

It Came upon the Midnight Clear

1. It came upon the midnight clear,
That glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth,
To touch their harps of gold;
“Peace on the earth, good will to men,
From Heaven’s all gracious king.”
The world in solemn stillness lay,
To hear the angels sing.
2. Still through the cloven skies they come
With peaceful wings unfurled,
And still their heavenly music floats
O’er all the weary world;
Above its sad and lowly plains,
They bend on hovering wing,
And ever over its Babel sounds
The blessed angels sing.
3. Yet with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
The love-song which they bring;
O hush the noise, ye men of strife
And hear the angels sing.
4. And ye, beneath life’s crushing load,
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way
With painful steps and slow,
Look now! for glad and golden hours
Come swiftly on the wing.
O rest beside the weary road,
And hear the angels sing!
5. For lo! the days are hastening on,
By prophet-bards foretold,
When with the ever circling years
Comes round the age of gold;
When peace shall over all the earth
Its ancient splendors fling,
And the whole world send back the song
Which now the angels sing.

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carol, peace, goodwill, angels, war, turmoil, unrest, Kingdom
Luke 2:10-14
Christ brings peace on earth only to those who put God first.

INTRODUCTION:

–Before looking at “*It Came Upon a Midnight Clear*,” let’s look at its context in the KJV– Luke 2:10-14, *And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, 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, good will toward men.* [Wycliffe’s older translation (and now, most modern versions) used older, more reliable Greek MSs that render this passage’s last phrase “*peace on earth to men of good will*.” For many reasons, that’s *probably the correct one*.]

–But the KJV rendering inspired many carols, including “*It Came Upon a Midnight Clear*,” sung in most churches, even though it never speaks of Christ or His birth. Its author, Edmund Sears, was a Unitarian pastor who *did* claim to believe in Christ’s deity, but his song’s focus wasn’t on Bethlehem. When he wrote it in 1849, his mind was on chaotic world that was far from exhibiting “*Peace on the earth, good will to men*.”

–Taken alone, that promising phrase seems to have no strings attached. But there is a string, and it’s attached to Jesus! The “*good tidings of great joy*” brought by the angels was that “*a Savior has been born... Christ the Lord*.” God was showing “*good will toward men*” by giving us His Son. And since Jesus was “the Prince of peace,” only those with a good-willed response to Him are able to receive that heavenly “*peace*.” **HOM.idea. But...**

I. Earthly Turmoil Can Distract Us from the Prince of Peace

A. Edmund Sears had much in his world to distract him:

1. In 1848 massive revolutionary uprisings in Europe had affected 50 countries, with over 10,000 lives lost, and many exiled.
2. 1848 brought an end to a 2-year war with Mexico, which many (including Abe Lincoln), saw as an unjustifiable land-grab.
3. Sears had also taken a stand against slavery, and long before the Civil War he predicted we’d “*reap the whirlwind*” for this sin.
4. In his personal life, he’d just had a breakdown after 7 years of strenuous ministry and had left the pastorate to preach part-time.

- B. These distractions may explain why, instead of *exultant joy*, this poem's emotional tone is one of *melancholy... almost of lament*.
1. Sears saw the *divine message* of “*Peace on the earth, good will to men,*” being *badly needed* but going *unheeded*.
 2. His sadness at the world's *lack of receptivity* caused *two verses* in his song to be *changed* in most hymnals or entirely left out:
 - a. In the original verse 2, he writes: “*Still through the cloven skies they come / With peaceful wings unfurled, / And still their heavenly music floats / O'er all the weary world; / Above its sad and lowly plains, / They bend on hovering wing, / And ever over its Babel sounds / The blessed angels sing.*”
 - b. Verse 3 is even more direct: “*Yet with the woes of sin and strife / The world has suffered long; / Beneath the angel strain have rolled / Two thousand years of wrong; / And man, at war with man, hears not / The love-song which they bring; / O hush the noise, ye men of strife / And hear the angels sing.*” (Here, he concluded on the right note, *not just criticizing* the situation, but *making an appeal*.)

TRANS: We still live in a “weary world” with “*sad and lowly plains.*” At this season especially, busy “*Babel sounds*” distract people from *the true meaning of Christmas*. After “*two thousand years of wrong,*” the *hope* sung by angels, is still being ignored by “*man, at war with man.*” But an appeal to “*hush the noise... And hear the angels sing*” is in vain, unless a person's heart is open to Christ, the *Author* of this promised “*peace on earth.*”

II. Only the Heart That Puts God First Has Room for His Peace

- A. *Textual evidence* shows why v.14 should read, “**on earth peace to men of good will.**” (*Theologically*, there are even greater reasons for it.)
 1. Self-glorification led us to sin and “**fall short of the glory of God.**” (As long as we put our own glory first, instead of giving “*Glory to God in the highest,*” we will have no room to receive divine “peace”)
 2. Jesus spent His entire life glorifying His Father... putting His Father's will first. (He prayed when facing the Cross, “not my will by Yours be done,” and calls us to the same life-style: “Follow Me.”)
- B. In this song, Edmund Sears was so distracted by and focused on the missed benefits of “*peace on earth, good will to men,*” that he forgot to exalt “the Prince of Peace,” Who brings that heavenly “peace.” (He's the only Way back to the “glory of God” from which we fell.)
 1. Sears did foresee emancipation for those in slavery's bondage:

- (listen again to verse 4) “*And ye, beneath life's crushing load, / Whose forms are bending low, / Who toil along the climbing way / With painful steps and slow, / Look now! for glad and golden hours / Come swiftly on the wing. / O rest beside the weary road, / And hear the angels sing!*” (Yet among those who died in slavery, many **did** find that “*rest beside the weary road*” by making room in their hearts for the One who said in Mat 11:28, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”)
2. He did not tell of a returning King, but of an *eventual* return to a past age of “*peace*” when earth will finally echo the song of the angels: (listen carefully to the last verse) “*For lo! the days are hastening on, / By prophet-bards foretold, / When with the ever circling years / Comes round the age of gold; / When peace shall over all the earth / Its ancient splendors fling, / And the whole world send back the song / Which now the angels sing.*”
 - a. Since humanity's Fall in the Garden, *world history* has never had any “*ancient splendors*” of *world peace* to “*fling*” again to us.
 - b. Until Jesus comes back to bring this world to an end and set up a new one, there **will be no world peace—you have His word on it— Mark 13:7**, “When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.”
 - c. We long for the outward conditions of “peace,” but God's focus is on the *inward disposition* of each person's heart to receive His “*peace*”— Isa 57:19-21 (NKJV), “...Peace, peace to him who is far off and to him who is near,” Says the LORD, “And I will heal him.” But the wicked are like the troubled sea, When it cannot rest, Whose waters cast up mire and dirt. “There is no peace,” Says my God, “for the wicked.”

CONCLUSION:

—This song's *poetry* is excellent. But I believe Edmund Sears probably *now regrets* having been *so distracted* by the absence of “peace on earth,” that he neglected to announce “the Prince of Peace” in this popular carol. —While I labored over his poem's contents, a *poetic response* came to me that I wrote down as an endnote supplement to this familiar song, and as my way of concluding this message on it:

PEACE AND GOODWILL (DLH, 12/7/2018)

Since Adam ate from off that tree,	If you'd find peace from Heaven's King,
Earth spins without tranquility.	Then join the song the angels sing:
No golden age of ancient Greece	“To God the highest glory be!”
Nor <i>Pax Romana</i> gave us peace.	That's goodwill's faithful melody!
The Son of God and Mary brought	All sinners, willing to believe,
The hope that midnight angels taught.	Alone that Prince of Peace receive.