

# The Hymns of Christmas

INTRO: I am surprised every year when I begin to prepare for Advent season. Maybe it is because I start preparing messages at the end of September/beginning of October. Which personally is nice for me, because it extends the reflection on the season for me, and allows me time to meditate on things when life is a little less busy.

Pastor's often lament trying to come up with sermons that are fresh around the Christmas season because everyone is so familiar with the core message. So after you have covered the people of Christmas, the prophecies of Advent, the qualities of Advent (love, hope, joy, etc) you tend to run out of Advent series rather quickly. One series that I am sure someone has done before I thought of this, but I have never heard done was a series on the Hymns of Christmas.

So that is what we are doing! The Hymns of Christmas. Some of them will be geared toward the Advent aspect of anticipation, and hope for the future Messiah. Others will be geared toward the Christmas story with key players of the angels, the shepherds, and of course, Jesus Christ.

TRAN: If you have never read any of the stories behind some of the songs we sing from the hymn book, much less the Hymns of Christmas, you are missing out. When you understand more of why the hymn writer wrote the song, your appreciation for a song takes on a whole new meaning - often more in line with the original meaning.

## I. Some examples of the stories behind Hymns

### A. Most people know of the story behind the hymn "It is Well With My Soul"

1. If you don't, you are only getting the fly-by now
2. Horatio Spofford wrote the song after losing all of his children at one time when their ship went down crossing from England to America
3. He travelled back to England to meet his wife and deal with business regarding their tragedy
4. At the approximate spot that the ship had gone down, the captain told Mr. Spofford of the location.
5. He penned the words, "When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say, It is well, It is well with my soul."
6. Many people connect with the song at a gut level because they have faced suffering or trials of some kind
7. Understanding its background brings the meaning to a whole new level

### B. A modern praise song was birthed out of a similar experience

1. After his wife had a miscarriage, Matt Redman wrote these words

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2. "I can see a light that is coming, for the heart that holds on, a glorious light beyond all compare, there will be an end to these troubles, but until that day comes, I will live to know You here on this earth - Oh no You never let go, through the calm and through the storm..."
  - C. These have become popular songs that the stories behind them inspire us, and help draw us deeper into Christ as we see faith displayed in magnificent ways
  - D. I dare say that not many of us know the stories behind familiar Christmas songs
    1. Did you know that "The Twelve Days of Christmas" is actually a spiritual song?
    2. It was written during a time in England when Catholicism was outlawed
      - a) Catholics were forced to meet underground
      - b) For them to teach the doctrines of the church, they concealed them into the song
      - c) Strangely, all of the doctrines they concealed in the song were doctrines the Church of England at the time would have agreed with
  - E. But there are a lot of great stories behind the songs we sing at Christmas time.
- II. So today, our first song that we will turn our attention to is often thought of as an Advent song, but it is actually far wider than that
- A. It could be sung at any point during the church year because of its original meaning
  - B. To understand this song, we need to understand the composer and his life a little better
  - C. The hymn was composed by Charles Wesley
    1. If you do not know who Charles Wesley is,
      - a) He is the writer of more than 7000 hymns - many of which are still sung today
      - b) And I encourage you, even urge you to pick up a biography on his life
      - c) There is a series of books out there of biographies of great Christian people in history - I promise those will help you understand your history differently, and strengthen your faith
    2. Charles and his brother John Wesley founded what we now know as the Methodist church
      - a) The Methodist church was so named because they were so methodical in how they approached Bible Study
    3. Charles almost died in a fire at church when he was only 15 months old - rescued by a maid
    4. Charles and John were given the best education available in England
      - a) Each went to college

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- b) Each went on to become ministers
- 5. Both Charles and John travelled to America to bring the gospel to the new colonies - Georgia
  - a) Having lived privileged and sheltered lives, the rigors of the new world proved too intense for both Charles and John
    - (1) They made few friends
    - (2) They earned little respect
  - b) Charles eventually travelled back to England, doubting his call to the clergy
- 6. Charles drifted a bit, seeking meaning from a variety of spiritual sources
  - a) The mystics and the Moravians
- 7. Then Charles experienced a life-changing event - he developed pleurisy
  - a) It is a disease brought on by pneumonia
  - b) It causes painful breathing
  - c) The disease confined Charles to bed for months, during which time he reconnected with God
- 8. It took another year before Wesley was completely well
  - a) When he was, he wrote one of his famous hymns
  - b) One in which he got so excited Wesley wrote 18 verses
  - c) The hymn - O For A Thousand Tongues to Sing
    - (1) It is the song that really launched Wesley into his career as a hymn writer
- 9. In the years that followed Wesley wrote multiple hymns
  - a) Christ the Lord is Risen Today
  - b) And Hark the Herald, Angels Sing, Wesley's most famous Christmas Hymn
- 10. His second most famous Christmas Hymn came about after Wesley read Haggai 2:7
  - a) So turn there - Haggai 2:7
  - b) "I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory," says the Lord Almighty."
- 11. After reading this verse, Charles Wesley began to reflect on what it must have been like for the world's people to be in wait for the coming of Jesus Christ
  - a) Wesley lived in a time of hunger, poverty, suffering, orphans
  - b) The distinction between the classes was large and obvious
  - c) He also lived in a time of slavery
  - d) He looked at the world, and saw that little had improved since Christ came

