
Text: Various

Republic, December 8, 2024

Title: "Background of Christmas Hymns, Pt 2 - I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day"

Introduction -

The beauty of the hymns we sing today is wrapped in the fact that many, many of them were stories of big struggles of what someone went through in life. The reason we enjoy them as much as we do is because of one of two reasons: 1. We have history of singing them. 2. We can relate to the words, as we think of similar things we have also gone through in life.

The story behind the song "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" involves a man by the name of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and dates back to his writing of 1863, 161 years ago. It is the story of a very, very tough time in his own life.

I will spend a little more time in this message talking about Longfellow's life than I did with the writer of last week's Christmas hymn. *Why?* because what he had been through in life is part of the reason the song is more powerful.

Here is some background information about who Longfellow was & what he went through:

Longfellow was a writer of poems. He created at least 1000 poems in his lifetime, put into 16 different collections. One of the more famous poems he wrote was called "Paul Revere's Ride." I am pretty sure we studied that in school when I grew up.

There are 2 phrases that Longfellow wrote in his poems that people often repeat in life, not knowing they came from Longfellow: One is "into every life some rain must fall." The other is "ships that pass in the night."

Longfellow spoke at least 7 or 8 languages: English, French, German, Italian, Latin, Swedish, and Polish. The 8th is possibly Dutch.

He enrolled in Bowdoin (*Bow-din*) college at the age of 15. He graduated at the same college as another well known writer named Nathaniel Hawthorne, who wrote romance novels. Two of Hawthorne's better known books were "The Scarlet Letter," and "The House of the Seven Gables."

Later, Bowdoin (*Bow-din*) college hired Longfellow as a professor. He was there for 6 yrs, then was hired by Harvard. He was at Harvard for 18 years before he decided to resign to spend more time working on his writings.

Also note that Longfellow lived in the same time period as Charles Dickens. They were actually familiar with one another, even though Dickens lived in London, and Longfellow lived in Massachusetts. They were considered friends for 30 years, both being writers. Longfellow actually had Dickens at his house for dinner on Thanksgiving day, 1867.

At the time before the words of "I Heard the Bells," Longfellow had already lost his first wife, just 4 years after he married her. She developed a bad infection during a miscarriage, & died.

He met his 2nd wife, later in the same year of his first wife's death. They ended up dating for 8 years before marrying. She died 18 years later when she was making wax seals by using a candle. She was wearing a dress that was made out of a gauze type of material and it somehow caught on fire. The entire dress went into flames very quickly. Longfellow rushed in to try to save her, and was himself badly burned. His wife died the next day. Some say the reason Longfellow grew a beard shortly after that, and kept it for the rest of his life, was due to covering up the burns he received on his face. Their marriage had produced 6 children: At the time of her death, they had 5 children. (one had died earlier as an infant) The 5 children at that time were: 2 boys, ages 17 and 16; and 3 girls, ages 11, 8, and 6.

Note that Longfellow never remarried again, and he continued to raise the 5 kids on his own.

In Longfellow's day they dressed up a lot. The style of clothing would have been at least similar to the kind worn by Charles Dickens. If you have seen "The Christmas Carol", sometimes called Scrooge, you have seen that style of clothing. Laurie and I occasionally go to St Louis early enough around Christmas to go downtown St Charles. They have Christmas carolers dressed up as Dicken's character singing as they walk the streets.

One more thing. Pure Flix is a app, or we could say a tv channel, that is mostly christian shows and movies. They always have some kind of special deal that allows you to try them out to see if you like the channel. On it, they have the movie called "I Heard the Bells," about Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's life. I am currently doing a trial with them and was able to watch the movie this week to see if I missed anything from when I did my own research on this song and its writer.

At the time of the writing of the words, that later became a song:

The United States was in the middle of the Civil War. There was obviously a lack of unity across the whole country, and with that, a lot of hatred that resulted in war. (Much like the lack of unity in America today, with lots of hatred, but without the war)

The Civil War began in the same year of Longfellow's 2nd wife's death (1861). His son Charles ran off to join the fighting 2 years later, in 1863. He knew his father disapproved, but he did it anyway. Charles ended up being severely wounded, and barely missed being paralyzed by a bullet.

