

Hark The Herald Angels Sing  
Luke 2:8-16  
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**Introduction:** Charles Wesley was born in 1707 in England, the youngest of (*this is not an exaggeration*) 18 children born to Samuel and Susanna Wesley. Imagine having 17 older siblings, that gives new definition to the phrase “baby of the family.” Hopefully you recognize his brother, John, who would eventually become the main founder of the Methodist Church. Earlier in life, though, the two of them both studied at Oxford and formed what they called the “Holy Club,” with another man who would become famous for his preaching in the American colonies, George Whitefield. Other students mockingly called them “Methodists” for their methodical ways.<sup>1</sup> Both brothers felt called to preach, but the church of England did not want laymen preaching in their churches, so the Wesley brothers went to the fields and the factories as itinerant preachers. The common workers, who often did not feel welcome in church, responded to their preaching. Charles married his wife, Sarah, in his early 40s and they had several children. Though he helped John immensely in the ministry that resulted in the birth of the Methodist Church, he never considered himself separated from the church of England, a point of contention between the brothers.

Charles wrote over 5,000 hymns. Let that number sink in for a minute, do that math – he lived to 80 years of age, so let’s say he wrote hymns for 50 years; that’s over 100 hymns per year; 2 per week! Not all of them were classics, but many of them are still being sung today, songs like “Christ the Lord is Risen Today,” “O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing,” “Rejoice the Lord is King,” “And Can It Be,” and the second song we sang today, “Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus.” Apparently, in one edition of the “Wesleyan Hymn Book,” of the 770 hymns included, 623 of them were written by Charles Wesley.<sup>2</sup> This emphasis on songwriting was intentional. The two brothers knew that many of the people they would minister to were illiterate, and so they knew that the best way to teach them solid theology would be in the songs that they sang. Songs were as important as sermons.

And so we look today at our focus hymn, Wesley’s triumphant “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” a song so well-loved that it’s both a staple of Christmas choirs as well as being sung in movies like *It’s a Wonderful Life* and *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. Before we read and ponder the meaning of the lyrics, let’s get our Scriptural foundation for the song in Luke 2:8-16:

*<sup>8</sup> And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. <sup>10</sup> And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. <sup>11</sup> For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. <sup>12</sup> And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” <sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup> “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” <sup>15</sup> 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.” <sup>16</sup> And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.*

(“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matt. 4:4b)

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Gant, *The Carols of Christmas* (Nashville: Nelson, 2015), pp. 106-114.

<sup>2</sup> [https://hymnary.org/person/Wesley\\_Charles](https://hymnary.org/person/Wesley_Charles)

We've heard this story so many times that it's probably lost its shock value, but back up and remember how crazy this was. Shepherds were one of the lowest groups of people in society, only a step up from lepers. If you tended sheep, you were dirty, smelly, and unclean; the respectable people looked down on you. And what was so special about this particular group of shepherds that they have God's plans revealed to them by angelic beings? Were they like the Magi, the wise men - carefully charting the movements of the stars and studying the Scriptures so that they were aware that something momentous was happening in their day and age? No, not at all. They were just random shepherds doing what they were hired to do - watching over a bunch of sheep in a field at night, not expecting to see anything or anyone, least of all heavenly creatures appearing in the sky.

But suddenly, out of nowhere, an angel appeared overhead telling them that he had great news for them - that the Messiah who had been promised to Israel was finally arriving! This is the only time the phrase "*a Savior who is Christ the Lord*" is used in the Gospels, and possibly the only time that all of these titles were brought together - Savior, Christ, and Lord. Savior indicates His role as Deliverer, Christ indicates that He is the Messiah, the anointed One of God, and Lord indicates that He is in control, the sovereign authority.

The angel didn't really tell the shepherds to go look for the child, it's more assumed that of course they need to go find Him. Verse 12 says that the sign that they had found the right baby would be swaddling cloths and a manger. Doesn't seem like much, does it? Doesn't seem to match the importance of the birth of a king; no royal trumpeters, no front-page announcement in the newspaper. Of course, Isaiah 7:14 had promised a sign to all Israel hundreds of years beforehand: "*Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel.*" So, a sign for history is the virgin birth and the divine child would be known as Immanuel, which means "God with us."

The one angel was then joined by a "*multitude of the heavenly host.*" They all praised God with the same message, a chorus in unison: "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!*" That must have been an amazing thing to hear, but it also brings up a big question: if the angels filled the night sky and boomed out in one voice their praise, were the shepherds the only ones who heard it? Either other people in the nearby villages and farms heard it as well and somehow dismissed it as a trick of their ears, or the Lord made it so that the angels' announcement only reached the shepherds' ears. Either way, the message did its work and the shepherds made haste to go find the baby.

Let's turn our attention now to the song "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." Charles Wesley had originally written it as a poem called "Hymn for Christmas Day" and the first line read "Hark, how all the welkin rings" - "welkin" is an old English word for the sky or the heavens. George Whitefield, who I mentioned was their friend and the famous preacher in the First Great Awakening in the colonies, adapted and altered some of the words. Wesley had originally intended the lyrics to be sung to his Easter song "Christ the Lord is Risen Today" - take a moment and hum that in your head. But that is not the version that has endured. The classical composer, Felix Mendelssohn, had written a cantata to celebrate Gutenberg's invention of the printing press. In 1855, long after both Wesley and Mendelssohn were dead, a British musician named William Cummings took one section of that cantata as the music for the hymn,<sup>3</sup> and that is the version that has endured. What a strange thing to think that the melody that was written to praise moveable type would be re-purposed to praise God's glorious plan to save humanity.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.forestbaptistchurch.org/the-story-behind-the-carol-hark-the-herald-angels-sing/>

The first verse gives a summary of the Luke passage we just read:

1. 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 the angelic hosts proclaim, "Christ is born in Bethlehem!"  
Hark! the herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King."

If you are a careful student of Scripture, you might object to the first and last lines of this verse on the grounds that the Scriptures nowhere record angels singing. Verses 10 and 13 of our Luke passage are "*the angel said to them*" and "*a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying.*" I did a little research, and the Greek words for singing are *ado*, *psallo*, and *humneo* – you can hear the roots of adore, psalm, and hymn, right? Luke, however, uses the words *eipen* and *legonton*, which mean speaking. So if you want to get technical with all this, the angels didn't sing anything to the shepherds, they just spoke to them. Now, this is not as inaccurate as the title of "We Three Kings of Orient Are" – the Bible never says there were only three of them, they weren't kings, and they weren't from the Orient, so a lot more problems with the accuracy of that one.

Furthermore, the lyrics do not accurately restate the dialogue in Luke 2:8-16, do they? The angels didn't say, "Glory to the newborn King" – they said that the Savior would be born and "Glory to God in the highest." So Wesley's lyrics sort of paraphrase and combine the angels' messages. And rather than quoting what the angels said to the shepherds – *on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased,*" Wesley gives a theological interpretation of what that peace and mercy would look like – "God and sinners reconciled"! And the fourth line claims that the whole angelic host proclaimed Christ's birth in Bethlehem, but it was only the one angel. So, we have this classic hymn that captures the joy and excitement of the angels' appearance even as it twists the wording a good bit. Thankfully, the theology is never off-course.

The second stanza speaks of the mystery of Jesus' two natures combined in one person:

2. 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 man as man to dwell, Jesus, our Immanuel.  
Hark! the herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King."

The first line is easily understood and appreciated – Christ is the everlasting Lord whom the heavens praise. But what about the second line – late in time He was born of the Virgin; why was He late? I think we have a reference to Galatians 4:4 – "*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman.*" Late here does not have the meaning of arriving after one should have, but in the sense of "lately" or "now" or when God purposed it to happen, the fullness of time, the select time. And then the next two lines have such strong theology describing Jesus becoming a man Himself to dwell among men. He is, and always was fully God, but He became Immanuel – "God with us," the incarnate Deity, God with a body. Did everyone who saw Him realize it? No, because His divinity was hidden, "veiled in flesh" the third line says. These are masterful lines of poetry probing the deep mysteries of what I mentioned last week is called the "hypostatic union," the joining of a full divine nature with a human nature in one person.

The final stanza that we still sing tells of the power and accomplishments of Christ:

3. Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of Righteousness!  
Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings.  
Mild he lays his glory by, born that man no more may die,  
Born to raise the sons of earth, born to give us second birth.  
Hark! the herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King."

