



NAC-USA  
DEVELOPMENT  
INSTITUTE

Joy to the  
World

**MIDWEEK  
SCRIPT**

O Come All  
Ye Faithful

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**2018**

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December

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## Session 1 – Joy to the World

Welcome to the first session of the festive month of December! This month, we'll spend some time looking at the history and Scripture behind two beloved Christmas hymns. In this session, we'll focus on the song, "Joy to the World," one of the most published Christmas hymns in North America.

The lyrics, inspired by Psalm 98 and written by Isaac Watts, were first published in 1719. As a theologian and hymn-writer, Watts had a desire to write lyrics for the Psalms in such a way that they pointed believers to Christ. This is clearly evident in the lyrics for "Joy to the World."

However, this Christmas hymn, as we know and sing it today, did not exist until 1839, when it was first published as a hymn arranged by Lowell Mason. Mason, who heavily influenced church music in America in the 1800s, used fragments of melodies from George Handel's oratorio, "Messiah," to create the melody for a song he called "Antioch." This tune is the one most commonly paired with the lyrics of "Joy to the World." So, the song that we sing today was the work of three people that took over 100 years to come into being.

Let's take a look now at Psalm 98 to see how it influenced the lyrics for "Joy to the World."

In verse 4, we read, *Shout joyfully to the Lord, all the earth; break forth in song, rejoice, and sing praises.* This verse sets up the entire mood of the hymn. We have joy because of the coming of our King. He reigns on earth and rules it with truth and with grace. Therefore, we shout joyfully to Him with songs of praise.

In verses 7 through 9, we read, *Let the sea roar, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell in it; let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills be joyful together before the Lord, for He is coming to judge the earth.* All of God's creation is called to make joyful noises to the Lord, even the rivers and the hills. This is displayed in both the first and second verses of "Joy to the World," where heaven and nature sing to God, where the fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains repeat the sounding joy of His coming. As part of creation, it is our joy and calling to bring glory to God and to praise Him loudly and triumphantly for everyone to hear.

Now, we see that in Psalm 98:9, the psalmist speaks of being joyful because God is coming to judge the earth. There is joy in this because of what follows in the rest of the verse: *With righteousness He shall judge the world, and the peoples with equity* (Psalm 98:9). God is the only One who knows what true justice looks like for the world. With His wisdom and knowledge of every person and of every thing, we can trust Him to judge each one perfectly and equally. And so, in verse 3 of "Joy to the World," we are called to "prove the glories of His righteousness." What does this mean? To *prove* means to test and to see if something is reliable or true. Because Christ "rules the world with truth and grace," and we experience His truth and grace in our own lives, we have tested, we have proven, that He is reliable. His grace is so overwhelming, that we can't help but see and prove His righteousness. And all people, one day, will have to prove for themselves the glories of His righteousness.

When we consider Psalm 98 and what the psalmist wrote, we can understand that this Psalm was about rejoicing over the coming Lord, the Savior of Israel. But what about when Isaac Watts wrote the lyrics for "Joy to the World"? For him, the Savior had already come to earth. It was a historical fact and a divine reality. But all the words of the hymn are written in the present tense, not something that *had* happened and is over with, but something that is happening and is still to come. So is "Joy to the World" really even a Christmas song about the birth of Christ?

Looking at the book that this carol was originally published in, Watts wrote a hymn about the first few verses of Psalm 98, and titled it, "First Part, Praise for the Gospel." Psalm 98:4-9, the verses that "Joy to the World" is based on, are then labeled, "Second Part, The Messiah's coming and Kingdom." Chronologically speaking, we can see that "Joy to the World" is in fact about Christ's second coming, not His birth. Take some time to read through Watts' lyrics for the hymn, which are provided in your guide. How do they call us to celebrate the second and final coming of Jesus Christ?

We don't need to get caught up in if "Joy to the World" is actually a Christmas song or not. It's a song that speaks to the past, to the present, and to the future. Jesus Christ came to earth, He reveals Himself through

the Spirit today, and He will come again, to judge all people equally. Through all, we are to be joyful. We can have joy because of Jesus Christ, joy because of the wonders of His love, and joy in proclaiming His gospel. The Advent season is the anticipation of Christ's coming, both as a past and future celebration, and this news is cause enough to praise God so that all the world may know and joyfully worship our Savior and King.

## Session 2 – O Come All Ye Faithful

Welcome back! The season of Advent is meant to focus our attention on the coming of Jesus to earth. But as we continue our look at Christmas carols, there is one that talks about a different coming, directed toward God's people: "O Come, All Ye Faithful."

Let's read the first verse: "O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant, o come ye, o come ye to Bethlehem; come and behold Him born the King of angels: O come let us adore Him...Christ the Lord."

This invitation to "come, all ye faithful" places us among the shepherds who rushed to see the Christ child. Let's read about their experience in Luke 2:

*Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger."*

*And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"*

*So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them. (Luke 2:8-20)*

After they hear the invitation of the angels, the shepherds do not stop and consider, but respond at once and with haste. Here is something more important than their everyday lives, than their responsibilities, than their livelihood. Not only do they go to the manger to see the baby, but then, they go and tell others. What is our response to the call to worship Christ the Lord?

The last verse tells us that *the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen...* Yes, the shepherds returned to their fields, but they were changed. They had seen the Messiah, there was good news to share; there was a song of thanksgiving to sing to God.

This excerpt from Luke 2 also gives us another example, a different sort of response: *But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.* What was Mary pondering? What had God done in her life? What wonders had she seen? Perhaps as we are prompted to "adore Him," our response is reflective as Mary's was. What all has God done for me? How can I express my adoration to Him? Do we take the time in our busy hustle of the Christmas season to meditate on our Savior?

The third verse of our carol reminds us again of the angels' proclamation that night: "Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation, sing, all ye citizens of heav'n above: 'Glory to God in highest.'" What a sight that must have been! Not only one angel, but a multitude of the heavenly host praising God. When God intervenes in the lives of humans, it's a supernatural event. This is also reflected in the last verse where it says, "Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing..." God sent His Son to the earth to fulfill the Scriptures and for our salvation. When we

contemplate what God has done for us, how can we not come and adore Him? How can we do anything but worship Him and the Son that He sent?

Whether the invitation to “come and behold Him” prompts us to act like the shepherds, or to reflect like Mary, both propel us to marvel at and worship our Savior and Redeemer. Both responses draw us into His presence, and both should leave us changed.