

## The Long and Winding Road Christmas Lesson

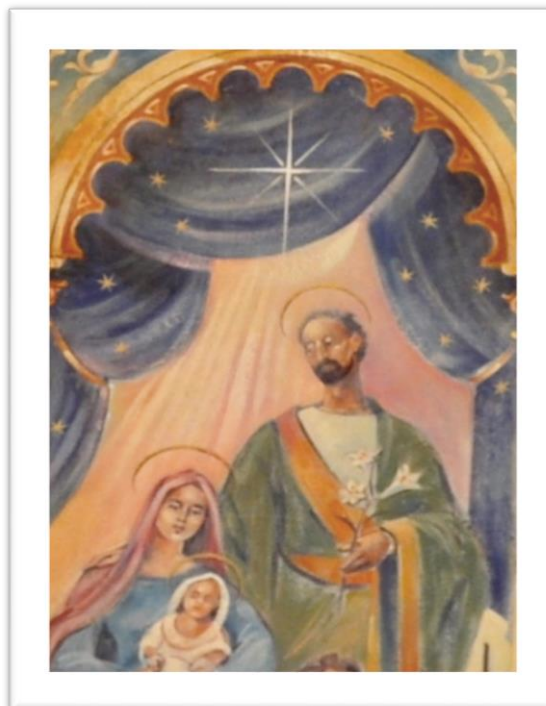
Martin Luther wrote of the Old Testament as the “swaddling cloths and the manger in which Christ lies.”

Simple and lowly are these swaddling cloths, but dear is the treasure, Christ, who lies in them.”<sup>1</sup>

While Luther had many images in mind, and was not limiting his reference to matters related to the nativity, his allusion is especially useful in a lesson during Advent.

In other lessons, we have examined the presence of the Messiah in the prophetic promises as well as stories and images. For this Christmas lesson, we look at specific promises made about the incarnation and the birth of the Messiah.

There are many ways to approach a lesson like this. One can “read backwards” from the New Testament into the Old, masterfully done recently from the gospels by Richard Hays.<sup>2</sup> One could study the dearth of messianic literature produced by scholars of Jewish and Christian origins, recognizing and writing on the messianic concepts and understanding of the Jewish world before, during and after the time of Jesus.<sup>3</sup> One could also look in many efforts by scholars over the centuries to recount the prophetic passages with notes of their fulfillments in the life of Jesus. My approach is akin to eating from a buffet line. I have grown and benefitted from reading from each of these approaches, and have put together a plate of my favorites learned and discerned from each approach. But in the spirit of Christmas, I will approach



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<sup>1</sup> Luther, Martin, “Preface to the Old Testament,” *Luther’s Works* (ed. E. Theodore Bachmann; Muhlenberg 1960), vol. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Hays, Richard, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Baylor Univ. Press 2016). Hays artfully uses the Luther quote above, crediting Tucker Ferda for bringing it to his attention.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Novenson, Matthew, *The Grammar of Messianism: An Ancient Jewish Political Idiom and Its Users*, (Oxford 2017).

these passages through Christmas carols! Hopefully we will find accuracies, the ambiguities, and the errors in some of our favorite songs.

### **What is a Christmas Carol?**

The Oxford English Dictionary gives the primary meaning of a “carol” as a “ring dance,” and thus it becomes secondarily, “a song; originally, that to which they danced.”<sup>4</sup> As a dancing song, the *OED* adds that it is typically of a “joyous strain,” and when of a religious nature, is “a song or hymn of religious joy.”

Accordingly, it is not surprising to read in older writings of carols, more emphasis and recognition of these purer elements. In 1928, Oxford published *The Oxford Book of Carols*. There the definition was more fully given.

Carols are songs with a religious impulse that are simple, hilarious, popular, and modern... They vary a good deal: some are narrative, some dramatic, some personal, a few are secular; and there are some which do not possess all the typical characteristics.<sup>5</sup>

Fast-forwarding nearly a century from 1928, “hilarity” is not something we typically associate with carols, but the association with fun and dance is not far under the surface. We hear it in the melodies, and can find it in many of the words. Even in carols of seriousness, we should find the truths of life that bring joy to the heart causing, at the least, internal dancing!

