

O Come, O Come, Immanuel

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[0 : 00] Great to see everyone. Yeah, great to have, be kicking off this Advent season. No, it's Advent, right? And always every year we do a special kind of Advent series as we're preparing for Christmas. What we're going to do this year, we're going to look at a few famous carols as kind of the theme of our series, because yeah, these are wonderful songs full of biblical truth, and we don't sing them enough. So that's a great way. And of course, the word Advent means coming, as we all know, the coming of Jesus back then and in the future.

And we're going to look today at O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, right, which is the ultimate Advent one, right? O Come, O Come, the coming of Jesus. So that's what we're going to look at. It's our first carol. We're going to sing it after the sermon so that we first kind of, you know, process it and think about it, and then we can sing it with all our hearts. That's what we want. But of course, we'll read a fitting Bible passage as well. So why don't I pray, and then Henrique will come and read the scripture for us. But let's pray together. Our Father, thank you for Advent, well, not for Advent, for the goal of Advent, the coming of your son 2,000 years ago and again at some point in the future. Please lift our eyes to him. Would we see what your word says? Would we see the world as it is, but also the hope and peace of Christmas? Would they be real to us in our hearts today? In Jesus' name. Amen.

This morning is from Isaiah chapter 24. Starting in verse 4, we read, The earth mourns and withers. The world languishes and withers. The highest people of the earth languish. The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants, for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore, a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt. Therefore, the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are left. The wine mourns, the vine languishes, all the merry-hearted sigh.

The mirth of the tambourines is stilled. The noise of the jubilant has ceased. The mirth of the lyre is stilled. No more do they drink wine with singing. Strong drink is bitter to those who drink it.

The wasted city is broken down. Every house is shut up so that none can enter. There is an outcry in the streets for lack of wine, and all joy has grown dark. The gladness of the earth is banished.

[2 : 52] Desolation is left in the city. The gates are battered into ruins. For thus it shall be in the midst of the earth, among the nations, as when an olive tree is beaten, as at the gleaning when the grape harvest is done. They lift up their voices. They sing for joy over the majesty of the Lord.

They shout from the west. Therefore, in the east, give glory to the Lord. In the coastlands of the sea, give glory to the name of the Lord, the God of Israel. From the ends of the earth, we hear songs of praise, of glory to the righteous one. This is the word of God. I was hoping for this really dramatic moment, because I don't know what kind of reading you expected, right? You were expecting joy and those kind of things, but actually it was such a sad reading, right? It's Christmas, and we put the presents and the trees and everything, and yet this is, yeah, what did we read, right? The tambourines are gone. There's no more wine. A city that's desolate. No more joy. People mourning and languishing. You might read this and you think it looks like the Ukraine, right? It looks like this city that's just destroyed in a war. People have no food, no power, and they're suffering. That's what it looks like. A city under a harsh COVID lockdown somewhere, right? That is, it's terrible. If you know the carol, though, it fits. It's the same kind of atmosphere, right?

Oh, come, oh, come, Emmanuel. Ransom, captive Israel. It's a, you know, I'm not very musical, but it's one of the few songs that's really in a minor key almost all the way through. That's why it sounds so sad and gloomy. And actually, and maybe for some of you, that is how you're feeling this morning. You know, it's maybe you've had a very tough week, a tough month, year. Many of us, we've had a very tough three years, right? You look at the economy. You look at the politics.

[4 : 54] You look at what's going on around the world, and things are really not getting better. you are maybe something in your life, a long-term illness, a problem at work or with your family.

And life really isn't what you want it to be. And then you find it so hard to get into the Christmas spirit. Celebrating is just really not what you're thinking about right now, right? Or are you just being Ebenezer Scrooge, right? Making it, spoiling it for the rest of us.

Or maybe you just understand the world better than the rest of us. Because Jesus came into a context. And Jesus didn't come out of nowhere. He came, well, to a people. That's what I love about O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. It has this real Old Testament feel, all right? What does it talk about?

