

Are Christmas Trees Idolatrous?

Or Perennial Pointers to Jesus?

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 10:7, 14, 31

Sermon Series: *Christmas*

Topic: Christmas Trees, Idolatry

Introduction

The question we want to consider this morning is, Are Christmas trees idolatrous? Or are they perennial pointers to Jesus?

Our great city of Boston has an incredible history. You may not know that part of that history includes outlawing the celebration of Christmas. In 1659 the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and his fellow Puritan lawmakers enacted the following law,



For preventing disorders arising in several places within this jurisdiction, by reason of some still observing such festivals as were superstitiously kept in other countries, to the great dishonor of God and offense of others, it is therefore ordered by this Court and the authority thereof, that whosoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas or the like, either by forbearing of labor, feasting, or any other way, upon such accounts as aforesaid, every such person so offending shall pay for every such offense five shillings, as a fine to the country.¹

A fine of five shillings would equate to about \$48 today.² This ban remained on the books until 1681 when it was overturned by governor Edmund Andros. Consider that. The celebration Christmas was outlawed in Boston for 22 years! It is amazing to think that the idea of celebrating Christmas was so offensive that a law prohibiting it was able to be passed in the legislature.

¹ *Records of Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay*, Vol. IV - Part I (1650-1660) ed. Nathaniel B. Shurtleff (Boston: William White Press, 1854), 366. Source <https://archive.org/details/cu31924091024590/page/n5/mode/2up> accessed 11 December 2025.

² Source: <https://www.mass.gov/news/massachusetts-law-banning-christmas> accessed 10 December 2025.

Why Was Christmas Banned?

Why? Why was Christmas outlawed? There are essentially two reasons that flowed out of a Puritan passion for holiness in all of life. The first reason had to do with what the celebration had become in the 1600-1700's. The second had to do with the celebrations's questionable origin. First, Christmas was banned because, over the course of time, *it increasingly had nothing to do with Jesus, and everything to do with partying*. Sadly the celebration had become something quite different from the original intent of the day. At the time of the ban, the behavior of average persons had in Boston become quite shocking and sinful, even by today's standards. This season was not a season of kindness and charity, but rather it was "a season of *misrule*,"³ marked by,

...rowdy public displays of excessive eating and drinking, the mockery of established authority, aggressive begging (often involving the threat of doing harm), and even the invasion of wealthy homes.⁴

In 1712 Cotton Mather (1663-1728), minister at Old North Meeting House in Boston, described it this way,

[T]he Feast of Christ's Nativity is spent in Reveling, Dicing, Carding, Masking, and in all Licentious Liberty... by Mad Mirth, by long Eating, by hard Drinking, by lewd Gaming, by rude Reveling...⁵



This problem existed not only in the "New England," but also in old. In 1725 the Rev. Henry Bourne of Newcastle, England wrote, "the way most people commonly behaved during Christmas season... a Scandal to Religion, and an encouraging of Wickedness."⁶ He went on to explain that for the vast majority of people Christmas was nothing more than "a pretense for Drunkenness, and Rioting, and Wantonness."⁷ The situation was so grave that the House of Lords and Commons in Parliament passed an ordinance in December 1644 stopping short of banning Christmas, but issuing a call "for the better observation... of the Feast of the Nativity of Christ, Thorowout the Kingdome of England and the Dominion of Wales," ordering,

...more solemn humiliation... remembrance of our sinnes, and the sinnes of our forefathers, who have turned this Feast, pretending the memory of Christ into an extreame forgetfulnesse of him, by giving liberty to carnall and sensuall delights, being

³ Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996) Apple Books, chapter 1.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

contrary to the life which Christ himselfe led here upon earth, and to the spirituall life of Christ in our soules...⁸

Sin and sacrilege surrounding the celebration of Christ's birth was so rampant that something had to be done. Thus, the whole lot of Christmas was done away with. This aversion to celebrating Christmas lasted among Christians until the mid-1800's and in some segments of the Christian church, it remains to this day.

Are Christmas Trees Idolatrous?

