



SING IN
Exultation

CFC ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2019

SING IN *Exultation*

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*“For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.”*

Isaiah 9:6-7

*“Sing choirs of angels, sing in exultation
Sing all ye citizens of heaven above;
Glory to God, all glory in the highest:
O come, let us adore Him, Christ The Lord”
-O Come All Ye Faithful*

This year’s Advent Devotional sets its sight on the songs of the church, particularly, the songs that the church sings at Christmas time. Many of the church’s Christmas hymns are among the greatest songs in the church’s musical canon when it comes to teaching theology through song. This is so because the primary focus of true Christmas songs is the most momentous theological event in history – the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In many ways, the theological richness of these songs is unmatched.

But despite their profundity, we often sing through the lines of these songs without much reflection. Our hope is that this Advent season, and perhaps by the help of this devotional, that changes for many of us. That this Christmas season, we would be more thoughtful, more reflective, and more responsive to the grace of God in Christ Jesus by reflecting on the magnitude of what God has done for us, even as we sing these Christmas songs.

With those goals in mind, this devotional seeks to provide theological and biblical insight into some of these magnificent Christmas songs. Each day of the Advent season, the devotional selects a lyric or verse from a song, followed by a brief reflection or explanation rooted in Scripture. The reflections are all written by Christ Fellowship Church members. It is our prayer for you this Advent season that your heart is formed with deeper affections for and greater joy in Jesus Christ, and that this love and joy produces praise.

When we turn to the Gospel of Luke, we see in Luke 2:13-14 that the response of heaven to the birth of Christ was praise: “And suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on the earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.’” For these heavenly beings, those who even beheld the preincarnate Christ in heaven, their immediate response is praise. C.S. Lewis helps us to understand why praise is the only fitting response, both for the angelic host and for us today. See what Lewis says: “[Previously] I thought of [praise] in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honor. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise.” That is, for us to truly enjoy Christ, we will inevitably respond in praise. Lewis continues:

"I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation." Our praising of Christ is the means by which our joy in Christ is made complete.

So let us think deeply on these beautiful songs this Advent Season. And let us sing with engaged minds and full hearts brimming with joy. Let us sing in exultation! We invite you to make your joy complete this Advent season by joining in the songs of exultation with brothers and sisters. As a citizen of heaven (Philippians 3:20), join your voice with the angelic hosts, "Glory to God in the highest!" Indeed church, this Advent season, come let us adore him, Christ the Lord!

*“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, O Come, Emmanuel*

Christmas is a time of great anticipation. Whether it's children eagerly waiting for mom and dad to wake up on Christmas morning so they can open presents, or hungry adults licking their chops as Christmas dinner is set around the table, Christmas excites in us a sense of longing.

The Bible itself is replete with people who experienced this longing, this sense of anticipation as they looked forward to the coming Messiah. Adam and Eve eagerly awaited the one who would rid the earth of the curse by crushing the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15). Abraham longed for the time when the nations would be blessed through his offspring (Genesis 12:2-3). David looked forward to when the perfect King would come to rule his kingdom (2 Samuel 7:12-13). As the lines above show us, Israel yearned and groaned for the one who would not only ransom them from their captivity in exile, but who would ultimately ransom them from the tyranny of sin. In Christ's birth, his *first* coming, we see in many ways the culmination of all this longing. The Son of God appeared, crushing the power of sin and Satan and showing himself to be the perfect King who extends life to all nations.

But we don't merely sing "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" as a historical reenactment looking forward to Christ's first coming. No, we sing it today looking forward to Christ's *second* coming in glory. We are, as Peter reminds us, still exiles (1 Peter 1:1, 17). We are still waiting for the day when Christ comes in power and forever does away with sin and death (Revelation 7:16-17). And so, this Advent season, more than we long for good food or the perfect gift, let us long for Christ. Let us sing with joy as we look forward with certain hope for Christ to come again and make all things new (Revelation 21:5). So we sing and pray, "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20). And if we've been taking our song rightly to heart, we can have confidence that he will. He will come. And the final prayer of the Bible—our final prayer—will be answered. That's the hope of Christmas.

*"Hark the herald angels sing
Glory to the newborn King!
Peace on earth and mercy mild
God and sinners reconciled"*
-Hark the Herald Angels Sing

Each of us is familiar with catastrophe: the abrupt outbreak of calamity and heartbreak. The lesser-known opposite of catastrophe is eucatastrophe, a term coined by J.R.R. Tolkien, the famous author of *The Lord of the Rings* and other fantasy stories. In literature, eucatastrophe is the most happy plot twist—a sudden bursting of good fortune for the main character, especially in a moment when all seems lost. In the story of mankind, our eucatastrophe occurs at the birth of Christ. The joy of this blissful reversal of man's fate came spilling over Heaven's edge as the herald angels exulted, *"Glory to the newborn King!"*

Luke 2:14 tells us the angels' exact words, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased." The message of these heralds is peace: *"God and sinners reconciled!"* Romans 5:10 says, "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life." What a plot twist! Reconciliation has not come to us through our good merit, our worthiness, or our effort. Reconciliation is brought about by a God who loves eucatastrophies; when the chance of deliverance by our own means was exactly zero, a child is born. Glory.

