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## Christmas Carols, their meaning, their history

**Vocabulary:** Carol, Hymn -The word "carol" originally referred to a dance being performed in a circle. Gradually words were introduced to these dance songs and the spectators became involved as well. Later, the term "carol" came to be applied more to verses of song than dance. Christmas Carols refer to those songs that tell the story of the wondrous event of our Saviour's birth. Christmas Hymns are those songs that address the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

## JOY TO THE WORLD

This incredible hymn by Isaac Watts is only one of the many thousands of hymns and songs written by him. His start in hymn/song writing came about as a challenge made by his father in an attempt to stifle Isaac's teen-age complaining. What was this 15 year old boy complaining about? He was complaining about the poor quality of hymns that were sung in his church. He took on his father's challenge and his hymns were an instant success. Sunday after Sunday Isaac wrote and presented new hymns to the congregation. He was a preacher-poet and incredibly well loved by his congregation. At the age of 38 his declining health required him to leave the pastorate. He went for a "short" visit to stay with friends and left 38 years later! During that time, he devoted himself to writing hymns based on David's Psalms. "Joy to the World" came about as he meditated on Psalm 98.

## HARK THE HERALD ANGELS SING

It's hard to get away from songs by Charles Wesley because he wrote so many of them! This one, however, has a really interesting history. First, it is important to realize that Christmas carols and hymns as we know them now were abolished by the English Puritan parliament in 1627 as being part of a "worldly festival". The Puritans considered Christmas to be a secular celebration. (Can you imagine what they would think of it today!) HARK THE HERALD ANGELS SING was one of the few written during the 17th and early 18th centuries. In Wesley's original text, the first line read "HARK! how all the welkin rings, glory to the King of Kings." Welkin is an old English word meaning "vault of heaven". The famous Reverend George Whitfield changed the first line to the one we now sing today. That final change was made in 1753. The music was composed by a Messianic Jew named Felix Mendelssohn. Originally composed in 1840 to celebrate the anniversary of Gutenberg's printing press, it wasn't until 1855 that the tune and Wesley's poem were put together.


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