“HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING”
Lk. 2:13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

The hymns we sing often started out quite differently to how we have them today. The way we have this particular carol in our hymnbooks isn’t exactly the way the hymn writer Charles Wesley originally wrote it in 1739. For one thing, rather than writing five original verses of eight lines, he wrote ten original verses consisting of only four lines. … The first verse, - when he wrote it, - was slightly different …

Hark, how all the welkin rings,
“Glory to the King of kings;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!”

(‘Welkin’ is an old English term referring to the highest celestial heavens.)

Also, did you notice I mentioned five original verses of eight lines? Yes, there is another verse …

Adam’s likeness, Lord, efface [i.e. erase, blot out],
Stamp Thine image in its place:
Second Adam from above,
Reinstate us in Thy love.
Let us Thee, though lost, regain,
Thee, the Life, the inner man:
O, to all Thyself impart,
Formed in each believing heart.

Another factor is that the tune today is different from what it was at the beginning. It was originally sung slowly and solemnly, and used a classical cantata written in 1739 by Felix Mendelssohn celebrating the four hundredth anniversary of Johann Gutenburg’s invention of the printing press. … George Whitefield, one of the co-founders of Methodism, made a few alterations to the words, and then a change to make them fit the tune was needed. This happened in 1840 when an English musician called William H. Cummings adapted the music … and so it became the carol we are familiar with today.

The real background to the hymn though comes from the Gospel of Luke, 2:13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

The chapter begins with the familiar account of Mary and Joseph having travelled from Nazareth to Bethlehem for the census ordered by Caesar Augustus. During their stay in that town the heavily pregnant Mary gave birth to the Baby Jesus. …
Of course, life went on as normal for everyone else … and out in the surrounding hills were the shepherds. Everything began as it had any other evening. However, in the midst of the stillness and the familiar, the spectacular happened, v.9 lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. Despite the trepidation that must have fallen upon them, the angel bade them not to be afraid, v.10 for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. 12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

… And, at that very moment, v.13 there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. The Glory of Heaven announced the birth of the Son of God … the incarnation … “offspring of a virgin’s womb. Veiled in flesh the Godhead see!” … When Spurgeon preached on this verse fourteen, he called it, “The First Christmas Carol”. … Matthew Henry described it as “the angels’ doxology to God”. …

The Angels’ Privilege

“Let me tell them!” … Those are the words children often frantically shout out when they have good news, - or bad 😞, - they want to tell. … Consider the multitude of angels and how they rejoiced at the birth of the Saviour. Warren Wiersbe writes, “How amazed the angels must have been when they saw the Creator born as a creature, the Word coming as a speechless baby”. … John the apostle recorded, Jn. 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 The same was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. … 14 And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. Wesley captures it perfectly, “Mild, He lays His glory by”.

What a privilege for those angels to witness to such glory … to first look upon the Saviour in the simplicity of the manger, and then to announce His birth to the shepherds! Surely, it was what every angel had been anticipating since the first time God’s plan had been brought to the attention of Heaven! … It was the highest honour for that multitude of the heavenly host! … Wesley, again, describes it as “the triumph of the skies”. The glory of God filled the heavens! What a sight that must have been!

Yes, and what a true honour to be among such a multitude announcing the arrival of the “new-born King” … This was the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies spanning back as far as Genesis 3:15, when God told the devil, I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel. “Rise, the woman’s conquering seed, bruise in us the serpent’s head”.
Consider also how each of that privileged number of angels would have been all-too aware of sin’s destruction. Even while in Heaven, one of their number who had been favoured with the title ‘son of the morning’ set out to exalt himself above the station God had so graciously granted him. … That angel, - described as Lucifer (Is. 14:12), - had proudly taken it upon himself to announce, Is. 14:13 I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: 14 I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High. … He set out to oppose and exalt himself above God, for he wanted the worship of the other angels. He coveted the throne that belongs to God, and he wanted to show himself as God (cf. II Thess. 2:4). His plans failed though, and God expelled him and a third of the angels to earth, Rev. 12:9 And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.

God made no way back for them. For those fallen angels, there was no redemption. He did not open up a means of salvation for those fallen angels. He didn’t send His Son to die on a cross for them … No, and … the point I’m trying to make is, these angels who announced the birth of His Son didn’t question why God would send His Son to die for the children of Adam, and yet provided no similar means of salvation for the fallen angels. … Such was their comprehension of the majesty, the triumph and the wonderful holiness of God, the song of the angelic host, - on the hills of Judea, - proclaimed to the glory of God, “Christ is born in Bethlehem”.

