

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

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[0 : 00] And in the article it read, we call them Christmas carols, but they are really Christmas hymns celebrating the incarnation of our Lord and Savior.

For a few weeks each December these profound songs of worship become part of the holiday atmosphere. Our society's pervasive interest in them provides us with a unique opportunity to share the gospel.

He says it's the perfect time to explain the meaning of these songs to those who don't know Christ. It's the perfect time, he says, to explain the meaning of these songs who don't know Christ.

I know that's what I want us to do this morning. I want us to consider one of the most well-known Christmas carols and see how it points to Jesus.

I want us to think about the words of the Christmas carol, Hark the Herald Angels Sing. Hark the Herald Angels Sing. And I'm sure you know the words, you probably learnt them as a child.

[1 : 04] And as you know there are three verses in the lyrics, Hark the Herald Angels Sing. And so I'd like us to think about each verse or each stanza under the following headings, these three verses.

Proclamation, personification and pontification. Proclamation, personification and pontification.

So first of all, proclamation. Proclamation. We'll read again in verse 13. I wanted to tie it in with what this passage is saying as well. We're told there that 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.

As you know the Christmas carol it begins, Hark the Herald Angels Sing. Glory to the newborn king. Peace on earth and mercy mild. God and sinners reconcile.

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

[2 : 16] And the words of this well known and much loved Christmas carol, they were written in 1739 by the famous hymn writer Charles Wesley. And Charles Wesley, he was the youngest son and the 18th child, 18th child born to Samuel and Susanna Wesley.

And Charles's older brother, he was a preacher and evangelist, you've probably heard of him, he was called John Wesley. And both the Wesley brothers, Charles and John, they both knew and worked closely with this powerhouse of a preacher called George Woodfield, another name we're familiar with.

In fact it was George Woodfield, John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards who were used mightily by the Lord in the Great Awakening in America during the 1730s and 40s, which is around the time that Charles Wesley wrote this Christmas carol.

But the reason I mentioned George Woodfield is because a few years after Charles Wesley had written the carol, George Woodfield in 1754, he altered the opening lyrics of Wesley's carol to what we have today, because Charles Wesley's opening words, the original words for the carol, they began with the lyrics, hark how all the welkin rings, glory to the king of kings.

But these words, they were replaced by George Woodfield with the words that we're very familiar with, hark the herald angel sing, glory to the newborn king.

[3 : 52] And as you can see from Luke chapter 2, these words are based upon this narrative where the angel of the Lord appeared to shepherds in the field explaining to them the good news of the gospel that a savior has been born.

And we're told that as the angel of the Lord spoke with these shepherds out in the field, there was this multitude of angels which appeared, singing glory to God in the highest and on earth peace and good will towards all men.

And it's with that that this Christmas carol gives its own evangelistic plea, hark the herald angel sing, glory to the newborn king.

Hark the herald angel sing, glory to the newborn king. And as you know the word hark or harken, it's an archaic word, it comes from the 18th century it means to hear, where we're being exhorted and we're being encouraged to hear and to listen and to pay careful attention to the proclamation of the angels because as heralds they were ministers and messengers of the king.

These angels were, they came to make a public proclamation, they came to carry the official message of the king. The angels were heralds of Jesus.

[5 : 15] They were heralds of the king of kings and the Lord of lords. They were, you could say his emissaries and his envoys who had been designated and delegated to represent the kingdom of God.

They were his ambassadors who had been selected and sent from the throne of heaven itself and they were to call and command sinners to give glory to the newborn king.

That's our chief end is it not? That's why we exist, that's why we were created, that's the meaning to life, not to glorify self but to glorify our savior Jesus Christ.

That's what the angels called the shepherds to do, hark the herald angels sing, glory, give glory to the newborn king. Then he says peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.

And you know my unconverted friend, whether you're here or at home, these words are calling us to listen and pay careful attention to the proclamation which the angels made because as we see here, Jesus Christ came to bring peace on earth.

