

CFBC Hymns Class 31

Horatius Bonar (1808-1889)

A Brief Introduction to Horatius Bonar

Dan Graves

"Please don't write a biography of me." Racked with pain in the Summer of 1889, Horatius Bonar knew he was dying. He also knew that people would be interested in his life. But **during his ministry, his one interest had been the glory of Christ, and he wanted to keep it that way. "Point men to Christ, not to Bonar," he might have said. That is what his sermons had always done:**

"If Christ is not the substitute, he is nothing to the sinner. If he did not die as the sin-bearer, he has died in vain. Let us not be deceived on this point nor misled by those who, when they announce Christ as the deliverer, think they have preached the gospel. If I throw a rope to a drowning man, I am a deliverer. But is Christ no more than that? If I cast myself into the sea and risk myself to save another, I am a deliverer. But is Christ no more? Did He risk His life? The very essence of Christ's deliverance is the substitution of himself for us--his life for ours! He did not come to risk his life; he came to die! He did not redeem us by a little loss, a little sacrifice, a little labor, a little suffering: 'He redeemed us to God by His blood' (I Peter 1:18,19). He gave all he had, even his life, for us. This is the kind of deliverance that awakens the happy song, 'To Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood' (Revelation 1:5)."

Christ's deliverance wakened happy songs in Bonar. **Although many of his hymns were originally written for children, they were so brim full of sound teaching that adults loved to sing them, too.**

I heard the voice of Jesus say, "Come unto me and rest;
Lay down, thou weary one, lay down, Thy head upon my breast."
I came to Jesus as I was, weary and worn and sad;
I found in him a resting place, And he has made me glad.

When Horatius Bonar died on this day, July 31, 1889, his wish was respected; no biography was written of him. Just a few memories and a short sketch of his life have come down to us.

<https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1801-1900/horatius-bonar-pointed-people-to-christ-11630625.html>

The Life of Horatius Bonar

"I heard the voice of Jesus say, Come unto me and rest," is one of our best known gospel hymns. It was written by Horatius Bonar, a godly minister of Christ, who was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, Dec. 19, 1808. His ancestors for several generations were ministers of the gospel. "In youth he devoted himself to the service of God," a writer says. By this we suppose he was converted while young...

Mr. Bonar received his early education at the High School and University of Edinburgh; his biographer says, "***He was fortunate in having Dr. Chalmers for his teacher. It laid the foundation for solid learning which advanced with growing years... It gave direction and strength to his life when most susceptible of influence.***" Few students are favored with such godly instructors today; and those taught by infidel or skeptical professors must be on their guard, and hold to the written Word of God as the sheet-anchor of their faith...

Mr. Bonar's public ministry began in 1837 in the famous old town of Kelso on the Tweed. ***He preached with fervor and unction, and in house-to-house visitation proved himself the comforter of the sorrowful, and guide of the perplexed.*** This is what Scripture urges upon us, "Whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as unto the Lord;" as the good king Hezekiah also did: "In every work that he began in the service of the house of God, in the law, and in the commandments, to seek his God, he did it with all his heart, and prospered" (2 Chron. 31: 21).

In 1839 the Free Church of Scotland sent a commission composed of four ministers, of whom Andrew Bonar and Robert McCheyne were the younger members, to visit the principal centers of the Jews in Europe and Palestine. It aroused widespread interest, and Horatius Bonar also visited Palestine in 1856. A returned traveler from Palestine relates the following concerning Dr. Bonar: "One dark night in the year 1856, in the city Jerusalem, I wandered into a lighted mission-room on Mount Zion, where a small company of men and women of various nationalities and complexions were gathered. At the desk was a man of impressive countenance, of low and musical voice...The preacher, as I learned later, was Dr. Horatius Bonar. ***Learned and eloquent, there was a wonderful charm in what he said that night, because he had strong convictions on that subject of much speculation—the second coming of the Lord. He believed in His personal coming, to reign on the earth;*** and his faith, seconded by his rich poetic imagination and fervor, all quickened by the fact that we were in Jerusalem, the city of the Passion, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection and the Ascension gave to his words a winning power which I cannot describe.

