



January 31, 2025

### **Groundhog Day, no biggie right?**

Warm hellos once again friends, brethren, fellow laborers, spiritual family, and scattered children of God from here on the Gulf Coast of lower Alabama. My wife and I pray and hope this finds you doing well, and that again your week has been blessed.

Every year on February 2, pretty sizeable crowds gather at Gobbler's Knob in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, to watch a groundhog emerge for the day—just like in the classic film *Groundhog Day*. Most people here in the U.S. know the routine. If he sees his shadow and promptly dives back into his burrow, well that's bad news! There will be six more weeks of winter. But, if he doesn't see his shadow, well, good news, spring is just around the corner!

Actually, I can safely say that groundhogs aren't the best meteorologists, and Ol' Punxsutawney Phil doesn't have a very good track record. As of 2022, he's recorded as making the right call only 39% of the time.

Here's what's interesting to me. Many "Christians" say, "why this is all in good fun, I'll check it out to see if Phil predicts a soon coming spring, why not?"

So, here's a glimpse into the history behind Groundhog Day.

The historical roots of Groundhog Day aren't quite as random as they might seem on the surface. Like so many of the customs and holidays of our age, few ever search out to find out anything about what they do. They just do it, because, well, everyone else is doing it, right?

On a calendrical level, the beginning of February marks the halfway point between the winter solstice (the shortest day of the year) and the spring equinox (when night and day are approximately the same length). Ancient Pagans would celebrate February 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> with a festival of light to mark the beginning of spring. According to Gaelic legend, if the goddess Cailleach (meaning Old Woman)

wanted a long winter, she'd make the day bright so she'd have sunlight to gather more firewood to keep things warm. But, if it was a cloudy or dreary day, why, she'd stay in - because spring was on its way at some point.

And here's where "Christians" come into the picture. Medieval Christians adapted the festival to fit their needs, and handed out candles. This feast day, called "Candlemas", falls 40 days after Christmas (a non-Biblical holiday), marking the end of the period when Jewish tradition would have considered Jesus' mother unclean after having given birth. She would have been allowed to worship in the temple again, so we find February 2 is also considered the day that Jesus would have been presented there for the first time.

Oh yes, and there's an old English song that also connects Candlemas to the weather.

The words went something like this "If Candlemas be fair and bright, winter has another flight. If Candlemas brings clouds and rain, winter will not come again."

Over time, Europeans started looking to animals' hibernation patterns on Candlemas to predict the weather. Some watched carefully to see if bears might come out of their dens, while the English looked for hedgehogs, and the French waited for marmots.

As a side note, contrary to popular belief, Woodchucks or Groundhogs are actually not marmots. (Although the scientific name for both is *Marmota monax*). Most closely related to squirrels, woodchucks actually can climb trees and also swim. Common names include: Yellow-bellied marmot, Rockchuck, and Whistle-pig. The yellow-bellied marmot is often called a woodchuck, which is incorrect. Generally, a woodchuck can be called a marmot, but a marmot cannot be called a woodchuck. Woodchuck and groundhog are common terms for the same animal.

While living in southcentral Wisconsin for 14 years, we saw a lot of Woodchucks. In fact we had two in our back yard. They are a true hibernator that rely entirely on body fat reserves for energy throughout their winter sleep - late October through March or April. They dug huge holes under our storage sheds, and often while driving along a county road we'd see them standing at the side of the road.

Germans, (whose tradition said a badger would walk out of its hole if there was snow, but retreat back inside if the sun was out), actually brought the custom to the United States. The Pennsylvania Dutch gave it their own twist by replacing badgers with groundhogs, (most likely because the hibernating animals were so common in the Keystone State).

It was back in 1887, watching for Punxsutawney Phil became an official event. Since then, other cities have started looking to their own groundhogs, like New York's Staten Island "Chuck" and Georgia's "General Beauregard Lee".

So nowadays whichever furry forecaster is your hope for the best, for a soon to come, shadow-free spring, right?

Um, for me, I am not so sure. There are records of groundhog celebration way before it was made official in Puxatawny, but it all relates back folks, to again, old, pagan roots.

Groundhog Day on February 2nd is one of those few remaining relics of a time when we were far more connected to the change of the seasons, and so, while it's maybe a great day to look forward to our anticipated coming of spring, might we consider it's also a good time to think about where the tradition came?

We should know by now that most all of the holidays have origins in Pagan and pre-Christian traditions. Easter eggs and bunnies? Pagan. Christmas trees and Santa? Pagan. But did you know that one of the strangest American traditions, Groundhog Day, also has pagan roots?

Well, now you do.

We should desire to observe those things from God's Word, the Bible, which our Creator would have us observing.

So, Groundhog Day, no biggie right? Your choice. It won't be mine.

Arms up friends! Our sincere prayers and thoughts are with you daily. Thanks in advance for your heartfelt prayers for us.



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