

# CHRISTMAS CAROLS WE HAVE LOVED

## *Part 1: O Little Town of Bethlehem*

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### Introduction

Yes, Christmas carols. We sing them every year! Most of us learned them as young children. I heard them being played in stores last month, and I realized how pleased I was to hear them again.

Of course, we'll hear them mingled with secular Christmas songs, new and old, as current recording artists, from Rock to Hip-Hop, release their latest Christmas tracks. But no matter what genre is their usual fair, nearly everyone will try their licks sometime with Christian lyrics that date back 100-300 years.

In spite of our familiarity with these age-old songs, until we sing them in church, we seldom stop to think about what they really mean, and even here, their meaning can escape us just because of our familiarity with them.

Therefore, on Sundays during December, we're going to consider the history and meaning of four of our favorite Christmas carols and let them shed fresh light on the grandest Story of all time.

### Background

We begin today with a relatively recent song, written only 140 years ago. Philips Brooks was the Rector of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Inspired by a trip to the Holy Land in 1865, where he journeyed by horseback from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to assist in a Christmas Eve service, he wrote the words of "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

The organist at Holy Trinity, Lewis Redner, said the tune came to him on Christmas Eve, 1868, and was first sung the next day.

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

In 1895, Uzziah Burnap, wrote a new melody for the lyrics, which he called Ephratah...

And in 1906, Ralph Williams, created another arrangement, known as Forest Green, widely used in Britain...

Nevertheless, over the years it has been the tune created by organist Lewis Redner, called "St. Louis," which stuck and remains popular today, as presented here by Steven Curtis Chapman...

## Fulfilled Prophecy

This first verse introduces us to the author's picture of Bethlehem as he approached it that evening before Christmas: quiet, sleepy, as darkness settled in. He could imagine that it was not much different on that night 2000 years ago, when Joseph and Mary, "great with child," arrived by the same road. Yet, in his heart the Holy Spirit was illuminating something no natural eye could perceive.

On that night long ago — a night like any other — a marvelous meeting was taking place. Heaven and earth were converging in an infant child; past and future were linked in His purpose for coming.

Bethlehem was a small town, a suburb of Jerusalem. It was the birthplace of David, the shepherd-psalmist, who became king of Israel. Before that and other than that, it was a little known hamlet. The Hebrew prophet, Micah, made a point of contrasting its size and reputation with its value in God's plan:

*Micah 5:2 But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you, one whose origins are from the distant past.<sup>4</sup> And he will stand to lead his flock with the Lord's strength, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. Then his people will live there undisturbed, for he will be highly honored around the world.<sup>5</sup> And he will be the source of peace.*

It was this very passage, so well known by Jewish scholars as a prophecy about the Messiah who was to come, that directed the wise men from the East to Bethlehem, when they came in search of the "king of the Jews." (Matthew 2:5-6)

Though Joseph and Mary, the mother of Jesus, had settled in Nazareth of Galilee (far to the north of Jerusalem), Luke records that a national census and taxation, forced Joseph and his bride to travel to Bethlehem, the home of his ancestors to be registered. This long journey, made more difficult by Mary's advanced pregnancy, brought them to that village of prophecy on the eve of Jesus' birth.

Brooks' lyrics capture not only the sleepy unawareness of the Bethlehem villagers, but also reveal a common manner of God in bringing to pass His purposes: He works in secret, under cover of darkness. After all, to God, there is no such thing as darkness or night; it is all light and eternal day to Him (Psalm 139:11-12). Yet, while we sleep, He works, for He never sleeps. (Psalm 121:4) And so, much is going on which we cannot see, and of which we are unaware. God is always at work in your life, when you feel and see Him and when you don't.

Life has a way of distracting us from God, with its many griefs and puzzles and demands. Though God gives hope, life breeds fear, and the result for us is confusion.

For this, Christ was born. He is the Answer, both to our hopes and to our fears, to fulfill the one and to quench the other.

*The hopes and fears of all the years  
Are met in thee tonight.*

## Reason to Praise

*For Christ is born of Mary,  
And gathered all above,  
While mortals sleep, the angels keep  
Their watch of wondering love.*

*O morning stars together  
Proclaim the holy birth!  
And praises sing to God the king  
And peace to men on earth.*

Why did the angels watch so intently over this unusual birth?

