



JOURNEY *to*
BETHLEHEM

*A Treasury of Classic
Christmas Devotionals*

LELAND
RYKEN

“To read *Journey to Bethlehem* is to take a class in poetry, church history, and theology all at once—and to do so with a master teacher. And like the best teachers, Leland Ryken doesn’t just instruct, but he also delights. You will learn new things about old favorites in these pages as well as encounter hidden gems from the best Christian poets, preachers, and thinkers. This book is a gift—not only for Christmas but for any time.”

Karen Swallow Prior, author, *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*

“With his insightful analysis of content, context, and form, Leland Ryken lifts the veil of familiarity from famous hymns, poems, and prose selections to reveal a new realm of Christmas, glowing with exuberant joy and singing with quieting peace. This is a weighty collection for the culturally curious as well as the literary enthusiast that opens the eyes afresh to what Christmas truly means. I highly recommend *Journey to Bethlehem* as a companion anthology to Ryken’s two previous treasuries, *The Soul in Paraphrase* and *The Heart in Pilgrimage*. There is rich reward in reading and rereading these works together.”

Carolyn Weber, Professor, New College Franklin; award-winning author, *Surprised by Oxford*

“This anthology is a feast. Choosing thirty classic texts for the Advent season is not an obvious undertaking. In Leland Ryken’s capable hands it has been beautifully done. Not only are each of these selections rich, but the commentaries by Ryken are most enlightening. Readers can memorize them, pray them, sing them, or simply revel in them. They will draw you closer to God.”

William Edgar, Professor Emeritus of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary

“With his signature talent for identifying challenging but accessible devotional material and skill for unpacking what makes those devotionals work, Leland Ryken offers up a collection of poems, hymns, carols, and sermon excerpts that delve into the meaning of God made man, of the Almighty Creator lying helpless in a manger. The ideal companion for Advent.”

Louis Markos, Professor in English and Scholar in Residence, Houston Christian University; author, *The Myth Made Fact*

“Ryken has assembled, contextualized, explicated, and applied a strong group of classics, both familiar and lesser known, whether cheerful and comforting or provocative and edgy. You’ll learn a lot as you’re being blessed and fortified. I think every pastor should have a copy handy for the Christmas season, as should families for their devotional gatherings. And aspiring writers of hymns, poetry, and edifying prose will get a short course in literary standards and ideals.”

Mark Coppenger, Former Professor of Christian Philosophy and Ethics, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *If Christianity Is So Good, Why Are Christians So Bad?*

“Leland Ryken is a master anthologist with an encyclopedic knowledge of devotional poetry and literature. This Yuletide anthology is a rich feast designed to nourish the soul on the truth and wonder of the incarnation with a masterful selection of hymns, devotionals, and poems.”

Gregory E. Reynolds, Editor, *Ordained Servant*; author, *The Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures* and *Yuletide: Poems and Artwork*

“Leland Ryken’s *Journey to Bethlehem* is such a rich resource. Sometimes it’s overwhelming how many books, devotionals, and resources exist for Advent. Ryken solves the problem by curating the best of the best for us. This volume will become an annual coffee-table staple in our household!”

Brett McCracken, Senior Editor, The Gospel Coalition; author, *The Wisdom Pyramid*

“What a valuable collection of Christmas gems: classic hymns, devotionals, and poems that celebrate Christ’s coming with words of weight and beauty. They are polished and packaged for us here, offered with just enough background and explication to help us relish and understand. This is a Christmas gift that will last.”

Kathleen Nielson, author; speaker

“This powerful but accessible volume instructs, delights, and edifies. It is a blessing that readers will long to share with others.”

David V. Urban, Professor of English, Calvin University; author, *Milton and the Parables of Jesus*

“Leland Ryken has been rendering great service to the church by recovering its rich devotional heritage and making it accessible for contemporary Christians. Now he takes up Christmas, the favorite holiday, helping us meditate on the birth of Christ by unpacking the classic works of songwriters, poets, and theologians.”

Gene Edward Veith Jr., Professor of Literature Emeritus, Patrick Henry College; author, *Reading Between the Lines: A Christian Guide to Literature*

“This volume provides the reader with a rich selection of well-edited Christmas texts drawn from across the ages, selected for their unique perspectives and artistic expression, and paired with thoughtful essays. The texts and commentaries are brief enough to read as devotionals, say after a family meal, and weighty enough to prompt one to ponder throughout the day.”

