

CHRISTMAS CAROLS WE HAVE LOVED

Part 3: Joy to the World!

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Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, December 16, 2007

I've got them ring-ding-ding-a-ling, jingling in my ears! Everywhere I go, even the gas station, I hear Christmas carols being played. No matter how many years we've been singing these classic songs, even when we sing them in church, we seldom stop to think about the message they convey.

So, this month, we're considering the history and meaning of some of our favorite Christmas carols, to let them shed fresh light on the grandest Story of all time.

Background

Here's another 300-year old carol. The lyrics of "Joy to the World" were written by Isaac Watts in 1719. Its music (sometimes erroneously attributed to Handel) is a work of Lowell Mason, who was largely responsible for introducing music into American public schools.

Watts has been recognized as the "Father of English Hymnody," having been the first prolific British hymnwriter — credited with as many as 750 hymns, many of which are still in active use today, such as "We're Marching to Zion" and "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." The oldest of nine children, his propensity for rhyme in his younger years apparently drove his parents to distraction. Once, while being spanked for his clever tongue, he is said to have cried, "O father, do some pity take, and I will no more verses make!"

For two years at the beginning of the 18th century, Watts served as Lord Mayor of London, during his long tenure as the pastor of a large Congregational church. He was also renowned as a theologian and logician, writing many books on these subjects. His book entitled, "Logic, or The Right Use of Reason in the Enquiry After Truth With a Variety of Rules to Guard Against Error in the Affairs of Religion and Human Life, as well as in the Sciences," became the standard text on logic at Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, and Yale universities, being used at Oxford for more than 100 years.

Receive

The hymn we looked at last week, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," spoke mostly about heaven's announcement, declaring the glories of God. Today's carol speaks mostly about our *response* to that message.

*Joy to the world! The Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King
Let every heart prepare Him room
And heaven and nature sing
And heaven and nature sing
And heaven, and heaven and nature sing*

Reminiscent of the arrival of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, where they could find "no room" at the inn, Watts urges people everywhere to make room for Christ.

The Lord is come. But each person individually must make room for Him in their heart and life and receive Him.

Many have filled their lives with idle and self-centered activities, that leave no time for contemplating their future beyond retirement, or their present beyond their five senses.

Of course, many people have loaded their calendars with worthwhile activities, too, but with the same short-sighted result.

These are busy times, for sure. The needs and demands are numerous and great. Still, our greatest need is not the loudest or most persistent. It may be drowned out by clamorous activities or pushed far to the back by nagging situations, but our greatest need remains inescapable.

It is great, not because of its volume or relentlessness, but because of its depth and length. It is our need for forgiveness, for eternal life, and for God.

At times, it surfaces, or forces its way to the forefront, as it did in the case of a rich, young Jewish leader.

Matthew 19:16 Someone came to Jesus with this question: "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?"

¹⁷ "Why ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. But to answer your question—if you want to receive eternal life, keep the commandments."

¹⁸ "Which ones?" the man asked.

And Jesus replied: " 'You must not murder. You must not commit adultery. You must not steal. You must not testify falsely. ¹⁹ Honor your father and mother. Love your neighbor as yourself.' "

²⁰ "I've obeyed all these commandments," the young man replied. "What else must I do?"

²¹ Jesus told him, "If you want to be perfect, go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

²² But when the young man heard this, he went away sad, for he had many possessions.

²³ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is very hard for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. ²⁴ I'll say it again—it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!"

Eventually, inevitably, the matter of our deepest need must be faced. Many have wrestled with it on their death beds. But, why wait? Why end your life with such an agonizing struggle?

Make room! Receive your King, while you can still enjoy him!

Rejoice

Joy to the earth! The Savior reigns!

Let men their song employ

While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains

Repeat the sounding joy

Repeat the sounding joy

Repeat, repeat the sounding joy

If a people could choose their king, an excellent candidate would be one who had proved to be a savior. Our King is also our Savior! Our Savior is also our King. This is cause for extraordinary joy.

Watts calls people to lift up songs of thanks and joy for this reality, as if to say, "You *cannot* remain silent; you *must* sing for joy!"

Every person has a song to sing. At least, every person once *had* a song. The song of some have been stilled by grief or pain or bitterness. But even these, if they turn to the Savior, can have their song restored.

Think for just a moment of the sheer volume of songs that have been written, composed, and sung over the course of human history. People have employed their songs to describe many different emotions and circumstances of life. However, the greatest volume of songs ever created to celebrate a single theme, have not been about broken hearts but about the person of Jesus Christ, our Savior and King. I think the Newsboys summed it up best:

*Of all the songs sung from the dawn of creation
Some were meant to persist
Of all the bells rung from a thousand steeples
None rings truer than this
It's all God's children singing
Glory, glory, hallelujah
He reigns, He reigns*

Watts acknowledged that even nature gets involved in this celebration: fields, floods, rocks, hills, and plains repeat this song of joy. Of course, this echoes the Bible:

*Psalms 98:7 Let the sea and everything in it shout his praise! Let the earth and all living things join in.⁸
Let the rivers clap their hands in glee! Let the hills sing out their songs of joy⁹ before the Lord.*

Isaiah agreed:

Isaiah 55:12 You will live in joy and peace. The mountains and hills will burst into song, and the trees of the field will clap their hands!