[6 : 33] He came to bring peace on earth because sin has caused separation, sin has caused sickness, sin has caused suffering and sorrow on the earth. He came to bring peace on the earth because he is the prince of peace.

It's an old Isaiah prophesied 800 years before Jesus was born. Isaiah prophesied behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son.

You shall call his name Emmanuel. For unto us a child is born, for unto us a son is given and the government shall be upon his shoulder and he shall be called wonderful counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting father and the prince of peace.

My friend Jesus Christ came to bring peace on earth because he is the prince of peace and he has come with mercy mild. But you know the mercy of Jesus is not mild in the sense of weakness.

It's mild in the sense of willingness. It's not mild in the sense of weakness but mild in the sense of willingness. And I say that because Charles Wesley, he uses this word mild again in verse 3 when he says about Jesus that mild he lay his glory by, born that we no more may die.

[7 : 50] My friend Jesus, he's not only the prince of peace but he's also mercy mild. He's willingly entered into our world in order to show us mercy.

And what is mercy? Mercy is withholding from us what we deserve. And the thing is because we've sinned, because we've fallen short of the glory of God, because we've fallen and failed to uphold God's standard, God's law, because we're sinners by nature and sinners by practice.

We don't deserve mercy. We don't deserve that God would withhold from us what we deserve.

What we deserve is God's wrath and rage. What we deserve is God's justice and judgment.

What we deserve is God's curse and condemnation. What we deserve is God's separation and God's suffering in hell. That's what we deserve.

And yet the proclamation that the angels made to these shepherds was that the prince of peace has mercy mild. He was willing to show mercy.

[8 : 57] He was willing to withhold from us what we deserve. He was willing to show mercy. Hark the herald angels sing, glory to the newborn king, peace on earth and mercy mild.

God and sinners reconciled. My friend, how did Jesus bring peace? How did Jesus show us mercy? How did Jesus secure our reconciliation?

Jesus secured reconciliation between God and man, not by his birth and a cradle, but by his death and a cross.

Jesus secured reconciliation between God and man, not by his birth and a cradle, but by his death and a cross. I know this is something Paul repeatedly highlights throughout his letters, that we are not reconciled to God by the birth of Jesus.

We are reconciled to God by the death of Jesus because Paul said that we were enemies with God. We were at enmity with God because of our sin.

[10:05] But we were reconciled to God by the death of his son. We were reconciled to God not by the cradle in Bethlehem, but by the cross of Calvary.

We were reconciled, says Paul, by the blood of the cross. And you know, it's with that proclamation of peace and reconciliation that Wesley goes on to write, joyful all ye nations rise, join the triumph of the skies with the angelic hosts proclaim, Christ is born in Bethlehem.

Christ is born in Bethlehem. So this brings us to consider, secondly, the personification. So proclamation and then personification.

We see that in verse two of Wesley's Carol. But if you look with me at verse 10, Luke chapter two, we're told that 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 savior who has Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.

[11:30] Charles Wesley's Christmas Carol continues in verse two with the words, Christ by highest heaven adored, Christ the everlasting Lord. Great in time behold him come offspring of the virgin's womb, veiled in flesh the Godhead see hail the incarnate deity, pleased with us in flesh to dwell Jesus our Emmanuel.

And then the chorus, Hark the herald angel sing glory to the newborn King. I wrote in this verse of the stanza, Wesley draws her attention to the miracle of the incarnation.

Now, when we use the word incarnation, we literally mean the inflection of God, the inflection of God. That's what the word incarnation means, where God, the son, the son of God became flesh. He became man. And the incarnation, it was a miracle because God is a spirit. That's what our catechism teaches us.

God is a spirit, infinite and eternal and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth. And as the son of God, as the second person of the Trinity, he became flesh.

[12:47] Just like ourselves, he became man. He became bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. And this is the greatest miracle. You know, we often look at babies when they're born.

