

Joy to the Earth

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[0 : 00] well, it is almost Christmas, or as Scottish Presbyterians used to call it, Wednesday. And as Christmas comes, all these different songs get sung.

Some of them ones we're used to, some ones that we are not as used to. There's an American poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and he wrote a poem called Christmas Bells, which was turned into a Christmas song called I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.

Anybody know that one? Heard the Bells on Christmas Day? Well, there's this refrain that gets repeated throughout that poem, that Christmas song.

It's from the angels in Luke 2. It says, peace on earth, goodwill to men. Doesn't that sound nice?

Peace on earth, goodwill to men. Well, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, he wrote that poem in 1863, which was right in the midst of the American Civil War.

And that year in 1863 was the Battle of Gettysburg, where 50,000 men died. And there's these lines in the poem that don't make it into the Christmas song that we sing.

[1 : 16] It goes like this. That's what he writes. 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, goodwill to men.

Merry Christmas. There's this tension that he names in his poem of joy and sorrow. One of the interesting, challenging things of getting up and preaching to a group of people is as you look out, there's all sorts of different life experiences today, this week, and in your whole life, right?

There are people here this evening who are feeling the fullness of family and joy. God has answered prayers, and your hearts are glad you're ready to clap your hands and to rejoice.

Others of us are waiting and hurt. Some of us love Christmas time. Others kind of loathe it. Others just kind of, you know, we just bear with it and get through.

Some of us are bored with life. Some of us are overwhelmed by it. Some of us want time to speed up to get to that thing that we're really, really looking for, and others of us would really love if time just slowed down.

[2 : 38] The older you get, I find the time goes quicker, right? Some of us are looking forward to family gathering around the table for a holiday meal. Some of us have the same sentiment as Clark Griswold in Christmas Vacation, who says to Cousin Eddie, Eddie, can I refill your eggnog for you?

Get you something to eat? Drive you out to the middle of nowhere and leave you for dead? A little bit of American culture if you don't know what I'm talking about. Just ignore it. If not. Here we are.

Joy and sorrow, peace and turmoil all together in this room. And a preacher gets up and reads from Psalm 98. We're about to sing a song. We say, joy to the earth. The Savior reigns.

That's what we're here to do. Give joy. Joy. Joy. There is joy to the earth because the Savior is reigning. Yet, do you live on this earth? Does it always feel like the Savior is reigning?

You feel that conflict, that tension. You often feel peace, but then you feel its absence. And that tension is actually in our psalm. In Psalm 98, there is a tension of joy and praise.

[3 : 47] And the other one that sneaks in there is judgment. I sang it as the song of praise at the very beginning. It is a song of praise. One pastor, I think it was Tim Keller, he summarized, I always remember in his devotion, he summarized Psalm 98 like this.

God is coming to judge. Yay! Judgment is coming. Yes! What?

Huh? Huh? You feel that tension. What is going on? Look at this passage in four points. The promise, the problem, the solution, and the response.

The problem, the promise, the problem, the solution, and the response. First off, the promise.

Here's the promise of Psalm 98. It's that the God who redeemed his people in the past will also do the same thing again in the future.

Verses 1 through 3, it talks about what God has done for Israel in the past. In fact, most commentators will point out to you, Psalm 98 is a lot like Exodus 15.

[4 : 55] What's Exodus 15? You ask, well, Exodus 15 is the song of Miriam, Moses' sister. God's people who are in slavery get brought out by God's strong and mighty arm, and they cross the Red Sea.

And horse and rider are thrown into the sea, and they safely arrive on the other side. And Miriam sings this song about what God has done.

And so the psalmist, what they are saying, the psalmist is saying, is God has done marvelous things like in the Exodus, and he promises to do similar things again, even more wondrous things. So many superhero movies out nowadays. There was one, probably nobody even remembers, called Superman Returns. Superman Returns.

