

December 7, 2014 by Steve Brandon



Hark The Herald Angels Sing

(Various)

1. Join the Chorus
2. Hail the Christ

During the four Sundays in Advent, we are taking up four familiar Christmas Hymns, allowing the themes of these hymns to direct our hearts to God's word. I have chosen these hymns strategically. They are popular enough to hear in the public places we will visit over the next month. And theologically rich enough to direct our hearts to God's word.

Last week we spent our Sunday morning going through, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." I heard from several of you this week how you heard this song in various venues, and that it was more meaningful to you as a result of last week. This is our goal. I want to help you all have a more meaningful Christmas season.

This morning, we come to one of the most famous hymns of all the Christmas hymns, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" (hymn #277 in our hymnal). This well-known hymn appears at the end of one of my favorite movies. "It's a Wonderful Life."

If you know the movie, you know that George Bailey had sacrificed much in his life for Bedford Falls. Rather than going off to college, and seeing the world, he remained behind and labored away at the old savings and loan. But, through no fault of his own, he faced a financial crisis so great, that he was contemplating suicide. Yet, he was able to see what life would have been like if he had never been born. And he realized that life was, indeed, worth living. This last scene shows the love poured out to him through many of his deep friendships. There are many people willing to come to his financial aide at a moment's notice with many gifts. They were willing to give thousands to the one who had given so much of his life to them. In celebration, the crowd burst into song, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing!" Seemingly everyone knows this hymn. It brings tears to my eyes every time I see the scene.

This hymn was written by Charles Wesley. You can see his name down on the bottom left of the hymn. Charles Wesley is no stranger to our hymnal. In fact, sixteen of his hymns have made it into our hymnal, more than anyone else in our hymnal. Some of his others include: O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing (#21), And Can It Be? (#347), Christ the Lord Is Risen Today (#367). And these sixteen are only a portion of the 6,000 that he wrote over the course of his life.

Here, in "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," notice that the by-line says, "Charles Wesley, altered." This means that Charles Wesley wrote the hymn, but it was altered by someone else. That someone else was his good friend, George Whitefield. I say, "Good friend," because they went to Oxford together, and were fellow members of "The Holy Club," which John and Charles Wesley began in 1729.

The Holy Club was an accountability group comprised of students studying for the ministry. Their purpose was to stir one another on in holiness. They committed to asking themselves 22 questions on a daily basis. They would gather together to encourage one another on in the process. Here are the questions they would ask.

1. Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am better than I really am? In other words, am I a hypocrite?
2. Am I honest in all my acts and words, or do I exaggerate?
3. Do I confidentially pass on to others what has been said to me in confidence?
4. Can I be trusted?
5. Am I a slave to dress, friends, work or habits?
6. Am I self-conscious, self-pitying, or self-justifying?
7. Did the Bible live in me today?
8. Do I give the Bible time to speak to me every day?
9. Am I enjoying prayer?
10. When did I last speak to someone else of my faith?
11. Do I pray about the money I spend?
12. Do I get to bed on time and get up on time?
13. Do I disobey God in anything?
14. Do I insist upon doing something about which my conscience is uneasy?
15. Am I defeated in any part of my life?
16. Am I jealous, impure, critical, irritable, touchy or distrustful?
17. How do I spend my spare time?
18. Am I proud?
19. Do I thank God that I am not as other people, especially as the Pharisees who despised the publican?
20. Is there anyone whom I fear, dislike, disown, criticize, hold a resentment toward or disregard? If so, what am I doing about it?
21. Do I grumble or complain constantly?

22. Is Christ real to me?

These are good questions to ask. But, they didn't much help John or Charles Wesley, as neither of them were saved at the time. They were pursuing a righteousness through their own efforts, rather than through faith in Christ. True salvation would come about a decade after the "Holy Club." A key event in their salvation came when the Wesley brothers took an evangelistic trip from England to America. On that journey, they experienced a tremendous storm. Neither John nor Charles were assured of their salvation and were tremendously fearful of their lives. In contrast to them were a group of German Moravians, who were on the same ship. And, although they experienced the same storm, they reacted far differently than the Wesley brothers.

