

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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A Biblical look at some popular hymns: Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

Good morning, today's talk is a special one; it is the last on the theme we have been looking at over the last few weeks of "A Biblical look at some popular hymns". The hymn this morning is, "*Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*" which we have all sung I am sure at Christmas over the years. Christmas is only six days away and while we are considering the subject before us we will have a fresh look at the Christmas story.

The words of this hymn were written by Charles Wesley in 1739. He was a great writer, and penned over 6,500 hymns and carols. He was inspired to write these words by the sound of London church bells while walking to church on Christmas Day. The carol itself gives us a lot of Scriptural teaching, which we hope to consider in our talk today.

Over many years I have been privileged to have been involved with summer camps in rural Northumberland. When night fell, it was very, very dark; the reason for this was that there was no light pollution, so the skies were very clear and distinct. One of my many great experiences; was walking around the camp site at night looking up to the sky, gazing in wonder at the glory of the heavens. Now and again I saw lightning flash across the skies; I have seen shooting stars; I could see the Plough, the Milky Way Galaxy and millions of stars. The sight was amazing. I used to think of the shepherds as they watched over their flocks, men who lived under the skies every night and knew the patterns of the stars inside out. They were not prepared for what they were about to witness, an angel: God's messenger appearing and a multitude of the heavenly host praising God. I would imagine that from darkness there was great light and from quietness and stillness to wonderful singing. God was about to reveal His heart of love and His great mercy to the world by the gift of His only beloved Son. "He was to be called Jesus, because He was going to save His people from their sins". What an experience that must have been for them. No wonder they were afraid at first, but they took everything in and recognised that something special was about to happen.

There is, I believe, a danger when we sing carols at Christmas to feel a sense of "this is what we sing at this time", and we don't really concentrate fully, on the words and their tremendous meaning. Some may only visit church at this time and sing happily without letting the words speak to them individually. There is almost an air of euphoria and sometimes fantasy about the whole season. As Christians we must pray that God will, by His Spirit, speak through the words of carols like this one we have before us this morning, by bringing men, women, boys and girls to know Jesus who was not only born at Bethlehem, but died after a short life here on earth at Jerusalem so that He could be their Saviour.

The story of the birth of the Lord Jesus is found in Matthew's Gospel chapters 1 and 2 and in Luke's Gospel chapters 1 and 2. You may want to have these chapters open in your Bible, so you can follow any verses that we turn to. It is interesting to note that although only two gospels give the account of the Lord's birth, every gospel gives an account of His death.

The carol begins with the announcement from the angel to the shepherds of a new born King. In the Gospel of Matthew (which is known as the Gospel of the King) we read of the account of the wise men from the East who came looking for the King of the Jews to worship him. The King is one of the Divine Titles of the Lord; we read that in Psalm 10:16. The Jews were looking for their coming King, but they failed to realise that, here He was among them, born in Bethlehem, as told by the prophets many years previous. We read in Luke 19:28-40 of His triumphant entry into Jerusalem when he was hailed as King: the cry went out! "The King cometh" and the crowd cried "Blessed be the King that cometh in the name of the Lord", but within the week they had crucified their King. In the future Christ will reign supreme in righteousness as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. So although we read of Him as King, we know Him and should address Him today as our Lord and Saviour.

Some may think when singing the next line that they can look forward some day to peace on earth, or at least there should have been peace on earth when Jesus was born. The world we live in today strives for peace; we have all sorts of peace movements, treaties, wars all in the name of peace, so often the central peace issue is in the Middle East where there will be no real peace until the Lord Jesus comes again.

But what about us today? How can we have peace? Peace is spoken of in three ways;

1. "Peace with God" Romans 5:1; It is the work of Christ into which the individual enters by faith.
2. "The Peace of God" Philippians 4:7; It is an inward peace, the state of soul of the believer who, having entered into peace with God through faith in Christ, commits all his worries to God.
3. "Peace on earth"; Will only come in the future when Christ the King reigns and there will be universal peace on the earth in His kingdom.

The first point is, "Peace with God", something we can have today. We must come to accept that we are sinners, and totally helpless in ourselves, to make peace with God. We have to realise that the Lord Jesus Christ has made peace with God, by taking our place and dying for our sins. Jesus Christ has made peace through the blood of His Cross, there had to be a blood offering for sin and there was only one who was suitable was God's Lamb. God provided Himself a Lamb for an offering for sin. So peace has been made, and all we have to do is accept the Lord in faith and because of this He is our peace with God. We also have the "Peace of God" as we can see in Philippians chapter 4 by having confidence that when we commit our anxieties to God and we live our lives according to His word we can depend entirely on Him and have peace. The third point "Peace on Earth" we have already touched on and until the Prince of Peace comes back into this world there will be no lasting peace.

