



TIME OF GRACE®

Away in a Manger Study Notes

Summary

How historically and biblically accurate are some of our classic Christmas carols? Pastor Mike strips away the music as we examine the lyrics of some of our favorite songs. First up: how often do we think about the environment in which Jesus was born? “Away in a Manger” isn’t a picture-perfect nativity scene or Hallmark moment. Instead, through its historical context, we see the profound impact of what it really means to be born in a manger.

- Verse 1 —

Away in a manger no crib for a bed
The little Lord Jesus lay down His sweet head
The stars in the sky look down where He lay
The little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay

- Verse 2 —

The cattle are lowing the baby awakes
The dawn of salvation beginning to break
I love Thee Lord Jesus oh gift from above
The King of the heavens forever with us

- **Hebrews 2:14-15** —¹⁴Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— ¹⁵and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

- Verse 3 —

I worship You Jesus for all of my days
The highest of praises be unto Your name
My God and my Savior my King and my Friend
Yours is the glory forever, Amen.

Points to Ponder

1. Discuss the final section of today's message with a friend. What part of worshipping Jesus is difficult for you right now? Yet why is Jesus still (and always) worth it?
2. Have you prayed about making a year-end gift to support the spread of Jesus' message in the new year? Take a moment to talk to your heavenly Father about what you could do to thank him for giving you his only Son.
3. Pray this week that just one person would join you for worship on Christmas Eve. Ask the Holy Spirit to open a door for you to invite and also to open that person's heart to accept your invitation.

Homework for Next Week

Luke 2:1-20, Philippians 2

Time of Grace Ministry
Is Christ in Your Christmas Carols? – “Away in a Manger”
Hebrews 2:14-15
December 10, 2023

Pastor Mike Novotny

You know, for a culture that loves things that are new, the latest shows, the latest screens, the latest phones; around Christmas time, it turns out we don't love the new and the novel, we love the classic and nostalgic. And it kind of begs an interesting psychological question, why would that be? Turn on pop radio from January through October or November, and the songs are always fresh. Nothing stays on the top ten for more than a month or two, or six at the most. So, why would it be during this time of year, the Christmas time, we don't want the things that are new, we crave the things that are old?

Well, here's one theory to answer that question. At the end of the year when so many things in our life have changed, we love to end the year with something that is unchanging, rock steady, and stable. I'm not sure how good your memory is but think back to a Christmas a year ago, has anything changed in the world since then? Has the economy changed? Just a little bit. Have some of your retirement accounts changed? More than a little bit. Have the governors and leaders, and politicians changed? Some of them, yes. Have the laws of the land changed? Some of them, yes. Have the best sports teams changed? For sure. Has the climate changed? Yeah. Everything it seems has changed, and it's not just, like, an out there in the headlines thing, it's actually under our own roofs that so much has changed. And for better or worse, I bet compared to 12 months ago, so much is different about your life now than it was last Christmas.

You know, this time of year we talk a lot about big words like peace and joy, and hope, but it's hard to be still and have peace when everything changes. And so maybe this Christmas playlist makes sense. We want something that reminds us of the past, something that hasn't changed and probably won't. Now, if that's the case, if you agree with me that so many things change and we just want something steady and reliable, I'm super happy you're here today, I'm super excited you're watching at home, because today, I want to add to your Christmas playlist. I want to take some classic songs, not that are just on Pop radio in the car, but classic songs that the Christian Church has sung around this time of year, not just for the last year or two, but maybe for the last century or two or more.

I want to go back to those classic Christmas Carols. And here's actually what I want to do, I don't just want to call back the nostalgia for some of you of growing up in church. You know, that Christmas Eve service when everything got quiet and they lit the little candle and we all sang Silent Night and the organ dropped out and that's -- that's emotional. But I actually want to give you something so much better than that. I actually want to strip away the music for just a second and have you look really intentionally at the lyrics in these classic Christmas songs. Because the

truth is, music can move you for a moment, but only a message can bless you when the moment is over. Alright?