When you look at them and you think it's a miracle, it's an absolute miracle, the birth of a child. But when it comes to the birth of Jesus, this is the greatest miracle.

This is the greatest mystery that Jesus Christ was conceived of the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary. But you know, my friend, if we deny the miracle and the mystery of the incarnation, then our entire salvation collapses because the incarnation, it is a mystery.

How can our finite minds comprehend the incomprehensible? How can we get our head around the miracle and the mystery of God becoming man?

You know, it was the late J.I. Packer. He died earlier this year. He wrote in his well-known book, Knowing God. If you've never read Knowing God, I'd encourage you to read it.

[14:01] He wrote in his book Knowing God. He said, the supreme mystery with which the gospel confronts us does not lie in the Good Friday message of the atonement, not in the Easter message of resurrection, but in the Christmas message of incarnation.

It's the Christmas message that's the greatest mystery. And that's because if we deny the miracle and the mystery of the incarnation, then our salvation collapses because in order for God to redeem us, in order for God to reconcile us, in order for God to restore us to himself, God had to become like us.

And John tells us in the prologue of his gospel, the word of God who was with God and was God in eternity, he became flesh and dwelt among us in time.

And it was by God sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, says Paul, that he condemned sin in the flesh.

You know my friend, the miracle and mystery of the incarnation is that when Jesus became man, he became our mediator.

[15:12] The Bible tells us that there is one God and there is one mediator between God and man. And he is the man, Christ Jesus.

And as our middle man, you could say, the one who stands on our behalf, Jesus is our substitute. He is our representative before a holy God.

He is our advocate with the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the righteous. And the miracle and the mystery of the incarnation is that when Jesus was born, he wasn't 50% God and 50% man.

He's not half and half. No, the miracle and the mystery of the incarnation is that he's 100% God and 100% man.

He is fully and truly God and fully and truly man. He is what we call the God man. But if you remove the miracle and the mystery of the incarnation, my friend, you have no substitute.

[16:11] You have no savior and you ultimately have no salvation. And you know, this is what our Catechism teaches us. This is why I keep emphasizing that the Catechism is a wonderful document to study.

The Catechism asks the question, a question you probably learned when you were a child. Who is the Redeemer of God's elect? And the Catechism asserts and affirms to us that the only Redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ, who being the eternal Son of God became man and so was and continues to be both God and man in two distinct natures and one person forever.

And you know, what the Catechism is emphasizing to us is that if you remove this miracle, if you remove this mystery, if you deny the incarnation, you have no substitute.

You have no savior and you have no salvation. My friend, the miracle and mystery of the incarnation, it is the greatest demonstration of love and it's the greatest demonstration of humility. It's the greatest demonstration of love and the greatest demonstration of humility. God so loved this world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever would believe in him would not perish but have eternal life.

[17:36] The miracle and the mystery of the incarnation is the greatest demonstration of love, but also the greatest demonstration of humility.

That's something Paul picks up on in his letter to the Philippians. He opens the words of Philippians chapter two with words that set before us the humiliation of Jesus Christ.

We're told that even though Jesus was in the form of God and equal with God, he made himself of no reputation. He made himself absolutely nothing we're told.

He took upon himself the form of a servant. He was made in the likeness of man. He humbled himself and he became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

It was the greatest demonstration of humility because Jesus was crowned in glory. He was crowned as king of kings, Lord of lords, face to face with the Father, co-eternal with the Father, co-equal with the Father and yet he humbled himself from the crown of glory all the way down to the cradle in Bethlehem.

[18:48] He was conceived of the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary. He took to himself our nature. But my friend, as you know, that's not the end of the story. The Christmas story is not the end of the story because Jesus humbled himself from the crown of glory to the cradle in Bethlehem all the way down to the cross of Calvary.

He humbled himself not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. My friend, Jesus made himself nothing for you.

This is where it all comes, what it all comes down to. Jesus made himself nothing for you and took upon himself the form of a servant for you.

