

Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: The Master Musician's Melodies

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Christmas in the Psalms

Psalms and Songs

- The Psalter served as Israel's hymn book. Christ Himself appealed to this collection of songs when He revealed Himself to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:44. If our Savior cited the Psalms, we ought to do so as well.
- Because various psalms cover the gamut of human experience, we find within their lines many references with which Christ might associate Himself during the days of His incarnation. Hebrews 2:5–8, for example, indicates that Christ was the ultimate fulfillment of Psalm 8:4–6.
- However, the Psalms speak of more than the humanity of the Messiah. Perhaps nowhere else in Scripture do we find such an exalted view of God. By reading the Psalter we can understand better the extent of Christ's humility, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil 2:6–8)
- As we sing Christmas carols, let's remember that singing played a leading role in the composition of the Psalms.
 - ✓ Psalm 33:1, 3
 - ✓ Psalm 47:6
 - ✓ Psalm 71:23

1 Who is He in yonder stall,
At whose feet the shepherds fall?
Who is he in deep distress,
Fasting in the wilderness?
'Tis the Lord! O wondrous story!

‘Tis the Lord! the King of glory!
At His feet we humbly fall,
Crown Him! Crown Him, Lord of all!

5 Who is He that from the grave
Comes to heal and help and save?
Who is he that from His throne
Rules through all the world alone?
‘Tis the Lord! O wondrous story!
‘Tis the Lord! the King of glory!
At His feet we humbly fall,
Crown Him! Crown Him, Lord of all!

— Words and music: Benjamin R. Hanby (1866)

Messiah as an Infant

- The only potentially direct reference to the birth or infancy of the Messiah in the Psalter is at Psalm 22:9–10 —
 - 9 Yet You are He who brought me forth from the womb;
You made me trust *when* upon my mother's breasts.
 - 10 Upon You I was cast from birth;
You have been my God from my mother's womb.
- Christ quoted this psalm on the cross (Ps 22:1, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?”). Though Psalm 22 has the reputation of describing the crucifixion of the Messiah, some of its most beautiful and instructive lines are in verses 26 and 27:
 - 26 Those who seek Him will praise the LORD.
Let your heart live forever!
 - 27 All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD,
And all the families of the nations will worship before You.



Messiah as a Child

- At Psalm 69:8 (cp. 69:9 and John 2:17) there might be a reference to Messiah’s mother —

I have become estranged from my brothers
And an alien to my mother’s sons.
- Although references to the incarnation itself are few and far between, a closer study of the Psalms reveals a number of texts that we might associate with the Messiah’s first advent.
- Christmas celebrates the Messiah’s coming as a child — what an amazing miracle. The Son of God came in human flesh, born to a human mother. In Psalm 131:2 David wrote of trusting God like a child finding comfort resting against his mother:

Surely I have composed and quieted my soul;
Like a weaned child *rests* against his mother,
My soul is like a weaned child within me.

Who can read those words and not wonder what Mary thought as she held the baby Jesus? There was, indeed, a special bond between these two individuals.

1 What Child is this, who, laid to rest,
On Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,
While shepherds watch are keeping?

*This, this is Christ the King,
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing:
This, this is Christ the King,
The Babe, the Son of Mary.*

2 Why lies He in such mean estate
Where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christian, fear; for sinners here
The silent Word is pleading.



3 So bring Him incense, gold and myrrh,
Come, peasant, king, to own Him;
The King of kings salvation brings,
Let loving hearts enthrone Him.

— Words: William C. Dix (1865)
Music: Traditional 16th century English melody

Messiah as Immanuel

- Christ is the God-man. His incarnation united both His eternal deity and His temporal humanity. He is more than the Son of Man, He is the Son of God. The prophet spoke to both aspects of His Person when he wrote, “For a **child will be born** to us [His humanity], a **son will be given** to us [His deity]” (Isa 9:6).
- The Messianic title that incites the greatest wonder over the incarnation is **Immanuel**, “God with us” (Matt 1:23; Isa 7:14). How amazing is this? The eternal God clothed Himself in human flesh and walked in our midst.
- Psalms do not mention this title directly. However, the Psalter does teach that God is with His people. For example, in the refrain of Psalm 46 (vv. 7, 11) the sons of Korah declare:

The LORD of hosts is with us;
The God of Jacob is our stronghold. Selah.