He had no specific time for the Advent. He gave himself up to the scene where, sooner or later, the King shall come again to walk in the streets of His abasement, in the effulgence of the sunlight that shall attend Him... ***To hear such a man in Jerusalem, having a firm belief in the personal coming and reign of Christ, thus to communicate to others freely his confident hopes, was a memorable event.***"

This visit to Palestine seems to have given occasion for the hymn already mentioned, and which he entitled, "The Voice from Galilee."

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
Come unto Me and rest;
Lay down, thou weary one, lay down
Thy head upon My breast!"
I came to Jesus as I was,
Weary, and worn, and sad;
I found in Him a resting-place,
And He hath made me glad.

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
Behold, I freely give
The living water; thirsty one,
Stoop down, and drink, and live!"
I came to Jesus, and I drank
Of that life-giving stream;
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived,
And now I live in Him.

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
I am this dark world's Light;
Look unto Me, thy morn shall rise,
And all thy day be bright!"
I looked to Jesus, and I found
In Him my Star, my Sun;
And in that Light of life I'll walk
Till trav'ling days are done.

"The impulse given by Dr. Chalmers to Mr. Bonar," says his biographer, "was deepened by his fellowship with Robert McCheyne, of Dundee, where a great revival had sprung up whilst they were away in Palestine on their mission to the Jews. The Spirit of God wrought in power, and many souls were saved. A tide of blessing swept through the land, and Mr. Bonar entered heartily into the movement, and helped to spread it.

He spared not himself in his efforts to carry the gospel to the perishing. He spoke as a dying man to dying men, resulting in many conversions. He also wrote 'The Kelso Tracts,' which went where his voice could not reach. His aim was to warn the careless, to present salvation simply, and to edify the saints. These messengers of life went into many homes and were eagerly read. Their circulation in Scotland and England was very large, and they found warm reception in America."

Dr. Bonar remained at Kelso for 28 years, serving in the pulpit, in the study, and at the fireside. He did not seek earthly honor, yet it came to him. His name became known both at home and abroad through his ministry and his writings. ***Few poets have done more than Dr. Bonar to enrich our hymnal treasury with gems of truth and power: they will be sung upon earth until they are exchanged for the melodies of heaven.***

Dr. Bonar removed from Kelso to Edinburgh in 1865, where he continued to minister till his death. One well acquainted with Dr. Bonar says, "Visitors in Edinburgh might go out of curiosity to see and listen to this 'sweet singer,' but they soon forgot the poet in the preacher. The opening prayer lifted them into the presence of God, and they listened as he went on to speak of a love stronger than death, and of the experiences of a Christian life."

Many of Dr. Bonar's most precious hymns refer to Christ's second coming as the Christian's "blessed hope." In one of his last addresses he says: "I know not but this may be my last opportunity of bearing witness to the much-forgotten doctrine which was so specially given to the Church as her blessed hope; and I wish to say how increasingly important that doctrine is to me as the ages are running to their close, and the power of the great adversary is unfolding itself both in the church and in the world...The poison of the last days has penetrated everywhere. Unbelief, error, strong delusion, self-will, pride, hatred of God and of His Christ—these are the deadly forces operating all over the earth, disintegrating society, and demonstrating the necessity for the return of Him who is to end all of Satan's and man's evil work, and introduce the kingdom of righteousness and peace."

From this it will be seen that the poet-preacher did not share the error of many today— that the world is getting better and that civilization is able to save the world. The hymn-writers of the preceding centuries, whose lives we have sketched, knew little of and wrote little about, the coming and kingdom of the Lord Jesus.

It was reserved for God's servants of the 19th Century to understand and teach clearly the truth of what is called the pre-millennial coming of Christ, the tribulation to follow, and then the thousand years' reign.

