

CFBC Hymns Class 14

"The Gospel is true because it deprives men of all glory, wisdom, and righteousness and turns over all honor to the Creator alone. It is safer to attribute too much glory unto God than unto man."

– Martin Luther, Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians

"To be convinced in our hearts that we have forgiveness of sins and peace with God by grace alone is the hardest thing."

– Martin Luther, Commentary on Galatians

**The sweetness of the gospel lies mostly in pronouns, as me, my, thy.
"Who loved me, and gave Himself for me." "Christ Jesus my Lord." "
Son, be of good cheer, thy sins are forgiven thee."**

Martin Luther

**Amazing Love! how can it be,
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?**

Charles Wesley

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

In 1738, Charles Wesley was struggling to find peace with God. He had served as a missionary to Georgia, but that had turned out disastrously bad. **Peter Bohler, the leader of the London Moravians, asked Charles if he hoped to be saved. Charles answered that he did. Bohler pressed, "Upon what basis do you hope to be saved?" Wesley replied, "Because I have used my best endeavors to serve God."** Bohler sadly shook his head and walked away. Wesley recorded his reaction in his journal. **"What, are not my endeavors a sufficient ground of hope? Would he rob me of my endeavors? I have nothing else to trust to."**

Wesley was stuck in the tension that many raised in church have experienced. **It is all too common to confuse the fruits of the gospel at work in our lives (good endeavors) with the root of spiritual life (the gospel promise believed.)** The problem with trusting our good works is that they are not perfect works. Jesus said that we are to love Him with all our heart, all our

mind, and all our strength, and this is a considerably higher bar than just offering Him our best endeavors. God requires that we love Him perfectly from the moment we are born ‘til the moment we die, with no lapses.

Faced with this impossible requirement many religious people attempt to take solace in such empty hopes as Wesley. But this hymn points us to a greater ground of hope that derives from the gospel.

Later in 1738, Wesley's friend, John Bray, discovered Martin Luther's Commentary On Galatians and brought it to Wesley, who was sick in bed. Wesley recorded in his journal again, "I spent some hours this evening in private with Martin Luther, who was greatly blessed to me, especially his conclusion of the second chapter. I labored, waited, and prayed to feel 'Who loved me and gave Himself up for me.'" Luther had famously once said that the whole of the gospel was found in the personal pronouns, and Wesley found peace as the Lord gave him faith to believe that Jesus had died for him.

It is sometimes said that this hymn was Wesley's first, written soon after his conversion. Hymn scholars are now convinced that "Where Shall My Wondering Soul Begin?" was actually his first hymn. But... And Can It Be was written soon after and expresses beautifully and powerfully the converting power of the gospel that he had experienced.

Wesley is one of the most skilled hymnwriters. He begins with a piercing question to which no real answer can be given. “How can it be, that thou my God, shouldst die for me?” If we ever get the point where God’s grace seems deserved or expected, we are in deep trouble. *We see his grasp of Luther's point in his use of the personal prounouns; my God, for me. But it is in the last verse where Wesley reveals the heart of his new-found hope. “Alive in Him, my living head, and clothed in righteousness divine.”*

Wesley had come to understand that in the gospel Christ gives us what God requires, His perfect righteousness, through our union with Him. What Christ does, we get credit for, what He deserves, we get! Rather than trusting in our best endeavors, Wesley gives us words to praise God for the only true hope, the righteousness of Christ imputed to His people through faith. This brings us not only, hope, but boldness to claim the crown not because of what we have done, but because of what Christ has done in our place.

