

Charles Wesley **(1707-1788)**

Charles Wesley, along with his brother John, helped found the Methodist Church, one of the most dynamic spiritual movements in the eighteenth century. Charles was indispensable to the early growth of Methodism, which began as a renewal within the Church of England and only later became a separate denomination.

Born in Lincolnshire, he attended Westminster School and Christ Church College, Oxford, where he translated many Greek and Latin classics into English verse.

Charles experienced a spiritual awakening in the winter of 1728-29 and as a result became a founding member of what was called derisively "the Holy Club." In fact plenty of derision went around in those days; they (by now John had joined with his brother Charles) were also called "Bible moths" for the way they fed on the Bible as moths on cloth, and "methodists" for their strict methods of study, fasting, communion, and prayer.

In 1735 Charles took Anglican holy orders in order to help his brother John with a mission to Georgia in the new world. It was an unmitigated disaster due in large part to a failed romance John had with Sophia Hopkey – which is a whole story in itself. Both Charles and John returned to England overcome by spiritual despair and physical exhaustion.

Finally in May of 1738 through the ministry of the Moravian Brethren Charles found "peace with God." Three days later John had his famous Aldersgate experience where he felt "my heart strangely warmed." At last the two Wesleys were together, prepared to lead the great Methodist revival that revolutionized English society. Charles was an eloquent preacher, but it was his hymn writing for which we remember him. In reality his hymns - and he wrote more than 8,000 - became a powerful means of evangelism for the growing Methodist movement.

In 1749 Charles married Sarah Gwynne. Out of eight children three survived, two sons and a daughter. Both of the sons, Charles II and Samuel, followed in their father's footsteps, and Samuel was the most prolific in musical composition, fashioning much of his work after J. S. Bach.

In later life Charles had something of a falling-out with John over two matters in particular. Charles disapproved of John's decision to ordain ministers, and he prevented John's marriage to Grace Murray. Still he left the Methodist Church and many others beyond

it with a wealth of hymns and songs that have endured through the ages as timeless treasures.

Among Charles Wesley's best-known hymns are "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," "Christ the Lord is Ris'n Today," and "Jesus, Lover of My Soul." Then there is perhaps the most famous Charles Wesley hymn, "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing," which is the text for our reading selection.

While many know "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing," few know more than five or six of the up to eighteen stanzas. (Stanzas varied somewhat, and an exact number is difficult to determine.) It was written in 1739, one year after Charles Wesley's "second birth," and was as he says, "For the anniversary day of one's conversion."

It is a powerful exercise to sing through all the stanzas of "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing," following its progression and logic and noting how the verses you are familiar with fit into the whole. Prayerfully reading and meditating upon specific stanzas are also of substantial benefit to the soul.

O FOR A THOUSAND TONGUES TO SING

Glory to God, and praise and love
be ever, ever given,
by saints below and saints above,
the church in earth and heaven.

On this glad day the glorious Sun
of Righteousness arose;
on my benighted soul he shone
and filled it with repose.

Sudden expired the legal strife,
'twas then I ceased to grieve;
my second, real, living life
I then began to live.

Then with my heart I first believed,
believed with faith divine,
power with the Holy Ghost received
to call the Savior mine.

I felt my Lord's atoning blood
close to my soul applied;
me, me he loved, the Son of God,
for me, for me he died!

I found and owned his promise true,
ascertained of my part,
my pardon passed in heaven I knew
when written on my heart.

O for a thousand tongues to sing
my great Redeemer's praise!
The glories of my God and King,
the triumphs of his grace.

My gracious Master and my God,
assist me to proclaim,
to spread through all the earth abroad
the honors of thy name.

Jesus! The name that charms our fears,
that bids our sorrows cease;
'tis music in the sinner's ears,
'tis life, and health, and peace!

He breaks the power of canceled sin,
he sets the prisoner free;
his blood can make the foulest clean;
his blood availed for me.

He speaks, and listening to his voice
new life the dead receive;
the mournful, broken hearts rejoice,
the humble poor believe.

Hear him, ye deaf, his praise, ye dumb,
your loosened tongues employ;
ye blind, behold your Savior come,
and leap, ye lame, for joy.