And he was obedient unto death for you, even death on a cross for you. Jesus humbled himself from the crown of glory to the cradle in Bethlehem, down to the cross of Calvary.

Jesus humbled himself down, down, down from the crown to the cradle to the cross, from glory to Golgotha to the grave, all for you.

[20:02] But that's still not the end of the story. And you know, this is what people miss when they box Jesus up after Christmas because they only want Jesus in the little manger.

They don't want to see that Jesus is now this risen and exalted Lord who has put all his enemies under his feet. God tells us that he has been highly exalted.

He has been raised from the dead. He has ascended up on high, leading the captives free. He has been given a name which is above every name. He's been given the name of Jesus.

That's why the angel said to Mary, call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins. And we're told in Philippians 2 that it will be at the name of Jesus.

The name that he was given at his birth, the name of Jesus that every knee will bow. It will be at the name of Jesus that every knee will bow in heaven and on earth and in hell.

[21:09] And every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. And you know that's why Charles Wesley gives this evangelistic plea in his Christmas carol.

He says Christ by highest heaven adored, Christ the everlasting Lord. Late in time behold him come, offspring of the virgin's womb, veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the incarnate deity, pleased with us in flesh to dwell.

Jesus our Emmanuel. He is God with us and he promises that whatever we go through in life, whether it's sin, sickness, suffering or sorrow, he will never leave us and never forsake us.

He's Jesus our Emmanuel and he's calling us to bow our knee before him. And that's what this carol is saying. Back the herald angels saying give glory to the newborn king, which brings us to consider the last verse of this Christmas carol under the heading pontification, pontification.

So proclamation, personification and pontification. Look at verse 15, we're told that when the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.

[22 : 49] And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.

You know, we often use the word pontificate when we often use it in a negative way. When someone is pontificating, they're giving it their opinion, even though it may not be needed or wanted.

And yet pontification is when a pronouncement has been made. In fact, that's why the Roman Catholic Church, that's why they refer to the Pope as the pontif because he pontificates, he makes pronouncements and gives his opinion on subjects and he makes declarations and he manufactures doctrines as true, even if they completely contradict the word of God.

But what we see here in this closing verse is that Wesley, you could say he pontificates, he makes a pronouncement, he preaches and proclaims to us the gospel message.

And the message that he proclaims to us is, you must be born again. You must be born again.

Wesley writes, hail the heaven born prince of peace, hail the son of righteousness, light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings, mild he lays his glory by, born that we no more may die, born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth.

[24 : 23] And then the chorus. Hark the herald angel sing glory to the newborn king. And you're in this closing verse, Charles Wesley, he reminds us that Jesus was born so that we could be born again.

Jesus was born so that we could be born again. And with that, Wesley, he echoes the evangelistic play that Jesus gave to Nicodemus in John chapter three.

You remember what Jesus said to Nicodemus in that nighttime meeting, John chapter three of our seven, Marvel North that I say unto you, you must be born again.

You must be born again. And when Jesus said those words to Nicodemus, Jesus didn't say to Nicodemus, just take it or leave it. No, Jesus said to Nicodemus, this is non-negotiable.

This is a requirement. This is a must of necessity. This is a must. You must be born again. Because unless you're born again, you cannot, you will not.

[25 : 31] It is impossible for you to enter the kingdom of God. My friend, you can't be saved. You can't receive forgiveness. You can't experience salvation.

You can't see or enter the kingdom of God. You can't become a Christian unless you're born again.

Did you remember that Nicodemus, he was confused by Jesus's statement?

And he asked, well, how can a man be born when he's old? Does he have to enter the second time into his mother's womb? And Jesus explains to Nicodemus and to us that what we need is not a physical birth.

What we need is a spiritual birth because the kingdom of God is not a physical kingdom. It's a spiritual kingdom. So we need to enter the kingdom of God, not by our first birth, but by a new birth.

In fact, it's our first birth that keeps us out of the kingdom of God. Therefore Jesus says to us, you need a new birth. You need a new beginning. You need a new heart.