After all Henry Longfellow had already been through with the loss of two of his 2 wives, he was so distraught over Charles being severely wounded that he worried he may have to go into an insane asylum. But, he ended up taking care of his son Charles until he (Charles) was later able to recover.

It was on the day of Christmas, in 1863, that Henry Longfellow heard the bells of a church

playing Christmas music. He was full of frustrating thoughts at the time, including trying to help his son overcome his injuries from the Civil War's hatred between men. He began to write down those thoughts.

Those words were made into a song 9 years later, in 1872, by an English organist. The organist used the same melody for "I heard the Bells" as a song he wrote the music for 24 years earlier called "Fling Out the Banner! Let It Float," which is also sometimes called "Waltham." (an 1848 song)

Longfellow was actually still living at the time his words became a song. He was 65 years old, and ended up living another 10 more years after that. It had to be very rewarding for him to see his poetry become a Christmas song. His hard times became a help to people during those days, and all the way up to including today.

This is quite often how it works in life. The tough times we go through, can help us grow if we choose to let it, as well as be of help to other people.

Note also that Bing Crosby recorded "I Hear the Bells on Christmas Day" 84 years later, in October of 1956. Others who have recorded it are Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

One of the more modern groups that recorded it was Casting Crowns in 2008. They changed the words slightly, skipped one verse, and changed some of the tune of the song. In other words, they did their own version of it. It's included on their album called "Peace on Earth." The Casting Crowns version is actually one of my favorite Christmas songs.

Let's look at the Song itself:

Note that two verses of Longfellow's poem from that night in 1863 were later removed when the song was put to music. Those 2 verses were direct thoughts about the civil war. I am guessing that the music writer felt he did not want a song that would always be remembered as mainly about the Civil War. He probably felt verse 3 did a good enough job of showing how life can have major discouragements that cause us to doubt. Then the rest of the song (verses 4 and 5) would have a good ending about how God comes through in our own discouragement.

If the music writer had not removed the 2 verses, that I will show you in a moment, the song would have consisted of the first 2 verses about the goodness of Christendom, followed by 3 verses about frustrations of the world - specifically focussing on the Civil War, and then finishing with 2 very positive verses about God.

Let's look at the 5 verses, on pg 195, in our hymnal:

I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day words by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1863
 music by Jean Baptiste Calkin, 1872

Verse 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 (Lk 2:14)

"wild and sweet" are 2 contrasting thoughts. Some say this was Longfellow's way of describing the conflict in the world, as well as inside of himself, about doubts versus belief.

Verse 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.

"The belfries of all Christendom had rolled along the unbroken song." Belfries means the bell tower or steeple in which bells are housed. The meaning is the longstanding aspect of the Christian faith and its worship on Christmas day, has been around for many years.

The two verses that were removed by the music writer would have fallen as verse 3 & 4
(Very fascinating words for a poem, not so much for a song to sing for generations after.)

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, <i>(comparing</i>
	<i>it to a fireplace's peaceful, homey location)</i>
And made forlorn the households born	Of peace on earth good will to men.
<i>(made households sad, feeling of being alone, kids, husbands gone to war)</i>	

Verse 3 *(back to our hymnal)*

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

Verse 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."

Verse 5

Then ringing, singing on its way	The world revolved from night to day
	<i>(The angels changed night to day (Lk 2:9))</i>
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime	Of peace on Earth, good will to men
<i>(in awe, beyond ordinary)</i>	

So, again the entire theme of the original words is about how messed up the world was, how bad it looked, how divided the country was at that time (Civil War), and the hatred involved between men. We can probably include Longfellow's frustrations of losing his wives as well.

It was making him doubt the peace that Christ brought with Christmas. Then the song ends with how Longfellow realized God is really there and wants to provide help, peace, and victory in such tough times. All

All of the song is wrapped up in the peace Christ brought at His birth. Every verse talks about peace, and is repeatedly quoting from the verse in [Luke 2:14](#) from the angels.