Serious Christian thought, and the seriousness of the incarnation, should never be perceived so superficially as to be devoid of joy. I am always saddened to hear Billy Joel’s song, *Only the Good Die Young* because his theme is based on the idea that anyone of faith is automatically missing out on life’s joys. He’d “rather laugh with the sinners than die with the saints. Sinners have much more fun.” That is sad and inaccurate! Paul wrote over and over of joy we have in the Lord. It is the second fruit of the Spirit, right after love (Gal. 5:22).

### **O Little Town of Bethlehem**

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of

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<sup>4</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford 1989), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vol. 2 at 907.

<sup>5</sup> Dearmer, Percy, *et al.*, *The Oxford Book of Carols* (Oxford 1928), at v.

old, from ancient days... And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And he shall be their peace (Mic. 5:2,4-5).

“Bethlehem,” a composite of two Hebrew words, “beth,” a house, and “lechem,” bread. How fitting that from Bethlehem, the house of bread, came Jesus, the bread of life. There were multiple Bethlehems in the days of the Old Testament, but the one to birth the Messiah was specified. It was not the Bethlehem in Zebulun (Josh. 19:15). It was the Bethlehem in Ephrathah, a small Judean village of great antiquity, near where Rachel was buried (Gen. 35:19; 48:7). Rachel along with Leah were the matriarchs of the tribes of Israel. When King David’s great-grandmother was blessed by the elders on her marriage to Boaz, the blessing centered on Rachel, Leah, and Bethlehem Ephrathah.

Then all the people who were at the gate and the elders said, “We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman, who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you act worthily in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem (Ruth 4:11).

Here was the promise. From this “little town” would come the Great One, the ruler. This one was from old, from ancient times. He was the one promised in Eden to defeat the serpent, promised to Abraham to bless the nations, promised through Moses as a greater prophet. He would be the great shepherd akin to King David to shepherd the people. He would bring peace to those at odds with the Lord.

This was Jesus, born in a manger in Bethlehem.

Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn (Lk. 1:4-7).

**Point for home:** The learned men of the day knew the Micah prophecy. They knew where the Messiah was to be born. When the wise men came to see Jesus, Herod the king was troubled about the Messiah’s birth. He assembled the priests and learned men of Judah and asked where the Messiah was to be born. The reply was “Bethlehem Ephrathah,” with a quotation of the Micah passage. The irony is that having proclaimed the location, these

same “learned men” just returned to their homes and lifestyles, not bothering to go to Bethlehem to see the Messiah! Heaven forbid we hear or know the message and fail to come and see the promised one!

CHRISTMAS

43

O Little Town of Bethlehem

FOREST GREEN CMD

Phillips Brooks, 1868

English folk melody  
Arr. Ralph Vaughan Williams, 1906

1. O lit - tle town of Beth - le - hem, How still we see thee lie!  
 2. For Christ is born of Ma - ry; And gath - ered all a - bove,  
 3. How si - lent - ly, how si - lent - ly, The won - drous gift is given!  
 4. O ho - ly Child of Beth - le - hem, De - scend to us, we pray;

A - bove thy deep and dream-less sleep The si - lent stars go by.  
 While mor - tals sleep, the an - gels keep Their watch of won - dering love.  
 So God im - parts to hu - man hearts The bless - ings of His heav'n.  
 Cast out our sin and en - ter in, Be born in us to - day.

Yet in thy dark streets shin - eth The ev - er - last - ing light;  
 O morn - ing stars, to - geth - er Pro - claim the ho - ly birth!  
 No ear may hear His com - ing, But in this world of sin,  
 We hear the Christ - mas an - gels The great glad tid - ings tell;

The hopes and fears of all the years Are met in thee to - night.  
 And prais - es sing to God the King, And peace to all on earth.  
 Where meek souls will re - ceive Him, still The dear Christ en - ters in.  
 O come to us, a - bide with us, Our Lord Em - man - u - el!