Kevin Twit

<http://hymnbook.igracemusic.com/hymns/and-can-it-be>

Charles Wesley's "And Can It Be": Background and Scriptural Allusions

Justin Taylor | December 14, 2013

According to the editor of *The Oxford Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975-1983, vol. 7), "**And Can It Be" was written immediately after Charles Wesley's conversion (May 21, 1738). Wesley knew his Bible well prior to this time, but had not yet experienced assurance of new birth or the fulness of grace in his life.**

The editor also notes that it was probably this hymn, or "Where Should My Wond'ring Soul Begin?" that was sung late on the evening of his brother John's Aldersgate Street conversion just three days later on May 24. John Lawson, in *A Thousand Tongues: The Wesley Hymns as a Guide to Scriptural Teaching* (London: Paternoster, 1987), says this "is perhaps the best known and best loved of all the Methodist hymns associated with the conversion experience."

Wesley begins the first stanza by expressing amazement over the love expressed in God the Son dying for him; it is a mystery that we who caused his death now benefit from it.

In the second stanza, Wesley calls for adoration at the incomprehensibility of God's love and mercy in this sacrifice.

In the third stanza, Wesley recounts the infinite grace and mercy of Christ's love and humility in the incarnation, death, and finding of lost sinners.

Now in the fourth stanza, Wesley turns his attention to the bondage of his own sin and the freedom he found in Christ.

Finally, he explores the results of Christ's amazing and merciful work: there is no condemnation for those made alive in Christ and clothed in his righteousness; rather, there is bold access to the throne as we have the right to claim the eschatological crown.

Using and adapting the notations in the reference works cited above, I have sought to identify probable biblical allusions (in the KJV) that probably implicitly or explicitly informed Wesley's wording and concepts in this great hymn:

1. And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour's blood?[1]
Died he for me? who caused his pain![2]
For me—who him to death pursued?[3]
Amazing love! How can it be[4]
That thou, my God, shouldst die for me?[5]

2. 'Tis mystery all: th'Immortal dies:[6]
Who can explore his strange design?[7]
In vain the first-born seraph tries[8]
To sound the depths of love divine.[9]
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore![10]
Let angel minds inquire no more.[11]

3. He left His Father's throne above[12]
So free, so infinite his grace![13]
Emptied Himself of all but love,[14]
And bled for Adam's helpless race.[15]
'Tis mercy all, immense and free,[16]
For O my God! it found out me![17]

4. Long my imprisoned spirit lay,[18]
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;[19]
Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray[20]
I woke; the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.[21]

5. No condemnation now I dread;[22]
Jesus, and all in him, is mine;[23]
Alive in Him, my living head,[24]
And clothed in righteousness divine,[25]
Bold I approach th'eternal throne,[26]
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.[27]

[1] Eph 1:7, "In whom we have *redemption through his blood*, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace." Eph 1:14, "Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory."

[2] Gal 2:20, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and *gave himself for me.*"

[3] Acts 9:4-5, “And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, *I am Jesus whom thou persecutest*: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.”

[4] Isa 29:14, “Therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a *marvellous work* among this people, even a *marvellous work and a wonder*: for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid.” 1 John 3:1, “Behold, *what manner of love* the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not.”

[5] Gal 2:20, “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and *gave himself for me*.”

[6] 1 Cor 2:7-8, “But we speak the wisdom of God in a *mystery*, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory: Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have *crucified the Lord of glory*.” Phil 2:6-8, “Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation [=emptied himself], and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.”

[7] Isa 28:21, “For the Lord shall rise up as in mount Perazim, he shall be wroth as in the valley of Gibeon, that he may do his work, *his strange work*; and bring to pass his act, *his strange act*.”

[8] Job 38:7, “When the morning stars [=angels] sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” Isa 6:2, “Above it stood the *seraphims*: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly.”

[9] Eph 3:18-19, “May be able to *comprehend* with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and *depth*, and height; And to know the *love* of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.”

[10] Hab 2:20, “But the Lord is in his holy temple: let all the *earth* keep silence before him.”

[11] 1 Pet 1:12, “Unto whom it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things, which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven; which things *the angels desire to look into*.”

[12] John 6:38, “For I *came down from heaven*, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me.” Rev 22:3, “And there shall be no more curse: but *the throne of God and of the Lamb* shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him.”