*“Joy to the world the Lord has come
Let earth receive her King
Let every heart prepare Him room
And heaven and nature sing”
-Joy to the World*

Parents know the feeling. They’ve strategized to maximize space in their tiny home, doing their best to accommodate all that comes with a growing family and young kids. Their house is an odd combination of storage bins, Pinterest ideas, and IKEA inventions, all of them designed to give as much living space as possible. And then Christmas comes. Specifically, Christmas with the grandparents. And despite conversations and pleas leading up to that day, they will now head home with, among other things, a life-sized toy kitchen and a 4-person inside-only tent. “Where are we going to put all this stuff?” they ask.

Well, it’s not just parents of young children who struggle with adequate space and room. In fact, we all struggle with this, spiritually. Consider your own life. Is it not true that Jesus sometimes exists in the margins? That he is peripheral rather than central? Maybe even an afterthought rather than a burning passion? To put it plainly, our hearts are full. But we confess that too often they’re full of the wrong things. Room must be prepared.

That’s what this song is calling us to do. The Lord and King who lovingly made us, powerfully saved us, and gently rules has come in the flesh. We must prepare him room by crowning him as Lord and King of our lives, regarding him as our rightful Sovereign and our gracious Master. He will suffer no rivals. He will entertain no competitors. But this too is gospel, for in preparing him room we are at the same time being prepared for true, even “great joy” (Luke 2:10).

*“Why lies He in such mean estate,
Where ox and beast are feeding?
Good Christians, fear, for sinners here
The silent Word is pleading.
Nails, spear shall pierce Him through,
the cross be borne for me, for you.
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,
the Babe, the Son of Mary”
-What Child is This*

The image of the manger is rather common at Christmas time. We sing of the manger. We highlight it in our Christmas Eve reading of Luke 2. We recreate the nativity scene with little figurines on our mantles or coffee tables. There is a great deal of emphasis on the manger at Christmas time—as there should be. But as we celebrate the birth of Christ, we cannot separate what took place outside the inn in Bethlehem from what took place on a hill outside Jerusalem some thirty-three years later. The link between the two is so inextricable that we cannot have one without the other. There is no significance in the cradle of Christ if there is no cross of Christ. We are a people who celebrate Christmas with an eye on Easter.

That is precisely what we have here in the two halves of this verse of “What Child is This.” Even as we reflect on the lowly and humble birth of Christ in a hay-scattered stall, the song directs our attention to the crucifixion of Christ. Long before Christ was to come, and long before the cross was in view (in the minds of men), the prophet Isaiah foretold Christ’s death. Isaiah 53:5, “But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.” Even as an infant in the manger, Christ was bound for a gruesome death on the cross in our stead.

Our song picks up on this enormous truth, and so must we. As we exult in the Savior’s birth, as we set up our nativities, let us be ever mindful that a cross is on the horizon. Indeed, the cross that was borne for me, for you. “Hail, hail the Word made flesh, the Babe, the Son of Mary!”

*“The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger
In all our trials born to be our friend”
-O Holy Night*

Jesus is the Lord. From everlasting to everlasting, he is God. He is sovereign, utterly independent, and limitless. Jesus was begotten, not made. He is the uncreated Creator and we are his creation. Jesus came down from heaven for our salvation. All of God’s intentions to glorify his name by creating humans and saving them is centered on him. From the very beginning, Jesus has been the one. His kingdom will never end. He is *King of kings*.

Altogether, Jesus is different - until he *lay thus in lowly manger*. When the fullness of time had come he was born of woman, born under the law. He became a great high priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses, a friend in our trials, and our victorious Savior. Jesus became a human like us. He breathed the same air; his feet touched the same ground.

Jesus experienced everything we do. He was tempted like us in every way. In every way that sin has crouched at our door, in every way that iniquity has gestured a bad promise, he knows. He experienced it. He was there — yet he never sinned. He knows our need; our weakness is no stranger. And this is how he died for us. The wrath he suffered in our place was for sins he resisted in perfect faithfulness. He suffered the Father’s fury for transgressions that were not his own. Of all the ways he is different from us, it’s in his becoming like us that his love was shown.

So when you look at a manger this Christmas season, amid whatever other thoughts you maintain about the humble circumstances of Jesus’ birth, be sure to dwell on the fact that the manger means that Jesus has come to befriend you. He comes to get close to you, as a friend does. Your trials are not trivial to him—the manger and the cross are proof. Your trials are so significant to him—and you are so significant to him—that he would leave heaven to dwell on earth, to be your friend. The King of kings, born to be *your* friend. Shouldn’t this make us fall on our knees in worship?

*“Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning;
Jesus, to thee be glory given;
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing:
O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord”
-O Come All Ye Faithful*

Words. We speak lots of them every day. Some of them are consequential, some are trivial, and many others are somewhere in-between. But what about God’s words? From the beginning of the Bible to the end, when God speaks, power is unleashed. He speaks and sun, moon, stars, cattle, birds, and seas exist (Genesis 1). He promises and a people is born, called, and blessed for the sake of the nations (Genesis 12:1-3). His voice, the Psalmist says, is powerful and full of majesty, and in response his people cry, “Glory” (Psalm 29).

So, when Jesus is introduced in John 1:1 as “the Word,” we are prepared for glory, and glory is what we see. He teaches in the synagogue and listeners hear something markedly different, indeed Someone different who teaches “with authority” (Mark 1:27). He speaks again in John 5 and the paralytic of 38 years grabs his mat and walks away (John 5:2-9). And so it continues throughout the Gospels—at the sound of his voice a raging sea becomes as glass (Mark 4:39), the sick are healed (Luke 4:39), the oppressed are freed (Luke 4:35), and, yes, the dead are raised to life (Luke 8:50; John 11:43).