Superman, he's left Earth to kind of find his place in the universe. He goes to find himself, right? Even Superman needs to find himself. While he's gone, Lois Lane writes an article, which she wins the Pulitzer Prize for, called Why the World Doesn't Need Superman.

[6 : 04] But of course, Superman Returns. Name the movie. And he meets up with Lois Lane on top of the Daily Planet, and she somehow still doesn't realize that he's Clark Kent, you know, the magic of glasses, I guess.

And Lois, they're talking, and she sticks to her guns. She's talking to Superman. She says, the world doesn't need a savior, and neither do I. Go, girl, right?

Need you, Superman. And Superman does his Superman thing. And he grabs Lois and flies her up into the sky above the clouds. And he says, shh, listen.

She listens. She says, I don't hear anything. And then all of a sudden, you start to hear what Superman hears. He's got this, you know, superhero hearing, right?

You hear all the cries, the violence, the longing, the tears. And he says, you say the world doesn't need a Superman, a savior, but I hear them crying out every single day for one.

[7 : 14] Psalm 98 is saying that the world is crying out for a savior, one who's going to work salvation.

Again, do it again, God. One who will set things right. One who's going to consummate the redemption that he began in the past. And it's not just that it's needed.

It's promised. He's promised to do this. Think about it. If you've suffered injustice at work in a relationship on the M8, you know, you want things to be set right.

In fact, I didn't come prepared to say this, but I had a little sermon illustration come before me as I was walking down Crow Road this evening. I was walking down. Somebody did something that the other motorist didn't like, and they honked at him.

And not just a beep, beep, but a long one. Oof. You know, really mad. To which the man rolled down his window and said things that I'm not allowed to repeat in a pulpit or anywhere.

[8 : 10] Else to him. And I was like, oh, man. Both of them wanted justice to be done. Crying out for justice, for things to be set right. And I walked about 20 paces more. And there was some sort of scuffle going on on the steps leading up to the car park outside the M&S.;

Two M&S; employees were pushing a man who was trying to get up. I have no idea what was going on. But at one point, they just started yelling at him, and he just ran away. Not to be all like paparazzi here in tabloids, give you all the scoop of what's going on in Crow Road.

But just to say, I just saw it. Well, the world was longing for things to be set right. I even felt it. I was walking by. I didn't know. It seemed like the guy was doing something to somebody else, and they were standing up for him.

Again, I don't know. But even in just seeing it for a second, I longed for justice. For something to be done. Not to get away with that. I was glad somebody stood up for that person.

What's going on all around us? You see, in one sense, when it says that the Lord comes to judge the earth, what it's talking about, what it says God's going to judge the earth, he is putting the cosmos right.

[9 : 16] He is righting every wrong. Right? And the promise is not just that he's going to bring his people out of slavery, but he will cast down all evil that plagues this world.

So, of course, if all the evil in the world is going to be cast down, what does creation do? It sings. Sounds pretty good to creation, doesn't it? Get rid of all evil? This is why the sea is roaring, the rivers are clapping, and the hills are singing, because the king is coming.

And when the king comes, everyone rejoices, including the created order. That's the promise that God has. Nothing less. Paul writes about this in Romans 8. He says that the creation itself is groaning as in the pains of childbirth, longing for the consummation of all things, for God to come and to judge the world, to remove all evil.

We sing about this in a second in Georgia World. He comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found. Wherever the curse is found, God's blessing is going to come in his judging the thing that is afflicting him.

[10:31] It's the promise. Big promise. All wrong, set right. Tiny thing, right? No big deal. Redemption of not just souls, but creation of all things made new. That's what gets caught up in what the Savior is doing.

Second thing, though, is the problem. It's the promise. We want to look at the problem. This is why we feel that odd tension of judgment. Yay! Because the problem is we all long for things to get sorted.

We all long for things to be righted. But you and I also need to get sorted out. Sin and evil are not just out there, but it's in here.