[13] 2 Cor 8:9, “For ye know the *grace* of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be *rich*.”

[14] Phil 2:7, “But made himself of no reputation [=*emptied himself*], and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men.”

[15] Rom 5:12, 14, “Therefore, as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin; and so *death passed unto all men*, for that all sinned . . . Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the likeness of *Adam's transgression*, who is a figure of him that was to come.” Rev 5:9, “And they sing a new song, saying, Worthy art thou to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou was slain, and didst purchase unto God *with thy blood men of every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation.*”

[16] Ps 145:9, “Jehovah is good to *all*; And his *tender mercies* are over *all his works*.” Rom 11:32, “For God hath shut up all unto disobedience, that he might have *mercy* upon *all*.”

[17] Acts 9:15, “But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is *a chosen vessel unto me*, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings, and the children of Israel.” Gal 1:15-16, “But when it was *the good pleasure of God, who separated me, even from my mother's womb, and called me through his grace*, to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the Gentiles; straightway I conferred not with flesh and blood.”

[18] Ps 107:10, “Such as sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, being *bound in affliction and iron*.” John 8:34, “Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, *Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin*.” Acts 12:6-9, “And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains: and the keepers before the door kept the prison. And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands. And the angel said unto him, Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals. And so he did. And he saith unto him, Cast thy garment about thee, and *follow me*. And he went out, and *followed him*; and wist not that it was true which was done by the angel; but thought he saw a vision.”

[19] Rom 6:17, “But God be thanked, that ye were *the servants of sin*, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you.” 1 Cor 2:14, “But *the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God*: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

[20] John 1:4, “In him was life; and the life was the light of men.”

[21] Acts 2:7-8, “And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and *a light shined in the prison*: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, *Arise up quickly*. And his *chains fell off* from his hands. And the angel said unto him, Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals. And so he did.

And he saith unto him, Cast thy garment about thee, and *follow me.*" Luke 5:28, "And he left all, *rose up*, and *followed him.*" John 8:36, "If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be *free indeed.*" Rom 6:18, "Being then made *free from sin*, ye became the servants of righteousness."

[22] Rom 8:1, "There is therefore now *no condemnation* to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit."

[23] Rom 8:32, "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not *with him* also freely give us *all things?*" 1 Cor 3:22, "Whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; *all are your's.*"

[24] 1 Cor 15:22, "For as in Adam all die, even so *in Christ* shall all be *made alive.*" Col 1:18, "And he is *the head of the body*, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence."

[25] Isa 68:10, "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath *clothed* me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of *righteousness*, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels." Phil 3:9, "And be found in him, not having mine own *righteousness*, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the *righteousness* which is of God by faith."

[26] Eph 3:12, "In whom we have *boldness* and access with confidence by the faith of him." Heb 4:6, "Let us therefore come *boldly* unto the *throne* of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." Heb 10:19-22, "Having therefore, brethren, *boldness* to *enter* into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; And having an high priest over the house of God; *Let us draw near* with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water."

[27] 2 Tim 4:8, "Henceforth there is laid up for me a *crown* of righteousness, which *the Lord*, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing." James 1:12, "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive *the crown* of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him." Rev 2:10, "Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a *crown* of life."

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/charles-wesleys-and-can-it-be-background-and-scriptural-allusions/>

“And Can It Be”: An Historical and Theological Analysis

Steve Weaver

Originally titled “Free Grace,” this hymn is one of several hymns by Charles Wesley that is still widely sung in the present day. Although we do not know exactly when “And Can It Be” was written, it is usually associated with a very early period linked with the Charles Wesley’s conversion. (1) Regardless of when it was written, ***the song clearly describes the experience of conversion and the wonder of one who is still amazed “That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?”*** ***Tyson points out the repeated use of “for me” in this hymn as evidence of the impact of the reading of Martin Luther’s Galatians commentary.*** (2)

1. And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Savior’s blood?
Died He ***for me***, who caused His pain—
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be,
That Thou, my God, shouldst die ***for me***?
Amazing love! How can it be,
That Thou, my God, shouldst die ***for me***?

