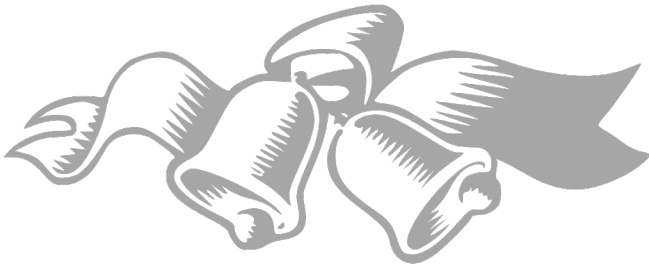


The Carols of Christmas

Volume 3



Daily Advent Devotions on
Classic Christmas Carols

Alan Vermilye

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Version 1

Contents

Introduction	VI
1. Week 1, Day 1	1
Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus—A History	
3. Week 1, Day 2	9
Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus	
4. Week 1, Day 3	11
Born To Set Thy People Free	
5. Week 1, Day 4	13
From Our Fears And Sins Release Us	
6. Week 1, Day 5	16
Hope Of All The Earth Thou Art	
7. Week 1, Day 6	19
Dear Desire Of Every Nation	
8. Week 1, Day 7	21
Joy Of Every Longing Heart	
9. Week 2, Day 8	23
It Came Upon the Midnight Clear—A History	
11. Week 2, Day 9	31
It Came Upon The Midnight Clear, That Glorious Song of Old	

12. Week 2, Day 10	33
Peace On Earth, Good Will To Men, From Heaven's All-Gracious King	
13. Week 2, Day 11	36
Still Through The Cloven Skies They Come With Peaceful Wings Unfurled	
14. Week 2, Day 12	39
O Rest Beside The Weary Road And Hear The Angels Sing!	
15. Week 2, Day 13	41
Yet With The Woes Of Sin And Strife The World Has Suffered Long	
16. Week 2, Day 14	44
Oh, Hush the Noise, Ye Men of Strife and Hear the Angels Sing	
17. Week 3, Day 15	46
What Child Is This?—A History	
20. Week 3, Day 16	53
What Child Is This, Who, Laid to Rest	
21. Week 3, Day 17	55
This, This Is Christ The King	
22. Week 3, Day 18	58
Why Lies He In Such Mean Estate	
23. Week 3, Day 19	61
The Silent Word Is Pleading	
24. Week 3, Day 20	64
So Bring Him Incense, Gold, And Myrrh	
25. Week 3, Day 21	67
The King of Kings, Salvation Brings	

26. Week 4, Day 22	69
Angels From The Realms Of Glory—A History	
29. Week 4, Day 23	78
Angels From The Realms Of Glory	
30. Week 4, Day 24	81
Shepherds, In The Field Abiding	
31. Week 4, Day 25	83
Sages, Leave Your Contemplations	
32. Week 4, Day 26	86
Saints, Before The Altar Bending	
33. Week 4, Day 27	89
Sinners, Wrung With True Repentance	
34. Week 4, Day 28	91
Come And Worship, Come And Worship	

Introduction

It brings me great joy to offer you the third and final volume of *The Carols of Christmas* devotional series. Driven by the overwhelming success of volumes 1 and 2, I set out to discover four additional carols with intriguing backstories and enough biblical content to craft a week of devotions. Fortunately, my search ended in success!

I have thoroughly enjoyed the research and writing process for all three volumes. My appreciation for each carol deepened as I uncovered the captivating narratives and historical influences that shaped each melody and their lasting impact on culture. This journey has been nothing short of amazing, and I feel immensely grateful that God has given me the opportunity to share it with you.

Similar to my approach in the previous volumes, I dedicated myself to conducting thorough research, understanding that discrepancies might arise in the narratives of hymns that have spanned more than a hundred years. Then I divided them into four weeks of daily devotions for Christmas. You will start each week by reading the history of the carol, followed by six daily devotions. Although Advent usually starts on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, the devotions in this book are undated and can be started anytime.

