

Christmas 2017

O Little Town of Bethlehem

O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight

For Christ is born of Mary
And gathered all above
While mortals sleep, the angels keep
Their watch of wondering love
O morning stars together
Proclaim the holy birth
And praises sing to God the King
And Peace to men on earth

How silently, how silently
The wondrous gift is given
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven
No ear may hear His coming
But in this world of sin
Where meek souls will receive him still
The dear Christ enters in

O holy Child of Bethlehem
Descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born to us today
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell
O come to us, abide with us
Our Lord Emmanuel
O come to us, abide with us
Our Lord Emmanuel

We are continuing our Christmas series on the biblical truths contained in many of the traditional Christmas carols. Our present song is "O Little Town of Bethlehem." It was the Old Testament prophet Micah who saw that the Savior

would be born in this town. And so eight hundred years before Jesus Christ was born Micah prophesied,

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
Though you are little among the thousands of Judah,
Yet out of you shall come forth to Me
The One to be Ruler in Israel
(Micah 5:2)

The name Bethlehem means house of bread. It was the main grain growing region of ancient Israel. Today they still farm there, but mostly grow olives and grapes. It was in Bethlehem that a poor woman named Ruth gleaned grain in the fields of a man named Boaz so she could care for her mother-in-law. It was in Bethlehem that Boaz married Ruth. It was in Bethlehem that their grandson king David was born. And it was in Bethlehem that their great descendant Jesus, the Bread of life was born.¹

The author of this song brings three locations to our minds. The first location is Bethlehem, the second is heaven and the third location is our hearts. The first verse sets the mood; it is the night of our dear Savior's birth. And in the first line we sing "O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie." There is a bit of poetic license here, because Bethlehem that night was hardly silent! The town was bursting at the seams, because of the Roman census where everyone had to return to their home town. As you will recall there was no room at the inn for Joseph and Mary.

But the powerful truth of the first verse is in the last line where we sing, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." Jesus Christ was born so that every fear, every anxiety, every worry, every sorrow and also every hope and aspiration of our hearts can find a place of rest. In Matthew 11, Jesus proclaimed,

Come to Me, all you who labor and are
heavy laden, and I will give you rest.
²⁹ Take My yoke upon you and learn from
Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and
you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For My yoke
is easy and My burden is light.
(Matthew 11:28-30)

Rest for our souls...is this not the best gift? Here we have an open invitation to everyone who hears this call to come to Jesus and lay our burdens down. The

¹ John 6:35

burdens of sin and guilt, the burdens of anger and despair, the burdens of a broken heart, these are heavy and drag us down to the ground. The book of Hebrews tells us that in Jesus we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, because, “he was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.” We can come boldly before a throne of grace “to obtain mercy and grace” in our time of need.”²

Our hearts do not have to be in the dark about God or about the meaning and purpose of our lives. In our song we sang “Yet in thy dark street shineth the everlasting light.” And in John 8 Jesus Christ said, “I am the light of the world. He who follows me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.”³

Now, in the second stanza the location changes from Bethlehem to heaven. We sing, “For Christ is born of Mary and gathered all above, while mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love.” The most defining characteristic or reason for God’s gift to us of Jesus Christ is love. John 3:16 tells us,

For God so loved the world that He gave
His only begotten Son, that whoever believes
in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

So in our song, as Jesus is being born the angels are looking at the scene observing this wonderful gift of love. In the apostle’s Peter’s first letter he writes about the Old Testament prophets. They prophesied about the birth of Christ. They prophesied about his ministry. They prophesied about his death and resurrection and his coming kingdom. And Peter says that when they wrote they wrote about the future—for you and me. And then he adds a final thought saying “things which angels desire to look into.”⁴

The angels whose lives are filled with the worship and praise of God marvel and wonder at the love of God for us in Christ. But why would the angels marvel at our salvation? The answer is stunning—there are no saved angels! There are good angels and there are the bad angels who followed Satan in his rebellion. But there are no saved angels, nor will there ever be. There are only saved humans. The author of Hebrews wrote of Jesus and said,

Inasmuch then as the children have partaken
of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared

² Hebrews 4:14-16

³ John 8:12

⁴ 1 Peter 1:13

in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵ and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. ¹⁶ **For indeed He does not give aid to angels**, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham. ¹⁷ Therefore, in all things He had to be made like *His* brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things *pertaining* to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted. (Hebrews 2:14-18) [my emphasis in bold]

Only human beings can be redeemed! We alone of all the creatures of the universe can experience the wonders and beauty of God's saving mercy, grace and love. This fascinates the angels and causes them to ponder the great love of God for us. Let that sink into your heart. God loves you so deeply that the angels are amazed!

In Luke 15:10 Jesus said, "there is joy in the presence of the angels over one sinner who repents. And this is one of our big failings, while the angels rejoice and marvel at God's love for us, we all too often take it for granted. If the angels marvel and wonder how much more should we?"

So in our Christmas carol the scene opens in Bethlehem and we see Christ being born. Then the camera focuses on heaven and we are told to fix our eyes on the angels who marvel at the love of God for us. Finally in the last two stanzas the location moves to our hearts. We sing,

How silently, how silently
The wondrous gift is given
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven
No ear may hear His coming
But in this world of sin
Where meek souls will receive him still
The dear Christ enters in.

So how does Christ enter our lives? How does his love come to us? It is not with trumpets and a big fanfare. It is not by force. No, it comes to our lives by faith and then something wonderful happens. In the gospel of John we read,

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: ¹³ who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:12, 13)

To receive Jesus Christ means to believe in his name. That it is he, Jesus, who will save us from our sins and especially the penalty for sin which is everlasting death. It means to believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's anointed prophet, priest and king. And when we receive Jesus Christ we are given the right to become children of God. The Greek word translated children is teknon.

As we have been learning from Galatians we are adopted as sons so that we can be heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.⁵ But we are His supernatural children as well. The Greek word teknon is used for a child of natural descent. The life of God is in us, because of the gift of the Spirit. Peter, in his second letter declares that we are "partakers of the divine nature."⁶ Even now, in this life we share in the very life that belongs to God. Therefore our ultimate end is not death and destruction, but everlasting life.

Still, there is one final thought in our Christmas carol. We sing, "O come to us, abide with us, our Lord, Emmanuel." Let's read a prayer in Ephesians 3 that relates to this line from our song.

For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵ from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, ¹⁶ that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, **¹⁷ that Christ may dwell in your hearts** through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height— ¹⁹ to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.
(Ephesians 3:14-19 [my emphasis])

⁵ Galatians 4; Romans 8:15, 16

⁶ 2 Peter 1:4

We want to read the Bible and understand God's Word so that our hearts and minds are renewed and transformed. When this happens then our thinking and feelings and behavior is transformed and we are more godly and loving. And when this happens then Christ dwells or abides with us. He is at home in our hearts. And his love and grace shines more brightly in all that we do and say.

Our song, "O Little Town of Bethlehem" is not just a sweet song; there is good theology for us here. Christ was born in Bethlehem just as the Word of God declared. We can trust the Scriptures. Christ enters our lives when we receive him and the angels marvel at God's love for us. And Christ can abide and be at home in our hearts so that his love can be seen in us. This is a wonderful blessing! Amen.