Wesley is clearly amazed at the extravagant grace of God evident in his own salvation. He is amazed that the One whom his own sins had caused his death would have offered his life up for him. Wesley puts himself into the place of the angry crowd that cried out “Crucify Him!” and whom Peter indicted on the Day of Pentecost of having crucified and killed by their hands (Acts 2:23). ***This thought causes Wesley to cry out “Amazing love!” and question in the words on which the modern title to the hymn is based: “How can it be, That Thou my God, shouldst die for me?”***

Wesley’s attribution of death to God is at first a shocking statement. He wished it to be so...He wishes those who sing this hymn to understand the amazing love of God that resulted in the death of the Son of God, the God-man, Jesus Christ. This expression, as used by Wesley, is thoroughly orthodox as it reflects the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures of Jesus. What is said of one nature can be said of the other since the two natures are united in one *hypostasis* or person. Scripture also speaks this way of the death of Jesus when Acts 20:28 records the apostle Paul exhorting the Ephesian elders “to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” Here, the blood of God refers to the blood of Jesus, the God-man.

2. 'Tis mystery all: th'Immortal dies:
Who can explore His strange design?
In vain the firstborn seraph tries
To sound the depths of love divine.
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,
Let angel minds inquire no more.
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore;
Let angel minds inquire no more.

Again in stanza two, Wesley probes the depths of the mystery of the death of the Son of God for us. Here Wesley juxtaposes immortality and death. These two obviously do not belong together, but Wesley places them together to emphasize the “mystery” of the atonement.
The depth of this mystery is highlighted by Wesley's speculative description of angelic attempts to understand the “depths of love divine.” ***This is no doubt a reflection upon 1 Peter 1:12 which describes the gospel as “good news . . . into which angels long to look.” Wesley is content to put an end to the speculation with the declaration that it is simply a mystery of mercy.***

3. He left His Father's throne above
So free, so infinite His grace—
Emptied Himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam's helpless race:
'Tis mercy all, immense and free,
For O my God, it found out me!
'Tis mercy all, immense and free,
For O my God, it found out me!

In the third stanza, Wesley explores the kenosis or “self-emptying” of Christ in the incarnation. The amazing love of God is seen in that it caused the Son to leave “His Father's throne above.” This demonstrates the freeness and infinite nature of His grace.
Philippians 2:5-8 seems to be the Scriptural backdrop for this stanza. These verses describe the depths to which the Son has descended in the incarnation. Wesley reveals an understanding of the meaning of the Greek underlying the language of Philippians 2:7 in the Authorized Version. The phrase “made himself of no reputation” translates the Greek *ekenosen* which literally means “he emptied himself”. Wesley evidently understands this for he says that the Son “Emptied Himself of all but love” in the incarnation. ***The climax of the incarnation, however, is seen in the hymn (as in Philippians 2:8) in Christ's death on the cross. He “bled for Adam's helpless race.”***

Again, the hymnist is forced to confess that the mercy of God alone is the source of this amazing love.

The personal nature of the evangelism of the Wesleys is seen in the use of “me” throughout the hymn. That Christ died “for me” is repeated three times in the first stanza, and in this third stanza the mercy of God is said to have “found out me!” twice. The personal emphasis is even more evident in stanzas 4-6.

4. Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray—
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

In stanzas 4-6, Wesley seems to offer his own testimony from his experience of conversion. This has caused many scholars to conclude that this hymn was written soon after Wesley’s conversion. It is important to note that although the language is profoundly personal, it also deeply biblical and theological. Wesley’s view of his pre-conversion state was that of an “imprisoned spirit” bound by both sin and nature. Wesley draws on the imagery of a prisoner bound by chains in a dungeon. This is an apt image of the state of mankind as described in Ephesians 2:1-3.