[26 : 34] You need to become a new creation. You must, he says, this is a must of necessity. You must, you must, you must be born again.

You must be born again. Do we mentioned George Woodfield earlier? And with this I'll close.

We said that George Woodfield knew and worked closely with the Wesley brothers, John and Charles who wrote this Christmas Carol. And there was alongside John Wesley that Jonathan Edwards and George Woodfield, they were used mightily in the Great Awakening in the 1730s and 40s.

And it said that George Woodfield, he was a powerhouse of a preacher. And throughout his ministry, he preached over 18,000 sermons to over 10 million people. He traveled across the Atlantic over 13 times. And remember, this was the 18th century. He didn't fly. He traveled by boat 13 times across the Atlantic.

[27 : 39] He tirelessly gave his life to the preaching of the gospel. And as a powerfully evangelist, George Woodfield's favorite text was John 3.

You must be born again. You must be born again. In fact, it said that a woman once came up to George Woodfield after he had just preached and she said to him, sir, why do you always preach the same thing?

Why do you always preach that you must be born again? To which Woodfield responded. He said, because dear woman, you must be born again.

You must be born again. I know it was one of my favorite preachers, Steve Lawson.

He said, if you have been born once, you will die twice. But if you have been born twice, you will die once.

[28 : 44] I just think about that. If you have been born once, you will die twice. But if you have been born twice, you will die once.

We need to be born again in order to avoid the second death in hell. If you have been born once, you will die twice.

You'll die the second day. But if you have been born twice, you will only die once. You must be born again. And that's the closing evangelistic plea of Charles Wesley's Christmas Carol.

Hail the heavenborn Prince of Peace. Hail the Son of Righteousness. Right and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings.

Mild he lays his glory by, born that we no more may die, born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth.

[29 : 46] Oh, my friend, hark the herald, angels sing. Give glory to the newborn King.

Because we're being encouraged this morning and reminded that we must be born again. Hark the herald angels sing.

Give glory to the newborn King. Well, may the Lord bless these thoughts to us. Let us pray together.

Oh, Lord, our gracious God, we give thanks to thee this morning for that wonderful reminder that the angels proclaimed to the shepherds, reminding them that a Savior has been born who has Christ the Lord.

And we give thanks to thee that he was born. He was born that we might be born again, that we might experience that new birth and that new beginning and be given a new heart and become a new creation.

[30 : 48] And Lord, our prayer is that for those who have only been born once, all order please that they will be born again, that they would enter the kingdom of God, that they would be brought from darkness unto thine own marvelous light, that they would see the beauty of Jesus, not only lying in a manger, but also hanging from a cross, that they would realize that it is through the blood of the cross that we are saved.

Oh, Lord, bless thy truth to us we plead, bless thy word to us this day, and help us this Lord's day to give thee the glory in all that we say and do, that everything that we do would rise before thee as a sweet smelling savor.

Go before us and we ask, take away our iniquity, receive us graciously for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, we're going to bring our time to a conclusion this morning by considering the words of Sam 91.

Sam 91, again in the Sing Sam's version, it's on page 121. Sam 91. And we're considering the words of verse 11 down to the end of the Sam.

Sam 91 from verse 11. And these words remind us about the role that the angels have. They not only proclaim good news, but they also have care over us.

[32 : 18] They guard our footsteps. And that's what Sam 91 is all about, how the Lord protects his people and provides for his people. So Sam 91 from verse 11, for he will charge his angels with your care to guard you in your footsteps every one.

They will uphold and bear you in their hands, lest you should strike your foot against a stone. And to the end of the Sam, to God's praise.

Sam 91 from verse 11, for he will charge his angels with your care to guard you in your footsteps every one.

And to the end of the Sam, to God's praise.

Sam 91 from verse 11, for he will charge his angels with your care to guard you in your footsteps every one.

[34 : 21] And to the end of the Sam, to God's praise.

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