James C. Wilhoit, Professor of Christian Education Emeritus, Wheaton College

“Advent can often feel like a treasure barely opened; we can tell the glories go far deeper than we’ve seen, even after many seasons. In *Journey to Bethlehem*, Leland Ryken plunders the poems and prose of Christian history to help us pause before the manger and, with the shepherds, stand in deeper awe. The devotionals included here shed fresh light at every turn, showing the riches of Christ more clearly—and showing why those riches are called ‘unsearchable.’”

Scott Hubbard, Editor, Desiring God; Lay Pastor, All Peoples Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota

JOURNEY TO
BETHLEHEM

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A Treasury of Classic Christmas Devotionals

Leland Ryken, editor

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For Tom and Dyanne Martin

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Editor's Introduction

This book is an anthology of classic Christmas devotionals. As I did the research for this book, it quickly became obvious that the Christian world needs an alternative to the lightweight Christmas books that flood the market. The classic texts that I have brought together in this volume have stood the test of time and for discernible reasons.

The word *classic* in this book's title is not simply honorific but denotes specific qualities of the texts that make up this anthology. One of these traits is that the authors and/or texts are famous. I hope that as my readers read the table of contents, they will have their curiosity aroused by questions such as: *What did Luther, Calvin, Spurgeon, and other famous preachers say in their Christmas sermons? Why are hymns included as examples of devotional poems? What ten Christmas poems rose to the top in the field?* In regard to the last question, I will share a secret: as I envisioned my project of collecting classic Christmas literature, I assumed that the section of poems would be the easiest to fill, but in fact it was difficult to find ten Christmas poems that were sufficiently weighty to lend themselves to a five-hundred-word analysis.

Being famous is one criterion for being a classic, but what qualities make a devotional famous? The answers fall into the categories of *content* and *form*. At the level of content, a devotional included in this anthology needs to yield fresh insight into Christmas. Often there is a surprise twist or paradoxical aspect to a classic devotional. We are left feeling that we have never thought of the situation in that particular way before. Because of this original slant, a classic devotional stays in our memories or at least strikes us as being worthy of being a permanent part of our experience even on a first reading. The Bible speaks of singing a new song, and the devotionals in this anthology are either

literally or figuratively a new song of Christmas. A classic devotional gives us more than we already know.

If we turn to the *form* and *style* of a classic devotional, the quality of originality just noted applies here too. Excellence of style consists partly in the freshness of expression. Literary qualities also elevate a passage above conventional expository discourse. The presence of figurative language is a prevalent but not indispensable technique. Verbal beauty, or what we call a well-turned phrase, is equally characteristic of the selections in this book. Readers of the devotionals in this anthology will feel artistically as well as spiritually refreshed.

These qualities of content and form relate to the explications that accompany the selections in this book. *Explication* is the term that literary scholars use for the practice of close reading of a text. The close readings of the passages in this book were governed by the impulse to show what makes each passage great at the levels of both spiritual edification and excellence of expression.

Several principles determined the selection of devotional texts for this anthology. The first criterion was spiritual edification. The second was that the selections as a group met the test of being the best in their categories. Because they all meet that criterion, they are also a roll call of the famous. In this regard, there is a latent educational agenda at work. In the history of theology, why is the name of Athanasius automatically linked with the incarnation? Why, according to a survey, is "Silent Night" the world's most popular Christmas hymn ever? What was the very first Christmas poem? Why does the Nicene Creed replace the Apostles' Creed in Sunday morning services during December in some churches? For people who have a curiosity about these and similar matters, this book will provide answers.

I hope that my readers will not be disappointed by my refusal to say anything in this introduction about the history of Christmas as an observance. It is not relevant to the subject of this book. Although all of the selections in this anthology were *occasioned by* the celebration of Christmas, they are not *about* the institution that we know as Christmas. They are about the events of the nativity and incarnation as recorded in the Bible, along with the meaning of those events.

Some readers will have noticed by now that I have not used the word *advent* in connection with this anthology. Is this an advent book? Yes and no. If we define the word *advent* to mean "coming or arrival,"

it is an advent book, concerned from start to finish with the coming of Jesus to earth in human form. Similarly, if we think of advent in a liturgical sense of preparing for the coming of Christmas, the definition again fits, and in fact the thirty selections could be read during the weeks of December ending on Christmas Eve. But at the level of content or subject matter, the selections do not deal with preparation for Christ's coming to earth. They are instead about the events of the nativity and incarnation as accomplished facts.

