

# “The Song and the Story”

## *A Look at the Stories Behind Some Favourite Christian Songs*

July 23, 2017

Wall Street United Church

### **JESUS KEEP ME NEAR THE CROSS - by Fanny Crosby**

Francis Jane Crosby wrote more than 9,000 hymns, some of which are among the most popular in every Christian denomination. And, for most people, the most remarkable thing about her was that she had done so in spite of her blindness.

Born in Putnam County, New York, Crosby became ill within two months. Unfortunately, the family doctor was away, and another man—pretending to be a certified doctor—treated her by prescribing hot mustard poultices to be applied to her eyes. She recovered from her illness, but the treatment left her blind. When the doctor was revealed to be a quack, he disappeared. A few months later, Crosby's father died. Her mother was forced to find work as a maid to support the family, and Fanny was mostly raised by her Christian grandmother.

She loved poetry. She also zealously memorized the Bible. Memorizing five chapters a week, even as a child she could recite the Pentateuch, the Gospels, Proverbs, the Song of Solomon, and many Psalms, chapter and verse.

Her mother's hard work paid off. Shortly before her fifteenth birthday, Crosby was sent to the recently founded New York Institute for the Blind, which would be her home for 23 years: 12 as a student, 11 as a teacher.

It was the work of a traveling phrenologist (one who studies the shape and irregularities of the skull for insights into character and mental capacity) that ignited her passion. Though his study is now the ridicule of science, the phrenologist's words were to prove prophetic: "Here is a poetess. Give her every possible encouragement. Read the best books to her and teach her the finest that is in poetry. You will hear from this young lady someday."

Another member of the institute, former pupil Alexander van Alstine, married Crosby in 1858. Considered one of New York's best organists, he wrote the music to many of Crosby's hymns. Crosby herself put music to only a few of hers, though she played harp, piano, guitar, and other instruments. More often, musicians came to her for lyrics. For example, one day musician William Doane dropped by her home for a surprise visit, begging her to put some words to a tune he had recently written and which

he was to perform at an upcoming Sunday School convention. The only problem was that his train to the convention was leaving in 35 minutes. He sat at the piano and played the tune.

"Your music says, 'Safe in the Arms of Jesus,'" Crosby said, scribbling out the hymn's words immediately. "Read it on the train and hurry. You don't want to be late!" The hymn became one of Crosby's most famous.

She was under contract to submit three hymns a week to her publisher and often wrote six or seven a day (for a dollar or two each!) Many became incredibly popular. When Dwight Moody and Ira Sankey began to use them in their crusades, they received even more attention. Among them are "Blessed Assurance"; "All the Way My Saviour Leads Me"; "To God Be the Glory"; "Pass Me Not, O Gentle Saviour"; "Safe in the Arms of Jesus"; "Rescue the Perishing"; and "Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross."

One well-meaning preacher said to her: **"I think it is a great pity that the Master did not give you sight when he showered so many other gifts upon you"**. Fanny Crosby responded at once: **"Do you know that if at birth I had been able to make one petition, it would have been that I was born blind?"** said the poet. **"Because when I get to heaven, the first face that shall ever gladden my sight will be that of my Saviour."**

### **"O MY SOUL" by Casting Crowns**

Mark Hall, the lead singer of the popular Christian band, *Casting Crowns*, speaks out about his cancer diagnosis and the important lesson he learned about God during the ordeal.

"It was definitely out of nowhere, I went to the doctor to be checked for acid reflux. He was just doing a scan to see if I had ulcers or anything else going on down there, and then, by accident, saw a tumour in my kidney."

Hall said it was Divine intervention that the doctor discovered the tumour. It was still fully encased, meaning it had not spread to the kidney surrounding it. Still, according to *Deseret News*, the cancer was a nuclear level 3 cell type, and the potential was high that it would grow aggressively.



"It really rocked me," he said. "I was going through feelings and doubts and fear and worry ... my feelings were all over the map."

"When you're the youth pastor, you're the guy who helps everybody else through their storm. And now, suddenly, I'm in the middle of my own," he said. "It was definitely a shock." However, his faith in Jesus Christ sustained him.

"My feelings kept slamming up against something solid in me, and that was the roots of my faith," Hall said. Hall said one central theme surfaced in his heart and mind: "God is who He said He is." Realizing that enabled him to concentrate on his faith during the times of uncertainty. Hall also said that one Scripture resonated inside: *"Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?" (Psalm 42:5)*

"The night I found out I sat down at the piano and wrote a song called, 'Oh My Soul' around that Scripture, because that's kind of where I was living at the moment," he said.