## Oh Come, Oh Come, Emmanuel

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel (Isa.7:14).

Here we read the miracle of the Messiah's birth. The Hebrew prophet Isaiah saw much about the coming Messiah. His prophecies are well-known not only in song, but in narrative. Perhaps his most discussed passages is this one – a virgin would conceive and bear a son who would be Immanuel.

The Hebrew word translated “virgin” (*almah*) doesn't simply mean a “virgin,” but rather refers to a young woman who has come into childbearing years. Typically, this woman would not be married, as the word was used, but not always. To understand the idea that the word used by Isaiah referenced a virginal young maiden, one needs to consider the context, the possible meanings, and the options for writing otherwise, should something less than the miraculous be intended. Scholars do this and find justification for their views on both sides of the issue, recognizing the ramifications on the nativity and personhood of Jesus. Those investigations are rewarding; however, in talking to others, I tend to take an easier tack.

Several hundred years *before* Jesus was born, Jewish scholars translated this passage into Greek. Those translations bear the modern title of the “Septuagint.” In our manuscripts of those ancient translations, we see that the Jewish scholars translated this Hebrew word “*almah*” with the Greek word *parthenos* (παρθένος). The Greek word *parthenos* doesn't carry the potential for debate that the Hebrew *almah* does. The Greek *parthenos* is a virgin, plain and simple. This is the understanding of the Isaiah passage among the learned Jews *before* the virgin birth of Jesus made this an important translation.

If indeed the prophet spoke of a miraculous birth, it suddenly makes sense how the child could be called by the name, “Immanuel.” The “name” of someone wasn't simply a label that went on a birth certificate, or used to get a social security number or driver's license. One's name was a statement of who they really were. It reflected their character, their history, and their essence. Here is why we rightfully call Jesus, “Immanuel.”

Immanuel is a composite of two Hebrew words. “El” is God. “Immanu” conveys “is with us.” This was no ordinary birth, for this was no ordinary Messiah. The Messiah was GOD with us. Deity wrapped in human flesh. This was a full game changer.

**Point for home:** When we confront the reality of the Christmas story with the truth of Jesus as God, it can't simply stir up songs of tradition for us. It should check our souls and convictions for our reaction to this once-in-the-history-of-the-world event.

## O Come, O Come Emmanuel

O come, O come, Em - man - u - el, and ran - som cap - tive  
 O come, Thou Day - spring, come and cheer Our spir - its by Thine  
 O come, O Branch of Jes - se's stem, un - to your own and  
 O come, De - sire of na - tions, bind In one the hearts of

Is - ra - el that mourns in lone - ly ex - ile here un -  
 ad - vent here; Dis - perse the gloom - y clouds of night, And  
 res - cue them! From depths of hell your peo - ple save, and  
 all man - kind; Bid Thou our sad di - vi - sions cease, And

*Refrain*  
 til the Son of God ap - pear. Re - joice! Re - joice! Em -  
 death's dark shad - ows put to flight.  
 give them vic - t'ry o'er the grave.  
 be Thy - self our King of Peace.

man - u - el shall come to you, O Is - ra - el.

## We Three Kings

Ask most anyone about how many wise men came to see Jesus and they will tell you three. You don't even need to ask, you can simply look at a nativity scene. Each one has three wise men. If you look at the Scriptures, however, it is not so clear! The passage that forms the basis for the familiar carol, "We Three Kings" is Matthew 2:1-2.

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

If you look carefully at the Matthew passage, and compare it to the song, you quickly see that the song tracks church history, more than it does Matthew.

Matthew does not tell us the Magi were kings, nor does Matthew tell us that there were “three.” Both of those are later church decisions. Matthew merely reports that the Magi came from the East and brought Christ gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Historically, the church saw this Matthew passage indicating a fulfillment of Isaiah 60, which promised,

A multitude of camels will cover you...They will bring gold and frankincense, and will bear good news of the praises of the Lord” (Is. 60:6).

