

THE SONGS OF CHRISTMAS

INTRODUCTION

Every year during the holiday season the airwaves are filled with the songs of Christmas with many stations devoting their entire playlist to Christmas songs from Thanksgiving into the New Year. While many of today's popular songs are secular, a surprisingly large number of the songs we hear even today are religious and communicate important teachings of the faith. Some of us love these songs. Others find their constant play annoying. It is my hope that whatever you're feeling about these songs, this study can make them more meaningful.

Each week, we will look at three different Christmas songs all grouped around one theme. We will consider the origins of these songs and how they came to be a part of the Christian tradition. Most significantly however, we will look to their lyrics to see what they have to tell us about the nature of our faith. What truth do we discover in the words of the song? What emotions are the songs trying to convey?

Because of the nature of this study, we will be using a different format from usual. This study will include the song's lyrics and we will look at each song in turn with questions related to each song. Read the lyrics carefully. They have a lot to say. We will be talking about the theology of the hymn and the message and truths we find in it.

At the very least, it is my hope that this study will change the way you listen to these hymns. While for many in the world they may have been reduced to background music, may we as people of faith hear in them the gospel message of good news.

LESSON ONE
WAITING AND LONGING

INTRODUCTION To "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"

For centuries the Jews awaited the coming of the Messiah. But it was not just the Jews who were awaiting the coming of our Lord. We live in a fallen world. All of creation groans as it awaits the coming of the Savior. And the Gentiles too, knew that not all things were right. Without knowing His name, they too awaited the coming of our Lord.

Our first hymn is "O Come, O Come Emmanuel". This hymn was originally written in Latin in the 9th century. Sung in monasteries as part of their Christmas celebrations and worship, the hymn and its message gradually became popular in the larger community. The message of the hymn focused on the longing expressed in the Old Testament for the coming of Christ. Read the hymn and answer these questions.

"O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL"

1 O come, O come, Immanuel,
and ransom captive Israel
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.

Refrain:

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.*

2 O come, O Wisdom from on high,
who ordered all things mightily;
to us the path of knowledge show
and teach us in its ways to go. Refrain

3 O come, O come, great Lord of might,
who to your tribes on Sinai's height
in ancient times did give the law
in cloud and majesty and awe. Refrain

**4 O come, O Branch of Jesse's stem,
unto your own and rescue them!
From depths of hell your people save,
and give them victory o'er the grave. Refrain**

QUESTIONS

- 1) What names are used for the Messiah in this hymn? What do they mean? Which one speaks to you the most?

- 2) What words and images in this hymn make you think of the Old Testament? Is the longing for a Messiah expressed here only for that of the Jews for their Messiah?

- 3) Are you surprised by the emphasis on wisdom and knowledge in verse two? Why do you think that belongs in this hymn?

- 4) The chorus tells Israel to do what? Who is it that should rejoice over the coming of Christ? Is it only Israel?

INTRODUCTION TO "LIFT UP YOUR HEADS YE MIGHTY GATES"

Based on Psalm 24, this hymn literally tells Jerusalem to prepare for the coming of the King. It is about much more than that however. Metaphorically, it tells everyone to prepare their hearts for the coming of the Messiah. The Lord is not coming just for a visit either. The Savior is coming to stay.

"LIFT UP YOUR HEADS, YE MIGHTY GATES"

1 Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates;

behold, the King of glory waits;

the King of kings is drawing near;

the Savior of the world is here!

2 Fling wide the portals of your heart;

make it a temple, set apart

from earthly use for heaven's employ,

adorned with prayer and love and joy.

3 Redeemer, come, with us abide;

our hearts to thee we open wide;

let us thy inner presence feel;

thy grace and love in us reveal.

4 Thy Holy Spirit lead us on

until our glorious goal is won;

eternal praise, eternal fame

be offered, Savior, to thy name!

QUESTIONS

1) What is the head of a gate? What were gates like for the cities of the ancient world?

2) In verse two, what are we to swing wide? How are our hearts like the gates of a city?

3) Verse three asks the king to stay. Why is that significant?

4) Verse four indicates that believers are not just to sit idle. Who will be leading believers?

INTRODUCTION TO "COME, THOU LONG EXPECTED JESUS"

Written by Charles Wesley, this hymn remembers Christ's coming and looks to his entrance into our lives now. People have been waiting and longing for the Messiah, not just to come, but to save. This hymn outlines the hope we have for God to enter our lives and transform them. God is the king who's nature it is to save. He invites us to make His kingdom our home, now and forever.

"COME, THOU LONG EXPECTED JESUS"

1. Come, thou long expected Jesus,

born to set thy people free;

from our fears and sins release us,

let us find our rest in thee.

