

# The Stories Behind Beloved Songs

Message for Sunday, July 15, 2018  
by Bruce Fraser

## Introduction to song stories

The songs that we sing—have you ever wondered where they come from? Certainly there are times when someone decided to write a song and did just that. Many of the *great* songs, the ones that speak to us powerfully, are often like that because they arose from an experience of deep emotion. Like many of the songs we're going to sing today.

### 1) Amazing Grace

Last week, I talked about making a “U-turn” in life. John Newton certainly did that. He grew up with a Christian mother. She told him about God, taught him to pray, and read much of the Bible to him. But she died when he was only seven years old. Four years later, he went to sea aboard his father's merchant ship. You can well imagine what kind of education he got from the crew on that ship.

While in port one day, he was grabbed by soldiers and forcibly enlisted as a member of the Royal Navy. He didn't take well to the rules and discipline of the navy, and ran away. He was captured, put in irons, and flogged. The captain, realizing this was a hopeless case, agreed with Newton's suggestion to send him to work with a slave trader in western Africa. After suffering much abuse there, his father learned what was happening, and sent someone to get him out of there. He took a job as part of the crew on a ship. That ship was overwhelmed by a mighty storm, and Newton believed he was about to die. By then, he had sunk to such a level of debauchery and sin that he believed God could never forgive him. Remembering some of what he had learned years ago, he prayed and pleaded with God to accept him. He was twenty-two at the time, and he marked the anniversary of that day for the rest of his life.

He became captain of his own slave trading ship, a horrible business. Even so, he was not as bad as most of them: he sought to make life tolerable for both crew and slaves, and told them about the Lord.

He quit the life at sea and took up a job on land. He still invested money in the slave trade, though, and did not call for its abolition for another three decades.

Newton was greatly influenced by George Whitefield and John Wesley, founders of the Methodist Church. He studied theology and was eventually ordained in the Church of England. He wrote many songs, one of which recalls the earlier state of his life.

**By the grace of God I am what I am; I am not what I ought to be. How imperfect and deficient I am! I am not what I wish to be. And then added: Though I am not what I ought to be, I can truly say that I am not what I once was—a slave to sin and Satan. I can heartily say with Paul: By the grace of God I am what I am!**

That song is “Amazing Grace.”

If you feel dismayed with yourself over your lack of Christian faith or behaviour, remember the good news, that God loves you just as you are; and wants to help you grow beyond that. This is part of God's amazing grace.

### 2) It Is Well with My Soul

In 1873, Horatio Spafford was a lawyer in Chicago who was moving with his family to Europe to start a new life. He still had a couple of weeks' work to finish up his business, but his wife and four daughters went ahead of him. Horatio saw them off as they left on a passenger ship sailing from New York to France. He never saw his girls again.

One evening, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, the ship was struck by another vessel, and sank within thirty minutes. Almost everyone aboard was lost. The Spaffords clung together, but the rushing waves swept away three of the girls, while Mrs. Spafford clutched the youngest. Suddenly even she was pulled from her arms by another wave. Mrs. Spafford became unconscious, and awoke later to find that she had been rescued by sailors from the other ship.

It took ten days for that ship to reach port in England. All that time, Horatio Spafford, aware of the shipwreck, waited anxiously for word of his family. Finally a telegram came from his wife, with just two words, “Saved alone.” Spafford spent all night pacing the floor in his house, overcome with grief, pouring out his heart to the Lord. When a friend came to visit the next morning, Spafford said, “I am glad to be able to trust my Lord when it costs me something.”

Spafford left the next day for England to be with his wife. When his ship came to the place where the family's ship had sunk, he leaned on the rail looking out over the water, and thought these words:

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea-billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well with my soul.

As we sing it now, let us also turn to the Lord and find this abundant life.

### 3) There is a Balm in Gilead

This song refers to a message from the prophet Jeremiah. The people of Israel had turned away from God, and their enemies crushed them. He feels the pain and hopelessness of the people.

Jeremiah 8:21-22, New International Version:  
Since my people are crushed, I am crushed;  
I mourn, and horror grips me.  
Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?

He is overwhelmed with grief, and his tears become a flood.

Jeremiah 9:1, New International Version:  
Oh, that my head were a spring of water,  
and my eyes a fountain of tears!  
I would weep day and night for the slain of my people.