John described the scene in his journal with these words:

In the midst of the Psalm (singing) wherewith their service began, the sea broke over, split the main sail in pieces, covered the ship and poured in between the decks. ... A terrible screaming began among the English. The Moravians looked up, and without intermission calmly sang on. I asked one of them afterwards, "Were you not afraid?" He answered, "Thank God, no!" [\[1\]](#)

See, these Moravians were ready to die. But, the Wesley brothers weren't. The Wesley brothers were fully aware of this difference and their need for a similar faith. Thus began their friendship with these Moravian believers. When they arrived back in London, they pursued a relationship with the Moravian leaders, Peter Bohler, being the most influential in explaining the gospel to them.

At one point, Charles was sick in bed with a tooth-ache. The pain was great enough that he thought that his soul and body would soon separate. So, Charles Wesley asked Peter Bohler to pray for him, which he did. Wesley then explained their discussion:

[Peter Bohler] asked me, "Do you hope to be saved?" "Yes." "For what reason do you hope it?" "Because I have used my best endeavours to serve God." He shook his head, and said no more. I thought him very uncharitable, saying in my heart, "What, are not my endeavours a sufficient ground of hope? Would he rob me of my endeavours? I have nothing else to trust to." [\[2\]](#)

At that point in time, Charles Wesley was just like the Jews of whom Paul wrote, "I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God" (Romans 10:2-3). It's no wonder why Peter Bohler went away sorrowful. He longed for Charles to know true grace, just as Paul did the Jews: "Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation" (Romans 10:1). It is only through Christ that one is made righteous, as Paul wrote, "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Romans 10:4).

Such was the state of his soul at this time. He was trusting in his religious zeal for his salvation, not in the finished work of Christ. This was the thrust of the "Holy Club," pursuing zeal for Christ, with (or without) faith in Christ.

After months of struggle in his soul, Charles Wesley finally came to faith on May 21, 1738. Gone was his trust in his own efforts and righteousness and in was his trust in Christ alone to save, as his journal entry for that day makes evident.

I now found myself at peace with God, and rejoiced in hope of loving Christ. My temper for the rest of the day was, mistrust of my own great, but before unknown, weakness. I saw that by faith I stood; by the continual support of faith, which kept me from falling, though of myself I am ever sinking into sin. I went to bed still sensible of my own weakness, (I humbly hope to be more and more so,) yet confident of Christ's protection. [\[3\]](#)

Shortly thereafter he wrote a hymn to commemorate his day of salvation, probably "And Can It Be?" One of the stanzas read,

No condemnation now I dread,
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine:
Alive in Him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness Divine,
Bold I approach th' eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ, my own.

Charles Wesley never got over that day. Eleven years later, on the anniversary of his salvation, he would write, ...

O for a thousand tongues to sing
My great Redeemer's praise,
The glories of my God and King,
The triumphs of His grace!

...

Jesus! the name that charms our fears,
That bids our sorrows cease;

'Tis music in the sinner's ears,
'Tis life, and health, and peace.

Such is the cry of a converted man! But, alas, I digress. ...

We are looking at the lower left hand side of hymn #277, and we see the line, "TEXT: Charles Wesley, altered." I noted before that George Whitefield, the great evangelist, was the one who altered the text. Charles Wesley had originally written,

Hark, How All the Welkin Rings.
Glory to the King of kings.

Now, let me ask you, do you know what "the Welkin" is? Probably not. Neither did many those of Whitefield and Wesley's day. It was an archaic word back then, used mostly in poetry, although it was a bit more common than today. Shakespeare used it some 18 times in his writings.

So, Whitefield changed the words to, "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing," which resonated with worshipers better than "Welkin." In fact, it could be argued that if Whitefield hadn't made this change, then it wouldn't have been regarded as such a great hymn to sing, and we still wouldn't know what "Welkin" means.

