



CELEBRATING
CHRISTMAS
THROUGH SONG

MANGER THRONE

TONY WOOD

FOREWORD BY MICHAEL W. SMITH

Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year, but if we're not careful, we can easily get wrapped up in other concerns, thereby forgetting the greatest gift of all. *Manger Throne* is the perfect companion to guide our hearts toward the moment that changed everything—the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

JORDAN ST. CYR, singer, songwriter, and BEC Recordings artist

I've jokingly referred to Tony Wood as the king of Christmas, thanks to his extraordinary ability to write some of the most memorable Christmas lyrics I've ever come across—words that focus our hearts and minds on Jesus throughout the season. In *Manger Throne*, Tony takes us behind the scenes in creating his songs and points us to the most important message of history: the hope and love found in Christ. This book will be a true gift to all who read it.

JONATHAN MASON, vice president of Christian A&R and publishing for Curb | Word Music Publishing

In an effort to enjoy the season just a little longer, I recently decided to put up and decorate our Christmas tree during the first week of November. I even started blasting beloved Christmas songs on the stereo before Thanksgiving (truly controversial!). When I listen to Christmas music, I feel in awe of the story of Christmas. That Jesus would come to earth to save *us*—His beloved. That He would take on human form and walk among us. My hope is that we won't let Christmas come and go each year without considering the wonder of Jesus coming to earth. I highly recommend joining Tony Wood on the Christmas journey through his book *Manger Throne: Celebrating Christmas through Song*. It's a collection of stories and devotionals that reminds us of the story of Emmanuel as well as the hope and peace that only He can bring.

PAUL McCLURE, singer, songwriter, and Bethel Music artist

Rumors spread throughout the hills of Judea that a “new Elijah” had come when John the Baptist’s parents welcomed him. Several months later, shepherds shared news of a Messiah born in Bethlehem. Then wise men came from the east, alerting Herod and all Jerusalem as they sought this Messiah. That’s because Jesus’ birth changed *everything*. May *Manger Throne* also awaken your heart and change everything for you this Christmas season.

TODD SMITH, founding member of Selah, author, and speaker



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TONY WOOD

FOCUS
ON THE FAMILY[®]

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Manger Throne: Celebrating Christmas through Song

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Foreword

Anyone who knows me well knows that I love Christmas! I always have. Having recorded five Christmas projects to date, every December I find myself crisscrossing the country sharing music that helps people prepare their hearts for another holiday and hopefully stirs afresh the awe and wonder of our Savior’s first coming.

I can slip into the Christmas spirit pretty easily. (After all, a lot of my holiday songs were actually written in the summertime!) But as December approaches, perhaps you find yourself a little slow getting into the spirit of the season. Maybe you feel overwhelmed by it all. Or maybe you’re sad, lonely, or simply have a sense that all is not “merry and bright” in your world.

No matter where you are this year, I would love to recommend to you *Manger Throne: Celebrating Christmas through Song*, written by my friend and collaborator Tony Wood. Partnering with Focus on the Family and Tyndale House Publishers, Tony has prepared twenty-eight daily devotions and prayers for the days leading up to Christmas—and slightly beyond.

These devotions are based on holiday songs Tony has written with a number of your favorite Christian artists. (Some of them we wrote together!) I believe that with each day’s reading you will be able to look beyond your circumstances and toward the majesty of the One who is “God with us”—the One who came to us in a manger bed.

Michael W. Smith

Introduction

I won't lie—there are times I *might* have played Christmas music in July!

Whether it's those sweet opening strings of Nat King Cole's "The Christmas Song," the jazzy colors of Vince Guaraldi on *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, any crooner taking on a holiday classic with *Home* in the title, or the many timeless carols of the season, Christmas music instantly transports me to a happy place.

I love the trappings of the season: the lights on Main Street, a wreath on our door, stockings by the fireplace, great food on the table and gifts under the tree, special programs at church and school, opportunities to be with family and friends, the celebration, the remembering . . .

But most of all, I love the *heart* of the season.