Receive Jesus Christ. Rejoice in Him.

Released

*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
Far as the curse is found
Far as, far as the curse is found*

So proclaimed Isaiah also, in the verse following the last one:

Isaiah 55:13 Where once there were thorns, cypress trees will grow. Where nettles grew, myrtles will sprout up. These events will bring great honor to the Lord's name; they will be an everlasting sign of his power and love.

The arrival of the Christ child signaled the end of the curse that had afflicted the whole earth since the dawn of humankind.

When Adam and Eve insisted on living life *their own way*, God called it sin and reprimanded them for it. The part of the judgment that He imposed on the man was this:

Genesis 3:17 “Since you listened to your wife and ate from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat, the ground is cursed because of you. All your life you will struggle to scratch a living from it. ¹⁸ It will grow thorns and thistles for you, though you will eat of its grains. ¹⁹ By the sweat of your brow will you have food to eat until you return to the ground from which you were made. For you were made from dust, and to dust you will return.”

And I guess men have struggled with listening to their wives and eating what they offered ever since!

The reality that our sin impacts the world around us is difficult to grasp. Most sins seem so private and personal, it is hard to see how they could affect other people, let alone the rest of the created world around us.

But it is just this kind of blindness that has led to many of the ecological concerns of our day. We dare not turn a blind eye to this any longer. We are connected. By our Creator’s design.

And also by His design, we will be delivered! Jesus comes to make His blessings flow! He comes to undo the works of the evil one and overturn the effects of the curse.

Galatians 3:13 *But Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing. For it is written in the Scriptures, “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.”¹⁴ Through Christ Jesus, God has blessed the Gentiles with the same blessing he promised to Abraham, so that we who are believers might receive the promised Holy Spirit through faith.*

He was cursed in death, so that you could be released from the curse of sin in your lifetime. Receive Him. Rejoice in Him. Be released.

Revealed

*He rules the world with truth and grace
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness
And wonders of His love
And wonders of His love
And wonders, wonders of His love*

Once again, Watts turns his attention to the effects of the Good News among human societies, an effect often overlooked or mistakenly attributed to the positive evolution of human society.

The increase of knowledge and technology and economics notwithstanding, human society is as corrupt and vicious today as ever. Economics is often the means and technology the cloak, but racism and power struggles and selfish advantage still rage among the nations. This is simply to note that we are not as advanced as we imagine. Savagery lies just beneath the skin of sophistication.

Nevertheless, there have been advancements and improvements, in science, in education, in government, in economics — the great bulk of them directly or indirectly attributable to Christians and the advance of Christianity (in spite of its many ugly warts and painful follies).

Everywhere the Gospel has gone, where nations have taken up His ways, people's lives have been lifted, emancipated, improved. In these ways they demonstrate the rightness of Jesus' ways, whether they acknowledge Him or not.

Christianity has been the foundation of Western society for so long, that its positive influence is like an underground stream — ever flowing, ever feeding, but seldom recognized.

And in the superficial affairs of men today, we seldom can recognize the positive influence of the Son of God. We continue to hear of wars, famines, plagues, and poverty. That news is not good. Men continue to struggle *against* one another and can hardly find room to struggle *together* against their common enemies.

Psalms 2: 1 Why are the nations so angry? Why do they waste their time with futile plans? 2 The kings of the earth prepare for battle; the rulers plot together against the Lord and against his anointed one. 3 "Let us break their chains," they cry, "and free ourselves from slavery to God." 4 But the one who rules in heaven laughs. The Lord scoffs at them. 5 Then in anger he rebukes them, terrifying them with his fierce fury. 6 For the Lord declares, "I have placed my chosen king on the throne in Jerusalem, on my holy mountain."

Jesus Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords!

Philippians 2:9 God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Paul further explained:

NIV Hebrews 2:8 In putting everything under [Jesus], God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. 9 But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

This is the central "wonder of His love":

John 3:16 God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. 17 God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.

18 "There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God's one and only Son. 19 And the judgment is based on this fact: God's light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil. 20 All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed. 21 But those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants."

Have you made room for Him? Have you received Him? If not, you may do so today!

If so, then rejoice in Him, and be released from past bondage, so that He may be revealed through your life. *"Let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father."* (Matthew 5:16)

Take Isaac Watts' advice and take Apostle Paul's advice:

Philippians 4:4 Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice! 5 Let everyone see that you are thoughtful about all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon.