



Introduction: Leading up to Christ's Coming

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. He also created man and woman in His own image, perfect and innocent, and placed them over all the earth. God created them to represent Himself and to use them to advance His kingdom. As a part of representing His image, He gave man his own will to choose to love and obey the Lord or to disobey and spurn Him. Tempted by the devil in the form of the serpent, man eventually sinned against the command of God and broke his perfect fellowship with Him, bringing physical and spiritual death. Although man's sin greatly grieved the heart of God, it did not cancel out God's love for man nor did it derail God's sovereign kingdom purposes. Immediately after man sinned, God gave him hope, promising that He would one day provide a Redeemer and King and defeating Satan and his kingdom.

"And I will put enmity between you & the woman, & between your seed & her seed; he shall bruise you on the head, & you shall bruise him on the heel." - Genesis 3:15

After a time God, in His own sovereign will, chose one man and his descendants through whom to reveal Himself to all men. He was the one from whom the hoped for Redeemer and King would come. That man was Abraham.

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, & from your relatives & from your father's house, to the land which I will show you, & I will make you a great nation & I will bless you, & make your name great, & so you shall be a blessing; & I shall bless those that bless you, & the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." - Genesis 12:1-3

After Abraham's descendants came out of their slavery in the land of Egypt, the Lord made them into a nation, the nation of Israel, and gave them the Law. The Law was a revelation of God's holiness and regulated how the Israelites should live and worship as His believing people. Obeying it allowed the believing Israelite to have fellowship with God, to receive His blessings, and to reveal Him to all the nations, while disobedience brought God's punishment. Most importantly, however, the Law allowed Israel to see their need for a Redeemer and King.

"Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice & keep My covenant, then you shall be my own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine, & you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests & a holy nation." - Exodus 19:5-6

But as time wore on, Israel forgot their God, following the example of the pagan nations around them. Eventually, they even rejected God as their King, asking for a man to rule them instead. God gave them over to their evil desires, but in His grace He gave them a godly king to govern them, a man after His own heart, David. At that time God made a promise to David, the promise of a Descendant who would rule over Israel forever in righteousness as the hoped for Redeemer and King.

"Your house & your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever." - 2 Samuel 7:16

After David, the kings of Israel began to turn away from the Lord, and the nation once again turned away with them. Because of this the Lord divided the kingdom and eventually allowed them to be defeated by the Assyrians and Babylonians. But the Lord had not abandoned His people. He was, in fact, disciplining them in order to bring them back to Himself and to continue to fulfill His kingdom purposes through them. Through His prophets, He continued to call His people to repentance and to point them to the future time when He would deliver them by sending their hoped for Redeemer and King. It was at that time that He promised He would one day replace the Law with a new covenant. The Law was unable to justify the people, bring them to maturity, or permanently cleanse their consciences. Also, the nation was unable to fulfill the obedience that the Law required, not having the resources to obey in their own flesh, because of their sin nature. So if the people were to receive the blessings of God, then there would have to be another way. And in His great mercy God provided this new way in the promise of the New Covenant.

*"Behold the days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel & with the house of Judah... I will put My law within them & on their heart I will write it; & I will be their God & they shall be My people... I will forgive their iniquity, & their sin I will remember no more."
- Jeremiah 31:31-34*

After being dispossessed from their land and led into captivity, Israel repented and was allowed by the Lord to return to their land and rebuild the temple. But they were still under foreign rule. The people's hearts again turned away from the Lord, and the glory of the Lord passed out of the temple. Israel was plagued with violence and war until eventually the Romans conquered Jerusalem. Herod the Great gained the favor of Rome and was appointed the King of the Jews. At this point it had been 400 years since Israel had heard the voice of the Lord, and the people were desperately looking for the advent, or coming, of their long hoped for Redeemer and King, who would deliver them from their enemies as well as their own wickedness...



Given all that had been promised to the nation of Israel & all that had befallen them, what would you expect their attitude to have been as they await the coming Redeemer & King?



The Advent of Christ: Hope

Luke 1:26-38, 46-55; Matthew 1:18-24

Week 1

O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL

- Latin hymn from 9th century; English translation by John M. Neale, 1818–1866

"Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel." – Isaiah 7:14

He says, "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth." – Isaiah 49:7

The preparation for the celebration of our Lord's birth begins four Sundays before Christmas Day—the period known as the Advent season. Advent centers on the Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming Messiah, who was foretold 600 years before His birth, while the Jewish people were living under Babylonian captivity. For centuries thereafter, faithful Jews greatly anticipated the Redeemer-Messiah, echoing the prayer that He would "ransom captive Israel."

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" is a 9th century Latin hymn that was originally used in church liturgy as a series of seven 'Antiphons'—short musical statements that were sung each day of the last week of Advent until Christmas Eve arrived. Each of the Antiphons greeted the anticipated Messiah with one of the many titles ascribed to Him throughout the Old Testament.

Below are the seven Latin Antiphons with each corresponding stanza of the English hymn. The order below is the original order of the Latin Antiphons. Notice that the beginning letters of each Antiphon form a reverse acrostic **ERO CRAS**, meaning "I shall be there tomorrow." In other words, this is the answer spoken the day before Christmas that echoes back from the One to whom the people call!

Sapientia – O come, Thou Wisdom from on high, Who orderest all things mightily; To us the path of knowledge show, And teach us in her ways to go.

Adonai – O come, O come, Thou Lord of might who to Thy tribes, on Sinai's height, in ancient times didst give the law in cloud and majesty and awe.

Radix Jesse – O come, Thou Root of Jesse's tree, an ensign of Thy people be; Before Thee rulers silent fall; All peoples on Thy mercy call.

Clavis David – O come, Thou Key of David, come and open wide our heav'nly home where all Thy saints with Thee shall dwell—O come, O come, Emmanuel!


Oriens – O come, Thou Day-spring, come and cheer our spirits by Thine advent here; O drive away the shades of night and pierce the clouds and bring us light.

Rex – O come, Desire of nations, bind in one the hearts of all mankind; Bid Thou our sad divisions cease, and be Thyself our King of Peace.

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

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

Truly our hearts can rejoice when we realize that Christ did come 2,000 years ago and accomplished a perfect redemption for Adam's hopeless race. Similarly, we wait with the same urgent expectancy, as did the Israelites, for the piercing of the clouds—His second advent, when victory over sin and death will be final.

 **Stargazing** *Think of a time when you desired or hoped for something more than anything else in the world. Have you ever hoped for Christ in that same way? Do you wait with urgent expectancy for Him this holiday season? Why or why not?*

**The Magi Say:**

Luke 1:26-38 ²⁶ Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And coming in, he said to her, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord *is* with you."

²⁹ But she was very perplexed at *this* statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this was. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid,

Mary; for you have found favor with God. ³¹ "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. ³² "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord

God will give Him the throne of His father David; ³³ and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end."

³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ The angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.

³⁶ "And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. ³⁷ "For nothing will be impossible with God."

³⁸ And Mary said, "Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word."

And the angel departed from her.

**The Magi Say:**

"Jesus" means "Yahweh saves." God revealed Himself as Yahweh, or "I AM" in Exodus 3. The name Yahweh communicates that God exists outside of time & that He is a personal God. In Exodus 3, God promised to deliver His people from slavery in Egypt. By naming the child Jesus, God was once again promising deliverance.

**Unwrapping the Passage**

To better understand, attempt to answer these questions.

- 1) What things do you notice about Mary's response to the angel Gabriel? What are some things that we learn about her character?

- 2) What is the significance of the words spoken by the angel Gabriel in vv. 31-33 (see intro article)?

BONUS: How does this description of Jesus relate to the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel 7:16?

Luke 1:46-55 ⁴⁶ And Mary said:

“My soul exalts the Lord,

⁴⁷ And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.

⁴⁸ “For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondslave;
For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed.

⁴⁹ “For the Mighty One has done great things for me;
And holy is His name.

⁵⁰ “AND HIS MERCY IS UPON GENERATION AFTER GENERATION
TOWARD THOSE WHO FEAR HIM.

⁵¹ “He has done mighty deeds with His arm;
He has scattered *those who were* proud in the thoughts of their heart.

