

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Christmas message Christmas carols

[New King James Version or Darby Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

What is your favourite Christmas song? Across the UK, the BBC has reported that Whams! 'Last Christmas' was the UK Christmas number one in both 2023 and 2024. Focusing on Christmas carols specifically, Classic FM's 2024 poll awarded the top spot to 'O Holy Night', followed by 'In the Bleak Mid-Winter' and 'Carol of the Bells.'

My young son's favourite Christmas song is currently 'Mr. Christmas Walrus', which has been on repeat and is seemingly endlessly requested on car journeys. I hope that in the years to come, if the Lord has not returned, I can teach him the wonder of the Christmas story and how it is about so much more than the fun decorations, presents, and walruses that currently fill his mind. While the lyrics of 'Mr. Christmas Walrus' - fun song as it is – will probably not aid me much with this, there are many carols that do set out the deeper truths of Christmas admirably. In the next 20 minutes or so we will consider some of them and what they can tell us about the wonder of the first Christmas.

Methinks I see an heavenly host

(William Billings, 1778)

There is a somewhat archaically worded carol called 'Methinks I see an heavenly host' that I particularly like – it might even be my favourite – that manages to set out in half a verse the essence of the Christmas story.

Then learn from hence ye rural swains,
The meekness of your God,
Who left the boundless realms of joy
To ransom you with blood.

Whether we would count ourselves a rural swain or not – or even know what one is – the focus of the carol, as with the Christmas story, is on God and His coming to Earth in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

That step of infinite distance: from Heaven, the place where God dwells, to Earth, a cursed and fallen world full of sin, sickness, sadness, and death, stands behind the wonder of Christmas. That God the Son would leave the boundless joy of Heaven, where myriads of angels worship unceasingly, where the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – dwell in perfect love between each member, in inapproachable light, to come to Earth already implies the selfless motive of this journey. The full extent of the Lord Jesus' selflessness, however, goes beyond our comprehension – it was 'to ransom [us] with blood.'

The Lord Jesus left the joys of Heaven for the horrors of Earth to ransom – to buy back – fallen man with His own most precious blood. We might have understood if as God, He had come to

Earth to deal with it, to clean it up, to execute justice and slay the wicked who lived in constant rebellion against Him. That might justify entering such sordid and squalid environs in our minds, even if a cosmic lightning bolt from the glory might seem more fitting. But it was to suffer, bleed, and die that the Lord Jesus came at Christmas, and we can only thank Him, now and for all eternity, for His unfathomable grace.

Hark the herald angels sing

(Charles Wesley, 1739)

But how could God die? The Apostle Paul describes God as the One who alone is immortal (I Timothy 6:16). It was in becoming Man, taking a body – which is sometimes termed the Incarnation – and being born on that first Christmas. What is likely one of the most famous Christmas carols, comments on this further wonder of Christmas:

Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord,
late in time behold him come,
offspring of the Virgin's womb:
veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
hail th'incarnate Deity,
pleased with us in flesh to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel.

The Lord Jesus was born to Mary, a virgin, as a baby boy, taking on flesh and blood like you and me, so that that flesh could be broken and that blood shed, to ransom us, to pay the penalty our sins demanded and allow God to offer full and free forgiveness to man.

Some of the same thoughts that we have just considered for our first carol are reiterated here: 'Christ, by highest heaven adored' - the Lord Jesus was (and is) the eternal Son of God in Heaven, praised unceasingly by the angels, and yet He came to Earth to die to save us. 'Veiled in flesh the Godhead see.' The Lord Jesus never ceased to be fully God when He was born on Earth. Throughout all His time on Earth He remained the almighty Creator of the creation He walked through. And yet He willingly became a Man so that, around 33 years after the first Christmas, He could give up His infinitely precious life on a cruel Roman cross to save us.

This time, from what we might term 'the Christmas story' to 'the Easter story', was a unique and wondrous time, when the Son of God, as Man, physically walked on Earth, interacting with men, women, and children. The secular historian does not like the idea of bringing the divine into history, in the sense of causality, but this is something beyond even that: a divine person directly entering man's history. We should not allow the materialistic and atheistic presuppositions of 21st century western society to diminish the truth and consequent wonder of what God has done, in walking and eating and speaking and working on this planet for 30 or so years. He knows what it is to suffer, to be tempted, insulted, mistreated, wrongfully accused, hated, hungry, tired, abandoned, betrayed. His sufferings exceed anything we might endure, but still He knows, by experience, these things. It is one of the many happy wonders of Christmas that when we who trust in Christ today turn to Him in prayer, we are speaking to One who knows the trial of our circumstances, as well as to One who has the power to shape them, and the love to do so in the way that is for our best.

