

More Family Devotions Based on Christmas Carols

# Christ- Centered Advent Volume 3

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## Week 1, Day 1

# The Christmas Carols

For the next few weeks, we are going to be using Christmas carols as the basis for our devotions! Let's read what the Bible says about singing:

*Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but **be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.***  
(Ephesians 5:15-21 (ESV))

Singing songs of praise to God is something we should be doing whether anyone is listening or not, “*singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart...*”, because it one of the ways that God tells us to worship Him. We should also be singing with others, though. The passage says, “*addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.*” That’s why we sing in church and why it’s a good idea for us to sing as a family.

There is a lot to be learned from singing the songs of the faith. Here’s a passage that makes that clear:

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.*  
(Colossians 3:16)

Singing hymns can be part of letting the word of Christ dwell in us and part of teaching and admonishing (that means to warn or advise) one another, too.

That’s what we are going to be doing – learning the Christmas carols, but also learning about what they mean and what they can teach us about Jesus.

# While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks



*Annunciation to the Shepherds, Fresco, Taddeo Gaddi, 1330*

This song was written in a time when church music was changing. After the Reformation, English-speaking churches looked to the book of Psalms for their worship music. The original languages did not fit automatically into poetic meter

when translated into English, so musicians and teachers revised passages to retain their meaning but make them more suitable for singing. These were known as metrical psalms, because they had been reset as English verse. For many years, these were the only songs used in worship.

In 1696, the Irish poet Nahum Tate and his collaborator Nicholas Brady published the *New Version of the Psalms of David*. In 1700, they added a supplement with settings of passages from the New Testament. This carol by Tate is a careful adaptation of Luke 2:8-14 included that collection. For many years, it was the only Christmas carol authorized for Anglican churches, since most of the popular English carols were secular folk songs!

After the revivals of the mid-1700’s, American churches began to accept hymns as well as the metrical psalms, and eventually hymns became the more popular music in most churches. However, a few of the old metrical settings are so powerful, they continue to appear in hymnbooks today – this is one of them!

The melody we know today comes from George Frederic Handel’s opera *Siroe*. The American composer Lowell Mason arranged it for church use and appropriately named the tune, “Christmas.” To fit Tate’s words to Handel’s tune, we repeat the final line of each verse.

Verse 1	Luke 2:8-9 (King James Version)
<p>While shepherds watched their flocks by night, All seated on the ground, The angel of the Lord came down And glory shone around, And glory shone around</p>	<p><i>8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.</i></p>

The birth of Jesus was the fulfillment of thousands of years of prophecy. In the Garden of Eden, God told Adam and Eve that a Savior would one day destroy their Tempter (Genesis 3:15); this is the first mention of the Messiah to come. For centuries afterward, the promised Savior was foretold as a prophet like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15), a king greater than David (Isaiah 9:6-7), and the Son of God Himself (Psalm 2:7)!

And yet, when He came for His time among us, it was not announced in the Temple, the holy city of Jerusalem, or the courts of the palace and government. The news wasn't sent to the king, the high priest, or the ruling council. God made the announcement to a group of men whose names we don't know, spending the night in a field full of sheep, outside a small village in the hill country of Judah.

Turn back to the painting for today. This fresco dates back to the 1300s. Notice how the light coming out of heaven with the angels even illuminates the trees on the distant mountain. What else do you notice? Do you see the sheep dog? These were ordinary people like us.

The story of the shepherds and the angel should remind us that God does not show favoritism to the powerful, wealthy, and wise – all these things are gifts from God to begin with! – but sees the quiet and faithful hearts of His people in every part of society. He calls Himself a father to the fatherless and a judge for the widow (Psalm 68:5) and reminds us all our advantages in life are gifts from Him (1 Corinthians 4:7). He does not ignore us or look down on us when we are poor, weak, or young, but instead He reserves great blessings for humble people (James 2:5) – like these shepherds out on the hillside!

Let's pray.

# While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks

*The glorious announcement of Christ's birth came to ordinary people like us.*

While shepherds watched their flocks  
by night,  
All seated on the ground,  
The angel of the Lord came down  
And glory shone around,  
And glory shone around

“Fear not,” said he, for mighty dread  
Had seized their troubled mind  
“Glad tidings of great joy I bring  
To you and all mankind,  
To you and all mankind.

To you in David's town this day  
Is born, of David's line,  
The Savior, who is Christ the Lord,  
And this shall be the sign,  
And this shall be the sign.

The heav'nly Babe you there shall find  
To human view displayed,  
All meanly wrapped in swaddling bands  
And in a manger laid,  
And in a manger laid.

