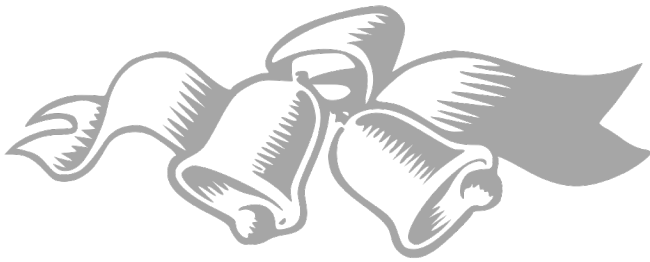


# The Carols of Christmas



Daily Advent Devotions on  
Classic Christmas Carols

Alan Vermilye

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Version 1

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*For my family, who makes every Christmas wonderful!  
Merry Christmas!*

## *Introduction*

I love Christmas music—all Christmas music!

Each year, right after Thanksgiving, a switch flips in my brain, and I'm ready to crank up some Christmas tunes. Suddenly I'm transported back to Christmases past and my mom dragging out her big RCA record player from the closet to an end table in the corner of the living room. There she'd stack on a half-dozen albums, including Andy Williams, Dean Martin, Burl Ives, Bing Crosby, and, yes...*Sing Along with Mitch*, belting out in succession everything from "Silent Night" to "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer." I can still hear the crackling sound of each song through the built-in side speakers and the winding sound of the motorized arm moving out to clear the way for the next record to drop. It was wonderful!

For many of us, Christmas music holds a place in our hearts of times gone by. But Christmas carols—specifically Christian carols—can provide another very important function in that they tell the story of the nativity and explain what happened around the birth of Jesus Christ. When many of the classic carols were created, not everyone was educated and could read the Bible. These hymns were essential in spreading the gospel message and helping people learn about the good news of Jesus Christ.

Today these hymns have become so ingrained in our culture and ubiquitous with holiday celebrations that millions of people around the world joyfully sing them out, over and over again, each year. Some of the richest theological truths about the birth of our Savior are being expressed by believers and nonbelievers alike in homes, churches, stores, cars, fitness centers, the media, and more!

It's hard to find a better evangelistic outreach tool than a Christmas carol that expresses the joy, devotion, and awe-inspiring scenes of the birth of Christ. There are some who are not fans of secular musicians, who, while making no claim to Jesus, sing Christian Christmas carols. But I'm not bothered by it in the least! Think about it. God has orchestrated opportunities for unbelievers to willingly present the gospel message using the talents that He gave them. I'm good with that!

As a believer, though, what I find most interesting about some of the classic Christian carols and hymns are the stories behind them. Who wrote the hymn? What was going on in their life that perhaps inspired the hymn? And how has God used this hymn throughout time?

This was the criteria I used when choosing the four hymns found in this book. I did the best research I could, fully realizing that there are discrepancies found in the stories of hymns, which are well over one hundred years old. Then, to dig a little deeper into the biblical basis for each one, I divided them into four weeks of daily devotions for Christmas. You start each week reading the history of the carol, followed by six daily devotions. Traditionally, Advent begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, but the devotions found in this book are not dated and can be started anytime.

I sincerely hope you enjoy reading about the histories of these great hymns. I also pray that the heartwarming stories and inspirational verses found in the devotions bring peace and hope to you this Christmas season. Please drop me a note at .



I would love to hear from you about your experience with the book.

God Bless and Merry Christmas!

Alan



*Week 1, Day 1*

## “O HOLY NIGHT”: A HISTORY

**Y**ou can almost hear the late Alex Trebek reading his cue card to contestants on the game show *Jeopardy!* “This popular Christmas hymn was written by an atheist, set to music by a Jewish composer, rejected by the church, sung on the battlefields, adopted by an American abolitionist, and the first song ever to be broadcast over airwaves to the entire world.” Judges will accept either “O Holy Night” or the original French version, “Cantique de Noel.”

Far more than just a trivia question though, “O Holy Night” has indelibly left its mark on history. In every Christmas Eve service for over 175 years, its inspiring lyrics and beautiful music have reduced many to tears who, except for on that one day, don’t normally darken the doors of a church. Perhaps it’s because the song’s origin begins with that of a non-churchgoer who himself was more into wine and poetry than the singing of Christmas carols.

It all began in 1847 in the small town of Roquemaure in the south of France. The local parish priest, Father Petitjean, was excited about the renovation of their organ for Christmas Eve Mass and decided to commission a poem to celebrate the occasion. The only amateur poet in the community just happened to

be an avowed atheist with vocal anti-cleric views but also a love for literature. Undeterred by what he considered a minor hindrance, Father Petitjean successfully coaxed the man, Placide Cappeau, into agreeing to his request, completely unaware of its future significance.

