

Favorite Hymns of Praise 91

I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day

Sunday, December 29 at 10:00

First Sunday after Christmas – 2013

Join us on New Year's Eve at 7 PM

Our Regular Schedule resumes on January 5

Mondays at 7 PM return on January 6

Introduction: Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen! Today we focus on the Christmas hymn, “**I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.**” First will we consider the background; then: †the words, †their connection to Scripture, and †their application to our daily Christian lives.

Background: The hymn writer was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882), known by many as America’s greatest poet. Henry’s life had some *extreme* ups and downs:

- **Up:** He began school at age three (1810); by “six [1813], he was already reading classical literature and writing stories.... At nineteen [1826], the college graduate was given the position of professor...at Bowdoin College.... [At 24 he married. By the age of 27] Henry was already viewed as one of [America’s] most respected scholars.”¹
- **Down:** Four years into his marriage, “his wife became ill and died.... [From down to up:] It took seven years

¹ Ace Collins, *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 71-72.

before he recovered enough from his loss to remarry.”²

- **Up:** He was blessed with five children. “By 1860 [while in his early 50’s] he had found wealth and worldwide fame.”³
 - **Down:** Then, in 1861, when his life was going incredibly well, “tragedy again struck.... While lighting a match, Longfellow’s second wife’s clothes caught fire and she burned to death.... his faith was again challenged by the...Civil War” [which he hated]. When his oldest son...was wounded in battle and sent home to recover, the poet’s prayers turned to rage.... He asked his friends and his God, “Where is the peace?”⁴
 - **Up:** Then, on December 25, 1863 (150 years ago), *with the turmoil of the Civil War on his mind*, Longfellow wrote the words to the famous hymn, “**I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.**” The hymn is NOT a typical Christmas hymn; *many of the words are dark and solemn*, but the final two stanzas overcome the gloom – *which inspired the Union Army*, even the whole world, *many years ago!*
1. **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.** // Don’t most people long for such things: “**peace on earth, good will to men**”? The angel announced to the shepherds: “**I bring you good news of great joy that**

² Ibid., 72.

³ Ibid., 72.

⁴ Ibid., 72, 74.

will be for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord....

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

¹⁴ ‘Glory to God in the highest, and **on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.**’” (Luke 2:10-11, 13-14 NIV)

But what does that mean? Dr. Just, *a professor at our Fort Wayne Seminary*, answered: “...those who receive the news of the child’s birth **in faith**. These are the ‘men of his favor,’ those on whom God’s favor rests.” (111) So the peace is NOT the absence of war, **but peace between God and man through Jesus!**

2. **Stanza 2: I 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.** // Since the fall of mankind, which was followed by the LORD’s promise of the Savior, God’s great blessing of eternal peace has been freely offered to all people. Nevertheless, among the inhabitants of the earth, most have rejected God’s wonderful offer. The reasons have been endless: ↓I don’t need it; ↓I don’t want it; ↓I don’t understand it; ↓I’m too busy; ↓etc.... **BUT let US praise Him for making us part of His remnant!**
3. **Stanza 3: 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.”** // Think back to the Civil War: ♦state against state, ♦family against family, ♦brother against brother. More American’s died in the Civil War (625,000) than in WWII (405,000)! Remember, “**peace on earth**” means

peace between God and man, **but those who receive such peace will try to extend it to all other people!**

4. **Stanza 4: 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.”** // Then the LORD opened Longfellow’s eyes to see God’s love and power, knowing that He would eventually prevail over *the world’s hatred and death*. Even for people who are sorry for their sins and believe in Jesus as their Savior, *God has NOT promised a life of ease*. Instead, God has promised to †be our refuge and strength *in the middle of our troubles* (Ps. 46:1), †use our troubles *to grow us in Christ* (Jam. 1:2-4), and †eventually deliver us *from every trouble* (Ps. 34:19)!
5. **Stanza 5: Till, 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!** // From Longfellow’s perspective, the “**night to day**” could have been the transition from *Civil War* to *civil peace*. As wonderful as that was, *it is nothing in comparison to peace between God and man – which was won by the Christ of Christmas through His sinless living and His sacrificial dying!*

Conclusion: Even today, when many are hoping for world peace, **let us rejoice in God’s gift of eternal peace!** Then, as *God provides opportunity*, let us point others to *God’s peace* through *the Christ of Christmas!* And all God’s people said: **Amen!**

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