

# OpenTheo

## Who Was St. Nicholas?

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### **Life and Books and Everything** - Clearly Reformed

With what little we know about St. Nicholas, it is safe to say he would not be pleased to know he had eclipsed Christ in the hearts of many as the central figure of Christmas. In this episode, Kevin reads from his article in The Gospel Coalition about the life and legacy of St. Nicholas.

### **Transcript**

[MUSIC] Greetings and salutations as is life and books and everything I'm Kevin DeYoung. Today, I'm reading an article I wrote this years ago and I've posted it a number of times, but it's evergreen, I think, and is appropriate, especially on December 6th, which is a great book. Which is a traditional day for remembering and celebrating St. Nicholas to ask the question, who was St. Nicholas? The unsatisfying answer to the title of this article is that nobody knows for sure.

To quote one Nicholas Scholar, we can grant a bishop of that name who had a great impact on his homeland. We can also accept December 6th as the day of his death and burial. These are all the facts we can hold to.

Further, we cannot go. According to the best estimates, Nicholas was born around AD 280 in Patara in Asia Minor. He later became Bishop of Myra in modern-day Turkey.

Nicholas, it seems, died about 343 on or near December 6th. There's no record of his existence attested in any document until the 6th century. By that time, Nicholas, whoever he had been, was already famous.

The Emperor Justinian dedicated a church to him in Constantinople. Initially, Nicholas was most well known in the East, but by 900, a Greek wrote, "The West as well as the East, a claims and glorifies him. Wherever there are people his name is revered and churches are built in his honor.

All Christians reverence his memory and call upon his protection." In 1087, Italian sailors stole his supposed relics and took them from Myra to Bari, Italy. This move greatly

increased his popularity in Europe and made Bari one of the most crowded pilgrimage sites. It is said that Nicholas was represented by medieval artists more than any other saint except Mary.

Why was Nicholas so famous? It's impossible to tell fact entirely from fiction, but this is some of the legend of St. Nicholas. He was reputed to be a wonder worker who brought children back to life, destroyed pagan temples, saved sailors from death at sea, and as an infant nursed only two days a week and fasted the other five days. Moving from probable legend to possible history, we can say Nicholas was honored for enduring persecution.

It is said that he was imprisoned during the empire-wide persecution under Diocletian and Maximeon. Upon his release in return, the people flocked around him. "Nicolas, Confessor St. Nicholas has come home," they said.

Nicholas was also hailed as a defender of Orthodoxy. Later, some sources claim he was in attendance at the Council of Nicaea. According to tradition, he was a staunch opponent of Arianism, writing five centuries after his death, one biographer said, "Thanks to the teaching of St. Nicholas, the metropolis of Myra alone was untouched by the filth of the Arian heresy, which it firmly rejected as a death-dealing poison." Stories of his courage abound, one claiming, that Nicholas traveled to Nicaea, and upon arrival promptly slapped Arius in the face.

As the story goes, the rest of the Council was shocked and appalled, so much so that they were going to remove Nicholas from his bishopric, until Jesus and Mary appeared to defend him. According to the same legend, this apparition changed the minds of the delegates who quickly recanted of their outrage. She might have guessed Nicholas was also revered for being a generous gift-giver.

Born into a wealthy family, he inherited the fortune when his parents died. Apparently, he gave his vast fortune away. The most famous story involved three girls who were so destitute that they were going to be forced into a life of prostitution, but Nicholas threw three bags of gold through the window as dowries for the young women.

Over time, St. Nicholas became the patron saint of nations like Russia and Greece, cities like Freiburg and Moscow, and of children, sailors, unmarried girls, merchants, and pawnbrokers. The three gold balls hung outside pawn shops are symbolic of the three bags of gold. In honor of St. Nicholas, the gift-giver, Christians began to celebrate December 6, his feast day, by giving presents.

The tradition developed over time. For good boys and girls, St. Nicholas would come in his red bishop's robe and fill boots with gifts on the night of December 5. For bad boys and girls, St. Nicholas was to be feared. In highly Catholic parts of Europe, St. Nicholas became a deterrent to airing young children.

In Germany, he was often accompanied by "necked ruprecht," farm-hand rupert, who threatened to eat misbehaving children. In Switzerland, St. Nicholas threatened to put wicked children in a sack and bring them back to the Black Forest. In the Netherlands, St. Nicholas's helper would tie them in a sack and bring them back to Spain.

In parts of Austria, the priest dressed up in Christmas garb would visit the homes of naughty children and threaten them with rod beatings. At least nowadays, he only checks a list. Not surprisingly, the reformers were less than friendly towards the traditions that had been built up around the Saints.

Luther rejected the Saints' days, believing they were built upon legends and superstitions, and a virulent strain of moralism, we might add. In Germany, Luther replaced St. Nicholas's day with a different holiday, Christ Child, or Christ Kindle. Ironically, Chris Kringle, which derived from Luther's Christ Child holiday, has become just another name for St. Nicholas.

And though Luther's intention was to replace Chris Kringle for St. Nicholas. The call to St. Nicholas virtually disappeared in Protestant Europe with the exception of one country. The Netherlands, if you love Christmas with all the trappings of Santa Claus and stockings in presence, thank the Dutch.

If you despise all that, then try to ignore my last name, "Diang Dutch" for the time being. The Puritans had done away with St. Nicholas and banned Christmas altogether, but the Dutch held onto their tradition and brought it with them to the New World. In the Netherlands, St. Nicholas was contracted to "Centerclause".

According to Dutch tradition, "Centerclause rides a horse and is accompanied by his helper Svoorte Pete or Black Pete. Many consider Black Pete a racist stereotype derived from slavery, although others claim he is black because he goes down the chimney and gets a face full of soot. At any rate, it is easy to see how "Centerclause" evolved in America to Santa Claus.

Santa Claus became the Santa we know in the United States only after the poem, "Twas the Night Before Christmas" was written in 1823. Possibly the best known verses ever written by an American, the poem has greatly influenced the tradition of Santa in the English-speaking world and beyond. How should Christians then relate to the traditions of Santa Claus? C.S. Lewis embraced them, and so included Father Christmas in the Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.

Other Christians fearing syncretisms stay clear of Santa, reindeer, and a tree full of presents. I'll leave it to you and your family to form your opinions on observing the Christmas holiday, C. Romans 14. But if Santa Claus is everywhere already, why not use him to your benefit and talk about the real St. Nicholas? We don't know a lot about him, but we know he was a real and much revered person.

According to legend, one of those stories that probably isn't true but should be, when Nicholas was a little boy, he would get up early to go to church and pray. One morning, the aging priest had a vision that the first one to enter the church the next day would be the new Bishop of Myra. When Nicholas was the first to enter, the old priest obeying the vision made the young boy Bishop right on the spot.

But before he consecrated Nicholas, the priest asked him a question. "Who are you, my son?" According to tradition, the child, whose legend would one day become Santa Claus, replied, "I am Nicholas the sinner." Not a bad answer for a little boy. With what little we know about St. Nicholas, it is safe to say he would not be pleased to know he had eclipsed Christ in the hearts of many as the central figure of Christmas.

For the Bishop of Myra no doubt knew the angel's words to Joseph. Mary will give birth to a son. You are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.

So this Christmas, give gifts if you like, we will in our family, receive them all with thanksgiving. But do not forget what we need most, salvation through substitution. This is one gift the real St. Nicholas would not have overlooked.

[Music]

(buzzing)