And that's what we want. You see, we want two things. We want a God who is loving, a God who is merciful, a God who is kind. We desire that thing. And yet we also want and need a God who is just and holy, a God who is a judge.

And some of us err more towards one. We want the God who is loving and kind. And we just kind of ignore the justice and things like that. And then the other ones of us, you know, when you're on Crow Road, all of a sudden want a God who is, at least that's what the man was saying, he wants a God who is going to come with recompense against those who have wronged him.

[11:41] You need both. The Bible says both are true. For God to judge the world with righteousness, we start to feel a little bit uneasy because for that to happen, the question is, what about my unrighteousness?

Francis Schaeffer, the pastor who gave a good illustration, I always remember, he said if you walked around your whole life with a tape recorder or an app on your phone now, we should update the illustration, right?

A little voice memo thing. And it just records all of the things that you say about how people should live. All the times on Crow Road when you get mad at somebody and shake your fist and say, this is the way a good human being should live and this is what should happen to them if they do that thing.

And he said if you played it back at the end of your life, you wouldn't even live up to your own law, much less the law of God. All the things of the way you think that people should be judged in this world, you would fail your own test, much less the holy God of the universe.

So what does God do? What's God going to do? Does he ignore your sin? Or does he ignore the ills and injustices of the world? If he ignores your sin and the injustices of this world, well then he is not just.

[13:00] Or does he just forget about you and hang out with the hills and the rivers? I mean the hills and the rivers aren't as selfish as you and I are. But if he does that, he's not a loving promise keeper.

He said he's a savior. He's heard the world crying out for a savior and he's made promises to bring that salvation. Verse 3, he's the one who remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel.

Verse 9, he will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with equity. He is the king that we long for, the savior of the world, the judge of all the earth.

And if we're honest, we start to feel a tension. Those things of longing and fear, desire and shame. So the promise, God's going when the king comes, things get set right.

But the problem is you and I have also done wrong and we need to be set right. So point 3, the solution. What's the solution? The solution is in Exodus 15.

[13:59] In Miriam's song that the psalm is based off of what is Miriam singing about in Exodus 15? We already said, Israel has just been saved.

God's just redeemed his people from slavery. He's worked salvation for Israel as they crossed the Red Sea. And you know, in the Old Testament, the paradigm of salvation and redemption is the Exodus.

So when you get to the New Testament and it talks about the cross, a lot of times it talks about it in terms of a new Exodus. This is what God has done. And when God saves Israel, here's the key thing.

God saves Israel. He redeems them in the Exodus. And this is going to help us understand what Jesus has done. He saves them through judgment. That's how God redeems his people in Exodus. He saves them through judgment. Right? What's going on is God has heard the cries of his people and he sends a liberator, Moses.

[15:00] And he gives all these chances for the Pharaoh to let his people go. Doesn't listen. Sends all the plagues. And the last one is what? The angel of death comes. Egypt's been ruthless.

They've enslaved an entire people group for 400 years, have acted cruelly towards God's people. And God's future judgment gets drug right into the present and death comes to them.

It's unsettling. But here's the thing. When God sends judgment, Israel is about to be judged too. Right?

They're not excused from it. See, so many times we cry out in Crow Road for justice to be done to that person. Like, let me off. I'm a good person. Israel's not allowed to think that way.

Instead, what do they have to do? Well, they take the lamb and they kill the lamb and they take the blood of the lamb and they put it on their doorposts so that judgment passes over them.

[15:55] Their only hope is if judgment falls on a substitute. Which God provided in the lamb. What is interesting too, there's another woman who sings a song of salvation in the New Testament.

Her name is Mary, which is the same name as Miriam. And it says in Luke 1, like Miriam does in Exodus 15 and as Psalm 98 does, Mary sings a song about how God has shown strength with his arm.

It's what we call the Magnificat. As the Savior is born into the world, a woman sings a song about God's redemption, his faithfulness, his salvation, his justice, and his mercy.

