord Jesus in speaking of worship says "Not at Jerusalem, nor on this mountain." It is not to be Jewish nor Samaritan, but in Spirit and in Truth. Here then is the setting aside of (shall I say?) "sacred places," in the present dispensation. Oh how important, beloved friends, how important that we should lay a stress upon this. There are not sacred places, except wherever God meets our souls and graciously enables us to walk with Him, but in this sense the workshop may become a sacred place, and everything may become sacred through communion. Of old God marked out a city. He has not marked out a city in this age. At the present time there is a Divine argument against sacred places. Now this suggests a similar thought to that which we have already had. Is it not remarkable that God has been pleased to blot out from man's knowledge the exact place where Christ was born in Bethlehem? to blot out the exact site of Calvary and the tomb whence He rose? Tradition has lighted on one place, explorers have suggested others, but no man knows the exact place. God has blotted out the knowledge. Our attachment, our faith, is not to places, not to dates, but to a Living Christ. In accord with this we find another argument against the observance of Christmas, for God has veiled the day when Christ was born. A human attempt to find out is, at least, suspicious. If God has however, not only veiled the day, but shewn it could not have been in certain months, to put it in those months is more than suspicious, it is, or was originally, defiant. Now God

has marked out, from John x., and Jer. xxxvi., that the month of December was winter in Palestine, when shepherds would not be watching their flocks by night in the field. Only of December has God marked this out in the pages of Scripture. Why has He marked out more than once that December was the cold month? There are no accidents to a believer; he sees, in all, his Father's wisdom. It is a serious thing to think to "change times." Antichrist will so develop his iniquity as Dan. vii. shows. A believer's true attitude is to be silent where God is silent. The secret things belong unto the Lord our God. We know that Christ was born, we know that Christ died. We know that He is risen, but we are not to seek in a fleshly way to know Him, 2 Cor. v. shows this. There were some in the early church who boasted of their knowledge of Christ in the flesh, and the apostle deals very definitely with that. Now the seeking after unrevealed knowledge, as to His birthday, comes perilously near such a sin. Again I would say, If GOD is silent, let His people be silent too. We may be sure there is a reason for the silence of Him Who has wrapped up such lessons in the brief, and largely "silent," account of Melchisedec, which is so precious explained by the Holy Spirit. Reverence God's silence, and never seek to intrude into it. But, beloved friends, if our Lord Jesus could not have been born in December, for the shepherds would not then be watching their flocks by night, Christmas is not only against Scripture in its principle of an anniversary, but it is a strange evidence of perversity. We ask ourselves, Why was that day adopted, and for this we must partly go to history,—not to see what is right from history, but to learn how men went wrong. We find that Chrysostom speaks of Christmas having been lately brought to the knowledge of those in his neighbourhood, and that was over 300 years after the death of Christ. One suspects, therefore, that the origin of "Christmas" cannot be taken back further than the beginning of the fourth century. Now what is the beginning of the fourth century? The time of Constantine. Who was Constantine? The one who, as Jeroboam, established a religion of his own. The one who, with sovereign power, sought to blend Christianity and Heathenism. But you know very well that if food and poison are mingled, the poison is the stronger. God condemns this Samaritan admixture. The emperor did not Christianize paganism, but he paganized Christianity.

You recollect how, in the fourth parable of Matt. xiii., we read, the woman took leaven, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened. One is very suspicious of “changing,” of altering, of developing. The changing of the day, to a season which it cannot occupy, must, in the light of this parable, sadden our hearts; and God has marked out that the whole effort of the evil one at that period was a changing. The woman appears on the scene as the symbol of a false church. Persecution was partly put on one side; it only produced martyrs whose testimony was stronger in death than in life. Satan adopted a flattering method—a uniting of the so-called church and the world; and so we have the woman of Matt. xiii., like the Jezebel of Rev. ii. and the Babylonianism of Rev. xvii. (*cf.* Zech. v.). Here is a saddening admixture. Beware of mixtures: let truth stand alone. What fellowship hath Christ with Belial? If Christmas is a feast of Belial, why should it be dignified with the Name of our beloved Lord? We dare not drag that Name in the filth of heathenism. We dare not bring Him down to the level of abominable iniquity—for the reason why a December 25th Christmas was adopted by men of the fourth century is that THEN there was a heathen feast. Among the Arabians, for example, at that time of the year, there was a feast in honour of THEIR great god. The Egyptians, too, had a feast then. At Rome the December feast was that of the Saturnalia, a feast which was observed during a period of about five days. A feast of carnival licentiousness; a feast in which there was drunkenness and wickedness of every kind. Yet, sad to relate, just as many professing believers at the present time associate themselves with the festivals and the enjoyments and the companionships and the societies of the world—so then, some professing believers wished to keep something of these feasts. There are those who, while bearing the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ in the twentieth century, would still venture into theatres, and more than questionable places of amusement. They know nothing of the way in which Christ satisfies, else they would not seek their pleasures in things that dishonour Him. Thus we must acknowledge that professing Christians were inclined toward the heathen feasts. Here was Satan’s opportunity. While condemning, let us search ourselves. Even real believers to-day sometimes so spend part of their time that the world

naturally concludes they are not fully satisfied with Christ—that they want some blend of earthly pleasures with Christ. The believer should never lay himself open to this taunt. He should humbly make manifest that he finds his all in the Lord. A life of devotion, in the power of the Holy Spirit, is a real witness. But to return to history—it was natural that on such an occasion there should be an attempt to blend. In the same manner as at the present-day some nominal places of worship have adopted concerts and cinematographs—making their buildings into second-rate places of amusement—so the professing Christians of the fourth century adopted the heathen arrangements, albeit modified them a little, and thus, one may presume, thought to retain their young people, and thought to strengthen their position; but God gave *no* warrant for this, and God was *not* pleased.

