

TAKING A FRESH LOOK AT SOME POPULAR HYMNS OF THE FAITH

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The Psalms were originally set to music and sung in the temple as part of the worship there. God delights in believers singing praises to Him. The Lord Jesus and His disciples sang a hymn in the Upper Room before they went to the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt 26:30). When the apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesian believers about being filled with the Spirit he spoke of “speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Eph 5:19). There can be no question but that we as believers should sing to God as part of our regular worship.

There can be a question, however, as to *what* we should sing. In this article I am examining some beloved hymns. My purpose is not to hinder our appreciation of these hymns, but to enhance it. The intent of this article is to challenge each of us to consider if what we are singing is truly honoring to God. And if not, what should we do?

SELECTED HYMNS

*Victory in Jesus*¹

Victory in Jesus is a great hymn. Yet the words, “Then I repented of my sins and won the victory,” are confusing.

The first verse, in which this line appears, concerns how a person comes to be born again. It reads:

I heard an old, old story, how a Savior came from glory,
How He gave His life on Calvary to save a wretch like me:
I heard about His groaning, of His precious blood’s atoning,
Then I repented of my sins and won the victory.

That second line speaks of Jesus who “gave His life on Calvary to

¹ Hymn #473 in *The Hymnal for Worship & Celebration* (Waco, TX: Word Music, 1986). All hymns cited in this article are taken from this hymnal.

save a wretch like me.” The next makes clear that this concerns eternal salvation: “I heard about His groaning, of His precious blood’s atoning.” Then comes the line meant to indicate what we must do to have eternal salvation: “Then I repented of my sins and won the victory.”

The “victory in Jesus” spoken of is the gaining of eternal life. While it is true that repentance may precede faith, repenting *of one’s sins* is not a condition of eternal life.²

There is one other possible reference to what we must do to be saved in verse two:

I heard about His healing, of His cleansing pow’r revealing,
How He made the lame to walk again and caused the blind to see;
And then I cried, “Dear Jesus, come and heal my broken spirit.”
And somehow Jesus came and bro’t to me the victory.

Does that verse concern justification? Or does it express deliverance from problems in this life? The latter is most certainly the case. And the third line in that verse seems to suggest that prayer is the means by which we can gain God’s healing of our damaged psyches.

So, this hymn says nothing about believing. The only thing it mentions in terms of what we must do to be saved is repenting of our sins.

Whenever we sing this song at church, I substitute the words “Then *I believed in the Lord...*” for “Then *I repented of my sins...*” A person could also sing, “Then *I trusted in the Lord* and won the victory.”

To God Be the Glory³

One of the great hymns of the faith is *To God Be the Glory*.

Sadly one little word in this fine hymn makes it a bit misleading. Take a close look at the second verse:

O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood!
To every believer the promise of God;
The vilest offender who truly believes,
That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

² I realize some Free Grace people define repentance as a change of mind about Christ and see it as a synonym for faith. However, notice that this doesn’t just speak of repenting, but of repenting *of my sins*. Unless a person understood this to mean something like, “Then I recognized I was a sinner in need of salvation,” this is clearly not a condition of eternal life.

³ Ibid. Hymn #66.

⁴ Ibid. Hymn #239.

Instead of the simple and biblically accurate “the vilest offender who *simply* believes,” the third line reads, “The vilest offender who *truly* believes.” Of course, Fanny Crosby, the lyricist, was not writing in a time of great gospel debate. If she were, I believe she would have chosen a different word than *truly*. In today’s climate of *true* versus *false* faith, this is a very unfortunate choice.

*Jesus Is Coming Again*⁴

When I racewalked the Dallas White Rock Marathon in December of 1998, I chose the chorus of this hymn, *Jesus Is Coming Again*, to sing from time to time over the five and one half hours I was on the course. (Yes, I did finish!)

Coming again, Coming again;
 May be morning, may be noon, May be evening it may be soon!
 Coming again, Coming again;
 O what a wonderful day it will be—Jesus is coming again!

The third verse in this hymn is potentially confusing:

Standing before Him at last,
 Trial and trouble all past,
 Crowns at His feet we will cast—
 Jesus is coming again!