I suspect this lingering sense that something is wrong with how Christmas is celebrated stands behind the fact that almost every year about this time I get a few questions about Christmas. Particularly frequent are questions about Christmas trees. This brings us to the second reason that stood behind the Puritan banning of Christmas, which is essentially *the question of the origin of Christmas*. There are many who believe and have been taught that the origin of Christmas is pagan and steeped in idolatry. Thus, should we set up Christmas trees? *Are they not idolatrous remnant from a pagan past?*

Christians Should Flee Idolatry

If Christmas trees are idolatrous, then certainly we should join our Puritan parents and forsake the idolatrous things. In my daily Scripture reading, this past week, I read the following from the apostle Paul, who wrote to the Corinthians,

⁷ Do not be idolaters as some of them were... ⁸ ...and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents... ¹¹ Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction... ¹⁴ ...flee from idolatry.
1 Corinthians 10:7-14 (ESV)

³¹ So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.
1 Corinthians 10:31 (ESV)

Certainly as we recall the history of Israel, we see clearly that *idolatry is a serious sin*. Christians ought not be idolatrous in any way. We ought to "*flee idolatry*" in every way. We must be willing to fling far from us anything in our lives that is idolatrous. We must do all that we do to the glory of God. There are many who claim that Christmas trees are idolatrous and that Christians should have nothing to do with them. If Christmas trees are inherently idolatrous, then Christians should "flee from" them. If they do not glorify God, then what do they do?

⁸ 'December 1644: An Ordinance for the better observation of the monethly Fast; and more especially the next Wednesday, commonly called The Feast of the Nativity of Christ, Thorowout the Kingdome of England and Dominion of Wales.', in Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1642-1660. Edited by C H Firth, R S Rait (London, 1911), British History Online, accessed December 11, 2025, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/acts-ordinances-interregnum/p580>.

But are Christmas trees inherently idolatrous?

Where Did Christmas Trees Come From?

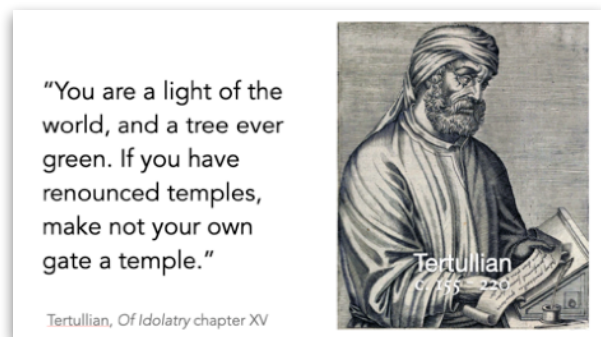
The history here is foggy, patchy, and scant. Exactly when did people begin going out in the forest and cutting down evergreen trees, and then bringing them inside their homes and decorating them? And what exactly, if anything at all, does such a practice have to do with the birth of Jesus? The short answer is that no one knows for certain. However, there are some historical clues.

The Romans and Evergreens

From about 200 years before the birth of Jesus, the Romans used greenery, evergreen boughs and branches, as well as shrubs to adorn their doors, gates, and streets during the new year celebration called *Saturnalia*, which began on December 17 and was apparently rooted in some sort of pagan agricultural harvest festival.⁹ While evergreen branches were involved in this pagan celebration, they were for outdoor adornment, not indoor and they never included a whole tree or a tree that was itself decorated.

Over time, as the Roman Empire was diminishing in its influence in the world, the influence of Christianity was rising. As Christ was embraced as the Son of God, Roman idolatry was forsaken by Christians. Like the apostle Paul, Christian leaders taught the people of God to abandon any participation in pagan festivals.

For example, **Tertullian** (c.155-220), an early Christian author and apologist from the north African city of Carthage, wrote in his work entitled, *Of Idolatry*, in an apparent instruction against the celebration of such festivals such as Saturnalia wrote to Christians, "You are a light of the world, and a tree ever green. If you have renounced temples, make not your own gate a temple."¹⁰ While this does indicate that some Christians were participating in the pagan celebration by adorning their gates with evergreens, there is no record that this practice continued among Christians and neither is there is any direct connection to the centuries later practice of decorating trees at Christmas.



