

HISTORY: O HOLY NIGHT

Tuesday, December 16

Reading: Galatians 4:4-7

In 1843, French wine merchant and poet Placide Cappeau was asked by his local priest to write a poem for Christmas Eve. Though he was not a regular church attender, he agreed and wrote the three-verse poem while travelling to Paris. Upon reaching Paris, he asked Adolphe Charles Adams, a famous Jewish opera composer, to write the music. ‘Cantique de Noel’ was first performed at the Midnight Mass that year. It became very popular until the French Catholic Church banned it because Cappeau had left the church and became a socialist. But people kept singing the songs in their homes anyway.

A decade later (1855), an American writer translated the song into English. During translation, he changed some of the ideas and thoughts to fit the English version and express some of his own thoughts. He changed the original French which would read "It is midnight: the solemn hour when the God-man came down" to the more familiar "O Holy night, the stars are brightly shining." He was particularly drawn to the third verse about breaking the chains of slavery and all men being brothers. He was an abolitionist and these words resonated with the effort to end slavery in America. The song became popular in America, particularly in the North during the Civil War.

In 1906, a university professor and former chief chemist for Thomas Edison named Reginald Fessenden had developed a new kind of generator that allowed sound to be broadcast over the airwaves for the first time. On Christmas Eve, he read Luke 2 and radio operators on land and sea were shocked when their normal Morse Code transmissions were interrupted by Fessenden’s voice. He ended the first ever sound broadcast over the airwaves by playing ‘O Holy Night’ on his violin.

The beautiful words and music of “O Holy Night” remind us of what Christmas is all about. It is about the light of Christ shining into our “world in sin and error pining.” It is the promise that all injustice and oppression will one day cease because of the coming of the Savior. We can have “a thrill of hope” as “with glowing hearts by His cradle we stand.” We can take comfort in the fact that “He knows our need; to our weakness is no stranger.” Because Christ came, we should “fall on your knees...Behold your King! Before Him lowly bend.” We are to “love one another” and “praise His name forever.”

It is interesting how this song, with lyrics originally written by a man known more for his poetry and political leanings than his church attendance and music composed by a Jewish man who did not even believe in Christ or celebrate Christmas, has touched the hearts of millions around the world. In this week’s devotions we will look at both the original French poem and the more familiar English version from our hymnbooks.

<https://www.annhgabhart.com/2019/12/16/the-story-behind-the-song-o-holy-night/>

https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/the-story-of-pain-and-hope-https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O_Holy_Night

Andrew Gant. The Carols of Christmas, p. 76-85