The apostle Paul said that the Kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power (1 Corinthians 4:20). Surely that is true of the King of the Kingdom. His words were never absent power. His speech was never empty. Why? Because, as the song rightly says, he is the Word of the Father, a Father who has been making things new from the very beginning. So come, adore him! The Word has become flesh, and nothing will ever be the same.

*"Mild 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 newborn King!'"*
-Hark the Herald Angels Sing

In the above lyrics, it is tempting to speed past that first line without even thinking. After all, this is Christmas, right? Let's get to the birth part, with shepherds, angels, a manger, animals, and all that other Christmasy stuff. But pause for a brief moment and reflect on that first line: "Mild he lays his glory by."

You see, being born is a matter over which you and I have no choice. If you are reading this, you were born without anyone asking you if you would like to be born or not. Birth is simply our lot as humans. But for Jesus the situation was much different. In a passage that calls for Christians to act in humility towards one another, Philippians 2:5-11 tells us that Jesus' time on earth was the ultimate act of humility, and that it all started with his birth. Jesus is the Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity. Before his birth in Bethlehem, he dwelt in perfection and glory; all power and authority were his. He had the option that we never have; Jesus could have chosen to keep himself free from the dirt and grime, the heartache and hurt that comes from being human. But instead, he "emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:7). In condescending to come to earth, Jesus laid aside the glory that rightfully belonged to him and became human.

This Advent season, don't forget that for Jesus, birth was an act of humility, a choice to lay what was rightfully his to the side in order that he might set you free and give you life. For this humble obedience, Philippians 2:9-11 goes on to tell of the highly exalted status that the Father confers upon the Son: "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Indeed, let us sing, "Glory to the newborn King!"

"Come and behold him, born the King of angels"

-O Come All Ye Faithful

Come and behold him! What a glorious, knee-bending invitation! Since the Fall of man in the garden, such a prospect had been rendered impossible for our sin-ravaged race. How could man, saturated with hellbent rebellion, come and behold *Him*? He is the holy God of all creation, and even upon the genuine request of Moses to see His glory in Exodus 33, the Lord responded: "You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live." For every generation from Adam to Joseph, only the rarest of glimpses, mere *manifestations* of him, had been possible.

Man proved in every instance that he could never become holy like God; but God, in his holiness, came to us "in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:7). The coming of Jesus Christ, in such shocking vulnerability, is the greatest paradox the world has ever known. For an infant, dependent upon his earthly mother and father for all his physical needs, was yet crowned with authority over all the might of Heaven. As the Son of God (Hebrews 1:5), the hosts of angels bow before him in the manger (1:6), and each one is eager and ready to answer his every call (1:7-14). After all, the angels know the Father, to whom belongs all glory and honor, and this child bears his name (1:4).

"O come, all ye faithful"—behold him! In the manger lies the great fulfillment of God's promises to his people. The great mystery of God's covenants, hidden for ages and generations (Colossians 1:26), is revealed at last in this perfect child, the King of angels, lying in a feeding trough. Behold him! Behold the perfect Lamb, sent to save us.

*“Who would have dreamed or ever foreseen
That we could hold God in our hands?
The Giver of Life is born in the night
Revealing God’s glorious plan
To save the world”
-Who Would Have Dreamed*

It almost sounds blasphemous at first. How can a human being presume that God could be confined to the point of being held in our hands? This is the One who holds the oceans in his hands (Isaiah 40:12). This is the One who knows stars by name and whose fingers put them in place (Isaiah 40:26). If our theology is remotely correct, then how could we have the audacity to presume to hold this God in our hands? Heaven and earth cannot contain him (1 Kings 8:27), so how could our hands? It almost sounds like God-belittling heresy.

And it probably would be heresy if any human being could have dreamed up such a scenario. But that is precisely the point. We could have never dreamed this; we could have never foreseen this. Instead, God himself dreamed it and planned it from time eternal, so that he might save the world. God himself would come to us in the most surprising of ways—as an absolutely dependent, infant child. And in this way, God came as one defenseless in order to gently break through all of our defenses, that we might know the extent of his love for us.

How could human beings hold the One who holds the universe? It’s inconceivable, unless God himself conceived it. And that’s precisely what he did. One night some two thousand years ago, a young Galilean virgin girl welcomed God in the flesh into her hands and into the world. All young mothers’ have their hands full. But in this case, this young mother’s hands were filled with God himself. Who could have dreamed?

*“Let all mortal flesh keep silence
And with fear and trembling stand
Ponder nothing earthly minded
For with blessing in His hand
Christ our God to earth descendeth
Our full homage to demand”
-Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence*

It’s a different sort of Christmas song. Many of our Christmas songs are brimming with joy that radiates to the world. Other Christmas songs even call for God’s people to burst open the doors to go tell on the mountains the news of what happened in the birth of Jesus. But this song doesn’t do that. It calls for the opposite—it says, “Let all mortal flesh keep silence.” In addition to this counter-intuitive instruction, it trades the cheery major chords for minor chords. It slows down the tempo. And instead of mirthful celebration, it calls for a different sort of contemplation.

