



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day

HEAVEN & NATURE SING

Tim Badal | December 25, 2022

It is so good to be able to worship in God's house and see such an awesome group of people. As a church, we have been focusing our time and attention on the sounds and songs of Christmas. We're doing this under the heading "Heaven & Nature Sing," looking at the stories behind the songs of Christmas. We've looked at three so far. First, "Joy to the World" a couple weeks ago. Then last week we focused on "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen."

Last night we had three awesome, jam-packed services in which we learned about the subject matter in the song, "O Holy Night." We saw that in just a few stanzas, the writer told us the story of where the world was throughout the Old Testament, and about the great joy and holiness of the night when Christ made His appearance to take away our "sin and error pining," when He appeared and we felt our worth. We saw how it is now our calling to "fall on our knees."

This morning, what has become one of the best-known stories behind a song, we're looking at "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 !

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 !

Then from each black, accursed mouth,
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound

The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men !

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
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 !"

This is a song that sounds like it comes straight from a Hallmark movie. You can picture an old country church in Vermont, with snow falling and the bells tolling. You may not know this, but when the bells tolled, that meant the kids could open their gifts. That's why kids always listened for the bells with great anticipation because then the celebration could begin. Many of you had similar bells this morning as the kids got you up early, you headed down to the tree and you opened up your gifts.

For some, like the Badals, you will wait until after the service this morning. We'll look a whole lot better in the pictures this year than we usually do when we're still in our pajamas and with hair that has been worked over by the bed fairies. Not that I have to worry about that. There's something about Christmas morning and the time for which we've been waiting in anticipation.

Now, what happens when you don't feel like celebrating? What happens when the circumstances of life keep you from enjoying the promise and prospect of Christmas? This song sounds so good at the beginning. "I heard the bells on Christmas day, their old familiar carols play, and mild and sweet their songs repeat of peace on earth, good will to men." But what happens when you don't feel that? What happens when life doesn't warrant that type of song?

The man who wrote this song was all too familiar with the pains of life. When you realize what he was feeling, you wonder how he could write words like this. He wrote them on Christmas morning in 1863. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was known as the poet laureate of America. He wrote the best-known poem of the Revolution that told the story of Paul Revere's midnight ride and how that awakened a nation to the danger they faced.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow experienced some great highs in life. He married the love of his life and together they had three children. Then things began to fall apart. His wife died giving birth to their last child. In fact, all of their children died in infancy. Can you imagine the pain and sorrow of having to bury your wife and three precious children? It's more than this father could bear. God met him in his grief by giving him a second love. He remarried and began another family, then his joy returned. It was easy then to sing about peace and good will. But more despair was on the way.

The poem we're looking at today, which he titled "Christmas Bells," speaks of the new struggles he faced. Even though he had gone through the heartbreak of losing his wife and three children, there were two more losses that were even more impactful on Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. In 1861, while writing letters to family and friends, his second wife accidentally hit a candle. The candle fell to the ground and lit her dress on fire. As a result, she too lost her life. While trying to extinguish the fire, Henry was also significantly burned and had to be hospitalized for weeks.

While he was in the hospital, one of his sons—who was dealing with the grief in losing his mother—enlisted in the army and entered the War Between the States. This resulted in him receiving critical wounds in a battle in Virginia. Not sure if his son would survive, Longfellow fell into deep despair.

Maybe some of you are also not feeling very Christmassy at all. We have lost loved ones in our church this year. We've lost fathers and husbands and brothers. We've lost friends. Beyond that, we've had other trials within our church. It was so good to see the Williamson family in church last night. Their dad is still recuperating from an accident in which a drunk driver hit him head on. As we enjoy our families and friends, it can be easy to forget that there are some who are holding on for dear life. So the first thing I want you to see in this song is the despair that can surround Christmas. I want you to know that eventually we get to some good news.

Let's think about what this good news is so good. Longfellow was feeling great despair that Christmas morning. Look at what he wrote:

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."

