

Revive Our Hearts



BORN A
CHILD AND
YET A KING

THE GOSPEL IN
THE CAROLS

A 31-DAY ADVENT DEVOTIONAL
NANCY DEMOSS WOLGEMUTH



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the many generous friends of
Revive Our Hearts
who help make it possible for us
to sound the glad tidings of King Jesus
throughout the world
day after day*




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INTRODUCTION

ou may be old enough to remember a TV game show from the 1950s (revived in the '70s and the '80s) called *Name That Tune*. In one part of the show, contestants were given a one-sentence clue to help them identify a random song. It might be new, might be old, might be anything from a current hit to a longtime standard. Both players, based on nothing more than this general hint, would then bid against the other, each declaring his or her ability to correctly call out the title of the mystery selection in the fewest number of notes.

“I can name that tune in six notes!” the first person might say. The opponent might counter, “I can do it in five.” And the countdown continued until one of them challenged the other to “name that tune!” And believe it or not, the players often guessed right, even after hearing no more than just the opening couple of notes being played on a piano.

Not me. I would have been terrible at that show.

But what if the songs consisted of Christmas carols? We’d all be pretty good at identifying those, don’t you think? Couldn’t you correctly name “Joy to the World” in four notes? “Away in a Manger” in five? “Silent Night” in three or maybe even two?

We know those special songs like we know the rooms of our house or the placement of our Christmas tree. One or two probably stand out for us as the epitome of how Christmas is supposed to sound. It’s not officially Christmas until we hear them.

I must confess I feel that way too. I love hearing and singing Christmas carols. More recently, though, I’ve been looking a little more closely at the text of these beautiful songs. And what I’ve found so fascinating is that even though they vary in length, style, and background, the best of the carols seek to accomplish two things. They speak to us of (1) who Jesus is and (2) why He came.

In other words, the carols were not created just to give us something bouncy or pretty to play in the background. Their writers deliberately wanted to give biblical shape to our

worship, to press the realities of the gospel into our musical memory. They sing, for example, of . . .

- the *desperation* of our need (“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”)
- our *desire* for His appearing (“Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus”)
- the depth of His *devotion* to us (“Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne”), resulting in . . .
- our *deliverance* from fear (“God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen”)
- the heavenly *declaration* of this deliverance (“Hark! the Herald Angels Sing”)
- the *delight* of His worshipers upon hearing this good news (“O Come, All Ye Faithful”)

So that’s what I’d like to explore with you throughout this Advent season. In the weeks leading up to Christmas, we’ll take hymn texts we already value for their lasting grace and beauty and use them as a treasure map that leads us to an even richer worship of Jesus. Then in the reflective week following Christmas Day, we’ll close with a medley of carols—a denouement, if you will. *Denouement* is a literary term for the final section in a story or play that ties all the various plot threads together. And that’s what we’ll be doing for those last seven meditations, pulling together the various themes we’ve explored in a way that I hope will prepare you to enter the new year with faith, joy, and fresh resolve to keep

your eyes fixed on Jesus through whatever the months ahead may bring.

Many of the lyrics we'll consider will be familiar to you. Some may be new to you. To get the most out of this Advent journey, I'd encourage you to take time to sing the carol related to each day's devotional reading. You may want to sing acapella. Or if you'd like some backup, go online to find arrangements you can sing along with.

Don't worry if the carols as quoted in this book differ slightly from what you're used to singing. These classic hymns have been around a long time. Some have been translated from other languages or altered slightly for different faith traditions. However, the timeless message of these carols still rings out as sweetly despite the minor variations.


How would you like to have a heart during this Christmas season that is tuned, alert, and responsive to the wonder of God's amazing love and the gift of His Son, ready for everything He wants to make known to you and to express through you during this last month of the year?

That's my hope—for both of us—over these next thirty-one days.

Nancy

“O COME”

*You who are enthroned upon the cherubim,
shine forth.
Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh,
stir up your might
and come to save us!*
(Psalm 80:1–2)

f you were to try to identify the theme that most often appears in the treasury of carols we sing each Christmas, you'd find there's really not even a close second.

The one-word answer? *Come*.

The word echoes through so many of those familiar texts:

- “O come, O come, Emmanuel . . .”
- “Come, Thou long expected Jesus . . .”
- “Come to my heart, Lord Jesus . . .”

It makes sense—because “come” is the core meaning of the word *advent*. And because the Advent theme of “coming” reflects a centuries-long expression of yearning.

“Please, Lord, please *come*”—the plaintive cry echoes throughout the Hebrew scriptures.

Messiah had repeatedly been promised and prayed for. The rolling centuries had presented a roster of fringe candidates who trotted themselves out as seeming possibilities. But they all came and went. Through the centuries, that was the pattern. Come and go. Never come and stay. Never come and change things. Never come and save our lives from what others have done to us . . . worse, from what we have done to ourselves.

And yet “when the fullness of time had”—had what?—when it “had come” (Gal. 4:4), God the Father sent Jesus. He *came*. And though the world was slow to pick up on His arrival, it soon became abundantly obvious, both to His friends and His enemies, that Someone new was among them. Someone unlike any other. That’s the reason for the shouted hosannas of Jesus’ triumphal entry. That’s why the blood-heavy cross of Good Friday. That’s why the beyond-belief joy and amazement of Easter morning.

