

# Episode 236

## Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. Here we are in this season again, Got Questions, around Christmas, as you can imagine, we get a lot of questions about should Christians celebrate Christmas, does gift-giving take away from the true meaning of Christmas, what about this, what about Saturnalia, all these things. We've done a few Christmas episodes in the past, so when you're looking at what's maybe a question we haven't covered in the podcast, one thing that came to mind is who was Saint Nicholas? Who was the character who through over 16, 17 centuries morphed into this character that we call Santa Claus today?

## Shea Houdmann

So we're going to kind of go through two parts, one like who was the historical Saint Nicholas, and then how did we get to where we are today, but then also a question we often get is what should Christian parents tell their children about Santa Claus, if anything? So that's our topic for today, joining me today is Kevin, the managing editor of gotquestions.org, and Jeff, the managing editor of BibleRef.com. So Kevin, start us off here, was there even a person named Nicholas, and what can we know for sure, or at least reasonably for sure, about this person?

## Kevin Stone

Yes, well, Merry Christmas, first of all, and what can we know about Nicholas, who later was called Saint Nicholas and all of that? Well, there's not a whole lot that we would know absolutely for sure. There does seem to be a good evidence that there was a man named Nicholas who lived in Myrna in the 3rd and 4th centuries. This is a seaport city in modern-day Turkey, and this is where he was a bishop there. He was leading a church, and this is pretty well substantiated.

## Kevin Stone

But we do have to recognize that all of the evidence that we get about Nicholas comes from secondary sources. We don't have any reliable historical sources, the type that historians would normally be looking to. We all have the secondhand stuff, people writing in their diaries and making reports about him and things like that.

## Kevin Stone

But it does seem pretty feasible that Nicholas was a bishop in this town of Myrna in Asia Minor. This would be the city where Paul changed ships during one of his trips to Rome as a prisoner in Acts chapter 27. What has then

grown up around Nicholas is that he was known for his generosity, for his giving of gifts, for his humility. All of these very good traits have influenced other stories about him until we get to the place where we have a whole lot of folklore that has built up around him.

### **Kevin Stone**

He seems to have become a priest, again, according to tradition. He was a priest at a very early age. His parents were likely wealthy, and when they died, he got this very big inheritance. So what to do with all this money? And Nicholas chose to give it away. He was a very giving, generous person, and so this became part of who he was viewed as, a very generous and a benefactor for so many.

### **Kevin Stone**

He was, according to tradition again, he was imprisoned and tortured under the persecution of Christians by the Roman Emperor Diocletian. He was released then under the rule of Constantine the Great, who was said to have had a dream about him where he was told to release him and stuff like that.

### **Kevin Stone**

We think that he may have been there as part of the First Council of Nicaea, as one of the delegates there. Some lists have him listed as an attendee of the council. Other lists do not include him. But again, we're not real sure. He may have been there, maybe not. If so, did he get into a fight with one of the Arians there? We don't know. Did he even attend the Council of Nicaea? We don't know for sure. But now we're starting to get into some of the legendary stuff that I think Jeff is going to be covering.

### **Jeff Laird**

Yeah, legendary is definitely the way things go when it comes to St. Nicholas. Just about everything that we are aware of in a broad cultural sense really is legendary. It's not something that we have explicit proof for. Most of the stuff that we know about Nicholas, like you said, is secondhand sources from very much later. A lot of what's in there is definitely interesting. By the time we see people mentioning Nicholas in literature and written records, he's already become a pretty famous, pretty popular saint within the Christian church.