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (ESV)

This picture of mankind as dead in “trespasses and sins” and “by nature children of wrath” could be the source for Wesley’s “fast bound in sin and nature’s might.” Giving credence to this theory is the next line where Wesley introduces “a quickening ray” emitted from the eye of God which caused Wesley to awaken from his slumber of sin and death. ***The language of quickening or “making alive” is present in the Authorized Version of Ephesians 2:1 and 4. “And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; . . . Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ.”***

The quickening of the sinner resulted in a dungeon now inflamed with light, chains being broken, and a free heart. ***Wesley's response to the quickening work of God was to rise up and follow the Christ who is the subject of this hymn. This combination of the biblical images of life, light, freedom from sin, and freedom of heart testify of a profound understanding of the transformation that takes place at regeneration.***

5. Still the small inward voice I hear,
That whispers all my sins forgiven;
Still the atoning blood is near,
That quenched the wrath of hostile Heaven.
I feel the life His wounds impart;
I feel the Savior in my heart.
I feel the life His wounds impart;
I feel the Savior in my heart.

Before Wesley's conversion, he longed for assurance of forgiveness. This longed for assurance has now come in the presence of the Holy Spirit. There may be an allusion to the inward witness of the Spirit in 1 John 5:10, but is largely an experiential reality which Wesley expresses here. The "small inward voice . . . whispers all my sins forgiven." ***Though deeply experiential, the basis for this experience is the objective work of Christ on the cross. It was Jesus' "atoning blood" which "quenched the wrath of hostile heaven." This vivid imagery of the death of Christ satisfying the wrath of a holy God is seen in the Scripture's use of the word "propitiation" in Romans 3:25, 1 John 2:2, and 1 John 4:10. The word "propitiation" means "to satisfy wrath." Christ on the cross propitiated a holy God on our behalf.***

6. No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine;
Alive in Him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach th'eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.
Bold I approach th'eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.

Wesley begins his final stanza with words which reflect a familiarity with Romans 8:1 "There is therefore now no condemnation for them which are in Christ Jesus." These hope-filled words provide an opportunity for reflection upon the imputation of Christ's righteousness in justification.

The reason that the believer need not fear God's condemnation is that we are united to Jesus Christ through faith "Jesus, and all in Him, is mine." This includes His righteousness, as Wesley specifies that the now alive sinner is "clothed in righteousness divine." This evokes biblical imagery from Genesis 3 when God provided coats of skin to cover the nakedness of Adam and Eve to Joshua the High Priest with dirty clothes for whom God provided a change of raiment in Zechariah 3. These words also reflect a careful reading of 2 Corinthians 5:21 which states, "For he [God] hath made him [Jesus] to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." **It is on the basis of this clothing with the righteousness of Christ that we are enabled to approach "th'eternal throne" boldly.** Also alluded to here is the work of Jesus, our Great High Priest, in Hebrews 4:16 which allows the author to exhort his readers: "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." **Wesley closes the hymn with the phrase "through Christ my own."** This is an apt summary of the hymn's teaching and of Wesley's theology. All our blessings are "through Christ" (the objective work of Christ) and they are by faith "my own" (the experiential possession). Because of its rich doctrinal and devotional quality, it is no wonder that this hymn has stood the test of time and remains a favorite by congregations in the 21st Century. The enduring relevance of this hymn was brought home to me in recent years at the Together for the Gospel conferences (2008 and 2010) when a crowd of 4,000 plus mostly men under the age of 40 sang this hymn with deep affection at the top of their longs. Tears streamed down men's faces and arms were uplifted as they sang of the amazing love of God as seen in the death of Christ for their sins.

1. John R. Tyson, *Assist Me to Proclaim: The Life and Hymns of Charles Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 49.
2. Ibid.