The reference to casting crowns at the feet of the Lord is based on an improper understanding of Rev 4:9-11, which reads:

Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, *and cast their crowns before the throne*, saying:

“You are worthy, O Lord,
 To receive glory and honor and power;
 For You created all things,
 And by Your will they exist
 and were created.”

⁵ It is possible, of course, to conclude that believers will give up their

Commonly the reference to crown casting is understood to mean that at the Judgment Seat of Christ believers will give back the crowns they receive. They will place them at the feet of Jesus, before His throne. These crowns, representing all rewards given, will return to their rightful owner. Thus no believer will have any more glory, honor, or power in the millennial or eternal kingdom than any other believer will.⁵

That understanding is not suggested by the Bible verses. Notice first of all the word *whenever*. This is a drama that takes place *repeatedly*. It is not a one-time event. There is no hint here that one of the times it occurs is at the Judgment Seat of Christ. However, the fact that it is a repeated event shows that the crowns are not permanently given away. They are given back to the possessors, later to be placed at Jesus' feet again.

Notice too the ones who are doing the casting: "the twenty-four elders." And who are they? In Rev 7:11 they are listed in the midst of angels and the four living creatures: "All the angels stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, and fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God." The four living creatures are angelic beings. So, obviously, are the angels. Thus it is extremely likely that the twenty-four elders are as well.

Why *twenty-four* elders? I believe it is because they represent Israel with its twelve tribes, and the church with its twelve apostles.⁶ Therefore whenever they cast their crowns at Jesus' feet, they symbolically are showing that all glory, honor, and power is derived from Him. Thus while *we* won't be doing the crown casting, our sentiments will certainly be reflected in the words and actions of the twenty-four elders.

Clearly from many passages (e.g., Matt 6:19-21; 2 Tim 2:12; Rev 2:17, 26) some believers will have treasure, rulership, and other rewards, and some will not. The crown casting of Rev 4:9-11 does not change that.

crowns and yet retain their authority, treasure, etc. However, very few people who believe we will give back our crowns hold that view so I have stated the conclusion to which *most* people who hold this view come.

⁶There is nothing inherent in this scene to exclude the participants from being human beings, other than the eternal nature of the event. The reason I point out that these are angelic beings is because Scripture indicates they are, not because human beings couldn't do it.

⁷Ibid. Hymn #188.

Therefore, when we sing the line “crowns at His feet *we will cast*,” I suggest we realize that we won’t be giving back our rewards. However, the point is, we should be thinking when we see this line that the Lord Jesus is the One from whom all glory, honor, and power flow. He is the worthy One. We will only share those things because He has graciously chosen to reward His children for their service.

*At the Cross*⁷

Another wonderful hymn is *At the Cross*. The words of the song give an outstanding portrayal of the substitutionary death of Christ on the cross. They speak of the blood of Christ, of His death, His love, our sinfulness, and the substitutionary nature of the cross. The last verse has a terrific statement of the freeness of the gospel:

But drops of grief can ne’er repay
The debt of love I owe:
Here, Lord, I give myself away—
‘Tis all that I can do!

That is a wonderful statement of the gratitude we should feel for what Christ did for us on the cross.

The chorus, however, ends with a discomfiting statement about being happy all day long:

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!

Of course, not all believers are always “happy all the day!” The reception of eternal life does not eliminate all problems in this life. Freedom from pain is yet future for the believer (Rev 21:4).

But what does the hymn mean by the words, “And now I am happy all the day”? I think it probably means something like this: “And now I am joyful whenever I focus my attention on the love of God reflected in Christ’s death on the cross for me.” Happiness is dependent on circumstances. Joyfulness is not. A believer can be in the midst of great grief and yet be joyful. Our faith should be the foundation of a stable life that can withstand great trials. Whether we do withstand those trials

⁸ Ibid. Hymn #542.

properly, however, depends on our spiritual strength. Have we grown strong in the faith by regular feeding on God's Word? Do we regularly focus on the Lord Jesus? Have we fallen deeply in love with Him? We can indeed be joyful all day long if our focus is on our blessed Savior.

When We All Get to Heaven⁸

When We All Get to Heaven is another splendid hymn. It speaks of God's mercy and grace and challenges us to "be true and faithful, trusting, serving every day" in light of our soon entrance into His presence.

