



Songs OF CHRISTMAS

SESSION 1: O COME, O COME EMMANUEL

Welcome! In today's session, we'll explore the Advent hymn, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel."

This ancient hymn takes us back over 1,200 years to monastic life in the 8th or 9th century. It originated from the "Great 'O' Antiphons," short, sung statements, all beginning with "O," that were part of the medieval Roman Catholic Advent liturgy. Seven days before Christmas Eve, monasteries would sing one antiphon daily. Originally seven in total, their purpose was to concentrate the mind on the coming Christmas. Today, most hymnbooks include just five of the original antiphons, all of which greet the Savior with one of the many titles ascribed to Him in Scripture: Emmanuel, or "God with us" (Isaiah 7:14), Rod of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1), Day-Spring (Luke 1:78, 79), Key of David (Isaiah 22:22), and Desire of Nations (Haggai 2:7).

Beautifully reflecting the anticipation and expectation that defines Advent, the hymn doubles as a prayer for both the first and second coming of Christ. Over 2,000 years ago, the Israelites were eagerly awaiting the first coming of Christ. His coming as the Messiah was first prophesied as early as the 6th century B.C. when the Jews were captive in Babylon. For centuries thereafter, the people of God looked for their Messiah with great longing. We see this reflected in verse one with the lyrics, *and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here*. Christ did come "unto His own" to establish a spiritual kingdom and free them from their sins, however, the tragedy was that *His own received Him not* (John 1:11-12). Even though many did not accept Christ as the promised Messiah, when we sing this hymn today, we celebrate the biblical and historical fact that God came to earth in the flesh, in the person of Jesus Christ.

There is also a future aspect to this hymn, however. Christ's first coming gives us a reason to rejoice again and again, yet we know that all is not well with the world. He shed His blood on the cross for the sake of our sins and for our eternal freedom, yet death, disease, and calamity still exist. Satan still has influence, and sin still abounds. When we sing this hymn, not only do we celebrate Christ's birth and His first coming, we also express our deep and heartfelt yearning for Him to return a second and final time, so that we might be in fellowship with Him forever. No more sin, no more sorrow, no more pain (Revelation 21:4). Along with our rejoicing, we plead that He would come again to perfectly fulfill the promise that all darkness will be turned to light. This is powerfully reflected in what is traditionally verse four: *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*.

As impactful as the hymn's lyrics are, the music is equally impactful, as it powerfully captures the longing expressed in the text. There is a significant difference in feeling between this hymn and the exuberant "Joy to the World," or the vigorous and bounding "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." Here, there is much yearning, aching, and hoping. The latter is expressed vividly in the refrain, which reaches down musically into our often weak and tired hearts and pulls us up, in faith, to see the certainty of the end: *Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel*.

We can be sure that Christ will come again, just as He promised He would (John 14:3). May our conviction of His return be strengthened this Advent season, and may our hearts and voices collectively sing, "O come, o come, Emmanuel!"

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe a time when you have experienced longing in your life.
2. Using Scripture, explore and discuss the different names of Jesus used in this hymn:
 - Emmanuel (Isaiah 7:14)
 - Rod of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1)
 - Day-spring (Luke 1: 78, 79)
 - Key of David (Isaiah 22:22)
 - Desire of Nations (Haggai 2:7)
3. If you had the opportunity to add a few verses to this hymn, what are some additional names that you personally would include for Jesus?
4. Describe how this hymn is both past and future-focused. When we sing “O come, o come, Emmanuel,” what are we confirming? What are we requesting?

HYMN LYRICS

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.

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.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Dayspring,
from on high,
And cheer us by Thy drawing nigh;
Disperse the gloomy
clouds of night,
And death's dark
shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, **Desire of nations, bind**
All peoples in
one heart and mind;
Bid envy, strife and quarrels cease;
Fill the whole world
with heaven's peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Key of David, come
And open wide
our heav'nly home;
Make safe the way
that leads on high,
And close the path to misery.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Adonai, Lord of might,
Who to Thy tribes,
on Sinai's height,
In ancient times didst give the law
In cloud and majesty and awe.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

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5. How is the music for this hymn different from many Advent and Christmas carols? Why is it appropriate that the music is written in such a way? What feelings does the music prompt in you?
6. What are some things that we can do daily to show the Lord that we long for Him to return? Discuss the difference between passively waiting and actively waiting.
7. The video explains that this hymn was part of the "Great 'O' Antiphons," which were sung statements whose purpose was to concentrate the mind on the coming Christmas. What could you do each day, individually or as a family, to focus your mind in this season of Advent?
8. Spend time reading through each verse together. Discuss the bolded phrases. What do they mean, or what are you proclaiming when you sing this phrase? What biblical references do you infer or recall as you read the verses? Which phrase speaks to your present situation?

