



As familiar Christmas songs fill your home again this season, listen closely. They are telling a story, the story of Jesus—who He is and why He came. With this Advent devotional, spend thirty-one days tracing the gospel through your favorite carols and discover anew the awe of this season.

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DECEMBER 1

“O COME”

You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth.

Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh,

stir up your might

and come to save us!

{ PSALM 80:1-2 }



IF ASKED TO IDENTIFY THE PREVAILING THEME that most often appears in the rich collection of carols we treasure each Christmas, there’s really not even a close second.

The one-word answer? *Come*.

The word echoes through so many of those familiar texts:

- “O come, O come, Emmanuel . . .”
- “Come, thou long expected Jesus . . .”
- “Come to my heart, Lord Jesus . . .”

Small wonder—because “come” is the core meaning of the word *advent*. And because the Advent theme of “coming” reflects a centuries-long expression of yearning.

"Please, Lord, please *come*"—the plaintive cry echoes throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Messiah had repeatedly been promised and prayed for. The rolling centuries had presented a roster of fringe candidates who trotted themselves out as seeming possibilities. But they all came and went. Through the centuries, that was the pattern. Come and go. Never come and stay. Never come and change things. Never come and save our lives from what others have done to us . . . worse, from what we have done to ourselves.

And yet "when the fullness of time had"—had what?—when it "had come" (Gal. 4:4), God the Father sent Jesus. He *came*. And though the world was slow to pick up on His arrival, it soon became abundantly obvious, both to His friends and His enemies, that Someone new was among them. Someone unlike any other. That's the reason for the shouted hosannas of Jesus' triumphal entry. For the blood-heavy cross of Good Friday. For the beyond-belief joy and amazement of Easter morning.

In fact, if any other single word can compete for prominence in the carols, it is *joy*. But joy, when you drill down to its essence, is the result of His coming, is it not? The lyrics of those carols that most thrill us with joy are really just helping remind us of how and why He came—and calling us to come as well:

- "O come, all ye faithful . . ."
- "O come, let us adore him . . ."
- "Come and worship, come and worship . . ."

So the gospel of Christ's incarnation is also the gospel of invitation. In view of His coming in fulfillment of His promise, we stand now in the borrowed light of His appearing, serving as shared communicators of His gospel message. And thankfully, whenever we don't know exactly how to express what our salvation means, carolers from generations past provide us help that never seems to grow old.

We can sing it.

Let us sing today of His coming.

{Prayer}

Lord, we praise You now for Your appearing, for Your coming to us. Not only did You recognize our truly desperate condition, but You stepped out of the safety of heaven, directly into our danger. During this Advent season, as we worship You afresh, may the joy we receive become the joy we share, so that others, too, may know of Your coming.

{ *Keep Reading* }

PSALM 79:8-13

"Let your compassion come speedily to meet us." (v. 8)

MALACHI 3:1-2

"Behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts." (v. 1)

2 TIMOTHY 1:8-10

". . . through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus."
(v. 10)

{ *Consider* }

How might you invite someone else to join you
during this Advent season as you seek
to receive all that the Lord has "come" to reveal
of Himself to us?

Part One

DESPERATION

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

*O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
from depths of hell Thy people save,
and give them victory o'er the grave.*

*O come, Thou Key of David, come
and open wide our heavenly home;
make safe the way that leads on high,
and close the path to misery.*

*O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer
our spirits by Thine advent here;
disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
and death's dark shadows put to flight.*

Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.¹



DECEMBER 2

UNCHAINED MELODY

They may come to their senses and escape
from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him
to do his will.

{ 2 TIMOTHY 2:26 }



AT ONE TIME IN MY LIFE, if I were imagining how to begin an Advent journey like this—through the carols—I might have had difficulty deciding which one to start with. Not anymore. Unsurprising to me now, my new favorite is the oldest (by far!) of them all.

The original Latin text of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” can be traced back to the 800s AD, although it wasn’t collected in hymn form until much later. The unknown writer was clearly well versed in both the Old and New Testaments. Each of the song’s seven original stanzas, some of which are rarely sung today, highlights a different title ascribed to the Messiah in Scripture, creating a collage of features and attributes that lead us to worship.

But these titles are more than just names. Each of them tells why He came.

Take the first, for example:

*O come, O come, Emmanuel
and ransom captive Israel.*

Emmanuel, as Matthew notated in his Gospel account, means “God with us” (Matt. 1:23), hearkening back to the prophet Isaiah: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isa. 7:14). (The slight spelling difference here has to do with transcribing the original Hebrew and Greek; it does not change the meaning of the name.)

God *with* us, not just over and above us.

God *with* us, not off at a distance, forever beyond us.

But why would we want Him so near us? Would we not, like Adam hiding in the garden, prefer to have Him *far* from us? Isn't that our nature—to duck from His gaze? To run toward shadow and seclusion? To avoid being found—or found out?