My faith hinges on a manger in Bethlehem and the reality that God in heaven came to earth to pursue a relationship with His people. I need to remember that. I need to be told that over and over. *That's* why I love Christmas.

Yet amid all the beauty and goodness of the season, the urgent (and often the trivial) calls out to me, trying to lure my focus away from what truly matters. If December is a beautiful country meadow

covered in a fresh snowfall, the daily to-do list leading up to Christmas Day shouts at me like a murder of crows on the edge of that same field. Worldly annoyances, frustrations, and distractions require all my effort to pay attention to what matters most.

And that's where Christmas music comes in. It helps me focus, and I hope it will help you, too.

I pray that the songs and prayers in this book will help you in your good fight to keep the amazing, incomparable love of our Savior at the center of your season.

Merry Christmas!
Tony



*Christmas needs a little less rushing about
and a little more quiet thinking.*

HELEN VALENTINE

DECEMBER 1

“MAKE IT TO CHRISTMASTIME”

*“For I know the plans I have for you”—this is the
LORD’s declaration—“plans for your welfare, not
for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.”*

JEREMIAH 29:11

“MAKE IT TO CHRISTMASTIME”

*No one loves December more than me
The month that moves at twice the normal speed*

*Frantic days and frenzied nights
Running like the wind
Things to do, places to be
Racing to the end
But I’ll be fine
Just gotta make it to Christmastime*

CHORUS

*Can’t wait for the twenty-fourth
Finally walking through that door
Fall into the arms of those that I adore
All the madness, all the miles
Melt into sweetest smiles
Those moments make it all worthwhile
So I’ll be fine
Just gotta make it to Christmastime*

*Every season there are times I feel alone
I give so much I'm weary to the bone*

*I keep my family in mind
Just gotta make it to Christmastime*

REPEAT CHORUS TWICE

Performed by TASHA LAYTON on *This Is Christmas*

Written by Tasha Layton, Keith Everette Smith, and Tony Wood



understand the chaos of Christmas! I've experienced it many times myself.

There's a December calendar that has too many events in too few nights. A to-do list that seems longer today because of what we didn't get done yesterday. A bunch of "things we always do at Christmas" that competes with a host of new things that we have every intention of getting to . . . eventually. Yet another list of people we need to reach out to during the month. (I remember a holiday-themed cartoon of a woman complaining that she had lost her list of lists!)

Amid all this busyness, I find it strangely comforting that at the heart of the Christmas story are a man and his young wife who find themselves in their own season of chaos.

Mary must have felt that her life had spun out of control—enduring her first labor pains in what was essentially a stable . . . and a stable in a strange town at that. Meanwhile, her husband, Joseph, was trying to follow God's instructions and care for his wife at the end of a trying journey. I can only imagine him feeling the strain: If the birth of this baby was to go well, the pressure was on him.

Stress. Uncertainty. Anxiety.

At the same time, were there ever two people more perfectly in the center of God's will? Was He not leading them? Was He not going to take care of them and provide everything they needed just when they needed it? On earth there was chaos and concern. In the eyes of heaven, however, every detail was accounted for. The plan was in place, the outcome secure.

How many times this December might we be standing in a similar place of tension? Perhaps then, for us, as physician and minister Martyn Lloyd-Jones once said, real faith is simply a refusal to panic.

God's plan is in place. The outcome is secure. There's no need to panic.



God of Order,

In all my disorder . . . in the middle of my uncertainty . . .
You are certain.

You are sure. You are faithful. You are good.

Even as Mary and Joseph were experiencing moments both holy and traumatic, not too far away were shepherds tending their flocks—shepherds whom You would lead to come see the newborn Savior.

You were already working in the midst of this couple's upheaval.

Moving in their mayhem. Tender in their turmoil. Divine in their disorder.

You are the God of great and perfect plans. Even in the messiness of life this season, You might well be leading me to the miraculous.

And I will trust You.

