

Nov/Dec 2021

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew

CHRISTMAS  
190

Silent Night, Holy

*And there were...shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch*

1. Si - lent night, ho - ly night, All
2. Si - lent night, ho - ly night, Sleep
3. Si - lent night, ho - ly night, Saw
4. Si - lent night, ho - ly night, Was

# Songs

OF CHRISTMAS

Round yon vir - gin  
Glo - ries stream from her  
Ra - diant beams from the  
With the an - gel

ten - der and mild, Sleep in her arms  
Al - le - lu - ia, Christ the Son of God  
deem - ing grace, to us born in the  
to our King, Christ, the

ALSO: TRAVELING WITH DAVID

Dear Friends:

Good stories are full of twists and turns and ups and downs—not to mention lots of surprises. The story of King David has all of the elements of a *really* good story. Indeed, the Bible stories about David include heroism, love, conflict, danger, jealousy, betrayal, friendship, and enemies. Sometimes we applaud David for his courage and daring feats. At other times, though, we scratch our heads at how a man “after [God’s] own heart” could act as David does.



For the month of November, Reggie Smith explores the complicated and often messy episodes in the story of King David. David’s life story teaches us some important lessons about following God, and it gives us comfort and assurance of God’s love and faithfulness in dealing with who we are—both the good and the bad. Even more importantly, we see God carrying out his wider, gracious purpose through David’s family line to bring the Messiah, Jesus Christ, to save us from our sins.

For the month of December, Brian Kuyper uses Christmas hymns and carols to help us explore the meaning of Christmas. For many Christians, singing is a highlight of the Christmas season, so this can be a fitting way to meditate on the wonder and joy of Christmas. This focus on songs—ancient and modern, many well known and some less familiar—aims to deepen our appreciation of God’s gracious love in sending his Son to bring “Joy to the World”!

May God’s Word refresh, refocus, and renew you each day!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

—Kurt Selles

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**“Traveling with David”  
Reginald Smith**



**“Songs of Christmas”  
Brian Kuyper**

**Managing Editor:** Jeff Bulthuis  
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**ReFrame  
Ministries**

is the new name of  
Back to God Ministries International

# december

## Songs of Christmas

**Brian Kuyper**

As the Christmas season approaches, we often hear and sing Christmas songs—on the radio, in stores and waiting rooms, in church as we worship, and even out on the streets as carolers sing.

For the month of December, let's look at some songs that help us remember why we celebrate Christmas. During the season of Advent we celebrate Christ's coming as the Savior of the world, and we look ahead to his coming again to live with us in the new heaven and new earth. As we focus on songs of Christmas and then some songs that look ahead to the new year, we will reflect on the Scripture message behind each song and how God calls us to live by his Word each day. May we also remember and celebrate that in the birth of Jesus, we have received *Immanuel*, which means "God with us."

*Brian Kuyper is a pastor in Taber, Alberta. He has also served in another congregation in southern Alberta. He is married to Brenda, and they have three school-age children.*

## 'COME, THOU LONG-EXPECTED JESUS'

*He has sent me . . . to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD'S favor . . . to comfort all who mourn. . . .* —Isaiah 61:1-2

"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." These opening lines of a hymn by Charles Wesley (1744) capture the spirit of Advent, in which we anticipate and celebrate Christ's coming as the Savior of the world (see John 3:16).

The season of Advent began a few days ago, and in many churches people have already sung this song to focus their celebration of Christ's coming. This song speaks to the hope the prophet Isaiah had before the coming of the Messiah, the promised Savior of God's people. The people were in exile, and the theme of being set free and blessed and comforted offered great hope.

Focusing on Jesus Christ as the Savior, this song offers us hope

as well: to be set free from our sin and to find our rest in Christ alone. It helps us to remember what God's people longed for. It also helps us to remember what *we* long for: that Christ will come again to end all suffering and sorrow and give us full life forever.

Whenever we are dealing with difficult situations, we can sing this song with fervent hope, trusting that Jesus will come again. We long for his return to free the world from all its suffering and to comfort all who mourn.

Long-expected Jesus, come to our hearts, we pray. Free us from our sin and suffering, that we may find comfort and rest in you. Amen.

## ‘COMFORT, COMFORT NOW MY PEOPLE’

*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her . . . that her sin has been paid for. . . .*  
—Isaiah 40:1-2

“Comfort, Comfort Now My People” is an old song with a powerful message. It is based on Isaiah 40:1-5, which gives hope to God’s people. It provides hope that our comfort will come.

In this song we sing about a prophet who was called to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. John the Baptist was that prophet (see Mark 1:1-11; John 1:19-34); he came to “prepare the way for the Lord.” John called people to repentance, preparing their hearts for the coming Savior. His work renews our hope that God fulfills his promise to comfort his people.

At the birth of Jesus, God fulfills his promise of bringing comfort. Jesus comes for the purpose of saving us from our sins. The Bible tells us that our sin has been paid for by Jesus’

death on the cross. Because Jesus has paid for our sins, we have comfort in knowing that we can find true peace and rest in him. Whenever we face struggles and challenges, we can remember that our comfort is in Christ.

