

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS CAROL

“Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

Luke 2:14

IT is superstitious to worship angels—it is but proper to love them. Although it would be a high sin and an act of misdemeanor against the Sovereign Court of Heaven to pay the slightest adoration to the mightiest angel, yet it would be unkind and unseemly if we did not give to holy angels a place in our heart’s warmest love. In fact, he that contemplates the character of angels and marks their many deeds of sympathy with men and kindness towards them, cannot resist the impulse of his nature—the impulse of love towards them.

The one incident in angelic history to which our text refers is enough to weld our hearts to them forever. How free from envy the angels were! Christ did not come from Heaven to save their compeers when they fell. When Satan, the mighty angel, dragged with him a third part of the stars of Heaven, Christ did not stoop from His throne to die for them. But He left them to be reserved in chains and darkness until the last great day. Yet angels did not envy men. Though they remembered that He took not up angels, yet they did not murmur when He took up the seed of Abraham. And though the blessed Master had never condescended to take the angel’s form, they did not think it beneath them to express their joy when they found Him arrayed in the body of an infant.

How free, too, they were from pride! They were not ashamed to come and tell the news to humble shepherds. Methinks they had as much joy in pouring out their songs that night before the shepherds, who were watching with their flocks, as they would have had if they had been commanded by their Master to sing their hymn in the halls of Caesar. Mere men—men possessed with pride, think it a fine thing to preach before kings and princes. They think it great condescension now and then to have to minister to the humble crowd. Not so the angels. They stretched their willing wings and gladly sped from their bright seats above to tell the shepherds on the plain by night the marvelous story of an Incarnate God. Mark how well they told the story and surely you will love them!

Not with the stammering tongue of him that tells a tale in which he has no interest. Nor even with the feigned interest of a man that would move the passions of others, when he feels no emotion himself. But with joy and gladness, such as angels only can know. They sang the story out, for they could not stay to tell it in heavy prose. They sang, “Glory to God on high and on earth peace, good will towards men.” Methinks they sang it with gladness in their eyes—with their hearts burning with love and with breasts as full of joy as if the good news to man had been good news to themselves. And, verily, it was good news to them, for the heart of sympathy makes good news to others good news to itself.

Do you not love the angels? You will not bow before them and there you are right. But will you not love them? Does it not make one part of your anticipation of Heaven, that in Heaven you shall dwell with the holy angels, as well as with the spirits of the just made perfect? Oh, how sweet to think that these holy and lovely beings are our guardians every hour! They keep watch and ward about us, both in the burning noontide and in the darkness of the night. They keep us in all our ways. They bear us up in their hands, lest at any time we dash our feet against stones. They unceasingly minister unto us who are the heirs of salvation. Both by day and night they are our watchers and our guardians, for know you not, that “the angel of the Lord encamps round about them that fear Him”?

Let us turn aside, having just thought of angels for a moment, to think of this song, rather than of the angels themselves. Their song was brief, but as Kitto excellently remarks, it was “well worthy of angels expressing the greatest and most blessed truths, in words so few, that they become to an acute apprehension almost oppressive by the pregnant fullness of their meaning.”—“Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men.” We shall, hoping to be assisted by the Holy Spirit, look at these words of the angels in a fourfold manner. I shall just suggest some instructive thoughts arising from these words, then some emotional thoughts. Then a few prophetic thoughts. And afterwards, one or two perceptive thoughts.

1. First then, in the words of our text. There are many INSTRUCTIVE THOUGHTS. The angels sang something which men could understand—something which men ought to understand—something which will make men much better if they will understand it. The angels were singing about Jesus who was born in the manger. We must look upon their song as being built upon this foundation. They sang of Christ and the salvation which He came into this world to work out. And what they said of this salvation was this—they said first, that it gave glory to God. Secondly that it gave peace to man. And thirdly, that it was a token of God’s good will towards the human race.

First, they said that this salvation gave glory to God. They had been present on many august occasions and they had joined in many a solemn chorus to the praise of their Almighty Creator. They were present at the creation: “The morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy.” They had seen many a planet fashioned between the palms of Jehovah and wheeled by His eternal hands through the infinitude of space. They had sung solemn songs over many a world which the Great One had created. We doubt not, they had often chanted, “Blessing and honor and glory and majesty and power and dominion and might be unto Him that sits on the Throne,” manifesting Himself in the work of creation. I doubt not, too, that their songs had gathered force through ages. As when first created, their first breath was song, so when they saw God create new worlds then their song received another note. They rose a little higher in the gamut of adoration.

But this time, when they saw God stoop from His throne and become a Babe, hanging upon a woman’s breast, they lifted their notes higher still—and reaching to the uttermost stretch of angelic music—they gained the highest notes of the Divine scale of praise and they sung, “Glory to God in the highest,” for higher in goodness they felt God could not go. Thus their highest praise they gave to Him in the highest act of His godhead. If it is true that there is a hierarchy of angels, rising tier upon tier in magnificence and dignity—if the Apostle teaches us that there are “angels and principalities and powers and thrones and dominions,” among these blessed inhabitants of the upper world—I can suppose that when the intelligence was first communicated to those angels that are to be found upon the outskirts of the heavenly world, when they looked down from Heaven and saw the newborn Babe, they sent the news backward to the place from where the miracle first proceeded, singing—

*“Angels, from the realms of glory,
Wing your downward flight to earth,
You who sing creation’s story,
Now proclaim Messiah’s birth.
Come and worship,
Worship Christ, the newborn King.”*

And as the message ran from rank to rank, at last the presence angels, those four cherubim that perpetually watch around the throne of God—those wheels with eyes—took up the strain and gathering up the song of all the inferior grades of angels, surmounted the Divine pinnacle of harmony with their own solemn chant of adoration upon which the entire host shouted, “The highest angels praise You”—“Glory to God in the highest.” Yes, there is no mortal that can ever dream how magnificent was that song. Then, note, if angels shouted before and when the world

was made, their hallelujahs were more full, more strong, more magnificent—if not more hearty—when they saw Jesus Christ born of the Virgin Mary to be man’s redeemer—“Glory to God in the highest.”

What is the instructive lesson to be learned from this first syllable of the angels' song? Why this—that salvation is God’s highest glory. He is glorified in every dew drop that twinkles in the morning sun. He is magnified in every wood flower that blossoms in the copse, although it lives to blush unseen and wave its sweetness in the forest air. God is glorified in every bird that warbles on the spray—in every lamb that skips the mead. Do not the fishes in the sea praise Him? From the tiny minnow to the huge leviathan, do not all creatures that swim the waters bless and praise His name? Do not all created things extol Him? Is there anything beneath the sky—save man—that does not glorify God?

Do not the stars exalt Him when they write His name upon the azure of Heaven in their golden letters? Does not the lightning adore Him when it flashes its brightness in arrows of light piercing the midnight darkness? Do not thunders extol Him when they roll like drums in the march of the God of armies? Do not all things exalt Him, from the least even song of Incarnation. Though creation may be a majestic organ of praise it cannot reach the compass of the golden canticle—Incarnation! There is more in that than in creation, more melody in Jesus in the manger than there is in worlds on worlds rolling their grandeur round the Throne of the Most High.

Pause, Christian, and consider this a minute. See how every attribute is here magnified. Lo, what wisdom is here. God becomes man that God may be Just and the Justifier of the ungodly. Lo, what power, for where is power so great as when it conceals power? What power, that Godhead should unrobe itself and become Man! Behold, what love is thus revealed to us when Jesus becomes a Man. Behold, what faithfulness! How many promises are this day kept? How many solemn obligations are this hour discharged? Tell me one attribute of God that is not manifest in Jesus and your ignorance shall be the reason why you have not seen it so. The whole of God is glorified in Christ. And though some part of the name of God is written in the universe, it is here best read—in Him who was the Son of Man and, yet, the Son of God.

But let me say one word here before I go away from this point. We must learn from this, that if salvation glorifies God, glorifies Him in the highest degree and makes the highest creatures praise Him, this one reflection may be added—that doctrine which glorifies man in salvation cannot be the Gospel. For salvation glorifies God. The angels were no Arminians—they sang, “Glory to God in the highest.” They believe in no doctrine which uncrowns Christ and puts the crown upon the head of mortals. They believe in no system of faith which makes salvation dependent upon the creature and which really gives the creature the praise. For what is it less than for a man to save himself, if the whole dependence of salvation rests upon his own free will? No, my Brethren. There may be some preachers that delight to preach a doctrine that magnifies man. But in their Gospel angels have no delight. The only glad tidings that made the angels sing are those that put God first, God last, God midst and God without end—in the salvation of His creatures—and put the crown wholly and alone upon the head of Him that saves without a helper. “Glory to God in the highest,” is the angels' song.

When they had sung this, they sang what they had never sung before. “Glory to God in the highest,” was an old, old song. They had sung that from before the foundations of the world. But, now, they sang as it were a new song before the Throne of God—for they added this stanza—“on earth, peace.” They did not sing that in the garden. There was peace there, it seemed a thing of course and scarce worth singing of. There was more than peace there. For there was glory to God there. But now man had fallen—and since the day when cherubim with fiery swords drove out the man there had been no peace on earth, save in the breast of some believers, who had obtained peace from the living fountain of this incarnation of Christ. Wars had raged from the ends of the world. Men had slaughtered one another, heaps on heaps. There had been wars within as well as wars without. Conscience had fought with man—Satan had tormented man with thoughts of sin.

There had been no peace on earth since Adam fell. But, now, when the newborn King made His appearance, the swaddling band with which He was wrapped up was the white flag of peace. That

manger was the place where the treaty was signed, whereby warfare should be stopped between man's conscience and himself, man's conscience and his God. It was then, that day, the trumpet blew—"Sheathe the sword, oh man, sheathe the sword, oh conscience, for God is now at peace with man and man at peace with God." Do you not feel, my Brethren, that the Gospel of God is peace to man? Where else can peace be found but in the message of Jesus? Go legalist, work for peace with toil and pain and you shall never find it. Go, you that trust in the Law—go to Sinai.

Look to the flames that Moses saw and shrink and tremble and despair—for peace is nowhere to be found, but in Him, of whom it is said, "This man shall be Peace." And what a Peace it is, Beloved! It is peace like a river and righteousness like the waves of the sea. It is the peace of God that passes all understanding, which keeps our hearts and minds through Jesus Christ our Lord. This sacred peace between the pardoned soul and God the Pardoner. This marvelous connection between the sinner and His Judge—this was it that the angels sung when they said, "peace on earth."

And then they wisely ended their song with a third note. They said, "Good will to man." Philosophers have said that God has a good will toward man. But I never knew any man who derived much comfort from their philosophical assertion. Wise men have thought from what we have seen in creation that God had much good will toward man—or else His works would never have been so constructed for their comfort. But I never heard of any man who could risk his soul's peace upon such a faint hope as that. But I have not only heard of thousands, but I know them who are quite sure that God has a good will towards men. And if you ask their reason, they will give a full and perfect answer. They say, He has good will toward man for He gave His Son. No greater proof of kindness between the Creator and His subjects possibly can be afforded than when the Creator gives His only begotten and well beloved Son to die.

Though the first note is God-like and though the second note is peaceful, this third note melts my heart the most. Some think of God as if He were a morose Being who hated all mankind. Some picture Him as if He were some abstract subsistence taking no interest in our affairs. Hark, God has "good will toward men." You know what good will means? Well all that it means and more, God has to you, you sons and daughters of Adam. Swearer, you have cursed God. He has not fulfilled His curse on you. He has good will towards you, though you have no good will towards Him. Infidel, you have sinned high and hard against the Most High. He has said no hard things against you, for He has good will towards men. Poor sinner, you have broken His Laws. You are half afraid to come to the throne of His mercy lest He should spurn you—hear this and be comforted—God has good will towards men, so good a will that He has said and said it with an oath, too, "As I live, says the Lord, I have no pleasure in the death of him that dies, but had rather that he should turn unto Me and live."

So good a will moreover that He has even condescended to say, "Come, now, let us reason together, though your sins are as scarlet, they shall be as wool. Though they are red like crimson, they shall be whiter than snow." And if you say, "Lord, how shall I know that You have this good will towards me," He points to yonder manger and says, "Sinner, if I had not a good will towards you, would I have parted with My Son? If I had not good will towards the human race, would I have given up My Son to become one of that race that He might by so doing redeem them from death?" You that doubt the Master's love, look to that circle of angels. See their blaze of glory—hear their song and let your doubts die away in that sweet music and be buried in a shroud of harmony.

He has good will to men. He is willing to pardon. He passes by iniquity, transgression and sin. And mark you, if Satan shall then add, "But though God has good will, yet He cannot violate His justice, therefore His mercy may be ineffective and you may die"—then listen to that first note of the song, "Glory to God in the highest," and reply to Satan and all his temptations, that when God shows good will to a penitent sinner, there is not only peace in the sinner's heart, but it brings glory to every attribute of God and so He can be just and yet justify the sinner and glorify Himself!

I do not pretend to say that I have opened all the instructions contained in these three sentences, but I may perhaps direct you into a train of thought that may serve you for the week. I hope that

all through the week you will have a truly merry Christmas by feeling the power of these words and knowing the unction of them. "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men."

II. Next, I have to present to you some EMOTIONAL THOUGHTS. Friends, does not this verse, this song of angels, stir your heart with happiness? When I read that and found the angels singing it, I thought to myself, "Then if the angels ushered in the Gospel's great Head with singing, ought I not to preach with singing? And ought not my Hearers to live with singing? Ought not their hearts to be glad and their spirits to rejoice?" Well, I thought, there are some somber religionists who were born in a dark night in December that think a smile upon the face is wicked and believe that for a Christian to be glad and rejoice is to be inconsistent. Ah, I wish these gentlemen had seen the angels when they sang about Christ! For if angels sang about His birth, though it was no concern of theirs, certainly men ought to sing about it as long as they live—sing about it when they die and sing about it when they live in Heaven forever! I do long to see in the midst of the Church more of a singing Christianity. The last few years have been breeding in our midst a groaning and unbelieving Christianity. Now, I doubt not its sincerity, but I do doubt its healthy character. I say it may be true and real enough. God forbid I should say a word against the sincerity of those who practice it but it is a sickly religion.

Watts hit the mark when he said—

*"Religion never was designed
To make our pleasures less."*

It is designed to do away with some of our pleasures—but it gives us many more—to make up for what it takes away. It does not make them less. O you that see in Christ nothing but a subject to stimulate your doubts and make the tears run down your cheeks—O you that always say—

"Lord, what a wretched land is this,

come here and see the angels! Do they tell their story with groans and sobs and sighs? Ah, no. They shout aloud, "Glory to God in the highest." Now, imitate them my dear Brethren. If you are professors of religion, try always to have a cheerful carriage. Let others mourn. But—

*"Why should the children of a king
Go mourning all their days?"*

Anoint your head and wash your face—appear not unto men to fast. Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say unto you rejoice. Specially this week be not ashamed to be glad. You need not think it a wicked thing to be happy. Penance and whipping and misery are no such very virtuous things, after all. The damned are miserable. Let the saved be happy. Why should you hold fellowship with the lost by feelings of perpetual mourning? Why not rather anticipate the joys of Heaven and begin to sing on earth that song which you will never need to end? The first emotion, then, that we ought to cherish in our hearts is the emotion of joy and gladness.

Well, what next? Another emotion is that of confidence. I am not sure that I am right in calling that an emotion, but still in me it is so much akin to it that I will venture to be wrong if I am so. Now, if when Christ came on this earth God had sent some black creature down from Heaven, (if there are such creatures there), to tell us, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men." And if with a frowning brow and a stammering tongue he delivered his message—if I had been there and heard it—I should have hesitated to believe him. I should have said, "You don't look like the messenger that God would send—stammering fellow as you are—with such glad news as this."

