



# A Christmas Countdown

by Jonathan Kraemer

**H**ave you ever noticed how much we like to count down to Christmas? We count the days using an Advent calendar or candles on the Advent wreath. We mark the time and prepare to celebrate a meaningful Christmas with special devotions or midweek services. We ponder just who this newborn baby in the manger is and why He has come.

One very meaningful way of counting down the final days to Christmas are the “O” Antiphons or refrains. Have you ever heard of those? Maybe not, but you likely know the hymn “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” (LSB #357). That hymn contains all seven of the “O” antiphons in verse form. The “O” Antiphons are printed in the hymnal right after the hymn. Sometime before the ninth century, the “O” Antiphons were written to be sung with the Magnificat in the evening prayer services on the last few days counting down to Christmas. They are commonly called the “O” Antiphons because each begins with “O”, addressing Christ using an Old Testament title. Each of the antiphons expresses in a different way who the Messiah is and why we need Him to come.

**Dec. 17:** *O Wisdom, proceeding from the mouth of the Most High, pervading and permeating all creation, mightily ordering all things: Come and teach us the way of prudence.*

The first “O” Antiphon calls on Christ as the Wisdom of God, which always has existed, before the creation of all things (Proverbs 8:22). By Wisdom, the very Word of God, He “founded the earth” and “established the heavens” (Proverbs 3:19). We might pride ourselves on being keen

observers and students of the order of creation, yet we are a fallen people who in our sin do not know the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:19-20). We create chaos in our own lives and the world by worshipping what we create, by calling evil good, by not seeking God’s wisdom. And so we pray: Come and teach us the way of prudence.

**Dec. 18:** *O Adonai and ruler of the house of Israel, who appeared to Moses in the burning bush and gave him the Law on Sinai: Come with an outstretched arm and redeem us.*



This antiphon calls on “Adonai” or “The LORD,” a stand-in for the divine name “Yahweh.” It is derived from what He spoke from the burning bush to Moses: “I AM WHO I AM... Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exodus 3:14). He is the one who heard the cries of His people Israel and redeemed them

with an outstretched hand from slavery in Egypt. Although we were not slaves in Egypt, we are born in slavery to sin, in the dominion of the devil and death. We cannot redeem ourselves because everything we do is tainted by sin. The Law He gave us on Sinai only shows how great our debt is. And so we pray to the great “I AM”: Come with an outstretched arm and redeem us.

**Dec. 19:** *O Root of Jesse, standing as an ensign before the peoples, before whom all kings are mute, to whom the nations will do homage: Come quickly to deliver us.*

Here the cry goes up to the Root of Jesse, the new David. The towering tree of the dynasty of David was cut

down when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Yet God's promise concerning David's son remained: "I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever." (2 Samuel 7:13). This Messiah would "stand as a signal for the peoples" (Isaiah 11:10). Kings and rulers would bow to Him. He would deliver His people from all the nations. We are like God's people who were refugees, but the powers we contend with in this world are death, Satan, and the enemies of God. And so we pray to the Root of Jesse: Come quickly to deliver us.

**Dec. 20:** *O Key of David and scepter of the house of Israel, you open and no one can close, you close and no one can open: Come and rescue the prisoners who are in darkness and the shadow of death.*

The Key of David (Isaiah 22:22) is the one who has the authority to do what no one else could do. Only He can open the way to light and life beyond the grave. We are born prisoners, locked away by our sin in deep shadows and death's darkness. He came and when he "had overcome the sharpness of death... didst open the kingdom of heaven to all believers" (*Te Deum*). Yet we still live in this shadowy world, locked in death's grip. So we pray to the Key of David: Come and rescue the prisoners who are in darkness and the shadow of death.

**Dec. 21:** *O Dayspring, splendor of light everlasting: Come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.*

This antiphon calls upon the Dayspring, the Sun of Righteousness (Malachi 4:2) that dawns on a world shrouded in the darkness of sin. The death pall was laid on creation when we rebelled against God, who is the light and life of all people (John 1:4). Without God, our light, we sit in endless night and gloom and grief, without hope, without life. But the "Dayspring from on high" has broken upon us; the Light of the World cracked open the tomb and broke its hold on us. That Dayspring will dawn on the last day and banish all darkness and death forever. And so we pray: Come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

**Dec. 22:** *O King of the nations, the ruler they long for, the cornerstone uniting all people: Come and save us all, whom you formed out of clay.*

This antiphon addresses the King of the Nations, the cornerstone. Israel as a nation and her kings were to draw all the nations together in the worship of our heavenly king. In their sin, though, they were no more than a brittle foundation of clay. And so a cornerstone is promised, a king of the nations. Though this stone was rejected it will become the cornerstone (Psalm 118:22). On Him is built a house, a people of living stone into a temple which will never fall (1 Peter 2:5). Still, we who are but weak and brittle clay often build on shifting foundations, rather than our King of Kings. And so we pray: Come and save us all, whom you formed out of clay.

**Dec. 23:** *O Emmanuel, our king and our Lord, the anointed for the nations and their Saviour: Come and save us, O Lord our God.*

The final "O" Antiphon calls upon Emmanuel. When overwhelming military forces threatened Judah and when they would have thought God had abandoned them, God gave King Ahaz a sign through the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 7:14). One day a virgin would give birth to a child who would be called Immanuel, God with us—God literally with us in the flesh. Sometimes we might think God has abandoned us, especially when our sin deserves separation from Him forever. Yet "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14) in order to draw us near

to him forever. And so we pray: Come and save us, O Lord our God.

With that, on the day before Christmas Eve, the countdown is complete. But the "O" Antiphons have one final important message. In Latin, the first letter of each Messianic title, from the last to the first reads "*ERO CRAS*" which means "Tomorrow I will come." The Messiah answers the fervent prayers of His people over the centuries, and ours over the last seven days with wonderful news. The one whom we have been waiting for has come, this baby whom we call Jesus, whose birth we celebrate at Christmas. With patriarchs and prophets, with priests and kings, with all of God's people down through the ages, and with all those today to whom He still comes we sing: "Rejoice, Rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel!"

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