Earlier in the chapter, Isaiah noted that,

Nations will come to your light, and the kings to the brightness of your rising (Isa. 60:3).

From this passage, the church decided the gift-giving Magi must have been the kings Isaiah prophesied. This was already well in circulation by 200 when the North African theologian Tertullian (c.155-c.240) wrote that the Eastern Church regarded the Magi as kings.

Why does Christmas tradition say there were three? Some believe that the three gifts indicated three men, but history shows more! Origen, the great early church father who allegorized the Old Testament, believed that Isaac, Abraham’s son, was a prototype of Jesus. From that, Origen went to Genesis 26:26-31 where King Abimelech and two others came to Isaac and acknowledged him as blessed of the Lord.

When Abimelech went to him from Gerar with Ahuzzath his adviser and Phicol the commander of his army, Isaac said to them, “Why have you come to me, seeing that you hate me and have sent me away from you?” They said, “We see plainly that the Lord has been with you. So we said, let there be a sworn pact between us, between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you, that you will do us no harm, just as we have not touched you and have done to you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace. You are now the blessed of the Lord.” So he made them a feast, and they ate and drank. In the

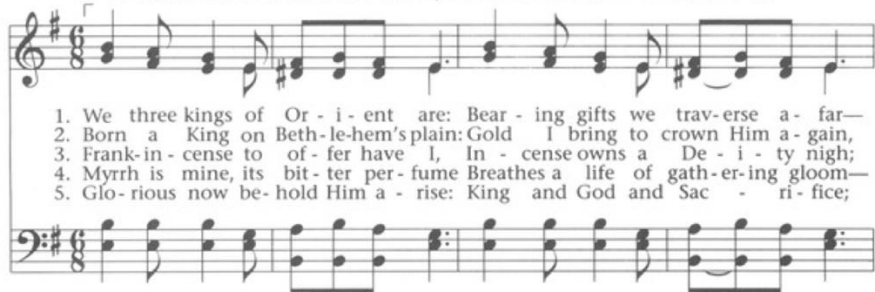
morning they rose early and exchanged oaths. And Isaac sent them on their way, and they departed from him in peace.

Origen (c.184-c.253), was a proponent of finding allegorical meaning in the Old Testament. He said that these three were the prototypes in the Old Testament of the Magi. Hence, the hymn.

COMING OF THE WISE MEN

## 113 We Three Kings of Orient Are

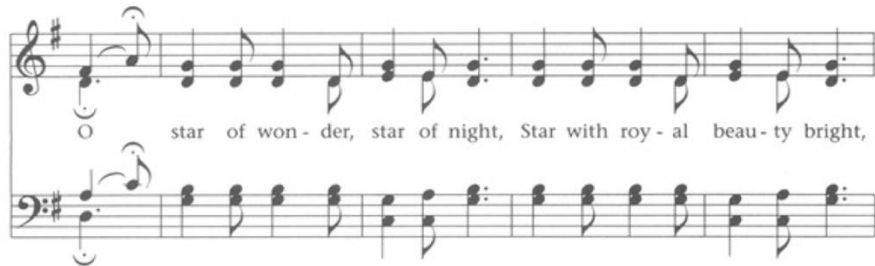
*When Jesus was born ... there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem — Matthew 2:1 KJV*



1. We three kings of Or - i - ent are: Bear - ing gifts we trav - erse a - far—  
2. Born a King on Beth - le - hem's plain: Gold I bring to crown Him a - gain,  
3. Frank - in - cense to of - fer have I, In - cense owns a De - i - ty nigh;  
4. Myrrh is mine, its bit - ter per - fume Breathes a life of gath - er - ing gloom—  
5. Glo - rious now be - hold Him a - rise: King and God and Sac - ri - fice;



Field and foun - tain, moor and moun - tain—Fol - low - ing yon - der star.  
King for - ev - er, ceas - ing nev - er, O - ver us all to reign.  
Prayer and prais - ing, all men rais - ing, Wor - ship Him, God on high.  
Sor - r'wing, sigh - ing, bleed - ing, dy - ing, Sealed in the stone - cold tomb.  
Al - le - lu - ia, Al - le - lu - ia! Earth to heav'n re - plies.