1 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!*

4 O come, Desire of nations, bind
All peoples in one heart and mind;
Bid envy, strife and quarrels cease,
Fill all the world with heaven's peace.

— Words: Unknown 12th century author
Translated from Latin by John M. Neale (1851)
Music: 15th century French processional
Arranged by Thomas Helmore (1856)

Messiah as King

- Echoing Genesis 49:10, Psalm 60:7 confirms the centrality of the tribe of Judah in God's plan for a ruler over Israel:
Gilead is Mine, and Manasseh is Mine;
Ephraim also is the helmet of My head:
Judah is My scepter.
- Bursting forth in full Messianic splendor, several psalms declare the royal identity of the Messiah:
 - ✓ Psalm 2

- ✓ Psalm 24
- ✓ Psalm 45
- ✓ Psalm 72
- ✓ Psalm 110
- Christmas carols remind us of this theme again and again. The Child who came to us is of royal blood. He will reign as King of kings and Lord of lords. One day He will establish His kingdom upon this earth. Thus the first advent looks to the second advent for the completion of the Messianic program.

1 Thou didst leave Thy throne and Thy kingly crown
When Thou camest to earth for me;
But in Bethlehem's home was there found no room
For Thy holy nativity.
O come to my heart, Lord Jesus—
There is room in my heart for Thee!



2 Heaven's arches rang when the angels sang,
Proclaiming Thy royal degree;
But of lowly birth didst Thou come to earth,
And in great humility.
O come to my heart, Lord Jesus—
There is room in my heart for Thee!

5 When the heav'ns shall ring and the angels sing
At Thy coming to victory,
Let Thy voice call me home, saying, "Yet there is room—
There is room at My side for thee."
My heart shall rejoice, Lord Jesus,
When Thou comest and callest for me!

— Words: Emily E. S. Elliott (1864)
Music: Timothy R. Matthews (1876)

Messiah as Savior

- Jesus came to save His people from their sins (Matt 1:21). When the Psalter speaks of salvation it usually refers to a temporal and physical deliverance from danger, oppression, enemies, calamity, or disease. However, there are also references to spiritual salvation or forgiveness of sins.
- In Psalm 51:12 David speaks of salvation relating to his confession of sin and his cleansing by God:
Restore to me the joy of Your salvation
And sustain me with a willing spirit.
Again, in verse 14, he says:
Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation;
Then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness.
- Psalm 132:16 offers an intriguing statement that goes beyond physical deliverance:
Her priests also I will clothe with salvation,
And her godly ones will sing aloud for joy.

- Note how the psalmists associate spiritual salvation with joy. There is no greater joy (cp. 1 Pet 1:3–12).

1 Joy to the world! the Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And heav'n and nature sing,
And heav'n and nature sing,
And heav'n, and heav'n and nature sing.

2 Joy to the earth! the Savior reigns;
Let men their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

— Words: Isaac Watts (1719)

Music: Arranged by Lowell Mason (1836)
from elements of Handel's *Messiah* (1741)

Salvation and the Savior are the message of Christmas. May you and your families know from personal experience the salvation from sins that Christ came to provide. Prayerfully consider the words of Psalm 86:5 —

For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive,
And abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon You.

Consider also the message of Psalm 130:

⁴ But there is forgiveness with You,
That You may be feared.
⁷ O Israel, hope in the LORD;
For with the LORD there is lovingkindness,
And with Him is abundant redemption.
⁸ And He will redeem Israel
From all his iniquities.



Have a Christ-filled and Christ-honoring Christmas.