

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”

Who is the Christ Who Comes at Christmas?

**A Message Offered by
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December 20, 2009

*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 thee, O Israel.

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” is one of my favorite hymns. I remember singing it as a child in advent services in the Lutheran Church I grew up in. After a few verses the organ would drop out and we’d sing it *acapella*: just our voices going straight up to God’s ears. It sounded dark and powerful and mysterious, which was what holy things sounded like to me. I didn’t know what the song meant, but I knew it expressed a longing in me that no bright Christmas carol touched. Perhaps it speaks for you, too.

Christians have been singing it for about a thousand years, first in Latin, and now in English, and, I’m sure, many other languages. The words come from an ancient prayer, called the “*O Antiphons*.” Each part of this prayer calls God by a different name, Emmanuel, Wisdom, Lord of Might, and so on. Each of these names has its source in an Old Testament scripture passage. The longing we hear in the song echoes the longing of the ancient Hebrews for the coming of the promised Messiah, or Christ, of God. When we sing “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” today we are giving voice once again to that longing and adding our own yearnings to it.

This song is a good example of how understanding the Old Testament helps us appreciate the New Testament. We can’t fully appreciate the gift of the Messiah if we don’t know how badly he was desired and what his coming

represented to the people. So let's take a look at the Messiah whom the Jewish people were waiting for and the Christ who comes at Christmas.

The oldest versions of the hymn and the prayer begin with the verse "O Come, O Wisdom from on high." "Wisdom" is one of the names used in the Old Testament for God, more specifically, the mind of God. In Proverbs we read, "Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice." [Proverbs 1:20]. Wisdom in the Bible isn't simply *knowledge* and it's certainly not, *data*; it's practical guidance for right living. Wisdom is what—or who—tells us how to live the way we were meant to live in the world that God made for us. Wisdom is God's voice. Wisdom spoke the world into being. Wisdom spoke through the prophets. When Jewish people prayed for wisdom they prayed to have the mind of God and longed to hear His voice speaking to them.

It's no wonder that the first Christians saw Jesus as the answer to these prayers. They called him, "the Word of God." They saw him as the Wisdom of God in human form. He taught in the temple and preached on the Mountain, but even more than that, he modeled "wise" living for us. He showed us how to live the way we were created to live.

We still need Wisdom, don't we? From time to time all of us face decisions with no simple or clear answers, not even from the Bible. Should I end this relationship? Should I finally start that business? How tough should I be with my kids? So we pray with the song, "O Come, O Wisdom, from on high," show us what we are to do.

*O come, O Wisdom, from on high,
Who orders all things mightily;
To us the path of knowledge show,
and teach us in her ways to go.*

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.
(Proverbs 1:20)*

One of the things the Jewish people understood—and still understand, I think—far better than we do—is the height, majesty, awesomeness, and transcendence of God: that's what the name, "Lord of Might" is all about in the next verse. There are dozens of stories in the Old Testament about people quaking in fear at the sound of God's voice. You didn't just talk to God face to face like two equals. When Moses dared to ask God what His name was, God spoke out of the burning bush and said, "I Am Who I Am." [Exodus 3:14] Come again? What kind of name is that? Even God's name is beyond our

understanding. To this day conservative Jews refuse to speak the name of God. They'll substitute "Adonai," or "Lord of Might," or some other name for fear of stirring up God's wrath by taking his name in vain.

Jesus showed his might in a different way, didn't he? It wasn't so much by appearing in clouds as by calming storms. It wasn't by striking down armies, but by raising people up and healing them. It's not his *wrath*, it's his *love* that makes us respond with humility.

Some of us need a God like that this Christmas, a God that's bigger than us, bigger than our pain, our fear, our sin, even bigger than our understanding. We need a God who is so *not us* that he can save us from being *so us*. Jesus is the "Mighty God," we're looking for today. [Isaiah 9:6] That's who we pray for when we sing, "O Come, O Lord of Might."

*O come, O come, great Lord of Might,
Who to Thy tribes on Sinai's height
In ancient times once gave the law
In cloud and majesty and awe.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.
(Isaiah 9:6 Exodus 3:14)*

The next name in the hymn, "Root of Jesse," comes from a few verses in the book of Isaiah. The people of Israel were struggling; they were praying for a leader like King David to save them. Jesse was King David's father. Isaiah told his people, Don't give up; Jesse's line isn't dead: Isaiah 11:1 "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." Hundreds of years later, a king was born, into the house and lineage of David. This great, great, great... child of Jesse was named, of course, was Jesus.

To fully understand the symbolism here we need to know something about olive trees. They can live to be hundreds, even *thousands* of years, old. You can prune them, hack them, mistreat them, even cut them down. But so long as there's even a little root left, new shoots grow. Olive trees are a symbol of miraculous resilience and hope.

Maybe you're feeling like you've been cut down, put down, purned, burned, and left for dead. Maybe you're looking for signs of life and a reason to go on. Our faith tells us not to give up. Hope hasn't died. As Jesus brought life out of death long ago, he will do it again in you and me.

*O come, Thou Root of Jesse's tree,
 An ensign of Thy people be;
 Before Thee rulers silent fall;
 All peoples on Thy mercy call.
 Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.
 (Isaiah 11:1)*

Any idea what the name “Key of David” means? In Old Testament times the king’s key represented his power and authority. Whoever held the Key of David would possess all the governmental power that David, the absolute ruler, had, including the power to release prisoners. Isaiah told his people that the Messiah would have this key, this power [Isaiah 22:22]: Says the Lord,

*I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall
 open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open.*

When Jesus came he didn’t *look* like David or a king like anyone expected. The Hebrew people were looking for a king, like David, who would be strong enough to set them free from the Romans. Jesus was interested in a different kind of freedom, spiritual freedom. He came “to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free.” [Luke 4:18; Jesus is quoting Isaiah 61:1]

We’re all captive in some way, aren’t we? Maybe it’s a disease, an attitude, old wounds, or a bad habit that’s got us in shackles. When we sing about the Key of David we’re praying that Jesus would come again and release us from *our* several bondages.