O star of won - der, star of night, Star with roy - al beau - ty bright,



West - ward lead - ing, still pro - ceed - ing, Guide us to thy per - fect light.

WORDS: John Henry Hopkins, Jr., 1820-1891  
MUSIC: John Henry Hopkins, Jr., 1820-1891

KINGS OF ORIENT  
Irregular



## Good King Wenceslas

This unusual Christmas song is not based on any Old Testament Scripture! There was no King Wenceslas in the Old Testament, and the “Feast of Stephen” is based on the date the church celebrates the martyrdom of Stephen read about in Acts 6 and 7.



### Good King Wenceslas.

CHRISTMAS.

Carol 415.

Words by J. M. Neale.

Chorus.

Traditional.

1. Good King Wenceslas looked out On the Feast of Stephen, When the snow lay  
round about, Deep and crisp and even: Brightly shone the moon that night,  
Though the frost was cruel, When a poor man came in sight, Gath'ring winter fuel.

2

Ten. Solo. "Hither, page, and stand by me,  
If thou know'st it, telling,  
Yonder peasant, who is he?  
Where and what his dwelling?"  
Treb. Solo. "Sire, he lives a good league hence,  
Underneath the mountain;  
Right against the forest fence,  
By Saint Agnes' fountain."

3

Ten. Solo. "Bring me flesh, and bring me wine,  
Bring me pine-logs hither;  
Thou and I will see him dine,  
When we bear them thither."  
Cho. Page and monarch forth they went,  
Forth they went together;  
Through the rude wind's wild lament;  
And the bitter weather.

4

Treb. Solo. "Sire, the night is darker now,  
And the wind blows stronger;  
Fails my heart, I know not how,  
I can go no longer."  
Ten. Solo. "Mark my footsteps, my good page;  
Tread thou in them boldly:  
Thou shalt find the winter's rage  
Freeze thy blood less coldly."

5

Cho. In his master's steps he trod,  
Where the snow lay dinted;  
Heat was in the very sod  
Which the saint had printed.  
Therefore, Christian men, be sure,  
Wealth or rank possessing,  
Ye who now will bless the poor,  
Shall yourselves find blessing.

\* All the verses may be sung in chorus if preferred.  
Parish Choir, No. 1496—4.

I believe this carol's popularity is from the melody more than anything else. It typifies that spirit of a carol that has a dancing lilt to it. It is fun to sing. Very few of us know who "good king Wenceslas" was, much less what he was doing on the feast of Stephen!

Notwithstanding my recognition of some of the ignorance on the meaning and context of the words, I find the 1928 Oxford comments a bit overly harsh, though humorous.

This rather confused narrative owes its popularity to the delightful tune, which is that of a Spring carol, *Tempus adest florum* [Latin for "bloomtime has come"]... Unfortunately Neale in 1853 substituted for the Spring carol this "Good King Wenceslas," one of his less happy pieces... poor and commonplace to the last degree. The time has not yet come for a comprehensive book to discard it; but we reprint the tune ... not without hope that, with the present wealth of carols for Christmas, "Good King Wenceslas" may gradually pass into disuse, and the tune be restored to spring-time.<sup>6</sup>

The carol recounts the story of a king who goes out into harsh winter weather to feed and help a peasant. The king's page has trouble in the harsh weather, and the king urges the peasant to follow in his footsteps, and so make it through the snow. The peasant does, and the song ends with the admonition that there is blessing for those who seek to bless the poor.

The song is rooted in the legend of a Bohemian duke Wenceslas (c. 907-935) who was martyred on September 28, 935. Shortly after his death, several biographies were published of how he frequently gave alms to widows, orphans, and those in prison. He was given the title of "king" by Otto the Great (912-973) after his death.

You can see a statue of Wenceslas in Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic. It is found in the appropriately named, "Wenceslas Square," and was a popular meeting place for demonstrators against communism before communism's demise.