The Heidelberg Catechism asks, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” And it answers, “That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.”

There is no greater comfort to be found than in Christ alone.

Lord Jesus, whenever we are discouraged, frustrated, or grieving, help us to find comfort in you, in you alone. Amen.

**'HARK, THE GLAD SOUND! THE SAVIOR COMES'**

*The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me . . . to proclaim good news to the poor . . . to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom . . . and release from darkness. . . .* —Isaiah 61:1

This song begins with the announcement: “The Savior comes, the Savior promised long!” For God’s people waiting for the Messiah, this was a welcome announcement.

Why? The Messiah who was promised since the time of Isaiah was to come with blessings for God’s people. The rest of the song describes what this Messiah would do:

“He comes the prisoners to release, in Satan’s bondage held. . . .”

“He comes the broken heart to bind, the wounded soul to cure. . . .”

At the beginning of Jesus’ teaching ministry, he was invited to read from the Scriptures in his hometown. He turned to this passage from Isaiah and read the words of our text for today. And when he finished, he said,

“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21).

The Savior has come! This is exciting for God’s people everywhere. The Lord and Savior has come with good news to meet all of our needs: to release us from our bondage to sin and Satan—to heal our broken hearts and cure our wounded souls. This is what we prepare to celebrate in the coming weeks. The long-promised Savior has come!

Dear Jesus, our Savior who was promised so long ago, thank you for coming! Set us free from our sin, and heal our brokenness, we pray. Thank you, Lord, for being our Savior. Amen.

## ‘O COME, O COME, IMMANUEL’

*[Jesus] made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.* —Philippians 2:7

“O Come, O Come, Immanuel” is a song filled with various titles for Jesus. These were all roles that he would fulfill by taking on our human flesh and becoming *Immanuel* (“God with us”).

Some months before Jesus was born, an angel of the Lord told Joseph in a dream that the child who would be born to Mary, his fiancée, was conceived by the Holy Spirit. The child was to be named Jesus because he would “save his people from their sins.” And this would fulfill a prophecy of Isaiah about a child born to a virgin; the child would be called Immanuel, which means “God with us” (see Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:20-23).

Philippians 2 describes how God himself comes down to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus, who is fully God, humbles himself, and is “made

in human likeness.” And he comes with a purpose and a mission: to pay the price for our sins by dying in our place. He took on himself the weight of all our sin and paid the full price to free us by dying on a cross.

Whenever we sing about “Immanuel,” we sing about God himself becoming like us to save us from our sin. Jesus became Immanuel, “God with us,” to experience what we experience, to suffer as we suffer. And even more—to rescue us from that suffering. “Rejoice! Rejoice!” Immanuel has come to us!

Immanuel, thank you for humbling yourself by taking on our likeness and suffering on a cross to save us from our sin. Amen.

## 'SAVIOR OF THE NATIONS, COME'

*"The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."*  
—Luke 1:35

"Savior of the Nations, Come" is one of the oldest hymns used in the Advent/Christmas season. It dates back to the fourth century A.D. in the works of Ambrose, and in later years Martin Luther (1523).

This song tells the story of the virgin birth. Mary's honest question about how it would be possible for her to give birth is explained by the angel in Luke 1:35: "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." The child born to Mary would therefore be called "the Son of God."

The song also includes the theme we reflected on yesterday from Philippians 2. "Christ laid down his majesty, passed through dark Gethsemane." The Son of God, the promised Messiah, laid aside the glory of heaven to become a human

being, to live among us in this world, and to submit to death on a cross to save us from sin.

Then he rose from the dead and ascended to rule in heaven. "Though he left his Father's home, Christ now sits on God's own throne." This echoes the theme of exaltation in Philippians 2 and what the angel prophesied: "The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David . . . his kingdom will never end."

So in this song we proclaim, with believers down through the ages, "Come, Lord Jesus, Savior of the nations!"

Lord Jesus Christ, may we humbly bow before you as the one true King who reigns now and forever. Amen.

**'BLESSED BE THE GOD OF ISRAEL'**

*"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them."*  
—Luke 1:68

Zechariah's song in Luke 1 is the basis of the song "Blessed be the God of Israel." This is a newer song, and it has an easy, familiar tune, as found in several hymnals (for example, *Lift Up Your Hearts*, 67).

At the announcement of the birth of his son, Zechariah the priest could not contain himself. After many months of not being able to speak, Zechariah burst into song: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them." But the Savior, Jesus, had not been born yet, so what was happening here?

Zechariah knew that his son (John the Baptist, as we know him) would be the prophet who came to "prepare the way" for the coming of the Messiah (Jesus).

This song, also known as the *Benedictus* (in Latin), tells us that the coming Messiah will come to rescue and redeem us, to bring us salvation and forgiveness of sins—all so that we may "serve him without fear."

The Messiah has come to rescue us for a purpose, his purpose—so that we can serve him. As the hymn puts it, he came "to save us all, that we might worship without fear and offer lives of praise, / in holiness and righteousness to serve God all our days."

