

“The Songs of Christmas”
I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day

Various Scriptures

December 29, 2019

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Introduction

Well, it’s happened. Another **Christmas** has officially come and gone, and in its wake we find many wondrous and amazing things. For some there are memories of laughter and family togetherness. For others memories of late nights and headaches. Kids everywhere are playing with their new toys and parents are reminding them to share and play together. Trash cans are filled to the top with crumpled up wrapping paper, torn apart bows, and empty boxes. Refrigerators are filled with leftovers and Christmas cookies, while adults map out their new year diets on full stomachs.

Christmas is a great time of celebration with so much anticipation and build up, and then after that day of smiles, laughter and time together, there can be quite the letdown. As radio stations abandon their Christmas music and stores practically give away their Christmas decorations that didn’t sell, Christmas is all but forgotten. But I don’t want us to abandon Christmas just yet. And as we cling to the truths of Christmas for one more Sunday sermon, let us walk together through another Christmas Carol. This Christmas carol was written by perhaps the greatest American poet to ever put ink to parchment. And a message of peace in the midst of brokenness shines through in the words to this poem entitled, “*Christmas Bells*”.

The year was 1863 and a poet by the name of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote the words to this familiar Christmas Carol, “*I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day*”. Longfellow was a man who has inspired and encouraged many people through the ages with his writing. And yet he wrote ‘believe me every man has his secret sorrows, which the world knows not, and often times we call a man cold when he is only sad.’ His poems uplift the thousands, and yet he was a man who had experienced many tragedies in his lifetime. You see, he lost both his wife and a child to tragedy. And now, he found himself in the midst of a Civil War that was tearing apart the country and taking the lives of nearly every young man in his town. His own son was wounded and would spend years impacted by this wound from war. It is from this heavy heart that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow asked the question – What about peace on earth, good will to men? This is the thought of a man burdened with trial and difficulty. Is God still faithful? Does God still care? Are the themes of Scripture found at the manger still relevant? And as Longfellow penned the words to his poem, Christmas Bells, you get to see his struggle, his heart, and his conclusion. My prayer is that we would be encouraged by God’s faithfulness as the bells of Christmas fade into the new year. Let’s *Pray*.

Luke 2:1-14 (read) – with the news of the Savior, the Angels responded in worship highlighting two things and really giving us advice on how we are to let the glory of God impact our relationships on earth. “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men...*”

This is the theme of Longfellow's poem, which was later put into music.

Video of Song

Let's dig a little deeper...by breaking down the song verse by verse and looking at the truths in God's Word it highlights.

Stanza 1...

I heard the bells on Christmas day; their old familiar carols play.

And wild and sweet, the words repeat:

Of peace on earth, good will to men.

1. Jesus Restores Peace!

The message of the Christmas bells, and familiar carols of olden days, is one of peace.

Peace on earth, good will to men. These were the words of the Worship Song the angels sang, in the Bethlehem night sky among the shepherds. *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men..."* And yet we don't always get the meaning right. To us the word 'peace' means, 'peace of mind' or a 'cease fire between enemies'. But the Hebrew word for peace is, *Shalom*, and it carries with it a much greater meaning. It means, "to be complete, perfect and full of peace." It is much more than a greeting or a mindset. One commentator writes, "The word *Shalom* in the Bible means, 'Universal flourishing, wholeness and delight in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts are fruitfully employed. The whole process inspiring joyful wonder as the Creator and Savior opens doors and speaks welcome.' *Shalom* is the way things "ought to be". Therefore, 'Peace on earth' is a recollection of the way things once were at the very beginning of Creation. **All throughout Scripture** men inspired by the Holy Spirit speak of God as being the 'God of peace'. And so, imagine with me as the God of peace speaks creation into existence. He speaks, and the stars light up the sky. He speaks and land separates from water. God speaks and birds begin to fly, beasts begin to walk on land, and fish inhabit the oceans. With His very voice, creation springs into existence – and everything created testified to God's goodness. Life was as it should be, perfectly peaceful, complete, and full. But then something happened. Adam and Eve gave into temptation and sinned, ushering in a new age of life, one terribly altered by sin – tearing the perfect (*Shalom*) peace of God and with God a part at the seems.

The earth continued to change, the disease of the soul, known as sin, grew and compounded the agony of the world, and death became an overarching theme to humanity. I'm sure as the angels watched history unfold, they thought of what it was supposed to be like and compared it to what it had become. But God, in His great love and mercy, did not give up on fallen creation. Prophets began to foretell of the restoration of peace between God and man, found in a Savior – and the angels must have watched with great anticipation. And then one day, the time was finally here. The long-awaited Messiah was born – and in great jubilation the heavens declared, *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men."*

With the birth of Jesus, that peace that once existed with God, as Adam and Eve walked and talked with Him, can be had again. The message of Christmas is one of Peace. **Romans 5:1** tells us, *"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord*

Jesus Christ.” In Jesus, peace with God is restored – and in that relationship we can experience what God intended us to have before sin wrecked it all.

This is the song of the Angels that day Christ was born, and this is the song of Christmas bells that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow turned his ear toward time and time again. But even with the truths of Christmas and the songs reminding us of peace with God and with each other, it is easy for us to grow discouraged. And this is where the **second verse** of Longfellow’s poem brings us...