The king has come. The king is a lion. Strong. The lion becomes a lamb. The lion executes justice. And the lamb is the substitute. Joy to the earth. The Savior reigns. How does the Savior reign? How does he ascend to his throne? Through the cross and resurrection.

[16:59] When you look at the cross, you see God judging sin. Not passing over. Judging with righteousness and equity. And you also see his love and his mercy.

Because he's become the one whose blood covers his people. Joy to the earth. The Savior reigns. And he reigns through the cross. That means then, if that is true, then Jesus is the king.

Jesus is the king of the world. And if Jesus is the king of the world, you know what that means? That means Keir Starmer and Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, your parents, your spouse, your own view of yourself, are not the king.

Those things aren't in charge. That's such good news. I would make a terrible king. You too. No offense. Been looking and crying for a savior, for a king to come.

And he has come. So joy to the world. So the promise, all rights get wronged when the king comes. The problem is you and I have done wrong. The solution is God's greater exodus is accomplished by the king who is both the lion and the lamb.

[18:15] As Paul says in Romans 3, he is both the just and the justifier. So lastly, what's the response? Well, I went to seminary, but you don't need a seminary degree for this one.

The most obvious application from Psalm 98 is staring at us right in the face. You know what it is? Sing! Sing!

And it's not. You better sing, you ungrateful wretch. No. What Psalm 98 is telling you is that the king who is coming, the judge of all the world, the savior and the redeemer, desires you to sing.

He desires your voice. He longs to hear your voice. You are a desired singer. Yes, you with the pitch problems and the insecurities and the distractions and the doubts.

He wants your voice. He commands it. He desires you to sing. To bear this song in the midst of creation as a witness to your fellow believers, to your families, to your neighbors, that Christ, the lion and the lamb is your life.

[19:25] And because he's your life, you have nothing to fear. And what happens then, as we start to sing, it's going to be people who can actually rejoice in the midst of a world full of sorrow.

We push out beyond our own petty interests, beyond our obsession with ourselves, beyond our proclivities to self-justify and self-protect. Beyond our desires and fears that paralyze us.

And what we do as we sing, this is the beauty, this is the wonder of Psalm 98. It is telling you, as you sing, you are not alone. You are joining with the song of creation that knows who created it and is giving praise every day to its creator.

You get swept up into that song. God is conducting this symphony of wind and mountains, forest and orchards, valleys and streams, feather and bone, whales and hummingbirds.

And you get to sing back to him. And if that sounds too fanciful and like, you know, touchy-feely to you, you haven't read Psalm 98. That's what's going on. And he calls his people to take a solo in the midst of all that praise and to give him glory.

[20 : 42] We practice being a people of celebration. We mourn the awful realities of this world. And yet we grow in the skill of seeing God's faithfulness and trusting his promises.

I'm not trying to be glib in talking about these things. No, I live in this world too. I know what it is like to lose loved ones. I know what it is like to struggle with sin.

I know what it is like to have pain in life. There are things that stink in our lives. That we want a judge to come and get rid of.

There's things we don't like about our job or our body or our story. But whatever you're struggling with, I want to say to you, God wants to say to you through Psalm 98, he knows your sorrow, your pain, your questions, and he invites your conflicted heart to bring him worship.

I know there's sorrow, but I also know Christ has come. Christ has risen. Christ will come again. It's a hymn that we sing, All Creatures of Our God and King.

[21 : 55] It says, You who long pain and sorrow bear. Praise God. And on him cast your care. Oh, praise him.

Hallelujah. That Longfellow poem mentioned at the beginning, Christmas Bells, goes beyond what I read. Remember it said, 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, goodwill to men. But then, it says this. 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, goodwill to men. Joy to the earth. The Savior reigns.

Let men and women their songs employ. Fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains. They're repeating the sounding joy. You sing it too. Let's pray.