SESSION 2: O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM

Welcome! In this session, we'll explore and see what we can learn from the well-known Christmas carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

The lyrics for this beloved carol were written in 1868 by Phillips Brooks, a well-regarded 19th century preacher, several years after he had returned from a trip to the Holy Land. The experience of spending Christmas Eve in Bethlehem and worshipping in the Church of the Nativity - thought to be the place of Christ's birth - made an indelible impression on Brooks. Three years later, while pastor at a church in Philadelphia, he was searching for a new carol for his children to sing in their Sunday school Christmas program. Brooks gave a copy of the text he had written to the organist, Lewis H. Redner, and asked him to compose a simple melody that children could sing easily. Redner struggled for a considerable time to contrive just the right tune for the text. On the evening before the program was to be given, he suddenly awakened from his sleep and composed the present melody. The carol was an immediate favorite with the children, as it has been with children and adults around the world ever since.

Within the beauty of "O Little Town of Bethlehem" is one of God's promises, given through the prophet Micah: *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* (Micah 5:2). The carol takes us on a wonderful journey from the past to the present, and starts by giving us a vivid picture of the seemingly insignificant town out of which the Savior of the world would come. Phrases such as *how still we see thee lie* and *above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by* remind us that Bethlehem barely stirred as the most significant event in the history of the world unfolded. The first verse also reminds us that this event is about so much more than the birth of a baby in a small town in a Middle Eastern country; it's about Jesus Christ - the Light of the World - breaking through the world's darkness: *Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight*.

The second verse emphasizes the seemingly quick and mostly unnoticed appearance of Jesus as a baby, born in humble circumstances, *while mortals sleep*. Amazingly, only the angels and a group of unsuspecting shepherds were witnesses to this momentous occasion.

The last two verses move us from the past to the present. Now we consider how this incredible gift of God has changed history and how His birth - and ultimately His death and resurrection - have enabled us to be reconciled to God. The third verse is perhaps the most profound: *How silently, how silently the wondrous Gift is given! So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His Heaven. No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in*. What a powerful reminder this is, especially in the midst of the busyness of the Christmas season, that Christ desires to enter into our hearts. He - the Savior of the world - wants to commune with us. How incredible this is, and humbling. The question from 2,000 years ago remains relevant today, however: "will you and I receive Him?"

The fourth and final verse is a beautiful prayer in which we express our desire to receive Him; here we ask for our sin to be cast out, and for the new life that Jesus offers to *be born in us today*. Through the singing of this verse, we make it clear that we recognize that Jesus' birth isn't just a historical fact, but rather something that still has a tremendous impact on our lives today. We confirm that He is not distant but close. He is always with us as He promised He would be, *Our Lord, Emmanuel!*

HYMN LYRICS

O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and
dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight

For Christ is born of Mary
And gathered all above
While mortals sleep,
the angels keep
Their watch of wondering love
O morning stars together
Proclaim the holy birth
And praises sing to God the King
And Peace to men on earth

How silently, how silently
The wondrous gift is given
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven
No ear may hear His coming
But in this world of sin
Where meek souls
will receive him still
The dear Christ enters in

O holy Child of Bethlehem
Descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born in us today
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell
O come to us, abide with us
Our Lord Emmanuel
O come to us, abide with us
Our Lord Emmanuel

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have one person read the first verse while everyone else closes their eyes. What do you imagine when you hear these words? What imagery is expressed in the lyrics? What other Christmas carols can you think of that use vivid descriptions in their lyrics to paint a picture?
2. Read and discuss the promise given to Bethlehem through the prophet Micah (Micah 5:2). Why is Jesus described as the *One to be Ruler in Israel*, and how are His *goings forth from of old, and from everlasting*?
3. Read Luke 2:1-20 together. Discuss how this biblical account of Jesus' birth are reflected in the lyrics of the song.
4. Discuss the significance of the first two verses. Why is the imagery used to describe Bethlehem on the night of Christ's birth important? Why are the last two lines of the first verse not to be glossed over? Discuss the meaning of this phrase: *the hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight*.

5. Read the third verse and discuss. What does it mean when we sing about Christ *entering in*, and what are some ways that we *receive Him* today? How does *God impart the blessings of His heaven* to us? Have you experienced His silent blessings this Advent?

6. The fourth and final verse can be seen as a sung prayer. What requests are we making when we sing this verse? Why should we desire the “new life” that Jesus offers?

7. *O come to us, abide with us...* Discuss the following verses: John 12:46, John 14:15-17, John 15:1-11, 1 John 4:12-16. What does it mean to abide with Christ?

SESSION 3: HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men (Luke 2:14). These were the words of the angels as they shared the news of Jesus' birth. This is the same sentiment that starts the hymn, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing."

In the time of Advent, we anticipate and await Christmas, the celebration of Jesus' presence on earth. In hymns like, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," we echo the pleas of God's people calling out to Him for the Savior. And in hymns such as, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," we are gently told the story of Jesus' birth. But as the shepherds and the surrounding people heard from the angels, and as we know it to be true today, Jesus is here! He has come, and He is with us! This is the truth that is taught to us in, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing."