⁵² “He has brought down rulers from *their* thrones,
And has exalted those who were humble.

⁵³ “HE HAS FILLED THE HUNGRY WITH GOOD THINGS;
And sent away the rich empty-handed.

⁵⁴ “He has given help to Israel His servant,
In remembrance of His mercy,

⁵⁵ As He spoke to our fathers,
To Abraham and his descendants forever.”



The Magi Say:

“In the Magnificat [song of praise] Mary echoes Hannah’s rejoicing in 1 Samuel, as well as parts of Genesis, 2 Samuel, the Psalms, Isaiah, and Micah (Seventeen references from the Old Testament). Evidently Mary knew her Scripture.” (Cheney, Jesus Christ.)



Unwrapping the Passage II To better understand, attempt to answer these questions.

1) Why does Mary close her praise to the Lord with verses 54-55 (see intro article)?

BONUS: How does verses 54-55 relate to the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis 12:1-3?

Matthew 1:18-25 ¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. ²⁰ But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. ²¹ “She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.”

²² Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³ “BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A

SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL,” which translated means, “GOD WITH US.”

²⁴ And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took *Mary* as his wife, ²⁵ but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.



The Magi Say:

In Bible times a betrothal lasted 12 months before the marriage and could only be broken on grounds of adultery. The punishment for adultery was so severe that if Joseph had exposed Mary publicly for her supposed act, she could have been stoned to death.



Unwrapping the Passage III

To better understand, attempt to answer these questions.

1) What does Joseph’s reaction to the situation say about his character?



The Reason for the Season


Now meditate & apply.

1. *Imagine yourself in Mary or Joseph’s place. Would you have responded in the same way?*

2. *In Mary's Magnificat, or song of praise to the Lord, she worships the Lord's character and praises Him for the mighty acts He has done, which assure her that He will fulfill the promises He has made. Spend some time thinking about the great things the Lord has done in your life and the promises He has given you for the future and respond in worship.*

3. *Now that you have reflected on these truths, write a few lines of your own Magnificat praising the Lord for His mighty acts in your own life.*

Review your memory verses for the week - Luke 1:32-33. Then write out these verses below from memory:

 *Now spend a few minutes responding in prayer. Thank God for what you've learned and pray for His help to follow through on your application. Then pray for the others God has placed in your life this Christmas season.*



The Advent of Christ: Joy

Luke 2:1-39

Week 2

JOY TO THE WORLD!

- Isaac Watts, 1674–1748

The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them. You shall multiply the nation, You shall increase their gladness; they will be glad in Your presence. – Isaiah 9:2-3a

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners; to proclaim the favorable year of the LORD and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to grant those who mourn in Zion, giving them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting so they will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified. – Isaiah 61:1-3

Joy is the keynote of the entire Advent season, especially for the believer who realizes its spiritual significance. This text is generally considered to be one of the most joyous Christmas hymns in existence, and while there is no mention of shepherds, angelic choruses, or wise men, “Joy to the World” truly emphasizes the reverent but ecstatic joy that Christ’s birth brought to mankind. For centuries hearts had yearned for God to reveal Himself personally. At last it happened as “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The very God of the universe invaded this world and provided a means whereby sinful man might live eternally. The entire Advent season should be filled with rejoicing as we contemplate anew God’s greatness.

“Joy to the World” is a paraphrase of the last part of Psalm 98:

Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth; make a loud noise and rejoice and sing praise. Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills be joyful together before the Lord; for He cometh to judge the earth; with righteousness shall He judge the world, and the people with equity.

When it first appeared in Watts’ hymnal of 1719 – *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament* – the text of this hymn was originally titled “The Messiah’s Coming and Kingdom.” It was his intent in writing this collection to give the Psalms a New Testament meaning and style by paraphrasing all 150 Psalms in Christian verse. Psalm 98 was originally a song of rejoicing for God’s protection of His chosen people and the anticipation of the time when He would be the God of the whole earth. Watts masterfully crafted the words of Psalm 98 into a New Testament expression of praise for the salvation that began when God became incarnate as the Babe of Bethlehem who was destined to remove the curse of Adam’s fall.