Eventually, doctors were able to remove his kidney, and the cancer did not spread. A grateful Hall and his family call it a miracle. The singer/pastor hopes his story and music will encourage people to remember the message that he held onto during the storm, "that God is who He says He is—and we can trust Him."

*(If you have access to Internet check this link)*

<http://freeccm.com/2017/04/25/behind-the-song-casting-crowns-share-the-heart-behind-their-single-oh-my-soul/>

### **“BECAUSE HE LIVES”—Bill & Gloria Gaither – Cathie Kelso**

Now for the story behind “Because He Lives,” In the late 1960s, (on New Year’s Eve) while expecting their third child, Bill and Gloria Gaither were going through a rather anxious time in their lives.

To make a long story short – you could say they were experiencing the 60’s version of how we all feel today in the 2017’s....the circumstances are much the same now...

Wondering how they could bring another child into this scary and troubled world...filled with drug abuse, racial tensions, terror in the name of religion...

Then suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, Gloria Gaither was filled with a gentle, calming peace. It was as if her heavenly Father, like an attentive mother bending over her baby, saw his child and came to her rescue. The panic gave way to calmness and an assurance that only the Lord can impart. At that moment she just knew that the future would be fine, left in God’s hands.

Shortly after their baby was born, and remembering the peace they had felt and focusing on Christ’s resurrection, with all of its power and it’s

affirmation of life; they were able to put aside their fear about the present circumstances and they wrote this song. We are reminded that God holds the future right in his hands and makes life worth living for all who trust in him.

“... because I live, you will live also.” — John 14:19

When my Father died, I struggled to find the right songs to sing at his funeral. There were the traditional funeral songs used at my grandparents' and even my mothers' funerals ... like 'In the Garden' and 'The Old Rugged Cross', but these just didn't fit my Dad.

My Dad went to church all his life but he wasn't one to talk about his faith. I know he believed, but he was very private about it. I remember asking him once if he wanted prayer for an eye surgery he was going to have and he just waved me off and said 'oh never mind'.

One thing I remember is how my Dad loved the Gaithers. He would faithfully watch on Public TV every Friday night and other times when they came on. We went to Toronto and Ottawa to Gaither Homecoming events. My Dad didn't talk about his faith but his faith was evident when songs like Because He Lives were sung. The tears would stream down his face. (Guess I get my emotions from my Dad!) So 'Because He Lives' was sung for my Dad at his funeral. It was a perfect fit for him.

Thank you God for the gift of music and for the way you inspire songs of hope and encouragement to help us through the sometimes scary times of life. Thank you God that because you live we can face tomorrow.....thank you God for places like Wall Street United Church where we can come to be inspired through the Word and through music. May we give to this church from our hearts so it can be here for many years to come as a beacon of light on the darkest of days.

## **PRECIOUS LORD TAKE MY HAND – Tommy Dorsey —**

**Rev. Alan Bennett**

*“For I, the Lord your God, will hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, “Do not fear, I will help you.” Isaiah 41:13*

On July 1, 1899, Thomas Andrew Dorsey was born in Villa Rica, Georgia. That's a small town 40 miles west of Atlanta. Tommy was one of seven brothers and sisters. He spent much of his early years around the church. His father was a Baptist preacher, and his mother was the Church organist. She introduced young Tommy to the piano when he was just 7 years old. From the beginning it was clear that he was a natural. By the time he was in his teens he had become a superb pianist.

He was a young man in the 1920s when Blues music was sweeping the south. Dorsey loved it and began a career as a blues musician. He billed himself as Georgia Tom. Singing Blues took him into the night clubs of Atlanta and eventually to the south side of Chicago where all the jazz clubs were. It was in the night clubs that he saw the misery and devastation of alcoholism. Tired of night clubs, he joined the Pilgrim Baptist Church in Chicago where he directed several choirs from 1932-1978. Over time he wrote more than 300 Christian songs. They were different. Dorsey's gospel music combined Christian lyrics with jazz rhythms and blues. They had a swing to them. His most famous song was "Precious Lord Take my Hand."

How famous? — "Precious Lord" has been recorded and sung by Albertina Walker, Elvis Presley, Mahalia Jackson, Aretha Franklin, B. B. King, Jim Reeves, Roy Rogers, Tennessee Ernie Ford, and Johnny Cash, just to name a few. It was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s favourite gospel song. He had it sung at the rally in Memphis the night before he was assassinated. A week later it was sung at his funeral by Mahalia Jackson. It was a favourite of President Lyndon B. Johnson, and was sung at his funeral.