Anyway, Welkin means, "sky" or "heavens" or "expanse." So, Wesley was saying in this first line, "Behold how heavens and the universe all ring out with the coming of the King of kings to earth!" And when Whitefield changed the text, he limited the scope of praise to Jesus to just the angels. And I don't think that Wesley really appreciated the change, even though it made his hymn popular.

Later, John Wesley would write, ...

I beg leave to mention a thought which has been long upon my mind, and which I should long ago have inserted in the public papers, had I not been unwilling to stir up a nest of hornets. Many gentlemen have done my brother and me (though without naming us) the honour to reprint many of our hymns. Now they are perfectly welcome to do so, provided they print them just as they are. But I desire they would not attempt to mend them, for they are really not able. None of them is able to mend either the sense or the verse. Therefore, I must beg of them these two favours: either to let them stand just as they are, to take things for better or worse, or to add the true reading in the margin, or at the bottom of the page, that we may no longer be accountable either for the nonsense or for the doggerel of other men. [\[4\]](#)

I think that George Whitefield was at the crosshairs of this comment. Wesley knew that when they appeared to the shepherds in the field to announce the coming of the messiah, the angels spoke with the shepherds, they didn't sing (Luke 2:13). And yet, George Whitefield would have them singing.

In fact, let's turn to there. Turn with me in your Bibles to Luke, chapter 2. This is the typical Christmas story that is familiar to many of us. You may hear this read on several occasions this Christmas season. Let me read it for you.

Luke 2:1-14

Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."

We see in verse 13 that the angels are "saying," they aren't "singing." I wouldn't make such a big deal about this, as it says that they were "praising God." This may have been in song, it may not have been. It certainly doesn't say that they were not singing.

Now, some will say that angels are never found singing in the Bible. But, Job 38:7 speaks about the "morning stars" singing together. This is probably a reference to angels. And in Revelation 5, we see songs of praise in heaven. And as angels are intelligent beings, capable of speaking, it's difficult to believe that they wouldn't ever sing praise to God.

But, we come back again to Luke 2. It is most definitely true that the welkin was ringing that night!

Luke 2:9

And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened.

Luke 2:13-14

And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."

This is the moment that heaven had been waiting for ever since Adam and Eve took of the fruit; ever since God made his covenant with Abraham, to bless the world through his family; ever since God made his covenant with David, that His offspring would sit on David's throne forever. Finally, God had sent the Messiah to redeem His people from their sins! And for sure, this is what Charles Wesley had in mind when he penned those words, ...

Hark, How All the Welkin Rings.
Glory to the King of kings.
Peace on earth and mercy mild
God and sinners reconciled

But, this hymn isn't just about heaven rejoicing. Charles Wesley is also calling us to rejoice as well. Look there at the second half of verse 1, ...

Joyful, all ye nations rise
Join the triumph of the skies
With th'angelic host proclaim:
"Christ is born in Bethlehem"
Hark! The herald angels sing
"Glory to the newborn King!"

From these words, I derive my first point of application.

1. Join the Chorus

That is, join the chorus of those who praised the coming of Christ! Join the welkin. Join the angelic hosts. In many ways, this is the call of Christmas. It's a call to join those who originally went to Bethlehem to see this baby that was born. The message is this: "Christ is born in Bethlehem."

They went to Bethlehem, in accordance with the prophecies concerning Christ. According to Micah 5:2, the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, the city of David. This fact is mentioned in verse 4, ...

Luke 2:4

Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David,

This fact is mentioned in verse 11, ...

Luke 2:11

for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

This is what we celebrate at Christmas time. Our savior has come for us! This is reason for great joy! Surely, you have heard of stories of those in distress being rescued! What's it like? It's utter joy when their savior comes.

Our family heard about one of these rescue stories on Friday evening, when we spent some time in the Midway Village museum. There's a big display about Bert "Fish" Hassel's attempt to fly from Rockford to Stockholm, Sweden, in 1928. He and his co-pilot, Parker Shorty Cramer, flew in a twin-engine plane with a cruising altitude of 100 miles per hour. The plane was incapable of travelling straight across the Atlantic Ocean. But, they wanted to prove that you could take the northern route, through Canada and Greenland and Iceland. This route would be the first across the Atlantic. If they did this, it would open up travel possibilities across the Atlantic -- days through the air, rather than months on a boat.

So, all was prepared on that day in 1928. Hassel and Cramer planned to refuel in Ontario, Greenland, and Iceland, before landing in Sweden. Things went well on the first leg of the journey. But, they ran out of fuel before reaching their stop in Greenland. Instead, they landed in the frozen country, miles short of their destination.

They hadn't planned on seeking to survive in the cold conditions. Their coats were insufficient. They had no gloves. They had little equipment, a few guns and maps, which were only useful as tinder to start a fire. They had little food, 10 pounds of pemmican (a fat and

protein mixture). But, they had little choice, but to walk to the eastern shore of Greenland. And for 14 days, they walked and walked, facing adversity along the way.

Finally, they reached the shore, but the shoreline was hundreds of miles long. Where was the refueling post? They had no idea. As a last resort, they set fire to some brush, hoping to draw attention to themselves. But, nothing.

And when their spirits were down, and all hope had been lost, they heard a small boat approach. It was a rescue boat, that had been out searching for them. Apparently, some Eskimos had seen the fire and reported it to the camp. [\[5\]](#)

Can you imagine their response when they heard the engine of the boat and saw it coming toward them? Utter joy. They once were lost, but now, they were found! Their savior had come. They would live! And that's what's happening in Luke 2. Our world was lost in sin and despair. We had no hope in and of ourselves. But, the Savior had come (verse 11). And look at the response, ...

Luke 2:15-20

When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, "Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us." So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.

There was much praise and excitement in Bethlehem that night. But, so also in heaven. That's the idea of this hymn! Heaven is rejoicing at the birth of the Savior. Let us join her chorus! Let us join the heavenly chorus of praise to our King, who has come to live among us.

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

Of anything, when you hear this tune this Christmas season, I want for you to join in the heavenly chorus and sing of the wondrous news that our savior has come! Perhaps you might want to take a few moments and sing the first stanza of the hymn to yourself right now.

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,
"Glory to the newborn King;"
Peace on earth and mercy mild
God and sinners reconciled"
Joyful, all ye nations rise
Join the triumph of the skies
With th'angelic host proclaim:
"Christ is born in Bethlehem"
Hark! The herald angels sing
"Glory to the newborn King!"

By the way, this tune has come to be so familiar to us, but it wasn't familiar to Charles Wesley. He envisioned these words to be sung to the same melody as "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today" (#367). This sounds a bit different than in our day, but, it still retains its triumphant feel. Just as glorious was Christ's resurrection on Easter Sunday, so also is the glory of Christ's appearing on Christmas morning!

The story of the tune is interesting. It was written by Felix Mendelssohn, a hundred years after Wesley wrote his hymn. You can see his name at the bottom left of the page in our hymnal as well. He was born into a prominent Jewish family, and was later baptized into the Christian faith. After writing this melody, he wrote in a letter, ...

I am sure that piece will be liked very much by the singers and the hearers--but it will never do to sacred words. There must be a national and merry subject found out, something to which the soldier-like and buxom motion of the piece has some relation, and the words must express something gay and popular, as the music tries to do. [\[6\]](#)

In other words, Mendelssohn could only see this tune being sung by those who had reason to rejoice, like a national anthem! Or like rejoicing in a military victory! Or some occasion for great joy! Not with sacred music. I believe that this is precisely why it works so well at the end of the movie, "It's a Wonderful Life!" Because, it's a triumphant scene! The movie has little to do with Jesus coming to earth. It has to do with the value of each of our lives. But it fits because the scene is one of exuberant joy!