Joy to the world! the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King; let ev’ry heart prepare Him room, and heav’n and nature sing.

Joy to the earth the Savior reigns. Let men their songs employ, while fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains repeat the sounding joy.

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.

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



Do you feel joyous this holiday season? Why or why not?

Luke 2:1-39 ¹Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. ²This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. ⁴Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, ⁵in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. ⁶While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. ⁸In the same region there were *some* shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; ¹¹for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹²"This *will be* a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased." ¹⁵When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds *began* saying to one another, "Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. ¹⁷When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. ¹⁸And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them. ²¹And when eight days had passed, before His circumcision, His name was *then* called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb. ²²And when the days for their

**The Magi Say:**

Skeptics often point to the lack of historical evidence of the census & the problem of Quirinius as governor as proof that the Bible contains errors, & yet there are many valid solutions available. There are several options as to what this empire-wide census was:

- 1) *Rome tended to take a census every 14 years & one would have taken place around 7 B.C.*
- 2) *Rome extended its practice of enumerating citizens & their property empire wide in 5 B.C.*
- 3) *The entire Roman Empire paid homage to Caesar Augustus registering to give citizen approval of the title: "Father of my Country," in 3 B.C.*
- 4) *The people were being registered for a tax that did not take place until later, possibly in A.D. 6. Quirinius is recorded as having been governor of Syria in A.D. 6-9, much later than Jesus' birth (which happened during Herod's reign, from either 40-4 B.C. or 38-1 B.C.) There are also several solutions to this seeming discrepancy.*
 - 1) *The Greek word translated "while" can sometimes be translated "before." So the census could have happened before Quirinius was governor.*
 - 2) *Quirinius could have served twice as the governor of Syria, once between 4-1 B.C., & again in A.D. 6.*
 - 3) *The Greek word "hegemonuo," does not mean governing, but simply administrating or ruling. Quirinius may have been a procurator especially appointed to administer the census.*



The Magi Say:

The “inn” where there was no room for Mary & Joseph was likely not an inn as we think of it today. The Greek word used here is one meaning “temporary shelter.” The Romans raised large tents for shelter when there was not enough lodging for the people such as at Passover in Jerusalem or perhaps when people were commanded to return to their hometowns for a census. These temporary shelters were loud & busy with both animals & people, & most likely no “innkeepers.” Since there was no room for Mary & Joseph, it is likely that Jesus was either born outside or in a shepherd’s cave. (Gower, New Manners.)

purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “EVERY *firstborn* MALE THAT OPENS THE WOMB SHALL BE CALLED HOLY TO THE LORD”), ²⁴and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord, “A PAIR OF TURTLEDOVES OR TWO YOUNG PIGEONS.” ²⁵And there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. ²⁷And he came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the custom of the Law, ²⁸then he took Him into his arms, and blessed God, and said, ²⁹“Now Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace, According to Your word; ³⁰For my eyes have seen Your salvation, ³¹Which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³²A LIGHT OF REVELATION TO THE



The Magi Say:

For every firstborn child a redemption price of 5 silver shekels or 10 days wages had to be paid to the temple (Num. 18:16). For the mother’s purification there was also a required offering of a lamb & a turtle-dove or a young pigeon. Joseph & Mary offered 2 pigeons, an alternative permitted to those too poor to afford a lamb (Lev. 12:2-8). (Cheney)

GENTILES, And the glory of Your people Israel.” ³³And His father and mother were amazed at the things which were being said about Him. ³⁴And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary His mother, “Behold, this *Child* is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed— ³⁵and a sword will pierce even your own soul—to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.” ³⁶And there was a prophetess, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years and had lived with *her* husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers. ³⁸At that very moment she came up and *began* giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. ³⁹When they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city of Nazareth.



Unwrapping the Passage

To better understand, attempt to answer these questions.

- 1) A sheep pasture seems like the last place one would expect an angelic announcement of the birth of the Redeemer and King. What do you think God’s purpose was in announcing the birth of Christ to shepherds rather than the political or religious leaders of the day (1 Cor. 1:26-31)?

- 2) The angel announced, “Behold I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people.” Why would the shepherds have felt such great joy at these words (see intro article)? How can we see that Jesus fulfilled this announcement?