Lord God, we praise you for coming to set us free—so that we may live our lives for you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

**'O COME, ALL YE FAITHFUL'**

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.*

—John 1:14

“O Come, All Ye Faithful” is one of the more well-known songs of Christmas. In its first three stanzas it tells the story of Christ’s birth with triumphant joy. And in the fourth stanza it draws from the deep mystery described in John 1.

The prologue of the book of John describes Jesus as the Word of God. “The Word was with God, and the Word was God.” And in fourteen short verses of Scripture we find a summary of the purpose of the coming of Christ.

For all who receive Jesus, believing in him as the true light of the world, he gives “the right to become children of God.” Amazing!

John 1 tells us that “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” In other words, God himself came to be one of us. He came to live

with us. He came to provide us the gift of becoming children of God.

“Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing”—this simple yet profound lyric reminds us that God himself has come to be one of us.

When we celebrate Christmas, we celebrate the mystery that God has become one of us—so that he could save us from the curse of sin and death, giving us new life as the children of God. And as the song’s refrain invites us to sing, “O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord!”

Word of God, we come before you to adore you as Christ the Lord. Thank you for the opportunity to be called children of God—all because you chose to become one of us. Amen.

**'OF THE FATHER'S LOVE BEGOTTEN'**

*"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."*

—Revelation 1:8

"Of the Father's Love Begotten" is another ancient Christmas hymn. It dates back to a poem from the fourth or fifth century A.D. This song celebrates the confession that Christ is the eternal Son of God. From the very opening lines of this song, Christ is recognized as God from before the beginning of time: "Of the Father's love begotten ere the worlds began to be, he is Alpha and Omega—he the source, the ending he, of the things that are, that have been, and that future years shall see/ evermore and evermore."

The name *Alpha and Omega* is used in the book of Revelation, and it refers to the Lord God Almighty. Jesus refers to himself in this way in Revelation 22, as the one who promises to return to make all things new.

We sing this song as a testimony to what Christmas is all about: the Creator of the world, who loves his creation so much, came to rescue and redeem it, and he promises to come again and restore it forever.

It is no small thing to welcome Jesus as the Lord and Savior of all creation—including us. And he promises to come again to make everything new so that we can live with him in the new heaven and earth forever. So we pray, "Come, Lord Jesus."

Eternal Son of God, thank you for coming to rescue and redeem us from sin and death. We look forward to your coming to renew the world. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

**'LO, HOW A ROSE E'ER BLOOMING'**

*Like the crocus, [the desert] will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.*  
—Isaiah 35:1-2

Growing up in the southwestern United States gave me a lot of opportunities to see the desert in bloom. A desert in full bloom is one of the most beautiful landscapes on earth. Part of the reason it can be so breathtaking is that for most of the year the desert looks like a wasteland. It looks the way Isaiah describes it—as a “parched land”—until the cactus blossoms and bright, radiant colors abound across the landscape. This can bring so much joy to the people who live there.

Isaiah describes the desert as responding with gladness and joy. The picture Isaiah paints is one of hope for the hopeless in a dry land.

“Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming” takes this picture and connects it to Isaiah's prophecy of a shoot coming from the stump of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1).

It ties the bloom of the crocus together with the “tender stem” that sprouted from the line of David, the son of Jesse. This imagery is then connected with the birth of Christ: “True God and yet true man, he came to save his people from earth's dark night of sin.”

At the birth of Christ we see hope, joy, and gladness. Jesus brings us the water of life, redeeming us from sin and death and replacing our sorrow and sighing with renewed strength and everlasting joy.

Jesus, you bring so much joy to our dry and weary hearts. May we “rejoice greatly and shout for joy” at your coming, now and forever. Amen.

## 'SILENT NIGHT! HOLY NIGHT'

*"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."*  
—Luke 2:11

"Silent Night! Holy Night" is another well-known Christmas hymn. It was written by parish priest Joseph Mohr when the organ at the small church of St. Nicholas in Oberndorf, Austria, broke down. Mohr wrote this song to be accompanied by guitar on December 24, 1818.

"Silent Night" tells the story of the birth of Jesus the Messiah from Luke 2.

In the closing lines of three stanzas in this song, we hear important titles that are assigned to Jesus at his birth. He is the "Savior," "Christ (Messiah)," and "Lord." All of these titles are mentioned by the angel of the Lord in Luke 2:11.

Appearing to shepherds at night in a bright burst of glory, the angel announces the birth of the Savior in the nearby town of David (Bethlehem),

saying, "He is the Messiah [Christ], the Lord."

This is the greatest birth announcement ever. The baby born in Bethlehem has significance for the whole world. He is the Savior, the one who saves us from our sins. He is the Messiah, the "anointed one" promised through the prophets. And he is the Lord. God sent his Son, who is himself fully God, to become human and live among us.

"Christ the Savior is born!"

Dear Jesus, we glorify and praise your name because you, O God, came to save us, to be our Lord as God's anointed. Thank you for coming to us, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

**'ERE ZIJ GOD/GLORY TO GOD'**

*"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."*  
—Luke 2:14

Just after the angel's birth announcement to shepherds in a Bethlehem field at night, "suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace. . . .'"