I also need to make a distinction between the genres of anthology and a book of daily readings in a devotional book based on the calendar. An anthology is not tied to a schedule. It can be read in a week if one desires. It can be dipped into intermittently, with no guilt feelings about having missed a day. Of course the determination of thirty selections invites daily reading according to the traditional Advent period of late November through December 24. But even here there is a twist: one is unlikely to reread a calendar devotional book after the days have passed, whereas I hope that the readers of this anthology will reread it many times and do so year round.

Everything that I have said in this introduction is a variation on a central theme, namely, that this anthology provides something new. The mixture of the three categories of hymns-as-poems, prose selections, and poems is new. Limiting the selections to famous classic texts is new. Accompanying each passage with a five-hundred-word analysis is new.

All of the entries in this anthology follow an identical format: (1) the devotional text; (2) an analysis and explication of the text; (3) a summing up paragraph that identifies the practical takeaway of the entry; (4) a parallel Bible passage that clinches and enhances the devotional experience. All of this will seem familiar to some of my readers because this anthology is a companion to two previous Crossway books—*The Soul in Paraphrase: A Treasury of Classic Devotional Poems* and *The Heart in Pilgrimage: A Treasury of Classic Devotionals on the Christian Life*.

The best way to combine the devotional passages with the explications is first to read the devotional entry, then read the explication as a way of reaching a fuller understanding and enjoyment of what you have just read, and then read the devotional a second time, using the tips from the explication as a lens through which to view the passage more fully.

PART 1

CHRISTMAS HYMNS

Every hymn begins its life as a poem. It becomes a hymn only when it is paired with music. Until the 1870s, hymnbooks were words-only books, five inches by three inches in size. They were essentially anthologies of devotional poems. Our experience of hymns is revolutionized when we see them printed as poems and interact with them as devotional poems.

The first thing we see is that the text was composed on the principle of the line as the basic and recurrent unit of thought. The sentences do not run all the way to the right margin. If hymnic poems are composed on the principle of line construction, we need to read them that way. When we do, we immediately sense that the thought units are much briefer and more succinct than prose is.

A second thing we note is that the flow of thought in a hymnic poem is packaged as a series of stanzas. We do not fully experience this until we see the stanzas before us in vertical sequence. The progression is not circular, as when we return to the same starting point in a hymnbook but sequential. Then as we stare at the stanzas arranged in this way, we can identify the specific function of each stanza in the ongoing flow and in the overall superstructure.

When these things are in view, we can take the next step to identify the unifying theme or “big idea” of the poem. Usually a poet signals the unifying idea or motif of a poem in the first line or two. Once we train ourselves to identify the unifying core of a hymnic poem, we naturally start to think in terms of theme and variation (a formula borrowed from music). The individual stanzas are not self-contained units but are building blocks in a coherent whole.

The foregoing considerations have to do with the organization or structure of a poem. We need to balance that with the poetic texture—the individual details such as images and figures of speech. It takes time to unpack the meanings of these details, and treating a hymn as a poem allows us take the time that is required, instead of being forced to resort to the speed reading that singing necessarily imposes.

The explications in this section include material that has been repurposed from my book *40 Favorite Hymns of the Christian Year* (2020), published by Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company; acknowledgment is hereby gratefully recorded (see acknowledgments page for more information).

Joy to the World

ISAAC WATTS (1674–1748)

Joy to the world! the Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing.

Joy to the earth! the Savior reigns;
Let men their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
Repeat the sounding joy.

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.

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

It is natural to begin the section of Christmas hymns with the hymn often chosen to begin a congregational Christmas service. It is doubly appropriate to begin with it because the author is none other than the person known to posterity as “the father of English hymnody.” Isaac Watts (1674–1748), an educator and author of books on wide-ranging subjects, is regarded as a fountainhead figure in the history of hymnody because he is the one who freed hymn singing from the single-minded adherence to Psalm paraphrases (also known as metrical psalms). Watts wrote some 750 hymns.

The most obvious quality of “Joy to the World” is the tone of exuberance that breathes through it from start to finish. The opening word gets the excitement started with the accented word *Joy*, and after that everything is part of a grand celebration.