- 3) What does the shepherds’ initial reaction to the angel of the Lord tell you about God’s glory (Luke 2:9)? Read the following verses to learn more about the glory of the Lord and what the shepherds might have witnessed that night: Exodus 33:18-23, 34:29-30; Revelation 21:23.

- 4) At the time of Jesus’ birth all of Israel was looking for a mighty warrior to come deliver them from Rome and establish the nation. The baby of a peasant family was the furthest thing from their mind. What are some evident traits in Simeon and Anna’s lives that may have allowed them to see God’s true Redeemer and King when others could not?



The Reason for the Season

Now meditate & apply.

1. *Isaiah 55:8-9 tells us about the transcendence of God and His ways. After looking at the expectations that the Israelites had of the coming Messiah at that time and the unexpected way God chose to bring the Messiah into the world, think about the unexpected ways God has worked in your life. What have you learned about the sovereignty of God and His good and perfect will through looking at the ways He has worked in your life in the past?*

2. *Mary and Joseph had to endure less than ideal circumstances at the time of Jesus' birth, as the whole event probably took place in a cave or even outdoors, yet they were able to make the best of it. Are there areas in your life that are keeping you from experiencing the joy of the Lord? What are some ways you can learn to be content in whatever circumstances the Lord has you (Phil. 4:11-13)?*

3. *It is so easy to gloss over the account of the birth of Christ because it is something that we have heard many times throughout our lives. Read Luke 2:17-18, 20, 33 and notice the reactions of those who witnessed the birth of the Messiah. Now spend some time in prayer asking the Lord to renew the joy of your salvation and open your eyes anew to the greatness of His plan of redemption through the birth of Christ. Respond by writing down some ways that you can make Christ the center of your Christmas celebration. Choose one to focus on this week.*

1)

2)

3)

4)

5)

Review your memory verse for the week - Luke 2:10. Then write out this verse below from memory:



Now spend a few minutes responding in prayer. Thank God for what you've learned & pray for His help to follow through on your application. Then pray for the others God has placed in your life this Christmas season.



The Advent of Christ: Peace

Matthew 2:1-23; Luke 2:40

Week 3

IT CAME UPON THE MIDNIGHT CLEAR

- Edmund H. Sears, 1810–1876

For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this. – Isaiah 9:6-7

“But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity.” This One will be our peace. – Micah 5:2, 5a

This hymn is one of the first ever written by an American writer. It was written in 1849 by Rev. Edmund H. Sears, a graduate of Harvard Divinity School who went on to become an ordained Unitarian Minister. Sears’ carol is based on the Gospel of Luke where the angels announce to the shepherds that there will be “peace on earth, good will toward men.” Yet, strangely, Sears makes no mention of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. As a Unitarian his primary focus was to highlight the angelic request for peace on earth, not Christ Himself.

“It Came Upon the Midnight Clear” is unique among hymns in that it emphasizes the social implications of the angels’ message—those of achieving peace and good will toward our fellowmen in the midst of social difficulty. The writing of this text occurred just before the Civil War, at a time in American history when there was much tension over the question of slavery, the industrial revolution in the North, and the frantic gold rush in California. The final verse is a great verse of hopeful optimism—a time when all people will enjoy the peace of which the angels sang.

While evangelical Christians would disagree with Sears’ Unitarian theology, this beautiful hymn does bring to light the need for peace on earth that only Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, can truly bring.

It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old, from angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold: “Peace on the earth, good will to men, from heaven’s all gracious King!” The world in solemn stillness lay to hear the angels sing.


Still through the cloven skies they come with peaceful wings unfurled, and still their heavenly music floats o’er all the weary world; above its sad and lowly plains, they bend on hovering wing, and ever over its Babel sounds, the blessed angels sing.

Yet with the woes of sin and strife, the world has suffered long; beneath the angel strain have rolled, two thousand years of wrong; and man, at war with man, hears not the love-song which they bring; o hush the noise, ye men of strife and hear the angels sing.

And ye, beneath life’s crushing load, whose forms are bending low, who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow, look now! for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing: O rest beside the weary road and hear the angels sing.