Dr. Bonar died in Edinburgh, July 31, 1889, and was buried at the base of Colton Hill, where he lies with his kindred, near to the house of the reformer John Knox. ***At his funeral no word of eulogy was offered, as was meet; for what better eulogium could he have than the rich legacy of hymns he has left to the household of faith?***

Soon, soon, the Saviour of whom he so sweetly wrote, will come, and then in the home of glory above we shall sing together the praises of the precious Saviour.

<https://www.wholesomewords.org/biography/bbonar.html>

"A Goodly Heritage" (22): Horatius Bonar, 1808-1889

R Cargill, St Monans

Horatius Bonar has justifiably been called Scotland's chief hymn-writer, his hymns numbering some 600. Although many never gained popularity, some have become an integral part of our goodly heritage of hymns today. Perhaps his best known one is *"I heard the voice of Jesus say..."* which he called *The Voice from Galilee*.

Not long before he died he said, "Please don't write a biography of me". He knew his time had come, and also knew that many people would be interested in his life. But ***his life's ministry had been centred on the glory of Christ, and he didn't want anything to stand in the way of that. Because of this we have only a brief outline of his life and ministry. He was, however, a prolific writer. His written works fill 47 volumes, a total of some 12,000 pages!***

Life and Ministry

Horatius Bonar was born in Edinburgh on 19th December, 1808, the sixth son of James Bonar, Solicitor of Excise, who died when the lad was twelve. His saintly mother (Marjory Maitland) and his elder brother James were then influential in bringing him to salvation in his teens. Others moulded his character and his thinking while he was a student at Edinburgh University. Dr Thomas Chalmers, born in Anstruther, scientist and theologian, energetic in promoting the gospel among the poor, was one of his tutors.

Edward Irving's lectures in Edinburgh quickened his interest in prophetic matters. ***Bonar and his brother Andrew developed a strong friendship with Robert Murray McCheyne of Dundee.***

His first public post was assistant minister in Leith, where for three and a half years his work among the youth of that poor and rough seaport was greatly blessed. He began his hymn writing there, for in his extensive Sunday School work he saw that the children needed something suitable to sing. Then in 1837, aged 29, he was appointed minister in the border town of Kelso. He stayed there for almost thirty years.

In 1843, he married Jane Catherine, daughter of Robert Lundie of Kelso. They had their fair share of joys and sorrows. Out of their family of nine children, five died in childhood.

1843 was also the year of "The Great Disruption" when the Free Church of Scotland was formed out of the evangelical movement in the established Church of Scotland. Bonar's heart and soul were in that movement and his ministry followed, partly due to the earlier influence of Chalmers but also because he had seen at first hand how the established church, with its politically appointed ministers, was failing to lead the nation towards God and arouse faith in Christ.

He was a typical nineteenth century Scottish scholar, well taught in the classics, serious and studious. His life was marked by piety and his ministry by deep earnestness, at times solemnising. He said, "Laughter and gaiety belong to a fallen world. They are too superficial to have a place among the holy and too hollow to be known among the truly happy". But he did have a good sense of humour and was very fond of children. Indeed some time after the five of his own had died, he was delighted when his widowed daughter and her five children came to live with him. It was said of him that he was always praying, that he was always preaching, that he was always visiting, that he was always writing.

In 1866, he came to the Chalmers Memorial Church, Edinburgh (Chalmers had died in 1847), where he continued until 1887 when he was in his 80th year. ***His wife who had been his faithful helper all through his ministry died on 3rd December, 1884 at the age of 63. For his own last 15 months he suffered from a protracted illness until he went home to heaven on 31st July, 1889.*** His body rests in the rather gloomy and neglected Canongate Cemetery, off the Royal Mile in Edinburgh.

The words on his gravestone are becoming worn out, but his record is on high and he can be perhaps more appropriately remembered when we turn to one of his hymns and sing it.

