

“A Christmas Crown of Joy”

by Pastor Steve Hammond on 12/29/19
Text: Psalm 98, at FBC of Newport, NH

//4 Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth,
burst into jubilant song with music;
5 make music to the Lord with the harp,
with the harp and the sound of singing,
6 with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn—
shout for joy before the Lord, the King.//

—Psalm 98:4-6 (NIV)

I am switching things around today, this Christmas Sunday. This text and the whole of Psalm 98 could easily have been our call to worship. And our call to worship from Matthew 2:11 about the worship of the magi from the East could easily have been our sermon text. But I've switched them. The last will be first and the first last, as they say.

I'm doing this because I just found out something most interesting and I wanted to share it with you right away. One of our all time classic Christmas songs—*Joy to the World*—technically isn't even about Christmas. It's about the Second Coming of Jesus, not his first coming.

But don't worry. That doesn't mean it doesn't belong on the lips of carolers. If anything, it means it belongs there all the more. Let me explain. Or, as Rock Johnson might say, “Let me tell yuh.”

First, let's look at the hymn more closely, especially in the light of Psalm 98 from which it came.

Joy to the World was written by the Methodist minister Isaac Watts in 1719. Prior to his hymn writing in general, Christian singing consisted almost exclusively of metered Psalms. He did base his song on Psalm 98, but he used a more free form of expression for his composition, giving us the beautiful words we're so familiar with today. But both the Psalm and the hymn are about the Second Coming of the Lord—the joy side of the “great and terrible” Day of the Lord, if you will. And Watts fully expected it to be sung all year round.

This hymn was also not written to the present tune we sing today. Today's tune is sometimes attributed to Handel in the 1700s, but probably came from Lowell Mason in 1839. Either way, over time *Joy to the World* became more and more popular as an expression of the Christmas joy. No

one quite knows when it started or how it happened, but it has stayed on as a Christmas favorite to this day. At the end of the twentieth century *Joy to the World* was the most published hymn in North America.

In a way, this hymn is the *opposite* of a Christmas carol. The writer of the article on this, Daniel Long, had some interesting things to point out about the song. (See his article at <http://www.authenticworship.org/joy-to-the-world-the-christmas-carol-that-isnt>)

For one thing, it not only called people to worship, it also called creation itself to worship. Phrases such as: “Let earth receive her king;” and “While fields & floods, rocks, hills & plains repeat the sounding joy;” illustrate this.

Another was the song’s interest in prophesy and even eschatology.

*“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.”*

Isaac Watts is bringing even more than Psalm 98 into consideration here as he makes reference to the curse of Adam’s fall and its cure being seen throughout the landscape of the world. This is not a glowing manger scene; this is a world aglow with the salvation of the Lord!

A third point was the song’s focus on, not a baby, but a full grown Kingdom of God and a warrior King ruling over the nations.

*He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love.*

Instead of it being about the nativity and a *Silent Night*, it’s about the zenith of salvation’s work and the noonday sun of God’s light over all the earth. “Joy to the world, the Lord has come. Let earth receive her King.” This isn’t the picture of a quiet little stable with just a few people and animals. This is an invitation to the whole planet and all the inhabitants, human or otherwise.

But opposite does not necessarily mean contrary, especially here. In fact, Daniel Long, whether he knows it or not, is making a good case for why *Joy to the World* makes for such a great Christmas flagship of a hymn. All of the things he mentions may be on opposite ends of a scale from small to great, but they are not opposite in their meaning and heart.

They are the seed contrasted with the full grown tree, while underlying the fact that both are actually the same reality, just at different stages.

Remember back on the first Sunday of December I preached a strange Christmas message on the *Blessed Hope of the Church*? That's normally a theme for the *Second* Coming of Jesus. But I tried to point out that there's really just one single hope at work here, not two separate ones. I said:

The Blessed Hope of the Church is the looking forward, not to a completely different hope from the OT, but the same one. Because we are looking forward to seeing the same Messiah, the same Savior. Both hopes center on the joy of meeting the exact same Person.

And that "joy" is the same "Joy to the World" regardless of whether it's experienced at Jesus' Second Coming or at his First Coming. For there is no competition between the first and second coming of Jesus. He's the same Lord each time, the very same Jesus. Whether the invitation is to only a few shepherds and sheep or to the entire creation; whether the Savior comes in a manger or on a white horse, it really makes no difference in what is most important—a call to joy at the coming of Jesus Christ!

In a sense, as I see it anyway, "Christmas Day" and the "Great and Terrible Day of the Lord" are the same Day. It's a bit more than 24 hours long, but then again, the "Day of the Lord" is actually eternal, which is also a bit more than 24 hours long. Christmas, in its *Silent Night* is like the biblical reckoning of a day starting at evening, not at the crack of dawn as we might think. (Actually, though, we too measure a new day in the dark of midnight.) So Jesus is born while the Old Testament and the old ways of our fallen world are still being played out. Yet, with his coming, the Kingdom of God is quietly "at hand." His birth signals the beginning of the end of all those old ways. The New Covenant and the new way of the Kingdom of God has broken through and is already a reality; eventually it will also become fully realized. Also, just as it is "darkest just before the dawn," the cross will bring both the darkest time and the brightest light. For the Light has shined in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it (John 1:5).

Then, at the other end of this new "Day" is the return of Christ. But this is not an ending of the new Day, it's the culmination of it. The Day itself has no ending for it's eternal. It's the Day of the Lord. Here is where we originally find everything *Joy to the World* describes. Here is where that joy is seen in all its fulness of completion.

But God has switched things around. It's as if God packaged up the joy of the full grown tree of the Kingdom of God, which normally could only be experienced on the last day of all days, and He injects it into the very middle of human history—before it had a chance to lead all the way up to its last day. On Christmas day God makes the last day first and the first day last. He combines them in this miraculous Coming of Christ in two stages: the birth of Christ and the Return of Christ.

This is what believers have recognized when they elevated *Joy to the World* to the seemingly 'lowly' place of Bethlehem instead of letting it remain at the high, eschatological side of history at the Second Coming, where the song was originally written. Such a demotion, however, was a promotion for the song.

And best of all, it's a promotion for us. Most of us would never make it to the last of the last days, or if we did we would be overwhelmed by the contrast between its glorious brightness and our sinful darkness. God knows this. And that's why he sent Jesus as he did. Through Jesus we can know the ultimate joy of God before that "great and terrible" day of God has come. For God himself has come to us, for the joy of seeing us believe in him, so that we might know him and follow him, by faith, through life and death and on to resurrection and that everlasting Day of Joy.

The joy of Christmas is perfectly expressed by singing *Joy to the World* because the birth of Jesus means we don't have to wait another day for that joy to arrive. For the Lord has come. Let earth receive her King. Let every heart prepare him room.

Let's sing.