For lo, the days are hast’ning on, by prophet bards foretold, when with the ever circling years comes round the age of gold when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling, and the whole world give back the song which now the angels sing.

The peace of Christmas, proclaimed by the heavenly chorus, is one of God’s greatest gifts to mankind. “God was reconciling the world unto Himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19). This message of reconciliation involves us on three different levels: peace with God, peace with our fellowmen, and peace within ourselves.

 **Stargazing** *Think of a time when you felt ‘life’s crushing load’ upon you. Maybe you are going through a tough time right now or carrying around a burden. How can Christ be your Prince of Peace this holiday season?*

Matthew 2:1-23 ¹Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, ²“Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.” ³When Herod the king heard *this*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: ⁶‘And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, Are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; For out of you shall come forth a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.’” ⁷Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared. ⁸And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found *Him*, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him.” ⁹After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over *the place* where the Child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with

**The Magi Say:**

“Who are these magi? The word, ‘magi,’ which is sometimes translated ‘wise men,’ is the root from which we get our word ‘magic.’ This doesn’t make them all magicians, in the present sense of the word. Some of them were learned men in general, who studied the physical world & were knowledgeable about many things, including the stars. Magi were often court astronomers who were consulted by the rulers of the day for guidance in affairs of state.” (Larson, The Star.)

For more see www.bethlehemstar.net.

**The Magi Say:**

Many find the account of the Magi difficult to believe, asking, “What Persian wise man would come to honor the birth of a Jewish peasant?” These objections overlook the intense interest by ancient astrologers in the connection between astral phenomenon & political events. It was widely believed during this time that stars heralded the birth of human beings destined for greatness. (Green, Dict. Of Jesus.)

great joy. ¹¹After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned *by God* in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way. ¹³Now when they had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him.” ¹⁴So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt. ¹⁵He remained there until the death of Herod. *This was* to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called My Son.”

¹⁶Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi.

¹⁷Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: ¹⁸“A voice was heard in Ramah, Weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for

**The Magi Say:**

The Bethlehem Star can be explained as an alignment of Jupiter, the King Planet, with Regulus, the King Star.

For more see www.bethlehemstar.net.



The Magi Say:

The gold given by the Magi was representative of royalty, the frankincense of sacrifice, & the myrrh of death. Frankincense was offered as incense before the Lord in the temple, & myrrh was used when wrapping the dead in their burial clothes.

her children; And she refused to be comforted, Because they were no more.”

¹⁹But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, and said, ²⁰“Get up, take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child’s life are dead.” ²¹So Joseph got up, took the Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel.

²²But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Then after being warned *by God* in a

dream, he left for the regions of Galilee, ²³and came and lived in a city called Nazareth. *This was* to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets: “He shall be called a Nazarene.”

Luke 2:40 ⁴⁰The Child continued to grow and become strong, increasing in wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him.



Unwrapping the Passage

To better understand, attempt to answer these questions.

- 1) The prophecy of the Messiah in Micah 5:5 says, “This one will be our peace.” In what ways has Christ already fulfilled this prophecy (Ephesians 2:11-22)? How will His reign as King fulfill it in the future?
- 2) Why would Herod and all Jerusalem with him be troubled upon hearing the Magi tell them of the One born King of the Jews (2:1-3)?
- 3) What do you think Matthew’s purpose was in including this account of the Gentile wise men who came to seek out the King of the Jews? Compare their actions to the response of the Jewish king at the time, Herod.



The Reason for the Season

Now meditate & apply.

1. *Spend some time thanking God for the reconciliation that you now have with Him through the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ. Also thank Him for the peace that He will bring about in the future when His Redeemer and King returns to earth.*

2. *Read Philippians 4:4-9 and John 14:27. Meditate on and write down some of the ways God has brought peace both to this world and to you in your relationship with God the Father through His Redeemer and King, Jesus Christ.*

3. *Think of someone you know who does not have peace with God through Christ. How can you use this Christmas season to approach them with the Gospel?*

Review your memory verses for the week - Luke 2:13-14. Then write out the verses below from memory:



Now spend a few minutes responding in prayer. Thank God for what you've learned & pray for His help to follow through on your application. Then pray for the others God has placed in your life this Christmas season.