Since releasing the first volume of *The Carols of Christmas*, I've had the pleasure of receiving countless stories from readers who have enjoyed these devotional books. It would be a joy to hear your story as well. Please drop me a note on the contact

page at . In addition, I would be extremely grateful if you could take a moment to share your thoughts on the book. Your review would greatly benefit both me and other readers who are curious to know if this devotional is a good fit for them.

God Bless and Merry Christmas!

Alan

Week 1, Day 1

COME, THOU LONG EXPECTED JESUS—A HISTORY

The setting was London, England, in the eighteenth century, shortly before the advent of the Industrial Revolution. Half of the population was living in dire conditions, with the poorest families squeezed into single-room dwellings. Despite advancements in farming, most people couldn't afford to purchase meat and survived mainly on bread, butter, potatoes, and tea. The absence of government assistance led to challenges for many in obtaining basic necessities such as food and shelter.

To make matters worse, the statistics revealed a somber reality: Nearly half of the children born during this period, roughly five hundred out of every one thousand, didn't survive past their second birthday. Malnutrition, unclean water, contaminated food, and inadequate hygiene practices were the leading causes of this heart-wrenching outcome. Those children that managed to survive were frequently left homeless and abandoned on the streets, their lack of education making it difficult for them to improve their circumstances. The increase in homeless children led to the creation of institutions known as orphanages, which primarily operated as workhouses.

Workhouses were grim places with cruel house masters that frequently forced children to do tasks that no one else would even think of doing. Children endured unimaginable mistreat-

ment at the hands of their masters—beaten, starved, and subjected to various forms of abuse.

Typically, children remained in workhouses until around the age of twelve, at which point they would either become an apprentice or join the military. Some, who couldn't tolerate the work anymore, would flee into the streets and join gangs, commonly known as Blackguard Children. Unfortunately, the girls had a slightly worse fate, with most of them turning to prostitution if they weren't adopted.

This was the unfortunate reality of life in eighteenth century England and one that Charles Wesley was all too familiar with. He and his brother John had been tirelessly preaching the gospel across the country and had witnessed firsthand the exploitation of children and the horrible conditions they endured. While sitting on a train coach in 1744, he couldn't help but ponder the profound sense of injustice that surrounded him. In his discouragement, he clung to Haggai's reminder to the Israelites that God's power can transform a bleak present into a future filled with unimaginable glory.¹

While traveling on the train that day, Wesley found himself deeply moved and motivated to write a prayer that would capture the profound needs and longings of humanity as well as the hopeful anticipation of Christ's imminent return to restore justice and bring about complete renewal. It was a prayer filled with eager anticipation, reminding believers of Christ's first coming to Bethlehem and their longing for his future return. The inspiration he found would live on as a cherished Christmas carol, touching the hearts of millions for over 275 years.

Charles Wesley was an English Methodist leader and considered one of the greatest hymn writers of all time, having penned in his lifetime over 6,000 hymns and some 3,000 poems. He was the brother of John Wesley, the famous theologian and

1. Haggai 2:9

founder of Methodism, who once said that his brother's hymnal was the best theological book in existence. We still sing some of Wesley's famous hymns today, including "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today," "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," and "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing."

Shortly after writing his prayer, Wesley adapted it into a rather short, two-stanza hymn and published it in his *Hymns for the Nativity of Our Lord* hymnal that same year. While the hymn was initially not well known outside of Methodist circles, it gained broader recognition when it was included in a collection of hymns known as festival hymns. These hymns reached beyond the Methodist community and were sung at communal gatherings to bring people together for worship, where they would sing, read, and pray. Interestingly, it took more than a century for the hymn to become widely popular across various Christian denominations. This was due primarily to a famous Baptist preacher who featured it as an illustration in his Christmas sermon in London.

Charles Spurgeon, famously known as the "Prince of Preachers," preached to over ten million people during his lifetime, making him the most popular preacher of his day. He authored numerous theology books and wrote over 3,500 sermons that are now bound in sixty-three volumes. At the young age of twenty-one, in 1855, a mere five years after his conversion, he had already taken charge of the largest Baptist church in London and was quickly becoming a well-known figure. In that year's Christmas sermon, Spurgeon used Wesley's hymn to illustrate his point that very few are born a king, Jesus, of course, being the sole exception in that he had been born a king without ever being a prince.

