# The Theology of Christmas Carols – A Godly View of This Sacred Holiday

*Dr. Robert Pyne looks at the theological message found in five different popular Christmas carols. For the most part, these carols, when listened to for their content, help us remember a biblical worldview perspective of this popular holiday.*

## Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus

Most radio stations play some type of Christmas music during the holiday season, but many of the songs have become so familiar to us that we no longer consider their content. In between the secular songs like "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" and "Up on a Housetop," you may hear the strains of an old hymn by Charles Wesley called "Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus." It was written in 1744, and it reads,

> **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.**
> **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 own sufficient merit, raise us to Thy glorious throne.**

"Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus" is a little heavier than most of the music we are used to hearing today, and if we are not careful we will miss much of the meaning. The first verse focuses on the fact that the coming of Jesus Christ fulfilled

Israel’s longing for the Messiah. As the one whose coming was prophesied in the Old Testament, He is the “long-expected Jesus.”

A few of the prophecies that Jesus fulfilled are Isaiah 7:14, which spoke of a virgin giving birth to a child whose name would mean “God with us;” Isaiah 9:6, which told of a child whose name would be called “Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, eternal Father, the Prince of Peace;” and Micah 5:2, which said that from Bethlehem would come a ruler whose “goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity.”

These and many similar prophecies looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, and many devout Jews prayed earnestly for the day when He would arrive. Luke 2 tells of Simeon, a man of faith who was “looking for the consolation of Israel” (v. 25). When he saw Jesus as an infant, Simeon knew that this Child was the fulfillment of his messianic hope. Charles Wesley was borrowing from this passage when he described Jesus in this song as “Israel’s strength and consolation.”

Although He fulfilled Israel’s prophecies, Jesus came to bring salvation to the entire world, which is what Wesley was referring to when he described Christ as the “hope of all the earth” and the “dear desire of every nation.” More than that, He is the “joy of every longing heart.” He alone is the one who can satisfy every soul.

The second verse tells us why Jesus can meet our expectations: He was “born a child and yet a King.” As the One who is both God and man, Jesus was able to satisfy God’s wrath completely by dying on the cross for our sins. When Wesley wrote about Jesus’ “all sufficient merit,” he was referring to Christ’s ability to bring us to salvation.

“Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus” is a great song for Christmas, focusing on the “long-expected Jesus” who was born to set us free from sin and to bring us salvation by His death.

# Hark! the Herald Angels Sing

Charles Wesley's best-known song is probably "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing." It has been altered slightly by editors, but most of it remains just as Wesley intended when he wrote it over 250 years ago.

As we generally hear it today, the song begins with a triumphant proclamation of Jesus' birth, describes the fact that He is both God and man, and then praises Him for the salvation He was born to provide.

The first verse reads, in part,

> **Hark! the herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King;**
> **Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled."**

Talking about peace on earth is popular at Christmas time, and appropriately so, for Jesus did come to bring peace. Primarily, however, He came to bring us peace with God, which is what Wesley meant when he wrote, "God and sinners reconciled." We have all sinned against God; we have broken His commandments and thus made ourselves His enemies. When people become enemies, they cannot go back to being friends until their differences are set aside. Sometimes reconciliation involves the payment of reparations, and which is essentially what Jesus did when He died on the cross. He paid the price necessary to reconcile us to God. The price was really ours to pay, not God's, but Jesus was able to pay it because, though He was God, He became also a man, being born as a baby on that first Christmas day.

Charles Wesley described Jesus' birth in the second verse of this song. He wrote,

> **Late in time behold Him come, offspring of the Virgin's womb.**
> **Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail the incarnate Deity,**
> **Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel.**

Though He was the everlasting Lord, the second person of the Trinity (which is described in the song as “the Godhead”), fully equal in nature with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, Jesus became the “offspring of the Virgin’s womb.” He was “veiled in flesh,” the “incarnate Deity.” He was God, having become also a man. The name Emmanuel means “God with us,” which is what Wesley was referring to when he wrote that Jesus was “pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel.” He became a man, but in the process did not lose His deity. He was “God with us.”

The idea that Jesus would lay aside His divine privileges for any reason is nothing short of incredible, but He did so in order to provide us with salvation. Wesley focused on this amazing occurrence in the third verse, where he wrote,

> **Mild He lays His glory by, born that man no more may die,**
> **Born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.**

Jesus laid aside His own rights, coming to this earth and dying for our sins, that those who trust in Him might have eternal life. He was born that we might be born again, and that is good reason to sing “glory to the newborn King.”

## O Little Town of Bethlehem

“O Little Town of Bethlehem” was written in 1867 by Phillips Brooks, an Episcopal pastor from Philadelphia. He had been in Israel two years earlier and had celebrated Christmas in Bethlehem. This song describes the city not so much as it was when Brooks observed it, but as he thought it might have appeared on the night of Jesus’ birth.