So what is the story behind this song? In 1932, Tommy's young wife, Nettie, was 9 months pregnant and about to give birth to their first child. The problem was that Tommy had been booked to play a gig in St. Louis. He was torn. It was the depths of the depression and they desperately needed the money, but he didn't want to leave her. It was Nettie who persuaded him to go. So alone in his Model A Ford, Tommy Dorsey drove to St. Louis.

During the first night of the event, while he was still on the platform, a telegram was handed to him. The message was that his wife had died giving birth to a son. He rushed back to Chicago that night. When he arrived he found that the baby boy had also died. He buried his wife and his little boy in the same casket.

In the weeks that followed, Tommy Dorsey slid into a deep depression. He was overwhelmed with grief. At some point in the midst of his pain he visited a good friend, a college teacher - professor Frye. They went into one of the college music rooms. Tommy sat down at the piano and began to improvise. He found himself playing a melody that he had never played before.

At first he kept singing, 'Blessed Lord, blessed Lord, blessed Lord.' It was his friend who walked over and said, 'Why don't you make that 'precious Lord?' He did, and began to sing,

*"Precious Lord, take my hand, Lead me on, help me stand.*

*I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.  
Through the storm, through the night, Lead me on to the light;  
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.”*

This beautiful song has been translated into more than 30 languages and is loved by all who hear it. It is one I love to play on my trumpet. Let's stand together and sing it.

**"AMAZING GRACE"** written in 1779 by John Newton (1725–1807).

Newton wrote the words from personal experience. He grew up without any particular religious conviction, but his life's path was formed by a variety of twists and hardships and coincidences, most of these because of his own rebellious behavior. He was pressed (conscripted) into service in the Royal Navy, and after leaving the service, he became involved in the Atlantic slave trade. In the song Newton describes himself as a wretch, and he really was! Newton often openly mocked the captain by creating obscene poems and songs about him that became so popular the crew began to join in. He entered into disagreements with several colleagues that resulted in his being starved almost to death, imprisoned while at sea and chained like the slaves they carried, then outright enslaved and forced to work on a plantation in Sierra Leone. His father found him and arranged for him to be brought home.

While aboard the ship *Greyhound*, Newton gained notoriety for being one of the most profane men the captain had ever met. In a culture where sailors commonly used oaths and swore, Newton was admonished several times for not only using the worst words the captain had ever heard, but creating new ones to exceed the limits of verbal debauchery. In March 1748, while the *Greyhound* was in the North Atlantic, a violent storm came upon the ship that was so rough it swept overboard a crew member who was standing where Newton had been moments before. It was a brutal storm and they all expected to be capsized. Newton rested briefly before returning to the deck to steer for the next eleven hours. During his time at the wheel he called out for God's mercy and his spiritual conversion began.

His conversion was inspired by a moment, but it was a gradual process. He continued his slave trading career until 1754 or 1755, when he ended his seafaring altogether and began studying Christian theology, eventually became a clergyman in the Church of England. It was for a sermon that he wrote "Amazing Grace"

He started actively campaigning against the slave trade. He wrote a pamphlet about what he had experienced of the horrors of the Slave Trade

and it spread far and wide, helping enormously William Wilberforce's efforts to bring an end to slavery.

## **AMAZING GRACE, MY CHAINS ARE GONE**

When Chris Tomlin was asked to write an additional part to the hymn "Amazing Grace" -- for the movie "Amazing Grace" (that came out in 2007) about the life of British abolitionist William Wilberforce -- he wasn't so sure he wanted to change the popular song.

"I was completely floored when they asked of all people — me — to write a new verse for one of the most sacred and recognized hymns of all time," Tomlin told Baptist Press. "At first, I was like, 'No, you don't mess with that.' But then, God got me thinking about slavery, and these words just came out --

*"My chains are gone, I've been set free  
My God, my Saviour has ransomed me  
And like a flood His mercy reigns  
Unending love, Amazing grace."*

After doing some research, Tomlin discovered that the hymn had had previous additions. "Even the famous last verse, 'when we've been there 10,000 years' was written nearly 100 years after John Newton wrote the poem," he said.

Tomlin found the original last verse, "the earth shall soon dissolve like snow" and incorporated it into the new rendition of the classic hymn entitled, "Amazing Grace (My Chains are Gone)." Tomlin said, "The hymn '*Amazing Grace*' has inspired generations of believers, and I hope that it continues to live on long after I'm gone." And it has!

We hope you enjoyed this look at what inspired the words of healing and inspiration in these much loved songs.

Thanks be to God! Amen.