Charles Wesley wrote the words to this carol, which first appeared in text in 1739, altered in 1753 to the words we know today. "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" and the many other hymns that Wesley wrote might not exist if not for an experience he had when he was 31 years old.

Charles grew up in a religious household – his father was an Anglican clergyman and his mother made sure all her children received spiritual teaching. In university, Charles formed a club with his friends to help them stay devoted to Christ and live out spiritual disciplines. He and his brother both even went on a missionary trip to America. This trip was not successful, and their return to England brought with it doubts about their faith and ministry. However, on Pentecost Sunday in 1738, Charles felt a change. He felt the Spirit of God move in him, and wrote in his journal, that the Spirit had "chased away the darkness of my unbelief."¹ This man grew up with faith in God, was a preacher, taught the Word of God, wrote hymns, and was a missionary. Yet it was only later in his life, after he experienced failure and doubt, that he finally felt the presence of God.

What a moment that must have been! To feel like you see and understand God, only to realize that you have been living with a veil over your eyes, that God is indeed much bigger, much greater, more present, than you ever imagined.

Have you ever experienced such a reawakening? Or do you feel as if your faith has been at a sort of standstill? Maybe this Christmas season is the time to dive deeper into who God is and what He means to your life. Let Charles Wesley's lyrics in "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" help you to renew your faith. These words come from a man who experienced a complete change, and they may just help you to facilitate a change as you allow God to work in your heart.

The words of this carol not only share biblical truths for all people, but also express the joy that comes from believing in these truths.

In the first verse, we sing of the angels' visit to the shepherds, proclaiming the birth of Jesus. In the coming of Jesus, man has the opportunity to be reconciled with God. Knowing that we, as sinners, can be with God, should cause us to rise in joy and praise Him.

¹ "1738 John & Charles Wesley Experience Conversions" – Christian History Institute

In the second and third verses, we sing about the virgin birth. Even though Christ was adored in heaven and Lord over all, He gladly came to earth to be with us to do His Father's will. And as true Man and God, we find new life in Jesus Christ. When we are aware of what Jesus has done for us and still is doing for us, we hail Him, as the song urges us to do – we declare in song, in word, in deed, in any way we can, how good He is.

These first few verses are about Jesus and what He was done, but the fourth and fifth verses are about our response. When you reflect on Jesus' role in your life, what is your response? What action are you spurred to? Out of thanksgiving and our love for Him, we desire to live like Him. We ask God, humbly, to help us as we strive to become who He wants us to be. We ask Him to move in our hearts. We ask Him to be with us and make His presence known to all believers. And as we reflect His light and align ourselves to His ways, all the while we proclaim the glory of Christ, as the angels did when He first came to earth as a baby.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is something that has reawakened your faith in the past?
2. What helps you to renew your joy in Christ? A certain song/hymn? A Bible verse? Something else?
3. Spend time reading through each verse together. Discuss the bolded phrases. What do they mean, or what are you proclaiming when you sing this phrase? What biblical references do you infer or recall as you read the verses? Which phrase speaks to your present situation?

HYMN LYRICS

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!"
*Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the new-born King."*

Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord
Late in time behold Him come,
Off-spring of a Virgin's womb
**Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,
Hail, the 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,
Risen with healing in His Wings.
**Now 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;
Oh, to all Thyself impart,
Formed in each believing heart!**
*Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the new-born king;
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!"*
*Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the new-born King."*

**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."*

4. Read John 1:1-14 together. How do the lyrics of the hymn reflect Scripture?
- Discuss the wonder of Jesus' condescension (coming to earth as true God, true man). How do the lyrics and verses highlight different aspects of His coming to earth?
 - How do they lyrics direct us in what response we should have to Christ's birth? How should we be changed?
5. Read Romans 5:12-17 in your Bible (or read the NLT translation below for simplified wording).
- What do you understand these verses to mean?
 - How do they reflect the lyrics, *Adam's likeness Lord efface, stamp Thine image in its place. Second Adam from above, reinstate us in Thy love?* How are we changed, *stamped* or *reinstated*?
 - Look back in Genesis – how was Jesus Christ, the second Adam, foretold even then?

Romans 5:12-17

When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned. Yes, people sinned even before the law was given. But it was not counted as sin because there was not yet any law to break. Still, everyone died—from the time of Adam to the time of Moses—even those who did not disobey an explicit commandment of God, as Adam did. Now Adam is a symbol, a representation of Christ, who was yet to come. But there is a great difference between Adam's sin and God's gracious gift. For the sin of this one man, Adam, brought death to many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of forgiveness to many through this other man, Jesus Christ. And the result of God's gracious gift is very different from the result of that one man's sin. For Adam's sin led to condemnation, but God's free gift leads to our being made right with God, even though we are guilty of many sins. For the sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of righteousness, for all who receive it will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ.