

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Christmas Message

Hark! the herald angels sing

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Introduction – the message of a Christmas carol

There are a number of hymns which, by deeply rooted tradition, are only ever sung at Christmas. And for our Christmas message this year, we're going to think about the words of one of the best known of these: "*Hark! the herald angels sing.*"

If I had to pick my absolute favourite Christmas hymn, or carol, I think it would have to be this one. Almost every line in it either quotes or closely paraphrases the actual words of scripture, and its poetry is, in my opinion, superb. By the way, I will try to refer to it as a Christmas hymn, rather than a Christmas carol, because the term 'carol', in my understanding, includes songs which are connected in some way with Christmas or the celebration of it, but which don't mention God or Christ, and which therefore cannot be called hymns.

We're going to look a little at the history of the hymn before going through the words line by line, but before we do either of those things I want to just stand back and reflect on the role played by hymns and hymn singing in Christian worship and in the spread of the Christian gospel.

The importance of singing

We are specifically instructed in two places in the New Testament (Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16) to sing "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs", and the first of these references provides what I always think is a clue to the particular power and significance of hymn singing. Ephesians 5, verses 18 (part of) and 19 read:

"...be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord."

As I read it, this scripture is telling us that two things are going on in parallel when we sing hymns. One is that we are addressing **one another**. The other is that we are singing and making melody **with our hearts to the Lord**.

As a broad generalisation, that mysterious blend of melody, harmony and rhythm which we call music has an amazing power to stir the human soul. How exactly it does this is, as far as I know, impossible to explain, but the experience of it is common to most of the human race. This is not to deny, of course, that there are some who do not share the experience, and that there are huge differences between the types of music which appeal to different people, but the generalisation remains true.

When we combine the beauty of music with the beauty of poetry, words which convey meaning but also in themselves have rhythm and structure (such as rhyme) then we have song, and when the theme of the poetry is spiritual, we have a spiritual song, or a psalm, or a hymn. I'm not going to digress further in order to try to distinguish those three biblical terms.

When we sing hymns, then, we are communicating with one another on a human level, as just described, whilst, at one and the same time, we are communicating with the Lord, on what we might call a spiritual level, singing and making melody with the heart. So there are two kinds of music being made at the same time. One is natural, made with our voices and heard with our ears, and the other is spiritual. It cannot be picked up by any earthly microphone, but it is being listened to in heaven!

God has created us with three component parts. We are spirit, soul and body¹. When we sing hymns together, all three of those parts are involved, working together in a unity which brings glory to God and blessing to us.

Many Christians can bear witness to the powerful effect which the singing of a hymn has had on them, and many would testify that God has spoken to them through the words of a hymn. Undoubtedly too, the singing of hymns has often also been the means God has used to touch the hearts of those who are strangers to Christ, and to draw them to Him.

Quoting hymns vs. quoting the Bible

Having said all of that about the great value of God's gift to us of hymn singing, I want to emphasise very strongly an extremely important point. Despite the great value of hymns, despite the treasury we have of great hymns, new and old, and despite the way that God so often uses them to carry forward His purposes, we must never, ever, ever put the words of a hymn on the same level as the words of scripture.

It is the Bible alone which is the inspired word of God. It alone has authority. So as we shortly begin to talk about the words of a particular hymn, we must never confuse them with scripture itself. It is in fact the accuracy with which, most of the time, this hymn quotes and applies the truths of scripture which makes it so special.

The hymn alludes to several Bible verses, but as I look at its words, the passage of scripture which comes most immediately into my mind, and which I'm sure was in the author's mind, is the account given by Luke of the angels' visit to the shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem. I'm therefore going to read Luke chapter 2 verses 8 to 14.

“And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!’”

History of the hymn

And now, having read the principal scripture on which the hymn is based, let's look at the hymn itself. It is one of the many which were born out of that glorious time of gospel revival which gave rise to the movement known as Methodism. The original version of the hymn was written by

Charles Wesley and appeared in 1739, but the version we know today is the result of a significant editing of the text by George Whitefield, another of the early Methodist preachers, in 1758.

Perhaps the most obvious of the changes Whitefield made is that he replaced Wesley's original opening lines, which were:

“Hark how all the welkin rings,
‘Glory to the King of Kings.’”

Whitefield replaced these with the familiar:

“Hark! the herald-angels sing
‘Glory to the new-born King!’”

and thereby effectively gave the hymn the title by which it is generally known. A further change was made in 1782 when these two opening lines were added as a refrain at the end of each verse.

The tune was also changed. Originally, at Wesley's request, the hymn was sung to a slow, solemn tune, very different from the joyful, triumphant one we know today, which was adapted from a melody by the composer *Felix Mendelssohn*.

We may well wonder what difference it would have made if Whitefield had never decided to change the words. Would the hymn have become as popular as it has? More interestingly perhaps, would more people know what the word *welkin* means? I don't know about you, but I had never come across the word until I started looking into the history of this hymn.

