



“I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day”

*Glory to God in the Highest, and on Earth peace, good will towards men.
Luke 2:14*

Did you know that the touching Christmas carol, “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day,” was written by one of America’s greatest poets, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow? It began as a poem he called “Christmas Bells” in 1864 and became a song when set to music in 1872 by John Calkin. The carol tells of a man who is troubled by the hateful world, but then has his hope restored as he is reminded of God’s power. As with any composition that truly touches the heart of the hearer, these words were penned from personal experiences in Longfellow’s life.

Longfellow was a legend in his own lifetime and popular abroad as well as in America. His fame, however, did not exempt him from tragedy. His first wife, Mary Potter, died after suffering a miscarriage while they were traveling abroad. Eight years later, after a long and difficult courtship, he married Frances Appleton in 1843 and they settled in Cambridge, Massachusetts. They were exceptionally happy together and blessed with six children: Charley, the oldest, followed by Ernest, Alice, Edith, and Anne. Another daughter, Fanny, died before her second birthday.

In 1860, Longfellow was at the peak of his success as a poet. Abraham Lincoln had just been elected President, giving hope to many in the nation. But things soon turned dark for America and for Longfellow, personally. The Civil War began the next year and the nation was torn apart. Three months later, on July 10, his wife Fanny was fatally burned in an accident in the library of their home.

The day before the accident, Fanny Longfellow recorded in her journal: “We are all sighing for the good sea breeze instead of the stifling land one filled with dust. Poor Anne is very droopy with heat and Edie has to get her hair in a net to free her neck from the weight.” After trimming some of seven year old Edith’s beautiful curls, Fanny decided to preserve the clippings in sealing wax. Melting a bar of sealing wax with a candle, a few drops fell unnoticed on her dress. The longed for sea breeze gusted through the window, igniting the light fabric of Fanny’s dress and immediately engulfing her in flames. Henry, awakened from sleep in the next room, rushed in and tried to extinguish

the flames with a small rug. When that didn't work, he tried to smother the flames by wrapping his arms around her - severely burning his face, arms, and hands. Fanny Longfellow died the next day. Too ill from his burns and grief, Henry did not attend her funeral. He fell into a deep depression after this event and threw himself into his work of translating. His family saw his anguish and observed his long periods of silence. His white beard, so identified with him, was one of the results of the tragedy - the burn scars on his face made shaving almost impossible.

The first Christmas after Fanny's death, Henry wrote, "How inexpressibly sad are all holidays." A year after the incident he wrote, "I can make no record of these days. Better leave them wrapped in silence. Perhaps someday God will give me peace." His journal entry for December 25, 1862 reads: "A Merry Christmas say the children but that is no more for me." *Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted in me? I hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance.* (Psalm 42:5)

Longfellow was a staunch abolitionist, something that was proudly reflected in his writing. It was no surprise that his oldest son, Charley, wanted to do his part in the war. In early 1863, Charley left to join the Union Army without his father's knowledge or blessing. He left word for his father in a note, "I feel it to be my first duty to do whatever I can for my country and I would willingly lay down my life for it if it would be of any good." When the Army commander wrote for Henry's permission for his young son to enlist, he gave it. On the first day of December, 1863, Henry was dining at home alone when he received word that his son had been severely wounded. Charley had been shot through the shoulder, with bullet exiting under his right shoulder blade. It had traveled across his back and nicked his spine. Charley avoided being paralyzed by less than an inch. But on December 5, when Charley arrived home, they were faced with a long, uncertain recovery.

Even the literary giant, Longfellow, needed the peace that only God can give to His children. With all of the tragedy that had happened in the past two and a half years in his own life and in his country, on Christmas Day of 1863, he tried desperately to reflect on the joys of the season. He wanted to pull out of his despair. As he heard the bells ringing, he recalled past Christmases and began writing:

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.

As he came to the third stanza, he was stopped by the thought of the condition of his beloved country. The Civil War was in full swing. The battle of Gettysburg was only six months past. Days look dark and he probably asked himself the question: “How can peace and good will be true in a war torn country, where brother fights against brother and father against son? But he kept on writing:

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!”

That could be said of our day as well! But then, catching an eternal perspective and the real message of Christmas and Christ Himself, he turned his thoughts to the one who solves all problems. Longfellow, a devout Christian, regained hope. Though the world was filled with grief, he realized that God was still alive and His power existed on earth. God was there with him and would reign sovereign in the days to come, no matter the circumstances. Thus he wrote:

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.

Just as our country was divided during the Civil War, we see the same strife and division in America today: so much hatred and violence. Many of us face trials and tribulations like never before and the way seems uncertain. But praise God, our hope is in Him and not in this world! We can have peace in every situation knowing that He is in control and never leaves us. He loves us with an everlasting love which He proved by sending His only Son to die for us while we were yet sinners. May you find your hope in the Prince of Peace, Jesus, as we celebrate His birth and coming return.