*And in despair I bowed my head,
“There is no peace on earth,” I said.
For hate is strong, and mocks the song,
Of Peace on earth, good will to men*

2. Life is Full of Discouragement.

Sin, War, Hatred, Difficulty, Hardship, Death, Disease and the list goes on. This is where we see the heartache and discouragement of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, as he reflected upon his own life. In 1861, Henry’s wife of 18 years, Frances (Fanny) had determined that their daughter’s hair was too heavy (filled with curls). And so while Henry was taking an afternoon nap, she began to cut some of those curls off. She was fond of those curls and wanted a keepsake, like many mothers do today, and so she placed a few of them in an envelope, which she sealed with hot wax. Unknown to her some of the hot wax fell on to her dress and because of the material of her dress, it burst into flames moments later. Henry Longfellow awoke from his nap to the screams of his wife and children and rushed to her aid trying to smother the flames with his own body (leaving him severely burned); but by the time the fire was out his wife had been burned beyond recovery – she died the next day. On Christmas day in 1862, the following year, he would record in his journal, *“How inexpressibly sad are all holidays, a Merry Christmas say the children, but that is no more for me.”* The death of his beloved wife was a burden too great to bear. This is why he would write – *“There is no peace on earth,” I said.*

We can relate to this can we not? Because of sin, each and every one of us understand this discouragement. And when it rains it pours. Within the next line of his poem we can hear the emotion...

“For hate is strong, and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men.” In 1863, two years after he wife’s tragic death, the Civil War began. Longfellow’s heart ached at the very thought of brother killing brother, and forbid his son to enlist. However, one morning as he rose, he found this letter waiting for him:

Dear Papa,

You know for how long a time I have been wanting to go to the war, I have tried hard to resist the temptation of going without your leave, but I cannot any longer. I feel it to be my first duty to do what I can for my country and I would willingly lay down my life for it, if it would be of any good. God bless you all.

Yours affectionately, Charley

In November of the same year Charley enlisted in the 1st Massachusetts Artillery division, at the battle of New Hope in VA, his unit was overtaken, and he was shot. The bullet went through him from back to shoulder, nicking the spine. Longfellow's fear unfolded before his very eyes as he read the letter of this news. With great worry, Longfellow traveled to Washington in order to be with his son. Roughly one month later, on December 8, Henry took his son Charley back home and began the lengthy process of nursing his son back to health. First his wife, and now his son.

The words of discouragement falling off of the pen of Henry Longfellow in this second verse are understood and speak to our hearts, because we have been there.

Maybe not under the same circumstances, but one of the constants in life is this very truth – that life is full of difficulty, discouragement and disappointment – and it all too often feels like there is no peace on earth to be had, and hatred wins the day.

It is then that Henry hears the old familiar sound of the Christmas bells, which inspired him to write this poem. And in the chiming of the bells, he was reminded of God's faithfulness.

Let's continue on, and look at the **third and final** verse...

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep,

God is not dead, nor does He sleep.

The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,

With peace on earth, good will to men.

3. Christmas Testifies to God's Faithfulness.

Even in the midst of the sorrow, depression, and difficulty that life brings – hope rings out – because the message of Christmas – the message of Peace and Hope – are found in the faithfulness of God expressed in the birth of His Son.

Listen to the words of the prophet - **Isaiah 7:14** reads, "Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel." And **Matthew 1:23** tells us that this title for Jesus means, "God with us." The faithfulness of God is that He sent His Son to be with us. **John 1:14** tells us that, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." And so this title in the context of John's Gospel means that God lives among us – God became a man. God is present with His people. That child that was born that day was fully God and fully man – that is what is wrapped up in this title Immanuel.

Hebrews 2:17-18 - "He had to be made like his brethren in all things so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest." In Biblical times the High priest was someone who interceded for you, someone who went to God on your behalf. A priest was always chosen from among men because he, being one of them, knew how to pray accordingly for their needs.

Jesus became one of us in order that He might rightly represent us as our faithful high priest before God the Father.

Verse 18 says, *“He Himself was tempted in that which He suffered and so He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.”* He knew temptation. He knew testing. He knew suffering. But never sinned. This speaks to His ability to sympathize with us.

He was hungry, He was thirsty, He was tired, He slept, He learned, He was glad, He was sad, He was angry, He was grieved, He was troubled, He was disappointed, He was tearful. He was overcome by the prospect of future events. He exercised faith. He read the Scripture. He prayed. He sighed with an aching heart. He felt everything. You say you've been mistreated and misjudged? So was He.

This is not a God who is apathetic toward His creation, but a God who because of Jesus, is sympathetic to our experiences. **He knows our hurts and He knows our weaknesses.** The child born that day was God with us to feel what we feel, to experience what we experience, to be tempted and tested as we are tempted and tested in order that He might sympathize with us on the one hand – and help us on the other hand. Do you see how personal this is? God did not send Jesus to this earth, so that He could simply experience a human life – He sent His Son, the Savior of the World to restore peace and bring salvation to you. God with Us – can be understood – God with Me/God with You. **When tragedy strikes, and difficulties overwhelm us, rest in this truth – God has not left you, He has not died, He is not sleeping – God is Awake, He loves and cares for you, and He is With You.**

The truth that Longfellow was trying to convey in this song, is that when the tragedies and difficulties of life come your way, allow your Savior to remind you of God's faithfulness. Even when hatred mocks God's peace, and your head hangs in despair – God is still faithful and the peace and salvation that He brings through Jesus Christ rings out louder still. For when we dwell upon the Word of God and His presence with us, our scars testify to His faithfulness.

Conclusion

This poem, written in the midst of tragedy and discouragement, reminds us that God has not abandoned us. He has not thrown us aside. But rather, He is with us. He knows our hurts and our weaknesses. He gives courage to face our fears; wisdom to understand trial's purpose; and strength to endure those trials – So we can trust Him for the rest. I bet you didn't know that's what those bells are singing on Christmas morning.

And it would be good for us to allow the truths of Christmas to be our focus in the New Year. *“God is not dead, nor does He sleep.”* He is alive and with us! *Closing prayer.*