Scandinavians, Baltics, and Evergreens

There is historical record of Nordic and Baltic use of evergreens during winter celebrations and festivals. This makes complete sense, for during the harsh northern winters, having greenery around reminds one that the cold barrenness will not last forever. The primary pagan

⁹ Bruce David Forbes, *Christmas: A Candid History* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2007) Apple Books chapter 1.

¹⁰ Tertullian, *Of Idolatry*, chapter XV (source: <https://www.logoslibrary.org/tertullian/idolatry/15.html> accessed 11 December 2025).

celebration in the northern European region was the Scandinavian celebration of *Yule* (or Jul), which included abundant consumption of ale and the use of evergreen branches placed over doors and windows, which may have been thought to keep out unwanted spirits.¹¹

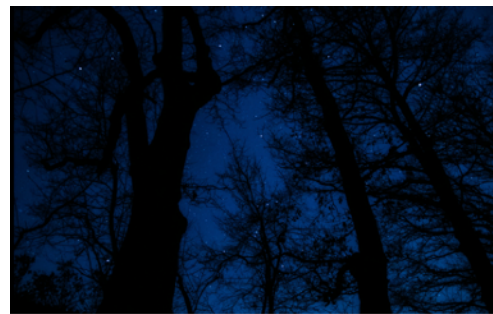
However, as Christianity reached into these northern areas, in Germany in particular, the only record of anything like the Christmas trees of today is something called "*paradise trees*." During the medieval era (6th to 14th century) these fir trees were used by clergymen of the church to teach biblical stories to a vastly illiterate people in the form of plays, called "mystery plays" or "miracle plays."¹² These plays became popular since they provided a welcome diversion during dark winter months and a good reason for a community gathering in a season when many were likely to remain isolated at home. Since the Feast day of Adam and Eve was held December 24 these trees were used in "*paradise plays*" and were decorated with apples to tell the story of Adam and Eve's fall into sin. As the story of redemption progressed, communion wafers were added to the trees as a symbol of forgiveness provided through redemption in Christ. However, even with these trees there is no clear connection between them—used as props in a play—and the Christmas tree used in the celebration of Jesus' birth.

Germans and the Christmas Tree

It does seem that Germany becomes the location and the link to what we know as the Christmas tree. There are a few legends that link Germany and the Christmas tree. Two are worth mentioning.

The oldest dates back to the eighth century, when an English Benedictine monk named **Boniface** (c.675-754), who went as a missionary to Germany and began preaching the gospel. During his ministry, he encountered a community of pagan worshipers offering winter sacrifices before a giant oak tree in the forest that was dedicated to the god Thor. To free them from their idolatry, Boniface took up an axe intending to chop the tree down. However, after his first blow, a great and powerful wind blew the mighty oak to the ground. While Boniface gazed in wonder at mighty work of God, the gathered crowd waited for Thor to strike Boniface dead with a thunder bolt. When nothing happened, Boniface pointed to young fir tree standing nearby and noted how that tree pointed upward to Christ who alone is the source of eternal life. The people then turned to Jesus and that, "the legend says, was the beginning of the Christmas tree."¹³

A second and later legend says that **Martin Luther** (1483-1546) was walking home one cold and clear winter night meditating on the miracle of the birth



Peter Poluch (<https://unsplash.com/@peter85>)

¹¹ Forbes, *Christmas: A Candid History*, chapter 1.

¹² Forbes, *Christmas: A Candid History*, chapter 3.

¹³ Ibid.

of Jesus as the Son of God. As he walked, he beheld the beauty of the stars shining like lights through the snow-covered evergreen trees. After arriving at home, he placed several small candles on their tree and told his family that the lights represented Christ, the star present at his birth, and eternal life.¹⁴ There is no extant written source of this, but the story has a very long oral history.