Rejoice, Emmanuel. O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel. This is addressed to God's people in the Old Testament. Because, of course, who did Jesus come to? To the people of the Old Testament, right? To God's people who were there with God's word. They were waiting for their Messiah.

And so, as we understand, as we look at that, we kind of get the feeling of, yeah, the background to Jesus coming. And as we start off Advent, I think that's a really good thing for us to do.

[6 : 18] And a really good, the thing that we need to grasp here. Well, what is the big metaphor in the Bible is that of exile, right? This is about exile. The first verse, yeah, we saw it, right?

A ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here. Now, what is exile? Exile, as you probably know, is when you're taken away from your home, right? This is what the people of Israel, they had. They were in God's promised land. They were living there. Everything was good, except through their idolatry and their rebellion and sin. They were taken away. The Babylonians came, destroyed the city, destroyed everything, took them away. And now they were away from home, away from God. They had nothing. They were enslaved in this foreign country. You can imagine how they would have felt, right? And that is not just, you know, this one time in the sixth century that they were really in Babylon. You know, they came back at some point, right? The Persian king let them go home. But were things really right? You know, they were no longer their own kingdom. They were just a province of the Persian empire, the Greek empire, the Roman empire. They were ruled over. There was poverty. There was war. They had a temple. But the glory of God never came down. They knew the temple was empty. God wasn't with them. And yeah, that's how they felt. That is their exile.

Of course, we are not Israel, right? You think, okay, but that was them back then. But actually, what makes it so applicable is that Israel is all of us. So, I don't know if you, when you heard this passage from Isaiah, it's not really the most famous Christmas reading. And it really sounds like, it sounds like an exile, right? This city and destruction. But who is here mourning? It's not Israel, right? Look at that. The earth mourns and withers. The world languishes and withers. This is not about Israel. Isaiah is here zooming out to the whole world that's suffering. That's why I've chosen this passage. But actually, it's for the same reason, right? Israel went into exile for their sin. And here, well, verse 5, the earth lies defiled under its inhabitants, for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant, right? It's again, their sin, their transgressions. The everlasting covenant. You hear that and you think, oh, the law of Moses. But of course, the whole world wasn't under the law of Moses. No, this is, you know, this goes back to Adam and Eve. You know, back in Genesis 3 already, the Bible starts with exile. Adam and Eve, they could enjoy the Garden of Eden. They could live with God. But they sinned. They were sent out, right? This was basically the covenant they had, right? That God said, well, you may eat of every tree in the garden. You can enjoy all my goodness and blessing. But if you eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, in that day you will die, right? And that's what happens. And that is what we're all under, right? If we turn away from God, as we all do, well, we all face death. And just like with then Adam and Eve sinned, what happens? Well, God said, curse is the ground because of you. In pain, you shall eat of it all the days of your life. The world was broken. And again here in Isaiah, verse 6, the same thing. And because of their sin, therefore a curse devours the earth and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt. That is the world we live in. All joy is gone. Gladness is banished. Desolation, cities broken down, mourning languages. And you're just so helpless, right? Why is there no joy?

People are helpless. They're stuck. Exile. I mean, people talk about some people going abroad in self-imposed exile. They need to say self-imposed because exile, you have no control over it, right?

[10 : 24] You're taken away and you're stuck and you're captive. And as you read through this carol, the helplessness comes out. And of course, it talks about Israel, but there's no Babylonians,

no Romans. It's that real spiritual exile from God, right? How are we described? Well, under Satan's tyranny, right? Free us from Satan's tyranny, the depths of hell that are facing us, and the grave because we're all going to die. Or in the third verse, the day spring cheer us up from, you know, the gloomy clouds of night and death's dark shadows. That's the world we live in.

