

# The First Noel

## Introduction

Leader's note: Feel free to read this section out loud to the group, or to summarize it, or to keep it entirely to yourself.

*We are taking time to focus on some common Christmas carols to prepare our hearts to sincerely worship God in this season. It can be easy to allow the familiarity and traditions of the season to be a barrier to authentic worship, but it is worth the effort to reorient our hearts toward God.*

*This study focuses on "The First Noël." The opening passage helps us to remember that, among many things to say about Jesus' incarnation, this is a monumental act of God's love to send Christ into the world. Paul teaches us that there were at least two key aspects: a timing, and especially with a time that had fully 'arrived' much like a pregnancy arrives; and a sonship that is most clear in a physical birth (see Galatians 4). The First Noël begins with the Biblical events found in Luke 2:8-14 when the Angels announce the birth of Christ to shepherds tending their flocks near Bethlehem. The implications of the story contained in the carol will be explored in this study.*

*Did you know: Noël is the French word for Christmas and is derived from the Latin natalis, meaning "birthday." While the exact origins of the song are unknown, many scholars believe the melody originated in France as early as the 1200s. The English version was first published in 1823 by William B Sandys.*

## Study

Take about 10-15 minutes to read through the lyrics of The First Noël. Make notes in the column to the right; there are some initial ideas to prompt you. See the "Note on Observations" if you are unsure.

A note on observation as a Bible study tool: observations are intended to be focused on the passage at hand, rather than ideas that the passage reminds you of. Though we are not looking at Scripture here, the skill of making observations is vital to good Bible study. What do you see in the lyrics of the carol? Are there repeated words? Do you see any connections to actual Bible verses or stories? Why did the author choose the words, ideas, descriptions, etc.?

Lyrics:	Observations (key words, active characters, symbols, descriptions, questions):
The first Noel the angel did say was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay;	Why call it the first?

in fields where they lay keeping their sheep, on a cold winter's night that was so deep.	
They looked up and saw a star shining in the east, beyond them far; and to the earth it gave great light, and so it continued both day and night.	<i>The light was great... John 1</i>
And by the light of that same star three Wise Men came from country far; to seek for a king was their intent, and to follow the star wherever it went.	<i>"From country far..."</i>
This star drew nigh to the northwest, o'er Bethlehem it took its rest; and there it did both stop and stay, right over the place where Jesus lay.	<i>Why Bethlehem?</i>
Then entered in those Wise Men three, full reverently upon the knee, and offered there, in his presence, their gold and myrrh and frankincense.	<i>What made the wise men revere a baby?</i>
Then let us all with one accord Sing praises to our heavenly Lord That hath made heaven and earth of nought, And with his blood mankind hath bought	<i>What is this one even saying?</i>
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel, born is the King of Israel.	<i>Born, a baby, a king</i>
<b>Broad themes, repeated ideas, other ideas and notes</b>	<i>People seeking Jesus, People told of Jesus, People led to Jesus</i>

*Leader's note: Have the group share some of their observations about the carol. The following questions could be used to foster discussion. Feel free to ask them out of order, or ask other thoughtful questions as you share observations about the carol itself. Do whatever helps your group identify key themes and engage with one another!*

**?** Of the groups mentioned in the song, who heard the angel's message first? What is the significance of that?

*Possible answers: The shepherds were the lowest of the low in society. Revealing the news to them first shows the inclusivity of Christ for all people. The shepherds may have also been more likely to spread the message than those of higher status who may have felt too entitled or selfish.*

**?** Who else heard the message? What is different about these groups?

*Possible answers: The wise men. They may have also been kings. First to shepherds then to the wise man (people of status) again shows the good news of Christ's birth being for all classes and types of people.*

**?** What symbols do we use in the Christmas season? What role does 'light' play?

*Possible answers: Light is a symbol of Christ, as the light of the world. Candles are traditionally used to mark the Advent season.*

### **Luke 2:8-14 (NIV)**

<sup>8</sup> And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. <sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

<sup>13</sup> Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup> "Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

### **Philippians 2:5-11 (NIV)**

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

<sup>6</sup> Who, being in very nature[a] God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;  
<sup>7</sup> rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature[b] of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
<sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!

<sup>9</sup> Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,  
<sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
<sup>11</sup>and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

? What is significant about Jesus coming to earth as a baby?

*Possible answers: He fully experienced every aspect of humanity, including being a helpless infant. He grew up, learned a trade, and worked for years before starting his public ministry. He was to become our new 'Adam', as Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 15:45*

? What do Jesus' actions teach us about our relationships and how to conduct ourselves?

*Possible answers: because Jesus, the King of Kings, humbled himself to serve us, we also ought to serve one another; Jesus was the only man to ever have a right to pride, in a sense, and yet he served us.*

? Why did God exalt Jesus?

*Possible answers: to show that death was defeated; Jesus deserved it for giving up his glory for our redemption.*

? Why should we seek humility like Jesus?

*Possible answers: it is not because we are seeking glory in the first place! We deserved death, yet Jesus served us. We seek humility because it is a frank acknowledgement of our status before God as sinners, without Christ's intervention.*

? How does Jesus' kingship, a theme in the carol, conflict or resonate with his being born as a baby?

*Possible answers: Jesus entered the world not to be served, but to serve, seeking to save the lost. The bible is clear that his Kingship will be evident to all mankind when he returns in glory.*

? How does Jesus' kingship conflict or resonate with his servanthood?

*Possible answers: Jesus is the creator and sustainer of all things, yet he washed his disciples' feet (John 13); Jesus is the author of life, yet subjected himself to a show trial to pay for his people (Philippians 2)*

? How does our 'co-heirhood' with Jesus, as our King and Savior, conflict or resonate with our humility in life?

*Possible answers: possible tension with a sense of value and humility, arrogance versus shame, Jesus saves sinners but calls for disciples.*

### For Discussion and Accountability

? The First Noel is ultimately a call to worship. How will you worship King Jesus in the coming week?

? How are you being called to humbly serve others this Christmas season?