But when the angels came there was no doubting the truth of what they said, because it was quite certain that the angels believed it. They told it as if they did, for they told it with singing, with joy

and gladness. If some friend, having heard that a legacy was left you and should come to you with a solemn countenance and a tongue like a funeral bell, saying, "Do you know So-and-So has left you £10,000?" Why, you would say, "Ah, I dare say," and laugh in his face. But if your brother should suddenly burst into your room and exclaim, "I say, what do you think? You are a rich man, So-and-So has left you £10,000!" Why you would say, "I think it is very likely to be true, for he looks so happy over it."

Well, when these angels came from Heaven they told the news just as if they believed it. And though I have often wickedly doubted my Lord's good will, I think I never could have doubted it while I heard those angels singing. No, I should say, "The messengers themselves are proof of the truth, for it seems they have heard it from God's lips. They have no doubt about it, for see how joyously they tell the news?" Now, poor Soul, you that are afraid lest God should destroy you and you think that God will never have mercy upon you—look at the singing angels and doubt if you dare. Do not go to the synagogue of long-faced hypocrites to hear the minister who preaches with a nasal twang, with misery in his face, while he tells you that God has good will towards men.

I know you won't believe what he says, for he does not preach with joy in his countenance. He is telling you good news with a grunt and you are not likely to receive it. But go straightway to the plain where Bethlehem shepherds sat by night and when you hear the angels singing out the Gospel, by the grace of God upon you, you cannot help believing that they manifestly feel the preciousness of telling. Blessed Christmas that brings such creatures as angels to confirm our faith in God's good will to men!

III. I must now bring before you the third point. There are some PROPHETIC UTTERANCES contained in these words. The angels sang "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men." But I look around and what do I see in the whole wide world? I do not see God honored. I see the heathen bowing down before their idols. I mark the Romanist casting himself before the rotten rags of his relics and the ugly figures of his images. I look about me and I see tyranny lording it over the bodies and souls of men. I see God forgotten. I see a worldly race pursuing mammon. I see a bloody race pursuing Moloch. I see ambition riding like Nimrod over the land, God forgotten, His name dishonored. And was this what the angels sang about? Is this what made them sing "Glory to God in the highest?" Ah, no. There are brighter days approaching. They sang "Peace on earth."

But I hear still the clarion of war. And the cannon's horrid roar—not yet have they turned the sword into a plowshare and the spear into a pruning hook! War still reigns. Is this all that the angels sang about? And while I see wars to the ends of the earth, am I to believe that this was all the angels expected? Ah, no, Brethren. The angels' song is big with prophecy—it travails in birth with glories. A few more years and he that lives them out shall see why angels sang. A few more years and He that will come shall come and will not tarry. Christ the Lord will come again and when He comes He shall cast the idols from their thrones. He shall dash down every fashion of heresy and every shape of idolatry. He shall reign from pole to pole with illimitable sway. He shall reign, when like a scroll, yonder blue heavens have passed away.

No strife shall vex Messiah's reign, no blood shall then be shed. They'll hang the useless helmet high and study war no more. The hour is approaching when the temple of Janus shall be shut forever and when cruel Mars shall be hooted from the earth. The day is coming when the lion shall eat straw like the ox, when the leopard shall lie down with the kid—when the weaned child shall put his hand upon the cockatrice den and play with the asp. The hour approaches. The first streaks of the sunlight have made glad the age in which we live. Lo, He comes with trumpets and with clouds of glory! He shall come for whom we look with joyous expectation, whose coming shall be glory to His redeemed and confusion to His enemies. Ah, Brethren, when the angels sang this there was an echo through the long aisles of a glorious future. That echo was—

*"Hallelujah! Christ the Lord
God Omnipotent shall reign."*

Yes, and doubtless the angels heard by faith the fullness of the song—

*“Hark! the song of jubilee
Loud as mighty thunders' roar,
Or the fullness of the sea,
When it breaks upon the shore.”*

“Christ the Lord Omnipotent reigns.”