Following that, the hymn quickly gained popularity and was incorporated into the hymnals of both the Church of England and American churches. However, it wasn't until 1875 that it was finally included in the Methodist Wesleyan Hymn Book, after

previously being excluded. The original reason for exclusion stemmed from the fact that no officially suitable music had been created for it prior to that. Wesley's original choice of melody for the hymn remains a mystery, and it has been performed with various melodies over time. Many consider "Stuttgart," a beautiful composition by German composer Christian Friedrich Witt, to be the very first tune ever used, but it wasn't until the mid-1800s that the popular lyrics became paired in most hymnals with a stirring Welsh melody, albeit one meant for children.

In 1844 Rowland Hugh Prichard, a nineteen-year-old Welsh musician, composed the melody "Hyfrydol" for his children's songbook titled *The Singer's Friend*, which also included forty other tunes. Despite spending most of his life working in the textile industry, Prichard was widely recognized for his exceptional singing ability and his role as a choir director. He was also a lesser-known individual who contributed to the advancement of Welsh hymn singing in the mid-1800s.

Hyfrydol, a term that means cheerfulness, beauty, and melody, presented a striking contrast to the traditionally stately "Stuttgart" melody. The melody became immensely popular and has been featured in over four hundred hymnals, with various adaptations. It can be heard in hymns such as "Alleluia! Sing to Jesus" by William Chatterton Dix, Charles Wesley's "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," and Francis Harold Rowley's "I Will Sing the Wondrous Story," among numerous other hymns from diverse church traditions. While some traditions still sing Wesley's carol with the "Stuttgart" melody, the "Hyfrydol" melody is the most widely recognized version heard today.

Today "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus" is considered a lesser-known carol that is rarely played on the radio, heard in shopping malls, or unfortunately sung as frequently in church services as other carols. Actually, it's quite possible that you won't hear its rousing call for Jesus to come at all during the Christmas season. And in the event that you do hear the carol,

it's unlikely that you'll be as familiar with the lyrics as you would be with "Silent Night," "Joy to the World," or other more popular carols.

It could be that we've grown so accustomed to our Christmas carols incorporating certain elements of the nativity that are never actually mentioned in Wesley's hymn. Although the word "born" is used four times, there's no reference to Mary, Joseph, Bethlehem, shepherds, wise men, mangers, or angels.

Ironically, though, among all the Christmas carols, there couldn't be one more fitting for the Advent season than one that begins with the inviting word "Come." Advent traces its roots back to the Latin term "adventus," which directly translates to "coming" or "arrival." Christmas is not only about celebrating the coming of Jesus at his birth but also our hope and anticipation of his second coming.

The words we sing in "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus" have remained virtually unchanged since Wesley first published it in the 1700s. This is a significant departure from other carols, as many have undergone subtle or dramatic changes and additions over the years. As you read through the lyrics, you begin to understand the reasons behind it. The theological richness and significance of Wesley's prayer, written over two centuries ago, remains just as captivating, poetic, and applicable in the present day.

Despite the challenging circumstances in which it was written, Charles Wesley's beautiful hymn resonates through time, offering peace and inspiration. Like Wesley, we, too, can examine the decline of culture in modern times, the attack on Christian values and principles, international conflicts, and the persisting challenges in our own lives that leave us feeling overwhelmed and in need of deliverance, peace, and hope.

As Wesley sat on the train that day, he shared the same sentiment. While he and his brother John were actively involved in various social causes, such as ending slavery, improving prison

conditions, assisting the underprivileged, and promoting education for all, he couldn't overlook the vast amount of injustice that still needed to be rectified in his own town. In the midst of feeling overwhelmed, he turned to the comforting words of Scripture and sought solace through prayer. And being the prolific writer that he was, he then meticulously transcribed his prayer, ensuring that others could recite the same words and intentions.

Wesley's prayer, both simple and profound, has resonated with millions of people for over 275 years, being spoken, prayed, and sung. As the music plays, some sing with pure delight, enchanted by the beautiful lyrics and harmonious melody, while others, weary from enduring seasons of waiting, are desperately pleading for the Lord to come into their own broken lives, bringing strength, joy, and peace.

