

## 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.*”<sup>1</sup>
- **Down:** Four years into his marriage, “*his wife became ill and died....* [From down to up:] *It took seven years*

<sup>1</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup>

- **Up:** He was blessed with five children. “By 1860 [*while in his early 50’s*] *he had found wealth and worldwide fame.*”<sup>3</sup>
  - **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?’*”<sup>4</sup>
  - **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*

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 72, 74.

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

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

<sup>14</sup> '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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 Bethlehem Lutheran Church, 7500 State Rd., Parma, Ohio 44134, 440-845-2230