IV. Now I have one more lesson for you and I have done. That lesson is PRECEPTIVE. I wish everybody that keeps Christmas this year would keep it as the angels kept it. There are many persons who, when they talk about keeping Christmas, mean by that the cutting of the bands of their religion for one day in the year, as if Christ were the Lord of misrule, as if the birth of Christ should be celebrated like the orgies of Bacchus. There are some very religious people that on Christmas would never forget to go to Church in the morning. They believe Christmas to be nearly as holy as Sunday, for they reverence the tradition of the elders. Yet their way of spending the rest of the day is very remarkable—for if they see their way straight up stairs to their bed at night, it must be by accident! They would not consider they had kept Christmas in a proper manner if they did not verge on gluttony and drunkenness.

They are many who think Christmas cannot possibly be kept except there be a great shout of merriment and mirth in the house and added to that the boisterousness of sin. Now, my Brethren, although we, as successors of the Puritans, will not keep the day in any religious sense whatever, attaching nothing more to it than to any other day—believing that every day may be a Christmas for all we know and wishing to make every day Christmas if we can—yet we must try to set an example to others how to behave on that day. And especially since the angels gave glory to God. Let us do the same.

Once more the angels said, “Peace to men.” Let us labor if we can to make peace next Christmas day. Now, old gentleman, you won't take your son in—he has offended you. Fetch him at Christmas. “Peace on earth.” You know that is a Christmas carol. Make peace in your family. Now, Brother, you have made a vow that you will never speak to your brother again. Go after him and say, “Oh, my dear fellow, let not this day's sun go down upon our wrath.” Fetch him in and give him your hand.

Now, Mr. Tradesman, you have an opponent in trade and you have said some very hard words about him lately. If you do not make the matter up today, or tomorrow, or as soon as you can, yet do it on that day. That is the way to keep Christmas—peace on earth and glory to God. And oh, if you have anything on your conscience, anything that prevents your having peace of mind—keep your Christmas in your chamber, praying to God to give you peace. For it is peace on earth, mind you, peace in yourself, peace with yourself, peace with your fellow men, peace with your God. And do not think you have well celebrated that day till you can say, “O God—

*With the world, myself and You
Wherever I sleep at peace will be. ”*

And when the Lord Jesus has become your Peace, remember, there is another thing, good will towards men. Do not try to keep Christmas without keeping good will towards men. You are a gentleman and have servants. Well, try and set their chimneys on fire with a large piece of good, substantial beef for them. If you are men of wealth, you have poor in your neighborhood. Find something wherewith to clothe the naked and feed the hungry and make glad the mourner. Remember, it is good will towards men. Try, if you can, to show them good will at this special season. And if you will do that, the poor will say with me—indeed, they wish there were six Christmases in the year.

Let each one of us go from this place determined that if we are angry all the year round, this next week shall be an exception. That if we have snarled at everybody last year, this Christmas time we will strive to be kindly affectionate to others. And if we have lived all this year at enmity with God, I pray that by His Spirit He may this week give us peace with Him. And then, indeed, my Brothers and Sisters, it will be the merriest Christmas we ever had in all our lives. You are going home to your father and mother, young men—many of you are going from your shops to your homes.

You remember what I preached on last Christmas time. Go home to your friends and tell them what the Lord has done for your soul and that will make a blessed round of stories at the Christmas fire. If you will each of you tell your parents how the Lord met with you in the house of prayer—how, when you left home, you were a happy, wild blade—but have now come back to love your mother's God and read your father's Bible—oh, what a happy Christmas that will make! What more shall I say? May God give you peace with yourselves. May He give you good will towards all your friends, your enemies and your neighbors. And may He give you grace to give glory to God in the highest.

I will say no more, except at the close of this sermon to wish everyone of you, when the day shall come, the happiest Christmas you ever had in your lives—

*“Now with angels round the throne,
Cherubim and seraphim,
And the Church, which still is one,
Let us swell the solemn hymn.
Glory to the great I AM!
Glory to the Victim Lamb.
Blessing, honor, glory, might,
And dominion infinite,
To the Father of our Lord,
To the Spirit and the Word;
As it was all worlds before,
Is and shall be evermore.”*

Adapted from The C. H. Spurgeon Collection, Version 1.0, Ages Software, 1.800.297.4307