Growing up in Roquemaure, Cappeau was like most boys of the time: destined to follow in the family business. In this case, it was the arduous work of making wine barrels. However, his destiny was soon curtailed when, while playing one day, a friend accidentally shot Cappeau in the hand, leading to its amputation. Bearing the burden of responsibility, the friend's father paid for Cappeau's education, enabling him to attend town school and the College Roya d'Avignon, where he was a highly awarded student. Due to his handicap, Cappeau turned to a life of academia, studying literature at Nimes and law in Paris, where he acquired his law license.

However, he was soon drawn back home, where he followed in the family business in the sense that he became a local wine merchant. Cappeau, though, had many other interests, including anti-slavery activism and, for a time, mayor of the town, but his true passion was always literature. It was this passion that motivated him to agree to the priest's request, which he took very seriously.

Shortly thereafter, Cappeau was on a business trip to Paris, traveling down dusty roads in a bumpy coach. He began to imagine the difficult and dangerous journey Mary and Joseph undertook to Bethlehem that culminated in the birth of Jesus on one special night. By the time he arrived in Paris, he had written a powerful poem that he titled "Minuit, Chretiens" or "Midnight, Christians." Later, the work became more widely known as "Cantique de Noel" or "Christmas Song." Inspired by his own work, Cappeau reached out to a friend—a French composer, teacher, and music critic—to set his words to music.

Adolphe Charles Adams was well qualified for the task requested of him. The son of a well-known classical musician, Adams had studied at the Paris conservatoire and had composed over eighty operatic stage works, including his masterpiece, *Giselle*, in 1841. His fame soon led to requests to compose music all over the world. He had a good sense of what the public liked to hear and was a master at writing music for mass consumption.

Yet it wasn't the music so much that was the challenge for Adams. It was the fact that he was Jewish and the lyrics were decidedly Christian. How could he write music for a day he didn't observe, celebrating a Messiah he didn't believe was God's son? Despite the obstacles, he persevered and created a musical masterpiece, to the delight of both Cappeau and Father Petitjean.

Around the same time, a soprano opera singer, Emily Laurie, was in Roquemaure with her engineer husband, who was overseeing construction on a nearby bridge. Out of her friendship with Adams, she agreed to perform "Cantique de Noel" just three weeks later at the midnight Mass service on Christmas Eve.

The song became an instant hit, first among the locals before being more widely circulated in towns all over France. In the beginning, it was wholeheartedly accepted and embraced by the church and was a mainstay at countless Christmas Eve services.

For a short while, the song became less popular as the reputations of the author and composer were revealed. Furor developed among church leaders when they discovered Cappeau was an atheist and opposed to the power and influence of the church and that Adams was Jewish. The song was quickly and uniformly banned and declared unsuitable for Christmas services. It was deemed as lacking musical taste and absent of religious spirit. The church succeeded in burying the song for a while, but over time, the ordinary people of France refused to comply and

continued to sing one of their favorite songs, only driving its popularity.

One reason for this might have something to do with the legend surrounding the song. The story goes that on Christmas Eve in 1871, during the Franco-Prussian War, the armies of France and Germany were in the midst of intense battle, fighting it out in the trenches. Suddenly, a French soldier jumped out of the trench with no weapon in hand and began singing “Cantique de Noel” only to be joined in song by a German infantryman. Singing broke out between both sides, and the fighting ceased for the next twenty-four hours as soldiers from both camps celebrated Christmas Day.

Another reason for the song’s survival is that by 1855 a London publisher had translated it into many languages, making it widely available to new audiences around the world, including a reclusive American writer, John Sullivan Dwight, who put his own touch on the song.

Dwight graduated from Harvard College and Harvard University Divinity School, becoming a Unitarian minister in Northampton, Massachusetts. His occupation in pastoral ministry was cut short due to numerous panic attacks he suffered while speaking in front of congregations. Searching for a new line of work, he returned to his early love of music, and in 1852 launched *Dwight’s Journal of Music*, a weekly periodical that became one of the most respected and influential such periodicals in the country. He edited the journal for thirty years and is widely considered the first American music critic.

In 1855 Dwight discovered “Cantique de Noel.” He was inspired by the powerful lyrics about the birth of Christ, but he saw something else that corresponded to his abolitionist beliefs as the movement to outlaw slavery was heating up in the North. He translated the carol into English and made some adjustments to the lyrics, publishing it in his journal under the title “O Holy Night.”

This new version quickly became a favorite among Christian abolitionists and was popular during the Civil War mainly because of the third verse: “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.”

Over fifty years later—long after the Civil War had ended, when Cappeau and Dwight were old men and Adams had been dead for many years—the song broke historical ground when a university professor made “O Holy Night” the first song ever to be broadcast live on the radio.

Reginald Fessenden, a professor and inventor best known for his pioneering work developing radio technology, was experimenting in his office one Christmas Eve in 1906 with a microphone and a telegraph. At this time, the only radios that existed were wireless transmitters that picked up code. Fessenden proceeded to do something that had never been done before by broadcasting a human voice over the airwaves.

