

# **Hark the Herald Angels Sing - Theology** by Todd Engstrom

## **SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION**

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*And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. 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. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and 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 among those with whom he is pleased!" --Luke 2:8-14*

*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. --1 Peter 1:12*

## **THEME AND STRUCTURE OF HARK THE HERALD ANGELS SING**

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Written by Charles Wesley in 1739, "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" is a song of rejoicing for the Incarnation. The refrain is written to draw us back to the narrative of the angelic announcement of Jesus, as Luke 2 recounts. The song utilizes this narrative to draw God's church into a divine perspective on the incarnation and in so doing produce wonder and worship.

As I have reflected on this song, there are three primary themes the author draws upon to cultivate praise in God's people:

1. Narrative Imagery from the Gospel of Luke
2. Invitation to Rejoice in the Story of God
3. Expanding on Gospel Truths

## **NARRATIVE IMAGERY FROM THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

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The opening verse draws heavily upon the Gospel of Luke, recounting the angelic choir and the song of exaltation. When we consider that the

angelic host of heaven marvels at the grace of God to send His son to earth, it brings into focus and perspective the magnitude of this historic event.

So often, we forget the significance of the day our Savior was born, fast-forwarding to the cross and the resurrection. The author of this great hymn brings us back to that evening when the heavens were rent open and some humble shepherds witnessed the heavens rejoicing.

The author doesn't simply stop at recounting the narrative, but uses this imagery as an opportunity to draw us into this grand story.

## **INVITATION TO REJOICE IN THE STORY OF GOD**

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The second verse of the song is one of invitation to the whole world to rejoice along with the angelic choir. It is reminiscent of a theme throughout the Psalms, but succinctly articulated in Psalm 117:

*Praise the LORD, all nations! Extol him, all peoples! For great is his steadfast love toward us, and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever. Praise the LORD! –Psalm 117:1-2*

After recounting the angelic announcement, the only appropriate response of the entire world is to sing along with the angels!

The rest of the song helps us to understand why the angels and all the earth should sing, helping us to see the rest of God's redemptive story, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

## **THE TRUTHS OF THE GOSPEL**

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The final two stanzas, including verses three, four, five and six are an expansion of the gospel truths, which are initiated at the incarnation.

Verses three and four reflect on the identity of Jesus. In the identity of the Son of God, we see both the eternity of Christ and the amazing idea that the eternal God became flesh and entered into time. In verse three, Wesley focuses our attention on the supremacy and divinity of Jesus, whereas verse four reflects on the truth that Jesus is fully God and fully man and the Incarnation. Using the distinct names of Jesus as "Lord" and "Emmanuel" (literally, "God with Us"), Wesley further highlights the idea that our God became man. Without this precious truth of doctrine, we are without the perfect righteousness of Jesus' life and a perfect atoning sacrifice in His death. The incarnation is truly a miraculous thing!

Verse five and six focus primarily on the purpose of Christ to redeem sinners, using again many of His names to illustrate His purposes. As

Prince of Peace and Son of Righteousness, Jesus has come to accomplish the will of the Father to reconcile and redeem fallen humanity back to God.

Verse 6 shows us the humility of Jesus to submit himself to the will of the Father and accomplish the task of redemption. Although not explicitly quoting Philippians 2:6–11, it certainly contains the fullness of that passage from Incarnation to Glorification. The purpose of Christ in taking on flesh was to bring great glory to God through the work of the cross and the power of the resurrection. By the power of the Spirit to bring repentance and faith, the sons of earth are raised to be with Christ for eternity.

This glorious Gospel is certainly something that angels have longed to look into, and we, God's people, are the humble, joyful recipients of His grace in Christ.

## **SONG LYRICS**

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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 angelic host proclaim  
Christ is born in Bethlehem

Hark! The herald angels sing  
"Glory to the newborn King!"

Christ by highest heaven adored  
Christ the everlasting Lord  
Late in time behold Him come  
Offspring of a virgin's womb

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see  
Hail the incarnate deity  
Pleased with us in flesh to dwell  
Jesus, our Emmanuel

Hark! The herald angels sing  
"Glory to the newborn King!"

Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace  
Hail the Son on Righteousness  
Light and life to all He brings  
Risen with healing in His wings

Mild he lay His glory by

Born that men no more may die  
Born to raise the sons of earth  
Born to give them second birth

Hark! The herald angels sing  
"Glory to the newborn King!"