

# Celebrating Birthdays

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An air of excited expectation hovers in the room. A dozen or more guests, replete with party hats and favors, sit around a long dining-room table laden with gift-wrapped presents and a decorated cake. Six shining candles—five and one to grow on—await the extinguishing breath of the young child seated at the place of honor. The now-five-year-old Mary takes a huge breath, silently makes her wish and blows for all she's worth until only little streams of smoke arise from the candle wicks.

Everyone claps and sounds their noisemakers. In seconds, the children are screaming for cake and ice cream, while their parents smile and say how cute the birthday girl is in her new outfit. After wolfing down their dessert, the guests exclaim, "Cool!" and "Awesome!" as Mary opens her many gifts.

Soon, they are all distracted by the arrival of Bertram the Clown and his trick dog, Winfred. The children sit mesmerized by their performance. Bertram is not only funny, but he also sings silly songs and makes balloon animals. Winfred can jump through a hoop and stand on both his front legs and his back legs. He even does math, barking the answers! The pair is a hit with the kids.

The party is all over in an hour or two, except for the clean up. What a wonderful day it has been for Mary!

Really?

Are birthday celebrations as harmless as they seem? Certainly, they are fun, but what are we teaching our children by throwing birthday parties for them? Are the long-term effects good or evil? Do they help or hinder the growth of a child's character? What implications do birthday celebrations have on their relationship with God?

## **Biblical Examples**

The Bible notes only two birthday celebrations, one in the Old Testament, one in the New. It should be instructive to review them because the way the Bible colors events indicates God's thoughts on a matter. Though the subject of birthday celebrations is never broached directly, it is mentioned as a detail in two negative vignettes.

We find the first occurrence in Genesis 40, in the account of the dreams of Pharaoh's butler and baker. After hearing these men's dreams, Joseph tells them that within three days the king will restore the butler to his office but hang the baker (Genesis 40:9-13, 16-19). "On the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday" (Genesis 40:20), the king did just as Joseph had predicted. The day ended badly, not only with the death of the baker, but also with Joseph having to languish in prison for another "two full years" (Genesis 40:22-41:1).

The New Testament occurrence appears in Matthew 14:1-12 and Mark 6:14-29. Herod holds a feast on his birthday and is so pleased by the dancing of his step-daughter that he promises to give her

anything she desires. Her mother, Herodias, instructs her to demand the head of John the Baptist, as revenge for his condemnation of her marriage to Herod. Though regretful, Herod orders the execution, feeling bound by his oaths and pressured by his guests (Mark 6:26-27).

One birthday celebration ends with a hanging and a servant of God locked in prison, and the other with the corruption of a young girl and the death of one of God's greatest prophets, the Elijah to come (see Matthew 11:11, 14). The major lesson in each of these events is certainly not about birthdays per se, but we cannot escape the fact that God puts birthday celebrations in an evil light through the details of these stories.

A spiritual lesson that can be drawn here is that, when seen in a larger context, birthday celebrations in no way enhance the purpose God is working out and may even play a role in hindering the salvation He is bringing to mankind (Psalm 74:12; see John 6:29).

Some might argue that birthday celebrations are only cultural affairs. But knowing that Satan is the god of this world (II Corinthians 4:4), and the whole world lies under his sway (I John 5:19), should we not at least examine their appropriateness to a Christian's life? At the very least, these biblical examples show that birthday celebrations seem to bring out and reinforce the darker side of human nature.

Obviously, the people of the Bible at least marked their birthdays because Scripture often records their ages. However, there is a wide gulf between marking a day and celebrating it. One acknowledges its passing while the other honors it. The biblical record shows no man or woman of God celebrating a birthday. Thus, birthday celebrations do not have a God-ordained origin.

One could even say a birthday celebration goes against God's instruction in Ecclesiastes 7:1, where Solomon writes, "The day of death [is better] than the day of one's birth." God's perspective on this matter, as in all things, is far higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8-9). He has more joy when we leave this world, having overcome it, than when we enter it (see Isaiah 57:1-2; Philippians 1:21-23). God's perspective seems to be, "Why celebrate the day all your troubles began? Far better to celebrate the day they ended in victory!"

### **A Spiritual Principle**

Let's look at this subject from another angle. A basic spiritual principle answers any questions regarding the celebration of birthdays. Paul states it very simply in I Corinthians 10:31:

Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

In all our activities, our emphasis should be on honoring God, rather than ourselves.

Since birthday celebrations encourage the glorification of the self and promote "self-centeredness" rather than "God-centeredness," birthday celebrations transgress this principle. If we are truly striving to instill godly character into our children, birthday parties are not a good option.

In a radio interview with a former Satan worshipper, the interviewer asked, "What is the most important day after Halloween to a Satan worshipper?" The answer is eye-opening! He said, "Your own birthday!" We know that everything Satan does is contrary to God's way. Satan opposes God in every thought and despises all godly things. If he initiates something, the result is wickedness. By

promoting birthday celebrations, Satan, the Great Deceiver (Revelation 12:9), deceives people into exalting themselves so he can de-emphasize the great God.

