



## CHRISTMAS HYMN: O Come, O Come Emmanuel

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Reprinted from Baptist Press ([www.baptistpress.com](http://www.baptistpress.com)), news service of the Southern Baptist Convention. The original story can be found at: <http://www.baptistpress.com/53991/christmas-hymn-o-come-o-come-emmanuel>

“O Come, O Come Emmanuel” is one of the most perfect hymn melodies ever written. Dating from the 8th or 9th Century, it was originally a medieval Latin antiphon, a short Psalm chanted in Christian ritual, sung as a refrain. It reminds us of the power of singing in the Dorian mode and allows us to participate in a 1200-year-old sacred Advent ritual.

Music and lyrics combine beautifully in this hymn to express a deep sense of longing and lament; the waiting for and the anticipation of God’s promised Messiah permeates every line.

The opening verse places us at the heart of the Israelites’ captivity, reminding us of their sense of loss and distress, as they cry out to God to rescue and redeem them.

*“O come, O come, Emmanuel  
And ransom captive Israel  
That mourns in lonely exile here  
Until the Son of God appear”*

While most of the more modern Advent and Christmas carols focus on the joy of God’s promise being fulfilled, here we are reminded of a nation, God’s people, in mourning for their sin and rebellion against God, of their resulting captivity and their desperate longing for God to save them.

It might seem strange to talk about the importance of lament in the Christmas period, but the book of Psalms is full of psalms of lament, and these were originally meant to be sung corporately rather than read privately! And while celebration and excited anticipation is a central theme of Advent, we shouldn’t shy away from the opportunity to sing songs of lament, to recognize the sin in our lives that leads to the need for God’s salvation and, ultimately, Jesus’ birth and sacrifice.

So, what can this hymn teach us about how the themes of the Advent carols can inspire our faith throughout the year?

It’s one of the few Advent hymns that gives us a sense of Old Testament context – it connects the agony of the Israelites’ captivity and unfulfilled longing for salvation with their belief in the coming Savior; they are holding fast to the words of the prophets that speak so clearly of Israel’s redemption.

*O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free  
Thine own from Satan's tyranny  
From depths of Hell Thy people save  
And give them victory o'er the grave"*

In the midst of the Israelites' sufferings, their ultimate hope is in a God who saves, their unwavering belief is in the coming of the Messiah. It contrasts Israel's feelings of desolation in captivity with their unyielding hope in a God who will rescue, who will save. But it also reminds us that God fulfils His Word, that He keeps His promises and that He is faithful.

*"Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel."*

This hymn teaches us that even in seasons of lament and unfulfilled hopes, when we long for God to intervene in the circumstances of our own life or in the world around us, God is a God who rescues, saves and delivers. But often we have to wait, like the Israelites, for God's plan to be revealed.

As we meditate on the eternal truths from the words of this ancient hymn, we can be reassured and reminded that in Jesus, all of God's promises are fulfilled, and, in Him, all our hopes and longings can be satisfied. This is an Advent carol that really is worth rediscovering. It's wonderful. Perfection itself.

*Keith and Kristyn Getty are modern hymn writers whose compositions are sung the world over. For more information about Getty Music and the Sing! initiative, please visit [www.gettymusic.com](http://www.gettymusic.com).*