The "feast of Stephen" is celebrated on December 26 in the Western Church and December 27 in the Eastern Church. It is a day set aside to commemorate the first Christian martyr Stephen, whom we read about in Acts 6-7. In many countries, this day is a holiday. In the United Kingdom, it is celebrated as "Boxing Day." Some trace this name to the boxes that were set up on the Feast of Stephen to collect special offerings.

**Point for Home:** Even without the direct Scriptural basis for this carol, there is an attitude that is rooted firmly in the incarnation as well as the martyrdom of Stephen. We are to live

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<sup>6</sup> Dearmer, Percy, *et al.*, *The Oxford Book of Carols* (Oxford 1928), at 271.

our lives in ways that show God's love to others, setting aside our comfort and convenience to share his love.

### **Joy to the World**

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth... Let the rivers  
clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together before the  
LORD, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the  
world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.  
(Ps. 98:4,8-9).

It might surprise many that *Joy to the World* was not written to be a Christmas carol. While it is arguably the most popular one sung in the last 100 years, Isaac Watts wrote the lyrics in the early 1700's to speak to Christ's triumphant return to earth in his second coming, not his first! It was a Christian re-write of Psalm 98.

The song was put to a melody often attributed to Handel, but that attribution is also challenged.

The song is quite fitting as a Christmas celebration because the second coming of Christ is only victorious because of his first coming. We can see both the first and second coming as bookends to the salvation reality for us humans. It is likely because of a view to the second coming of Christ, that the early church didn't celebrate Christmas or Christ's birth.

You can scour the New Testament from Matthew chapter 1 to Revelation chapter 22, and you will find no indication whatsoever of the date that Jesus was born. While there are two accounts of the birth of Jesus (Matthew & Luke), neither of those accounts give any indication that the birth occurred on December 25<sup>th</sup>. The New Testament gives no indication that the early church celebrated the birth of Christ on any special day.<sup>7</sup> In fact, Paul makes no reference in all of his writings to the birth of Christ, nor do other New Testament writers beyond Matthew and Luke. In Luke's history of the church (the book of Acts), he also does not make any reference to the church celebrating Christ's birth.

As a modern church, we celebrate the birth of Christ, but never as our sole focus. We know that his birth and his second coming are two events that pivot around his crucifixion and resurrection. The gospel message of Christ paying the price for our sins, infuses joy at the Christmas celebration, and joyful confidence in the second coming.

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<sup>7</sup> Some dispute whether the New Testament church celebrated any day as more special than another. There are indications that the Lord's Day (Sunday) was marked as special (1 Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10). Beyond that, Paul writes in Romans that, "One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike." What those days were, however, Paul does not say.

**Point for Home:** So, sing *Joy to the World*. Sing it twice. Once with an eye toward the first coming of the Savior, and once with an eye toward his second coming. You will see the beauty of its claims in both.

BIRTH

## Joy to the World! the Lord Is Come 146

*Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Ps. 98:4*

1. Joy to the world! the Lord is come; let earth re-  
 2. Joy to the earth! the Sav - ior reigns; let all their  
 3. No more let sins and sor - rows grow, nor thorns in -  
 4. He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the

ceive her King; let ev - ery heart pre - pare him room,  
 songs em - ploy; while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains  
 fest the ground; he comes to make his bless - ings flow  
 na - tions prove the glo - ries of his right - eous - ness,

and heaven and na - ture sing, and heaven and na - ture  
 re - peat the sound - ing joy, re - peat the sound - ing  
 far as the curse is found, far as the curse is  
 and won - ders of his love, and won - ders of his  
 (1.) and heaven and na - ture sing,

(1.) and

sing, and heaven, and heaven and na - ture sing.  
 joy, re - peat, re - peat the sound - ing joy.  
 found, far as, far as the curse is found.  
 love, and won - ders, won - ders of his love.  
 heaven and na - ture sing,

WORDS: Isaac Watts, 1719; para. of Psalm 98  
 MUSIC: Lowell Mason, 1848; based on G. F. Handel, 1742

ANTIOCH  
 C.M.Repeats