Not when we've finally seen our sin for what it really is—a trap. Not when, like Israel taken captive into Babylon, the confining walls of our own making have closed in on us. The bondage has become inescapable. Our dark nights have begun to howl with the loneliness of separation. We've realized, through the unforgiving lens of personal experience, that Jesus

was right, that “whoever commits sin” is in reality “a slave of sin” (John 8:34 NKJV).

And we want out. We want to be set free.

*O come, O come, Emmanuel
and ransom captive Israel.*

This is a hymn of longing—of Israel’s longing for their Messiah, for a rescuer, for a deliverer who would come and set them free. They longed to be back in their homeland, back to their temple, back to the things they’d taken for granted during those years when God had pleaded with them to return to Him, warning them of what their continual compromises with evil and idolatry would surely cost.

We sing His name—Emmanuel—because of how we ourselves came to this earth, not with sins that we could learn to overcome if we worked hard enough, but with sins that had already defeated us, destroyed us, doomed us. And this is how we would die—in eternal captivity—if not for “God *with us*.”

If not for the coming of Emmanuel.

If not for Christmas.

{ *Prayer* }

Father, thank You for hearing us when we cry to You, for not abandoning us in our captivity to sin, to the past, or to anything that has kept us apart from You. Help us realize today, whenever we feel chained to old taskmasters and tyrants, that You have already done all the work to set us free forever. May we live every day knowing our Deliverer is here: God with us.

{ *Keep Reading* }

NEHEMIAH 1:6-10

“. . . though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts . . .”
(v. 9)

PSALM 22:1-5

“To you they cried and were rescued.” (v. 5)

EPHESIANS 2:13-19

“You are no longer strangers and aliens.” (v. 19)

{ *Consider* }

When in your life have you felt the most trapped and confined, held down from being free to serve your Lord the way you truly desire? What difference does it make that Emmanuel—God *with* you—has come?



DECEMBER 3

CHRISTMAS MOURNING

Those who sow in tears
shall reap with shouts of joy!

{ PSALM 126:5 }



SEEING THE WORD JOY IN TODAY'S SCRIPTURE, with the exuberant exclamation point after it, brings to mind so many carols. There's Isaac Watts' classic,

Joy to the world! The Lord is come.

And then there's the German carol "While by the Sheep We Watched at Night," which, as you may recall, surges into that echoed refrain:

How great our joy! Great our joy!

Joy, joy, joy!

That's truly what Christmas should—and does—evoke in us. *Joy!*

But joy, in order to be real joy, requires a suitable counterweight. It must stand in glorious contrast to something utterly bleak and hopeless, something totally bereft of joy. And the

joy of Christmas does exactly that. It shines against a backdrop of banishment. Our sins had alienated us from God, leaving us no reason to expect a rescue. We were alone and left for dead.

"Remember" said Paul the apostle, "that you were at that time separated from Christ," that you once lived with "no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). The experience of "captive Israel" in Babylon—overwhelmed with misery, living through a soul-crushing loss that provided no prospect for joy—is the experience of every one of us without Jesus. As the writer of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" phrased it, we are a people

*that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.*

And we must never forget that lonely misery. True joy depends on our remembering it, acknowledging that our sin is a separator. It once separated us from God, and even now it can separate us from experiencing Him as fully as He desires. Only when we face that reality can we understand the joyful reality of the gospel. As Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matt. 5:4). Or as James said, in words that would otherwise make no sense at all, "Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom" (James 4:9).

Because joy doesn't only come "with the morning" (Ps. 30:5), as David said. Joy comes also from our *mourning*, from

the stark awareness that our sin has never been and will never become excusable or harmless, that it represents our all-too-willing part in hammering our Christ to His cross.

So we must never be dulled by the sweet nothings of sin's deception, but rather stay awakened to its gravity even as we open our arms to its remedy. Real joy—Christmas joy—is the joy of knowing He is able to “comfort all who mourn,” to give us

a beautiful headdress instead of ashes,
 the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
 the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit.
 (Isa. 61:2–3)

Only when we receive that gift can we truly live into the carol's invitation:

Rejoice! Rejoice!

Not because He's swept our sins under the rug as if they never existed, but because He's buried them in His love to keep them from costing us everything.

{ *Prayer* }

You, Lord, are my reason for joy—not the pleasantness of my relationships, not the agreeability of my circumstances, not the state of my resources, not the bright prospects of my future. And lest I be tempted to make my joy dependent on anything else but You, grant me today a spirit of heartfelt repentance, showing me that real joy comes from how You rescue me from myself.

{ *Keep Reading* }

EZRA 9:6-9

"Our God has not forsaken us in our slavery." (v. 9)

PSALM 30:8-12

"You have turned for me my mourning into dancing."
(v. 11)

JOHN 16:19-24

"You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy."
(v. 20)

{ *Consider* }

Why do you think we resist the biblical call to sober-mindedness and solemnity? What would be different about the joy emanating from us if it grew out of the full recognition of our sin and forgiveness?

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