<https://pastorhistorian.com/2010/10/07/and-can-it-be-a-theological-and-devotional-analysis/>

The Doxological Nature of Calvinism

The wonderful, albeit absentminded, "Rabbi" John Duncan (1796–1870), professor of Hebrew at New College, Edinburgh, once read out the words of Charles Wesley's hymn "And Can It Be That I Should Gain":

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray;
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;

My chains fell off, my heart was free;
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.
My chains fell off, my heart was free;
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

Duncan commented quizzically, “Where’s your Arminianism now, friend?” The Wesley brothers were indeed Arminian in theology (despite their conviction that many of their views were “within a hair’s-breadth of Calvinism”). But at this point, Charles Wesley’s expressions of praise are rooted in a theology borrowed from his Calvinist friend George Whitefield’s preaching on the new birth.

Wesley bids us sing praise to God for His sovereign, liberating, prevenient, divine work on the soul that both awakens us and delivers us. When he does so, he is forced to borrow a Calvinistic frame of reference. A moment’s reflection will underline how contradictory it would be to sing praise to God for something He had not done. Of course, hymns may be written to parody Calvinistic doctrine, and on very rare occasions one hears songs that celebrate “free will.” But *the great hymns of ages past, like their predecessors in Scripture, praise God for being God, for being sovereign, for being a saving and keeping God...Most of the old hymns underscore the point that Calvinism is in its very nature doxological, and that all doxology, in fact, depends on such biblical theology.* Here, for example, is the best-known hymn of Augustus Montague Toplady (1740–1778):

Not the labors of my hands
Can fulfill Thy law’s demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and Thou alone.

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress;
Helpless look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the Fountain fly;
Wash me, Savior, or I die.

This is Calvinism in poetry: such is our depravity and helplessness that “Thou must save, and Thou alone.” Only these emphases that are characteristic of Calvinism can give birth to such theology as poetry. Granted, the

Calvinism is more pronounced and more deliberately articulated with some hymn writers. But these same truths come to expression in the more pastoral spirit of a John Newton and his “Amazing Grace!” ***What makes grace so amazing is precisely that it sovereignly frees and sovereignly saves from first to last. Since every stable doctrine of providence stresses God’s absolute sovereignty over the details of life, robust singing on providence is characteristically well-rooted in this Calvinistic emphasis.***

This excerpt is taken from Sinclair Ferguson's contribution in Living for God's Glory: An Introduction to Calvinism by Joel Beeke.

<https://www.ligonier.org/blog/doxological-nature-calvinism/>

History of Hymns: 'Where Shall My Wondering Soul Begin'

By Beth R. Holzemer

“Where Shall My Wondering Soul Begin”

By Charles Wesley

The United Methodist Hymnal, 342

*Where shall my wondering soul begin?
How shall I all to heaven aspire?
A slave redeemed from death and sin,
a brand plucked from eternal fire,
how shall I equal triumphs raise,
and sing my great deliverer's praise?*

“Where shall my wondering soul begin?” — an apt question to ask when facing the formidable task of presenting, arguably, the greatest hymn writer of our faith, the venerable Charles Wesley (1707-1788). Born in Epworth, Lincolnshire, England to Anglican cleric and poet, Samuel Wesley (1662-1735), and Susanna Wesley (1669-1742), whom many consider the Mother of Methodism, Charles was the eighteenth of nineteen children. He spent many hours at his mother’s knee receiving a classical education along with his siblings. He was later educated at Westminster School and Christ Church, Oxford, where he was ordained. While at Oxford, Charles formed a prayer group with fellow students in 1727; his older brother, John, joined them in 1729. Other students ridiculed this “Holy Club” and dubbed them “the Methodists” because they were methodical and disciplined in their Bible study, speech, and lifestyle. The brothers traveled to the United States in 1735, but Charles returned to England the following summer, having been poorly received by the settlers he had been sent to shepherd. No doubt John Wesley spoke for both of them when he wrote in his journal, “I went to America

to convert the Indians, but, oh, who shall convert me? Who, what, is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of mischief?" (J. Wesley, *Journal*, p. 29)