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12. The more he reflected on the world, the more he became excited by the thought of Jesus' second coming.

- a) Wesley began to desire the second coming of Jesus as much as he saw Haggai excited by the idea of Jesus first coming

D. Spurred on by the thoughts of what Jesus' birth meant to those that eagerly anticipated it, Charles Wesley began to write a his second most popular Christmas Hymn

1. It is a hymn that actually escapes the bounds of the seasonal time table
2. It can be used in worship throughout the year because of its far reaching lyrics
3. And it happens to be a favorite hymn of mine
4. Wesley penned these words in reflection of the birth of Christ
  - a) "Come, Thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free"

E. But Wesley's song was about far more than just a baby in a manger

1. Charles Wesley was writing about the adult Jesus that came to set all people free
2. Jesus was the solution to every man woman and child's problems as well as all nations

III. The meaning of the song

A. This song is often equated as a Christmas hymn, yet it really is a statement of who Christ is and what his mission was

B. The first two lines apply equally well to the first coming of Christ as to the second coming

1. "Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free"
  - a) Matthew 1:21 - this points out that Jesus was to save people from their sins
  - b) Luke 4:18-21 - This is Jesus in adult life stating that He was freeing the prisoners, and releasing the oppressed
2. Jesus' first coming began the process spoken of in these first two lines
3. But it was Jesus life, death and resurrection that give the power to what the lines say
4. In the final sense, it is the second coming of Christ in which all of this will be fulfilled
  - a) There will be no more oppression
  - b) There will be no more sin
  - c) While we have been set free from the penalty and power of sin, we still have to suffer under its ravages in this life
  - d) When Christ returns the second time, we will be set free not just from the penalty and power of sin, but from all of its effects for all of eternity

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5. No wonder Charles Wesley was so excited for the second coming
- C. The next two lines are telling as well
1. "From our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee."
  2. Again, we see the dual nature of Christ's first coming and the second coming
    - a) A release from our fears
      - (1) Probably a reference not only to the fears of this life
      - (2) But also the fears of acceptance by God
        - (a) In the OT they feared the acceptance of their offerings
        - (b) In our day we fear our acceptance by God - usually because we do not understand or appreciate the sufficiency of what Christ did for us
          - i) Sadly we think we need to earn our salvation or God's love
          - ii) We don't say that, but we act like it
      - (3) But the fear is released
      - (4) All fears are released
    - b) A release from our sins
      - (1) We have already spoken of how Jesus accomplished a release from our sins
        - (a) Sin no longer has the power over us
        - (b) Before we were at the mercy of sin
          - i) If it came calling, we had no weapons against it
          - ii) But because of Christ, we have been given an alternative to sin, and the power and freedom to walk away from sin
      - (2) And of course in Christ's second coming, we are release from sin in the complete and final way
    - c) Next the Wesley writes "let us find our rest in thee"
      - (1) Rest is not a concept that we talk about much from Scripture
        - (a) Yet it is a very important idea
      - (2) The idea of rest began in the OT when God promised rest to the Israelites from their wanderings in the wilderness
        - (a) This was to be a rest that they would receive by trusting in God for what was in their best interest, and the plan He has for them
          - i) No different than for us today
          - ii) We trust in God and the plan that He has for us
        - (b) Yet the Israelites struggled to trust God
          - i) Much like us today
      - (3) This idea of rest was picked up on and extended in the book of Hebrews