In fact, if any other single word can compete for prominence in the carols, it is *joy*. But joy, when you drill down to its essence, is the result of His coming, is it not? The lyrics of those carols that most thrill us with joy are really just helping remind us of how and why He came—and calling us to come as well:

- “O come, all ye faithful . . .”
- “O come, let us adore *Him* . . .”
- “Come and worship, come and worship . . .”

“O COME”

So the gospel of Christ’s incarnation is also the gospel of invitation. In view of His coming in fulfillment of His promise, we stand now in the borrowed light of His appearing, serving as shared communicators of His gospel message. And thankfully, whenever we don’t know exactly how to express what our salvation means, carolers from past generations provide us help that never seems to grow old.

We can sing it.

Let us sing today of His coming.



PRAYER

Lord, we praise You now for Your appearing, for Your coming to us. Not only did You recognize our truly desperate condition, but You stepped out of the safety of heaven, directly into our danger. During this Advent season, as we worship You afresh, may the joy we receive become the joy we share, so that others, too, may know of Your coming.

KEEP READING

— Psalm 79:8–13

“Let your compassion come speedily to meet us.” (v. 8)

— Malachi 3:1–2

“Behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.” (v. 1)

— 2 Timothy 1:8–10

“... through the appearing of our Savior Christ.” (v. 10)

CONSIDER

How might you invite someone else to join you during this Advent season as you seek to receive all that the Lord has “come” to reveal of Himself to us?



DESPERATION

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

*O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
from depths of hell Thy people save,
and give them victory o'er the grave.*

*O come, Thou Key of David, come
and open wide our heavenly home;
make safe the way that leads on high,
and close the path to misery.*


*O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer
our spirits by Thine advent here;
disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
and death's dark shadows put to flight.*

*Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.¹*

UNCHAINED MELODY

*They may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil,
after being captured by him to do his will.*

(2 Timothy 2:26)

 At one time in my life, if I were imagining how to begin an Advent journey like this—through the carols—I might have had difficulty deciding which one to start with. Not anymore. Unsurprising to me now, my new favorite is the oldest (by far!) of them all.

The original Latin text of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” can be traced back to the 800s AD, although it wasn’t collected in hymn form until much later. The unknown writer was clearly well versed in both the Old and New Testaments. Each of the song’s seven original stanzas, some of which are rarely sung today, highlights a different title ascribed to

the Messiah in Scripture, creating a collage of features and attributes that lead us to worship.

But these titles are more than just names. Each of them tells why He came.

Take the first, for example:

*O come, O come, Emmanuel
and ransom captive Israel.*

Emmanuel, as Matthew notated in his Gospel account, means "God with us" (Matt. 1:23), hearkening back to the prophet Isaiah: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isa. 7:14). (The slight spelling difference here has to do with transcribing the original Hebrew and Greek; it does not change the meaning of the name.)

God *with* us, not just over and above us.

God *with* us, not off at a distance, forever beyond us.

But why would we want Him so near us? Would we not, like Adam hiding in the garden, prefer to have Him *far* from us? Isn't that our nature—to duck from His gaze? To run toward shadow and seclusion? To avoid being found—or found out?

Not when we've finally seen our sin for what it really is—a trap. Not when, like Israel taken captive into Babylon, the confining walls of our own making have closed in on us. The bondage has become inescapable. Our dark nights

have begun to howl with the loneliness of separation. We’ve realized, through the unforgiving lens of personal experience, that Jesus was right, that “whoever commits sin” is in reality “a slave of sin” (John 8:34 NKJV).

And we want out. We want to be set free.

*O come, O come, Emmanuel
and ransom captive Israel.*

This is a hymn of longing—of Israel’s longing for their Messiah, for a rescuer, for a deliverer who would come and set them free. They longed to be back in their homeland, back to their temple, back to the things they’d taken for granted during those years when God had pleaded with them to return to Him, warning them of what their continual compromises with evil and idolatry would surely cost.

We sing His name—Emmanuel—because of how we ourselves came to this earth, not with sins that we could learn to overcome if we worked hard enough, but with sins that had already defeated us, destroyed us, doomed us. And this is how we would die—in eternal captivity—if not for “God *with us*.”

If not for the coming of Emmanuel.

If not for Christmas.



PRAYER

Father, thank You for hearing us when we cry to You, for not abandoning us in our captivity to sin, to the past, or to anything that has kept us apart from You. Help us realize today, whenever we feel chained to old taskmasters and tyrants, that You have already done all the work to set us free forever. May we live every day knowing our Deliverer is here: God with us.

KEEP READING

— Nehemiah 1:6–10

“ . . . though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts . . . ” (v. 9)

— Psalm 22:1–5

“To you they cried and were rescued.” (v. 5)

— Ephesians 2:13–19

“You are no longer strangers and aliens.” (v. 19)

CONSIDER

When in your life have you felt the most trapped and confined, held down from being free to serve your Lord the way you truly desire? What difference does it make that Emmanuel—God *with* you—has come?

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