Speaking into a makeshift microphone, he recited the birth of Christ from Luke chapter 2 from his Bible. Then he picked up his violin and played “O Holy Night,” making it the first song ever to be broadcast over the radio. Radio operators all over the world must have been stunned as the normal, coded impulses they would normally transcribe were miraculously altered into a man’s voice and music.

Since that first debut broadcast, “O Holy Night” has become one of the music industry’s most recorded and played songs. But more notably, since that first Christmas Eve in 1847, it’s been sung millions of times in Christian churches worldwide.

How has this song, which battled multiple controversies and survived very nearly being banished from existence by the church, somehow reclaimed that much anticipated high point of the Christmas Eve celebration?

Perhaps it's because "O Holy Night" clearly embodies the redemptive aspects of the Christmas story, turning our hearts to the reason why we celebrate the birth of Jesus. It was a night like no other when our majestic and awesome God broke into our world in the form of a human baby to become our King. He was no ordinary King but rather a Savior sent to rescue us from a broken and sinful world. And in that moment and every Christmas Eve since, we, too, stand by his cradle on that holy night in awe of the Christ child.

It's interesting to wonder whether Father Petitjean would've had any idea that his simple request to the local town's atheist would eventually produce one of the most beautiful, inspired pieces of music ever created.



## **O Holy Night**

O holy night, the stars are brightly shining,  
It is the night of the dear Saviour's birth;  
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,  
Till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.  
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices,  
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn;

Fall on your knees,  
Oh hear the angel voices!  
O night divine! O night when Christ was born.  
O night, O holy night, O night divine.

Led by the light of Faith serenely beaming;  
With glowing hearts by his cradle we stand:  
So, led by light of a star sweetly gleaming,  
Here come the wise men from Orient land,  
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 no stranger!  
Behold your King! Before Him lowly bend!  
Behold your King! your King! before him bend!

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,  
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful Chorus raise we;  
Let all within us praise his Holy name!

Christ is the Lord,

then ever! ever praise we!

His pow'r and glory, evermore proclaim!

His pow'r and glory, evermore proclaim!

## **Cantique de Noël (Christmas Song)**

Midnight, Christians, is the solemn hour,  
When God as man descended unto us  
To erase the stain of original sin  
And to end the wrath of His Father.  
The entire world thrills with hope  
On this night that gives it a Saviour.

People, kneel down, await your deliverance.  
Christmas, Christmas, here is the Redeemer,  
Christmas, Christmas, here is the Redeemer!

May the ardent light of our Faith  
Guide us all to the cradle of the infant,  
As in ancient times a brilliant star  
Guided the Oriental kings there.  
The King of Kings was born in a humble manger;  
O mighty ones of today, proud of your greatness,

It is to your pride that God preaches.  
Bow your heads before the Redeemer!  
Bow your heads before the Redeemer!

The Redeemer has broken every bond  
The Earth is free, and Heaven is open.  
He sees a brother where there was only a slave,  
Love unites those whom iron had chained.  
Who will tell Him of our gratitude,  
For all of us He is born, He suffers and dies.

People, stand up! Sing of your deliverance,  
Christmas, Christmas, sing of the Redeemer,  
Christmas, Christmas, sing of the Redeemer!

*Week 1, Day 2*

## THE NIGHT OF THE DEAR SAVIOR'S BIRTH

*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness  
has not overcome it. John 1:5*

**T**he first day of winter is called the winter solstice, and it's an astronomical event in the Northern Hemisphere that can occur anywhere between December 20 and December 23. It's the one day of the year with the fewest hours of sunlight and the longest night, meaning it's the shortest and darkest day of the year.

For some, the onset of shorter, darker days can trigger a type of depression that saps their energy and makes them feel moody, giving them the "winter blues." There's even a clinical name for it: seasonal affective disorder. Science has shown that six percent of Americans suffer from this disorder in the winter months, with symptoms including poor concentration, over-sleeping, feelings of worthlessness, and weight gain. The gold standard treatment for it is exposure to light, and the brightest of lights are best.

While we think of Christmas as a season of light, the truth is, the birth story of Jesus Christ is not so much. God had been

silent for four hundred years, leaving his people to walk in spiritual darkness. They were living under the oppressive rule of the Romans, and the nation of Israel was fracturing into various political groups that sought and fought to lead the people. Darkness permeated Judaism.

Then something truly incredible happened! Jesus came as the incarnate Word of God to bring the light of God's life into a spiritually dark and dying world. His light is powerful and far-reaching, able to illuminate and dispel the darkest of days. The nature of light is to shine, and darkness cannot exist in the presence of light. Despite whatever darkness is in the world or your life, it's important to remember that the Light of Jesus Christ cannot lose against the darkness; the darkness will never overcome it.

The reality of dark winters is not in itself comforting, but this year, begin to take notice of a very definite and subtle trend that begins around December 24 or 25. You'll find the days starting to get longer and the light returning! What provides the most comfort on any dark day is to remember that the light of Christ came on the darkest of nights to give us hope and to pour light into our hearts to shine out into our lives for others to see.