Writings

The character of Horatius Bonar and his beliefs shine through his writings. He was founder and editor of *The Quarterly Journal of Prophecy*. ***Unlike many at that time he held definite pre-millennial beliefs which are well described by Augustus Toplady (1740-1778, author of Rock of Ages, cleft for me) whom he quotes: "I am one of those old-fashioned people who believe the doctrine of the Millennium; and that there will be two resurrections of the dead, first of the just, secondly of the unjust, which last resurrection of the reprobate will not commence until a thousand years after the resurrection of the elect. In the glorious interval of a thousand years, Christ...will reign in Person". His own books, The Coming Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ (1849) and The Morning of Joy (1850), expound his own deeply held convictions that Christ would come before the Millennium begins.***

Even the titles of two others, *The Night of Weeping* (1845) and *The Morning of Joy* (1850), show how ***his mind and spirit were tuned to the soon return of the Lord.***

He wrote many gospel tracts while in Kelso. One of them, Believe and Live, one million of which were printed, was a favourite with Queen Victoria. His book, *God's Way of Peace* (1862), was richly blessed to anxious souls. He preached in surrounding villages and farmhouses as well as in the pulpit. ***His gospel was Christ centred and Christ honouring.*** He said, "We think if we can but get men converted, it does not much matter how. Our whole anxiety is not 'How shall we secure the glory of Jehovah?' but 'How shall we multiply conversions?'" . Again, "If Christ is not the substitute, He is nothing to the sinner. If He did not die as the sin-bearer, He has died in vain. Let us not be deceived on this point nor misled by those who, when they announce Christ as the deliverer, think they have preached the gospel...The very essence of Christ's deliverance is the substitution of Himself for us - His life for ours! He did not come to risk his life; He came to die! He redeemed us to God by His blood (1 Pet 1.18-19). He gave all He had, even His life, for us. This is the kind of deliverance that awakens the happy song, 'To him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood' (Rev 1.5)".

Hymns

It is no surprise, then, that his hymns were so devotional as well as evangelical and pastoral, and, above all, Scriptural. Almost all of them can be found in the three volumes entitled *Hymns of Faith and Hope* which he published in Kelso in 1857, 1861 and 1866.

When we gather for the Lord's Supper, for Bible teaching, for prayer, for gospel preaching, or whatever, some of the hymns chosen from our hymnbooks will be Bonar's. We love to sing hymns such as:

*All that we were, our sins, our guilt
I hear the words of love
Blessed be God, our God
Here, O my Lord I see Thee face to face*

*No blood, no altar now
Done is the work that saves
Not what I am, O Lord, but what Thou art
I was a wandering sheep*

*I heard the voice of Jesus say
Rejoice and be glad
Yet there is room
Go, labour on, spend and be spent.*

And perhaps our singing will be a little more thoughtful and expressive as we recall their author. But his wish would be that we rather recall and think more highly of his Saviour, and ours, as he wrote:

*Unchangeable Jesus, Thy praises we sing
And own Thee our Prophet, our Priest, and our King.
O give us while singing sweet tastes of Thy love
To raise our affections to treasures above.*

<http://www.believersmagazine.com/bm.php>

Christ for us. From Horatius Bonar, in a collection he entitled, "Communion Hymns" (1881). I set it to the tune for "Before the Throne." So I take eight original stanzas and make them four, repeating the last line. You may find a different tune. Here it is as Bonar penned it. I've also added an historical note after the hymn. Precious words. Even more precious the Savior who so freely gave himself for us.

