

Oh, how Joyfully

I) "Oh, how Joyfully" is a classic Christmas carol.

And further, dear congregation, it says: "Oh, how joyfully, Oh, how merrily, Easter comes with its grace divine! The world was in bondage, Christ is risen. Hail, ye Christians, hail the joyous Easter time."

No, I haven't made a mistake. It is simply the original version of the second verse of the well-known Christmas carol by Johann Daniel Falk. And in the third verse, Pentecost is announced: "Oh, how joyfully, Oh, how merrily, Pentecost comes with its grace divine! Christ, our Master sanctifies the spirits: Hail, ye Christians, hail the joyous Pentecost time."

Johann Daniel Falk wrote a song for the three major Christian festivals for the children in his home. He wanted to convey the three major Christian festivals—Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost—to his children using very simple words. Singing, they absorbed the underlying saving acts of God into their hearts:

Christmas: The world was lost—therefore Christ was born.

Easter: The world lay in the bonds of death—but Christ has risen.

Pentecost: Christ bestows the good Holy Spirit, who awakens and sanctifies faith.

We sing the three original verses of the song:

1. Oh, how joyfully, Oh, how merrily, Christmas comes with its grace divine!
Grace again is beaming, Christ the world redeeming,
Hail, ye Christians, hail the joyous Christmas time.

2. Oh, how joyfully, Oh, how merrily, Easter comes with its grace divine!
The world was in bondage, Christ is risen:
Hail, ye Christians, hail the joyous Easter time.

3. Oh, how joyfully, Oh, how merrily, Pentecost comes with its grace divine!
Christ, our Master sanctifies the spirits:
Hail, ye Christians, hail the joyous Pentecost time.

The first verse of this hymn has survived and is still sung today: "Oh, how joyfully, Oh, how merrily, Christmas comes with its grace divine!" Then come the two verses written by Heinrich Holzschuher. He uses the same text in both verses except for the middle line: "Christ has appeared to reconcile us" and in the third verse, "Heavenly hosts sing your praises." Heinrich Holzschuher was an associate of Falk.

II) Who was Johann Daniel Falk?

Johann Daniel Falk was born in Danzig in 1768. His father was a wigmaker. At the age of ten, he had to leave school and work in his father's workshop. However, mentors recognized his talent. With their help—against his father's wishes—he was able to attend and graduate from high school. The Danzig city council even enabled him to study in Halle an der Saale. This wasn't without ulterior motives: they hoped Falk would return to Danzig as a pastor.

Man proposes, God disposes: life sometimes takes unexpected turns.

Johann Daniel Falk married Caroline Rosenfeld in 1797. His linguistic talent and biting humor led him to Weimar. There he associated with Christoph Wieland, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Johann Gottfried Herder. His linguistically bawdy "Pocketbook for Friends of Jest and Satire" caused a scandal, made him famous at the time, and is now largely forgotten.

In 1807, the Weimar court appointed him Legation Councilor—a kind of ambassador—due to his negotiating skills. Johann Daniel Falk saw himself on the sunny side of life. His wife said of him, "He sees the sun at midnight." In other words, he never missed a social event.

But then his world collapsed. Napoleon's troops invaded the country. His family was not spared either. He founded a relief organization in Weimar, raised money, and, together with his wife and helpers, opened a "rescue home for children."

This became his life's work and its impact is still felt today. Children were dear to his heart. He gave them lessons and instilled in them a love for Jesus Christ as the foundation and support in life. For them, the children, he wrote the carol "O du fröhliche" (Oh, How Joyfully) and published it in 1816.

III) 1st verse: The world was lost, Christ is born

During the Battle of Leipzig in 1813, half a million soldiers raged like barbarians, and Weimar was also occupied: barns were set on fire, livestock was stolen, household goods were plundered, and disease spread. War brutalizes people. Children were orphaned and wandered through towns and villages. Johann Falk's family was not spared either.

"The world was lost!"

But in these difficult times, Johann Falk realized: God has not abandoned me. God holds fast to me and to the world. Not only did God come into the world in Bethlehem many years ago, but God also comes to me today, right now, into my heart. Jesus comes to be my Savior.

That is the mystery of Christmas: When Jesus comes into our lives, when our hearts become his manger, then we too can say: "Oh, how joyfully, Oh, how merrily, Christmas comes with its grace divine!"

As often as I sing or hear this carol, I think of my father: Along with thousands of other soldiers, he was taken prisoner of war by the British in 1945 on the Sinai Peninsula. The camp chaplain ensured that the men would at least be able to hear the carol "Oh, how Joyfully" at Christmas. A signal was agreed upon. Thousands of young men then sang "The world was lost." It was palpable, a bitter reality. For these men, a world had collapsed, and the future was uncertain. And into it all came the message: "Christ is born." My father said he had never rejoiced more at the message "Christ is born" than he did then. And that stayed with him for the rest of his life. He told us about it.

Oh, how joyfully, Oh, how merrily, Christmas comes with its grace divine!
Grace again is beaming, Christ the world redeeming,
Hail, ye Christians, hail the joyous Christmas time.

IV) 2nd verse: Christ appeared to reconcile us

That Jesus came into the world has a great purpose. Here, the purpose is described: "To reconcile us." The word "reconcile" is right there in it.

And with whom are we to be reconciled?

First and foremost, with God! Our relationship with God needs to be healed and restored. Jesus brings this about. That's why he is also called "Savior."

Perhaps some think: Why? Do I need that? I haven't done anything wrong. Exactly, that's the point! We don't care about God, we aren't against him, many don't care about him.

What human relationship can withstand that in the long run? Especially God, who created us, who gives us life, who loves us?

God cannot withstand that. He sets out, comes personally, woos, calls, seeks, and wrestles for you and me. That is the Christmas message: Christ appeared to reconcile us—with God.

And then also with humanity. Christ also came for this reason, so that we might once again see the one who is in need, who needs help, with whom we are at odds.

What human relationship can endure that in the long run? Johann Daniel Falk didn't just focus on himself and his family. He saw others, those who wandered amidst the terrible misery of the Napoleonic Wars, children and young people.

Falk recognized how important it is, alongside a solid school and vocational education, to lead children to a living faith in Jesus Christ. "Children of robbers and murderers sing psalms and pray," he later wrote. "They build houses they once learned to break into. Yes, it is truly so, where chains and leg irons, where whips and prisons are powerless, love triumphs."

Oh, how joyfully, Oh, how merrily, Christmas comes with its grace divine!
Peace on earth is reigning, Christ our peace regaining,
Hail, ye Christians, hail the joyous Christmas time.

V) Verse 3: Heavenly hosts shout praise to you

What kind of celebration is it when people truly experience Christmas, the divine Christmas? Jesus says: Then all the angels in heaven rejoice and celebrate with us. "Heavenly hosts sing your praises," our song says. The shepherds in the field heard something of this.

It is an immense joy, a great jubilation, when people are suddenly given a new beginning in their lives; when their relationship with God and with their fellow human beings is healed and restored; when they begin to care for others.

The story of Johann Daniel Falk and his song "O du fröhliche" (O How Joyful) shows that Christmas is not a fairy tale. Christmas happens when people find Christ and live with him. Even though Johann Daniel Falk and his wife Caroline had to endure much, and his help for street children wasn't always well-received, he rejoiced in Jesus Christ. His song and the inscription on his grave in the old cemetery in Weimar still tell of this today. Amen.

Oh, how joyfully, Oh, how merrily, Christmas comes with its grace divine!
Angels high in glory, Chant the Christmas story:
Hail, ye Christians, hail the joyous Christmas time.