The opening line states the unifying idea of the poem, namely, the coming of Christ to earth in the incarnation and the joy that accompanies that coming. Everything that follows is an elaboration of this opening sentence. A discernible division of duties is present between the first two stanzas and the final two.

The first two stanzas focus on the coming itself. These stanzas are filled with references to the nativity story, with the imagery of coming, the angels’ pronouncement of *joy* that resounded over the countryside, mention of the *fields* where the shepherds were abiding with their sheep, reference to four nativity *songs* recorded in Luke’s Gospel, the joining of *heaven and nature* in the angels’ poetic words to the shepherds, and the need to *prepare room* for Jesus (an implied rebuke of how at Jesus’s birth there was no room in the inn). In our imaginations we journey to Bethlehem on the night of Jesus’s birth.

We can hardly miss the element of command in the first two stanzas, as expressed in the imperative verb *let*. The command to praise is a standard feature in the praise psalms of the Old Testament, and its presence here alerts us that this is a poem of praise. After the praise psalms state a command to praise and name the recipients of the command (as stanzas 1–2 of this hymn do as well), they outline the reason why we should offer praise. That is exactly what the final two stanzas of “Joy to the World” do.

These stanzas shift our attention from the coming of Jesus to earth to the effects of his coming. We continue to participate in a grand celebration in these stanzas, which are a partly literal and partly figurative picture of the blessings of the messianic reign that began when Christ

came to earth to accomplish his great work of redemption. Stanza 3 asserts that the coming of Jesus has reversed the effects of the fall, as pronounced by God in the curse of Genesis 3:17–18. The last stanza balances this act of cancelation of what is *no more* with a positive picture of what Christ has brought with his universal spiritual rule, with emphasis on *righteousness* and *love*. The exuberance continues unabated here at the end with the words *glories* and *wonders*.¹

The devotional takeaway from this poem follows the contour of the poem itself: we should celebrate Christmas with the joy that the hymn commands, and we should secure our position as recipients of the blessings of Christ’s messianic rule as delineated in the two concluding stanzas.

This hymnic poem arose from Isaac Watts’s famous enterprise of giving the Old Testament Psalms a Christological interpretation. Psalm 96:10–13 is a particularly close parallel to “Joy to the World”:

Say among the nations, “The LORD reigns! . . .
Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
let the field exult, and everything in it!
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
before the LORD, for he comes. . . .

Angels from the Realms of Glory

JAMES MONTGOMERY (1771–1854)

Angels from the realms of glory,
Wing your flight o'er all the earth;
Ye who sang creation's story,
Now proclaim Messiah's birth.

Shepherds in the fields abiding,
Watching o'er your flocks by night,
God with man is now residing,
Yonder shines the infant light.

Sages, leave your contemplations,
Brighter visions beam afar;
Seek the great Desire of nations;
Ye have seen his natal star.

Saints before the altar bending,
Watching long in hope and fear,
Suddenly the Lord, descending,
In his temple shall appear.

All creation, join in praising
God the Father, Spirit, Son;
Evermore your voices raising
To the eternal Three in One.

Refrain

Come and worship, come and worship,
Worship Christ, the newborn King.

Orphaned at age twelve and a dropout from grade school shortly thereafter, Scottish-born James Montgomery (1771–1854) would seem to be an unlikely candidate to write four hundred hymns, including “Prayer Is the Soul’s Sincere Desire.” Shortly before Christmas of 1816, Montgomery, then age forty-five, read the Christmas story from Luke 2. The song of the angels seized his imagination, and the words of a poem took shape. As is true of many hymns, inspiration caused the words to flow, and Montgomery completed the poem by day’s end. He printed it a day later, on Christmas Eve, in the local newspaper that he owned.

Most hymnic poems signal in the opening line what the controlling theme of the entire poem will be, but in this instance that expectation is misleading. The poem is not only about the angels of the nativity but also presents a pageant of nearly all the major agents in the Christmas story. In successive stanzas, we are led to contemplate the *angels*, the *shepherds*, the wise men (*sages*), Simeon and Anna (*saints*), and finally *all creation*.

Then as we look more closely, we begin to see what a packed and subtle poem this is. The poetic strategy of addressing someone absent as though present and capable of responding is called *apostrophe*. That is what this poem employs in every stanza as well as the refrain. The understood rule is that apostrophe is a way of expressing strong feeling, and if we note further that the speaker in the poem is busy issuing commands from start to finish, we can scarcely avoid being swept up into the rhapsody that is unfolding before us.