Unto us is born a Son

(G. R. Woodward, 1902;
Percy Dreamer, 1928)

So God was, in the person of Jesus Christ, on Earth as a Man. What was His reception, His welcome, His arrival? Another carol helpfully summarises this for us:

Christ, from heav'n descending low,
Comes on earth a stranger;
Ox and ass their Owner know
Now cradled in a manger.

Another translation of this Carol (originally written in Latin) helps fill out the same thoughts:

Cradled in a stall was He
'Midst the cows and asses;
But the very beasts could see
That He all men surpasses.

God had come as Man and yet, among His own creation He was a stranger, unrecognised by almost all. As the Apostle John wrote:

He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him (John's Gospel 1:10-11, NKJV).

While the biblical text does not actually comment on the presence of animals at the Lord's birth, nor their interaction with Him if they were there, it is a not unreasonable assumption by the carol-writer that animals were present and that they would have shown some sensibility to the presence of the Creator, as Balaam's donkey did centuries earlier.

If, then, as the carol states, even brute beasts could recognise that the Baby born to Mary surpasses all other men, what did man make of Him? Tragically, the carol continues immediately with the following lines:

Herod then with fear was filled:
"A prince," he said, "in Jewry!"
All the little boys he killed
At Bethl'em in his fury.

The incident the carol describes here is recorded in the second chapter of Matthew's Gospel. Herod – or 'Herod the Great', to give him the title bestowed on him by history but certainly not Heaven – had planned to have the wise men, who visited the Lord Jesus, tell him the Lord's location so that he could have Him assassinated. God intervened, telling the wise men to return to their home by a different route, avoiding Herod, and telling Joseph to take the Lord Jesus and Mary to Egypt. When Herod realised the wise men were not going to come back to inform him of the Lord's whereabouts, he ordered the murder of all boys in Bethlehem aged two or under, in the hopes that he would thereby eliminate the rival to his throne.

Herod was perhaps a particularly evil character, as this savage incident well demonstrated, but in many ways Herod's savagery reflects the heart of all unredeemed men and women. Herod feared a rival to his throne and was willing to act immorally to dispose of this supposed threat, irrespective of whether the Child he targeted was the subject of ancient and divine prophecy. In ourselves, naturally, we also resist the idea of someone else taking ultimate control over our lives. Our natural minds are enmity against God, as we read in Romans chapter 8, verse 7. We, like Herod, are willing and indeed predisposed to reject and do away with the Lord Jesus to retain our supposed self-sovereignty. And it was for people such as us that the Lord Jesus left the boundless joys of Heaven to become a Man and shed His precious blood to save.

The Lord at first did Adam make
(Anonymous)

This immense kindness of God is well portrayed in a carol of unknown origin - 'The Lord at first did Adam make' - which includes the following verse:

Now mark the goodness of the Lord,
Which he for mankind bore;
His mercy soon he did extend,
Lost man for to restore;
And then, for to redeem our souls
From death and hellish thrall,
He said his own dear Son should be
The Saviour of us all:

From an outside, earthly perspective, the entrance of the Lord Jesus into this world was one of poverty. Contrary to the necessarily accelerated timelines of nativity plays, the wise men and their costly gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh likely arrived over a year after the Lord's birth. Herod the Great, by contrast, was likely quite well off, at least by the standards of his time. The Lord Jesus was, to human eyes, a Baby in a manger, while Herod had the power to command the destruction of all boys under two years old, seemingly on a whim. While we might rightly decry the barbarity of Herod's actions, compared to the newborn Messiah, it would appear that Herod was the one with power, autonomy, and control.

And yet, as our latest carol reminds us, the reality was completely the reverse. Herod, and all of us who have not trusted in the Lord Jesus for salvation, are in thrall – slavery would be the modern word – to death and hell. Our souls are destined to both, by virtue of our crimes against God – sins, as the Bible calls them – but a redemption from this awful fate is made possible by God's sending of 'His own dear Son', as our carol puts it. The apparently weak and helpless Baby in a manger would, as a Man upon a cross years later, make possible that redemption by taking the death and punishment we deserve so that we can go free if we accept His offer of salvation.

Christians, awake, salute the happy morn
(John Byrom, 1749)

But if the world at large did not recognise the greatness of the One born in Bethlehem's manger, God ensured that at least some were aware of the wondrous happenings of that first Christmas.

Then to the watchful shepherds it was told,
who heard th'angelic herald's voice: "Behold,
I bring good tidings of a Savior's birth
to you and all the nations of the earth;
this day hath God fulfilled His promised word;
this day is born a Saviour, Christ the Lord."