Thus spake the Seraph, and forthwith  
Appeared a shining throng  
Of angels praising God, and thus  
Address their joyful song,  
Address their joyful song

All Glory be to God on high  
And to the earth be peace;  
Goodwill henceforth from Heav'n to  
man  
Begin and never cease,  
Begin and never cease.”

Text by Nahum Tate (1652-1715), first published 1700.

Tune by George Frederic Handel, arranged by Lowell Mason.

Play the tune at [Hymnary](#).

# Fear Not



*The Angel Appearing to the Shepherds, Thomas Cole, 1833-34*

Verse 2	Luke 2:10 (KJV)
“Fear not,” said he, for mighty dread Had seized their troubled mind “Glad tidings of great joy I bring To you and all mankind, To you and all mankind.	10 <i>And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.</i>

Since the time of ancient Greece and Rome, angels appear in artwork as fat little babies. The Italians called these *putti*, and they represent everything from divine

love to worldly feasting and festivals. The common image of Cupid on Valentine's Day is one of these. Whatever they signify, they are always *cute*.

The angels in the Bible are *not* cute. They are messengers from the Most High God, and a common reaction to their appearance is *fright*. For example, when an angel appeared to the prophet Daniel, he fell to the ground, breathless and trembling. He said later "*when I saw this great vision, ... no strength remained in me,*" and couldn't face the being until the angel empowered him (Daniel 10:4-19). When the future father of John the Baptist encountered the angel Gabriel in the Temple, "*he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.*" (Luke 1:11-13) When Gideon realized he had been talking with a heavenly messenger, he cried out, "*Alas, O Lord GOD! For I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face.*" (Judges 6:22) Often the angel has to comfort the witness before he can give his message.

That's what happened here. It is helpful sometimes to try and place yourself in the situations the Bible describes. How quiet it must have been in the field that night – the sheep asleep on the ground, your fellow shepherds dozing or sound asleep themselves, nothing but the stars and moon above, and all around, *silence*.

Until something amazing appeared, all at once!

Today's painting is by Thomas Cole, founder of the Hudson River School – an art movement that celebrated the grand sweep of the American landscape and its reflection of God's creation. His painting gives us a sense of the isolation of the shepherds and how shocking the appearance of the angels must have been to them. The artists of this movement were known for the detail in their paintings and there is a lot of detail to be found in this one. Look for a blue cloak, a dog, a second set of shepherds and a very special star.

Even if the angel had been simply another man, it would have been startling to have him walk up in the darkness with no warning. This angel is flying down from

heaven, wrapped in the glory of God, and made a dramatic and amazing entrance. No wonder they had “mighty dread” and “troubled minds.”

So, his first words to the alarmed onlookers was “Fear not!” and he announces good news to come.

One note which the shepherds probably didn’t comprehend was that the “*good tidings of great joy*” would be for “*all people*.” It was not a blessing for Israel alone, but for the Gentiles as well. This did not unfold for many years to come – read the book of Acts for that exciting story! – but it was foretold by prophets for centuries before. God spoke of His Messiah in Isaiah 49:6, “*It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant ... to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.*” Many other passages show it was always God’s intent to bring all the nations to Himself, not only the chosen people of Israel. That would be revealed in a few years to come!

Let’s pray.

# Born of David's Line



*The Census at Bethlehem, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1566*

<b>Verse 3</b>	<b>Luke 2:11-12</b>
<p>“To you in David’s town this day Is born, of David’s line, The Savior, who is Christ the Lord, And this shall be the sign, And this shall be the sign.</p>	<p><i>11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.</i></p> <p><i>12 And this shall be a sign unto you;</i></p>

The coming of the Messiah was foretold by *thousands* of years of prophecy, all the way back to the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:15). Many of these prophecies were very detailed, and many they would only be understood when Jesus actually fulfilled them. Some of them were prophecies that no one could have controlled or manipulated. No one chooses when and where he is born, for instance; nobody chooses his own family tree or nation of birth. Yet Jesus' birth precisely fulfills all the predictions that were made beforehand.

In this verse, the angel explains the "*glad tidings of great joy*" he brought. First, he says that the Savior is born "in David's town." The great King David had ruled Israel a thousand years before Jesus was born, but he never forgot the village of Bethlehem where he grew up. About 700 BC, God told the prophet Micah (5:2),

*"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
Though you are little among the thousands of Judah,  
Yet out of you shall come forth to Me  
The One to be Ruler in Israel,  
Whose goings forth are from of old,  
From everlasting."*

The city of David became the birthplace of the Messiah, as the prophets foretold.

