

Text: [Luke 2:8-14](#) (NKJV)

Republic, December 15, 2024

Title: "Background of Christmas Hymns, Pt 3 - It Came Upon the Midnight Clear"

Introduction -

I know this is a very different kind of Christmas series than you may be used to, which may or may not disappoint some for this year's focus. But, look at it this way, I am not just telling the story about Christmas hymns. I am doing two things. I am combining the story of a hymn, along with the scripture of the event at the same time. I am doing two things at once. Today, you will see that a lot more than the previous two messages.

You will also, not just learn about the song, but also learn a lot about angels, that you may or may not know, and specifically what the scene was like in [Luke 2:8-14](#).

One last thing about today. This sermon could have easily been written with a study of Luke then added information about the song, and lots of information about the angels and how things may have looked. And, also adding information about tv shows about angels, etc

One of the interesting things I found out while doing this series is:

Lots of Christmas songs were either written, or put to music, in the 1800's.

Here is a list of 1800's Christmas songs.

Note that the first date is when words were written, and if there is a 2nd date, it's the date it was either set to music, or made into English, or even a different version of music was used with it. If there is only one date on this list, that means it was written and put to music that same year.

Silent Night (1818-1863), Joy to the World (1719, 1839 later version used today), Hark the Herald Angels Sing (1840), It Came Upon a Midnight Clear (1849-1850), O Holy Night (1847-1855), Angels We Have Heard on High (1855), We Three Kings of Orient Are (1857), Jingle Bells (1850-59 - originally designed to be a Thanksgiving song, stemming from a town's annual sleigh race around Thanksgiving), Up on the Housetop (approx. 1860), What Child Is This? (1865-1871), O Little Town of Bethlehem (1868), Away In a Manger (1885-1887).

In 1871 alone, 3 very old songs were re-arranged and re-introduced to the public. They were: The First Noel (from 13th century), God Rest Ye Merry Gentleman (from 16th century), and Here We Come A-Caroling (from 17th century).

Where the song's words came from & what was going on at that time:

The words that became the song "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" came from a poem by

Edwin Hamilton Sears in 1849. His poem was a response to the turmoil of his time, including the United States war with Mexico (ended in 1848) and strife brewing in the U.S over slavery. The slavery strife continued for quite a few years until the Civil War broke out in 1861. Then there was also a season of change going on called The Industrial Revolution.

The Industrial Revolution was a time where things switched from mainly an agricultural world (farms, etc) to a world of machines. During that time things were also changing from hand-produced items to using machines from water power, or steam power, as well as power tools. Output greatly increased during this time.

You might ask "*What did the Industrial Revolution have to do with the concerns of the author of this poem/song?*" Once everything started changing, the need for slaves started lessening. The north part of the U.S. was the quickest to change. The south mostly stayed an area of farms, ranches, especially the need of growing cotton, basically hand-done things. The south needed the help of slaves. Most of the north wanted an end to slavery anyway, but also because of the Industrial Revolution they didn't need the slaves as much.

Now let's look at what Sears was seeing about the U.S.

Sears was serving as a part-time preacher in Wayland, Massachusetts. His poem depicts a world full of sin and strife that is unable to hear the angels message of peace. The poem also portrays the life of anyone who is struggling in life for any reason, and how we need to look up at God's evidence of hope, in this case brought by the angels. The poem is based on [Luke 2](#) (which was also a part of last week's song), and describes angels singing "peace on earth." The poem was set to music, one year later, in 1850 by Richard Willis.

Most people believe the song dealt mainly with the need for the U.S. to heed to the peace that the angels talked about, and stop the strife that was brewing. I see more than that in this song. I see help for anyone struggling in life.

Evaluation of the song:

I personally like the song, and enjoy singing it. But, I am going to point out several things the author wrote that, scripture really does not say, or at least we do not know for sure. I will tell you more about that in a few minutes.

I am not trying to influence you away from the song, but to merely give an honest evaluation of things that might be, what I would call "a stretch," on what the biblical facts are. I will spend a lot of time on Verse 1.

It Came Upon the Midnight Clear

Words by Edwin Hamilton Sears in 1849 Music by Richard Willis in 1850

Verse 1

It came upon the midnight clear
From angels bending near the earth

Thou glorious song of old
To touch their harps of gold,

"Peace on the earth, goodwill to men, From heav'n's all gracious King"
The world in solemn stillness lay To hear the angels sing.

The phrase "**the midnight clear**" is sometimes written with "**the**" and sometimes written as "**a**," "**a midnight clear.**" Same thing goes for the title of the song.

The meaning of the phrase "**It came upon a midnight clear**" is to say "This event happened in the middle of the night, on a clear night, meaning no clouds in the sky, or anything to restrict the ability to see in the sky."

Biblically, the only part we really know is it happened in the middle of the night. What we do not know is whether the sky was completely clear. I will read the bible verses in a few minutes.

Does it hurt anything to say the sky was clear? Not really.
Is there a good chance it was completely clear? Probably, so that no clouds blocked the view of the angels.

"Artistic License" or "Poetic License"

It is important to note that sometimes when people write poems, or even people writing about bible characters, a lot of times the writer will add things that we really do not know if it happened that way, or not. Those added things become the writer's guess about what could have happened. In the writing field, that is called "artistic license." For poets, it is sometimes called "poetic license". Basically, it is saying "Since we do not know for sure, I believe this is how it happened."

Why are you telling us this, Pastor Mike? Because a few times in this song, we really do NOT know if those things happened exactly the way the author wrote it.

Pretty much every christian movie about a bible character does this. You might ask *Why?* Think about it. There is not enough information told in the bible to know the details of every event, or even every discussion that was going on at that time. And, many times we don't even know the emotion that a bible character was experiencing. If you are making a movie about a bible story, there is not know enough iinformation in the bible to make the story last an hour, or more often, an hour and a half. So, authors guess at possibilities of some of the details.

For example, The Chosen has at least 32 episodes so far. *What are the chances that the writer used some of their own words in those stories, or depicted emotions from someone in the stories that may, or may not, have ever happened?*
In fact, this week there was some controversy about interaction between Judas

and Jesus in one of the episodes.

I am not saying this is okay. I am just saying it tends to happen a lot. My opinion on that is they need to limit artistic expression as much as they can.

In my sermons, if I do not know something for sure, I will say "I can't prove this by scripture, but here is my opinion." Personally, I think pastors should say that more often when they are not sure. I see too many pastors say things that we really do not know. They say those things as if they, themselves, know what is meant.

Here is an example of something I believe that I cannot prove scripturally. I believe there are times God allows someone who died to see an event on earth, like their own funeral, or some other event that would be special to them. Again, I cannot prove that. It's just something I believe. But, on the other hand, I definitely DO NOT believe God allows people who die to watch everything that goes on on earth, or to watch over us. *Why don't I believe that?* Because it goes against the very nature of the bible, that God is the one that watches over us, not our loved ones who have passed away.

Back to the hymn:

When you see these words from the author "**Thou glorious SONG of old**" & you see the words "**to touch their HARPS of GOLD,**" understand that there are no bible verses that say the angels sang to the shepherds. And, there are no bible verses that say they carried, or played, harps of gold.

Could they have sung to the shepherds and played gold harps?

It's possible, especially with the bible words "glory to God in the highest." But, we don't really know that. So, Sears' used his own "artistic license" to basically say that he believes the angels sang and played gold harps. He believes that is probably what happened, so he puts it in his poem.

Let's next look at the sentence "**From angels bending near the earth.**"

Sears is implying that at least some, if not all, of the **angels** are hovering in the sky. So, if they are hovering in the sky they would need to be in a position where they can look down toward the shepherds. Of course, that would also make it easier for the Shepherds to see them as well. So, the way the author wrote this is the angels' bodies were bent downward, or angled downward, as well as near the earth.

The truth of the matter is the bible does not say the angels were in the sky. Again, we see some artistic license going on, that may, or may not really be what happened.

The bible event Sears is writing about actually reads like this:

Luke 2:8-14 (NKJV)

- ⁸ Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.
- ⁹ And behold, **an angel** (*meaning one angel*) of the Lord **stood before them**, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they (*the shepherds*) were greatly afraid.

Where was the first angel? Hovering in the sky? Or what?

Also, just to point out another thing here, you can understand why the shepherds were greatly afraid. What a contrast to go from darkness to instant bright light, and then have an angel appear on the ground near them.

Luke 2:10-14 (NKJV)

- ¹⁰ Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, **I** bring you good tidings of great joy (*positive or happy news*) which will be to all people. (*available to all*)
- ¹¹ **For there is born to you** (*available to you*) this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.
- ¹² And this *will be* the sign to you: (*implying they needed to go find the Christ child*) You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger."
- 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 toward men!"

Wouldn't the words "with the angel" imply the multitude of other angels were on the ground with the first angel?

But, to be fair, I guess it wouldn't have to be like that. I suppose you could be with an angel, or very near the first angel, and just be hovering above that one angel. Or, you could have many angels on the ground, and many hovering above them.

Look at the words "**a multitude of the heavenly host.**" *Would that have to be all angels? Could it be mostly angels, and then also include seraphim and cherubim, interesting beings with 6 wings each? Could it be that many of the angels were on the ground, and many were in the sky? So, it would be a combination of both?*

Verse 13 doesn't say they were praising God **and singing**. *But, then again, could they have been praising God by singing? And, in order to sing, technically you are **saying words** when you sing? Those words "Glory to God in the highest" involve a lot of praise to God, so could they have been sung? It's possible. I personally would say that might be "a bit of a stretch," but certainly not impossible.*

Lest we be too hard on the writer Edwin Sears:

How have YOU always pictured this event? Have you read this passage of scripture before, or at least heard it read before, and you visualized it as angels in the sky?

Have you ever seen a painting of this event where an artist used his own artistic expression to paint the angels in the sky?

I understand a little bit of "artistic license" when we don't know for sure, but if scripture is very clear on something, or opposes our ideas, that would not be good.

The rest of verse 1:

"The world in solemn stillness lay":

"The world" - what the world was doing before the event happened

"solemn" - means serious, respectful, sacred atmosphere

"stillness" - complete lack of movement, or noise

"lay" - probably laying down. It wasn't a world back then where people had night shifts to work, like today. Shepherds were awake, but also may have been laying down as watched and listened. (maybe even dosing a little)

"to hear the angels sing"

Verse 2

Still thro' the cloven skies they come	With peaceful wings unfurled,
And still their heav'nly music floats	O'er all the weary world
Above its sad and lowly plains	They bend on hov'ring wing,
And ever o'er its babel sounds	The blessed angels sing.

"through cloven skies" means the angels came through a split in the sky, basically out of nowhere.

"**with peaceful wings unfurled**" meaning they are coming in peace, not with hostility, or force. And, their wings are all the very open. (unfurled)

Once again this is "artistic license." I did a bible search years ago to find out if any angels had wings. There are no accounts of angels appearing where they had wings, with the exception of the special beings called seraphim and cherubim, technically not regular angels. For all regular angel appearances angels are never mentioned as having wings. If you know of a verse that mentioned wings on an angel let me know, because I could not find any.

Think about it. They are spirit beings. They are not bound by the law of physics like birds, where they need wings to fly.

Why do most artists, paint angels that have wings?

#1 They probably didn't realize the bible does not mention angels having wings. It's been a common, accepted, myth for a long, long time.

#2 By the artist adding wings to their angels, it does makes it clear to the viewer, that this is meant to be an angel.

In the 1946 movie "It's a Wonderful Life" Clarence had to do kind things in order to what? (*earn his angel wings*) This is a fun thought for a movie, but totally inaccurate about angels.

While we are at it, a lot of artists who have painted a scene with an angel have also used their own "artistic license" to paint mostly women angels. Sorry, but there are not accounts in the bible of an angel looking like a woman. If you look at scripture & their appearances, they either looked like a man, or a young man, or no gender is mentioned at all. In the cases where the bible does say the angel had the appearance of a man, it was probably only done to initially disguise the fact that they were an angel. In other words, it had a purpose for that particular occasion.

Another example of "artistic license"? The tv series "Touched by An Angel." Most of the key actors who played the angels were women. I love the series. It's a "feel good" tv series. The things that were written into each story was fun for a tv series, but parts of it were not very biblical.

Let's look at the rest of verse 2

"**above its sad and lowly plains**" - a flat area of land with no interesting things in it like trees, mountains, or lots of hills, meaning it could be a

little blah. (Hence, the words "sad" and "lowly")

"They bend on hov'ring wing" - again, bending while hovering. And the angels had wings.

"And ever o'er its babel sounds" - it does not say over the angels' babel sounds" but over "its" babel sounds. The world is represented here with the words "babel sound" because of its many problems.

"The blessed angels sing" - over the babel of the world, the angels were singing, makes it all better.

The original verse 3 from the poet is missing from most hymnals. It sheds light on the author's concerns about the social situation in the U.S. in the mid 1800's. This original verse 3 was very relevant to WHY Sears originally wrote the song. **Without this original verse 3, the song is more about our own frustrations, and the joy the angels brought.**

Look at the original verse 3:

But with the woes of sin and strife	The world has suffered long
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled	Two thousand years of wrong
And man, at war with man , hears not	The love-song which they bring
O hush the noise ye men of strife	And hear the angels sing!

My opinion is I think those are some very good thoughts and it wouldn't have hurt the song at all. I say that because it does not list any particular war. The words of this original verse 3 seem more universal, and would apply to most any time in history, now or even in the future.

Verse 3 (*This verse heavily relates to all of us & what we go through in life*)

And ye, beneath life's crushing load	Whose forms are bending low
Who toil along the climbing way	With painful step and slow,
Look up! for glad and golden hours	Come swiftly on the wing
O rest beside the weary road	And hear the angels sing.

"And ye, beneath life's crushing load Whose forms are bending low" seems to mean you who are struggling heavily in life, and bent over from the weight of it, feeling low, down, or depressed.

"Who toil along the climbing way with painful step and slow"

People struggling through life's hardships, facing difficulties with each step they take, the author implying it's a difficult journey but you are hoping for a better future, even though it may seem like a slow process to get there.

"Look up ! for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing"

Look up in your struggle. God has sent His angels in the midst of the days you live in. Better days are coming quickly like on the wings of an angel.

"O rest beside the weary road and hear the angels sing."

Stop and rest, when you are struggling, and pay attention to the things God is trying to do to make us feel better. In this case, He is using angels to let us know the Messiah is here. Then listen to the joy of the angels singing.

Verse 4

For lo, the days are hast'ning on,	By prophet bards foretold,
When with the ever circling years	Comes round the age of gold
When peace shall over all the earth	Its ancient splendors fling,
And the whole world give back the song	Which now the angels sing.

"For lo, the days are hast'ning on, By prophet bards foretold,"

The days are leading to a time of great peace and hope, as prophesied by ancient prophets who wrote sometimes in a poetic (bards) way.

"When with the ever circling years ...

The continuous cycle of time, with all kinds of bad & good coming & going.

... Comes round the age of gold"

Probably describing a future period of ideal conditions.

"When peace shall over all the earth Its ancient splendors fling,"

A time will come when peace will spread across the entire world, bringing back its original beauty and glory, signifying a time of harmony & tranquility that was once present, but has been lost due to conflict and strife.

"And the whole world give back the song Which now the angels sing."

And the whole world applies the song to their own lives.

I am going to mention a more modern day southern gospel song that is written that is about angels singing. Have you ever heard of "The Martins" singing group? They have been on Bill Gaither's program. They sing a song called "Listen to the Angels Singing" ("singin' gloria, gloria, who'd ever thought that a baby would have brought the good news") I love that song.

The poem that Sears' wrote in 1849, and was put to music in 1850, is a great song. It is one I enjoy singing. I talked about, in the first part of this message how that wars and changing times of Industrial Revolution, were a lot of the reason why the poem was written.

But, when you take out the original verse 3 of the song, it kind of changes the rest of the song away from that reason. It really removes the war stuff out of the song. It changes it to be a song that relates more to us and what to do when we are frustrated in life.

I did not realize the encouragement that the song is trying to convey until I did the research about the song. The song actually goes back and forth between the tough times we face in this world, and the fact that the angels brought relief and happiness to the shepherds when they announces the news of the Messiah.

Yes, the writer took some "artistic license" that may or may not have been 100% true. *But, what if they were true?*

Being that most tv programs or movies have some add ons, would we turn against "Touched By An Angel" Or "The Chosen?" Or many of the other Christian bible character movies? Or, even The Martins great song "Listen to the Angels Singing"?

Hopefully, today was more than just information about this Christmas song. Maybe there were some things you had previously visualized about this event that you learned may, or may not be accurate. Hopefully, there were things about angels you learned as an extra bonus of this sermon. And, hopefully, I did not taint your view of the song to where you no longer like its good points. Its good points really are the best part of the song.

I still think its a great song, despite some minor flaws.

Today, let's end the service by singing this song in pg 168 in your hymnals, "**It Came Upon the Midnight Clear.**" As you sing it, notice how the song is trying to show our tough times in life, and also the happiness we can have if we stop, rest, and look up, for the angels' announcement of the Savior's birth.