Birthdays promote the idea that we have achieved something worthwhile, when in fact life is a gift from God. King Solomon, speaking of man in general, writes of "the days of his life *which God gives him* under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 8:15). A birthday celebration takes credit away from God, redirecting it to a physical human being. Birthday celebrations rob God of the honor and glory He is due as Creator and Sustainer of life.

Moses records:

The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7).

Man made no effort in his creation; he *is* the creation. Nevertheless, human beings redirect the credit and glory to themselves, which is simply a form of idolatry. We have been called and set apart to worship the Creator, but those who are still carnal worship the creation (Romans 1:25).

### **Gift-Giving**

At birthday parties, gift-giving is usually a central part of the celebration. Guests give gifts to the creation instead of the Creator, showing honor to an undeserving recipient. What have humans ever done to merit such rewards, honor and praise? Surely, attaining one more year of age is not such an achievement! Spiritual gifts such as praise and thankfulness should go to God for all of His wonderful creations, as well as for the many gifts He gives.

Satan uses this common practice to de-emphasize God's greatness and worthiness. Jesus gives us the proper perspective:

How can you believe, who receive honor from one another, and do not seek the honor that comes from the only God? (John 5:44).

In the end, only the honor and praise that God gives us are of any eternal importance.

Generally, though, giving gifts is not wrong. James describes God the Father as the Giver of "every good gift and every perfect gift" (James 1:17), and He gives His children many gifts and talents throughout their lives. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commends parents for giving good gifts to their children (Matthew 7:11). In many places the Bible instructs us to imitate and grow in the character traits of God.

The context of Jesus' remarks in Matthew 7, however, hints at providing for their needs, not fulfilling their lusts or lavishing them with undeserved "loot." As Herbert Armstrong would say, doing so only teaches and reinforces the "get" way that Satan promotes. Knowing when and why to give a gift to another is the key. A gift should always serve to edify the recipient and should never perpetuate an existing problem like greed, covetousness, envy or self-pity. Giving a gift simply because time has passed is not among the best of reasons.

Celebrating birthdays with parties and gifts emphasizes the "selfish" way of life. However, acknowledging a loved one's birthday and letting him know that he was remembered can be a

"thinking of you" type of warm gesture that can be encouraging if done properly. Sending an uplifting card, calling on the telephone or a personal visit would not be inappropriate, especially to those who are elderly, live alone or reside far away.

But God's spiritual principles should not be compromised. If we feel that a wrong spirit pervades any kind of celebration, we should not be part of it or condone it by our presence and participation.

### **Wrong Attitudes**

The apostle Paul writes in Galatians 6:3, "For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he *deceives* himself." The word "deceives" in this verse is the Greek word *phrenapateo*, meaning "to mislead after having been misled by a seducer." Satan, the seducer, misleads man in any way he can, and one of his subtle methods is the pride and selfishness that birthday celebrations promote. Once a man is misled by Satan, he becomes a misleader himself, leading others down the road to destruction.

Celebrating birthdays at first glance may look like a harmless, innocent celebration, but it still promotes wrong attitudes. Along with self-centeredness, it also encourages self-exaltation or pride.

Jesus Christ said, "And whoever exalts himself will be abased [humiliated], and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Matthew 23:12). Satan uses pride to combat humility because he knows that pride and humility cannot co-exist. Pride replaces humility unless we actively fight against it.

The apostle Paul says:

For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith" (Romans 12:3).

Here, he admonishes us not to esteem ourselves too much, an attitude that leads to vanity and arrogance.

Yet, is that not what is being pushed in our society today? A central premise in education and childrearing is instilling self-esteem in our youth, supposedly to give them confidence and motivation to succeed in life. There is no surer method to produce competition and strife! The Word of God, on the other hand, teaches us:

Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself" (Philippians 2:3).

This latter attitude produces peace, cooperation and unity.

A birthday party places all the attention on one individual, upon whom is bestowed attention, praise, honor and gifts. What a boost to the self-esteem! A young child, without wisdom and maturity, might come to expect—even demand—such attention, which could evolve into self-centeredness. Obviously, this could lead to grave, eternal consequences.

A true Christian is God-centered rather than self-centered and gives honor to Him rather than himself. We look forward to a new birth as spirit members of the Kingdom of God rather than back at an imperfect physical life. Why would we want to celebrate an inferior physical birth?

We will not even celebrate our "birth" as spirit beings at the resurrection. We (as the bride) will attend the *marriage* supper with Jesus Christ, the Bridegroom. We will not be celebrating our birth as spirit beings but our union with our God, Elder Brother and King. God does not even ask us to celebrate the birth of His own Son but rather His death! We do this each year at Passover (I Corinthians 11:26).

As quoted earlier, Paul's words sum up our approach to our every action: "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, *do all to the glory of God*" (I Corinthians 10:31). Everything we do should bring dignity, honor, glory, praise, and worship to the great and almighty God of the universe! If what we do fails this test, avoid it.