

“Christmas carols aren't just picturesque; they contain deep Christian teaching. In this little book, Jonathan Landry Cruse organizes twenty-five carol excerpts into an Advent calendar of reflections, each ornamented with Scripture and prayer. Let this be your guide through the month of December, as you treasure up the mystery of the incarnation and ponder it in your heart.”

Josh Bauder, composer

“The Apostle Paul encourages us to sing in the Spirit with understanding. In this short book, Jonathan helps us to do just that, as he explains the meaning behind the words of our favorite (and now too familiar) Advent hymns and Christmas carols. This book will help you tune your heart (and mind) to the melody (and mystery) of the gospel, expressed so beautifully in the songs we sing each Advent and Christmas season.”

**Jonny Gibson, associate professor of Old Testament,
Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia**

“Each year, the carols of Christmas sound in our ears, even as their words fill our mouths. Yet, the great aim of these carols is left undone if that is where they remain; their message is meant to fill our hearts. Jonathan Cruse’s Christmas devotional, *Sing in Exultation!*, promotes this great end with brief and encouraging explanations, searching questions, and poignant prayers. Be prepared to have your understanding of famous Christmas carols expanded and your worship of Whom they sing enflamed.”

**Jason Helopoulos, pastor, University Reformed Church,
Michigan and author, *The Promise and A Neglected Grace***

“A rare treat: a devotional that is both rich in content and manageable for daily use! Christmas is a time for singing. This little work will help individuals and families see that the good news woven into our favorite carols is both biblical and heart-warming. A wonderful way to sing your way through Advent.”

Jonty Rhodes, minister, Christ Church Central, Leeds, UK



Sing in

A Christmas Devotional

Exultation!

Exploring Our Favorite Carols

JONATHAN LANDRY CRUSE

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Introduction

One of the (many) wonderful things about Christmastime is that it gets us to do something we can be pretty reticent to do any other time of the year: sing together! The holidays can pry open our otherwise shy vocal cords and get us *fa-la-la-la-la-ing* with the best of them. Singing Christmas carols, for many, is one of the most beloved aspects of the season. As indispensable as hall-decking, light-stringing, or gift-giving, it wouldn't be Christmas without carol-singing.

Admittedly, there are a host of ditties about bullied reindeer, winter wonderlands, and rocking around Christmas trees, but most of the well-known songs of the season are actually packed with scriptural language and rich theology. This is a blessing. What other time of year do we find the characters in our favorite TV shows singing, "Glory to the newborn King!" or hear, "With the angels let us sing Alleluias" blaring out of the radio? When else might a non-Christian neighbor saunter into a nearby church and declare, "Joy to the world the Lord is come!"?

Realistically, many people at Christmas do not believe the words they are singing. Others believe the words, but do not fully understand them. Even those of us who have been believers for a while can get caught up in the excitement and sentimentality of the season and not pay close attention to the words we are singing. What does "rest ye merry" mean, after all? Or, "Word of the Father, late in flesh appearing"? In one carol, Charles Wesley says that Jesus is "risen with healing in His

wings”—where did he get that language from, and what in the world does it mean?

The Apostle Paul said that we must “sing with our minds” (1 Cor. 14:15). Words that are sung with no understanding, even if sung in God’s direction, fall flat before the Lord. This little book aims to unpack some of the best lines from the best carols, not only so we might better appreciate the meaning of the hymn, but the meaning of Christmas, too.

The carols are arranged in the book so that we start with the first prediction of Christ’s coming and end with the hope of His second coming. So as you work through these twenty-five reflections you will be covering the Christmas story as told throughout all of Scripture. Our carols cover it all: Old Testament prophecies (“Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence”), angelic announcements (“Angels We Have Heard on High”), first visits to the Christ-child (“As with Gladness Men of Old”), and even powerful applications of how we should respond to the incarnation (“In the Bleak Mid-winter”).

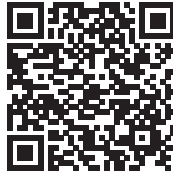
So, how should you use this little book? There are a number of ways. If you want to enjoy an overview of the importance of Christmas provided by some of our best carols, simply read it from beginning to end. This will take you through the biblical story of the promise and fulfillment of Christ’s coming in a brief, albeit rich, way. If you are new to Christianity, you may be surprised at how much of the Christmas story you already know simply from the lyrics you have heard and sung over the years!

The book is also structured to be a helpful daily devotional in the season of advent leading up to Christmas. Each day covers a single verse from a carol. I would highly recommend singing this, especially if you are using the devotional with your family, though you could read it, too. Perhaps listening to a version online would be helpful if you’re unfamiliar with the tune—or your family is reluctant to sing (it’s okay—join in. No one will make fun of you!). We have put together a

Spotify playlist to make searching for the carols easier. You can access this by scanning the QR code below.