Let's take a moment and look at today's painting. The painting, by Renaissance artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder, portrays the census at Bethlehem. You might remember that Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem, their families' hometown, to comply with the command of Caesar Augustus that all his empire should be counted (Luke 2:1-5) You can see them in the lower center right of the painting. Why then does this look like a village in Belgium, not a village in Israel? In fact, the castle at the upper right looks remarkably like the fortifications of Amsterdam. There's a pig being butchered on the lower left, which certainly

never would have happened in a Jewish town! The sign on the building where the census is being taken is the double eagle of the Hapsburgs, who ruled Belgium at the time.<sup>1</sup> Why do you think the artist painted Bethlehem like this? It could be that he just painted what he knew. Or instead that he wanted his audience to picture the happenings in real life as they lived it. You see this, though, all over the world. Artists portray biblical events filtered through their own culture and surroundings. After all, the Bible is for everyone in every culture and every place. It's universal – it applies to all of us.

In the hymn, the angel mentions another truth, that the Savior was “born of David’s line.” God had told King David, *"Your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever"* (2 Samuel 7:16). Jeremiah confirmed that the Lord would raise a king from David who would be called *"The Lord Our Righteousness."* (Jeremiah 23:5-6), and Isaiah said the Messiah would come from the root and stem of Jesse, David’s father (Isaiah 11:1-6).

In the Gospels we read the fulfillment. Mary the mother of Jesus was descended from King David through his son, Nathan (Luke 3:23-38). His foster father, Joseph, was *"of the house and lineage of David"* (Luke 2:4) descended from David through the king’s son Solomon (Matthew 1:1-16). When the angel Gabriel visited Mary, he told her, *"the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father, David"* (Luke 1:32). Both by blood and by adoption, Jesus was born into “David’s line”!

Finally, the term Christ means “anointed One.” The act of anointing was part of the coronation of a king (1 Samuel 16:13) and also the purification of a priest (Exodus 29:7-9). Zechariah said the Christ *"shall sit and rule on His throne; so He shall*

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<sup>1</sup> You can look at the parts of this painting up close and learn more about it at <https://tinyurl.com/bruegelbethlehem>.

*be a priest on His throne.”* (Zechariah 6:13) Jesus is the Chosen One who fills both roles!

God sent Jesus as our Savior to save us from our sins. And so that we could know for sure that Jesus was the Christ, He gave us signs, prophecies that would be fulfilled in ways no one could imagine, but were very clear once they happened.

Let's pray.

## To Human View Displayed



*The Adoration of the Shepherds, Gerard van Honthorst, 1622*

<b>Verse 4</b>	<b>Luke 2:12</b>
“The heav’nly Babe you there shall find To human view displayed, All meanly wrapped in swaddling bands And in a manger laid, And in a manger laid.	12 <i>Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.</i>

The hymnwriter elaborates on the simple story in Luke's gospel, and adds another layer of truth to the account. The angel refers to Christ simply as, "*the babe,*" but Tate calls Him "heavenly."

Jesus was no ordinary baby who somehow grew into His divinity. Jesus announced publicly, "*I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will but the will of Him who sent Me.*" (John 6:38) The angel Gabriel called Him "*the Son of God*" and "*Son of the Highest*" (Luke 1:32, 35). To take on human flesh, He was conceived by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:20, Luke 1:35) then born like other babies, but He even so He was definitely a Child of heaven!

The second line emphasizes the great event of Jesus' birth in human form, "to human view displayed." The birth of Jesus was a milestone in God's eternal plan to save mankind, but it was not the beginning of Jesus' existence. John's gospel tells us that Jesus was present at Creation, long before His birth:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*

(John 1:1-3, 14)

Paul wrote to the Colossian church,

*By Him [Jesus] all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things consist [or hold together]."*

(Colossians 1:16-17)

So, Jesus, the Son of God, existed in eternity and created everything we see, but was not visible to our human eyes until He came to earth!<sup>2</sup>

And just as He humbled Himself to leave heaven and take on human flesh, He was willing to become a humble man among humans, too. Swaddling babies was common enough at the time, but to lay a newborn in a cattle trough spoke of poverty and hardship. If Jesus had been born in a palace, shepherds could not have found Him to see and worship that night; they would not have made it past the gates, and they would have felt very uncomfortable, unwelcome, and out of place if they *were* able to enter. But God placed His Son on the earth for all people, not just those of rank, authority, or wealth, and when the angel said, “Your Savior is lying in a manger,” they were free to say, “*Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.*” *And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.* (Luke 2:15-16)

Today’s painting is by Gerard van Honthorst, a painter from the Dutch Golden Age. Notice how all the light in the painting is coming from the Christ Child. Did the baby really glow? Almost certainly not, but the artist is illustrating that Christ is the light of the world.

*Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”* (John 8:12)

Look carefully at the faces. What do you see? Joy, excitement, gentleness, peace? Jesus brings all that. Let’s pray.