For one thing, they were on assignment as the protectors of the mother and her child.

From the Book of Beginnings (Genesis) to the Book of Conclusions (Revelation) a single storyline may be found, a story of persistent rebellion and ultimate conquest.

In the Garden, after their disobedience, cover-up, and exposure, God declared the consequences of Adam's and Eve's sins. And to the serpent who had deceived Eve, God said:

*Genesis 3:15 I will cause hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel."*

Apostle John wrote of an endtime vision he received:

*Revelation 12:3 I saw a large red dragon... He stood in front of the woman as she was about to give birth, ready to devour her baby as soon as it was born. <sup>5</sup> She gave birth to a son who was to rule all nations with an iron rod. And her child was snatched away from the dragon.*

Satan, that deceiver, has continuously sought to destroy the Son-King who was to be born, and failing that, to render His influence negligible. The angels of Heaven were assigned to protect Him, as they did repeatedly from the day He was born, throughout His lifetime.

And, of course, they were also dispatched to announce His arrival (to Mary and to Joseph, to the Wise Men and to the shepherds and to others who waited in faith). They, themselves, marveled at the grace of God and His stealth plan of salvation. The birth of God the Son elicited their highest praises:

*Luke 2:14 "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased."*

## **Stealth Approach**

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

I said it was a "stealth plan." It always has been.

Isaiah explained it and was quoted by Paul:

*1 Corinthians 2:9 "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him."*

God's goodness is incomprehensible; we cannot grasp it or fathom it. We can simply believe in it.

We are inclined to look for signs, but He promised none that are clear. He said the only sign He would give is the "sign of Jonah" (apparently, a reference to His resurrection). Beyond that great sign, everything would appear fairly normal, as it has for generations. Those who seek to uncover signs will continually be disappointed and confused.

*Luke 17:20 Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God can't be detected by visible signs. <sup>21</sup> You won't be able to say, 'Here it is!' or 'It's over there!' For the Kingdom of God is already among you."*

It is hidden among us, like yeast in a lump of dough, like buried treasure. Still, His invitation to partake of it is clear:

*Revelation 3:20 "Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends."*

## **He Transforms Us**

*Where children pure and happy  
Pray to the Blessed Child,  
Where misery cries out to Thee,  
Son of the mother mild;  
Where charity stand watching  
And faith holds wide the door,  
The dark night wakes, the glory breaks,  
And Christmas comes once more.*

This verse plainly reminds us that when we call on the Lord, He listens and responds! Whether we call on Him with praise for the goodnesses we enjoy, or out of misery are compelled to cry out for His help, or in loving service are stretched in faith, when He responds He turns things about for His glory.

*The dark night wakes, the glory breaks,  
And Christmas comes once more.*

It can be Christmas all year long! He is not far away; He dwells with you! He is as far as your next prayer. He will multiply your joys, soothe your misery, and strengthen your love in service.

## **Emmanuel**

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

This carol ends in the best of all places: revealing and reveling in Christ's purpose for coming. He did not come primarily to teach with words or to work temporary miracles. He came to transform us individually by what He called a "new birth" or a "birth from above."

He descended from Heaven, leaving deity's glory behind, to pay for our sin and carry away from us its punishment, and to bring into our hearts a newness of life. A newness of life!

*Be born in us today.*

Have you been born again? It's not a feeling, and it's not a theory. It's an act of God in response to your willing faith that awakens your spirit and unites you to Him forever.

This is the Good News of Christmas. You can be changed! In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, the whole world can seem altogether different. When you give God His place at the center of who you are and what you are pursuing, your perception of all things becomes different — even though “all things” may not have changed.

The Israelite prophet, Isaiah, said it first:

*Isaiah 7:14 the Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means 'God is with us').*

That's who Jesus is: Emmanuel. He is God with us. He is the infinite God in finite human form. He is eternal life with flesh and bone.

Come to us, Lord Jesus! Be born in us today! Be born in us to stay! This is the true meaning of Christmas.