### **Jeff Laird**

He's associated with a lot of different things. There's legends around Nicholas that involve his generosity and things that people knew him for that made him the patron saint of just about everything. One of the most famous stories about him is that when he was a very young man, wealthy, but choosing to be a minister or a priest, he found out about a man who had three daughters and they were very poor. The man could not afford to get his daughters

married. He was worried that they were going to have to turn to all sorts of awful things to survive. Nicholas heard about that, so he snuck money into the home secretly so that this wouldn't happen. This happened supposedly on three separate nights. There's lots of variations of the story. Sometimes they have Nicholas just hiding the money. Sometimes they have him dropping it down the chimney. Sometimes when he drops it down the chimney, it lands in stockings or socks that were hung up there to dry. You can see where some of the modern Santa Claus things come with. In most of the versions of it, he gets caught the third time and the father is very grateful that Nicholas is doing this to stop his daughters from having to go into, well, selling themselves, basically. He tells him, don't tell anybody about it, and of course, the guy does. Something more reliable is that he had a reputation for leaving money in poor people's shoes. That's another thing that sometimes people do closer to St. Nicholas Day, which is earlier in December.

### **Jeff Laird**

Some of the legends about Nicholas are a little more interesting. One of the more famous or infamous ones is that he resurrected three boys who had been murdered and put into barrels of brine by an evil butcher. A lot of the artwork that we see of Nicholas is either of him helping the girls with putting money in the house or resurrecting these boys from barrels. There's the legend that he saved some sailors during a storm, that they prayed because they were afraid what was going to happen during the storm, so they prayed and Nicholas basically teleported there and helped them move the sails and haul the anchors and all the other nautical stuff and then went back to town. Another one is that the town was suffering from a famine and ships came from one town, stopped at his town to go somewhere else, and he made an arrangement with the ship merchants that he would purchase grain for the people there to eat and put it on his credit, knowing that the people at the next city would consider that good. So they agreed to that, but then when they left, they found out that all the grain was miraculously restored like it had never been taken. There's a legend that he rescued three men who were falsely accused and about to be executed just by walking up and pushing the executioner's sword peacefully down to the ground. So those are sort of interesting ideas.

### **Jeff Laird**

There's nothing in the writings that tells us that any of those are absolutely true or that they're very well attested, so we really don't have a whole lot of information. By far the most famous legend about Nicholas is that he was part of the Council of Nicaea and that at some point in time, somebody began talking about Arianism, which is a heretical idea about the Trinity and the

divinity of God and so on and so forth. And while this person was talking, Nicholas just became so enraged by the heresy that he was hearing that he walked up and slapped this person in the face. Now we can already start to see a pattern that's coming here in that some of the legends say that it was Nicholas who walked over and slapped an Arian, somebody who was saying stuff in general. Some legends say he punched the person. Some people say it was Arius. Some people say it was Arius and he knocked him unconscious. So you can see that the progression just keeps going and going and going. Had things gone the same way, it could have been that Nicholas summoned the armies of angels and had a war right there and who knows what else.

### **Jeff Laird**

But just about everything surrounding St. Nicholas has turned into this expanding and expanding and expanding legend, which is one of the reasons why he was featured so much in Renaissance art. And that art itself seems to have contributed to a lot of the legends or ideas about Nicholas because people see these images, but they don't have a lot of context to them. So they see barrels because of the little boys and people start to associate him with barrels. So he is actually the patron saint of barrel makers, among other people. They see these small round objects that he's using in the pictures and they don't know exactly what they are. He's also associated somehow with oranges.

### **Jeff Laird**

So there's lots of different lists of what he's a patron saint of. According to the ever reliable, never wrong, absolutely perfect Wikipedia, he is currently associated as the patron saint of children, barrel makers, travelers, sailors, fishermen, merchants, toy makers, brewers, and archers. Also, for reasons completely unknown, broadcasters, pharmacists, pawnbrokers, unmarried people, and then sort of more understandable, the falsely accused and repentant thieves. So if you're mad that St. Nicholas is not currently your patron saint, just wait because your time is coming. He's going to be all set and ready for you pretty soon. You just got to give it a minute. So almost all legend, almost all unverifiable stuff, all interesting, but all sort of growing from these little seeds of ideas of things that we might have known or may actually have been true about Nicholas, but that's where we are.

