

“18th-Century Hymn Stories - The Journey From Sinner To Saint”

Special Presentation

Rev. Ted Wood

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Ted: Lord, we thank You for the land that You’ve given us, the culture You’ve given us, the society You’ve given us, the government You’ve given us. All these things are ordered by Your decree. And we thank You for the great honor and privilege of being part of this nation. We pray that we may never take these things for granted.

We pray also for Bruce and for Jeff, Tabitha and also for Brenda, for Your ministering to them, maximizing and making the most of the time that they have.

And finally, Lord, we thank You that You’ve given us voices and music so that we can praise You in our music, our hymns, our spiritual songs. You cause us to remember the things of Scripture—the things of God, the holy things—oft embedded that our own memories can bring to mind. So we thank You for that, and we pray today that we may sing hymns and learn about those hymn writers and see how they apply to Scripture, how the Scripture applies to them. And we pray these things in Your name. Amen.

Brave Men: Amen.

Ted: Okay, good. When I get to the news I always go to the articles about how you know that you have dementia or Alzheimer’s and things like that. I quit going into my Tick Tock; too many boxes in those squares to fill.

Jim Hamilton: It’s hard to change.

Ted: I would like to change too, but it’s been very difficult.

Don Maurer: Change spells p-a-i-n.

Ted: That’s right. We have the teachers pretty much set up through June. Next week we’re going to cross the Jordan, and Jordan Obaker is going to be teaching. Do you know what you’re going to be teaching on yet, Jordan?

Jordan Obaker: Yes. We’re going to be talking about how we prepare for, take and review our preparation for the Lord’s Supper.

Ted: Oh, that’s good. I was just teaching on that in church this past Sunday; good! Don is going to teach again.

Don Maurer: I don’t yet know exactly what I’m going to be doing.

Ted: Well, we’re not calling you to account yet.

Don: All right.

Ted: Okay. John Gratner is going to be teaching, and that’s great. Mike Davis again and again and again; thank you, Mike. And by popular demand Mike Rush is going to be back. And we’ll keep working on this. I just don’t know how much longer Jeff is going to be away; it may be a while. He’s got his work cut out for him.

Well I’m going to try again today to talk about hymns and hymn writers. And let me know how you like this. I mean, I love hymns. I could talk about hymns and hymn writers, the verses of hymns, the meanings of hymns. I just love hymns and I could do that all the time, but it may not appeal to you. So I can go on to something different. But I thought that when Ted gets up here and does his gig that I might try something a little different. So if I can do it better and if there are ways you would change it, please let me know; I would really appreciate that.

I’m going to deal today with three 18th-century hymns; this was the 1700s—a really very involved and intense time in Western history. You have the American Revolution in the 18th-

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century. You have the French Revolution. You have the war that made America, the French and Indian War. You have tremendous discoveries in the area of science. You also have some of the great newer philosophers—Burke and others—who are stimulating the intellectual minds of the day. You also had a tremendous amount of poverty and sin and degradation; alcoholism in the major cities in England. And all these hymns come out of English authors.

I’m going to be talking about Charles Wesley and his great hymn “And Can It Be.” I’m going to be talking about Robert Robinson, who probably many of you don’t know: “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” He’s a very interesting character and there is a lot of controversy about him and this hymn. And finally there’s Isaac Watts’ :O God, Our Help in Ages Past.”

Charles Wesley was the brother of John Wesley. I’m going to talk about the author of the hymn and then I’m going to go through the words of the hymn, and find which Scripture might be applied to those verses, and then we’ll sing.

One authority has calculated that Wesley wrote over 7200 hymns in his life. He was probably one of the most, if not the most prolific hymn writer. And we still sing many of his hymns today. “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” is a Charles Wesley hymn. “Christ the Lord is Risen Today” was written by Wesley. “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing” and “Jesus, Lover of My Soul.” How many of you know that song? (*Ted sings*): “Jesus, lover of my soul.” And then he wrote, “And Can It Be.”

Many people know his brother John Wesley, who was a tremendous preacher and part of the revival that went on in England in the mid-18th century. Many souls were led to Christ as a result of John Wesley’s preaching. But Charles was also a tremendous preacher as well as a hymn writer. His sermons were so electrifying that there was one instance in which he preached for three hours. And the crowd wouldn’t go away, so he preached for another three hours. So it was an extraordinary time.

