

# The History of Christmas

Early Europeans believed in evil spirits, witches, ghosts and trolls. As the Winter Solstice approached, with its long cold nights and short days, many people feared the sun would not return. Special rituals and celebrations were held to welcome back the sun.

In Scandinavia during the winter months the sun would disappear for many days. When the first light of the sun was seen again a great festival would be held, called the Yuletide. Great bonfires would also be lit to celebrate the return of the sun. In some areas people would tie apples to branches of trees to remind themselves that spring and summer would return.

The Roman's also had a festival at this time of the year. They celebrated their god Saturn. The festival was called Saturnalia and it began in the middle of December and ended on January 1st. The Romans decorated their halls with garlands of laurel and green trees lit with candles. With cries of "Jo Saturnalia!" the celebration would include masquerades in the streets, big festive meals, visiting friends, and the exchange of good-luck gifts called Strenae.



"Jo Saturnalia!" was a fun and festive time for the Romans, but the Christians though it an abomination to honor any pagan god. As Christianity spread they were alarmed by the continuing celebration of pagan customs, like Saturnalia among their converts. At first the Church forbid this kind of celebration. But it was to no avail. Eventually it was decided that the celebration would be changed and made into a celebration fit for the Christian Son of God, Jesus Christ.

And so Christians began to celebrate "Christmas" in order to compete against the pagan celebrations of December. The Church eventually was successful in taking the merriment, lights, and gifts from the Saturnalia festival and bringing them to the celebration of Christmas.

Ironically, the exact day of the Christ child's birth has never been pinpointed. In 350 AD a Bishop of Rome, Julius I, choose December 25th as the observance of the birth of Christ.