Welkin is a literary word for the sky or the heavens, so Wesley's original lines were about a great proclamation of glory to God, ringing out across the heavens. I'm pretty sure he would be thinking of the very first part of the proclamation of that multitude of angels we've just read about: “Glory to God in the highest.”

To fully sense what I would call the atmosphere of this hymn, I think we need to grasp the sense of irrepressible joy bound up in these words. It's what the whole hymn is about. When the angel announces that he is bringing good news of great joy for all the people, it is one of the Bible's great understatements. Words just can't express the enormous wonder of what had happened that night in the nearby town. The eternal God, infinite in power and wisdom, had come, in the person of God the Son, to live amongst us. He had been born as a tiny baby that night, and laid in a manger.

But do angels ever sing?

But at this point I want to just digress a little to explore with you a question which wouldn't have arisen if Wesley's original words had remained unaltered. Perhaps it's a question not often considered. Do angels actually sing? I suspect many people will dismiss this as a very silly question. “Of course angels sing”, they will say, “everybody knows that!” Perhaps surprisingly though, you can search the New Testament from end to end and you will not, as far as I know, find a single reference to angels singing. In the verses I've just read, from Luke chapter 2, the text of verse 13 gives no indication that the heavenly host did anything other than speak the words attributed to them.

To the best of my knowledge, there is nowhere in the entire Bible, with just one possible exception which I'll come to in a minute, that angels are said to sing. Of course, just because it never says they do, we can't conclude that they don't or can't, so we don't want to make a huge issue of this, but I do believe there is a special reason why scripture does not portray angels as singing.

If we start at the beginning of the Bible and hunt for references to singing, we have to go all the way to Exodus chapter 15 before we find one. What, then, was the occasion which gave rise to this new thing, that people should for the first time, as far as God's revelation is concerned, burst forth into song? It is that moment at which God's earthly people, Israel, stand on the far side of the Red Sea, rubbing their eyes in amazement we can imagine, at what God has just done for them. They have been rescued by God's mighty arm out of Egypt, where they have suffered as the slaves of Pharaoh for so many years. They have marched peacefully out of his domain under the very noses of their former masters. They have walked on dry land across what was normally an inlet of the Persian Gulf several miles wide, because God has miraculously dried it up for them, and now they have just witnessed the complete destruction of Pharaoh's entire army as he launches a final bid to recapture them. At last they are truly free. They have been gloriously redeemed by our Saviour God. And now they sing!

The lesson, I suggest, that we learn from, let us just say, the silence of scripture as to angels singing, is that **it is the redeemed who sing!**

I don't think that the author of the children's hymn 'There's a friend for little children' was intending to imply that angels don't sing when he wrote the lines:

“a song which even angels can never, never sing,
they know not Christ as Saviour, but worship Him as King.”

yet these lines just seem to capture the thought. Singing is something perhaps uniquely the privilege of those who've experienced God's saving power.

Now I did promise to come back to the one scripture I know of which can be taken as a reference to angels singing. This is in Job chapter 38 verse 7. It is part of the passage towards the end of the book in which God Himself speaks directly to Job. He is speaking about the creation, and of the day when He laid the foundations of the earth. On that day, God says to Job:

“the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy.”

To me this reads very much as poetic language, perhaps akin to the time when the Lord Jesus spoke of the stones crying out, and I'm not inclined to read a particularly literal meaning into the song of the morning stars. However, on the other hand, the term “sons of God” *is* used in scripture where it seems clearly to mean angelic beings of some order or other, so it is certainly possible to understand the verse as being about the response of the angels, looking on while God lays the foundations of the world where all His purposes will be brought to fruition. I'm sure the author of 'Angels from the realms of glory', another well known Christmas hymn, had this verse in mind when he wrote

“Ye who sang creation's story, now proclaim Messiah's birth.”

As I've said earlier, we can't dogmatically assert that angels don't sing, but I rather think that scripture does suggest that, and perhaps for the reason I've given.

Verse 1

Now let's look at the words of the hymn. Verse 1 reads:

“Hark! the herald angels sing
'Glory to the new born King!
Peace on earth and mercy mild,

God and sinners reconciled.
Joyful, all ye nations rise,
Join the triumph of the skies
With the angelic host proclaim
'Christ is born in Bethlehem.'

Hark! the herald-angels sing
'Glory to the new-born King!'"

The first three lines are a paraphrase of the message of the angelic host recorded in Luke chapter 2. Almost everyone wants peace on earth, so the reference to peace is often quoted at Christmas time. But there will only be peace on earth when God is given the glory, and it is all too common to leave out the first part of the quotation, the bit about giving glory to God in the highest. Wesley's hymn takes that as its starting point, and the first verse explores the universal impact of the birth of the new born King, the long awaited Messiah, He who was to save His people from their sins².

Harking back to what I said about never placing the words of a hymn on a level with scripture, I would take issue to some extent with the phrase "God and sinners reconciled". Yes, scripture certainly speaks of reconciliation between us and God, but it puts it rather differently.

To say that God and sinners have been reconciled might imply that both have made some concessions. In human affairs, we are familiar with the situation in which two parties have been at loggerheads, and then somehow or other the problem between them is resolved. We say they have been reconciled. But whatever has happened to put things right has, almost certainly, involved some movement, some backing down, on **both** sides.

When Paul writes about reconciliation in 2 Corinthians chapter 5 verses 18-19 he says:

"All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them..."

Do you see the subtle difference here? The Bible says that we have been reconciled to God, not the other way round. As regards our offences against God, those being what has caused the enmity, God has not lowered His standards. He hasn't turned a blind eye to anything. No, because of the death of Christ on the cross, God has found a way for those offences to be **not counted against us** – not counted against us because they have been counted against another, His beloved Son!

The second half of verse 1 contains that glorious appeal beginning "Joyful, all ye nations rise." In the Jewish thinking of Bible times, "the nations" means everybody apart from Israel. And this appeal captures the implications, not just for Israel, but for the whole world, of the coming of Messiah. He was indeed coming in the first place for the Jewish nation, yet they were going to reject Him and put Him on a cross.

The wonder of it all is that God's response (for the want of a better word) to that supreme act of rebellion was not to rain down righteous wrath upon this world which had crucified His Son, but instead to make that very death the basis on which He could open the floodgates of His mercy not only to the Jewish nation, but to the entire world.

The good news of great joy is indeed for "all the people" in the widest possible sense. The appeal to all the nations of the world to rise and join the triumph of the skies is absolutely in line with the Christian gospel which goes out today. How much that appeal needs to be heard!

Verse 2

Whilst verse 1 is in the main based on the scripture we have read from Luke chapter 2, verse 2 draws together truths from several scriptures to emphasise the greatness of the person of the Lord Jesus Christ and to focus our minds on the marvel of His incarnation. It reads:

“Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord,
Late in time behold Him come,
Offspring of a virgin’s womb:
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,
Hail the incarnate Deity,
Pleased as man with man to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel

Hark! the herald-angels sing
‘Glory to the new-born King!’”

How marvellous it is that He who was indeed “by highest heaven adored” and was “the everlasting Lord” came down to be born of Mary, by that unique route, being born of a virgin. The line “Christ, by highest heaven adored” makes me think of Hebrews 1 verse 6:

“...when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says,
‘Let all God’s angels worship him.’”

The reference to Him as the everlasting Lord, reminds me of one of the Old Testament prophecies about Him, in the prophet Micah:

“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old,
from ancient days”

(Micah 5 : 2).

And the miracle of the virgin birth was prophesied by Isaiah³ and is explicitly recorded in the gospels by Matthew and Luke⁴.

The second half of verse 2, along with the second half of verse 3, rank, in my judgement, as the high points of the hymn; the flow of the poetry is so majestic, and the truths alluded to so glorious. Here in verse 2, the hymn leads us to worship on account of the great mystery unfolded by John in chapter 1 of his gospel:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”

(John 1 : 1).

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”

(John 1 : 14).

Well might we bow down in worship that the Godhead, in the person of God the Son, was indeed veiled in flesh, and well might we heed the hymn’s exhortation to hail the incarnate Deity! He was indeed pleased as man with man to dwell, and to fulfil Isaiah’s prophecy, in the scripture already alluded to³, that He would be Emmanuel, which means God with us.

Verse 3

Now we come to verse 3. Whilst it is just as Christ-centred, just as full of Christ, just as honouring to Him as the previous verses, yet in verse 3 the focus seems to shift to the immeasurable blessings for the human race which stem from His coming into the world.

Verse 3 reads:

“Hail the Heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings,
Risen with healing in His wings;
Mild He lays His glory by,
Born that man no more may die,
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth.

Hark! the herald-angels sing
‘Glory to the new-born King!’”

One of the titles given to the promised Messiah in another of Isaiah’s prophecies is the Prince of Peace⁵, but the main reference in the first half of the verse is to almost the last prophetic promise of the Old Testament, in Malachi chapter 4:

“But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings”

(Malachi 4 : 2).

That’s S.U.N by the way. And just as the sun does indeed bring light and life, so the Lord Jesus gives both light and life to all who will receive Him⁶.

The hymn ends with a crescendo of praise for what His coming, but more particularly His death on our account, means for us – if we will but accept the salvation which is available for all in Him. It gives three reasons as to why He was born.

He was born “that man no more may die”, echoing the words of perhaps the most quoted verse in the Bible⁷, that “whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” He was born “to raise the sons of earth”, and until we come to Him we are counted as members of Adam’s race, as from the earth⁸. And lastly he was “born to give us second birth”, and without that, the Lord Jesus said, no one can see the Kingdom of God.⁹

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today Christmas message based on the hymn “Hark! the herald angels sing” talk number 1178.

Footnotes

¹1 Thess. 5:23; ²Matt. 1:21; ³Isa. 7:14; ⁴Matt. 1:18-23 & Luke 1:26-38; ⁵Isa. 9:6; ⁶John 1:4;

⁷John 3:16; ⁸1 Cor. 15:47; ⁹John 3:3.

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