It was also a time of a lot of persecution in which groups and gangs would come into Wesley’s preaching assemblies and cause all kinds of disturbance. The story is told that they once attacked him. They called the local fire department and they hosed him down. And then when that was done he invited them in to come to listen to more of Charles’ preaching. Several hundreds came into the hall, and they say that a hundred people were converted. So he was an amazing fellow.

He was one of eighteen children. You know, in the 18th century they didn’t have electricity. When the lights went out, what else were you going to do, you know? (*Laughter*) “Honey, I’m not sleepy yet; are you?” (*Laughter*) Out of those eighteen children only nine survived to adulthood. This was a time of tremendous infant mortality.

Both Charles and John went on to Oxford University. And when he was there he, with John, created what was called “The Holy Club.” Both John and Charles Wesley were very religious. But they were religious in a very legalistic sense. And The Holy Club was organized with a number of other students there, so that they would check each other and be sure that each was being righteous enough, acting in a holy and a right way.

After Oxford they were ordained as Church of England clergy, and they were sent to Savannah, Georgia. And you can go today to Savannah, Georgia, and see the ruins of the Wesley colony. It was to convert convicts because Georgia was a penal colony to convert convicts and Indians; that was their assignment.

They arrived in March of 1736 and left in August of 1736. It was a terrible failure. It was extremely discouraging to the Wesley brothers because nobody got converted. They didn’t

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convert any Indians or convicts. And the regular colonizers that were there in that colony didn't like them and asked them to leave. So they left and went back to England.

After he returned from America both John and Charles understood that they really had not plugged into a relationship with the living God. And this experience in America shook them tremendously. Charles wanted to feel that Christ loved him—He not only loved the world, but He loved me—and that he personally could be reconciled to God, and that he could know peace with God.

So after a year-and-a-half of being in agony, all the time serving as a Church of England clergyman, at the age of 30 in this spiritual desert, he was reading Martin Luther's commentary on Galatians. That's very interesting, because Charles Wesley was converted by reading Martin Luther's commentary on Galatians, and John Wesley was converted by listening to Luther's commentary on Romans.

And it's very interesting. I've read some of Luther's commentaries; they are very powerful. They were written in 1520 and they read as if they were written in 2023; they are very powerful.

But this is what Charles Wesley read in Luther's commentary on Galatians. Luther wrote: *“Faith needs to be personal. Away with relying on ceremonies! Away with good works!”* See, that was The Holy Club at Oxford. They were involved in good works and ceremonies.

Luther says: *“Away with ceremonies! Away with good works! Away with anything else and anybody else except Jesus Christ!”* And so at that point Charles came to faith.

Within a few months he wrote the hymn “And Can It Be?”, because it's the story of his conversion. He lived 51 more years and had one of the most fruitful lives of preaching, hymn writing, evangelism and pastoring that the Christian world has ever seen. So there's so much that I could say about Wesley. I'm just going to give you a brief on each one of these folks.

Let's look then at the hymn “And Can It Be.” I'm going to go through it and this is an interactive thing; I need your help. You tell me what Scriptures this reminds you of. I've given you a bunch of Scriptures on the side there. So the first verse:

*“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!”*

Okay. Anything from that verse that would jump out at you? What does he mean by “And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior's blood?” What is that question all about? The hymn starts out with a question. Yes?

David Miller: I'm reminded of the verse in Romans chapter 8 which says that *“we are heirs with God and fellow heirs with Christ.”*

Ted: Yes. What is this “interest in the Savior's blood?” He's wondering if he can gain “an interest in the Savior's blood.” Does that mean to be interested in the Savior's blood? What does it mean? Yes, go ahead.

Gary Craig: It sounds like a financial allegory.

Ted: Yes it does, doesn't it?

Gary: Yes.

Ted: Yes. Can he gain some kind of ownership in the Savior's blood? Can that be for him? Remember that question he asked after he came back from America, from Georgia. He said,

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“Does Christ love me? Can I be reconciled to God? Can I be reconciled? I’m preaching to the whole world, but what about me?”

*“Died He for me who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?”*

Basically he’s saying that very Savior is the One I sought to kill and to put an end to. I mean, these words are powerful! Yes?

Don: *“That Thou, My God, shouldst die for me.”* That’s Acts 20:28.