We have in the first two lines paraphrases of Malachi 4:2 – *"But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in his wings."* I always thought that the song meant "Son" of Righteousness, not "Sun" of Righteousness because if Jesus is the Son of God, He's the Son of Righteousness, right? But the Malachi verse uses "sun" as a way of saying that the Messiah would be like the rising of the sun, and then mixing the metaphor with the wings that bring healing. Then the third and fourth lines speak of the mission for which Jesus came to earth: to give His people spiritual birth that will ensure they are raised to life after their physical deaths. John 3:3 – *"Truly, truly, I say to you unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."*

One of the early versions of the hymn also had fourth verse that is rarely sung today:

4. Come, desire of nations, come, fix in us Thy humble home,  
Rise, the woman's conquering seed, bruise in us the serpent's head.  
Adam's likeness now efface: Stamp Thine image in its place;  
Second Adam, from above, Reinstale us in Thy love.  
Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King."

That first phrase "Come, desire of nations" is a reference from Haggai 2:7, which says: *"And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the LORD of hosts"* (KJV). The second line, "the woman's conquering seed, bruise in us the serpent's head" is a clear reference to Genesis 3:15, which is part of the punishment that God gave after Adam and Eve's fall into sin. It is generally referred to as the first mention of the redemptive work of Christ in the Bible: *"I will put enmity between you (the serpent) and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."* It's a foreshadowing of Christ's people being plagued by Satan and his dark forces, but Christ ultimately triumphing over His enemies.

The third and fourth lines bring us more theology. "Stamp Thine image in its place" – where is the place that God stamps His image? On each one of us; Genesis 1:26 – *"Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."* But from birth, we are fallen in Adam, who was our representative head when he first fell in sin. But as Romans 5:17 says, *"For if, because of one man's (Adam's) trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ."* That is what Wesley means by calling Jesus the Second Adam who came from above to reinstate us in God's love.

The bottom line is that Charles Wesley knew how to take phrases and theological ideas from all over the Bible and incorporate them faithfully into a deeply meditative hymn that makes its listeners and singers more theologically literate. Just imagine your average Joe singing along to Christmas music in the mall or at a restaurant or on Spotify, and in between "Frosty," "Rudolph," and "Santa Baby," he's singing, "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail the incarnate Deity, pleased with man as man to dwell, Jesus, our Immanuel" - the central tenets of Christian orthodoxy that unbelievers sing along to. At what other time does the whole world sing the gospel? Thank God that wonderful, Christ-honoring hymns and carols have endured and still fill the airwaves, malls, movies, church services, and homes all over the world.

Have you ever wondered why God sent angels to deliver this news to the shepherds, not to mention that He used angels to communicate to Mary, Joseph, Zachariah, the wise men... all these people surrounding Jesus' birth? The word "*angelos*" in Greek means messenger, so that's literally their function – to deliver messages. But remember the words of 1 Peter 1:10-12:

*"<sup>10</sup> Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, <sup>11</sup> inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. <sup>12</sup> It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look."*

The angels longed for the plan of redemption to unfold, they yearned for Jesus to come to earth, to live a sinless life and die a sacrificial death for His people. This was no joyless task performed out of mere duty, the angels were in awe and brought good news with great joy, lifting their praises to their Creator and Lord. And we are invited to do the same.

Let's back up to Luke 2:14 where the angels said, "*peace among those with whom he is pleased.*" They didn't say "peace to everyone" or "peace and joy to the world" as it's sometimes mistakenly thought. They actually said, "*peace among those with whom he is pleased.*" How can you be one of those with whom God is pleased? Do you have to clean up your act, become a righteous, holy person who lives like a monk? No, Romans 8:8 says that "*Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.*" Colossians 1:21 says, "*And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds.*" In our natural state, we choose enmity, strife with God, we are pleasing to Him.

So, how do we get peace with God? We can only have peace through someone who makes peace on our behalf. The next verse in Colossians 1 (v. 22) says, "*He has now reconciled in His body of flesh by His death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before Him.*" That word "reconciled" means to bring two parties that are separated together. That's what Jesus' death does. When we back up to verses 19-20, we see that "*For in Him (Jesus) all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross.*" How do you get peace with God? Jesus shed His blood for you and you accept it as the payment for the penalty of your sins. Then you are pleasing in God's sight, He bestows His favor on you, and you are now the fulfillment of the angel's words that Jesus brings peace! God and sinner reconciled. Through Jesus, you are given the second birth so that you won't die spiritually, but you will be raised to eternal life after this life is over. That should make us all rejoice with a loud voice, "Glory to God in the highest!" Amen.

#### Benediction

Romans 15:13 - "*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.*"