This song is an answer to Jeremiah. Yes, there is a balm, a healing medicine. His name is Jesus. He will make the wounded whole again. He will cure the sin that infects our souls.

This song is a spiritual, created by black slaves while they prayed to God for help in their oppression. Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave, wrote about his captivity, saying, "We were at times markedly buoyant, singing hymns and making joyous exclamations, almost as triumphant in their tone as if we had already reached a land of freedom and safety."

### 4) What a Friend We Have in Jesus

Joseph Scriven was deeply in love with his childhood sweetheart. The day they had been waiting for—their wedding day—was the next day,

and she was on her way to join him for the celebration. They had arranged to meet at the bridge over the River Bann (in Ireland). She rode her horse across the bridge to join him. Partway across, the horse stumbled, she lost her balance and fell off the horse. Scriven watched helplessly while his beloved fell into the deep water and drowned.

Overcome with grief, he decided to move far away and start a new life. He emigrated to Canada, settling in the Port Hope area. He stayed with a local family and earned his keep by doing chores and tutoring children. He met a wonderful woman, and they made plans for their wedding. Again tragedy struck, and she developed pneumonia and died.

Based upon what he read in the Gospels, Scriven made a vow of poverty, and spent his life working with the poor and disabled, accepting no payment for his work. When he received word that his mother was seriously ill, he had no money to travel back to Ireland. So he wrote for her a poem. It came from a heart which had been deeply wounded, but which still trusted in Jesus. He never intended to make it public. A friend of his happened to see it by chance among some papers on the table. The friend asked where the poem came from, and Scriven replied, "The Lord and I together wrote the song." The friend encouraged him to share it with others. And that's how we can sing it today.

When you and I are stricken with grief and trouble, we can follow his example, and bring our sorrows to Jesus.

### 5) There Is a Green Hill

Some Irish boys were complaining to each other, "The catechism we have to learn at church is so dull!" Their godmother overheard them, and set about to write songs to make the teaching both interesting and memorable. She—her name is Cecil Alexander—wrote several well-known songs:

- "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth" became "All Things Bright and Beautiful"
- "And in Jesus Christ, his only son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary" became "Once in Royal David's City"

- “Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried” became “There is a Green Hill.”

Jesus gave his life for us. We can never repay that. All we can do is say, “Thank-you,” give our lives to him, and seek to follow him.

## 6) Abide With Me

Henry Lyte was a rector in the Church of England, but had to retire at the age of only 54 because of a fatal illness. He was barely able to make it through his last service, but he insisted on going ahead. He spoke about the sacrament of communion, and shortly administered the sacrament to the congregation.

That evening, while walking through his garden and along the sea, he thought about how his end was drawing near. But rather than being sad, the theme throughout the song is that Jesus is with us through it all, and we need not fear or lose hope. Listen to the words of verse 4:

I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;  
 Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness:  
 Where is death's sting? where, grave, thy  
 victory?  
 I triumph still if Thou abide with me.

Let's sing it now, not as a sad and mournful song (as many people think of it), but as a song of faith and hope, of trusting in God no matter what happens.

## 7) Blest Be the Tie That Binds

John Fawcett was the pastor of a Baptist church in the tiny hamlet of Wainsgate, England. He was an outstanding preacher, and it was no surprise that a big prestigious church in London had called him to be their pastor, with a much larger salary. He and his wife had packed up all their belongings, and the wagons were loaded and ready to go. John would lead worship the last time that Sunday, and they would head to London immediately after that.

As they were saying their farewells, there were many tears on all sides. “John,” said his wife, “I cannot bear to leave. I know not how to go!” He replied, “Nor can I either. We shall remain here with our people.” They gave the order to unload the wagons, and they stayed there the rest of their lives.

John was so affected by the occasion that he wrote a song which celebrates the love between Christians, “Blest Be the Tie that Binds.”

King George III greatly valued Fawcett's messages, and promised he could have any benefit he desired. Fawcett declined the offer:

“I have lived among my own people, enjoying their love; God has blessed my labors among them, and I need nothing which even a king could supply.”

This is the kind of love which makes a church a community, a place where we are accepted and loved, just as we are; and we do the same for everyone who comes.