Transcriber’s Note: Acts 20:28, NKJV. *“Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”*

Don: Wait a minute; God can’t die.

Ted: Oh, yeah.

Don: Acts 20:28 says something about *“the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”*

Ted: Yes.

Don: And since Christ is the God-Man, Scripture uses that kind of language.

Ted: Yes. When you debate with Muslims they always say, Do you believe God died? How is that possible?” And remember, this hymn was written just a few months after his conversion. So all of this hymn deals with his conversion. The second verse:

*“He left His Father’s throne above;
So free, so infinite His grace!
Emptied Himself of all but love.”*

“Emptied Himself”; where do you get that in Scripture? Think about it. Where in Scripture do you get this idea of emptying? Yes?

David: Philippians chapter 2.

Don: What does he mean by *“emptied Himself of all but love?”*

Ted: That means He gave away everything except love. I think He retained that because of His love for us. I’m not too sure exactly what that means. I’ve puzzled about that myself.

Don: That can be misunderstood.

Ted: Well when we see Charles we’ll ask Him about it.

Don: Okay.

Ted: *“Emptied Himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam’s helpless race.”*

*‘Tis mercy all, immense and free,
For oh my God, it found out me!”*

This is the idea of God pursuing him—the God he could not find—the God who comes and finds him.

*“’Tis mercy all, immense and free,
For oh my God, I found out me!”*

Don: I’m going to put another fly into the ointment.

Ted: Okay.

Don: In the hymnal that I have at church they changed some of the words.

Ted: Yes.

Don:

“Humbled Himself, so great His love,

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And bled for Adam’s chosen race.”

Ted: Yeah. Okay, that’s good. Charles Wesley’s theology was a little different from what you might find in the PCA.

Don: Yeah, right. Anyway, go ahead.

Ted: The fourth verse. This is one of my favorite verses of all the hymns that were ever written.

*“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.”*

Any thoughts about that one?

*“Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature’s night.”*

It’s not only my sin, but the nature. By nature we are “*children of wrath.*”

*“Thine eye diffused a quickening ray;
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light.
My chains fell off; my heart was free.”*

I’m very much thinking about Paul’s or Peter’s experience in the jail. The chains fell off of Peter; that was that experience. You know, I like that because that’s me.

*“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.”*

That’s kind of how I think of myself in my own spiritual journey: in a dungeon trapped. And all of a sudden the Lord came into that dungeon, that jail cell.

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

That’s what happens. When you get released from the prison of sin and nature’s night, that’s what you do: you get up and follow Jesus; that’s what happens. Any other thoughts about that verse?

Jordan: I have something to say.

Ted: Yeah, sure.

Jordan: I know that Jeff is a super big fan of *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

Ted: Yes.

Jordan: He has talked about it here before.

Ted: Yes.

Jordan: It’s interesting how in that story there’s a similar idea of a burden being removed from you with your chains.

Ted: Yes.

Jordan: And you talked a bit about Charles Wesley’s background, and how where he didn’t feel he had the personal relationship. And I kind of struggle with that; I never had that crisis of faith. Because I was raised in a Christian home, what this started was a sense in me of living

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without knowing about God; I wasn't totally in my sin. But it wasn't as though there was this moment where I felt this burden removed from me because of my former life, or whatever.

Ted: Sure.

Jordan: And I've struggled with that, because I've wondered, am I really saved? When am I going to feel that this burden has been lifted?

Ted: Right.

Jordan: And there's a part of me that admires that. But there's a sense that I'm almost a little bit envious of people that have that sense of this moment where my burden was lifted, where my chains were set free.

Ted: Yeah.

Jordan: And I know I've personally struggled with that. And I've heard people tell me, “God bless you! You were raised in a covenant family.”

Ted: Mm-hmm.

Jordan: I know I've been taught about God and His grace and His love, and so forth.

Ted: That's good.

Jordan: Sometimes I admire people who have that experience.

Ted: Do you find yourself coveting them? *(Laughter)*

Jordan: If I'm being honest with you, that is a part of me.

Ted: We don't want you to lie to us. Please, don't do that. *(Laughter)*

Jordan: You know, I've mentioned this to people in my own church when they've asked me to tell my testimony. I have a boring testimony.

Ted: Yeah? Well, make something up. *(Laughter)* I mean really, that's what we always do. I know that in telling about my walk with Christ I would make it worse, because it was not gory enough.

