

Carols for the King: *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day*

(Various Texts)

The Story behind the Song

Written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in 1863, one of the most well-known poets and writers of his day and a staunch pacifist and abolitionist.

In July 1861, Longfellow's wife Fannie had tragically died after her dress caught on fire. Henry tried to extinguish the flames, even using his own body. His own burns were so severe that he was unable even to attend his own wife's funeral. He stopped shaving on account of the burns.

As the Civil War raged, Longfellow's oldest son Charles snuck off to join the fighting against his father's wishes. On Dec. 1, 1863, Henry received a telegram that his son had been severely wounded. Henry set out to find his son, meeting up with him on Dec. 5th in Washington D.C.

Charley's wound was inches from his spine and surgeons feared he would be paralyzed.

After traveling back home to Boston, on Dec. 25th, 1863, Longfellow, wrote the poem seeking to capture the dynamic and dissonance in his own heart and the world he observes around him.

The Meaning of the Song

- Longfellow reflects on how the message of Christmas is wrapped up in the angels' announcement to the shepherds (Luke 2:14, KJV)
- Every year, Christians proclaim this message of peace and goodwill
- And yet, Longfellow saw a disconnection between this message and the world around him
 - Something that we can all relate to
 - The world is full of strife and turmoil
 - Human sin & hate mocks the message of the angels

The Hope of Humanity

- The last stanza summarizes the Gospel
- Peace & goodwill is not based on human endeavors
 - It is centered in the work of God through Jesus
- The message of the angels was that the Savior has come to right the wrongs
 - And God is still alive and well
- Our hope is in God at work in the world
 - Through Jesus
 - Through His Spirit alive in us
- Every year as we celebrate Christmas, we, like the bells Longfellow heard, ring out the message of hope found in Jesus

So What?

- The message of Christmas is that Jesus is the hope the world needs
- Do we live in His hope?
- Do we proclaim it?

Meditation Verse: *Luke 2:14, KJV*

I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day

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.

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along, the unbroken song,
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

Til ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime,
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

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.

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep;
God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
With peace on earth, good will to men.