However, the chorus contains a potentially deceptive statement: "When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be!" All believers will indeed enjoy the kingdom forever (which, by the way, will be on the new earth, not in heaven as the hymn implies; see Rev 21:1-3ff.). However, the focus of these words is on our first glimpse of Him ("Just one glimpse of Him in glory will the toils of life repay") suggesting that all believers will be rejoicing upon seeing Christ.

But is that true? Will *all* believers consider the Rapture "a day of rejoicing"? For the overcoming believer rejoicing is certain. But not for the faithless believer (2 Tim 2:12-13).

John presents his believing readers with two options:

And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming (1 John 2:28).

Some believers will have confidence when they see Christ. Some will have shame!

We see the same thing in many of the parables of the Lord. Some will hear His "Well done, good servant" (Luke 19:17). Some will hear, "You wicked servant" (Luke 19:22; compare Matt 24:45-51; 25:14-30.)

When we sing this chorus, we should realize that meeting the Lord will be a day of rejoicing only if we have endured in our profession of faith in Christ. Make no mistake about what I'm suggesting here. I'm not saying that any believer will be disappointed to be with the Lord. However, the unfaithful believer will have some initial shame and tears. Though it will be short lived, it will be real.

We should let this hymn remind us of our need to focus on Christ's soon return so that indeed it will be a day of rejoicing for us.

ADVICE TO WORSHIP LEADERS

HYMNS THAT AREN'T COPYRIGHTED

Since uncopyrighted hymns are now public domain, you are free to change the inaccurate words and either put the new words on overheads or else print out the new words and put them in the bulletin.

I suggest the worship leader indicate that this is a change from the way the song was originally written. Taking a moment to explain why the word or phrase is being changed might be helpful. This serves several purposes. It glorifies God by singing words that are theologically accurate. It educates believers and unbelievers. And it reminds all to be thoughtful of the words they are singing. Words matter.

HYMNS THAT ARE COPYRIGHTED

There are definite restrictions on what a church can do with a song that is copyrighted. It should be noted that for a church to duplicate a copyrighted piece of music, it must first receive approval to do so. Further, if a church wished to change the wording of the song before duplication, it would need to receive permission from the publisher. However, churches are free *to sing* different words, though even here it would be good to request permission from the publisher. The worship leader has the following options:

- Point out the confusing line and explain why it is misleading.
- Suggest that the congregation sing alternate words in place of the confusing words.
- Choose to skip that entire verse (with or without pointing out why).

ADVICE TO WORSHIPPERS

If you find songs that are basically sound but which contain some unbiblical elements, first, go to your church's worship leader(s) and discuss your concern and the question of what should be done. If they do not agree that something must be done in such cases, then there is no point in bringing up specifics. Then the matter becomes one for the leadership board of the church.

While people might disagree on what is significant enough to be offensive, all boards should agree that if some words are clearly unbiblical then something should be done.

Second, once you find agreement on the general issue, then seek to get a committee in place that evaluates the songs you sing each week. This could be done on a week by week basis. Or, songs that are regularly sung could be evaluated all at once. In addition, involve the congregation in finding lines in songs that are unbiblical.

If you find that some of the board is not bothered by lyrics that suggest Lordship Salvation, for example, then that brings up the opportunity to discuss the gospel with the board. Possibly the board is not united on the issue. Sadly many churches today have some leaders who are Free Grace and some which are Lordship.

Third, if the church doesn't respond to your concerns about misleading lyrics, you must decide what you will do. If the church is Free Grace and simply sings some songs with minor points of confusion, then you could choose the following options:

- Simply sing nothing when you come to the offending word or words.
- Change the words yourself, singing low enough that you don't cause a disturbance.
- Sing the offending words, but think about what they should mean.

Personally I have trouble with the last option, since I am singing something which is wrong in its context. I just can't make myself sing, "Then I repented of my sins and won the victory." I can sing, however, about us casting our crowns at His feet, even though I don't believe that the Scriptures teach we will do that, since that is not a gospel issue and it does not require a rejection of eternal rewards either.

The bottom line is that worship is to be in spirit and in truth. We are not merely to sound good. We are to think about what we are singing. Our songs are to be directed to God in praise. Our minds must be in gear to do this. So think when you sing!