A short reflection follows each carol, exploring its biblical truth and significance, while always providing a point or two of application. If you want to meditate on the topics further, each chapter has suggested further reading and some questions to prompt more reflection or discussion. Finally, a prayer is provided for you. Feel free to let those words serve as your own prayer to God, or you may be moved to use your own words. In either case, the important thing is that these reflections, and the great carols they are based on, serve as a means of treasuring up God's amazing promises and purposes in our hearts—just like Mary (Lk. 2:51).

Scan here for a Spotify playlist to use alongside these devotions.





DECEMBER 1:

“Far As the Curse Is Found”

*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!” Isaac Watts

Christmas begins with a curse. While sounding counterintuitive to a season that is supposed to be merry and bright, it’s nevertheless true. After all, why did Jesus Christ come to earth in the first place? He came to “seek and to save the lost” (Lk. 19:10). We could say He was on a rescue mission—He came to rescue sinners under the cruel curse of sin and death.

“Joy to the World!” takes us back to the effects of Adam and Eve’s first sin, which plunged both them and all of humanity into this curse. God pronounces in Genesis 3 that because Adam and Eve disobeyed their Maker, life would not be easy for them any longer. “Cursed is the ground because of you,” He solemnly tells Adam. “In pain you shall

eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field” (vv. 17–18). The image is no longer of a luscious and enjoyable garden, but of frustrating and painful weeds and brambles.

Have you ever experienced the frustration of seemingly pointless work? Once, a church member and I carved out a whole day to sand down the front doors of the church and give them a fresh coat of red paint. We started early and then worked in the hot July sun until almost dinner, putting on two coats. It wasn’t until we finally stepped away from the doors and looked back from the road that we noticed something we couldn’t see up close: the paint hadn’t dried the scarlet red we had intended. It was bright pink! We knew in an instant we would have to do the work all over again. My friend turned to me and said, shaking his head, “Thorns and thistles, thorns and thistles.”

A bad paint job is the least of our problems. We feel the effects of sin every day: anger, violence, betrayal, injustice. We hear of it on the news, we experience it in our homes, we sense it even in our own hearts. We know that the world—and we along with it—doesn’t work the way it’s meant to. We no longer live in the blessed Garden of Eden. We live now where “sins and sorrows grow”—trapped in the thorny prison of the fallen world.

But then a rescue! That is what is so glorious about Christmas, but of course the good news isn’t good if we don’t first recognize the bad news. We live in a world of sin and sorrow, at every single turn, *but* Jesus has come to change all of that, and to “make His blessings flow” wherever “the curse is found.”

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Pray: *Father, I thank You that You don’t leave us in our sin, though we deserve it. I praise You for Your rescuing grace, which sent Jesus to transform the curse of sin into the blessing of salvation. In His name I pray. Amen.*



DECEMBER 2:

“Ransom Captive Israel”

*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 you, O Israel.*

–“O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” traditional,
translation by J. M. Neale

Both the words and melody of this carol do a remarkable job portraying the dark distress felt by the nation of Israel in their time of “lonely exile.” Despite many warnings, the people had rejected God and as a result He allowed their enemies to conquer them. Many had been taken into a foreign land but ached to return. This carol’s minor key and long, plaintive notes express how “captive Israel” must have felt as they were far from home, and far from the covenant blessings of God.

But that was then and this is now. We might wonder whether it's even an appropriate song for us to sing as New Covenant believers. Is it appropriate to identify as "Israel"? It is. In fact, the Apostle Paul calls the church "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16). The church is now the people of God—the true Israel. And while most Western Christians haven't experienced national upheaval like the ancient Israelites, we do know of the captivating power of sin. Satan is a far worse prison warden than any Egyptian pharaoh or Babylonian or Assyrian tyrant. And though Christ has defeated the *power* of sin over us, we have yet to be rescued from the *presence* of sin. This carol helps remind us that we should "mourn" the fact that we are still far from our heavenly home.

Do you mourn over your sin? Do you grieve over the sins of others, and the suffering that it all causes? So often we can become calloused to the reality of sin in and around us. We become far too familiar with this world and we get comfortable here, rather than longing for our true home and for pure hearts. Christians who do not grieve sin and its effects and who are too settled in this world have some major reprioritizing to do

While this carol reminds us to mourn, it also calls us to rejoice. Why? Because "Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel." It is Emmanuel—"God with us"—and Emmanuel alone who can answer our great need. When He comes to be with us, all sin and sorrow will flee away. This was Israel's hope under the Old Covenant, and it is also the church's hope under the New Covenant as we await Christ's second coming. But we have *even more* reason to sing with joyful confidence than they, because we live this side of the first appearance of the Son of God. "He appeared in order to take away sins" (1 Jn. 3:5). Truly, we could sing, "Emmanuel *has* come to you"! And since He has come once, we can be confident He will come again.