- The oldest record of a public Christmas tree dates back to 1510 in the town square of Riga, the capital of Latvia.¹⁵ To this day, the town maintains this tradition.¹⁶
- In 1539 the historical record shows that a Christmas tree was put up in the Strasbourg Cathedral.
- In 1561 an ordinance was posted in the region of Alsace (today located in France, but at the time belonged to Germany) stating that only one Christmas tree was allowed per family.¹⁷ This is amazing since Christmas trees were so popular in this region that they treated the fir tree population.
- In 1605 an anonymous author noted that, "At Christmas they set up fir-trees in the parlours at Strasbourg and hang thereon roses cut out of many-coloured paper, apples, wafers, gold-foil, sweets, etc."¹⁸
- During the whole nineteenth century the popularity of Christmas trees exploded in Europe and America, most notably in the 1820's among the German immigrants living in Pennsylvania.¹⁹
- In France Christmas trees were popularized by Latvian Princess Helene de Mecklembourg when she married the Duke of Orleans in 1840 and introduced the practice to Paris.
- In England decorating Christmas trees exploded in popularity a short time after Queen Victoria married the German Prince Albert, who brought with him his own family tradition of decorating an evergreen tree at Christmas. The new royal tradition was noted in the *Illustrated London News* in 1846 and immediately sparked a new fashion across the British Empire.²⁰ The image was reprinted in the US and became equally as popular.
- In 1851 New York businessman Mark Carr saw an opportunity



¹⁴ Forbes, *Christmas: A Candid History*, chapter 3..

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Source: <https://neighborhood.lv/en/how-riga-decorated-the-first-christmas-tree-and-set-an-example-to-the-world/> accessed 11 December 2025.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Forbes, *Christmas: A Candid History*, chapter 3.

¹⁹ James C. McGlothlin, "O Tannenbaum: Norse Pagans, a Missionary, and a Tree," a paper presented at Bethlehem College and Seminary in December 2024 available to watch here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OhHU6tGOilk>

²⁰ Ibid.

and took a huge horse-drawn sled into the Catskill mountains, cut down scores of evergreens, hauled them back to New York City to be sold and his efforts were a huge success and "the practice of buying evergreen trees at Christmas spread widely across America."²¹

Summary. We have seen that while several ancient pagan cultures did incorporate the use of evergreens in their winter festivals, those practices were very different from the current use of Christmas trees today, in that they were used outdoors not indoors, and only used branches and not a whole tree. The earliest and most reliable sources reveal that the custom of decorating evergreen trees inside the home at Christmastime arose among Christians within sixteenth century northern Europe, most likely in Germany, without any direct connection to a pagan ritual or ceremony.

Does Jeremiah 10:1-4 Prohibit Christmas Trees?

However, some argue that there is a specific prohibition against Christmas trees in Scripture spoken by the prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 10:1-5 (ESV) ¹ Hear the word that the LORD speaks to you, O house of Israel. ² Thus says the LORD:

“Learn not the way of the nations,
nor be dismayed at the signs of the heavens
because the nations are dismayed at them,
³ for the customs of the peoples are vanity.
A tree from the forest is cut down
and worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman.
⁴ They decorate it with silver and gold;
they fasten it with hammer and nails
so that it cannot move.
⁵ Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field,
and they cannot speak;
they have to be carried,
for they cannot walk.
Do not be afraid of them,
for they cannot do evil,
neither is it in them to do good.”

There are at least 4 reasons why this passage does is not about Christmas trees.

1. ***Christmas trees didn't even exist*** at the time this was written. Jeremiah lived around 550 B.C., thus he was not speaking about Christmas trees, since they didn't exist until around

²¹ Ibid.

A.D. 1500. No one to whom Jeremiah spoke this word of the Lord would have imagined he was talking about a Christmas tree.