The song "Ere Zij God/Glory to God" celebrates this stunning announcement. For many churches with a Dutch-heritage background, this hymn has become a favorite to sing on Christmas Day.

The angels of heaven burst into spontaneous praise, giving "glory to God" and announcing peace on earth. During the time of Jesus' birth, the Roman Empire offered the *pax Romana* ("Peace of Rome"). They offered peace to all the citizens within its borders. But that was not the kind of peace the angels sang about on that

glorious night. They were singing of the true and lasting peace that comes because of the birth of Jesus, the Savior. The peace that this baby came to offer was not dependent on any government but is the true peace of God for all who come to believe in him.

Later in Jesus' life, as he prepared to lay down his life for us all, he said to his followers, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you" (John 14:27). With the peace of God in our minds and hearts, we know that Jesus restores our relationship with the Father.

*"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." Together with the angels, we sing your praise, O God. Amen.*

**'HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING'**

*All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ. . . .*  
—2 Corinthians 5:18

We continue today with the angels' announcement to the shepherds. "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" is yet another favorite song packed with meaning.

Four words in the middle of the first stanza could easily be overlooked: ". . . God and sinners reconciled." This profound truth speaks volumes about Jesus' mission and God's great plan to save us from sin and death.

Paul explains in 2 Corinthians 5 that God has reconciled us to himself through Christ. Ever since the fall of humanity into sin (Genesis 3), our relationship with God was broken. Yet God wanted to restore that relationship. And the only way to do that was through the gift of his Son, Jesus Christ (John 3:16).

When the angels announced the birth of Jesus, they spoke

about the peace that Jesus brings. And with this peace comes reconciliation between God and all who believe. In Jesus, God comes to us, to reconcile us to himself so that we can live in relationship with him again.

Paul says that because we are reconciled with God, we also have the task of sharing the message of reconciliation. We are "God's ambassadors." Having been reconciled, we can share with others the good news that our relationship with God is restored. Jesus, who had no sin, became sin for us so that we may live for him.

Jesus, thank you for coming to reconcile us with the Father. May we be your ambassadors, sharing the message of reconciliation. Amen.

## ‘ANGELS, FROM THE REALMS OF GLORY’

*On coming to the house, they saw the child . . . and they bowed down and worshiped him.*  
—Matthew 2:11

We have heard the story of the angels appearing to the shepherds (Luke 2). And we have heard the shepherds' response. In the song "Angels, from the Realms of Glory" those details are celebrated again. And in stanza 3 of this song we also hear about "sages," wise men from the east, who come to worship Jesus, the newborn King.

In the church calendar the story of the wise men, or Magi, is associated with Epiphany (January 6), but it connects with the Christmas story as well.

The book of Matthew explains that "Magi from the east" came to Jerusalem to honor a new king. These wise men studied the stars, and they had seen a special star that signified the birth of a king.

The Magi referred to this newborn as the "king of the Jews." It is interesting to note

that they knew this child was already a king. And once they found him, they bowed down and worshiped him.

As we see in the Christmas story, everyone responds in worship: the angels burst into song, glorifying God; the shepherds go to find the baby, and they praise God for all they have heard and seen; and the Magi find the child Jesus and worship him.

In "Angels, from the Realms of Glory," we are all encouraged to respond in the same way: "Come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ, the newborn King!"

Lord Jesus, as we celebrate Christmas, may we remember that you are and always have been the King we are called to worship. Amen.

**'AWAY IN A MANGER'**

*She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger. . . .*

—Luke 2:7

“Away in a Manger” is a beloved song that seems like a lullaby. In fact, many children learn this song at a very young age. It tells the story of the birth of Christ in a clear and simple way, and it shares how the situation of Jesus’ birth was very humble.

In Philippians 2 we read how Jesus “humbled himself.” Not only does Jesus humble himself by taking on our human flesh, but his very birth takes place in humble circumstances.

Joseph and Mary had to travel to Bethlehem, his family’s hometown, to register for a census that was required by the Roman government. And when they arrived, there were no guest rooms available, so Joseph and Mary could not find a place to stay. They had to take shelter in a stable, and that’s where Mary gave birth to Jesus. So she wrapped him in

cloths and placed him in the animals’ feed trough, a manger.

The humility of Jesus’ birth is deeply significant. We would not expect the King of all nations to be born in such meager circumstances. Yet Jesus was born in a stable. This shows us that no matter how poor, dirty, weak, or insignificant we might think we are, Jesus came to save us all.

Jesus, the King of kings, humbled himself and took on our flesh. And his humility and love for us were on full display from the moment he was born to the moment he gave up his life to save us from our sin.

Thank you, Jesus, for showing your love and humbling yourself for our sake so that we can be saved. Amen.

**'ONCE IN ROYAL DAVID'S CITY'**

*"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." —Mark 10:14*

"Once in Royal David's City" tells the story of Jesus' birth and childhood in a kid-friendly way. The first three stanzas touch on the early years of Jesus in a way that few other songs do.