Israel's strength and consolation,

hope of all the earth thou art;

dear desire of every nation,

joy of every longing heart.

2. Born thy people to deliver,

born a child and yet a King,

born to reign in us forever,

now thy gracious kingdom bring.

By thine own eternal spirit

rule in all our hearts alone;

by thine all sufficient merit,

raise us to thy glorious throne.

QUESTIONS

1) Why was Jesus born?

2) Why is it significant that Jesus is born a king?

3) We often say that we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. How does this hymn reflect this truth?

4) If Jesus is the King, what does this mean for us?

INTRODUCTION TO "HAIL TO THE LORD'S ANOINTED"

This nineteenth century hymn, describes the hope we have in Christ for justice and righteousness. Based on Psalm 72, a psalm that looks forward to the coming of the messiah, this hymn declares the difference Jesus does make and will make to the world.

"HAIL TO THE LORD'S ANOINTED"

1. Hail to the Lord's Anointed,
great David's greater Son!
Hail in the time appointed,
his reign on earth begun!

He comes to break oppression,
to set the captive free;
to take away transgression,
and rule in equity.

2. He comes with succor speedy
to those who suffer wrong;
to help the poor and needy,
and bid the weak be strong;
to give them songs for sighing,
their darkness turn to light,
whose souls, condemned and dying,
are precious in his sight.

3. He shall come down like showers
upon the fruitful earth;
love, joy, and hope, like flowers,
spring in his path to birth.
Before him on the mountains,
shall peace, the herald, go,
and righteousness, in fountains,
from hill to valley flow.

**4. To him shall prayer unceasing
and daily vows ascend;
his kingdom still increasing,
a kingdom without end.
The tide of time shall never
his covenant remove;
his name shall stand forever;
that name to us is love.**

QUESTIONS

- 1) Is this hymn talking about Jesus' birth or about His second coming?

- 2) What wrongs will Jesus set right?

- 3) What does verse three say Jesus will bring?

- 4) What is the significance of the final name given to God in this hymn?

LESSON TWO

WHO IS THIS CHILD?

INTRODUCTION TO "WHAT CHILD IS THIS?"

Written in nineteenth century Britain, the song is now far more popular in America than in the country of its origin. As the song suggests, it invites us to ask the question, "Just who is this child?" As you read through the hymn, consider the fundamental dichotomy it raises. Why is the king of the earth born in such humble circumstances when he deserves the most extravagant recognition and praise.

"WHAT CHILD IS THIS?"

1 What Child is this, who, laid to rest,

On Mary's lap is sleeping?

Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,

While shepherds watch are keeping?

Chorus:

This, this is Christ, the King,

Whom shepherds guard and angels sing:

Haste, haste to bring Him laud,

The Babe, the Son of Mary!

2 Why lies He in such mean estate,

Where ox and ass are feeding?

Good Christian, fear: for sinners here

The silent Word is pleading.[Chorus]

3 So bring Him incense, gold, and myrrh,

Come, peasant, king to own Him.

The King of kings salvation brings;

Let loving hearts enthrone Him.[Chorus]

QUESTIONS

- 1) Right from the start, verse one raises the contrast between the elements of Jesus' birth. What is contrasted?

- 2) Verse two raises and answers the question of why Jesus was born in such humble circumstances. Why was He born in a stable?

- 3) Verse three raises the question of what kind of praise we should offer. What is that praise?

INTRODUCTION TO "O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM"

Written shortly after the tumult of the Civil War, the author, Phillip Brooks, made a journey to the Holy Land where he visited the town of Bethlehem. He was struck by how unpretentious, small and insignificant the town was, especially in light of the importance of Jesus' birth. Emphasis is given to how quiet the city seemed, lacking in the hustle and bustle we associate with larger cities. The final verse has an invitation for Christ to enter into and abide in our hearts.

"O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM"

1 O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by;
yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting light.
The hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.

2 For Christ is born of Mary,
and, gathered all above
while mortals sleep, the angels keep
their watch of wond'ring love.
O morning stars, together
proclaim the holy birth,
and praises sing to God the King
and peace to all the earth.

3 How silently, how silently,
the wondrous gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of his heav'n.
No ear may hear his coming,
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him, still
the dear Christ enters in.

**4 O holy Child of Bethlehem,
descend to us, we pray,
cast out our sin and enter in,
be born in us today.**

**We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Immanuel!**

QUESTIONS

- 1) How do you think the city of Bethlehem might have appeared to someone observing it from above on the night Jesus was born?

- 2) Why wasn't Jesus born in a larger and more important city?

- 3) According to this hymn, who receives the Christ child?