2. ***Christmas trees are not "worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman."*** Clearly Jeremiah is talking about a tree that is cut down and then "***worked***," i.e. molded, shaped, carved, or *fashioned by* a craftsman into the image of an idol. No one "works" a Christmas tree. No one molds, shapes, or fashions a Christmas tree. The only work involved is cutting them down, but that it. No one hires a "***craftsman***" to work a Christmas tree.
3. ***Christmas trees are not decorated with silver and gold.*** Christmas trees have shiny ornaments put on them, but no one actually puts silver or gold on them. Jeremiah is talking about a plain, worthless piece of wood that looks like worthless wood which needs to be brilliantly adorned with silver and gold so that people will be deceived into thinking it is something valuable and worthy being worshiped as an idol. No one worships a Christmas tree. Jeremiah is talking about an idol, not a Christmas tree. This is clear from v.5.
4. ***Christmas trees are not expected to speak or walk.*** Christmas trees are not shaped to have mouths or legs. No one thinks a Christmas tree will talk or walk. However, what Jeremiah is talking about does have mouths and legs, but "***they cannot speak***" and they cannot walk because "***they have to be carried***." Again the clear implication is that Jeremiah is prohibiting the carving of a log into the shape or image of a human that has human features and is worshiped as being real, but truly is just a piece of wood. Christmas trees are not viewed as idols, but rather only what they are, trees.

How Should Christians Think About Christmas Trees?

A few points to consider.

1. ***Christians have forever struggled with controversial topics.*** The apostle Paul several times had to instruct Christians on how to think about meat sacrificed to idols.²² Tertullian instructed Christians regarding celebrations of pagan festivals. Christians are always concerned to do what is holy and to avoid what is sinful. Therefore, it is right to wrestle with such issues and seek the Lord for help in doing what is right.
2. ***There is no clear line of connection between Christmas trees and pagan worship.*** There are similarities, but no exact equivalent. Pagans used evergreen branches and boughs, but nowhere did they use whole trees. The branches and boughs were used outside in pagan worship, but never inside their homes.

Some might argue that since pagans used evergreens, then Christians should have nothing to do with evergreens. Just for the sake of argument, let's say that Christmas trees do have some sort of ancient pagan connection, it seems that there comes a point in time in which

²² 1 Corinthians 8, 10; Romans 14; Colossians 2:16-23.

the present thing has been so far removed from the past that all the original meaning is lost. And if that's true, is it wrong to use the thing if means something entirely different? For example, the name of every day of the week has ancient roots Babylonian astrological idolatry which was later embraced by Roman, German, and Norse idolatry and yet no one today thinks of ancient false gods when we say Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, etc. And no one is arguing that Christians should abandon the current names of days. So is it wrong to use the word Sunday because it has ancient connection to a sun god?

3. ***Trees were created by God, therefore trees can be used to glorify God.*** Just because the use of certain trees have been corrupt in the past, does not mean that they no longer have the ability to be used for the glory of God in the present. Paul instructs Christians to go the local market and buy whatever meat you want without worrying about whether or not it was slaughtered in a pagan ceremony.

²⁵ Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. ²⁶ For "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof."

1 Corinthians 10:25-26 (ESV)

His point is that all animals belong to God, so don't let the past misuse of animals keep you from feeding yourself, but give thanks to the Lord. All trees belong to God, so we ought not let the past misuse of them keep us from using them presently for the glory of God as we give him thanks.

Optional example: We see this principle in the Exodus. When the people of Israel left Egypt they "plundered"²³ the Egyptians by asking them for gold and silver jewelry and garments, which the Egyptians agreed to give them (because they wanted them gone as quickly as possible). There is no doubt that the gold and silver jewelry they received were in many cases connected to Egyptian idolatry for they had dozens of gods and their worship was often reflected in their jewelry. They certainly didn't receive a lot of little golden crosses or crucifixes. Yet later when God commanded them to make the ark and the tabernacle and all its necessary vessels it was this idolatrous jewelry that was used and transformed into the material necessary for the golden vessels and the fabric for the curtains. Past misuse did not prevent present use for the glory of God.