We need Christmas songs like this, ones that slow down and bid us to think of all that is going on in the nativity scene. Yes, it is the joyful scene of the greatest birth announcement of all time. But it is also layered with theological significance, even beyond the calls for joy and gladness.

In the verse above, our song calls for fear and trembling, for a deep consideration of the things of God, and that we would banish earthly-minded thoughts to do so. Why? Because the Second Person of the Trinity descended to earth. We can’t rightly ponder the depth and meaning of the incarnation while simultaneously jingling sleigh bells and juggling our shopping lists. While joy is certainly chief among our mindsets at Christmas, it can’t be an empty-minded joy. It must be a joy that’s been thought through. A joy that journeys through fear and trembling, and not around them.

Our song also calls for contemplation of the nature and future of Jesus’ human existence. Verse two of the song says, “Lord of lords in human vesture / In the body and the blood / He will give to all the faithful / His own self for heavenly food.” Here, we’re being called to contemplate how the lowly baby body in the manger will one day be broken and tortured on the cross. And as we look at that baby’s body, we are to remember that this very body—this flesh and blood—is the body and blood that we take and eat, that we drink, that we feast upon in our hearts in the Lord’s Supper. We go to the manger like we go to the

Lord's Table: in both solemn contemplation and joyful celebration, for it is the same body and same blood in the cradle and on the cross.

Our songs also calls us to consider what has surrounded God's presence until this point. Verse four of our song says, "At His feet the six-winged seraph / Cherubim with sleepless eye / Veil their faces in His presence / As with ceaseless voice they cry / Alleluia Lord most high." For all of eternity, God has been surrounded by horrifying cherubim and seraphim, who themselves veil their own faces out of fear and reverence for God's holiness. These are God's perpetual surroundings. But all of a sudden, God in Jesus Christ is surrounded not by seraphim, but by barnyard animals. He's not surrounded by face-covered cherubim, but by the bald-faced stares of an ordinary mother and father, along with some dirty shepherds. Consider what condescension, what grace it is that the face of God could be seen by such people like this—like us—when even the cherubim cannot gaze upon him.

So yes, the manger scene calls for joy and celebration. But it also calls for meditation, for contemplation. This good news bids us to tell it on the mountain. But maybe not before we've rightly, dare we say silently, pondered these universe-altering truths in our hearts and minds first. Make some space for silently thinking upon these things today. Your soul needs it.

*"Israel's strength and consolation
Hope of all the earth Thou art
Dear desire of every nation
Joy of every longing heart"
-Come Thou Long Expected Jesus*

In the time of the "long expected Jesus'" birth, God's chosen people of Israel were living the ultimate dream deferred under the oppressive rule of a godless regime, with centuries separating them from the last inspired prophetic writing.

In desperate need of strength and comfort, it would have been easy to lose hope and perform the choreography of religious ritual. But a hope rooted in the Lord, though not exempt from difficulty, is a joyful hope. In Luke 2, we are told "there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon Him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ."

The number of years Simeon waited for Christ isn't recorded, but in obedience to the Spirit, Simeon went to the temple on the same day that Mary and Joseph brought their infant son, Jesus, to the temple in obedience to the law. There Simeon not only saw the incarnate Word, he held the fulfillment of all the law and prophets in his arms. In the overwhelming completion of a promise, he joyfully proclaimed, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:29-32).

Today, we as God's people again wait for consolation. Paul writes in Romans 8:23, "we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." Let's wait like Simeon—eagerly, expectantly, obediently, watchfully, hopefully, joyfully.

*“And in this Child we’ll find our rest
And all the meek and lowly blest
An infant tongue could sing the hymn
Of Hallelujah and Amen
Amen, Amen
Amen, Amen
I found my life
I found my life in Him”
-Amen, Amen*

When something shows up in all four Gospels, it is significant. There are many stories and teachings of Jesus for which this actually does not apply. For instance, Lazarus’ resurrection only shows up John’s Gospel. The parable of the Good Samaritan only shows up in Luke’s Gospel. The Sermon on the Mount (in its full form) only shows up in Matthew’s Gospel (though some snippets are in Luke, too). Of course, Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection are in all four Gospels, along with other various teachings. But one of the teachings of Jesus that appears in all four Gospels is Jesus’ teaching on finding and losing our lives.

Matthew 10:39 puts it this way: *“Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”*

Mark 8:35 turns the phrase in this manner: *“For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.”*

Luke 17:33 records the teaching like this: *“Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it.”*

And John 12:25 gives it to us in this way: *“Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”*

We mustn’t miss this significance of this repeated teaching. Jesus knows that we are always in search of life, and we’ll go wherever and try whatever to find it. Jesus knows that our hearts regularly love too much the things which will actually destroy us. Jesus knows our tendency to try to preserve the lives that we know. And Jesus knows those things always backfire.

So to all of these tendencies of ours, Jesus is saying, “Let go of life as you know it, life as you love it, and learn to take hold of that which is truly life (1 Timothy 6:19) by taking hold of me. Find your life, your everything, in me” And to get this message through to us, Jesus would take drastic measures. He would upend his own eternal existence, condescend to earth, and offer us this life.

In the description of the incarnation in Philippians 2:5-11, Paul tells us that Jesus actually practiced what he preached. Jesus chose not to preserve his eternal existence in heaven; even though he was in the form of God and rightly deserved his place on the throne, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. Instead, he emptied himself and was born in the likeness of men. And in that great condescension, we're told that he humbled himself to the point of death, as he lost his own life on the cross. Jesus lost his life for our sakes, so that we could find life in him. All of this is meant to come into focus as we see Jesus enter the world on that first Christmas Day.