- 4) What does Jesus do for those who receive him?

INTRODUCTION TO "IN THE BLEAK MIDWINTER"

Written by the English poet Christina Rossetti in the 1870s , in 2008 this hymn was voted best Christmas Carol by an international group of choirmasters. It is written in an irregular meter, making it somewhat difficult to sing. The hymn speaks of Christ's birth and His second coming. It speaks powerfully of the miracle of the incarnation and describes beautifully and simply the response we owe to Christ.

"IN THE BLEAK MIDWINTER"

1 In the bleak midwinter
frosty wind made moan,
earth stood hard as iron,
water like a stone:
snow had fallen,
snow on snow, snow on snow,
in the bleak midwinter,
long ago.

2 Our God, heaven cannot hold him,
nor earth sustain;
heaven and earth shall flee away
when he comes to reign:
in the bleak midwinter
a stable place sufficed
the Lord God Almighty,
Jesus Christ.

3 Angels and archangels
may have gathered there,
cherubim and seraphim
thronged the air,
but only his mother,
in her maiden bliss,
worshiped the Beloved
with a kiss.

4 What can I give him,
poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd,
I would bring a lamb,
if I were a wise man
I would do my part,
yet what I can I give him,
give my heart.

QUESTIONS

- 1) What do you make of the first verse, describing as it does the stark and cold conditions of winter?

- 2) Verse two describes the miracle of the incarnation. If you had to put it into your own words, how would you describe the incarnation?

- 3) Verse four talks about the human response to Christ. how would you describe your response to the coming of our Savior?

LESSON THREE

THE DIFFERENCE CHRIST MAKES TO THE WORLD

INTRODUCTION TO 'HARK THE HERALD ANGELS SING'

This hymn was written by Charles Wesley shortly after his conversion to the faith. With the exuberant zeal of a new convert, Wesley pours theological truths into the verses. The result is a powerful mishmash of exclamation, exhortation and theological reflection. This hymn helps us to understand the difference that Christ's coming makes to the world.

"HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING"

1 Hark! the herald angels sing,

"Glory to the newborn King:

peace on earth, and mercy mild,

God and sinners reconciled!"

Joyful, all ye nations, rise,

join the triumph of the skies;

with th'angelic hosts proclaim,

"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"

Refrain:

Hark! the herald angels sing,

"Glory to the newborn King"

2 Christ, by highest heaven adored,

Christ, the everlasting Lord,

late in time behold him come,

offspring of the Virgin's womb:

veiled in flesh the Godhead see;

hail th'incarnate Deity,

pleased with us in flesh to dwell,

Jesus, our Immanuel. [Refrain]

3 Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!

Hail the Sun of Righteousness!

**Light and life to all he brings,
risen with healing in his wings.**

**Mild he lays his glory by,
born that we no more may die,
born to raise us from the earth,
born to give us second birth. [Refrain]**

QUESTIONS

- 1) What does the word "Hark" mean? Do the angels actually sing "Hark"?

- 2) Angels, nations, and people all hail Jesus. What are some of the titles given to Jesus in this hymn?

- 3) The second half of verse two talks a lot about what important doctrine of the faith?

- 4) What was Jesus born to do?

INTRODUCTION TO "ANGELS WE HAVE HEARD ON HIGH"

This song is a french hymn of unknown origin. The song's subject is the birth of Jesus as narrated in the gospel of Luke. Specifically it focuses on the scene in which shepherds outside of Bethlehem encounter a multitude of angels singing and praising the newborn child. The juxtaposition of the humble shepherds with the heavenly multitude is used to proclaim the power and meaning of Jesus' birth.

"ANGELS WE HAVE HEARD ON HIGH"

**1 Angels we have heard on high,
sweetly singing o'er the plains,
and the mountains in reply
echoing their joyous strains.**

Refrain:

***Gloria in excelsis Deo,
gloria in excelsis Deo.***

**2 Shepherds, why this jubilee?
Why your joyous strains prolong?
What the gladsome tidings be
which inspire your heav'nly song? [Refrain]**

**3 Come to Bethlehem and see
him whose birth the angels sing;
come, adore on bended knee
Christ the Lord, the newborn King. [Refrain]**

**4 See him in a manger laid,
whom the choirs of angels praise,
Mary, Joseph, lend your aid, while our hearts in love we raise. [Refrain]**

QUESTIONS

- 1) In verse two are the shepherds portrayed as singing a response to the angels?

- 2) Verse three is an invitation to the shepherds to come to Christ. Is the invitation only for them?

- 3) Verse four invites us to all join with whom in praising Jesus?