There's someone who is seeking to mock us this morning, and that's the devil. He's doing everything in his power to take away our hope and joy this Christmas and year-round. Amidst the darkest moments of our lives, I want you to know God is ringing His bell. He's telling us He understands our pains and shares them with us. Let's turn to some Scriptures.

In Isaiah 53:3, we read these words about the Messiah Who was to come: *"He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain."* Maybe this year you've said goodbye to a loved one. Maybe you're dealing with relational, emotional, or spiritual strains. I want you to know Jesus is familiar with pain. He left a place of perfection in heaven and came to earth to be despised and rejected by men. He knows what it's like to be isolated. He knows what it's like to be viewed with reproach. Even though He Himself was perfect, He knows what it's like to lose someone close to Him, as He wept at the grave of His friend Lazarus.

That's why the writer of Hebrews says in Hebrews 4:15, *"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin."* We have a sympathetic Savior. He never leaves us nor forsakes us. He tells us He will comfort those who are hurting in our hour of need.

In Psalm 34:18 he says, *"The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."* So if you are brokenhearted today, take heart. You have a Savior Who longs to put you back together, Who longs to mend your broken heart. He wants to fill you with His joy and mercy.

We read in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, *"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God."* On this Christmas morning, when there is so much joy and love, we realize there may be moments that are different. Maybe for you it won't be this Christmas, but it might be true in other Christmases to come. In a future year, pain and sorrow might fill your December calendar. Yet in those moments, let us never forget that God is with us and that His peace is available to us. He will be sympathizing with us and wiping away our tears, replacing them with the joy we seek. In those moments, when we turn our attention away from our struggles and sadness to the God Who is standing behind them, something changes.

As Longfellow wrote those words and as he heard those bells ring out, he was reminded of God's goodness in his life. Pastor Phil gave us opportunities to hear of God's goodness and grace from little kids to older individuals telling of the goodness of God this Christmas. Longfellow, after months of bed rest, dependent on drugs just to make it through the day, on that Christmas morning heard the bells and all he knew about the faithfulness of God began to well up within him. As the bells rang, he opened the greatest gift of all: the gift of God's promised victory over everything we struggle with. He wrote, *"Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: 'God is not dead, nor doth He sleep.'"*

Brothers and sisters, in our hour of need, we can begin to believe the devil's lies that God is not there, or that God has lost touch, or that God does not care about us. I want you to know today from the Scriptures, from Romans 8:38-39, that you and I can be convinced, *"that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

The gift of Christmas is that Jesus Christ came that Christmas morning for a purpose. Brothers and sisters, in our sorrow and pain—maybe just in the tiredness of toiling in this world and hearing the devil's lies and feeling his heat upon us—we need to recognize something so true this Christmas morning—God is not dead, nor does God sleep. That means God is with us. What God was doing that first Christmas morning was displaying His greatest work in dealing with sin and death. He was telling us, as His children, that no matter what the world or the devil, or even ourselves, bring into our lives, God is greater and better and bigger than anything we can every imagine.

I love what my friend Ray Pritchard says:

If Christmas means anything, it is this: God wins in the end. At Bethlehem He launched a mighty counteroffensive that continues to this very day. It all started with a tiny baby boy named Jesus, born in a scandalous way, in a barn, to unmarried teenagers who were homeless and alone. The world knew nothing about what was happening in Bethlehem. Only in retrospect do we understand that in Bethlehem God struck a blow to liberate the world from sin and death, and His frontline soldier was a tiny baby boy.

I don't know where this Christmas finds you this morning. I don't know where the countless individuals who are watching online are, but here's what I do know: whatever you're struggling with, whatever pain and sorrow—whether in the past or something that will come in the future—never forget this. As the bells ring on Christmas Day, as we open the gifts of Christmas, the greatest gift of all is that Christmas is the opening stanza of God's victory song to every weary soul who needs a Savior and needs to find rest. Sing this song. Proclaim this song in the helplessness and hopelessness of your lives. As you do, watch God show up, even as He did that Bethlehem morning.