As you ponder Jesus' incarnation and Jesus' teaching, what is it that you need to lose today in order to find your life in him? What are you clinging to for life that is actually going to kill you? If you won't lose it now, Jesus says, you will lose it and yourself forever. But if you are willing to part with it in the same way that Jesus parted with heaven, he stands ready to give you life, joy, hope, and satisfaction in himself. And in him, you will never be disappointed. Amen and amen.

*“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, O Come, Emmanuel*

Of all the consequences of the Fall that we see around us every day, none of them affect us like death. Adam and Eve believed the serpent’s slippery suggestion that “You will not surely die.” But as they buried their son, Abel, who was killed by his own brother, the lies of Satan would surely ring in their ears as a judgment against their rebellion. Death, which was once an outsider of God’s good creation, now made itself at home and ruled over humanity (Romans 5:17). Its tyranny leaves people oppressed and desperate, crying out with Paul, “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24)

People have been asking and answering that question for millennia. Whether it’s the fountain of youth, a search for Nirvana, or age-defying eye cream, we all want to find a way out of the curse of death. But all of these are mere cover-ups, Band-Aids put on bullet holes that ultimately end up with the same result: death.

There is, however, one Man who has an answer for death. Like everyone before him, Jesus tasted death and felt its sting, though he did not have to (Philippians 2:6-8). But unlike everyone before him, Jesus was raised from the dead. Death would not reign over him. Satan’s tyranny, the depths of hell, the grave: these things were all mortally wounded as Jesus walked out of the tomb alive. Death lost its sting (1 Corinthians 15:54-55). What’s more, Jesus’ victory over death is not only for him, but for His people as well. For those who have trusted in him, he is just the firstfruits, an initial promise of what’s to come (1 Corinthians 15:20). So what is the answer to Romans 7:24, and who delivers us from death? “Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:57).

*“No more let sins and sorrows grow
Nor thorns infest the ground
He comes to make
His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found”
-Joy to the World*

At one point, the city of Pripyat, Ukraine was a busy and growing city, dotted by apartment buildings, pristine parks, and even an amusement park. The city was only officially established in 1979, but by 1986 there were nearly 50,000 people living, working, and playing in the city. But all of that changed dramatically on April 26, 1986, when the nuclear power plant at Chernobyl, just a few miles away, exploded. Within two days Pripyat and the surrounding areas were abandoned. Thirty years later and the once promising city is now overgrown, a town taken over by weeds, animals, and decay.

What once was beautiful is now broken. That's not just the story of Pripyat, but also our own story. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden (Genesis 3), the results were farther reaching than they could have possibly anticipated. Sin spread to all mankind, and with it sorrow, pain, struggle, and death. And it was not just humanity that felt its effects. The once fertile soil began to sprout thorns and weeds. The curse of sin meant the fracturing of all creation, so that all of creation groans in pain, waiting for redemption (Romans 8:21).

But what began that first Christmas in Bethlehem proved more powerful than the Fall, reaching further than we could ever hope. Christ came to overturn the curse of the Fall. He came not only to comfort sorrow, but to utterly uproot sin and all its effects. His blessings flow and begin unraveling the effects of the curse. The great day Isaiah saw coming has dawned: “Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come the myrtle; and it shall make a name for the LORD, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off” (Isaiah 55:13). The once groaning creation and our own withering bodies will one day be remade beautifully. Who can help but sing!

*“Adam’s likeness now efface
 Shine Thine image in its place.
 Second Adam from above,
 Reinstate us in Thy love.
 Hark! The herald angels sing,
 ‘Glory to the newborn King!’”
 -Hark the Herald Angels Sing*

Throughout C.S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*, human beings (as opposed to the other creatures in the world of Narnia) are referred to as “sons of Adam” and “daughters of Eve.” Such language is intended to draw our minds to our first ancestors, and to the Biblical account where we learn of them. But any long look at Adam and Eve inevitably brings despair, for it is through Adam and Eve that the curse of sin enters the world, and the pain of death is introduced. The apex of God’s glorious creation, formed out of dust like a potter forms a vessel out of clay, is now destined to die as a result of sin. God tells Adam that he and all of his offspring would suffer the same fate: “For you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19).

As we bear the likeness of Adam, we know that we too share the destiny of Adam. We sin like Adam, and we will die like Adam. We ourselves are dust, and to dust we shall return. But, as this song reminds us, the Son of God came to “efface” Adam’s likeness. Efface is not a word that we use too often, but it simply means to erase or blot out. This is not to say that Christ will make us un-human, but instead, that he will make us fully human. The likeness of Adam that will be removed from us will be the likeness of sin and death. And in place of Adam’s likeness, Christ will shine his perfect image – the image in which we were originally created. 1 Corinthians 15:47-48 tells us that as the first Adam came as a man of dust, the second Adam – the true and better Adam – comes from heaven, and his name is Jesus.

Apart from Christ, our destiny is dust. But in union with Christ, our lowly bodies will be transformed to be like his glorious body (Philippians 3:21). Our perishable, dust-destined bodies will put on the imperishable; our mortal bodies will put on immortality (1 Corinthians 15:53). And all of this is possible, because Jesus Christ, the God-Man emptied himself, being born in the likeness of men (Philippians 2:7). Christ put on flesh, so that we could put on Christ, and so be reinstated in the love of God. Christ came that we could exchange our dust for the divine.

“Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we [who are in Christ] shall also bear the image of the man of heaven” (1 Corinthians 15:49).

*“He rules the world with truth and grace
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness
And wonders of His love”
-Joy to the World*

Isaac Watts wrote “Joy to the World” in 1719 as a meditation on Psalm 98. (It would be well worth your time to read Psalm 98 before you press on here. It’s only nine verses.) Psalm 98 is about the full and final reign of God’s final King. Thus the words of what has become a beloved Christmas song were actually written to celebrate not the coming of Jesus on that first Christmas but his second coming as ruler, judge and King.

Let’s look more closely at the last stanza. *He [Jesus] rules the world with truth and grace* – drawn from John 1:14, where we’re told that the incarnate Christ is the glory of God on display, “full of grace and truth.” And in his ruling, [Jesus] *makes [that is, compels] the nations prove* [or to test the reliability and certainty] of *the glories of His righteousness and wonders of His love*. In writing this hymn, Watts shows us how in Psalm 98, the Lord judges with righteousness and love, comparable to grace and truth found in John 1.

Jesus, the Word who became flesh, is full of both grace and truth. Often we struggle to balance grace and truth. Those of us who are truth-oriented love studying Scripture and theology, but are sometimes quick to judge and slow to forgive. Grace-oriented believers love forgiveness and freedom but may neglect Bible study or see moral standards as “legalism” to be avoided. Our countless mistakes in dating, marriage, parenting, ministry and other relationships reveal our constant failure to properly balance grace and truth.

The good news is that Jesus has come! He perfectly balances grace and truth; he is 100 percent grace and 100 percent truth. As we sing this Christmas season, let’s be reminded that Jesus is our King who rules and reigns! He deals with us perfectly in truth and bountifully in grace. And he is coming again. This is good news! Let’s celebrate with great joy and let’s go tell the world of this joy that has come to us and is truly and graciously offered to all!

*“Veiled in flesh the Godhead see
Hail the incarnate Deity
Pleased as man with man to dwell
Jesus, our Emmanuel”
-Hark the Herald Angels Sing*

“Show me your glory,” Moses requests of the LORD in Exodus 33:18. To be sure, this is an absurdly bold petition. And God kindly tells Moses in Exodus 33:20, “You cannot see my face and live.” It is a kindness, because there was not a single human being since Adam and Eve who had seen the face of God and lived. Once sin was brought into the equation in Genesis 3, a safe glance at God was no longer possible. All human hearts were now too dark, human eyes now too dim to behold the brilliant perfection of God and not be utterly ruined. From the Garden of Eden onward, every human who entered the presence of God would not dare look at God’s glory full in the face.

But God had a design to make such a thing possible again. Indeed, God knew that ultimately, he intended to have all of his people safely in his presence, with even the ability to look upon his face and live to tell about it. The final chapter of the Bible reveals God’s vision that one day, humanity would fully and finally see His face (Revelation 22:4). But how could we ever get from Moses’ rejected request to God’s fulfilled promise? God’s answer: through a baby.

“No one has ever seen God,” John 1:18 reminds us. But, “the Only God, who is at the Father’s side, he [Jesus Christ] has made him known.” Jesus Christ, God incarnate, the Godhead veiled in flesh, has been seen. Whether she knew it or not, mother Mary was granted the request that her forefather Moses had made so long ago. God showed her his glory in the form of a newborn – that is, a newborn King. And as that King grew, he readily rejected a crown for the sake of a cross, and thus earned the right for all of his people once again look upon God. For thirty-three years, Jesus Christ was pleased as man with man to dwell, so that “the dwelling place of God [would be] with man” for all eternity (Revelation 21:3).

*“Long lay the world in sin and error pining
Till he appear’d and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!”
-O Holy Night*

Years...too many years. Ever since that first sin in the garden mankind had lain in sin. Generations had lived and died with plenty of joys and celebration, true. Weddings, births, wealth and good harvests always brought joy. But invariably the heaviness of sin and its terrible fruit cast a pall over it all (Isaiah 25:7). Sickness, shame, injury, wars, pain and finally the specter of death overshadowed every joy. Indeed, the world laid in sin and error and we were most certainly pining. All mankind suffered a mental and physical decline from a broken heart. Rebellion against the One who loved us to the core broke our hearts, even if we didn't know it.

Then something happened. A plan which was from the beginning took shape. A salvation appeared! The One that the prophets pointed toward and that our ancestors hoped for suddenly appeared. The humblest of births in a lowly manger far from his home brought the most surprising salvation. He appeared, born of a simple woman, attested to by angels and seen first by shepherds and wise men. This helpless baby would be the one who would save his people from their sins. A new and glorious morning had dawned on a very weary world.

When you are *really* loved by those who know you best, you *do* actually get a sense of your worth... your value. But when the Lord of creation invades the dark places of our hearts, well, there is nothing like this. There is a sudden thrill of hope. Could he indeed love me, a sinner? Grasping his undying love for us in spite of our sin brings the thrill of finding the most impossible treasure. Rejoice brothers and sisters! The long awaited One has come to invade the darkest of hearts and take away all sin. Rejoice, Christian!