Eventually the band stops playing, and music loses its effect. But if it's possible, in the next few weeks that I can put a message about an unchanging God and unfailing love into your heart, then whether something changes in your life this Christmas or next Easter or next Summer; you would actually have something rock steady and reliable to depend on. You would have a Jesus who is the same yesterday and today and forever. And so that's my goal for the next few weeks. We're going to look back at these classic Christmas Carols. If you're here live at The Core, we're going to sing them after the sermon is done. I hope with more meaning than ever. But just for a second, so the music doesn't distract us, we're going to -- I'm not going to sing them a cappella for you, thank the Lord. We're just going to look at the verse after verse, chorus after chorus, and see the truth about this amazing God that we have packed inside these beautiful and classic songs.

So, if you're up for that, we're going to dive in to our first song today, a classic, "Away in a Manger." A quick church show of hands, how many of you have heard or sung "Away in a Manger" before? Alright, hands down. Any of you here today or watching at home, it's your very first time singing "Away in a Manger?" Zero votes, alright. So, this is a song that lots of us know. It actually had an interesting rumor attached to it, many people in the early years thought that "Away in a Manger" was written by Martin Luther, the great German theologian. Some of the titles of the song were originally "Luther's cradle song." But it turns out, I know, Luther probably said it. "It's a good song." Turns out he didn't do it. The song was actually written in the late 1800's right here in America and it was almost an instant classic. It was like that one Bruno Mars song that's just on the radio forever, and ever, and ever. By 1891, I learned, this song was sweeping the country. Multiple artistes were recording multiple musical settings, different musical remixes that all focused on this incredible and touching song about the birth of Jesus. And over the years people have tweaked with some of the wording and the lyrics, you're going to notice that today, but I hope you find in this classic tune and this classic text, the unchanging truth about the birth of Jesus.

Here's how the song starts, "Away in a manger, no crib for a bed, the little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head; the stars in the sky looked down where he lay, the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay." If the point was just that the Lord Jesus came down from Heaven and Mary put him in a manger, the song could say, "Look, there in a manger." Or, "Right there in the manger, no crib for a bed." But it doesn't say that, it says, "Away in a manger." And what does that mean? Well, the word "Away," I don't have to tell you this, implies a distance between two things. If I start conversation with you in the lobby after church and you say, "Pastor, go away." Don't say that, that wouldn't be very Christian of you. But you're basically saying, "Put some distance between the two of us."

Or if you say, "You know, my husband went away to serve in the military," or, "My daughter went away to college," you're saying there's some significant distance between where you are and where that person is. And so, the song, from the very first word wants you to know that the

Jesus who is in the manger is away, and how far away was he? He is the Lord as this first verse says two times, "The Lord of Heaven."

Jesus is the son of God who lived with his Father and the Holy Spirit for all eternity in perfect comfort and glory. In a place where there was no struggle, no suffering, and no pain. Where saints and angel worshiped him for years upon years, centuries and millennia upon millennia. That's where Jesus belonged and yet here he comes, way, way, way, way, way far away from his home and is placed in a manger. In fact, if you want to know just how far from the comforts of Heaven Jesus was, think about that word, "Manger." You know what a manger is? I kind of hate how we Hallmark most the original Christmas story. You know, we think of this perfectly symmetrical two pieces of wood and just this Egyptian cotton straw. Something like this beautiful little ancient crib and Jesus all snuggled up and looks so great. Do you know what a manger was? It was a feeding trough that barn yard animals would lick. This is kind of like saying, "The little Lord Jesus in a dog dish." Right? Your dog licks his dish, your cat scrapes the bottom of the bowl, and barnyard animals would've taken their gritty, wet tongues and licked a manger.