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<sup>2</sup> It is true that Jesus appeared on occasions in the Old Testament. John says, “*No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son ... has declared Him.*” (John 1:18) Then who did the prophets and people see in the Old Testament, when they saw God? They saw Jesus, the perfect representation of God, made visible for a time. Paul explains that Jesus is “*the image of the invisible God,*” (Colossians 1:15) and Jesus Himself said, “*He who has seen Me has seen the Father.*” (John 14:9). These are called “Christophanies,” where God revealed Himself in the person of His Son – even before His birth in Bethlehem!

Week 1, Day 5

## All Glory Be to God on High



*The Annunciation to the Shepherds, Abraham Hondius, 1663*

Verses 5 and 6	Luke 2:13-14
(optional) Thus spake the Seraph, and forthwith Appeared a shining throng Of angels praising God, and thus Address their joyful song, Address their joyful song	<i>13 And suddenly there            was with the angel a multitude of the            heavenly host praising God, and saying,</i>
“All Glory be to God on high And to the earth be peace; Goodwill henceforth from Heav’n to man Begin and never cease, Begin and never cease.”	<i>14 “Glory to God in the            highest, and on earth peace, good            will toward men.”</i>

The original hymn included a verse based on Luke 2:13, beginning “Thus spake the Seraph, and forthwith / appeared a shining throng ...” This verse is sometimes omitted in modern collections, or modified to read “Thus spoke the angel – suddenly / appeared a shining throng ...”

A seraph is a type of angel mentioned in Isaiah 6:1-2. This is the only time that word is used in the Old Testament, and the passages in Luke 2 use the more common word “*angelos*.” The author Tate probably wanted to emphasize this was an especially high-ranking angel or a leader among them, but word “seraph” is not strictly from the gospel account.

But it doesn’t harm our worship to go straight to the final verse ...

The final verse is the chorus of a multitude of angels – what music that must have been!

The painting today is Abraham Hondius, another Dutch Golden Age painter, who was known for his depictions of animals. You can see a few at the bottom of the painting. We particularly like the very startled dogs (left and right) and goose (center)! Most of the angels depicted are *putti* which we talked about a few days ago; they are very different from how the Bible describes angels – more likely to inspire awe and fear than “Aw...how sweet!” This painting, though, gives us the sense of multitudes of angels coming down from heaven to earth to praise God for His gift to us.

They praise God for three things in this verse. First is **the glory of God**. He is worthy of our praise! Our heavenly Father is a merciful and loving God, *who gives us richly all things to enjoy* (1 Timothy 6:17). His greatest gift is eternal life, through the birth, death, and resurrection of His Son Jesus. We glorify God when we confess His goodness and power with a spirit of thankfulness. The Bible tells us over and over that we should give Him the glory He deserves (Psalm 29:1-2, Psalm 50:15, Psalm 96:7-8, 1 Corinthians 6:20, Revelation 19:7 – and many other verses!), and we can join the angels in this praise. Psalm 19:1 says “*The heavens declare the glory of God*” -- and we should too!

The second blessing is **the peace of God**. The prophet Isaiah said the coming Messiah would be called “*Prince of Peace*.” (Isaiah 9:6) The Messiah whom God sent that night had come to take away the guilt, shame, and punishment we earn because of our sin, and to give us new hearts that love God and keep His commandments. We are naturally rebellious toward God, but Jesus – and only Jesus – can overcome that rebellion and give us peace with our heavenly Father. “*Having been justified by faith,*” Paul writes, “*we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*” (Romans 5:1)

And the new heart and new spirit we experience as believers gives us the power to make peace with our neighbors. One of the sharpest distinctions of that time – and throughout history – was hostility between Jews and Gentiles. Yet the coming of Christ bridged the divide through faith in the Savior. The letters of Paul are full of his wonder at finding Gentiles added to God’s kingdom alongside his Jewish brethren. *“Now in Christ Jesus,”* he writes, *“you were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one ... putting to death the enmity.”* (Ephesians 2:13-16) *“For the Scripture says, ‘Whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek ...”* (Romans 10:11-12)

Finally we have **the grace of God**. We can never work our way into God’s forgiveness, but He offers it out of mercy and undeserved kindness to those who believe in His Son. *“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”* (Ephesians 2:8-9) God’s goodwill toward man is what brought Jesus to earth, and ultimately, led Him to die to purchase our pardon. *For God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* (Romans 5:8)

The hymn writer adds the line, “begin and never cease.” It’s not in Luke’s narrative, but it is definitely part of God’s promise to His followers. Jesus told His disciples, *“I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”* (Matthew 28:20), and the Bible reminds us, *“He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’”* (Hebrews 13:5) What a blessing we have, that God gave His Son to take our punishment, and gives us the assurance that He will always be present for us until we are forever with Him!

Let’s pray.