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Pray: *Lord, forgive me for the times I feel at home in this world and forget that actually I am destined for something much greater and better. Speed the return of Christ, so that I might live with Him in glory forevermore. Amen.*

Reflect:

Read Exodus 2:23–25.

- How does Israel’s historic captivity help us to understand humanity’s plight?
- Do you cry out like Israel for rescue, or do you find yourself feeling at home in this world? What steps can you take to love the world less and long for heaven more?



DECEMBER 3:

“Of Jesse’s Lineage Coming”

*Lo, how a rose e’er blooming
From tender stem hath sprung,
Of Jesse’s lineage coming,
As men of old have sung.
It came, a flow’ret bright,
Amid the cold of winter, when half-spent was the night.*

–“**Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming,**” traditional,
translation by Theodore Baker

The imagery in this carol is unquestionably rich and vivid, but it’s also somewhat confusing. Are we singing about a flower, after all? No—we are singing about Jesus! Standing behind the poetry is a biblical metaphor found in numerous places throughout the Old Testament. One such place would be Isaiah 11:

“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest

upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.” (Is. 11:1–3. See also Jer. 23:5, 33:15; Zech. 3:8, 6:12)

Here, the prophet Isaiah (one of the singing “men of old” in the carol) describes the coming Messiah as a blossoming branch coming from a “stump.” He’s talking about a family tree. The people of God had put their hopes in the covenant promises God made with King David, that the throne of David’s kingdom would stand forever (2 Sam. 7:13). And yet, years, decades, and generations went by and no such throne was set up. Far from it, the line of David had nearly been lost entirely! It was as though someone took an axe to the family tree and whacked away—leaving not a grand and growing oak, but a lifeless “stump.”

But from that seemingly useless and dead stump, the promise will still spring up. Jesus of Nazareth, “the son of David” (Mt. 1:1), was the proof that God was not yet done with David’s line. His promises had not failed, though the people feared they had. It seemed to them that all hope was lost. The carol speaks of the dead of winter, the middle of the night—as though time had run out and darkness had prevailed. But that’s precisely when this flower bloomed in Bethlehem! God often surprises us the most when we expect it the least. Do you feel like time has run out for God to act for you, and that all hope is lost? Take heart: even when the night seems half spent, God is still at work.

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Pray: *O God, how great are Your promises to us! I thank You that not one word You have spoken has ever failed. Give me the faith to trust that Your good purposes will always be worked out, even when I can’t imagine how. In Jesus’s name I pray. Amen.*



DECEMBER 4:

“O Little Town of Bethlehem”

*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.*

—“O Little Town of Bethlehem,” Phillips Brooks

The first line of this carol is drawn from the prophet Micah:

*“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old,
from ancient days.” (Mich. 5:2)*

God has big plans for this “little town”: it will be the birthplace of Israel’s future ruler. And not just any ruler, either. This is none other than the

Messiah. Did you notice how Micah asserts that the Messiah is eternal? At the same time as looking forward to Jesus’s birth in Bethlehem, this Old Testament prophet describes the Messiah as “from of old, from ancient days.” This ancient one will be born in Bethlehem! He is both the once and future King of Israel.

But why would God choose Bethlehem, an unimportant one-horse town, for such an incredible moment? In one sense, because He can. We might expect lights, cameras, and a red carpet to be rolled out when the Messiah comes. But God doesn’t operate according to human wisdom, and He isn’t bound by our expectations. The incarnation is one of the clearest examples of how God turns our assumptions inside out:

“God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.” (1 Cor. 1:27–29)

This carol invites us to look upon Bethlehem and marvel at the upside-down wisdom of God. It imagines the birth of Christ taking place on any old Wednesday or Thursday night; the town lying quiet and still, the houses dark as most everyone is in bed. But with the eye of faith, we can see something far more marvelous: the object of all our hopes and the answer to all our fears has come in the baby boy born that night. If God could bring the Savior out of a pitiful place like this, then we have every reason to expect Him to use other seemingly mundane or unimpressive things, too. He can even have a use for people like you and me.

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Pray: *Lord, You are wiser than our wisdom, but sometimes it is hard to see that or accept that. If Jesus came from a place*