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- (a) God used the idea of rest that was promised to Israel as an illustration, in reality a type, to point to the ultimate rest we would have in heaven
- (b) The author of Hebrews pleads with the recipients that rest is still being offered, we need to be careful that no one falls short of the offer of rest
- (c) Here the idea of rest is being compared to the promised land
  - i) The promised land was Israel's rest from their suffering in the wilderness
  - ii) The promised land for us is heaven - the ultimate picture of entering God's rest
- (4) So back to our song
  - (a) We find rest from our wanderings in this life by trusting in God
  - (b) Ultimately, or upon Christ's second coming, we find rest in our forever home - heaven

## D. The next four lines are all straight from the OT

1. Charles Wesley uses a variety of ways from the OT of describing the hope that is found in Christ
2. But notice that none of these are exclusive to the first coming - they apply equally to both
  - a) Israel's strength and consolation - While seemingly OT, it applies equally to Christ's first coming or His second coming
  - b) Hope of all the earth thou art
  - c) Dear desired of every nation
  - d) Joy of every longing heart
  - (1) All of these apply just as much to us in awaiting the second coming as it did to those awaiting the Messiah's first coming

## E. The second verse begins with the Messiah's mission and position

1. His mission is to deliver His people
  - a) Again, there is a dual nature here not bound to the Christmas or Advent season alone
    - (1) Born to deliver us from sin - through his death on the cross
    - (2) But born to deliver us to heaven through the redemption He provides
    - (3) The statement is general enough to cover each
  - b) Born a child and yet a king
    - (1) Born a child is the only statement in the whole song that we have to say is exclusive to the Advent season
    - (2) Born a king is very much the second Advent
      - (a) Was Jesus king while here on earth

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- i) Yes and no
  - ii) He was the king, is the king, and always will be the king
  - iii) But no, He was not in the position of the king yet - that comes later - not while here the first time
- 2. Back to his mission
  - a) He was born to reign in us forever
    - (1) That really is what His coming was all about
    - (2) He came to rule and reign in our hearts
    - (3) God is not interested in a piece of property - earth
      - (a) He is not interested in being king of the land
      - (b) He is interested in being loved and worshipped by those that He created
  - b) With that in mind that we are to have Him reign in us forever, the petition comes to bring the kingdom now
    - (1) Basically, "If we are to be with you forever, and you, in your love, wisdom, and goodness are to rule over us, bring it!"
    - (2) Let's get this party started Lord!
- 3. The final four lines clue us in on how this is accomplished
  - a) It is by His Spirit
    - (1) By the Holy Spirit God rules in our hearts
    - (2) By the Holy Spirit we learn to follow Christ daily
    - (3) By the Holy Spirit we allow God to be the one and only person we love and adore
  - b) It is by His all-sufficient merit
    - (1) Understand that line because it is one of the most important in the song!
    - (2) It is not by our power, abilities, or goodness, but by His merit
      - (a) What He did is all sufficient
      - (b) It was enough
        - i) While we could never give enough
        - ii) Do enough or be enough
      - (c) What He did was enough - it was sufficient
  - c) Sufficient for what?
    - (1) To raise us to God's glorious throne
    - (2) In other words, take us to heaven to be with Him
  - d) Simply put we do not have enough in us to get us to heaven
    - (1) Jesus made it real simple to understand that He is the ONLY way to heaven
    - (2) What He did is what made it possible for us to go to heaven to be with Him

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(3) If you are here today, and you have not trusted in that all-sufficient gift of God's grace for your salvation from your sins, you need to deal with these concepts

(a) You cannot be blasé about what Christ did

(b) You had no hope of going to heaven without Him

(c) He stepped in and took your punishment on Himself and gave you His righteousness

(d) All you have to do is trust Him that it is true

i) And trust means to act in accordance as if something is true

ii) So you say I believe that God did this for me, so how do I live?

(1) You live like God says you should

(2) You look to the Bible to understand what God is asking of you

## IV. The end of the story

A. 44 years after "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus" was published, Charles Wesley, 88, was on his deathbed

1. He was too weak to write, so he spoke one final verse

2. "In age and feebleness extreme, who shall a helpless worm redeem?

Jesus, my only hope Thou art. Strength of my failing flesh and heart, O could I catch a smile from Thee, and drop into eternity."

B. Shortly after, Charles Wesley had the privilege of living out the last line of his Christmas Hymn, "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus"

1. He was raised to God's glorious throne

2. Not on his merits, but on the merits of Christ Himself

C. Charles Wesley left us with a hymn that:

1. It is theologically deep, and perfectly captures the desire for the coming of Christ in both His first advent and His second coming

2. It is called a Christmas hymn, but really it is one that can be sung all year long by those that long for Christ's to come back and set up His final kingdom here on earth