Jordan: Right. The interesting thing to me with this is that if you look back in your lifetime and the stuff that I've done, even the stuff I still do, I mean, we're still sinners. And you hope that as you continue to be sanctified you can do that, right? You look back and you say wow! I'm so immature and so weak in my faith.

Ted: Yeah.

Jordan: And I think that a year from today, ten years from today, I'd say the same thing. And so it's easy to look backwards to say, “Man, you've really had this change!”

Ted: Well, think about what Luther wrote in his commentary on Galatians, and how it touched Charles Wesley. “*Away with ceremonies! Away with good works! Away with anything and anybody except Jesus Christ!*” So away with experiences! Away with great testimonies! Away with everything and everybody else except Jesus! Don, were you going to say something? Not you, Don; Don Bishop. I got him a little nervous there.

Don Bishop: It reminds me of that scene in “The Mission.” Do you remember that movie?

Ted: Yes.

Don: Robert DiNiro plays a criminal. And he comes to this mission and he realizes he's a sinner.

Ted: Yeah.

Don: And he takes this big bag with all kinds of junk in it. He carries it around all the time at the mission. He's climbing up this cliff and comes up to the top. And this priest comes along and cuts it off, and he's free.

Ted: Oh yeah; beautiful.

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Don: Great stuff.

Ted: Yeah; great.

Ron Baling: (*Unclear*)

Ted: When Luther was a monk he would go to his Superior. I think his name was Von Staupitz. And he would confess, and Von Staupitz said to him, “Luther, you have nothing even slightly interesting to confess. Please don’t come back until you have something interesting.” (*Laughter*)

Don Maurer: Von Staupitz said, “Luther, Staupitz, Staupitz!” (*Laughter*)

Ted: That’s right. Jordan, you have a really excellent point, and it would bear the rest of our time to talk about it here, because yes, I’ve come to a couple conclusions on that. #1 is that everybody is wired differently. With some people everything is really a huge spiritual experience. Just the way they’re wired, their emotions are wired. Other people are much more thoughtful and kind of internal in the way they deal with things.

So I think a lot of times about the experiences we have. We can watch a lot of people on TV who have had all these great experiences and emotions and feelings. But that is just kind of how they are. It doesn’t say anything about where they are in terms of their journey. That’s what I’ve come to believe.

There is really no greater experience than to know the truth, and I think that’s the thing. At some point everybody, whether they’re raised in a Christian home or raised by Bill Obaker—God bless you!—or whether they’re raised in a totally fractured environment, somewhere along the line everybody has to say, “This is true, and it’s about me! It’s true for me!”

I mean, that’s where I came in my conversion at college. And the guy that I met with taught the Bible studies to me. And it was all interesting, interesting, interesting, interesting, interesting. And then one day I said, “Wow; it’s about me, and it’s true!” And that’s where everything changed, because if it’s true, your life is based on that.

This is an excellent question that you have. I wouldn’t exercise yourself over that. If you want God to give you a great, roaring experience at conversion, He’ll do it. And you may wish that He never touched you or laid His hand on you. (*Laughter*) “You want an experience, Jordan? I’m going to give you an experience. And you’re going to beg for mercy at the end.” (*Laughter*)

Jordan: May I mention one more thing related to this?

Ted: No, you can’t. No, go ahead.

Jordan: For whatever reason, in the last three or four years I’ve been convicted on how I use the Lord’s Day.

Ted: Oh yeah; mm-hmm.

Jordan: Have I been pondering it? Am I resting from my activities and from the world, and so forth? And I think that I used to treat Sunday as a check box. All right: Go to church on Sunday? Check. All right, I’ve done what I was supposed to do on this day. And the last three or four years I’ve tried to really honor the Lord’s Day with not doing hobbies, not doing activities, not going out to eat so that people work for me—that type of stuff. I have come to love the Lord’s Day more than I ever have.

Ted: That’s good.

Jordan: And it has truly become for me a day of rest. You talked about the burden of living in this sinful world. The further I get from the Lord’s Day, the more I feel that I need the Lord’s Day.

Ted: Mm-hmm.

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Jordan: It’s a rest from that. And it’s supposed to be a picture of what we’re going to experience for eternity. We have a taste of that every seven days.

Ted: Yeah.