And yes, this multitude of angels in God’s choir heralded the Heavenly message with such triumph that filled the skies. They sang … not to a king or an emperor … but to common shepherds in the fields! They came from the throne-room of Heaven to the hills of Judea … Their message wasn’t to well-educated and influential and articulate men … but to the very lowest of society. … And just imagine how those excited shepherds then ran into the nearby towns and villages with their good news! …

Yes, the angels brought their message to the simplest … and it was such a Gospel even they could understand. And imagine … God did not spare the resources of Heaven to announce the birth of His Son for He sent a multitude to sing this short hymn to His glory! … Hold that thought, and also consider that each time a soul is wonderfully saved by the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ … each time, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth (Lk. 15:10).

And yet, in God’s eternal plan, this same Baby Who was “by highest Heaven adored” … Heb. 2:9 was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man. … The angels ‘lifted’ above the Christ-child, and yet the Baby in the manger received all their praise. … Yes … The angel’s privilege
THE ANGELS’ PRAISE
“Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail, the Sun of righteousness” … His Name, - Isaiah tells us, - is called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace (Is. 9:6) … Malachi prophesied, 4:2 unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings.

Before the foundation of the earth, and in eternity long before that eventful day in Bethlehem, … in Heaven the angels had already been praising and serving the Lord Jesus, Ps. 103:20 Bless the LORD, ye his angels, that excel in strength, that do his commandments … The exact same worship was given to Him in the hills and fields of Judea. He had not lost any of His Glory. The One they worshipped and adored in Heaven, - Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God (Phil. 2:6), - was this same Baby in the manger … In the counsel of eternity, Eph. 1:9 according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself … the Triune God decreed His Son, - in coming to earth, - He made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men (Phil. 2:8) … This eternal Son of God. … … the Second Person of the Trinity … Here we have the mystery of the Godhead in three Persons … Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And Heaven’s purpose in Christ, Heb. 1:2 appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; [He] 3 Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person.

And the song of the angels entered the hearts of the shepherds, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. … The glory the angels enjoyed was received by the shepherds. They spoke in terms familiar to those men … they spoke of the long-awaited Messiah, … they heralded the salvation He would bring into this world … and they made sure to centre all their glory in God. The peace He would establish would reign, “God and sinners reconciled”. … Earlier, the instruction had been given that the Baby would be called Jesus, … Mt. 1:21 for he shall save his people from their sins … Salvation is at the very heart of His Name … Our salvation is the very purpose for which He was sent (Jn. 3:16) … He was “born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth” … Ye must be born again (Jn. 3:7).

In another setting, the Lord told Job this angel choir had been singing the song when the foundations of the earth were laid … They were the morning stars [that] sang together, and all the sons of God [who] shouted for joy (Job 38:7). They had watched as the planets were formed and set in their place. While God was doing His work of creation, they were as the music of praise in the background. What an even greater song for God they were now singing as they announced the birth of His Son!

Perhaps we need to pause for a moment and acknowledge those who make a very valid point that the text in Lk. 2:14 explicitly describes the angels as ‘saying’ these
words, rather than ‘singing’ them. … So we need to be careful we don’t misuse the Word of God, even in something that mightn’t seem too significant. Did they ‘sing’, or did they ‘say’ these words? Personally, I think it is quite irrelevant because surely the language of Heaven is far more beautiful than any music we hear on earth. Indeed, if you want to push it a little further, Zech. 3:17 tells us, The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing. Surely if God sings, it’s not too hard to believe His angels enjoy singing too!

And yes, also, consider the grandeur of their song … No note in Heaven’s symphony would have been too high or too low for them to reach! … And no matter how high their notes ascended, the One they worshipped was still higher, Glory to God in the highest! It sounded throughout Heaven, that a child is born, … a son is given (Is. 9:6) … It was God’s promise in the times of Zechariah, 3:8 behold, I will bring forth my servant the BRANCH … and there in the manger shone the Father’s brightest glory. Yes, as the psalmist wrote, Ps. 19:1 The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork … but far greater, Peter reminds us, is He Who received from God the Father honour and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased (II Pet. 1:17). … All other glory fades before the glory of our Saviour! He is the centre of the angels’ praise.

