

Peace on Earth, Good Will toward... Whom?

Song: *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day* (Casting Crowns)

Here is the original poem, by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, prompted by the horrors of the Civil War (1863):

*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!*

*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 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!*

*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!"*

*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 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."*

*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!*

Luke 2:8-13 (New International Version)

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying...

Luke 2:14

The King James Version:

¹⁴ Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace,
Good will toward men.

NIV (and other modern translations)

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace
to those on whom his favor rests."

What is the difference between the last lines?

This difference has to do with a difference among our Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. When the King James Version was translated (1611), the translators based it off an edited Greek New Testament that used only a handful of relatively recent, generally inferior Greek manuscripts of the New Testament.

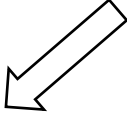
Our modern translations take into consideration far more, far older, and more reliable manuscripts of the Greek New Testament. Scholars recognize that the reading behind the KJV is probably not original. What is likely the original reading is only one letter different:

Behind the KJV:

καὶ	ἐπὶ	γῆς	εἰρήνη	ἐν	ἀνθρώποις	εὐδοκία.
And	on	earth	peace,	among	men,	favor.

Behind Modern Translations:

καὶ	ἐπὶ	γῆς	εἰρήνη	ἐν	ἀνθρώποις	εὐδοκίας.
And	on	earth	peace	among	men	of favor.



It was once argued that this latter phrase was an unusual or impossible phrase in Hebrew (which the angels must have spoken to be understood by the shepherds), but the phrase has turned up in the Dead Sea Scrolls: "...the extent of [God's] compassion with all the **sons of his approval**" (1QH 12.32).

How does this change the meaning of what the angel says?

Notice how the restricted promise fits other themes in Luke's Gospel:

^{1:50} His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. ⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. ⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

^{2:33} The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵ so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

^{12:51} Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. ⁵² From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three...

So, while Jesus comes for all people...

^{2:10} But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for **all the people**."

...the salvation he brings will bless only those who have God's favor (i.e., those he chooses, those who respond to Jesus correctly, with faith and acceptance of the salvation he brings).

^{2:14} "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace **to those on whom his favor rests.**"