And no wonder there's no joy. This is the curse lying on all of us, on the whole world. Now, of course, you might say, yeah, yeah, but that was the Old Testament, right? We were in the New Testament and Jesus has come and surely that has changed things. Well, it's interesting, right? Because the New Testament is a little bit mixed on that. Okay? Because, you know, when you're in the Old Testament, this is basically what you would expect, right? Here, you know, we have the old age of sin and death and then, boom, the Messiah comes and you've got the new age, right? That was how they saw things. That's what they were expecting. But then when Jesus came, actually, it became a bit more complex because Jesus comes once and he starts the new age, yes, but the old age is still there. Sin and death and enemies, it's still there and one day he will come back and that's when there's only the new age, right? So, it's a bit of both and we're kind of living in the middle, in the already and the not yet. And in some books of the Bible, that are really big on the already, right? We did Ephesians just now and Ephesians is, oh, what? Jesus is on the throne and, you know, we're seated with Christ in the heavenly places, united and wonderful. It's focused on the new age. And yet, physically, not spiritually, but physically, this is very much we're in the old age, right? We suffer, we die, sin, death, suffering. From that perspective, we're still in exile, still living in the old age. And this Old Testament feeling is very, very applicable to us, right? When you see the news, when you see the city around you and you go to your shopping center and there's a, oh, your favorite shop is closed, they're bankrupt and everything, right? You just see that this world is wrong and there's not, something is wrong with it. I don't know how you respond to that. I mean, for some of us, yeah, we really feel this at the moment. You look at your life and you feel just so miserable. I don't know. Some people have a child in hospital or just really long-term family difficulties. And you really want it to just end. And I don't know how you feel coming to church.

Sometimes you might feel so alien, right? Because everyone is there and they're having such a great time and you just don't feel it. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Sorry, I'm not making fun of people who really go, but yeah, sometimes it doesn't, you don't feel like that, right? And you feel like, well, what do I not get? Do I not belong here? Well, you read passages like this. I hope this is a carol that you can sing, right? It's okay not to be okay. It's okay to, to be miserable because we are in exile. We're living in a broken world full of sin, full of pain, full of death. And sometimes that just really gets to us. And Jesus knows that. And yeah, you can sing this carol and just lament. But for others of us, maybe we don't feel it as much. Because, you know, some of us, we're young and we're healthy and we have a job that we like and quarantine is over and now we can travel to all these exciting places, you know? Everything is great. And the worst thing is, well, my football team didn't get through it. But that's about it, right?

I don't know how this carol, how this passage speaks to you. I guess, first of all, if that's us, we should be thankful. But actually, we're the exception to the rule, right?

[14:35] In some way, many of us, we live in a bubble. We live in a comfortable, wealthy, 21st century bubble. I mean, this carol is based on a Latin kind of chant from the 8th century, 1200 years ago. Life was very different back then. War and famine and disease and most children not reaching adulthood and those kind of things. That's the world. For them, this really resonated.

You know, no celebrity worship artist would have made this song. But back then, this was how people felt. And even outside, right? Yeah, Hong Kong is pretty peaceful. You know, you read the news of what's happening in Ukraine, right? And the people there facing the winter without power, without food.

That's terrible. And even just people around us. I mean, there might be people in church, near CG, who are having a really hard time. Or just outside. Other people here in Hong Kong. We are one of the most unequal cities. I feel love... If you don't really feel in exile, maybe join loving the city. A few weeks ago, RCG went to help with inner city ministries, handing out food to street cleaners. And so, wait, it was eye-opening. Most of these guys I spoke to were from Nepal. And they'd arrived in the last six months to a year. And I mean, you see these street cleaners, and it's not quite the life you want for yourself, right? Or for your kids. You know, these people were so cheerful. Why were they cheerful? Well, being a street cleaner was so much better than life in Nepal, in the poverty and those kind of things. For them, this was a dream job compared to where they came

from. So can you imagine what it's like out there for some people in the world?