INTRODUCTION TO "O COME, ALL YE FAITHFUL"

The origins of this hymn are unknown. What is known is that it was originally written in Latin as *Adeste Fideles* sometime before 1750. The song's call for all the faithful to come to Bethlehem is of course to be taken metaphorically. We are all invited to come into the presence of the king to worship and adore Him.

"O COME, ALL YE FAITHFUL"

1 O come, all ye faithful,
joyful and triumphant!

O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem!

Come and behold him,
born the King of angels.

Refrain:

O come, let us adore him,

O come, let us adore him,

O come, let us adore him,

Christ the Lord!

2 God true of God true God,

Light from Light eternal,

Lo, he shuns not the Virgin's womb,

Son of the Father, begotten, not created

3 Sing, choirs of angels,

sing in exultation,

sing, all ye citizens of heav'n above!

Glory to God, all glory in the highest: [Refrain]

4 See how the shepherds, summoned to his cradle,

Leaving their flocks, draw nigh to gaze.

Sing, all ye citizens of heaven above!

we too will thither bend our joyful footsteps. [Refrain]

QUESTIONS

- 1) Where are the faithful invited to come? In what sense are we to go there?

- 2) How is Jesus described in verse two?

- 3) Verses three and four tell us that two other groups will be praising God. Who are they?

- 4) what do you see as the overarching message of this hymn?

LESSON FOUR

THE DIFFERENCE CHRIST MAKES TO ME

INTRODUCTION TO "LOVE CAME DOWN AT CHRISTMAS"

Written by English poet Christina Rossetti in 1885. This poem captures the essence of what the incarnation is all about. It is simple, direct and sincere. The beautiful message of the song challenges the believer to let the love of Christ enter in and become our outreach to the world.

"LOVE CAME DOWN AT CHRISTMAS"

1 Love came down at Christmas,

love all lovely, Love divine;

Love was born at Christmas;

star and angels gave the sign.

2 Worship we the Godhead,

Love incarnate, Love divine;

worship we our Jesus,

but wherewith for sacred sign?

3 Love shall be our token;

love be yours and love be mine;

love to God and others,

love for plea and gift and sign.

QUESTIONS

- 1) What were the sacred signs that love came down at Christmas?
- 2) We worship the Godhead. What is that?
- 3) What is the sign that we worship and adore Jesus?

INTRODUCTION TO "I HEARD THE BELLS"

This Christmas carol is based on a poem written in 1864 by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. In 1861, Longfellow's wife of eighteen years to whom he was very much devoted, died, burned to death in an accidental fire. In 1863, his oldest son joined the Union army, but without his father's approval. Commissioned a Lieutenant, he was first severely ill (and then recovered) and then severely wounded that November at the Battle of New Hope Church, Virginia. His father took care of him and he eventually recovered, but was unable to serve any more. The poem was written right after these depressing circumstances and has much to say about the war, the evils of the world and the nature of hope.

"I HEARD THE BELLS"

1 I heard the bells on Christmas day

Their old familiar carols play,

And wild and sweet the words repeat

Of peace of earth, good will to men.

2 I thought how, as the day had come,

The belfries of all Christendom

Had rolled along th'unbroken song

Of peace on earth, good will to men.

3 And in despair I bowed my head:

"There is no peace on earth," I said,

"For hate is strong, and mocks the song

Of peace on earth, good will to men."

4 Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:

"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;

The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,

With peace on earth, good will to men."

INTRODUCTION TO "THERE'S A SONG IN THE AIR"

Written by Josiah Holland in 1874 this song lifts up a very romantic and glorious vision of the birth of Jesus. The beauty of that event has transformed all of life and all of time. The song invites a response of joy and song. A positive response beautifies the life of the believer.

"THERE'S A SONG IN THE AIR"

1 There's a song in the air!

There's a star in the sky!

There's a mother's deep prayer

and a baby's low cry!

And the star rains its fire

while the beautiful sing,

for the manger of Bethlehem

cradles a King!

2 There's a tumult of joy

o'er the wonderful birth,

for the virgin's sweet boy

is the Lord of the earth.

Ay! the star rains its fire

while the beautiful sing,

for the manger of Bethlehem

cradles a King!

3 In the light of that star

lie the ages impearled;

and that song from afar

has swept over the world.

Every hearth is aflame,

and the beautiful sing

in the homes of the nations

that Jesus is King!

4 We rejoice in the light,
and we echo the song
that comes down through the night
from the heavenly throng.
Ay! we shout to the lovely
evangel they bring,
and we greet in his cradle
our Savior and King!

QUESTIONS

- 1) How would you describe the tone of the first verse?
- 2) Who are the beautiful who sing?
- 3) What is the appropriate response to the star that rains its fire?