Look unto him, ye nations, own
your God, ye fallen race!
Look, and be saved through faith alone,
be justified by grace!

See all your sins on Jesus laid;
the Lamb of God was slain,
his soul was once an offering made
for every soul of man.

Harlots and publicans and thieves,
in holy triumph join!
Saved is the sinner that believes
from crimes as great as mine.

Murderers and all ye hellish crew,
ye sons of lust and pride,
believe the Savior died for you;
for me the Savior died.

With me, your chief, you then shall know,
shall feel your sins forgiven;
anticipate your heaven below,
and own that love is heaven.

BIBLE SELECTION

Psalm 150 (NRSV)

Praise the Lord!

Praise God in his sanctuary;

praise him in his mighty firmament!

Praise him for his mighty deeds;

praise him according to his
surpassing greatness!

Praise him with trumpet sound;

praise him with lute and harp!

Praise him with tambourine and dance;

praise him with strings and pipe!

Praise him with clanging cymbals;

praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord!

BREATH PRAYER

(Inhale) "Let every single breath ..."

(Exhale) "... praise you LORD."

JOURNAL QUESTIONS

1. In what ways can I enhance the worship experience for those around me?
2. How can I guard against detracting from the worship experience for others? What steps can I take to avoid unnecessary criticism and complaints?
3. Optional Stretch Exercise: Listen, with an intentional mindset of worship, to a recording of great traditional hymns.

REFLECTIONS FROM RICHARD J. FOSTER

I love this Charles Wesley hymn. I love the verses we sing often. I love the verses we never sing. I love the whole of it. I love its strength and power. I love its graced theology. I love that Charles wrote it to celebrate the one-year anniversary of his commitment to Christ.

Two stanzas deserve special comment; one which is sung frequently though seldom fully understood, and the other sung not at all though I wish it were.

The familiar stanza I am referring to is this: "He breaks the power of canceled sin, / he sets the prisoner free; / his blood can make the foulest clean; / his blood availed for me." Wesley understood the matters of the heart so clearly. He knew that it was possible for sin to be canceled out, that is, forgiven, but that it could still have power over a person. He had addressed the matter of forgiveness as canceling out sin in the third stanza when he wrote, "Sudden expired the legal strife... " But the salvation that is in Jesus Christ is more than outward, legal, objective forgiveness. It is more than a right positioning of ourselves before God. Dealing with that matter is vitally important, and it is wonderful that Jesus' death can put us into a right legal standing with God, but there is more to it than that. There is a subjective freeing of the soul from the power of sin's grip. This is what Wesley is celebrating in this stanza. The salvation of Jesus Christ not only cancels out sin's debt but breaks its power over us. That is something worth having a thousand tongues to sing about.

The other stanza I truly love and wish that we would sing is this: "Murderers and all ye hellish crew, / ye sons of lust and pride, / believe the Savior died for you; / for me the Savior died." I love the bluntness of the language – "Murderers... ye hellish crew." The gospel invitation is for just such people. Sometimes it helps us to have language we cannot dress up or make dignified. It is the "hellish crew" for whom Christ died. Then note how Wesley places himself right in the middle of them all. Refusing to stand off from all the "sons of lust and pride," he boldly identifies with the sinfulness of all humanity as he adds "for me the Savior died."

I know I said I would comment on only two stanzas but I must not leave out the final one (in this version, the seventeenth). Wesley, already identified with humanity's sinfulness, now follows the lead of the Apostle Paul by declaring himself the chief of sinners and welcomes all to "feel your sins forgiven." Then he presents us with two of the finest lines in the entire hymn, "anticipate your heaven below, / and own that love is heaven." This is a tremendous understanding of the fact that Jesus' death and resurrection call us into life in the kingdom of God now, a life that is so filled with righteousness and peace and joy that it is a foretaste of the heaven to come. Even more, the supernatural love of God – agape – is so taking over our lives that we can own the fact that this love, multiplied and extended infinitely, is what heaven will be like.

Excerpts taken from *Spiritual Classics: Selected Readings on the Twelve Spiritual Disciplines* (Richard Foster and Emilie Griffin, Editors. HarperCollins, 2000.)