[16:26] No, we need to see the truth, right? This world is in exile. If you just open our eyes. And Christmas makes no sense unless we get that, unless we see, yes, this is a world in so much need, in so much brokenness, that it needed help. And we couldn't do it. And then we get to see what, yeah, the birth of Jesus really offers. Because what does Jesus offer in the midst of this exile?

Hope. This carol, it has incredible hope. That's what we're doing today, the candle of hope. The Old Testament, yes, it's a lot of doom and gloom. But in the midst of the despair, there's a longing and waiting, waiting for God to come. It's full of promises. And you heard it in the reading, right?

Yes, there was all this misery. But then those last few verses, as people, you know, see God coming, right? That's when they go, right? They lift up their voices. They sing for joy over the majesty of the Lord. They shout from the West. Verse 16, from the ends of the earth, we hear songs of praise, of glory to the righteous one, right? Suddenly, there's joy because in the midst of this brokenness, God is going to come in and sort it out. It's the same in the carol, as you know it, right? In the refrain, you know, we go, rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come. And the power of music, it goes from a minor key to a major key. And suddenly, it sounds happy, right? Because that's the thing. Emmanuel will come. God will be with us. And actually, that runs through this whole carol. Every verse starts with a title of Jesus from a promise about Jesus in the Old Testament. I guess the first one, O come, O come, Emmanuel. We know that one, right? Isaiah chapter seven, in the midst of a siege, in the midst of a terrible time, the virgin will conceive and bear a son. And she will call his name Emmanuel, which means God is with us. We know that one, right? God would come and God would be with him. The second one, O rod of Jesse, three, rod of Jesse. That's a very weird one, right? If you don't know who Jesse is, Jesse was the father of David. David, you hear that all the time at Christmas, right? David, David, because

God promised to David an everlasting kingdom of peace ruled by his descendants. That was the great hope. And in Isaiah's day, it didn't look like much, right? It looked like a tree that was just cut down. Where is it gone? But then Isaiah 11, a great promise. Yeah, the Jesse tree comes from that because what did God promise? There will be a shoot from fourth, it will shoot fourth from the stump of Jesse and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit, right? There will be a flourishing again, a new tree. And what will he do? Verse 12 of Isaiah 11, he will raise a signal for the nations and will assemble the banished of Israel and gather the dispersed of Judah. If you're doing the watermark devotions, it's today's reading. It's such a wonderful chapter, Isaiah 11 of what Jesus will come and do. And all those verses, verse three, oh come, oh day spring, come and cheer, the morning star. Yeah, you know, the day spring, the first light, everything is dark, but then the first light comes over the horizon and the darkness is slowly melting away. That's what Jesus is coming to do.

Or the last one, again, David, oh come thou key of David. Key, I think we know a key, right?

Something is locked up. The kingdom of David, where was it? It is like it was shut up. No one could access it.

[20:12] But Jesus, yeah, the key, he opens up the heavenly kingdom. He opens the door wide and we can come back to God. We can come to, we can come home, our heavenly home. And not just open it, but bring us there, right? Bring us safely home. All these verses, they're full of promise. They're full of hope.

And I hope you can hear that, right? Hope in the darkness, hope of freedom, hope of life, hope of coming back to our loving God, hope of an end of suffering and death, hope for all of us.

You may wonder, when will your situation change? It will. God made all those promises. Now, that might be a very long time. Isaiah promised about 700 years before Jesus. And that was Jesus' first coming. So it's 2,700 years and counting for his second coming. But we know he will come, right? God's people always had this hope. And so, you know, God had promised. They held on to that in the darkest, most difficult time. Now we have God's promise. So yeah, how should we, how should we then respond? I guess what one obvious one in the carol, of course, is to rejoice, right? Not a fake joy, not empty praise, but deep down knowing that things will be better, knowing that one thing in the day it will change. Your situation won't last forever. A hundred years from now, you will be with Jesus. And nothing else will matter, right? And from then on, just you'll have billions and billions of years of fullness of joy. No matter what you're going through, you know, just hold on. Ultimately, we'll be there, right? And maybe tomorrow, maybe it's a hundred years, but it will all be sorted out. Of course, if you're trusting in Jesus, right? If you're not going to be with Jesus, if you're not with Jesus now, you won't be with him later. And things will actually only be worse than this world. You