Jordan: And I would say that for me that’s how I’ve come to appreciate the sense of the burden being relieved. I used to think of coming to Sunday or the Lord’s Day to rest as being a burden.

Ted: And those who don’t know the Lord find doing what you’re doing a burden.

Jordan: You’re right.

Ted: If you know the Lord, it’s a relief and a peace. If you don’t know the Lord it’s a burden, because there are plenty of stories about families or children who are made to do nothing on Sundays and hated it. No, that’s good. Thank you. Well, no matter what you’re dealing with,--

*“No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus and all in Him is mine.”*

Wow, what an amazing statement!

*“Alive in Him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine.
Bold I approach the eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.”*

My own, mine; He loves me! He has reconciled me! And this is actually a very strong theme in Methodism, which the Wesleys helped to found. It was the importance of the personal experience of God.

Don Maurer: That verse is fraught with Scripture there. “Alive in Him, my living Head”—that’s Colossians 2.

Ted: Oh, yes.

Don: “Clothed with righteousness divine”—Romans, Galatians. “No condemnation now”—Romans 8; it’s there.

Ted: And while you may not remember Scripture, you will remember the words in the song, because our minds do that.

Don Maurer: Yes. And there’s a verse in there which says:

“’Tis mystery all; the Immortal dies!”

Ted: Yes. I didn’t include that verse.

Don: But it’s right out of 1 Peter chapter 1.

*“Who can explore His strange design?
In vain the firstborn seraph tries
To plumb the depths of love divine.
’Tis mystery all. Let earth adore;
Let angel minds inquire no more.”*

Ted: Yes, that’s right.

Don: Right out of 1 Peter 1.

Ted: Excellent. Well let’s try to sing this song. Give us four verses, okay? (*The men sing*)

Ted: Okay. “And Can It Be?” was a hymn written at Charles Wesley’s conversion or shortly thereafter. And now we go to the next author. “And Can It Be” has to do with conversion. “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing” is about sanctification—walking through your faith.

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Robert Robinson is a really interesting character. I had to read a number of articles about him to kind of get my arms around his life and who he was, because there was a fair amount of controversy involved with him. And it may speak to some of us.

He was born to a very poor family in rural England. His mother married the wrong fellow. His father died when he was eight. She was from a higher class and he was from the lower class. He was a ne'er-do-well. And when he died his mom's family was so unhappy with the man their daughter married that he was disinherited. So Robert Robinson and his family were disinherited because his mother's father didn't care for the scoundrel that died too soon. So he was left with nothing.

So in great poverty his mother sent him to an apprentice in London to become an indentured servant. This was in the 1740s. He was an indentured servant to a hairdresser. So he was going to become a hairdresser.

While he was there as a teenager he became involved in a street gang. He did nothing but cause trouble and mischief. One day the gang decided they would go and listen to this preacher George Whitefield and make fun of him, and try to disrupt the evangelistic meeting that George Whitefield was holding.

And you'll remember that in the 18th century the two great giants in evangelism and revival in England and in America were George Whitefield and John Wesley. So they went to hear George Whitefield, who was an interesting character in his own right. He was 5 ft. 1 or 2 inches tall—a very short man and blind in one eye. But thousands and thousands were converted through him.

And when Whitefield went to Philadelphia, Ben Franklin joined the crowd. And Whitefield's voice was so strong that they said that every one of the ten thousand could hear him. And although Franklin was not converted, when they passed the plate around once he took change out and he put it in. And they passed the plate again, and Franklin was so convicted that he emptied his pocket. And the third time the plate went around he took out his pocket watch and put it in. Franklin never got saved, but he contributed to the Kingdom. That was how powerful Whitefield's preaching was.

This gang that Robert Robinson was a part of attacked Whitefield. But Whitefield's preaching was on Matthew 3:7. And the theme is that *“When John the Baptist saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them: ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’”* So the topic of the sermon was the wrath to come.

That had Robinson very agitated. And for three years day and night Robinson was haunted by this idea of the wrath to come. And finally at age twenty he had a wholehearted conversion. And later they found this in his books. He had taken a blank leaf in a book and written in Latin—probably so that others wouldn't see it!—he wrote down the following: *“Robert Robinson. Born on Saturday the 27th, 1735. Reborn on Saturday, May 24th, 1752 by the powerful preaching of George Whitefield.”* That's what he wrote in his own handwriting.