Christ for us

On merit not my own I stand
on doings which I have not done
merit beyond what I can claim
doings more perfect than my own

Upon a life I have not lived
upon a death I did not die
another's life, another's death
I stake my whole eternity

Not on the tears which I have shed;
not on the sorrows I have known,
another's tears, another's griefs,
on them I rest, on them alone

Jesus, O Son of God, I build
on what your cross has done for me;
there both my death and life I read
my guilt, my pardon there I see

Lord, I believe; oh deal with me
as one who has your word believed;
I take the gift, Lord look on me
as one who has your gift received

I taste the love the gift contains
I clasp the pardon which it brings
and pass up to the living source
above, whence all this fullness springs

Here at your feast I grasp the pledge
which life eternal to me seals,
here in the bread and wine I read
the grace and peace your death reveals

O fullness of the eternal grace
O wonders past all wondering!
Here in the hall of love and song
we sing the praises of our King

Horatius Bonar, 1881 Communion Hymns

Bonar's son, H. N. Bonar, wrote a book, *Hymns by Horatius Bonar* (1904), in which he includes this note:

"[In 1881] a little collection of thirty Communion Hymns was issued a few of which had already appeared in previous volumes. Most of these hymns were known to my father's own congregation already. It was his custom at the close of every Communion service to read aloud some hymn or poem bearing on the subject which had been the theme of the sermon and table addresses. This was often selected from some old hymn book, sometimes it was a translation from the German, but many a time it was specially written by himself for the occasion. In this little collection appears that perfect exposition of the author's standpoint before God: ON MERIT NOT MY OWN I STAND"

<https://surprisinglight.blogspot.com/2009/05/precious-communion-hymn.html>

Indelible Grace...Upon a Life I Have Not Lived

1. Upon a Life I have not lived,
Upon a Death I did not die,
Another's Life; Another's Death,
I stake my whole eternity.

2. Not on the tears which I have shed,
Not on the sorrows I have known,
Another's tears; Another's griefs,
On these I rest, on these alone.

Chorus:

O Jesus, Son of God, I build on what Thy cross has done for me;
There both my death and life I read, my guilt, and pardon there I see.

3. Lord, I believe; O deal with me,
As one who has Thy Word believed!
I take the gift, Lord, look on me,
As one who has Thy gift received. (Chorus)

I ran across this quote years ago, attributed to C.H. Spurgeon, "Upon a death I did not die, upon a life I did not live, I stake my whole eternity." I loved the succinct statement of the imputation of our sin to Christ and His righteousness to sinners that is at the heart of the gospel, and used the quote regularly in my preaching. But around 2011 I discovered that this Spurgeon quote was actually a snippet of a hymn by Horatius Bonar!

Reflection by Indelible Grace

Meditating on the Gospel

Paul Tautges

Meditating on the gospel means that I must consciously fix my mind on truths revolving around the love of God for me in Jesus Christ.

This includes anything ranging election in eternity past to glorification in eternity future. ***Central to my thoughts is the cross. In addition to thinking on particular Scriptures cross-saturated music is tremendously helpful to me.***

This hymn was so very helpful to me. When I choose to think of Christ, what He has done for me, and who I am in Him, my faith is fed as simple truths shine bright clarity into the fog of life.

Written by the Scottish pastor Horatius Bonar, this ancient hymn has been redone by *Indelible Grace*. May its truth encourage your mind and heart today to focus on the grace and love of Jesus Christ!

<https://counselingoneanother.com/2013/03/18/upon-a-life-i-did-not-live/>

His Hymns Make Souls Feel Whole...Horatius Bonar

Sinclair Ferguson

If you could choose a century and a country, not to live in, but to visit in order to listen to preaching, what would it be?

A case could be made for the sixteenth century if you enjoy Geneva, and Calvin is a hero to you. There is certainly something attractive about London in the seventeenth century — imagine hearing John Bunyan, Thomas Watson, John Owen, and dozens of others — some of them preaching within a few minutes' walk of each other. Or perhaps you would prefer to be there two centuries later to hear C.H. Spurgeon.

For myself, I think I would choose “my ain folk” and visit Scotland in the mid-nineteenth century. To be able to hear Thomas Chalmers, Hugh Martin, William Cunningham, George Smeaton, William Chalmers Burns, Robert Murray M'Cheyne, John Kennedy of Dingwall, John MacDonald of Ferintosh. That would be a treat.