"Jesus is our childhood's pattern, day by day like us he grew;/ he was little, weak, and helpless, tears and smiles like us he knew. . . ." In other words, Jesus developed as we do. Like us, he was helpless as a baby and had to grow as all children grow. We can connect with Jesus and know that he experienced life as we do.

The book of Mark tells us a story about Jesus and some little children. His disciples were rebuking people who were bringing their children to Jesus to be blessed by him. But Jesus didn't like that. He said, "Let the little children come to me. . . ."

He even used them as an example that everyone can follow. "Truly I tell you," he said, "anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

Often, as adults, we have questions and doubts. Sometimes we need to be reminded that we need to have faith like a child—to hear the good news and accept it, trusting God to be true to his promises. As God's children, we respond to his call to come to him and to follow him wherever he will lead.

Lord Jesus, thank you for coming and experiencing life as we do. May we hear your invitation to come to you and follow you. And may we trust in you to lead us. Amen.

**'ANGELS WE HAVE HEARD ON HIGH'**

*Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God. . . .*

—Luke 2:13

Angels play an important role throughout the entire birth narrative of Jesus. An angel visits Zechariah to announce the coming of John, who would prepare the way for Jesus' ministry (Luke 1:11-20). An angel appears to Mary to announce the coming of Jesus, the Son of God (Luke 1:28-38). An angel appears to Joseph in a dream, urging him to stay with Mary because she is carrying the baby Jesus, who will "save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21).

Then, when Jesus is actually born and an angel announces his birth, a crowd of angels appears, lighting up the night sky in the fields near Bethlehem. "A great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God. . . ." This was no simple birth announcement—the Savior of the world had come!

"Angels We Have Heard On High" tells the story in a beautifully lyrical way. And the refrain picks up the angels' song, using the Latin phrase "*Gloria in excelsis Deo*," which means "Glory to God in the highest." The angels could not contain their praise.

As we celebrate Christmas this season, we are reminded of God's great love for us in the birth of Jesus. Like the angels, we too have the opportunity to burst into praise. And let's invite others to join us as we give glory to God, for the Savior has come!

Dear Jesus, may we celebrate your birth by rejoicing and joining with others in singing your praise. Amen.

## 'O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM'

*In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*  
—John 1:4-5

The beginning of “O Little Town of Bethlehem” pictures a quaint village, peacefully asleep, unaware of what is taking place there on the night of Jesus’ birth.

“Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light. . . .” The prologue to John’s gospel describes Jesus’ coming in a similar way: “In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.” In the quaint village of Bethlehem, the “light of the world” (John 8:12) was born.

Notice the contrast between the dark streets of Bethlehem and the everlasting light. The world that Jesus was born into was full of the darkness of sin and evil. Until Jesus came, there was no hope of anyone getting out of that darkness.

But in one significant moment the light of the world comes in the birth of a baby. In that little

child, as the Christmas song puts it, “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

In the birth of Christ we have the hope of coming out of the world’s darkness. Because of Jesus, we can leave the darkness of sin behind and begin a new life. As Jesus himself says in John 8:12, “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

Are you living in that hope today? Look to the light! Follow Christ and live!

Jesus, light of the world, shine forever into the darkness of our hearts, and lead us to bring your light into the world around us. Amen.

## ‘HOW GREAT OUR JOY’

*The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.—Luke 2:20*

“How Great Our Joy” is a traditional German carol that retells the story of Jesus’ birth from the perspective of the shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem.

The shepherds had a unique encounter with angels, who appeared in a burst of light to announce the birth of the Savior. And when the angels left, the shepherds said to each other, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened.”

In Bethlehem they found the baby Jesus, lying in a manger. And after spreading the word about the angels’ message and what had happened to them, the shepherds returned to their flocks, “glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen. . . .” This was after one encounter with Jesus.

How do we respond when we encounter the living Lord? Are our hearts filled with so much joy that we cannot help glorify and praising God?

We celebrate the birth of our Savior and King on Christmas. We know that Jesus came to rescue us from sin and death. Are our hearts filled with joy like that of the shepherds when they encountered Jesus?

By the power of God, our lives can be transformed by coming to know Jesus as our Lord and Savior. And as we grow in our faith in Christ, may we continue to be filled with joy like the shepherds on that amazing night.

Lord, at your birth, we are filled with joy. May our hearts and lives overflow with unceasing praise! Amen.

**'JOY TO THE WORLD'**

*The LORD has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations.*  
—Psalm 98:2

“Joy to the World” is not only a well-known Christmas song; it’s one of the first songs people want to sing on Christmas Day to celebrate Christ’s birth.

This song was written by Isaac Watts in 1719, and it is a Christological interpretation of Psalm 98. When we sing “Joy to the World,” we are proclaiming that Christ is the fulfillment of what the psalmist writes: “The LORD has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations.” In the birth of Christ, we see God’s salvation plan being made known. In the life and death of Christ, we see the revelation of righteousness for all people.