And he goes on: *“Having tasted the pains of the Bible two years and seven months.”* So for two years and seven months he was thinking about the wrath to come. *“Having tasted the pains of the Bible two years and seven months, I found full and free absolution through the precious blood of Jesus Christ on Tuesday December the 10th, 1755, to whom be honor and glory forever and ever.”*

So that was his testimony about his own conversion. It took him 2-1/2 to 3 years to finally get it. And he became very interested in the subject of baptism. He researched it and wrote on it and he became a Baptist. He started off as a Methodist and became a Baptist. And at age 26 he

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became the preacher and later the pastor of the Baptist Church in Cambridge; it still exists today. He was so successful and popular in his preaching and his pastoring that the congregation quickly grew to over a thousand people, which is pretty good for the mid-1700s.

At the same time there were the philosophies of Deism and Unitarianism that were actually gaining a foothold in many of the Baptist and Congregational churches. Deism basically says that God created the universe and then stepped back and just flew off into space and said, “Good luck, everybody; I hope it works out for you. I’ve got some natural laws.” But God disengaged Himself. There is a God who made it, but He disengaged Himself.

Unitarianism taught that there was only one God and that Jesus Christ was not God. Robinson argued against that. It’s interesting that these two philosophies became very popular in the evangelical Baptist churches. This just tells you that if a church is solid and orthodox, that doesn’t mean it can’t be undermined.

In 1776 he wrote *A Plea for the Divinity of Our Lord Jesus Christ to the Dissenters of the Baptists at Cambridge*. So he was actually writing pleas to them to hold on to the divinity of Jesus Christ.

It was so popular that he was approached by the Church of England and asked to become a pastor in that church. That’s how good the book was. He also at that same time became very involved as a civil libertarian for the rights of the Dissenters and Baptists who were not part of the Church of England. They did not have rights for a while. Dissenters, who were like Baptists, could not vote or hold office. He also became very involved in the anti-slavery movement—the Abolitionist movement which William Wilberforce headed and through which John Newton was converted, who wrote “Amazing Grace.” He was also very supportive of the American and French revolutions.

So he was an amazing preacher, an amazing person who I think was in turmoil. At age 65 he became friends with Joseph Priestley. And Joseph Priestley was the discoverer of oxygen, and one of the early researchers into electricity. If you read about chemistry and science the name Priestley is huge.

But Priestley was also the pastor of a Unitarian church. And Robert Robinson went and preached two sermons at that church. And because of that a lot of people, as I researched this, said that Robinson lost his faith. In fact, there is a story that’s attributed to Robinson in which a woman was in a coach. They’re going someplace, and she’s singing this hymn “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” And Robinson is an old man at this time and says, “Oh, I wish I had the faith I used to have. I don’t believe that anymore.”

But you’ll find that. You read books about hymns and you’ll find this story repeated. But there is no ascription to it. Nobody knows where the story came from. I doubt that the story is real. But three days after he preached at Priestley’s church he died unexpectedly.

And so the Unitarians made a big deal about this and they said, “Well look, Robinson converted. He became a Unitarian at the end of his life.” I don’t think that happened at all.

I was reading a professor from Regent University in Vancouver. And that was the same university where J. I. Packer taught. And he wrote a whole story about this hymn on the Desiring God website, which is John Piper’s website. And at the end of the article he wrote this about Hymn and about Robinson; I thought it was good.

“We should remember with some sympathy that Robinson was, late in life, a broken man. By 1790—the year he died—he was physically and mentally ill. His sermons became incomprehensible, and some described him as insane. He never recovered from the death of his

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17-year-old daughter three years previously. He faced a financial crisis that could have sent him to debtor's prison. And many of his friends had turned against him. Thinking of his suffering at this distance today, the final verse of his great hymn takes on more poignancy.”

The verse isn't sung much, and we're not going to sing it today. But this is the final verse that he wrote. But we can perhaps imagine Robinson at the end singing, trusting as we all must in Christ's boundless grace as the ultimate hope in the face of death. And the final verse which we're not going to sing goes like this:

*“O that day, when freed from sinning,
I shall see Thy lovely face.
Cloth-ed then in blood-washed linen,
How I'll sing Thy sovereign grace!
Come, my Lord; no longer tarry;
Take my ransomed soul away.
Send Thine angels, now to carry
Me to realms of endless day.”*

So this is an interesting fellow. He's a very interesting fellow, hard to put your finger on. And there's a lot of controversy about him. But I believe he died in the faith of Christ. Well let's look at the verses, and then we'll sing it.