Now, how desperate do you have to be? Moms, you can answer this question. How desperate do you have to be to put your first-born child in a manger? I mean, Jesus, who was living in perfect comfort and glory, his first moment out of the womb after Mary's arms, was there. There were no sanitizing scrubs, there was no Febreze to make it sound better. Jesus was so, so far from his heavenly home, that he came into the muck and the mud of life on earth. His love for you was so profound, he desperately wanted to save you so badly, that he didn't just come down to live away in a palace or away in a castle, or away in a comfortable chair. He was born.

I hope you never sing those first four words the same way, he was away in a manger. There should be a parenthesis and just a bunch of exclamation points after that. The Lord Jesus became little and ended up in a manger. The one who made all the stars and looked down upon them was now being looked down upon by the stars. He was so, so low in his humility and love.

You know, when I think about Jesus getting into the middle of it, I think about an epic run that I had about nine months ago. My wife, Kim, my friend, Matt, and I were on this trip in Israel. We were staying in a hotel right on the Sea of Galilee and right next to it is an epic national park called "Mount Arbel." We got up before the sun came up. We ran to the start of the trail. And then we started going, switching back and forth to get up on this amazing view, so we could watch the sun come up over the sea of Galilee. Does it sound idyllic? It almost was. Because we were not alone on Mount Arbel. The cattle were lowing, animals covered the side of it, grazing on the hills, wild animals with big -- In fact, I took a picture when we came across one. We were on the side of this cliff trying not to die and right in the middle of the path was this giant beast with these huge horns and we looked at each other like, "Ah, what do we do now?" And since Matt and I are gentlemen, we said to my wife, "Ladies first," right? No so we, we actually made it past the cow, there were tons of them all over the place, and not to be too graphic about it in church, but the cows were not just taking things into their body, they were pushing things out their body, and they weren't hiding them in the corner of the National Park, stuff was everywhere. So, we're trying to dodge and not die, stepping on rocks, dirt, mud, we think it's mud

but we're not quite sure, it was pretty nasty. And in fact, there were a bunch of times we were so caked with stuff on the bottom of our shoes that we would find, like, a jagged rock to scrape it off.

We got back to the hotel, got a hose just to salvage our shoes; but then it hit me, this is the exact land where Jesus lived. Two thousand years ago when he was away from his heavenly home, he didn't just live in a dirty manger and then jump to the palace. He walked, not with closed toed modern running shoes but with open toed sandals, these exact same trails and hills. He didn't have fancy running water and a swanky hotel to clean himself up. He got right into the middle of all the things that it means to be human. And when I thought about that, the king of all kings, the Lord of the earth, the one who made the stars is in the middle of this, in a manger, in the muck, on a cross. How can you not be moved by the profound sacrifice and the love that God has for us? Which gets our hearts ready for verse 2.

Now, I want to warn you, before I show you these words, people have used different versions of the song. The verse I'm about to share with you maybe isn't the one that you grew up with, but don't be mad at me, alright? "The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes, the dawn of salvation beginning to break, I love thee Lord Jesus oh gift from above, the king of the heavens forever with us." I know, I know, it's supposed to say, "The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes, the little Lord Jesus," can you finish this with me? "No crying he makes," right? But some people have said, "Is that true?" Once again, let's not make this a beautiful Hallmark moment. Mary didn't sweat or grunt. Joseph didn't run around the manger totally panicked. Jesus never cried. They just put him in this feeding trough and he was at peace -- Is that true? Some people have said, "Well, do we know? Jesus was a baby. Babies cry. Jesus likely cried," No crying he makes.

And so, this author has chosen to tweak the lyrics and I love the update. "The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes, the dawn of salvation beginning to break." That's a great line. The dawn is the start of something; the dawn of a new day, and in this case, it's the dawn of salvation. So, the act of saving us, it started with the conception and birth of Jesus. It led through his life, to the cross, and to his resurrection. And I would say to you, that to really understand the joy and relief of the Christmas season; in fact, to really understand what the Christian faith is all about, that it is so, so essential to define that word, "Salvation" in an emotional way.