The Advent of Christ: Love & Truth

Philippians 2:5-11;

Revelation 19:11-16; 21:1-5; 22:16-17, 20

Week 4

HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING

- Charles Wesley, 1707-1788

But he was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each one of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall upon Him. – Isaiah 53:5-6

“I kept looking in the night visions, and behold with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed. – Daniel 7:13-14

Charles Wesley’s “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” was one of the few Christmas hymns written during the 17th and 18th centuries. It is thought to have been written approximately one year after his dramatic, Aldersgate conversion experience of 1738 and is generally considered to be one of Wesley’s greatest hymns. The fine poetic text, along with the melody composed by Felix Mendelssohn, has given this hymn its great popularity and its standing as a classic among Christmas songs.

Like so many of Charles Wesley’s hymns, this text is a clear, yet concise presentation of Biblical doctrine in poetic language. The first stanza describes the song of the angels outside Bethlehem with an invitation to join them in praise of Christ. The succeeding verses teach such spiritual truths as the virgin birth, Christ’s deity, the immortality of the soul, the second or new birth, and a prayer for the transforming power of Christ to reign in our lives.

As the late Eric Routley, noted English hymnist, observes in his book, *Hymns and Human Life*: “These [Wesley] hymns were composed in order that men and women might sing their way, not only into experience, but also into knowledge; that the cultured might have their culture baptized and the ignorant might be led into truth by the gentle hand of melody and rhyme.”

Hark! the herald angels sing, “Glory to the new-born 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!”


Christ, by highest heav’n adored, Christ, the everlasting Lord! Late in time behold Him come, offspring of the virgin’s womb. Veiled in flesh the God-head see; hail th’ incarnate Deity, pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel. Hark! the herald angels sing, “Glory to the new-born King.”

Hail the heav’n-born Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of Righteousness! Light and life to all He brings, ris’n with healing in His wings. 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. Hark! the herald angels sing, “Glory to the new-born King.”

Come, Desire of nations, come! Fix in us Thy humble home. Rise, the woman’s conqu’ring Seed; bruise in us the serpent’s head. Now display Thy saving power; ruined nature now restore! Now in mystic union join, Thine to ours, and ours to Thine.

Adam’s likeness, Lord, efface; stamp Thine image in its place! Second Adam from above, reinstate us in Thy love. Let us Thee, though lost, regain; Thee, the Life, the inner man: O, to all Thyself impart, formed in each believing heart.

Hark! the herald angels sing, “Glory to the new-born King!”

 **Stargazing** *Take some time to meditate on the words of this hymn silently. Now spend a moment praising Christ for all of His attributes spoken of in this hymn.*

Philippians 2:1-5 ⁵Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. ⁸Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.



The Magi Say:

“Emptied Himself:’ The kenosis (emptying) of Christ during His incarnation does not mean that He surrendered any attributes of deity, but that He took on the limitations of humanity. This involved a veiling of His pre-incarnate glory (Jn. 17:5) & the voluntary nonuse of some of His divine prerogatives during the time He was on earth (Matt. 24:36).” (Ryrie, Study Bible).



Unwrapping the Passage

To better understand, attempt to answer these questions.

- 1) In Philippians 2:6-7, it says that Christ existed in the form of God, but emptied himself by taking the form of a bondservant and being made in the likeness of men. How did Christ show us His love by being made in the likeness of men? What other sacrifices did Christ make on our behalf?
- 2) Read John 3:16, 6:38-40, and Romans 5:8. Why did Jesus become a man? Now read Acts 16:30-31 and John 1:12. How does one receive the benefits available through Jesus' incarnation?
- 3) Read Hebrews 2:14-18 and 7:23-28. Why was it necessary for Christ to be both God and man in order for Him to accomplish His purposes?

Revelation 19:11-16 ¹¹And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. ¹²His eyes are a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems; and He has a name written on Him which no one knows except Himself. ¹³He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. ¹⁴And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses. ¹⁵From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. ¹⁶And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, “KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.”