### **Kevin Stone**

So many fun stories concerning Nicholas. I guess we can all pick our favorite. Which one? I heard one too where he calmed the storm. They were at sea. It was kind of like a Jesus thing where he prays and the storm immediately ceases and all of that. And then I heard that one too about the

murdered boys that he restored to life. But I heard a variation of it where it was actually three theological students that were traveling to study theology in Athens, and they stopped at an inn and they were murdered, thrown into the pickle barrel. And along comes Nicholas and happens to stay at the same inn. And then that night has a dream in which the crime is revealed to Nicholas. And so the next morning he confronts the innkeeper and he raises these three students back to life again. And so I guess we can go with that version of the story as well. But definitely a lot of colorful stories surrounding him.

### **Jeff Laird**

You thought that the Marvel Cinematic Universe was the ones who invented multiple universes and retcons and all this other stuff like that. I think St. Nicholas's Life is the original what-if series.

### **Shea Houdmann**

Hearing to you, obviously, I read some of these stories too. The ones that actually seem to have a connection to Christmas today, like the stockings and chimneys and those stuff, those are cute. But then you get into the really weird stuff and you're just like, oh my word, what is going on? Which makes me grateful for, again, for scripture. And that once something is written down, the embellishments tend to have a problem living because you can go back to actually read the source. So the fact that there's so little written about Nicholas until almost a thousand years after he lived is why all these embellishments and crazy wild stories that there may be some tiny little element of truth. And then it goes and goes and goes and goes until the story is barely even recognizable.

### **Shea Houdmann**

So Kevin said, what do we know from church tradition? It seems possible, plausible, even I would even go likely that there was a man named Nicholas who lived in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey, fourth century A.D., who was known for his generosity, giving to children, was appointed the bishop of the city, and possibly attended the Council of Nicaea, which is a very important council in church history, and somehow combated, we'll say, the heresy of Arianism. But beyond that, don't know. And even those details, I don't know that we can be super confident in based on how everything else has been embellished.

### **Shea Houdmann**

So that raises the next question, one that we get a lot around Christmas time is, what are Christian parents to do with the whole Santa Claus mythology that we have today? The North Pole and elves and all these different things. Some parents, they like to, at least when their children are young, play around with

the story and eventually reveal it to their kids. You know, it was actually me all along who was buying these presents for you. Other parents like to incorporate, okay, here's who the original Saint Nicholas was, telling them some version of the story that Kevin and Jeff just laid out for you. And we're just playing a little game in how we give these gifts and pretending they're from Santa Claus when they're really not.

### **Shea Houdmann**

And then there's the other side, basically want to call them Satan Claus, because it's a distraction from the true meaning of Christmas, want absolutely nothing to do with anything related to Santa Claus whatsoever. So let me ask both of you, so Jeff and Kevin, both of you are parents, MeLissa and I never had the privilege of being parents, we've never had to make this decision directly, but we do remember what our parents did. So what did you two do in terms of Santa Claus with your kids growing up, and what advice would you give to Christian parents trying to figure out how to manage this? So Jeff, why don't you go first?

### **Jeff Laird**

Well, this is one of those things that sometimes you're going to have people in a marriage where they're going to have slightly different perspectives on that. And that's part of the thing that has to be considered is, we have to look at this as traditions go and decide to what level do we want to fight about this, go to war over this. Is one parent going to put their foot down and say, I am absolutely doing the full blown Santa type thing when the other is totally opposed to it? Is one going to say, I refuse to do it, even though one thinks that it's important. So there's always going to be that sense of mutual respect and deference and understanding and communication. So I think a married couple needs to just understand what are their objections or what are their reasons for wanting to do it, so they can kind of sort those things out together. I know that it's important for us to remember that I think you can take anything that's good and cute and go too far with it. Speaking personally, it's tough for me to take the approach of trying to actively, aggressively fool children about Santa. I think it's one thing to sort of, as you would say, play the game, you know, have the hints about that sort of a thing and just let the cards fall where they will as far as the children picking up on it or believing it.

