

January 20, 2019 Singing His Praise Psalm 138

I wanted to do something very different for this morning's service. My decision was to share with you the stories behind some of the hymns we sing and know. The bulk of what I am sharing comes from a book entitled "Then Sings My Soul" written by Robert J. Morgan. Everything I am sharing with you this morning is new information to me. I have made an assumption that if I did not know these stories, it is highly probable you would know them either. They underline a conviction of my own, that the praise of God erupts out of the human soul as a result of his grace in what can be called "an hour of need experience."

The first hymn story I want to share is about "I Heard The Bells on Christmas Day." The lyric was written by the American author and poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Henry was a professor of literature at Harvard University. His younger brother was a minister and a writer of numerous hymns. Henry of course is best known for his epic poem about Hiawatha. A number of events conspired together to bring tragedy and gloom into Henry's life.

In 1861 his wife died tragically. Her dress caught fire in their home in Cambridge Massachusetts. 1861 is also the year in which the American Civil War erupted, dividing the nation and threatening to tear it apart. In 1863 Henry's son Charles at the age of 17, ran away from home, and joined the Union army. He fought in the Battle of Chancellorsville in 1863, but in early June contracted typhoid fever and malaria. As a result he missed the Battle of Gettysburg and was sent home to recover. Returning to action, he was wounded during he Battle of New Hope Church in Virginia. His father rushed to Washington and took Charles home and was instrumental in nursing son back to health.

On December 25th 1863 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow gave vent to his own pain and anguish as he wrote the lyric. We tend to hear this carol on the radio or see it performed as part of those Christmas specials on Television. To be fully appreciated it needs to be set against the backdrop of the times, and the pain and anguish of the war between the States. The 3rd verse describes the situation. "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.'" But then he hears the bells ringing in the churches' towers and the author remembers, God is not dead, nor doth HE sleep. Like so many hymns it was inspired by verse from the book of Psalms. Psalm 121:4... "Behold, he who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep." It continues to remind us that the Lord is present when we seem to be surrounded by both darkness and pain.

The second Hymn whose story I chose for sharing is "Jesus Keep Me Near The Cross," by Fanny Crosby. She was born in 1820, and was blinded in infancy as a result of the malpractice of a doctor. At the age of 15 she enrolled in a school for the blind, in New York City. She remained there for 12 years, first as a student, and then remaining as a member of the faculty. Her poetry brought widespread acclaim to the school. She was often asked to recite her work for visiting dignitaries.

On November 20th, 1850 she responded to an alter call at New York's Thirtieth Street Methodist Church. That event marked her life in several ways. She found in Jesus, her Lord and Saviour. As she went forward the congregation was singing Isaac Watt's hymn, "At the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the light, And the burden of my heart rolled away, It was there by faith I received my sight, And now I am happy all the day."

It was shortly after that experience that Fanny Crosby turned her own skills as a poet to the writing of hymns, and many of her songs of praise focus on the theme of the cross of Christ. "Jesus Keep Me Near The Cross was written after her meeting a Cincinnati business man named William Doane. He presented her with a melody that he had composed. She listened to it and responded saying, "Jesus keep me near the cross." And she promptly wrote the entire lyric. Fanny Crosby produced 8,000 hymns over the expanse of her career. She sang and empowered the church to sing praises to our God, and for the salvation that comes of giving our lives to the Lord.

The Bible verse that has always been published along with that hymn is John 19:17: "And He, bearing His cross, went out to a place called the place of a skull, which is called in Hebrew Golgotha."

If I asked you who Cecil Frances Alexander is, I would not be surprised if you said, "I have never heard of her." You have and you know her work. She is the lady who wrote the hymn, "All Things Bright and Beautiful." But I would bet this month's salary that you have never heard the story of how she happened to do so....except I am Presbyterian and we continue at least officially to be against gambling. So I jest. There is no money on the line here!!

She was working with the children in the Sunday School class that she taught. A little boy (it happened to be her godson) was having trouble understanding The Apostle's Creed and certain portions of the catechism. As she thought about all of this Mrs. Alexander began to mull over the idea of converting the Apostle's Creed into songs for children. She wanted to use simple relatively short hymns to explain phrases and truths of the Christian faith to children. The Apostle's Creed begins, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord." For the phrase "Maker of heaven and earth," she wrote All Things Bright and Beautiful. She based the hymn on the text Genesis 1:31: "Then God saw everything that HE had made, and indeed it was very good."

According to one account, the inspiration for the actual choice of words came about as she was driving by horse and buggy into the city of Derry Ireland. She was going to do some shopping. A grass covered hill just outside the city walls helped her to imagine what the hill of Golgotha in Hebrew, Calvary in Greek looked like. And so she wrote the verses of that lyric. In 1848 she published a collection of hymns entitled Hymns For Little Children. Christians of all ages have been singing her hymns in praise of the Lord ever since.

The Apostle's Creed goes on to say, concerning Jesus,... "who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary." This phrase inspired Mrs. Alexander to write, "Once In

Royal David's City." And the next phrase says, "(HE) suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried." That phrase became the basis for her composition of "There Is A Green Hill Far Away." All three of those hymns are included in The Book of Praise we are currently using as a principle praise resource. And needless to say, All Things Bright And Beautiful ranks as a favourite hymn among many, many Christian adults. Some of us would say we have been singing it forever.

Here is the lasting point of this message. When we read the Psalms we are continually called to praise God and to rejoice before HIM. Remember, please remember, that every Hymn in the Book of Praise, every chorus in our other praise resources are the results of God's touching and using the lives, the gifts, the talents of HIS people. Longfellow, Fanny Crosby, Frances Alexander. We praise God using these words and melodies written by servants of Jesus. Singing HIS praise is what we do! Let us pray.

Lord we thank you and praise you for new life in Jesus Christ by the means of faith. We acknowledge that you have put new songs on our lips. Some of those songs of praise seem to us to be very old, and yet very dear, a means of grace. Continue to raise up composers and lyricists who dedicate themselves to helping us faithfully sing your praises. In Jesus name we ask. Amen

Be it known that the balance of the material in this message is based on material in the book, Then Sings My Soul Book 2, by Robert J Morgan published by Thomas Nelson.