Conclusion

Christmas trees are nowhere mentioned in the Bible. They are neither prescribed nor prohibited. It is not wrong to establish new worshipful traditions. Jesus went to Jerusalem to

²³ Exodus 11:2; 12:35-36.

celebrate the Feast of Dedication (Jn 10:22), which is today is called Hanukkah²⁴ and is nowhere mentioned in OT. Yet we ought not mindlessly embrace any tradition or practice. The Bible frequently reminds us to teach our children why we do what we do in worshiping the Lord (Dt 6:4; 12:26; cf. 1 Ptr 3:15). If we are going to use Christmas trees as a part of our celebration of Jesus' birth, then we ought to have good reasons why we use them at Christmas time. Let me suggest five ways the use of a Christmas tree can point to Jesus.

1. **Christmas trees point our eyes up to Jesus.** If we stand out in a forest and follow the lines of an evergreen tree, it will lift your eyes up, up to the stars. We often put a star or an angel on the top of Christmas trees. A star reminds us of the star that led the wise men to Jesus. An angel reminds us of the angel who announced to the shepherds in the field, "Unto you is born this day a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Lk 2:11). Christmas trees can lift your eyes up and point to Jesus.
2. **Christmas trees remind us that in Jesus there is light after darkness.** The lights on Christmas trees reminds us that Jesus said, "*I am the light of the world*" (Jn 9:5). Light is necessary for life, but at night lights are beautiful. The lights of Christmas time, shining in the dark, reminds us that there is hope that the darkness of this world will one day be dispelled by Jesus. The apostle John explains that Jesus is "*the true light that has come into the world*" (Jn 1:9) and that his "*light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it*" (Jn 1:5). Just before his crucifixion Jesus said, "*In this world you will have trouble, but take heart for I have overcome the world*" (Jn 16:33). Look at the lights of the Christmas tree shining in the dark and remember that one day Jesus will return and forever dispel all darkness with the glory of his goodness and power.
3. **Christmas trees remind us that in Jesus there is life after death.** In the winter most trees drop their leaves and appear to die, but evergreen trees are always living. This reminds us of what Jesus said to Martha after her brother Lazarus had died, "*I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me... will live, ...and never die*" (Jn 11:25-26). And as Jesus said to Nicodemus, "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life*" (Jn 3:16). When you look at the evergreen Christmas tree, remember that everlasting life comes only from Jesus.
4. **Christmas trees remind us that in Jesus there is forgiveness after atonement.** We hang ornaments on Christmas trees which reminds us that Jesus himself was hung on a tree. The Bible tells us that, "cursed is the man who is hanged on a tree"

¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"—¹⁴ so that in Christ Jesus the

²⁴ This celebration takes place in December and began at the rededication of the temple in 164 B.C. after its desecration by the Antiochus Epiphanes IV in 167 B.C.

blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.
Galatians 3:13-14 (ESV)

When you see ornaments hanging on a Christmas tree, remember that Jesus was hanged on a cross to atone for—to take away—our sin. After atonement was made, then forgiveness is granted and that is what Jesus accomplished at the cross.

5. *Christmas trees remind us that salvation is gift.* We place gifts underneath the tree until Christmas morning when we give the to those we love. This reminds us that salvation—everlasting life with God—is a gift to be received rather than a right to be earned. We, who believe in Jesus,

“are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus... for the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 3:24; 6:23).

Christmas trees are not necessarily idolatrous, so long as we use them as pointers to Jesus. Jesus is our focal point of Christmas and anything that pulls us away from focusing on him can be idolatrous. Paul rightly says to us, “Do not be idolaters. Flee idolatry. Do everything to the glory of God.” If a Christmas tree draws your attention away from Jesus, then fling it far from you. But if you do set one up, then do it to the glory of God.

Let’s keep our eyes on Jesus.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did the Puritan government of 1659 cancel Christmas in Boston? What was wrong with the celebration at that time?
2. Do you think Christmas trees are idolatrous? Why or why not?
3. What things in our culture do you consider to be idolatrous?
4. Do you think Jeremiah 10:1-5 prohibits Christmas trees? Why or why not?
5. How can Christmas trees point us to Jesus?
6. What can you do this Christmas seasons to keep your eyes on Jesus?
7. Is there any idolatrous thing in your life from which you need to flee so that you can remain devoted to Jesus?