A life-threatening sea voyage provided the answer. A group of Moravians shared passage to America with the Wesleys in January of 1736 when a vicious storm arose. While the English passengers panicked and screamed in terror, the German Moravians remained calm, prayed, and sang and tended to their despairing fellow passengers. So profoundly touched by the living out of their faith was Charles that he experienced an evangelical conversion. On Pentecost Sunday, May 21, 1738, he wrote in his journal, "I have found myself at peace with God, and rejoiced in the hope of a loving Christ . . . I saw that by faith I stood" (C. Wesley *Journal*, 1738, n.p.). While it cannot be proved with certainty, scholars generally agree that the hymn referred to in the following quotation is "Where Shall My Wondering Soul Begin" (Dudley-Smith, 2013, n.p.). Charles Wesley's journal entry continues (May 23, 1738):

At nine, I began an hymn upon my conversion, but I was persuaded to break off for fear of pride. Mr. [John] Bray, coming encouraged me to proceed in spite of Satan. I prayed Christ to stand by me, and finished the hymn. Upon my afterwards showing it to Mr. Bray, the devil threw in a fiery dart, suggesting that it was wrong, and I had displeased God. My heart sunk within me; when, casting my eye upon a Prayer-book, I met with an answer for him. "Why boastest thou thyself, thou tyrant, that thou canst do mischief?" Upon this, I clearly discerned it was a device of the enemy to keep back glory from God (C. Wesley Journal, 1738, n.p.).

In the rhetorical style of the great hymn writers of the eighteenth century, including Isaac Watts (1674-1748), Charles puts forward six questions within the first three stanzas.

Stanza 3 poses two questions:

*And shall I slight my Father's love,
or basely fear his gifts to own?
Unmindful of his favors prove,
shall I, the hallowed cross to shun,
refuse his righteousness to impart,
by hiding it within my heart?*

Wesley borrows actual phrases and concepts from this hymn for his more famous, "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing" (1739), thought to have been composed on the anniversary of his conversion.

Take, for example, the uncommon word “antepast” found at the end of stanza 2 of “Where Shall My Wondering Soul”:

*I should be called a child of God!
Should know, should feel my sins forgiven,
blest with this antepast of heaven!*

Quite literally, an “antepast” is synonymous with an appetizer, but Wesley uses it here to tantalize us with a foretaste of heaven, the deliciousness of eternal life with God. In earliest hymnal editions, the text includes “An Antepast of Heaven” as a subtitle. Compare this with the final stanza of “O for a Thousand Tongues,” composed a year later (1739), where “antepast” becomes “anticipate,” a more common, but less colorful word:

*In Christ, your head, you then shall know,
shall feel your sins forgiven;
anticipate your heaven below,
And know that love is heaven. (The United Methodist Hymnal, 57)*

Similarly, in stanza 5, Wesley uses a phrase he would repeat. The stanza begins in “Where Shall My Wondering Soul”:

*Outcasts of men, to you I call,
harlots and publicans and thieves;
he spreads his arms to embrace you all,
sinners alone his grace receive.*

In “O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing” (1739), using the same phrase and the theological appeal to the sinner, Wesley reframes the focus from others – “Outcasts of men, to you I call” – to now include himself – “crimes as great as mine.”

Three days later, after the hymn’s composition, Charles Wesley writes in his journal, “Toward ten, my brother was brought in triumph by a troop of our friends, and declared, ‘I believe.’ We sang the hymn with great joy, and parted with prayer” (*C. Wesley Journal*, 1738, n.p.). Yes, John Wesley experienced his conversion and a strangely warmed heart a mere three days after his younger brother. And this is the hymn they sang.

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/history-of-hymns-where-shall-my-wondering-soul-begin>