I belong to St Peter's Free Church in Dundee. Robert Murray M'Cheyne was our first minister. Sometimes I lean against the wall and whimsically ask it, “What

was it like in the 1830s and early 1840s?” Sitting here I might, at times, have been able to hear a minister with poetry in his soul — Horatius Bonar.

Undivided Service

Horatius Bonar was born into a comfortable middle-class family in Edinburgh in 1808 and died there in 1889. His father was a solicitor (attorney), but the Bonar family line gave many ministers to the Presbyterian Church — including his older brother John James, and the better-known younger brother Andrew.

Horatius Bonar’s life is simply told. Andrew Somerville, one of the close-knit “M’Cheyne Circle” of his student days, said, following his death:

He lived for the long space of eighty years maintaining a Christian and unblemished life in this world of sin, treachery, and unrighteousness. From the day of his conversion at an early season of life, he laid all the resources of his being at the feet of Jesus, consecrating his scholarship, his distinguished abilities, and all the energies of his nature, that he might undividedly serve on earth his heavenly Master.

Horatius (“Horace” to his friends) graduated from the University of Edinburgh, was an assistant minister in Leith (the city’s port), served faithfully from 1837 in the Scottish Borders town of Kelso, and then was called in 1866 to the new charge of Chalmers Memorial Church in Edinburgh (named after his great professor). Here he ministered until his death in 1889.

During his life he edited various Christian magazines, including *The Quarterly Journal of Prophecy* (he was deeply committed to premillennial eschatology), wrote many outstanding tracts (he had a great heart for pointing others to Christ), and a number of best-selling books (*God’s Way of Peace* and *God’s Way of Holiness* being perhaps the best known; they are still in print today). In 1843, at The Disruption, he was one of more than four hundred ministers who sacrificed their livings and manses in the Church of Scotland to form the Free Church of Scotland.

Bonar requested that no biography of him should be written (although he himself wrote two biographies of others), and those who knew him best honored his request. But there is so much that could be written about his faithfulness in ministry, his friendships, and his fruitfulness. He experienced deep wounds during his life in the loss of five children; occasionally he was caught up in sharp controversy — on one occasion over his support for D.L. Moody, on another over the use of hymns (rather than only psalms, and in some instances, paraphrases)

in public worship. To tell those stories would require a separate essay. But two features of his ministry tell us much about the man.

Let the Children Learn

The first is his work with young people. From the beginning, as a young assistant minister in Leith, he invested his energetic love in pointing young people to faith in Christ and finding ways of nurturing them in God's grace. He loved them and was loved by them in return. "The children he met would often run up to him in the street, claiming a kind of property in him," remembered a friend. One of those youngsters said about him,

I sometimes wonder if anyone else ever possessed the faculty that he had of drawing towards him the affection of young people, which, when you were once brought under the charm of his friendship, could never afterwards be lost or lessened. How well I remember his class for us girls! We would not for all the world have missed that hour on Wednesday afternoon.

I think I see the little room underneath the dear old church where we gathered, a bright, happy band of school-girls, sitting around to listen to his earnest, loving, faithful teaching. I see Dr. Bonar seated at the end of the long table with the large Bible spread out before him, the Bible hymn book in his hand, his dear handsome face beaming, and the pleasant smile which lighted it up, as some of us gave a fuller, clearer answer than he expected to the question asked.

And then the last meeting before the holidays; what a solemn hour it was, as he reminded us that never again here below should we all meet together, and spoke of the meeting-place above. All kneeling down, to be each tenderly commended to the loving care of our heavenly Father, bathed in tears, we could hardly tear ourselves away, lingering long after the usual time.

It is a great mark of grace, surely, when a minister of the gospel endears himself to youngsters in this way. For this was also a man who was no shrinking violet and was resolutely opposed to any distortions of the gospel.