The psalmist calls for the whole earth to respond with a “shout for joy.” And as “Joy to the World” puts it, both “heaven and nature sing,” and “fields and floods, rocks, hills,

and plains repeat the sounding joy.” God’s salvation is made known with the coming of his Son to bring salvation.

We are called to make room in our hearts for the coming of our Lord. And we can join together with all creation in singing our praise to God for revealing his salvation everywhere.

Lord God, we join with all creation in singing your praise for revealing your salvation through Christ the Lord! Amen.

**'GO, TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN'**

*Let the wilderness and its towns raise their voices. . . . Let them shout from the mountaintops.*  
—Isaiah 42:11

After the birth of each our children, my wife and I spent time on the phone calling grandparents, great-grandparents, other relatives, and friends to tell them the good news that our baby had been born.

As new parents, you want everyone to know as quickly as possible, and you want to share your good news as much as possible. And this is easy today with cell phones and social media available.

Whenever anyone has good news, they want to share it with as many people as possible. The prophet Isaiah spoke about the servant of the Lord who would come in faithfulness to bring justice and restoration. And at his coming, the people are called to sing a new song of praise, to go out and “raise their voices” and “shout from the mountaintops.”

On the day of Jesus' birth, God's people are given news of the greatest gift, the gift of salvation. As we hear the good news of Jesus, we respond with great joy, sharing it wherever we go.

“Go, Tell It on the Mountain” calls us to hear the good news of the birth of Jesus and to respond with shouts of joy! We can go out and share this news with everyone we can imagine.

Go to the mountaintops and shout—share it everywhere!

Lord and God, may we respond in pure joy at the news of Jesus' birth, sharing it wherever we go. Amen.

## ‘WHAT CHILD IS THIS’

*Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus’ side with a spear. . . .*

—John 19:34

Though we celebrate Jesus’ birth and the gift of salvation with joy and gladness, it’s important to note that our salvation has come at a terrible cost. God’s grace and salvation are free to us, but these amazing gifts come only through the excruciating death of our Lord, who laid down his own life to pay the price of our sin for us.

As we sing “What Child Is This,” a well-known and loved text set to the old English tune “Greensleeves,” we again review the story of the birth of Jesus.

The first stanza tells the story of Christ the King’s humble birth, as we have noted a lot this month. And the second stanza points directly to the reason why Jesus came. It sings of the salvation this baby would provide, and it describes in detail the suffering he would endure to bring us salvation.

“Nails, spear shall pierce him through, the cross be borne for me, for you.” In one stunning line this song describes the suffering that Christ would take on for us all. This is a humbling reminder that Jesus, the “King of kings,” was born in humiliation and had to suffer to save us from our sin. And he did all of this willingly, out of his great love for us.

The song begins with a simple question, to which the answer too is simple—and yet deeply moving. “What child is this?” He is Jesus, born to save us.

Dear Jesus, thank you for suffering to save us from our sin. We thank you for your willingness to come and suffer on our behalf. Amen.

## ‘CHRISTMAS OFFERING’

*I urge you . . . in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.*  
—Romans 12:1

Today we revisit the story of the Magi who came a long way from the east to worship Jesus. They came bearing costly gifts: “gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” And we need to ask ourselves, “What can we bring as a gift to the King of kings?”

The contemporary song “Christmas Offering” retells the Christmas story in a way that focuses on offerings of praise, joy, and worship. Beginning with the shepherds and the Magi going to find the new King, this song points out that they honor Jesus with offerings of worship—and we are called to do that too.

As the song puts it, “We bring an offering of worship to our King./ No one on earth deserves the praises that we sing./ Jesus, may you receive the honor that you’re due. . . .”

Throughout Scripture, God calls his people to truly worship him. He sent his Son, Jesus, to reconcile us to himself and make us holy. And because of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, we are washed clean. It’s only by his blood and through his mercy that we can say, “Lord, I come to you.”

In view of God’s mercy for us, we are called to offer ourselves “as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.” When we worship—as a community or individually—we are praising God for who he is and what he has done. And we can do this with our whole life, bringing “true and proper worship” to Christ our King.

Dear God, may we bring our whole selves as an offering to you in worship. Amen.

**'FROM THE SQUALOR OF A BORROWED STABLE'**

*But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence,  
serve you.*  
—Psalm 130:4

Psalm 130 is a powerful reminder of our brokenness. We cry out from the depths, "If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?" But there is also the powerful reminder that with the Lord there is forgiveness so that we may serve him.

"From the Squalor of a Borrowed Stable" tells of the life and work of Jesus in a moving way. It ranges from his humble birth in a stable, to his betrayal and his death on a cross, to his victory over the grave, and to his ascension to heaven and his coming again.

As we celebrate Christ's first coming, we are reminded that we are waiting for his second coming. We live in the "already but not yet" tension of God's salvation—Christ has already fully paid for our sins, and we are given new life; but in this world we still face sin and

suffering, and the kingdom of God is not yet fully realized. So we await Jesus' coming again.

We wait with eager expectation for Christ's return. As the psalmist puts it, we "wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning." And as we wait, we are also encouraged to "put [our] hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption."

In Christ we see God's unfailing love and full redemption.

God's people, put your hope in the Lord!

Dear God, may we put our hope in you, for we know that in you we find unfailing love and full redemption. In Christ we pray. Amen.

**'JOY HAS DAWNED'**

*God was pleased . . . through him to reconcile to himself all things . . . by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*

—Colossians 1:20

“Joy Has Dawned” is another contemporary song about the Christmas story. And, like many other songs, it speaks of the reason Jesus came: “Son of Adam, Son of Heaven, given as a ransom, / reconciling God and man, Christ our mighty champion.”

Colossians 1 echoes this theme. “The Son is the image of the invisible God. . . . He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

As the apostle Paul shows in this passage, God’s fullness lives in Jesus. And through Jesus the Son, God the Father was able to reconcile all things to himself. Because of our fall into sin, there was brokenness in our relationship with God. And the only way to restore that was for us to be ransomed. Our debt had to be fully paid for.

Jesus, God’s own Son, came to pay our ransom. Jesus, the Christ, paid the debt for our sin, “making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” As the song sings, “Christ [is] our mighty champion”!

“What a Savior, what a friend, what a glorious mystery.” It is indeed a mystery that Jesus, once a tiny baby in Bethlehem, is “now the Lord of history.” God himself, in Christ, has come to pay our ransom, our debt of sin, so that we may be reconciled with God.

Thank you, Jesus!

The fact that you, Lord and Savior, would come to be like us and save us from our sin so that we may be reconciled is indeed a mystery. Thank you, Jesus. Amen.

## 'A CHRISTMAS ALLELUIA'

*Praise the LORD. . . . I will praise the LORD all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.* —Psalm 146:1-2

Psalm 146 is a rousing song of praise that celebrates God's faithfulness. And today, as we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we are reminded in this psalm to praise the Lord and put our trust in him alone. For God "reigns forever . . . for all generations."

"A Christmas Alleluia" is a contemporary song by Chris Tomlin celebrating the day of Christ's birth. It recalls the scene and song of the angel hosts of heaven, singing, "All glory to our God and King!" And it calls us to sing "Alleluia," which means "Praise the Lord!" We give praise because "Christ, the Savior of the world . . . has come!" We sing "Alleluia" because Christ's is the highest name of all.

We are reminded in Psalm 146 that God is the Maker of all things and that "he remains faithful forever." With the com-

ing of Christ, God fulfills his promises to send the Messiah, the Savior; he is faithful forever.

Christ our King is born! And because of his birth, life, death, and resurrection, he demonstrates his supremacy over all. He comes to uphold "the cause of the oppressed" and to give "food to the hungry." He "sets the prisoners free . . . gives sight to the blind," and "lifts up those who are bowed down."

And because Christ reigns forever, we sing "Alleluia"; we "praise the Lord all [our] life."

Alleluia, Lord Jesus Christ!  
We give you praise for coming to bring your kingdom to this earth. May we praise you as long as we live. Amen.

## ‘GOOD CHRISTIAN FRIENDS, REJOICE’

*“My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations. . . .”*  
—Luke 2:30-31

Expecting parents wait about nine months for the arrival of their newborn baby. When the child finally comes, there is a sense of relief and excitement. Nine months is a long time to wait.

Now, imagine you are waiting for the birth of a baby that would bring salvation to people everywhere. Imagine waiting year after year for this baby to be born. Imagine the sense of joy and relief when you are finally able to set your eyes on this child. That was Simeon’s experience.

We do not know how long Simeon waited. But we do know that he was an old man “waiting for the consolation of Israel.” The Spirit of God had revealed to Simeon “that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.” So we tend to assume he was waiting for a long time.

Then one day the Spirit moved Simeon to go and see this child at the temple. Imagine the joy and the excitement Simeon must have felt! At last he was able to see the Messiah who had come to save, and he took the child in his arms and gave praise to God.

“Good Christian Friends, Rejoice” is a medieval German folk song calling us to rejoice that Christ has come. It calls us to sing “with heart and soul and voice” that “we are blest forevermore.” For “Jesus Christ was born to save!”—yes, he was “born to save!”

Thank you, Jesus, for coming to “open heaven’s door” so that we all might be saved through you. Amen.

**'JESUS, THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD'**

*When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."*

—John 8:12

It has been said that "darkness is the absence of light." Throughout Scripture, darkness and light are set apart as opposing forces—with darkness representing the forces of sin and evil, and light representing the love, righteousness, and faithfulness of God, revealed ultimately in Jesus Christ.

Jesus says in John 8:12, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Earlier in the book of John, Jesus is described as "the light of all mankind" (John 1:4).

When sin entered the world, darkness entered with it. But darkness would not rule forever, because God promised to send the light. When Jesus was born, the light of God shone in the darkness of this

broken world. Yet, many did not fully recognize Jesus as the true light (John 1:5, 9-10).

In John 8, Jesus describes himself as "the light of the world." Jesus came to bring the true light into the darkness. And he tells us that if we follow him, we will never be in the dark "but will have the light of life."

