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Introductions to the hymns by Rev. Peter Cornick

Where shall my wondering soul begin?

Charles Wesley wrote this hymn following his conversion experience on 21st May, 1738. Both he and brother John had felt stirred by the Spirit at a similar time; John's conversion at Aldersgate Street on 24th May, 1738, is well documented, but what happened to Charles?

Charles was staying with John Bray, who he wrote, was a 'poor ignorant mechanic, who knows nothing by Christ, yet, by knowing him, knows and discerns all things.' Charles had been ill and had been hoping for some reassurance of God's love. In a way, Charles felt he deserved God's love, 'because' he wrote 'I have used my best endeavours to serve God.' Charles was to learn that 'endeavour' was not the way to discover God's love.

On the evening of the 21st May, John Bray's sister brought this message to Charles: "In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, arise and believe, and thou shalt be healed of all thy infirmities". Perhaps it was this unexpected and simple gift of grace that stirred Charles' heart. He wrote: 'I now found myself at peace with God and rejoiced in hope of loving Christ.'

This conversion experience is apparent in verse 2; the importance of Christian experience is found as Charles feels his sins forgiven; that he should be 'a child of God' is an 'antepast', or foretaste, of heaven. This experience is something to proclaim – quite a new and controversial thought at the time. So, at the end of verse 3, Charles asks a question paraphrasing Psalm 40:10, 'Shall I, the hallowed cross to shun, refuse his righteousness to impart by hiding it within my heart? The answer is clearly, this is not something to hide. Notice how in verse 4, God's love to all is emphasized – whether outcasts, harlots, publicans and thieves. The Wesleys had been influenced by Arminian theology – God's grace available for all, but notice too, that one has to accept in that theology, one's sin and total need of grace. Verse 5 picks this theme up graphically.

The 'brand plucked from eternal fire' in verse 1 refers to the fire at the Wesley's home in 1709, probably an act of arson. Brother John famously quotes Zechariah 3:2, as he feels literally saved for a higher purpose.

Charles apparently sang this hymns with John on the 24th May, when John Wesley got home from Aldersgate Street, But throughout the hymn, we see Charles' genuine amazement, that Christ has found him. And this has nothing to do with his endeavor, and everything to do with God's grace.

How do thy mercies close me round

This is really an evening hymn. Based on Psalm 4, it reminds us first of God being present – around us – to blush in all things, means to delight in the good things God offers. Then, a strange line, 'The servant is above his Lord.' Can we really be above Jesus?

Luke 6: 40 says: 'A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher.

So, perhaps this line is, oddly, Wesley aware of Jesus' words, but exclaiming that he feels Christ so close, he rather feels 'above' Christ.

If Wesley was getting above his station, the suffering of Christ brings him back to reality. Christ's admission that he had nowhere to lay his head, contrasts with the security of Psalm 4. In verse 3:

Yea, He Himself becomes my guard;
He smooths my bed, and gives me sleep.

Compare Psalm 4.8:

I will both lie down and sleep in peace;
for you alone, O LORD, make me lie down in safety.

God of all redeeming grace

Having confessed our sins, this hymn invites us to offer a new life to God, who had offered to us 'redeeming grace' and 'pardoning love.' Verse 1 closes by affirming that we live for Christ alone – echoing Paul's words in Romans 14:

⁷We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

The hymn was originally written for Wesley's collection, *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*, 1745.

Verse 2, 'Holiness unto the Lord' leads us to a fascinating background. John Wesley had written that:

all which we are, which we can give, even to the last vessel in our houses, is made holy in this one consecration.

It is a very down to earth offering of our lives to God – even the pots and pans – in other words, all that we are or do is to be holy.

O that ev'ry work and word
Might proclaim how good thou art:

But it gets even more down to earth; John Wesley writes:

In that day shall be upon the very bridles of the horses, 'Holiness unto the Lord'!

From where does this theology of 'holiness unto the Lord' arising from the very stuff of our lives come? Zechariah 14:20.

²⁰On that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, 'Holy to the LORD.'
And the cooking-pots in the house of the LORD shall be as holy as the bowls in front of the altar.

Spirit of truth essential God

Charles Wesley is aware of one of John Milton's objectives as he set out to write *Paradise lost*; to 'justify the ways of God to man.' And this is what the hymn attempts to do, particularly in relation to the scriptures.

2 Timothy 3: 16 is a cornerstone where 'All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness'. You see the inspired nature of scripture by God in verse 2. The 'essential God,' or the 'Spirit of truth', from 1 John

4:6, is the divine interpreter who 'the scriptures to our hearts apply'. Writing the word on our hearts might reflect Jeremiah 31:31, which we know from the covenant service:

'I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts'.

The same phrase is found in the prayer:

Lord have mercy upon us, and incline our hearts to keep this law.

So, we will hear the scripture, and then, sing this hymn as a response, praying that the triune God, the will be interpreter.

God of unexampled grace

How this missed the cut for *Singing the Faith* is beyond me! It is quite simply, a poem which causes us to stop and gaze at the passion. The mysterious tree is the cross, on which Christ is crucified – but why? What hast thou done? It is Christ's innocence which heightens the mystery of his cruel death.

George Herbert wrote a poem called 'The Sacrifice', part of 'The Temple.' In it, there was a recurring refrain: 'Was ever grief like mine?' Wesley changes this to 'Was never love like thine.'

It is the last line which stands out. Theologians had long struggled to define God as suffering in any way. It seemed impossible that God could, or would intentionally, suffer. The 20th century German theologian Jurgen Moltmann, defined God as suffering in the context of the concentration camps and horrors of war. In the suffering, God was to be found. Two centuries before, Charles Wesley states clearly a theology of the passion. Christ is God. And on the cross, God experiences the worst of human suffering.

What shall we offer our good Lord

This is a translation by John Wesley of a hymn written by August Spangenberg. Spangenberg and Wesley had met in Georgia. Spangenberg had, by the 1730s become a Moravian and ended up as a Moravian Bishop in north America. You may remember, it was a group of Moravians who so impressed Wesley by their calm faith, when both he and they, were in the eye of a storm at sea, an episode which in part, led to John's Aldersgate conversion.

The hymn was first entitled, 'God's husbandry', translating it from the German. Verse 1 is based on Psalm 116 and is a prayer of thanksgiving. Verse 4 is clearly referencing the parable of the sower, and the spreading of the gospel, Mark 16: 15:

And he said to them, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.

O for a thousand tongues to sing

"If I had a thousand tongues, I would praise Christ with them all." So wrote Peter Bohler, another Moravian, and friend of Wesley. There was a German hymn of a similar title, and the scripture inspiring it, is probably Revelation 5:11

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands.

The hymn is based loosely around the familiar passage from Philippians 2; 'assist me to proclaim ... the honours of thy name,' might refer to Philippians famous every tongue

confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord. Verse 7 suggests the obedience to death on the cross of Philippians. 'Jesus – the name that charms our fears' reminds us of the:

name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend.

Verse 6, which may cause modern ears some difficulties, arises from Isaiah 35:6:

*then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.*

Verse 4, line 1, looks complicated. There seems to be a breaking of the power of sin, which has already been cancelled, which would make no sense. In fact, it is a poetic device – basically, using two words, 'breaks' and 'cancelled' to emphasise sin being overcome.

When the hymn first appeared, it was entitled, 'For the anniversary day of one's conversion.' So as we sing, perhaps we too, might recall our call to Christ.

Bibliography

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