So, we talk about that a lot in church, don't we? Jesus is our Savior, here's the dawn of salvation. We sometimes ask, have you been saved? Or we're saved by grace. Do you know what that word means? Saved means to be rescued from a horrific danger. Something unthinkable just chills you to -- That was about to happen and someone or something rescued us, so we became not in danger, but safe. That's what it means to be saved. Have you considered that? That if there was no Jesus in a manger, that you would've been in horrific danger? You need to imagine that for a second, there's no Jesus, there's no manger, there's no Christmas, there's no cross, there's no Easter. Imagine it was just you living life. How do you think you would make it through death and into the presence of God? What would you do? Would you try to be nicer or cut back on some of your worse vices? Would you give a little bit of extra to charity and maybe try to be more patient with the kids? Would you work on this part of your character or step away from drinking or smoking like you used to? What would you do so when you get to the end of your

life, you would feel confident and not absolutely terrified that you're actually going to make it to a better place?

Jesus would say, "Whatever your answer is, however much effort you're ready to put in, it would not have been nearly enough and you would've been in horrific danger." Without a manger, you and I would've lived, however good or bad, we would have died, and then God would've looked us in the eye, shaken his head and said, "Go to hell." And he would've been right. Now, some of you are shocked to hear that because you've grown up in a warm and fuzzy culture that doesn't think. But just imagine, there you are, standing with all the world as a witness and God just opens a book and starts to read. You know, the thing you said to your dad when you were 15, the thing you said to your worst enemy when she wasn't in the office, when you wanted to win that argument with your ex or your spouse, the depths that you sunk to. If God, with no commentary, just read the bear facts of the worst moments of our life, who of us would look around to the angels and say, "I'm worthy?" The answer's no one.

Listen, if on the main road that came into church today, God put up a single billboard with your three worst sins, I guarantee you, you would not have walked into this church. And so, thank God, Jesus is in that manger. Before you and I had to face death trying to be good and knowing we could never be good enough, thank God that the little Lord Jesus came down and the dawn of salvation began to break. Thank God that you and I don't have to hope and pray and strive and sweat, thinking, "Am I good enough, am I not good enough?" Instead, we can look at the Jesus who started there and ended there and know that we don't need to be afraid. There's forgiveness for everything we've done wrong, that the blood of Jesus takes everything bad in that book and erases it, and gives us a whole new story.

I love how the book of Hebrews talks about the birth of Jesus, it says, listen, Hebrews 2, "Since the children have flesh and blood," since you and I are human, "Jesus too shared in their humanity so that by his death, he might free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." I hope the sight of your Savior there, not your teacher, your instructor, or your counselor, your Savior in a manger, is the greatest relief, because it is the only way to be saved. It's why the song says, "The dawn of salvation beginning to break I love thee, Lord Jesus Oh gift from above, the king of the heavens," the only one who can save, "forever with us."

Did you hear the story of those three men whose boats sank off the coast of Louisiana? In early October, I believe, of 2022, three guys were boating when their boats sank and for 28 straight hours, they were stranded. They actually tied together their ice chest, they had something to sit on, but then the sharks came. One of the sharks, you can find this picture on the internet, actually leapt out of the water, and with his jaws, ripped off the front half of one man's life vest. He had to take his thumbs and gouge the shark in the eye so it scurried away, but it would be back, and it would bring friends. One of the men, desperate, knowing the horrific danger, he jumped into the water and swam. His cell phone had one/ two percent left on the charge. He was looking for a signal and by the grace of God, the sheer grace of God, he found a signal, screenshotted his location, and sent it to someone just before his phone died. And then the men were there floating on the ice chest, around them, four black tip sharks circling and hungry, until they heard in the distance... [Imitates Helicopter Choppers] And the coast copter's helicopter appeared.