Here is the origin of Christmas:—A heathen feast before the birth of Christ, linked with the worship of the sun god—as we know there is a lengthening of the day, the rising of the sun earlier on December 25th—a heathen feast before the time of Christ, linked with the worship of the sun god, dragged through the mire of profligate heathenism, during all the periods of rebellion against God which have broken over this earth; and then, in that age when nominal Christianity was prostituted and adulterated with heathenism, Christmas was "adopted."

If there *were* any authority in Scripture for the keeping of a day in memory of the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, and if we *could* choose the day for ourselves, the one day we should leave out most of all would be the day which was the "birth" of the sun-god! We have seen there is no authority for keeping *any* day at all, except every day. Every day we remember our beloved Lord—but if there were an authority to make an anniversary, here is the worst day, if I might so characterize it, and yet the observance has penetrated nominal christendom through all the years since that dark fourth century. And the way in which union and fellowship, apart from Christ, and so-called joy in pleasure, apart from Christ, characterize the observance, even now must betray its Babylonian home. But someone will say, "Can we not sanctify things that are heathenish? Is it not wise to lay hold of them, and rescue them from their heathenish surroundings?" Beloved friends, just as when God saves a sinner, he gives a

new creation, and our rescuing from a heathenish surrounding is worse than a poor counterfeit, so in this matter, we must wait till God rescues any day from a heathenish surrounding before we keep it. If GOD had done so in this connexion He would have created it new, but MEN can only develop, and they have no warrant thus to do. But has God been pleased to act in this way? We go back to the arrangements for Israel. The heathen worshipped toward the east. Did God arrange a Tabernacle with the worship toward the east, that they might learn the desirability of sanctifying that to which the heathen were brought up? No. The sanctuary faced the west, God gave his contrast, not His development of heathenism, nor His modification of it, but His contrast. Were the heathen worshipping under their groves? God particularly appointed that there was not to be this arrangement near His altars (Deut. xvi. 21). He did not sanctify heathenism, but He demanded and demands a real and definite contrast. So is it ever. Thus the principle of Scripture again stands out definitely against this wrongly-adopted feast. We could recognise that many dear believers who in some measure observe it to-day are, as probably we all were in the past, ignorant of its true character, and the good Lord pardons wondrously His people who desire to please Him, when in ignorance, they make many mistakes. Never for one moment would we condemn *persons* with anything of pride, or anything of contempt. It is only mercy if our eyes have been opened, and we should go softly all our days. Boasting never befits a child of God, and never will, except—“he that boasteth in the Lord, let him keep on boasting.”

The believer needs to realise and recognise more and more fully, more and more definitely, more and more earnestly, how grateful he should be for every measure of Divine instruction, and how tender he should be to every one who bears the Name of the Lord Jesus. We cannot be too gracious to weak believers, but we need to be very firm against error and false teaching, we must not yield to that for a moment: if any will cling to their errors, we cannot approve of their errors to please them, for if we pleased men we should not be the servants of Christ. And, moreover, while believers—*young* believers—are being helped to compromise and stumble by this evil custom, with its evil pleasure-loving, how can we be silent, through fear of offending?

Therefore, with loving concern for God's glory, we would say, Christmas is without any Scriptural warrant. The observance of any special day or anniversary is against Scriptural principles for the present dispensation. God has veiled the exact time when our beloved Lord was born. December 25th is a heathen feast, and Christ could not have been born then. Our only true attitude is, accordingly, entire separation from every observance, even to the bare extent of sending a "Christmas card" or wishing a "happy Christmas," or using mottoes so as not to appear singular. Though we desire to be *happy* in the Lord every day, we cannot adopt the mongrel word "Christmas," and associate that with happiness. We must have painful reminders in relation to that day, and in connection with its name and nature, of the sad intermarriage between the professing things of God, and the things of the world. I say the *professing* things of God, for the Christianity of the fourth century before Christmas was adopted was not the Christianity of the first. Things had sunk very low before there was the *readiness* for the amalgamation. There was a departure from God, ere it was possible to consummate this harlotry. Various circumstances led up to it gradually, until Christmas arrived at the very time when there was a signal opportunity for the evil one, and thus there seemed a fulfilment of that which was marked in the third epistle of Revelation ii. Pergamum brings before us a *king* and a false prophet, who had power over the people of God with regard to a feast (Num. xxv.). May the Lord give us grace to bear a sorrowful, painful, prayerful and intense witness against this, and every form of evil, seeking to combine our protest with a spiritual godliness of life, that so we may honour Him Whose Name we bear, and live to the praise of the glory of His grace in Whom we are accepted, though by nature poor worthless sinners, and only quickened by infinite grace, that any other object in life but the honour of our Lord should be foreign, aye and hateful to our hearts.