### **Jeff Laird**

But I think it's at least worth considering that you set your kids up in a really interesting way if you actively, deliberately deceive them, supposedly for their own good. And then at some point in time, they are going to find out about that. And people think it's dramatic to say that that erodes trust. It's not like your kids don't trust you as a human being anymore, but it does put that seed

in their mind that my parents are willing to lie to me for something that they think is good for me. So what other things are they telling me are good for me that maybe I should really question or really don't think is real or is good?

### **Jeff Laird**

So I don't think that there's any hard answer other than I don't think it's a good idea for parents to, you know, take on Santa Claus as almost a hobby, like something that they're going through all of the steps and all of the rigmarole and the grand deception in order to happen. If you want to have it be, you know, a game and play it out and make that an opportunity at some point to explain to your kids the difference between legends and fantasy, then I think that's good. But definitely, definitely something I think parents need to communicate together about so that it's not something that causes bitterness and division between mom and dad.

### **Kevin Stone**

Yeah, Jeff, I think it is important for parents to be on the same page when they approach all this issue. But I'll say that when I was really young, before I had kids, I went through this period where Satan was, I mean, it was Santa. There I go. Santa was Satan Claus to me, you know, and I was just, I was just deaf on the whole idea of Santa Claus. I mellowed. By the time I had kids, I had, I had decided it wasn't that big of a deal. And I'm glad that I, I'm glad that I came to that conclusion. So when my wife and I were raising our four children, we acknowledged the existence of the myth of Santa Claus. We didn't like freak out about it. We didn't try to shield them from from the Christmas specials that came on or the songs that they would sing at school and stuff like that. We just had them understand that there's a difference between fiction and nonfiction. And Santa Claus, as the magical person, was in the fictional side of things. And that's okay. Part of the culture, part of the tradition of Christmas in our area. And that's fine. We understand that. And he represents, you know, giving and looking out for other people and some good stuff. So we didn't, we didn't try to shield them from all things Santa.

### **Kevin Stone**

At the same time, we wanted to teach the true meaning of Christmas. So we focus on Jesus and the manger and Bethlehem and all of that. And then we also taught our kids the true story of St. Nicholas, that there was a pastor of a church a long, long time ago whose name was Nicholas, and he did good things and he got a good reputation and gave gifts to people. And so that's what the whole mythology of Santa Claus grew out of. So we talked about those historical roots and how those historical roots are good. And this is something that we can emulate. And so this is a good thing. So we just tried to strike a balance and it worked for us and our family. So we were happy with

our kids loving Christmas and understanding that the truth of Christmas is really about Jesus.

### **Shea Houdmann**

For sure. Kevin, I think if MeLissa and I were to have had kids, I think we would have focused similar to that on who was, we say, who is the real St. Nicholas? And then we spent the first half of the episode talking about, we don't actually know who the real St. Nicholas was, but who is the possible, plausible, maybe real St. Nicholas, and then discuss here's how all the different ideas and myths have developed around it. So this is sort of a little game that we play, but just know this is the real meaning of Christmas. The gifts we're giving each other is to remind us of the gift that God gave us in the person of Jesus Christ, who was born potentially in December and those things. But like what Jeff said, the idea of actively trying to deceive our children, we could not have done that.

### **Shea Houdmann**

And even like me with how my parents raised me, I never actually remember thinking there was a Santa Claus. So maybe I should ask my mom, it's like, what did we actually do? Because I always knew the gifts were from my parents. If they ever went with the Santa Claus myth, I either figured out or they told me pretty young. I never remember a, like, why were you lying to me type of moment. I probably wouldn't care. You can lie to me all you want as long as you give me lots of presents. But I don't remember. So yeah, maybe the conversation I can have with my mom. So that's, I think, the right balance. And let's focus on what the true meaning of Christmas is, why we're celebrating, where some of these myths came from, and the degree to which you make it a fun game to play with little children. I think that's something that parents can decide between themselves.