Poetry in His Soul

It was originally for such youngsters that he began writing hymns. In total, he wrote around six hundred, which, of course, are not all of equal merit. But since

his time, most hymn books — where they are still in use today — include a number of his compositions.

Bonar’s hymns are usually simple, but not simplistic; poetic and yet clearly theological; and the best of them focus on the person of the Lord Jesus, his atoning work, coming to him in faith, living unreservedly for him, and anticipating future glory.

In these hymns, the heart of the gospel is always found in Jesus Christ, at the cross, in substitutionary atonement. For him — as for Paul — this was a personal work of Christ, accomplished in love for us, on our behalf and in our place (“The Son of God . . . loved me and gave himself for me,” Galatians 2:20). And while he wanted to express all this simply and memorably for young people, he did so in such a way that the oldest and most mature are deeply moved by the profundity of it all.

Here is “The Work That Saves”:

Done is the work that saves,
Once and forever done;
Finished the righteousness
That clothes the unrighteous one.

And this love, expressed at the cross, is an ongoing reality for the Christian:

The love that blesses us below
Is flowing freely to us now.

The sacrifice of Christ and its implications are vividly described with an economy of words that not only give clear articulation to biblical teaching, but also vividly bring the reality of the cross before our eyes, viewed through biblically-crafted lenses. Notice the visual and emotional power of the second and especially the third line of the next verse:

The sacrifice is o’er,
The veil is rent in twain,
The mercy-seat is red
With blood of victim slain.

Good Gospel Poetry

Bonar makes direct personal application so that we find ourselves as evangelists to one another as we sing:

Why stand ye then without, in fear?
The blood divine invites us near.

Other hymns with a similar focus, creatively reworked, come to mind, such as “The Substitute”:

I lay my sins on Jesus,
The spotless Lamb of God.
From all their guilt he frees us;
He bears himself the load.

I lay my want on Jesus,
All fulness dwells in him;
He heals all my diseases,
My soul he doth redeem.

I lay my griefs on Jesus,
He takes them all from me;
I cast my cares on Jesus,
My shield and tower is he.

I give myself to Jesus,
This weary soul of mine;
His right hand me embraces,
I on his breast recline.

This is not Milton or Shakespeare. Bonar himself used to say it “might be good gospel, but it was not good poetry.” Yet in terms of gospel communication, it is *multum in parvo*, much in a little: the purity of Christ our sacrifice, the heart of his work in substitution, the activity of faith, the fullness of Christ to save to the uttermost, to comfort and strengthen, the recognition that the Christian life is not easy (“This weary soul of mine”), the possibility of intimate fellowship with Christ, all punctuated by biblical allusions and in only four simple verses and less than ninety words.

Whole-Souled Hymns

Other, and better known, hymns come to mind. They too are characteristically full of biblical allusion and warm Reformed theology. Bonar wrote *Colossians 3:16 Hymns* which (1) cause the word of Christ to dwell in us richly, (2) are spiritual songs (in the sense that they are certainly in harmony with Spirit-given Scripture!), (3) give us ways of teaching and admonishing one another, and (4)

help us to make melody to the Lord in our hearts. The lines may be simple, but they are never banal, and always develop a theme, make personal application, and lift the soul in praise to God.

“Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power,” based on Revelation 5, is a wonderful example of that last characteristic, as it brings us in a whole-souled way to share in the doxology of heaven. Others, such as “Not what I am, O Lord, but what thou art! That, that alone can be my soul’s true rest” illustrate Bonar’s ability to hold together the fundamental objectivity of the gospel with personal appropriation of it. A deeply experiential preacher and writer, he well recognized that to focus exclusively, or even predominantly, on the subjective can quickly leave us spiritually bankrupt, and yet at the same time he draws out the affections in worship.

Head, Heart, and Hands

All Horatius Bonar’s hymnody was poetry; but because he was a poetic soul, not all his poetry was hymnody. Indeed, he expressed his deepest feelings about everything in poetry. In “Lucy” (written in August 1858 on the death of a beloved daughter), he writes out his pain in the presence of the Lord:

All night we watched the ebbing life,
As if its flight to stay;
Till, as the dawn was coming up,
Our last hope passed away.