Amen



DECEMBER 2

“CHRISTMAS IS”

*As a deer longs for streams of water,
so I long for You, God.*

PSALM 42:1

“CHRISTMAS IS”

*Christmas is music and family in town
Christmas is Snoopy and Charlie Brown
It's anticipating that snow's gonna fall
And praying for someplace to park at the mall*

*It's Mom going crazy 'cause the turkey got burned
It's saying thanks for some gift you'll return
Christmas is caroling kids at your door
It's paper and ribbon all over the floor*

CHORUS

*Christmas is coming
Christmas is near
I've been counting down the days all year
Christmas is almost here*

*Christmas is rooftops covered in lights
It's away in a manger, it's a wonderful life*

*Christmas is caring for those who've got nothing
It's dropping your change in the bell ringer's bucket*

CHORUS

*Christmas is all of these fun things for sure
But Christmas is really oh so much more
It's good news of hope for the whole world because
Christmas is Jesus*

CHORUS

Performed by **FRANCESCA BATTISTELLI** on *Christmas*
Written by Francesca Battistelli, Ian Eskelin, and Tony Wood



To me, there is something perfect about where our celebration of Christmas falls on the calendar.

After the slow grind down of autumn when there is progressively less light, more darkness, and more cool winds that send us indoors, we finally hit the cold, long nights of winter. Maybe because I'm inside more, perhaps a bit more removed from so many people, there is something introspective about this time of year. Being indoors more, I also seem to catch a bit more news online and from my TV. That's rarely something that increases my hope that things are going well in the world!

Yet therein lies the beauty of Christmas. Like a diamond in the dust, it's a bright, colorful light that shines in what might otherwise be the darkest, dreariest time of the year.

Sometimes in a grocery store I'll hear Johnny Mathis's "We Need a Little Christmas" coming through some cheap speaker in the ceiling. I almost always whisper a soft amen. I know that *I* need it.

I'm also aware that I don't need just the lights and happy greetings of the season. They can help brighten the darkness of winter, but only for the briefest of moments. They can bring a smile, but they can't reach my soul.

I don't *need something*, like a song or a wreath. I need *someone*. Someone who gives me real hope. Someone who is the *way* to the Father, the *truth* in a world flooded with lies, and the *life* that is abundant and unending.

That's what I need. *That's who we all* need.



God I Long For,

You and I know my heart. You and I know my need.

In a time of the year when my heart can feel heaviness all around, I need You, Jesus.

You remind me that with You, light conquers darkness;

that love has truly come into the world;

and that my heavenly Father cared enough to move toward me.

I will always need that reminder.

I will always be glad to see Christmas come around.

Amen





The Story behind the Song: “Christmas Is”

Nobody co-paints. Nobody co-sculpts.

But in the world of music, cowriting is a regular part of the art and business. For thirty years now, often multiple times a week, I have walked into a room to meet with some combination of close friends, casual acquaintances, and/or total strangers. I’ve been asked on occasion what the dynamic in such a room is like. Truth is, it’s as different every time as the personalities that are present. Yet there are a few things I’ve learned based on my experience.

I knew from my early days as a cowriter that I was an introvert with a low-simmering insecurity. Enough honest, heart-to-heart, confessional conversations with buddies have led me to believe that a lot of creatives struggle with insecurity at times. Yet the desire to craft the best song possible compels us to put ourselves in situations where we need to be deeply vulnerable—all in order to create something with others that is better than what we might typically create on our own.

In order for that to happen, the writing room must be a safe zone. I want to be in a room where every contributor feels free to suggest whatever comes to mind, whether lyrically or musically. In such a safe zone, people are free to say the so-called wrong thing, knowing that sometimes the wrong thing leads someone else to the right thing. I often think the two most beautiful words during a writing session are *What if. . . ?*

When I walk into a writing session with Francesca Battistelli and Ian Eskelin, we never know for sure if we’ll get a good song, but we do know for sure that we’ll have a lot of fun. I’ve written a couple dozen songs with Francesca and a couple hundred songs with Ian,

so that's a lot of water under the bridge. We've celebrated together as friends and prayed for one another in tough stretches. Both of them are gifted, musically and lyrically. They are top-shelf artists as well as people whose faith is as real in private moments as in public ones.