### **Jeff Laird**

Yeah, I was in a similar situation where I don't ever remember actually believing. So even when I was very little, I remember thinking of it as I'm playing a game. I might have actually fooled my parents more than most parents fool their kids. They probably thought I believed in Santa Claus and I just didn't want to hurt anybody's feelings. So I was like, yeah, Santa came and left presents. You know, so I do have that perspective where I don't I don't have a lot of resonance with the idea of destroying somebody's childhood.

### **Jeff Laird**

Now, my wife, on the other hand, her family, that was a big deal. So for us, with having two kids, my wife handled it very well when I said I was a little a little hesitant about the whole thing. And she was very, very good about it, you know, for the two of us to sort of come up with a compromise in that we were



just going to sort of let things happen naturally. We put Santa on the gifts and, you know, we do cookies and things like that. But we weren't going to bend over backwards to try to lie to the kids about it. And as soon as one of the kids expressed a little bit of questioning or doubt about that, well, then it was time for that that conversation. So I think that worked well.

### **Jeff Laird**

Now, I was really lucky, though, because I'm just old enough that I missed being a parent during the elf on the shelf era. I don't know why everybody's so upset about Santa Claus. If you want to talk about something straight from the pits of hell, that would be that would definitely be elf on a shelf. So I can't say that's the official ministry position. But I can say that as far as I'm concerned, that's the vilest of the evil of the evil. I can only imagine all the stuff involved with elf on a shelf. But kidding aside, you know, things like that, we just have to be careful. Just be careful about what exactly it is you're doing with your kids when it comes to truth and trust. And, you know, all things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. So just consider it. Think about it. Make a smart decision.

### **Kevin Stone**

One thing I wish that we would have done with our kids is instructed them when they go to school to not be talking about how Santa Claus isn't real. So it's one of what one of our kids did, she went to her, you know, first grade class and just announced, you know, Santa Claus is fictional. And so we had to have a little talk with her and say, that's something for their parents to tell them. You don't have, you know, she let the cat out of the bag. What can I say?

### **Shea Houdmann**

So at this point, I'm just actively trying to avoid looking like Santa Claus as my beard increasingly gets more white in it and trying not to add more to the dad bod that I've got going on, even though I'm not a dad, not looking like Santa Claus is kind of my goal for Christmas this year. Why do all the big eating holidays have to be right in a row? I've never quite understood that, but no.

### **Jeff Laird**

And I try not to look like Nicholas because I do everything I can not to slap heretics.

### **Kevin Stone**

You need to start working on your laugh, your Santa laugh, your ho ho ho.

### **Jeff Laird**

I probably laugh a little bit too much like the gentleman in my shirt. So we'll hold off on that. I scare enough children. I don't need to make it worse. I could

do Krampus or something like that, but there's a whole nother ball of theological wax.

**Shea Houdmann**

Which we're not going there today. So yeah, this has been the Got Questions podcast. Thank you both of you for your insight. And I do know a lot of parents struggle with this. And we can tell from the questions we get from different conversations I've had where people actually ask me in person, it's like, I'm starting to feel weird about deceiving my kids. It's like, well, then try stop deceiving them. I think there's enough good historical things about Nicholas that we can communicate what we can reasonably believe was possibly the truth about him without having to embrace all the craziness that goes along with Santa Claus or Elf on the Shelf. We didn't even talk about where the idea of elves came from, and I actually don't want to know.

**Shea Houdmann**

So Jeff, Kevin, or Grinch and Kevin, thank you for joining me today. This has been the Got Questions podcast on who was the real Saint Nicholas and what should Christian parents tell their children about Santa Claus? Hope our conversation today was encouraging and helpful to you. Got Questions, the Bible has answers, and we'll help you find them.