He spake, and straightway the celestial choir
in hymns of joy, unknown before, conspire;
the praises of redeeming love they sang,
and heav'n's whole orb with alleluias rang;
God's highest glory was their anthem still,
peace on the earth, and unto men good will.

In the night sky over Bethlehem angels appeared to declare the advent of the Lord Jesus and sing praise to God. God's glory shone down on the shepherds and God's messengers, the angels, appeared to declare the greatness of the One who had been born and to praise God.

What were the "glad tidings of great joy?" (Luke 2:10, Darby). The birth of a Saviour, 'Christ the Lord.' And the result of this birth? "Glory to God in the highest" (Luke 2:14, Darby). When we remember the Christmas story it is right that we consider and wonder at the magnitude of what the Lord Jesus did for us: the greatness of what He left, the squalor what He came to, the insulting reception He received, and above all the cruel death that He ultimately went to. But besides what He did for us we should also consider what He did for God, His Father. The Lord Jesus' birth, His entrance into this world; His perfect life; and His atoning death all brought glory to God. God's greatness: His love, His wisdom, His power, His grace; His mercy; His justice – all are manifested through the Lord Jesus' time on Earth, and all that began with the Christmas story.

The same magnitude of distance that the Lord traversed from Heaven to Earth that we have been considering speaks at least equally of His love to His Father as it does of His love for us, fallen sinners. That He would be born to die for sinners certainly speaks of the immensity of His love for us, but that He would do so to fulfil the Father's will speaks of His love for Him. How did the shepherds react to all of this? Our carol continues:

To Bethl'hem straight the happy shepherds ran,
to see the wonder God had wrought for man;
and found, with Joseph and the blessed maid,
her Son, the Saviour, in a manger laid;
amazed, the wondrous story they proclaim,
the earliest heralds of the Saviour's name.

A herald, in this context, is someone who pronounces a message. The shepherds, having seen the Lord Jesus in the manger, went and proclaimed what the carol rightly terms 'the wondrous story.' What an immense honour to be the first people to spread the news of the birth of the Saviour. In a way we who are the Lord's today follow in their footsteps when we share the good news of the Lord Jesus's coming to this world in grace. Unlike the shepherds we can also add the Easter story to the Christmas story, making it the more wondrous and providing the explanation for why the Lord was rightly termed 'the Saviour.'

Like the shepherds we too can first gaze on the Lord before going out to the world around us to proclaim His name. How can we gaze on the Lord? Through the pages of Scripture. As we read the Christmas story, the Easter story, the details of the Lord's life between the two, the revelation of His heart and mind in the epistles, we can figuratively gaze on Him as the Holy Spirit opens up the word to us. As we appreciate more and more the beauty of the Person of the Lord Jesus and the extent of His love for us, our hearts will respond in love to Him and a desire to make His name known for His sake.

Methinks I see an heavenly host
(William Billings, 1778)

With this thought we return to the carol we started with: 'Methinks I see an heavenly host.' In colourful language that had lodged in my memory, William Billings, the carol's author, takes aim at the innkeeper who refused to house Joseph and Mary:

The master of the inn refus'd,
A more commodious place;
Ungen'rous soul of savage mould,

And destitute of grace.

Ungenerous, savage, and entirely lacking in grace. This fairly well sums up the human race's reaction to the Lord Jesus' advent and is the near-perfect opposite of the Lord's own character: generous without limit, kind, and full of grace.

While the carol focuses squarely on the innkeeper, there is a challenge here for all of us today. The innkeeper made no room for the Lord when He came – the Lord Jesus still seeks room today, not in an inn in Bethlehem but in the hearts of men, women, and children. He stands at the door of your heart, ready to enter in, to bring salvation from the penalty of sin and unending joy, if we but accept our guilt and His offer of forgiveness, paid for with His blood.

Joy to the world

(Isaac Watts, 1719)

For those of us in the happy position of having accepted and welcomed the Lord into our hearts, how commodious, to use the carol's term, is the room we grant the Lord? How warm are our hearts towards Him? This is as much, and probably more, a challenge to me than to anyone listening, but the solution is the same in either case: turning to the Scriptures and thereby turning our minds to think on Him and His love for us. As Christmas nears ever closer and the giving and receiving of gifts draws nigh, let us focus our minds on the greatest gift ever given and so answer to the call of 'Joy to the world':

Let ev'ry heart prepare him room,

I hope you have a very blessed Christmas and a happy new year.

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today Christmas broadcast, talk number T1438.

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