As we sing "Jesus, the Light of the World," we echo this promise of Jesus. We find encouragement to "walk in the light," to live every day knowing that Christ shines in our hearts.

And we can shine Jesus' light wherever we go.

Jesus, shine in us, so that we may shine your light in the darkness around us. Amen.

**'AS WITH GLADNESS MEN OF OLD'**

*"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."*

—Matthew 2:2

The visit of the Magi is celebrated on January 6 (Epiphany). But the story of the Magi visiting the child Jesus connects with the Christmas story as well. "As with Gladness Men of Old" tells the story of the Magi responding to their discovery of "the guiding star" that indicated a king had been born.

When the Magi saw this star in the heavens, they set out in search of the newborn king. Each stanza of the song encourages the singer to respond in a similar way. With the Magi, who eagerly follow the light to find the newborn king, to bow before him in worship, and to offer "gifts most rare," we are encouraged to see his splendor, seek his mercy, and bring our "costliest treasures" to "our heavenly King." We rejoice at the birth of Jesus as the King of kings, and we are called to respond.

We are encouraged to live our lives as an offering to the Lord and King, who has made our salvation possible. The song points us to the promises of Revelation 21-22 describing the full life we will have with God in the new heaven and new earth. Then we will no longer need "created light," because Jesus, the light of the world, will be our light. There we can forever live with the Lord and "sing alleluias to our King!"

Thank you, Lord, for the Magi's response of faith: setting out with joy to find the newborn King. May we also, with joy and gladness, live our lives for you each day and forever. Amen.

## 'HOURS AND DAYS AND YEARS AND AGES'

*From everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him. . . .*  
—Psalm 103:17

As we move toward the coming new year, we often reflect on the past year. One thing I experience with the passing of each year is that I often look back and wonder, "Where did the time go?"

As we reflect on the past year and the fleeting passage of time, we are reminded that no matter how fast time seems to go by, God is still faithful. As Psalm 103 says, "From everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear him." As quickly as the time comes and goes, there is one thing that never changes: the Lord's great love for us.

In the hymn "Hours and Days and Years and Ages" we sing about time passing away swiftly. Yet God is still our God, and he is ever faithful. No matter what we have faced in the past year—and no matter what we will face in the year ahead—

God remains and will be our faithful, loving God.

What a comforting thought: God's love remains with us from "everlasting to everlasting." That is a really long time, for eternity!

God's love for us in Jesus Christ *never* changes. As stanza 3 of the hymn says, "When life's dangers overwhelm us, you will ever be our stay;/ through your Son you are our Father, always changeless, come what may."

Thank you, Lord!

Dear God, as we come to the end of another year, we thank you for showing us your love "from everlasting to everlasting." Amen.

**'GOD OF ALL AGES, WHOSE ALMIGHTY HAND'**

*God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.*

—Psalm 46:1

As we draw close to the end of another year, we look ahead to the coming year. And as we look ahead, we trust that God will be with us.

Psalm 46 reminds us that “God is our refuge and strength.” In this psalm God is also referred to as an “ever-present help” and a “fortress.” This imagery communicates strength and confidence.

Over the past couple of years we have faced a lot of uncertainty. Yet there is one thing we know as we prepare for a new year—that God is always our strength and confidence. It is in God and God alone that we find our safety and security.

In “God of All Ages, Whose Almighty Hand” we sing of trusting in God the Almighty. “Thy love divine hath led us in the past . . . / be thou our ruler, guardian, guide and stay; / thy

Word our law, thy paths our chosen way.”

As we continue into the new year, we ask God to continue to lead us as he has led us in the past. God is the faithful God who continues to watch over his people. This is why the psalmist can say with such confidence that the Lord is “our refuge and strength.”

We do not know what we will face in the year 2022. One thing we do know for certain: God has been faithful, and in his faithfulness we will find our strength for the year to come.

Dear God, thank you for being our place of refuge, no matter what we face. In Christ we pray. Amen.

**'O GOD, OUR HELP IN AGES PAST'**

*Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.*  
—Psalm 90:1

In our congregation it is a tradition to sing "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" during our New Year's Day worship service. Some other churches like to sing this song as they worship on the last day of the closing year.

This song paraphrases Psalm 90. Even though Psalm 90 can be considered a song of lament, "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" summarizes the content of this psalm in an uplifting way.

As we end this year, we reflect on the fact that God has been "our help in ages past" as well as "our hope for years to come." When we look back on the year we have just gone through, not one of us can say we knew it would turn out the way it did. We cannot see into the future.

Yet God has been our help, and he has been our strength. God

has "been our dwelling place through all generations." So whenever we face uncertainty, we can trust that, with God, we can find courage and strength.

God has made all things, and "a thousand ages in [his] sight are like an evening gone." Yet the Lord our God will *always* continue to be faithful.

In the final stanza of the song, we profess our trust in God. We sing, "Still be our guard while troubles last, and our eternal home!" We have confidence to face the future because our hope for eternal life is found in God our Savior.

Dear God, thank you for being with us through this past year. We trust that we can always make our dwelling with you. Through Christ we pray. Amen.

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