need Jesus. If you don't know him yet, please come and talk to me. But actually, you know, next week is the candle of joy. Next week, we'll talk more about rejoicing. Actually, there's another big application here in this carol. And that's where I want us to focus. If we see the world as it is, what should we do? I think we should pray. A real response here is prayer. Because this whole song, basically, it's a prayer, right? Every verse is prayer. Oh, come.

Oh, come. That is a request. Lord, we need you. We are mourning here. Come. And not just come. Ransom us. Save us. Free us. Deliver us. You know, disperse the gloom. Get rid of the darkness. Give us victory over death. It's just prayer after prayer after prayer, right? Because this desperate longing of people, you know, it should turn us into prayer. If you're in misery, but you know God cares, and you know God will do something, what do you do? You go to him. You pour out your heart to him, and you ask him, Lord, do something. You know, you see the world. You see the misery. Even in the MTR, all those people on their phones looking pretty unhappy. Pray, right? God, do something.

[23 : 41] And do we really pray? I know we should pray, your kingdom come, and come, Lord Jesus. But do we pray them just because that's what Christians do? Do we really mean it? Do we really want, you know, Jesus come today? And if you're coming in 10 years' time, that'd be a terrible thing. Most of us wouldn't mind another 10 years of our current life. But in Ukraine, another 10 years of war, they wouldn't want that. So let's pray. If we just get into our hearts, the feeling of the Bible, of exile, of hope, we will pray. Now, God may not answer straight away. God has unlimited love and infinite wisdom, and he knows the best time for Jesus' return. But let's pray, because he hears, he knows, he cares.

Right? And sometimes maybe we're hesitant to pray, because we're, you know, with some things you pray and you don't know, will God actually do this, right? With some of our prayers. But I hope this is a prayer we will feel so confident about. Again, because this is a real difference, right? We're no longer in the Old Testament. From one perspective, we are in the new, right? Jesus has already come.

That's why we sing, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel, right? We don't sing, Emmanuel might come, or Emmanuel could come. Emmanuel shall come. And why? Well, because Emmanuel has come already, 2,000 years ago. And he didn't stay at a distance. He came down. He was God with us. And how much with us? I don't know. Try reading this carol later. It's in your devotional booklet. Actually, didn't Jesus come into our exile? He came to us, and he took it on him. I mean, what did Jesus do, right? He was born. He lived the perfect life, but then he grew, and then he went to the cross. You know, he submitted himself to Satan's tyranny, right? He let himself be taken captive. Self-imposed exile, in a way, right? As he carried his cross along the path of misery, and then when he hung on the cross, you know, everything went dark at noon. You know, the gloomy clouds of night, death's dark shadows.

And he was exiled from his father, right? Shut out from all the father's love and blessing as, you know, all the wrath was poured on him. Went to the depths of hell for us. And he took on our exile. Why? Because he wants to get us out of it. We know that. And if he's done that already, he will come again, and he will take us home. We can see how much he's willing to do. So come to him. Come to his love. Pray. Pour out your heart. And know that, yeah, he will come again. Why don't we? Why don't we? Oh, we have plenty of time, actually. Why don't we pray together?

[26 : 52] Lord Jesus, thank you for your love. You know our needs. You know this world. You know how much we are longing, if we really just be honest, for your return. So please come as we sing this song.

Would this be true in our hearts, that we long for you to come, to make things better, to come into people's hearts, that they would turn to you, and they would have this hope, but then that you would come and then bring us home. Make this world the world you want it to be, as sin and death and Satan are destroyed. We need you. We want you. In Jesus' name. Amen.