Regardless of your familiarity with the carol, its lyrics and melody will undoubtedly touch you. As you enter this Advent season, where do you find yourself? Is there an injustice that breaks your heart and compels you to call upon Jesus to come? Drawing inspiration from Wesley, it might be beneficial to start by recalling the teachings of Scripture. Then seek spiritual guidance through prayer to gain a fresh perspective and be reminded that Jesus already did come as a baby in a manger to save us and will eventually come again to bring about complete restoration.

Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus

Come, Thou long expected Jesus,
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us;
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel's strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear Desire of ev'ry nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

Joy to those who long to see Thee
Day-spring from on high, appear.
Come, Thou promised Rod of Jesse,
Of Thy birth, we long to hear!
O'er the hills the angels singing
News, glad tidings of a birth;
"Go to Him your praises bringing
Christ the Lord has come to earth!"

Come to earth to taste our sadness,
He whose glories knew no end.
By His life He brings us gladness,
Our redeemer, Shepherd, Friend.
Leaving riches without number,
Born within a cattle stall;
This the everlasting wonder,
Christ was born the Lord of all.

Born Thy people to deliver,
Born a child, and yet a King,
Born to reign in us for ever,
Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.
By Thine own eternal Spirit

Rule in all our hearts alone;
By Thine all-sufficient merit
Raise us to Thy glorious throne.

Week 1, Day 2

COME, THOU LONG EXPECTED JESUS

On that day it will be said, “Look, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he has saved us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him. Let’s rejoice and be glad in his salvation.” Isaiah 25:9

It was the fall of 1981, and I had just left my friend’s house having played what I believed was the most remarkable invention mankind had ever seen, the Atari 2600 gaming system. There was no question in my mind that my future happiness depended on me having one. So I waited for Christmas. During the wait, I used the opportunity to consistently give my parents solid reasons for making such an expensive request. All things considered, I argued, it was likely that it would have a positive impact on our growth as children. Only time would reveal whether they were convinced by my sound arguments. Now all I could do was wait for Christmas morning and hope for the best.

No one enjoys waiting, not even for bad news—especially not for bad news, because we’d rather know it sooner than later. Yet there are certain seasons in our lives when it seems like we are waiting indefinitely. We eagerly await the companionship of a spouse, the joy of a child, or the comfort of a place we can truly call home. We wait for the ideal job opportunity or the perfect timing to embark on our own journey. But mostly we wait on

answers—answers to important questions that could determine our next stage of life, such as a job promotion to another city, lab test results, or whether that broken relationship will finally be mended. And waiting for long periods of time can lead to impatience and discouragement.

Waiting is a recurring theme in Scripture. Abraham, Sarah, Rachel, Hannah, Joseph, Moses, the Israelites, Ruth, David, and Elijah all experienced seasons of waiting. Abraham and Sarah waited for the birth of a son, just like Rachel and Hannah. Joseph waited for his circumstances to change, while Moses waited for the opportunity to lead the Israelites out of slavery. The Israelites themselves waited for forty years before they could enter the Promised Land. Ruth patiently waited for a suitable husband, while David waited for his chance to become king. Lastly, Elijah waited for the rain to come.

However, the most extended period of waiting was for the fulfillment of God's promise of a Savior, which was first mentioned in Genesis 3 and took a considerable amount of time to be fulfilled. Then God arrived in a humble manger in Bethlehem, and the angels and shepherds burst into a jubilant celebration on that very first Christmas morning. The wait was over!

I, too, burst into a joyous celebration on that Christmas morning when I discovered the game system I'd been wishing for under the tree. I couldn't help but imagine the endless enjoyment it would bring.

Waiting is hard regardless of what we're waiting for, but it's what we do in the wait that's important. Have we presented our situation to God with the unwavering faith that he is faithful regardless of the outcome? Are we aware that God frequently uses seasons of waiting to increase our dependence on him? Trust in God's providence, and you will be able to celebrate with joy no matter what happens.