The carol goes on to speak of "God and sinners reconciled." What does this mean? There is a great gulf between God and us because of sin. The Lord Jesus by His death on the cross has removed any distance there is by dying for our sins. So as Christians we know that we have been reconciled to God and we know that our sins have been forgiven, there is no distance between us anymore; in fact we are brought near and we know Him as our Father. Surely the knowledge of this would touch our hearts and bring us in praise and worship to God.

Let us look at Luke 2:8-20, and read how the Saviour was born. "Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them: and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger'. And 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, goodwill toward men!' 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 hath made known unto us'. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all those who heard it marvelled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them".

It is quite amazing that God chose the lowly, humble shepherds to reveal the coming of the Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. They were down to earth men who had great experience in life making decisions that affected their flocks and their livelihoods, not men that would be easily convinced if they did not believe what they had seen or heard. First of all they were afraid, so it must have been a real shock when the angel appeared and the glory of the Lord shone round about them. Maybe there is something troubling you this Christmas; you may be unsure whether you would know if the Lord was speaking to you? Remember Samuel? He never knew that it was the Lord speaking, because he never knew His voice. Do you know the Lord Jesus personally? The shepherds listened to what the angel had to say and then they watched as the heavenly host praised God and went back to the heavens. The shepherds acted upon what had been revealed to them and said, "Let us go to Bethlehem" and they went in a hurry. You need to hurry if you feel the Lord is speaking to you today. Once they had seen the babe lying in the manger they told everyone they had seen and heard. They were full of the Saviour, they were changed men, they returned with a song in their heart, glorifying and praising God. If you have heard God's voice speaking to you this morning act on it now because the Bible tells us "now is the accepted time, now is the day of God's salvation".

As we go down through the verses of the carol we are directed to, why Jesus came into this world in the first place. First of all we sing "Jesus our Immanuel"; Immanuel means God with us. Yes God had come in flesh into this world: this baby was the Son of God. For Jesus to come amongst us He had to be like us in bodily flesh, but we must remember He was truly God. He was Holy spotless, undefiled and pure; "in Him was no sin at all". No other one could come and reveal the Father's heart to us, but His well beloved Son. No other one could come and do the Father's work than His well beloved Son and what a work it was. "Jesus said I have come to do the will of Him who sent me and to finish His work". Jesus came, as we sing in the carol, laying aside all His majesty and glory and came as a lowly, willing, obedient servant. There was no room for Him in this world, no room in the inn. Jesus said "foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay His head" He was, as in the words of another hymn that comes to mind, "lowly hated and rejected in the world He came to save" Jesus throughout His short life on earth went about revealing the truth with words of grace and mercy, doing good, healing the sick, making the

lame to walk, but men hated Him and He was rejected by His own people (the Jews). He was taken by wicked hands and nailed to the cross, there to die for our sins. He was buried and He rose again on the third day, then we read he was carried back to heaven. I think the heavenly host were also praising that day, when the darling of heaven returned having completed His work.

You might be thinking, "Well you are going a bit far now we are on to the Easter story", but without Jesus dying and shedding His precious blood there would be no second birth as our carol tells us. The story of the birth of the Lord Jesus is special. When we read about His walk in this world – it is also truly special, but it is only in His death that we can enjoy the Light and Life. New birth is as if we have been born again: We have a new nature with the Holy Spirit dwelling in us; we have a new purpose in life; to please God. Yes we can still do wrong things, but we belong to Christ and we are now part of His body here on earth. When you acknowledge that you are a sinner, and believe that Jesus died for your sins, the Holy Spirit enters into your life and gives you real peace, light, hope and joy. These words are key words at Christmas; so many of you will buy and send cards with these words displayed on them. Do you really have hope? Do you really have a lasting joy? Do you really have inner peace? You are the only one that can answer these questions. Maybe God is speaking to you this morning? Is there something that has been said which is troubling you?

Dear listener, if you do not yet know the Saviour and you want to be saved, please be like the shepherds and don't hesitate; come to Him now. If you are unsure how to do this phone our number and ask for more help. Or you may be a Christian listening today and you have been challenged as to how much joy and peace you have; get before the Lord and lay your burdens on Him. We should be like the shepherds and have a heart that is always praising and glorifying God.

So as Christmas comes upon us, as the Christmas lights burn brightly, take a moment and consider what that amazing night over 2,000 years ago really means to you.

God bless you all and have a happy Christmas.

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