A very similar song, written by Casting Crowns:
I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day by Casting Crowns

Verse 1 (*almost identical to verse 1 of the original song. I bolded the differences.*)

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

Chorus (*new*)

And the bells are ringing (<i>peace on Earth</i>)	Like a choir they're singing (<i>peace on Earth</i>)
In my heart I hear them (<i>peace on Earth</i>)	Peace on Earth, good will to men

Verse 2 (*They didn't do the original v 2. Their v.2 is almost identical to v 3 of original*)

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

Chorus

But the bells are ringing (<i>peace on earth</i>)	Like a choir singing (<i>peace on earth</i>)
Does anybody hear them? (<i>peace on earth</i>)	Peace on Earth, good will to men

Verse 3 (*almost identical to the original song's verse 4*)

Then rang the bells more loud and deep (<i>peace on earth</i>) (<i>peace on earth</i>)	God is not dead, nor doth He sleep
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail	With peace on Earth, good will to men!

Verse 4 (*almost identical to the original song's verse 5*)

Then ringing, singing on its way	The world revolved from night to day (<i>The angels changed night to day Lk 2:9</i>)
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime	Of peace on Earth, good will to men

Bridge

And the bells they're ringing (<i>peace on earth</i>)	Like a choir they're singing (<i>peace on earth</i>)
And with our hearts we'll hear them (<i>peace on Earth</i>)	Peace on Earth, good will to men

Do you hear the bells, they're ringing? (*peace on earth*) The life, the angels singing? (*peace on earth*) Open up your heart and hear them (*peace on earth*)

Peace on earth, good will to men.

Peace on earth. Peace on earth. Peace on earth, Good will to men.

Words and Music by Bernie Herms, Dale Oliver, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Mark Hall
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Conclusion -

The story of Christmas is a lot about Christ bringing the availability of peace on earth in the hearts of people when they get saved. That peace can help carry us through all our frustrations we experience on this earth.

Here are 4 sets of verses about Christ bringing peace with Him:

Isaiah 9:6 (NKJV) (*prophesy about Christ*)

⁶ For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And **His name will be called** Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, **Prince of Peace.** (*It is who part of who He is & what He offers*)

Luke 1:78-79 (NKJV)

⁷⁸ Through the tender mercy of our God, **With which the Dayspring from on high** has visited us;
⁷⁹ **To give light to those who sit in darkness & the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace.** (*which comes from listening to, and following Him*)

Luke 2:13-15 (NKJV)

¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying:
¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, **And on earth peace, goodwill (*good things*) toward men!**"
¹⁵ So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us."

John 14:27 (NKJV)

²⁷ **Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.**

The kind of peace Christ gives us is not the kind of peace the world wants. The world thinks of peace as freedom from division and fighting, or peace because everything in life is going

right for them, or going the way they want it to go. Only then do they feel peace.

Someday, during the 1000 year reign of Christ on earth, there will be unrepresented peace on earth. Also, in heaven there will be unrepresented peace. But, on the earth, at this moment, we will not have the world's kind of peace. There is too much evil going on.

The peace that was felt at the birth of Jesus is the peace we can have in our hearts. It is the peace that helps bring us through some terrible times. It is the kind of peace that, we need when all is going wrong. We can still feel God's peace. It is the kind of peace Longfellow

wrote about that he needed right then in his own life. It is the kind of peace that he finally realized with his words in verses 4 and 5. The peace that came on Christmas day with the birth of Jesus is the same peace that can come into your heart at salvation.

If you have never asked forgiveness for your sins, and asked Christ to come into your life, & take over your life, this would be a good time to do that. You can start your journey with Him, knowing His peace, and having it through all the struggles in your life.

Today, we will end the message by singing **verse 3-5** of the original song "I Heard the Bells On Christmas Day," pg. 195.

Then we will sing along with the similar song by Casting Crowns, that has the same name.

On YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F756Mjxxrvc> Or, go to YouTube and do a search for Casting Crowns I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day with lyrics.

Closing Prayer - Lee Conner