*“Joyful, all ye nations rise
Join the triumph of the skies
With the angelic host proclaim:
‘Christ is born in Bethlehem’
Hark! The herald angels sing
“Glory to the newborn King!”
-Hark the Herald Angels Sing*

“But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish....The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shone. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end.” –Isaiah 9:1-2, 6-7

Isaiah 9 presents one of the most well-known Biblical images of Christmas. Isaiah foresees a day when the nations that long walked in darkness have now beheld a glorious light. Isaiah 9:6 tells us that the light comes from a child being born. From this child, and from the mission that he would accomplish and subsequently send out his disciples to publish, the kingdom will widen beyond all comprehension. No longer would God’s people be a Middle Eastern ethnic minority, but his people would soon include every tribe, language, people, and nation (Revelation 5:9). Carried in the news of Christmas is the news that the gospel of the kingdom is the most ethnically inclusive kingdom the world has ever known. Literally, various people from every skin color, every tongue, and every cranny of the earth would be swept in. Ethiopians and Athenians. Asians and Australians. Americans and Brazilians.

Revelation provides a picture of the appointed consummation of this prophecy. It depicts nations streaming into an eternal kingdom, where there is “no longer any need for sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light and its lamp is the Lamb” (Revelation 21:23), much like Isaiah had foretold. The question for us is whether or not we will play any part in carrying this light to the nations, and share in the joy of seeing them join their voices to ours both now and forever.

As you worship the risen and reigning Christ this Christmas, widen your view to see your brothers and sisters from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth joining you and the angels, singing “Glory to the newborn king.” Can you see it? And don’t you want to?

*“Go tell it on the mountain
Over the hills and everywhere
Go tell it on the mountain
Jesus Christ is born”
-Go Tell it on the Mountain*

This song is one that we can tend to sing rather casually, but in looking at the Scripture behind the lyrics, we can see that the shepherds’ reaction to the news of Christ’s birth is *anything but casual*:

“When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.’ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them... And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” (Luke 2:15-18, 20)

Can you feel the shepherds’ eagerness to see Christ and to tell others about him? Imagine yourself in their place and let the hope of this moment wash over you. In the coming of this baby, there is the promise of the longed-for Messiah, joy for all people, and peace and goodwill among men! No wonder they couldn’t contain themselves! These guys did not care how others would perceive them as they came running through Bethlehem, declaring what these angels had told them... they were *compelled* to share what they had witnessed. And their faithfulness to declare this good news resulted in others being filled with awe and wonder.

We see in their reaction, and in the lyrics to this song, a picture of what our response to the good news of Christ should be: to *praise* God and *proclaim* what we have seen and heard. The angel’s announcement is one not only of good news for Israel, but of “great joy that will be for *all the people*” (Luke 2:10)—that means our neighbors, co-workers, and every person we meet. Do we allow the *hope* of Christ’s birth to fill us up so that it overflows into our conversation with others? Do we feel the same *haste* as these shepherds to share this Good News? Do we have an attitude of glorifying and praising God for what we have witnessed him do throughout Scripture and in our own lives? Spend some time dwelling on this hope-filled announcement and ask for the grace, opportunity, and boldness to tell this Good News everywhere we go: *“Jesus Christ is born!”*

*“Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings
Risen with healing in His wings”
-Hark the Herald Angels Sing*

“But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings” (Malachi 4:2).

Malachi, the prophet whose book is the last of the Old Testament, wrote these words to a people weary from exile and captivity. But these words are a promise, that for the people of God, good news was in store. And that good news would involve a visitation of God to His people. In other places in the Old Testament, the rising of the sun is used as a metaphor for God coming to His people (see Isaiah 60:1-2).

The writer of “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” is utilizing this image, and even this verse from Malachi. Like many others in Christian history have done, our songwriter attributes this prophecy to the coming of Christ. Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, as the light of the world, is indeed the One whose visitation Malachi foretells. Continuing with the metaphor, Malachi, and our songwriter, are not saying that Jesus Christ has wings. No, the image is that of the sun that rises, whose rays spread out like wings and cover the earth. This poetic imagery is all pointing to the truth that the apostle John uncovers for us in his gospel. There, in John 8:12, Jesus claims, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” In the person of Christ, light and life and healing are brought to a dark and dead and sin-diseased world.

The rising sun is a welcome sight after a long, weary night. And that very sun lifts our eyes to the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who has come into the world, bringing light, life, and healing to those of us who dwell in darkness. So indeed, for this hope bestowed upon us, let us “Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of Righteousness!”

*“O come, Thou Day-Spring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
And death’s dark shadows put to flight.”
-O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*

While death has been a part of our world since Genesis 3, it was not present in the garden to begin with. The discomfort we feel around death is a constant reminder that it is an intruder in God’s good creation. We may avoid thinking about it and dealing with it for years, but as our bodies age and we see loved ones lost, the shadow of death can become long indeed.

In the face of death’s shadow, Jesus’ coming is like the rising of the sun, the “Day-Spring” as the King James Version puts it in Luke 1:78. When Jesus came, he made a way for his people to overcome the ultimate consequence of sin, which is death. His resurrection is the ultimate hope for the Christian life. We know that because of the resurrection death no longer has power over the believer. In John 11:25, Jesus says that he is the Resurrection and the Life. That was true for Lazarus back in the time of Jesus, and for anyone who submits to his Lordship, it will be true forever.

