

Hope Runs Deep

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" – Luke 2:14

It was Christmas, 1863. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow listened to the church bells ringing, his heart despondent. Two and one-half years earlier, his beloved wife, the mother of his six children, died from severe burns the day after her dress caught fire in a tragic accident. His own burns that he sustained trying to extinguish the flames were so severe that he was unable to attend her funeral.

His country was fighting a war against itself over the state's rights to uphold slavery—dark years painfully recorded in Longfellow's diary as "brother against brother, father against son." His own family was pulled into the war when the oldest son, Charlie, ran away to join the Union army. Within a month the nineteen-year-old fell ill with typhoid fever, but after a long summer spent home recovering, was well enough to rejoin his unit on the battlefield. On December 1, Longfellow received crushing news—a telegram that Charlie had been severely wounded four days prior, with a very real possibility of paralysis from his spinal injury.

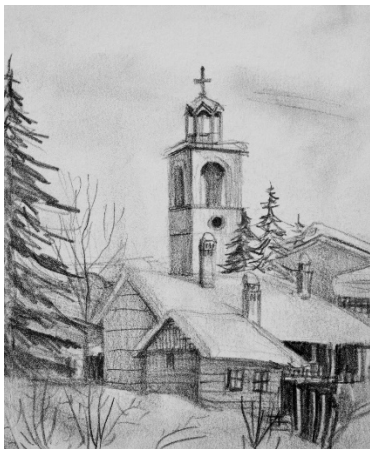
Diary entries show that this man who had once been at the peak of his success as a poet was now drowning in grief and pain. So on this cold winter morning in 1863 as Longfellow awoke to the joyous bells from the church steeple, he penned a poem that reflected his personal struggle: his ears hearing the festive Christmas bells and voices singing of *peace and good will*, yet having lived the reality that all the world around him was filled with injustice and violence. *Hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men.*

But as he continued to listen and ponder and reflect, this man settled into a confident hope that *God is not dead, nor doth he sleep. The wrong shall fail, the right prevail, with peace on earth, good-will to men.*

Jesus was born to bring peace on earth. Not the kind of peace that comes from lack of strife or pain. That, unfortunately, will always be a part of this broken world. Yet a deep, abiding joy and confident hope can be ours as we, like Longfellow, adopt an eternal perspective and seek the real meaning of Christmas—the Christ Child who came to purchase our forgiveness through his death on the cross and to offer us a changed life if we will only receive him into our hearts. Have a blessed Christmas!

I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day

by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow



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I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
and wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along the unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,

And with the sound the carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn the households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong, and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail, the Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men.

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