Revelation 21:1-5 ¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. ²And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, ⁴and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.” ⁵And He who sits on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” And He said, “Write, for these words are faithful and true.”

Revelation 22:16-17 ¹⁶“I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.” ¹⁷The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost.

Revelation 22:20 ²⁰He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming quickly.” Amen. Come Lord Jesus.



The Magi Say:

This description of Jesus is a portrayal of His second advent (second coming). At that time Jesus will return as the Supreme King with many diadems, or crowns, upon His head to judge the world & make war upon the unrighteous nations. After which He will establish peace. Only God knows when these things will transpire (Acts 1:7).



Unwrapping the Passage II

To better understand, attempt to answer these questions.

- 1) What truths do we learn about Christ through looking at the various titles given to Him throughout these passages in Revelation?

- 2) At Jesus' first advent He came as the Redeemer. When He returns, it will be as King. From these passages, what will be some of the characteristics of His reign? How will mankind benefit from His reign?

BONUS: How are Christ's roles of Redeemer and King tied together?



The Reason for the Season

Now meditate & apply.

1. *Knowing what we do now about Christ's life, death, and resurrection, what significance does this bring to His birth? How would your life be different if He had never been born?*

2. *This Christmas as we celebrate Christ's first advent, we can be filled with hope because we know that He will be coming again. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11. What perspective should we take as we wait for Christ's second advent?*

3. *Thinking back on the study and the truths you have learned, what are areas in your life that you would like to see change this new year? Journal in a short paragraph what those changes are. Then think of some practical steps you can make to achieve them.*


Share these desires with someone else this week, and ask them to hold you accountable.

Review your memory verses for the week - Philippians 2:5-7. Then write out these verses below from memory:

*Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely, & may your spirit & soul & body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, & He also will bring it to pass.
- 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24*



Now spend a few minutes responding in prayer. Thank God for what you've learned & pray for His help to follow through on your application. Then pray for the others God has placed in your life this Christmas season.



Appendix A: Chronology

A SUGGESTED TIMELINE: THE LIFE & TIMES OF JESUS CHRIST

October 25, 36 B.C. – Herod captures Jerusalem

May 19, 4 B.C. – Zechariah’s time of appointed temple service begins

Summer 3 B.C. – Registration of all people in the empire for an oath of obedience and an approval to the title “*Father of our Country*” to Augustus while Saturninus was governor of Syria and Quirinius was a procurator appointed to oversee the registration in the region

~**March 10, 3 B.C.** – John the Baptist’s birth

September 11, 3 B.C. – Jesus’ birth

September 18, 3 B.C. – Jesus’ circumcision

October 20/21, 3 B.C. – Jesus’ temple presentation, and the subsequent return of the family to Nazareth

Between October, 3 and December, 2 B.C. – Jesus’ family moves to Bethlehem

December 25, 2 B.C. – Magi visit Jesus in Bethlehem; Joseph, Mary, and Jesus leave for Egypt shortly thereafter

January, 2 B.C. – Herod decrees the death of males 2 years and under in Bethlehem

January 10, 1 B.C. – Lunar eclipse

January 28, 1 B.C. – Herod’s death

April 6, 11 – Jesus attends Passover in Jerusalem at the age of 12 and stays at the temple

August 19, 14 – Tiberius becomes emperor

A.D. 29 – Beginning of John the Baptist’s ministry

Summer/autumn of A.D. 29 – Beginning of Jesus’ ministry

April 7, 30 – The first Passover during Jesus’ ministry

April 3, 33 – Jesus’ crucifixion

April 5, 33 – Jesus’ resurrection

May 14, 33 – Jesus’ ascension

May 24, 33 – Day of Pentecost

August 10, 70 – Temple is destroyed

A.D. ? – Jesus’ second advent



Appendix B: For Further Reading

A list of resources for further study:

- *Jesus Christ the Greatest Life* compiled and translated by Johnston Cheney and Dr. Stanley Ellisen
- *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times* by Ralph Gower
- *Josephus the Essential Writings* translated by Dr. Paul Maier
- *The Star that Astonished the World* by Dr. Ernest Martin
- The Star of Bethlehem Presentation at <http://starofbethlehem.net/> by Dr. Rick Larson