It's hard to recall the specifics of the session for "Christmas Is," but I know we had decided that we wanted to take on that toughest of all assignments: a fun song! Believe it or not, fun songs can be quite difficult to write; so many ways to go wrong and end up in a ditch. I know we would have worked out in advance that we wanted to save our truth—that Christmas *is* Jesus—until the end of the third verse. That's pretty late in a song, which left us with a lot of lyrical freedom in the earlier verses.

I'm sure we talked about our childhood Christmases, as well as more recent holidays. I imagine I would have recounted the Christmas when my wife and I discovered that our live tree had dripped sap on all the wrapped presents beneath it. What's more, our tree must have also been hosting an egg sac of aphids that subsequently hatched and fell into the sticky sap on our presents! Then there was the year when three generations spent Christmas Day together with the stomach flu. I didn't wish to memorialize either day in the lyrics to this song!

In the end, I'm guessing that dozens of lyrics and musical ideas were left unused, but I think we ended up with a good combination of the sacred and silly memories that have made our holidays so memorable.

DECEMBER 3

“HOPE IS HERE (DO NOT FEAR)”

*The angel said to them, “Don’t be afraid, for
look, I proclaim to you good news of great
joy that will be for all the people.”*

LUKE 2:10

“HOPE IS HERE (DO NOT FEAR)”

*There’s never been a year when I’ve so needed
To see the season come around
To sing the sweet, familiar carols
See the lights all over town*

*’Cause I need to be reminded
In the darkness of these days
Our God is not so far away*

CHORUS

*Hope is here
Love chose to leave His throne
Hope is here
He made our world His home
There’s an echo from the angels saying
Do not fear
Hope is here*

*May we always seek Him like the wise men
Following that star*

*May the holy wonder of the story
Captive our hearts*

*Of how a tiny baby
Changed eternity
So let us remember and believe*

CHORUS

*Right where you're standing
Come empty-handed
Out of the darkness
There comes a light
The Father, the Spirit
The Son is alive*

CHORUS

Performed by BUILDING 429 featuring TERRIAN on *Hope Is Here*
Written by Jason Roy, Chad Cates, Jason Barton, Riley Friesen, and
Tony Wood



In a season when we walk past brightly glowing storefronts and drive through neighborhoods radiant with light displays, there is sometimes a shadow that trails behind us. At times it seems to follow us everywhere. It's anxiety and worry, and it's there in our edgy, annoyed responses to people. It's there in the strained look around our eyes.

For some, worries show up before the big day. There is the fear of *I've been to four stores, checked seven websites, and still can't find it in the color she wants*; the anxiety over *It's just too much for one person to get done and so many people counting on me*; the worry about *I hope everyone behaves and acts civil this Christmas and no one brings up politics or Uncle Norman's little problem*.

For others, worry slips in after the big day. There is the fear over *How are we going to pay for all this?* as well as the generalized anxiety of *I've got an unsettled feeling about what the New Year holds*.

God sees us all running around in December, and He knows exactly which of us are running scared.

Throughout the story of Jesus' birth, we find an angel saying "Fear not." Encountering a holy messenger from the throne room of heaven would be unnerving to anyone, and the news Gabriel brought for Mary and Joseph was earthshaking. So God had His servant preemptively address their concerns with His calming words.

The shepherds, too, were experiencing things so outside the norm that they needed reassurance from the Most High.

To all of them, the angel spoke words of *peace*.



God Whose Voice Settles My Soul,

In this season, may my heart hear You speaking *peace* to me.

May Your Word, the words of a friend, a message in some card, the truth of some sermon, perhaps the words of some song connect to my soul and remind me:

It's going to be okay.

I am seen by You.

You've got this.

You have heard every word of every prayer.

In this very moment, You know all that I think and feel, and You are working for my good.

May I have the kind of faith that is so settled in who You are, so confident in Your sovereignty over this world and over my being, that I simply refuse to lose my joy to life's frustrations.

Amen