*O come, Thou Key of David, come,
 And open wide our heavenly home;
 Make safe the way that leads on high,
 And close the path to misery.
 Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.
 (Isaiah 22:22)*

One of my favorite names for Jesus is the next one. In the Bible it’s translated sometimes as Dayspring, Radiant Dawn, or Bright Morning Star. It was said that the Messiah would come from the East, where the sun rises, and so the coming of dawn and the coming of the messiah were connected from ancient times. Hear these words from Malachi:

But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.

Malachi 4:2 NRSV

[Bonus question: what Christmas carol also refers to this passage? Hark the Herald Angels Sing, see verse 3.]

In the book of Revelation Jesus makes clear that *he* is the sun of righteousness: saying, "I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." (Revelation 22:16).

Have you ever been up all night waiting for a child to come home? Sitting with a friend who is dying? Anxious about something you had done or were about to do? If so, you know something about the hope you feel at the first signs of light, that a new day is breaking, that the worst is over. When we pray for the Dayspring to come we're praying that Jesus, the first light of God's dawning, would fill our darkness and scatter the shadows that trouble us so.

*O come, Thou Day-spring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.
(Malachi 4:2; Revelation 22:16)*

The prophet Haggai is the one who gave us the name, "Desire of Nations" [Haggai 2:7]. He was foretelling the rise of a ruler who would not just be recognized by the Jews, but by *all* peoples. He would be "The King of Kings," in a very real sense because he would fulfill the hopes of *all* humans, not just the Jewish people. He would unite all people and peace would reign forever.

I can't think of a better time for the "Desire of Nations" to come than now. As our world has gotten smaller, it seems to have gotten more divided—between Muslims and Christians and rich and poor. Our own nation is becoming seriously divided on fundamental values. Even Christian communities are on the verge of schism over a variety of issues.

But Christians should know, perhaps better than others, that none of us has an exclusive claim to God's favor. What unites Christians isn't how right

or righteous we are—it's our fallenness and redemption in Christ that make us brothers and sisters. The good news is that God's grace crosses all lines of nation, race, color, orientation, and religion. The world is longing to hear—and see—a God whose heart is big enough for everyone. That's what it means to pray for the coming of the "Desire of Nations."

*O come, Desire of Nations, bind
In one the hearts of all mankind;
Bid Thou our sad divisions cease,
And be Thyself our King of Peace.*

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

The first verse of the hymn is actually the last verse of the ancient prayer. Isaiah was the prophet who told us that the Messiah would be called Emmanuel, [Isaiah 7:14] which means "God with us." [Matthew 1:23]. Jesus lived among us for a brief time long ago. The book of Revelation tells us that at the second coming he will make his permanent home with us. Says the prophet John:

I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

Revelation 21:3-4

As much as we want a God who is so much bigger than us, a transcendent God whose name we don't even dare to speak, we also need a God who is with us as one of us. We want a God who understands our pain, a God who has been hurt, a God who has been sorely tempted himself. When we pray for the coming of "God with us" we're praying for a savior who is so much one of us that he can take *our* place on the cross.

Jesus is "God *with us*, not as in *against* other people, but as in not *against us*. When we celebrate the coming of Emmanuel at Christmas and pray for his coming again, we're reminding ourselves that God is not mad at us, God is not trying to "get" us, God would do anything for us and did, by becoming one of us.

The ancient Hebrews were looking for wisdom, power, freedom, peace, grace, and acceptance when they prayed for the Christ to come. We're looking for the same things when we pray for Christ, *Emmanuel*, to come again. Amen.

Amen.

The "O Antiphons"

Leader: O Wisdom, coming forth from the mouth of the Most High, pervading and permeating all creation, you order all things with strength and gentleness: come now and teach us the way to salvation.

People: Come, Lord Jesus.

Leader: O Adonai, Ruler of the house of Israel, you appeared in the burning bush to Moses and gave him the law on Sinai: come with outstretched arm to save us.

People: Come, Lord Jesus.

Leader: O Root of Jesse, rising as a sign for all the peoples, before you earthly rulers will keep silent, and nations give you honor: come quickly to deliver us.

People: Come, Lord Jesus.

Leader: O Key of David, Scepter over the house of Israel, you open and no one can close, you close and no one can open: come to set free the prisoners who live in darkness and the shadow of death.

People: Come, Lord Jesus.

Leader: O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, Sun of justice: come, shine on those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death.

People: Come, Lord Jesus.

Leader: O Ruler of the nations, Monarch for whom the people long, you are the Cornerstone uniting all humanity: come, save us all, whom you formed out of clay.

People: Come, Lord Jesus.

Leader: O Immanuel, our Sovereign and Lawgiver, desire of the nations and Savior of all: come and save us, O Lord our God.

People: Come, Lord Jesus.

Leader: God of grace, ever faithful to your promises, the earth rejoices in the hope of our Savior's coming and looks forward with longing to his return at the end of time. Prepare our hearts to receive him when he comes, for he is Lord forever and ever.

People: Amen.

To learn more about the Biblical symbolism of this hymn, read *O Come Emmanuel: A Study of the Advent Antiphons*, by William J. Marshall (1994, Morehouse).

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With selected Biblical references

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(Haggai 2:7)*

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