mystery science

Grades K-5
Mini-Lesson: “Why is January the first month of the new year?”

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

VIDEO 1

Hi. It's Doug. Now is the time of year that we get to do this. Happy New Year! Now, on the first day of the New Year, I like to do two things. I like to look back on all the big things I did in the past year. So this year, I took a trip to visit my sister and her family in Northern Canada. And I think about not just the good things that happen, but the bad things too. Like towards the very end of last year, I broke my arm. The other thing I like to do is think ahead to the new year. What kinds of things will I do? What will I accomplish? What will I learn? Someone named Zane has a question about the new year. Let's give him a call now.

[Video Call]

- Hi, Doug!

- Hi, Zane!

- I have a question for you. Why is January the first month of a new year?

- That's a great question.

Why is January a first month of a new year? That's a great question. When we look at history, when we go back and look at notes that people kept from long ago. We discover that the people who gave the months their different names were the ancient Romans.

For the first month, they chose the name of January for a special reason. They named it after Janus who was one of the gods in their stories or myths. Now you might know other characters from these Roman myths. Like the god Zeus, the Romans called him Jupiter. Or maybe you've heard of the god Poseidon, the Romans called him Neptune. Each of these gods had something special about them. Zeus, for example, was very powerful. He was the god of thunder and lightning, and the Romans imagined him holding a lightning bolt. Poseidon was god of the sea, and the Romans imagined him holding a spear and riding the waves. But Janus This is how the Romans imagined Janus. Now, why do you think the Romans would choose to name the first month of the year after Janus? Do you have any ideas?

VIDEO 2

Well, remember how with the new year, I said I like to think back about the past year and forward to the new year? Well, I'm not the only one who does that. Lots of people do that. You might even know that reflecting and setting goals for the new year is called New Year's resolutions. It turns out people have been doing this for a really long time. Even the ancient Romans would think back over the past year and think forward about their goals for the new year. Now you have a clue why the Romans chose to name the first month January. After the god Janus. Think about it. Janus has two faces. He looks backwards and forwards at the same time. It's just like people do at the beginning of the new year. Looking backwards, thinking about what happened in the past year and looking forwards, thinking about what will happen in the year ahead. You might even take a minute to look forward and backward in your own life. What's one important thing that happened to you in the past year? What's one goal you have for the next year? Now our calendar today is based on the calendar that the Romans invented, but the Roman calendar isn't the only calendar in the world. People in other parts of the world invented

other calendars, and they gave different names to their months. Not every calendar has the new year around January. For example, you might have heard of the Chinese New Year. That happens a few weeks after the Roman New Year because that's when the Chinese calendar says that one year ends and the next begins. There's also the Persian New Year called Nowruz. That happens on the first day of spring. The Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, is another example of a different calendar. It happens at the beginning of fall. What all of these new years have in common is that they're celebrations, they're times for gathering with family and friends and often looking backwards at the past and forwards to the future. So in summary, January is named for Janus, a Roman god with two faces. One face looks backwards at the past and the other looks forward to the future. It's a great symbol for what we do at the start of a new year. Which is to look back on the past year and to set goals or resolutions for the year ahead of us. That's all for this week's question. Thanks, Zane, for asking it.