The first verse reads,

> **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.**

The streets of our own cities are quiet on Christmas day; stores are closed and most people are at home. It is possible that Bethlehem was quiet on the night that Jesus was born, but we know that the place was full of people from out of town, and chances are that there were even more people on the streets than usual. But this song does not say as much about the level of activity in Bethlehem as it does about the fact that very few people even noticed the Baby who was born. One line from the second verse reads, "While mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love"—a situation that is true even today. The world goes on about its business, working, eating, sleeping, and playing, utterly oblivious to the spiritual realities around it. As Brooks wrote in the third verse of the song,

> **How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!**
> **So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven.**
> **No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,**
> **Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.**

When Christ came into this world, He came quietly. The angelic announcement to the shepherds was the only publicity that accompanied Him. He was born in a stable and laid in a feeding trough; He did not arrive with the pomp that one would expect of a King. For the most part, He still does not. When people today place their faith in Jesus Christ, the Bible tells us that He comes to live inside them through the indwelling Holy Spirit (John 14:16-23; Rom. 8:9-11). There is not a lot of flash associated with an entrance like that, and some of your friends might not even notice the difference at first, but when you trust in Jesus Christ an incredibly significant event takes place. Your sins are forgiven and you are made a new person (John 5:24; 2 Cor. 5:17).

Jesus' coming means that Christmas does not have to be the lonely time that it is for so many people. We can experience His salvation and enjoy His presence as individuals, even though the world around us does not understand what is really going on. As the last verse of the song reads,

> **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 Emmanuel.**

## O Holy Night

The carol "O Holy Night" by John Dwight begins by describing the night Jesus was born. It reads,

> **O holy night! The stars are brightly shining.**
> **It is the night of the dear Savior's birth.**
> **Long lay the world in sin and error pining,**
> **Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.**

The coming of Jesus Christ should make us feel valuable, and it should make us feel loved. John 3:16 tells us that Jesus came because "God so loved the world." First Peter 1 reminds us that God has actually purchased us out of our slavery to sin, not with something perishable and comparatively worthless like silver and gold, "but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ" (vv. 18,19). The fact that Jesus gave Himself for us should cause our souls to feel their worth to God.

The second verse of "O Holy Night" calls us to consider the incredible fact that the King of kings was born as a human infant and placed in a manger. Most of us cannot relate to that kind of birth—our children are usually born in hospitals and nurtured in the most sterile of environments. Jesus was not. He was born in a stable. More than that, He lived a life of poverty, experienced severe temptation and persecution, and

died a brutal death, abandoned by His friends and wrongly condemned by His enemies. Thus, although we cannot always relate to His experiences, He can relate to ours. This empathy is what Dwight was describing when he wrote,

> **The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger,**
> **In all our trials born to be our Friend.**
> **He knows our need, to our weakness is no stranger.**
> **Behold your King, before Him lowly bend.**

It must have seemed ironic for grown men to bow down before a baby, but no act of worship was ever more appropriate.

Considering our Lord's birth should cause us to worship Him, and it should cause us to respond to one another with humility. The third verse of "O Holy Night" reads,

> **Truly He taught us to love one another;**
> **His law is love and His gospel is peace.**
> **Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother,**
> **And in His name all oppression shall cease.**

We no longer have slavery in this country, but we have many other forms of oppression, and Dwight was correct in writing that the oppression of human beings is inconsistent with the worship of Christ.

The Bible tells us that we are to model the humility that Jesus demonstrated when He voluntarily laid aside His rights as God and became also a man in order to suffer for our salvation. Based on Christ's example, Paul writes,

> Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others (Phil. 2:3-4).

Paul tells us that we are wrong when we put our own interests

ahead of someone else's, whether through the slavery that John Dwight spoke against or simply through insensitivity toward others.Because He loved us, Jesus chose not to exercise all of His rights. May we follow that pattern of humility as we love one another, even after Christmas.

## Joy to the World

"Joy to the World" was written by Isaac Watts and published for the first time in 1719. The song is a paraphrase of the 98th Psalm, and it has become one of the most popular Christmas carols of all time. The popularity of "Joy to the World" has resulted in a number of revisions designed to fit the theology of those singing it. For example, in 1838 the song was revised by a group of religious skeptics, who apparently liked the song but did not want to sing about the coming of the Lord. They changed the words from

> **"Joy to the world! The Lord is come. Let earth receive her King.**
> **Let every heart prepare Him room, and heaven and nature sing,"**

to

> "Joy to the world! The light has come [a reference to reason], the only lawful King. Let every heart prepare it room, and moral nature sing."

Several years ago the song was used by a marching choir in a major televised parade. But the choir only sang the first four words, "Joy to the world," and then just hummed the rest of the song!

People who do not believe in Jesus often do not mind singing about a baby born in a manger, but it is a little more awkward for them to sing about Him being the Lord of heaven and earth. And this song makes it very clear that Jesus did not just come

to be an inspiring infant or a gentle teacher. He came as the Lord, the King of kings, fully deserving our praise.

“Joy to the World” continues with the words,

> **No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground.**
> **He comes to make His blessings flow far as the curse is found.**

This verse alludes to Genesis 3, where God told the first man that the ground itself would be cursed as a consequence of his sin. Instead of abundant crops, the ground would now produce thorns and thistles—weeds that would cause humankind to labor intensively in order to survive. With this verse of the song, Watts anticipates the day when the blessings of salvation in Christ will overturn sin’s consequences “as far as the curse is found.”

That day has not come yet, but someday Christ will return to reign in His glory and judge the nations. As the last verse of “Joy to the World” reads,

> **He rules the world with truth and grace, And makes the nations prove**
> **The glories of His righteousness and wonders of His love.**

When Jesus came to this earth, He did not remain in the manger, where He might have been easily controlled. He did not even remain on the cross, where He might have been honored as a martyr. He rose from the dead, that He might reign over all creation. Whether people enjoy singing the words or not, Isaac Watts was right. “Joy to the world! The Lord is come.”

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