Can you imagine how that must've felt? Something unspeakable is about to happen to us until someone else saves us. That's just like Christmas. The little cries of that little infant are the blades of the chopper coming to save. It's not just some heart-warming story, like on Hallmark that we lost love and then Prince Charming walked into the room. No, this is us about to die and suffer the punishment of our sins, until God in his great love gives up everything he has, to give us everything that we need.

And so, when you see baby Jesus there. When you sing these songs. When you remember "Away in a manger," remember the dawn of salvation, a Savior given to you. And if you believe that, that because of your sin, you deserve to go to hell but because of Jesus you won't come anywhere near it, only then are you prepared to sing the last verse of this song.

"I worship you Jesus for all of my days, the highest of praises be unto your name. My God and my Savior, my King and my friend, yours is the glory forever, amen." I love that rendition, it's a big praise party for Jesus, right? The honor, the glory, the praise, all of my days, it's all yours, Jesus. In a few minutes, some of you are about to sing that, but before you do, I need you to understand what you're singing. "I worship you Jesus," you know what that means? It means, "Jesus, I'm willing to do whatever you want because you're worth it." This was packed into word of worship. "Jesus, whatever you want me to do, whatever you want me to stop, whatever you want me to start, whatever you want me to change. Not my will but yours," that's what it means to worship Jesus.

If you're going to sing this song from a sincere heart, you're basically saying to Jesus, "Blank check, you tell me what you want. I will live the rest of all my days trying to serve you saying, 'Your will be done,' to the best of my ability." And that's a huge thing to say. I mean, in fact, that might be the reason that some of you are, kind of, tentative about church or the Bible, or the Christian faith, because you know there are some things that you do or like to do, or are orientated to do that are different than what Jesus says. You're handing your whole life, hopes, and dreams over to Jesus and saying, "Whatever you want, you're worth it." It's like you're taking every desire; you're taking your sexuality, your dollars, your cents, your budget, your retirement, your career, your relationships, and you're saying to Jesus, "Doesn't matter what I want, what do you want? Not my will, but yours be done. I'm not going to lean on how I see the world or understand things, I'm going to trust in you with all of my heart."

That's the most important thing you could probably say about Jesus. "You are so good, and so worthy, and so worth it, that I will worship you. And it might be hard, and I might not do it perfectly; but I'm going to try to follow you and be your disciple, even if I have to deny myself and take up the cross." That's a huge thing to say. You thought it was a warm and fuzzy church word, didn't you? "Ah, we worship you, Jesus." No. "Anything and everything, Jesus, is yours because you're worth it."

But I want to tell you today before I say amen, he's worth it. What Jesus wants to give you is so absolutely worth it that whatever you need to change, whatever it costs you to repent, you will

never regret. There's nothing new and novel in the song, but maybe that's not what you need this Christmas. Maybe you, like me, just need the old, old, story of Jesus and his love. Let's pray.

Jesus, we call heroes the people who leave the comforts of home and family and friends to serve and fight for freedom overseas. But that sacrifice, as great as it is, is nothing compared to you. But we honor those who have given up personal comfort and went through the trauma of war to fight for a greater cause, but that is nothing compared to your cross.

Some of us might be used to these scenes of the Son of God on a cross or that little baby Jesus in a manger. I pray that you would awake us up this year to realize how profoundly beautiful and sacrificial all of that is. That the one who had the right to live in absolute comfort for all eternity gave all of it up to be oh so far away, right down to a manger.

Jesus, it is not easy to follow you. For some of us, it's financial, for some of us it's forgiveness, for some of us it's sexual, for some of us it's materialism. There are challenges and temptations and decisions we make every single day. And so, today we are praying that your Holy Spirit would open our eyes to see and believe that if the King of Heaven gave up Heaven and came to earth, so that the people of earth could end up in Heaven, you are worthy.

And so, Jesus, we lift up your holy name today as we pray, as I preach today, and as we sing "Away in a Manger." What an amazing Savior. It's in the name of Jesus that all of us pray and all God's people say amen.