

The Sordid History of Valentine's Day

Written by Brett Gray

Today, much of the world marks February 14th as St. Valentine's Day, the "Hallmark holiday" of love, roses, chocolates, and poems. Oh, and don't forget Cupid, the winged baby who shoots arrows into the hearts of men and women, causing them to fall in love.

But where did this holiday come from?

The name comes from three fellows the Catholic Church dubbed "St. Valentine," all of whom are thought to have been beheaded. Legends and folktales notwithstanding, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* confesses that virtually nothing is known about any of them.

Clearly, the name has nothing to do with the day. It's a disguise for something else.

As for the February date, the ancient Romans celebrated a fertility festival called Lupercalia about the same time, on February 15th, at which they honored their deities Juno and Faunus. Cupid, one of the chief symbols of Valentine's Day, was the Roman god of erotic love and sexual attraction, a counterpart of the Greek Eros (from which comes the word "erotic").

At Lupercalia, two orders of Roman priests gathered at a cave, butchered a dog along with some goats, and burned them on the altars of Juno and Faunus. The priests, standing naked, smeared each other with the red blood and washed it off with white milk. The Vestal Virgins participated in the ceremony by offering meal cakes to Juno.

Following this wicked ceremony, the Roman priests cut the goat's hide into strips called *februa*, from which comes the name February, and ran naked through the streets. Plutarch observed, "At this time many of the noble youths and of the magistrates run up and down through the city naked, for sport and laughter striking those they meet with shaggy thongs. And many women of rank also purposely get in their way, and like children at school present their hands to be struck, believing that the pregnant will thus be helped to an easy delivery, and the barren to pregnancy" (Plutarch, *The Life of Julius Caesar*, 61:2-3).

The Roman goddess Juno paralleled the Greek Hera, the queen of the gods. Like other deities, Juno wore a goatskin. In fact, goats permeated Lupercalia ceremonies, but more on that in a moment.

Now, as we've previously observed, pagan religions all over the world resemble each other, for Satan authored them all. Thus, when God's Word condemns the heathen practices of the Canaanites and the Israelites, it condemns rituals that mirror Greek and Roman mythology.

In the Book of Jeremiah, God rebuked the Jews for making cakes to the queen of heaven: "The children gather wood, the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes for the queen of heaven; and they pour out drink offerings to other gods, that they may provoke Me to anger" (Jer. 7:18).

As for Faunus, the other Roman deity honored at Lupercalia, he was a horned goat deity like the Greek Pan. The Greeks and Romans considered Pan/Faunus to be the patron deity of shepherds and flocks, and portrayed him as half man, half goat. In addition, the Romans associated Faunus with demonic creatures called fauns or satyrs, which were also half man, half goat.

What of these goat deities? God's Word warned us about them, too. In Lev. 17:7, God commanded His people, "No longer shall they sacrifice their sacrifices to hairy goat-demons after whom they have been prostituting" (*Concordant Literal Version*). Yet centuries later, when King Jeroboam led Israel into idolatry, he offered sacrifices to these same goat-demons (2 Chron. 11:15; Strong's # H8163).

Like the Israelites, many "Christians" found heathen customs very alluring. Centuries after Rome had supposedly converted to Christianity, "Christians" continued to celebrate Lupercalia. Toward the end of the 5th century AD, Pope Gelausius I finally persuaded the Roman Senate to stop sanctioning it. About the same time, he proclaimed February 14th to be "St. Valentine's Day" instead.

After this, we're left with a gap in the historical record. Lupercalia disappears from the records of medieval festivals, and nothing seems to be known of early Valentine's Day customs. Yet, when Valentine's Day resurfaces, it appears to preserve much of the Lupercalia tradition.

In the 14th century AD, Geoffrey Chaucer and three other English poets wrote poems associating Valentine's Day with love. Chaucer's poem in particular, the "Parliament of Fowls," speaks as if the association of Valentine's Day with love was already common knowledge.

The animal sacrifices of Lupercalia had, of course, ceased by this time. But the association of the day with romantic and sexual love harkens back to the old Roman fertility rites. Even the colors of Valentine's Day, red and white, harken back to the red blood and white milk of the Lupercalia ceremony.

And remember Cupid, the Valentine's Day mascot? The Roman god of erotic love and sexual attraction? The winged child or baby armed with a bow and arrows? He's scarcely changed from Roman days.

Like so many modern holidays, Valentine's Day preserves old pagan ways God condemned, wrapped up in modern hedonism and consumerism. The date of Valentine's Day, its association with romantic love and sexual desire, and all its symbolism stem from paganism. It's a holiday presided over, even to this day, by a pagan Roman deity.

Is Valentine's Day something that God's people should celebrate? Should we indulge in the customs of the heathen? Should we honor the pagan gods, Satan and his demons, as long as we do so in a playful manner? I think not!

“What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. Therefore, come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you” (2 Cor. 6:15-16, 17).

© 2023 by Brett Gray. This work may be redistributed and reproduced in whole or in part, provided that proper attribution is given to the author.