Mendelssohn didn't think this tune would be appropriate with sacred music. That's where Mendelssohn was wrong. Perhaps in his mind, sacred music was to be more somber and serious, not triumphant, as his tune suggests. But, the themes put forth here in this hymn are triumphant! That's why it works! The king has come to earth to reconcile God and sinners. Even the first stanza says, "Join the triumph of the skies." And what's the triumph? That deity has come to earth!

Christ by highest heav'n adored
Christ the everlasting Lord!
Late in time behold Him come

Offspring of a Virgin's womb

The king and glory of heaven has come to earth! The everlasting Lord -- the one adored throughout all heaven -- has come to us through a virgin's womb. And our only response to such a one is worship.

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see
Hail the incarnate Deity
Pleased as man with man to dwell
Jesus, our Emmanuel

These words bring to mind the great text found in John, chapter 1, John's prologue.

John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.

In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him. He was not the Light, but he came to testify about the Light.

There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

The word (of verse 1) became flesh (verse 14), speaking of Jesus. But, look in verse 1 how Jesus is described. He is called, "the word." He was "with God." He "was God." This is the mystery of the Trinity: One God, three Persons of the Godhead.

Verses 2-4 more fully describe this Jesus. He was with God in the beginning. He was the one who created all things. He is the giver of life! And he has come to dwell among us.

Pleased as man with man to dwell
Jesus, our Emmanuel

Our only response can be worship.

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see
Hail the incarnate Deity

And here we get my second point of application is this.

2. Hail the Christ

Worship the Christ. Notice how often this word, "Hail" is used in this hymn. We see it in stanza two, "Hail th'incarnate Deity," and in stanza three, "Hail, the heav'n-born Prince of Peace! Hail, the Sun of Righteousness."

Christmas is more than simply reflecting upon Jesus. It's all about worshiping Him! When the wise men came from the east, they came to worship. Matthew 2:2, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw his star in the east and have come to worship Him." And the fact that God is with us is enough.

I want to close my message this morning by visiting the deathbed of Charles Wesley's brother, John. It was March 2, 1791. John Wesley was 88 years old. His family and friends were gathered around him. This is how his housekeeper (Betsy Ritchie) described the scene:

... though he strove to speak we were still unsuccessful [to understand]. Finding we could not understand what he said, he paused a little, and then, with all the remaining strength he had, cried out, "The best of all is, God is with us"; and then, as if to assert the faithfulness of our promise-keeping Jehovah and comfort the hearts of his weeping friends, he lifted up his dying arm in token of victory and raising his feeble voice, with a holy triumph not to be expressed, again repeated the heart-reviving words, "The best of all is, God is with us!" [\[7\]](#)

Indeed, this is the best of all. That God is with us! So, "Join the Chorus" and "Hail the Christ" this Christmas season.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on December 7, 2014 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] John Wesley's journal (January 25, 1736), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal.pdf>.(p. 25).

[2] Charles Wesley's journal (February 24, 1738), <http://wesley.nnu.edu/charles-wesley/the-journal-of-charles-wesley-1707-1788/>.

[3] Ibid. (May 21, 1738).

[4] John Wesley in the preface to the 1779 *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People called Methodists* (http://www.hymntime.com/tch/bio/w/e/s/wesley_c.htm).

[5] See <http://www.historynet.com/bert-rj-fish-hassell-and-parker-d-shorty-cramer-pilots-of-a-remarkable-rockford-to-stockholm-flight.htm>.

[6] The Musical Times, September 1, 1908, p. 611. You can read the electronic version here: <https://books.google.com/books?id=n-YEAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA611>.

[7] The full account of Wesley's death by Betsy Ritchie is given in chapter 24 of William Henry Meredith's book, "The Real John Wesley." This quote is found on pages 415-416. You can read the electronic versions here: <https://books.google.com/books?id=19lpAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA415>.