

## Day 22: O Holy Night

Dec. 19

*1 O holy night! the stars are brightly shining;  
It is the night of the dear Savior's birth.  
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,  
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.  
A thrill of hope—the weary world rejoices,  
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!  
Fall on your knees! O hear the angel voices!  
O night divine, O night when Christ was born!  
O night, O holy night, O night divine!*

*2 Led by the light of faith serenely beaming,  
With glowing hearts by His cradle we stand.  
So led by light of a star sweetly gleaming,  
Here came the Wise Men from Orient land.  
The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger,  
In all our trials born to be our Friend.  
He knows our need—to our weakness is no stranger.  
Behold your King, before Him lowly bend!  
Behold your King, before Him lowly bend!*

*3 Truly He taught us to love one another;  
His law is love and His gospel is peace.  
Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother,  
And in His name all oppression shall cease.  
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we;  
Let all within us praise His holy name.  
Christ is the Lord! O praise His name forever!  
His pow'r and glory evermore proclaim!  
His pow'r and glory evermore proclaim!*

**The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now. (Romans 8:21-22)**

The author of *O Holy Night* was Placide Cappeau. Like most children born in 1808, Cappeau was “destined” when he grew up to take on his father’s occupation, in his case to become a cooper (barrel maker). Tragically, however, when he was only eight years old, a playmate shot him in the hand. It was an accident, but the result was that young Cappeau’s right hand was amputated, thus ending his succession into the family business.

Cappeau was sent to school instead, the fees divided between his father and the family of the friend who had shot him. At university, he studied both literature and law. One day a priest from his city asked Cappeau to write a poem in honor of the reconstruction of the church’s great organ. The words he wrote became the great Christmas classic, *O Holy Night*. An opera singer friend saw the words and asked a Jewish composer she knew, Adolph Adam, to write music for

these lyrics. Although the song was instantly popular, it was soon banned from the church – not because the music’s composer was Jewish, but because Cappeau was himself an atheist and an outspoken critic of the clergy.

But God can and does use the strangest vessels to spread his word. And though Cappeau despised the institutional church of his day, he grasped very well the Gospels’ portrait of Jesus.

“Long lay the world in sin and error pining, till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.”

This is the backdrop against which the spectacular news was delivered by angels in the opening verse of *O Holy Night*. It is the announcement of the in-breaking of “a new and glorious morn.” Romans 8 describe this truth as poetically as the hymn itself when the apostle Paul asserts that the whole of creation has been “groaning,” needing “to be set free for its bondage to decay.”

Because sin is so pervasive, we tend not to notice its equally pervasive effects. Indeed, the whole of the created order – everything in our known universe – has been tainted by sin’s dark grip. That’s why God takes our rebellious attitudes and actions so seriously. They are anathema, and they are deadly – not just to ourselves, but to all creation.

That is the bad news against which is set the tremendously more glorious news of our redemption. It comes with the appearing of the “King of kings” who “lay thus in lowly manger.” No wonder we’re bidden to “Fall on your knees!” It is indeed a “night divine, when Christ was born!”

*O Holy Night* is my favorite Christmas hymn, and for me, without it, it’s just not Christmas. Both the message and the beautiful music that magnifies it almost always bring tears to my eyes as I sit in a Christmas Eve service when it is traditionally sung. More than once I’ve attended an early service on Christmas Eve, often of the “Kid-friendly” variety, only to discover that *O Holy Night* was not on the program. In those instances, I’ve returned for a later service – either at the same “offending” church, or in a completely different congregation – just to be reminded in the most exquisite way possible that this is the “Holy night! O Night divine!”

Whether its message is written by the most devoted Christ-follower or a complete pagan, it is the message our weary world needs to hear afresh.

## Questions

1. What is one instance in which something really tragic that happened to you was later turned into good in your life?
2. Where have you seen the redemptive power of God at work in our world, undoing some of the bad effects of sin?
3. What song is a “must” for you to hear at Christmas?

## Prayer

Jesus, we live in a world seriously broken by our sin. Sometimes we catch glimpses of sin’s dreadful effects, but mostly we simply pass it off, saying, “Ah yes, that’s just the way things are.” And yet our hearts, along with all creation, groan in pain and even despair as we long for something different. The message the angels brought so long ago fuels our hope: that one day the decay will be done and we shall be fully free. Lord Jesus, help us to live in that hope, to make this and every night a holy night because you were born into our world and you will come again! Amen.