As we look still more closely, we see that in the first four stanzas the agents who are successively addressed are commanded to leave their customary activity and turn instead to the newly born Jesus. For example, the angels reside in heaven, and they sang at the creation of the world (Job 38:7), but now they are commanded to wing their flight to Bethlehem. It is likewise with the shepherds who ordinarily watch their flocks, the wise men who contemplate the stars, and Simeon and Anna who worship in anticipation in the temple. The final stanza breaks the pattern by introducing a liturgical ingredient that sounds the perfect note of closure.

Nothing more would seem to be possible in this procession, but something more *is* possible. The refrain, actually a doxology (a command to praise God), brings *us* into the drama, as we are commanded and invited to do what the angels, shepherds, wise men, and Simeon and Anna did. And all that we have noted is expressed with an eloquence and verbal beauty that are breathtaking.²

As we leave this beautiful devotional poem, we should allow ourselves to agree with the poet that leaving our ordinary concerns behind for the moment and journeying to Bethlehem instead are the order of the day. Worshiping the newborn King is what the Christmas season calls us to.

The following is the text that prompted Montgomery's inspired response:

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 among those with whom he is
pleased!” (Luke 2:13–14)

Come, Thou Long- Expected Jesus

CHARLES WESLEY (1707–1788)

Come, thou long-expected Jesus,
Born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us;
Let us find our rest in thee.

Israel's strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth thou art;
Dear Desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

Born thy people to deliver,
Born a child, and yet a King,
Born to reign in us for ever,
Now thy gracious kingdom bring.

By thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone;
By thine all-sufficient merit
Raise us to thy glorious throne.

This hymn was written by the most prolific English hymn writer of all time. Charles Wesley (1707–1788), brother of the evangelist John Wesley, wrote approximately 6,500 hymns, placing Wesley second only to American hymn-writer Fanny Crosby. “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus” was written in 1744 but was mainly only known in Methodist circles for a century. Then in 1855 a twenty-one-year-old Baptist minister in London named Charles Spurgeon quoted from it in his Christmas sermon, and after that it became a standard Christmas hymn in all Protestant denominations.

The first thing we notice is the pleasing simplicity of the poem. The stanzas are short and fall into the simplest stanzaic form in English poetry. It is called the *quatrain*, with alternate lines rhyming in an *abab* pattern. The entire poem, moreover, is a prayer addressed to Jesus by believers as a group (*our, us*). This simplicity of form is played off against the exaltation and eloquence of the words and phrases.

Once we move beyond the simplicity of the poem’s form, the poem requires our best analytic powers, lest we misinterpret it. First, despite the fact that the word *born* appears four times, this poem is not about the nativity as an event. It is about the incarnation as a theological fact. The poem is nothing less than an exposition of what the coming of Jesus in human form accomplished for those who believe in him as Savior.

It is particularly important that we get the opening line right. It does not ask us to perform an act of imagination and become an Old Testament believer looking to a coming Messiah. The poem situates us in our own present experience. The opening petition *Come* is the first of six petitions in the poem. It does not invite Jesus to be born in Bethlehem but instead invites him to apply his already accomplished acts of redemption in our own lives. The phrase *thou long-expected Jesus* is a stately epithet or title for Jesus that calls attention to the fact that he was foretold and longed for throughout Old Testament history.

Each quatrain performs its own function in the unfolding design. The first stanza asks Jesus to free and release us from our sin. The second stanza momentarily drops the petitionary mode and is an outpouring of adoration to Jesus as the *strength, consolation, hope, desire*, and *joy of every nation and every longing heart*. Stanza 3 devotes three lines to rehearsing why Jesus was born, and then the last

line petitions Jesus to bring his eternal kingdom. The last stanza is wholly petitionary, as two parallel pairs of lines, beginning with the formula “*by thine _____,*” ask Jesus to rule in our hearts and raise us to heaven.³

The purpose of the poem is to define who Jesus is and what he came to earth to accomplish. We can absorb the poem best by allowing it to codify our understanding of the incarnation and by allowing the statements of longing and adoration to express our own feelings.

This hymnic poem is a meditation on why Jesus came to earth in the flesh. Zechariah’s song recorded in Luke 1 does the same:

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people
and has raised up a horn of salvation for us . . .
(vv. 68–69)