THE ANGELS’ PROMISE
There is also another aspect to their announcement. Yes, the angels’ message began with a Heavenly theme, Glory to God in the highest … and it also had another equally clear theme for the inhabitants of the earth … and on earth peace, good will toward men. … What does this mean?!

Up until our present day, there has never been peace on the earth, to compare with Heaven’s understanding of peace … and there is only ever a limited amount of good will toward men! Good will was also in short supply when Herod attended to the information from the wise men concerning the birth of the Messiah! He killed all the baby boys below the age of two that lived in or around Bethlehem (Mt. 2:16)! … There wasn’t much peace on earth, or good will toward men!

Will there ever come a time when true peace shall reign on this earth, and good will shall be the order of the day? Is this the promise the angels brought to the shepherds … for their times, in the first century? No, of course it wasn’t! Rome was in control of their villages, towns and cities. Rome was an idolatrous enemy state who had occupied their land … One of their generals, - Titus, - would ransack Jerusalem in 70 AD, and the Jewish temple built on the site of Solomon’s great temple would be destroyed … and the Lord Jesus told it to His disciples, ye shall be hated of all nations
for my name's sake (Mt. 24:9). I cannot understand it any other way than this … the angels’ promise must be referring to a time yet to come.

It is not merely symbolic language … because how can you have ‘symbolical’ peace?! … The angels are announcing real peace … as the prophecy of Isaiah, for example, described it, Is. 52:7 How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth! 8 Thy watchmen shall lift up the voice; with the voice together shall they sing: for they shall see eye to eye, when the LORD shall bring again Zion. 9 Break forth into joy, sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem: for the LORD hath comforted his people, he hath redeemed Jerusalem. 10 The LORD hath made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. I don’t believe that is symbolic language …

It is nothing less than our sovereign God can achieve in reality. He literally made this world for His glory … and I believe He will literally keep the promise He sent His messengers to proclaim to the shepherds. This world shall see it! Micah 5:2 But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting. 3 Therefore will he give them up, until the time that she which travaileth hath brought forth: then the remnant of his brethren shall return unto the children of Israel. 4 And he shall stand and feed in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God; and they shall abide: for now shall he be great unto the ends of the earth.

The song of the angels on the Judean hillside is indeed oozing with promise and hope for God’s people today! God, Who wrote their song, has committed Himself, Hag. 2:7 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. … Who is the desire of all nations? It is the same One Wesley addresses, “Come, Desire of nations, come” … the Lord Jesus Christ Who will come and return to this earth.

… Rev. 22:20 Even so, come, Lord Jesus. He’s coming to display and demonstrate His sovereign power as King of kings and Lord of lords. He will restore the ruined nature, Is. 64:1 Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down, that the mountains might flow down at thy presence. 2 … that the nations may tremble at thy presence! And what’s more … when Jesus returns, the message of the angels will not be restricted to a localised area, - it won’t just be to Jerusalem or the hills of Judea … for it will be worldwide, Rev. 1:7 Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him … 1 Thess. 4:16 the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God. … How will such a tremendous event happen, on such a grand scale? … I do not know, but I know it will … because God has promised it!
And then what? … Yes, at that time, - in Wesley’s words, - we shall “in mystic union join Thine to ours, and ours to Thine”. God has promised, Is. 65:19 I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in my people: and the voice of weeping shall be no more heard in her, nor the voice of crying. … 21 And they shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them. … 23 They shall not labour in vain, nor bring forth for trouble; for they are the seed of the blessed of the LORD, and their offspring with them. … 25 The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock: and dust shall be the serpent's meat. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith the LORD. …

CONCLUSION

That is the glorious promise of hope we have for a fallen world at Christmas, Jn. 1:14 the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us. And we are not just looking back, we’re looking forward. The promise the angels made when the Lord Jesus was a Baby lying in a manger, … they made another promise as He returned to Glory from the Mount of Olives, … the angels promised, Acts 1:11 this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven. … And one of those same disciples who was standing there, was later granted the privilege in the vision, Rev. 21:2 And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

It’s not about ‘Jingle Bells’, Santa Claus or Christmas trees … It’s all about our Saviour Who came to this earth, and Who will one day return again … “Glory to the newborn King!” Amen.