*“Come Thou Fount of every blessing;
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace.
Streams of mercy never ceasing
Call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet,
Sung by flaming tongues above.
Praise the mount; I'm fixed upon it,
Mount of God's unchanging love.”*

It says, “Sung by flaming tongues above.” Teach me a song taught by flaming tongues above. What does that make you think of?

Mike Davis: The Holy Spirit.

Ted: Yes, the day of Pentecost. Let the Holy Spirit touch my heart and change it, and teach me a song. Next verse:

Here I raise my Ebenezer.” That comes from 1 Samuel the 7th chapter. And it talks about the raising of a memorial that God was there with us; He was present. This will remind us of God's presence.

*“Here I raise my Ebenezer;
Hither by Thy help I've come.
And I hope by Thy good pleasure
Safely to arrive at home.
Jesus sought me when a stranger,
Wandering from the fold of God.
He to rescue me from danger
Interposed His precious blood.”*

Any thoughts there? It's by God's good pleasure that we safely arrive at home.

*“Jesus sought me when a stranger,
Wondering from the fold of God.*

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*He to rescue me from danger
Interposed His precious blood.”*

I think these are all verses about us growing in our life of faith. And finally that great final third verse, although it wasn't his final verse:

*“Oh to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let Thy grace now, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it;
Prone to leave the God I love.
Here's my heart; oh take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.”*

Don Maurer: Ted, in the first verse when he says, “Praise the mount, is it Mount Zion?

Ted: Yes, I think that's exactly what he's talking about. God brought Israel to Sinai, and all the elders and Moses went up along with Aaron to the mount. And that's the mount we're fixed upon; it's Mount Zion for us, Mount Sinai for Israel.

Don: Yes. Go ahead. Yes?

Gary: I just wanted to say that the second verse is reminiscent of the lost sheep, where it talks about wandering from the fold.

Ted: Yeah.

*“Jesus sought me when a stranger,
Wandering from the fold of God.”*

I like this hymn because it's very sovereign grace oriented. It's about God's initiative. Jesus sought me. He sought me; I didn't seek Him. He sought me when I was a stranger wandering. He to rescue me from danger, He interposed His precious blood.

And then I'm constrained as a great debtor. What does that mean?

*“Oh to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be.”*

To constrain means to hold something in—to hold on to it, to hold it tight. Why are we constrained by grace?

Don Maurer: If it were up to us, we'd be toast in a second.

Ted: We'd be gone forever. We'd be like sheep over the cliff, and dead. Yes?

Gary: We've been bought with a price.

Ted: We have been bought with a price. We owe a great debt to God—a great debt.

*“Let Thy grace now, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.”*

“Prone to wander, Lord; I feel it.” That's me! *“Prone to leave the God I love.”* I remember what Bruce used to say. Every time we sin we're telling God we don't love Him. Oh wow; I hated to hear that. I don't know if that's completely theologically correct. But I was always touched when Bruce would say that.

*“Prone to leave the God I love.
Here's my heart. Oh take and seal it;
Seal it for Thy courts above.”*

Any other thoughts on that great hymn? We're not going to get to Isaac Watts' hymn, “O God, Our Help In Ages Past”; we'll finish up with this one. *(The men sing)*

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Ted: Very good. It’s interesting. As we were singing that—“*Here I raise my Ebenezer*”— basically the Ebenezer was that monument that Israel could point to and say, “The Lord met us here; this is where we met the Lord.” And Jordan, thinking about your comments about not having an experience, there was something like that which you could point to. Did I get that right?

Jordan: Like the Damascus Road.

Ted: Yeah, like the Damascus Road. And many point to that as their Ebenezer. You know, that is where God met me. But in fact that is even inadequate, isn’t it? Because the only real Ebenezer we have is Jesus Christ. That’s the mark where God met us. God met us in Jesus Christ on the road of wandering, like a wandering sheep and like a stranger.

Well, that’s it for today. Let me know what you think and whether I should do it. I’m going to keep teaching this way about hymns. If that’s not something you want, please let me know. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Brave Men: Amen. (*Applause*)