Christians in this Advent season should remember that our hope is twofold. First, in Jesus’ first coming, the sun rose on death’s reign, and its shadow began to flee. But secondly, an even greater hope remains that he will come once more. And that second coming will be like the noonday, fully flooding the shadows of death with marvelous light, as our Day-Spring sits in triumph. He will dwell with us, and death will be no more (Revelation 21:3-4). Not only do we rejoice in Christ’s first coming, but we also hope in his second coming when He will restore all things and eliminate death forever.

*“Wondrous gift of heaven: the Father sends the Son
Planned from time eternal, moved by holy love
He will carry our curse and death He’ll reverse
So we can be daughters and sons”
-Who Would Have Dreamed*

One of the great mysteries of Christmas is that this was not a “plan B” for God. The history of the Old Testament is not just about a group of misfits and false starts that God eventually got tired of and scrapped, only then to send Jesus. No, Ephesians 1:3-6 says that this was God’s good grace and plan for us far before we ever deserved it. From the foundation of the world, God determined that He would send His own Son, Jesus, the greatest gift He could ever give.

Think about that radical fact. Do you think that you are just a divine afterthought, a nuisance to God that He begrudgingly deals with? Brothers and sisters, that is not the case! Jesus becoming flesh for us is the sure and steady sign of God’s holy love, that He does indeed care for His people. Before time began, before you ever did anything good that you thought would make yourself worthy before God, God planned to make a way for you to be with Him!

From all eternity, God has planned this great reversal. The eternal, glorious Son becomes a tiny bawling baby. The curse that was meant for you and me is placed on His shoulders. The wrath that we deserved was instead poured out on Christ. And in Christ we find that our death sentence, our slavery to sin, is undone. Death is reversed and rebels are remade. The Son of God has come and welcomes us home as His beloved children. Brothers and sisters, fellow sons and daughters of the One True King, we have cause to sing!

*"Mild 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*

Everything that is born dies. Encouraging, right? But we know that it's the case: every flower born from a seedling, every family dog that we brought home as a puppy, every company that's ever been formed, every country that's ever ruled or reigned. These all, like the milk in our refrigerators, have expiration dates. And we know this truth hits home most pointedly when it comes to human beings. Ecclesiastes 3:1 tells us that there is "a time to be born, and a time to die." Hebrews 9:27 tells us that it is appointed for man to die. Death, because of the presence of sin in this world, is coming for all of us.

Death, however, is not a problem for God. We're told in Psalm 90:2 that God is "from everlasting to everlasting." In other words, God has no beginning and no end. God was not born and God cannot die. So here's the two realities we have so far: 1) We can't help but die; and 2) God cannot die. And this is where the incarnation ought to floor us. In the incarnation, Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, is making himself killable. The incarnation is telling us that Jesus is taking on human flesh, breathing human breath, and making it possible for his breath to be taken away, for his flesh to be stricken. In becoming a man, Jesus is becoming killable for us.

In becoming killable for us, in coming to be born in order to die, Jesus is making it possible that we might not die forever. Jesus' birth, ultimate death, and resurrection purchase for us the possibility of re-birth. Jesus is coming to make it so that our first birth and ultimate death can be upended, so that our second birth results in the power of an indestructible, eternal life. Birth begets death. But re-birth banishes death forever. This is the gospel. Jesus becomes a man, making himself killable out of love for us. He was born to die, that death wouldn't have the last word over us. He was born to rise from the dead, and raise us from the dead. He was born to grant us re-birth.

*"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"*
-Come Thou Long Expected Jesus

For many, the Christmas season is a busy one. At this point, you may simply be looking forward to January, where things might slow down. You might find yourself singing Merle Haggard lyrics during your prayer times, just hoping to make it through December. But if we're more desperate to make it through December than to slow down through December, then we might have done it wrong. Because one of the major theological themes of Christmas is rest.

Rest is a significant idea that is portrayed in both the Old and New Testaments. There are examples of rest from war, rest from work, and so forth. But all that rest from the various physical stressors is actually meant to point us to a much greater spiritual reality.

From an Old Testament vantage point, the longing for the coming Messiah included the rest that He would bring. The thought was that the Messiah might give the people of Israel rest from their enemies by overthrowing them. But with the New Testament in view, it becomes clear that God has in mind a rest that is more extensive, a rest that could even exist in the midst of oppression from enemies. And that rest is made available to us in Christ, even now. Jesus beckons in Matthew 11:28, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

A promise of the Christ of Christmas is rest for his people. Not mere rest from travel or company Christmas parties, but eternal Sabbath rest. Christ has come to give us much needed rest: rest from the need to appease God; rest from the need to seek God's approval; rest from the comparison game; rest from anxiety; rest from our worst fears; rest from our harshest and most unrealistic expectations; rest from purposelessness; rest from the sins that destroy us. Jesus—the one whom we remember this day resting in a manger, but who is now resting at the right hand of God until the appointed time of his return—this Jesus offers us real, satisfying rest. He speaks tenderly to us, and tells us that our warfare is ended. He beckons us to himself, he tells us that he himself has fulfilled the standards we never could have, and that he has finished the work that we should have completed. He has said, "It is finished!" His perfect life, his substitutionary death, his victorious resurrection all speak to us with one voice: "Rest."

Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless until we find our rest in Thee." So if you've found yourself restless this season—or this lifetime—it's time to stop. Hear the calming voice of Jesus speak specifically to you saying, "I will give you rest."

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