And then this heartrending contrast:

She was the music of our home,
A day that knew no night,
The fragrance of our garden-bower
A thing all smiles and light.

Here we get a glimpse of what added pathos to both his writing and his preaching (and what is surely an essential but sometimes absent characteristic of real preaching) – the marriage of *logos* (powerful biblical reasoning), with *ethos* (a life integrated with and illustrating the fruit of that biblical reasoning), bound up with *pathos* (the expression of affections and emotions that match and express the truth that is being proclaimed).

Lyrics Without Music

There is an important litmus test for what we sing: Does this hymn or song instruct me biblically and move me affectionately *even when there is no musical*

accompaniment? If without the rhythms and melody of the accompanying music, the words of a song or hymn fail this test, it is likely that the music is moving me more than the gospel.

We do not, and probably should not, sing all of Bonar's hymns today. But few if any modern hymnwriters surpass him in simplicity and gospel profundity, and it would be a sad loss to any church not to be familiar with at least a short catalog of his hymns. I think here of:

- A few more years shall roll
- All that I was, my sin, my guilt
- Come, mighty Spirit, penetrate, this heart and soul of mine
- Father, our children keep
- For the bread and for the wine
- Glory be to God the Father
- Go, labor on; spend and be spent
- He liveth long who liveth well
- I hear the words of love
- Into the heaven of heavens has he gone
- No, not despairingly come I to thee
- Not what I am O Lord, but what thou art
- O love of God, how strong and true
- These are the crowns that we shall wear
- This is the day of fellowship and love
- Thy way, not mine, O Lord
- Thy works, not mine, O Christ

Who has not felt the tug of gospel truth in perhaps his most frequently sung hymn, "I heard the voice of Jesus say, Come unto me and rest"? Or who, having tasted communion with the Lord Jesus at the Lord's Table, can doubt that their experience has been wonderfully described, and its meaning marvelously illumined, by his hymn "This do in remembrance of me"? In Scotland it has often been the custom to sing these three stanzas before the Supper is served:

Here, O my Lord, I see thee face to face;
Here would I touch and handle things unseen,
Here grasp with firmer hand th'eternal grace;
And all my weariness upon thee lean.

Here would I feed upon the bread of God,
Here drink with thee the royal wine of heav'n;
Here would I lay aside each earthly load,
Here taste afresh the calm of sin forgiv'n.

This is the hour of banquet and of song;
This is the heav'nly table spread for me:
Here let me feast, and feasting, still prolong
The brief, bright hour of fellowship with thee.

Then these verses following the enjoyment of the Supper:

Too soon we rise; the symbols disappear;
The feast, though not the love, is past and gone;
The bread and wine remove, but thou art here,
Nearer than ever, still my Shield and Sun.

I have no help but thine, nor do I need
Another arm save thine to lean upon:
It is enough, O Lord, enough indeed;
My strength is in thy might, thy might alone.

Mine is the sin, but thine the righteousness;
Mine is the guilt, but thine the cleansing blood;
Here is my robe, my refuge, and my peace:
Thy blood, thy righteousness, O Lord my God.

Feast after feast thus comes and passes by,
Yet, passing points to the glad feast above,
Giving sweet foretaste of the festal joy,
The Lamb's great bridal feast of bliss and love.

Bonar's hymns outlasted the fads and fashions of his day and continue to speak to ours. It is testimony to their worth that music-makers wed them to different tunes in order to sing them for the rising generation.

Still today we can rejoice that Horatius Bonar found a way of expressing his theology, poetry, and heart's doxology in hymnody. And since we are commanded to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, and make melody to the Lord in our hearts, perhaps we should be praying more than we do that God will raise up others like him today.

We still need pastors with poetry in their soul.

<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/his-hymns-make-souls-feel-whole>