

*Hymn 181, We Come, O Christ, to You*

The author Edith Margaret Clarkson was born in 1915 in rural Canada. Throughout her life, she was plagued by pain; initially from migraines, accompanied by convulsive vomiting, and then arthritis—two ailments that accompanied her continually. Later she wrote that that her mother told her that her very first spoken words were “my head hurts.” At age 3 Margaret, or Margie as her friends knew her, contracted juvenile arthritis and became bed-bound. She recalled the pain as well as the bald spot worn on the back of her head from lying in bed so long.

Her family moved to Toronto when she was around age 4. From that point on, she grew up in downtown Toronto, Ontario, Canada. The street that they lived on “was a long one, with a high-steepled church at either end.” Margaret’s family attended the closest one, St. John’s Presbyterian Church. She later described her time at this church, which had a significant impact upon her, as growing up in “the heart of a large evangelical church.” Margaret was active in church, though she felt no kindred connection, remembering that she was different from everyone she knew. Through memorization, Margaret won a hymnbook from her Sunday School, which she would love to climb in a tree with to the highest point possible and sing.

Margaret found great comfort and strength in hymns. She would leaf through pages reading and noting authors and composers. She gained a “sense of the community of saints” as she did this, which “led naturally to a search for their other writings.” She came in contact with “such people as John Bunyan, John and Charles Wesley, Martin Luther, John Newton, Paul Gerhardt, Isaac Watts, and Fanny Crosby.” As she did this she began to see the church “as one continuous, living stream of the grace of God” in which she too had a place.

Along with her love of the outdoors, Margaret experienced recognition for her writing efforts. She enjoyed “playing with words and phrases, savoring as sweet morsels those that most delighted” her. At age ten she had her first published work—a poem on the New Year took second place in a contest for children under sixteen. It was also at this age that she gained an assurance of faith in Christ during a series of children’s meetings based on Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress. Within the next year Margaret confessed her faith to the church and joined St. John’s. She was able to recite “all 107 questions and answers of the Westminster Shorter Catechism.” Shortly thereafter Margaret began “writing verse more or less regularly...publishing in parish magazines and Sunday School papers.” In addition to these new forms of expression, Margaret began to learn to play piano with the hymnbook being her chief teacher.

She went on to be educated at Toronto Teacher’s College and the University of Toronto. She taught elementary school in Ontario for 38 years.

She was a gifted natural writer who published hundreds of poems, articles, songs and sketches, and 17 books in 7 languages.

Hymn writing was her first love, and it sprang from her lifetime of Bible study, personal experience of living as a Christian, and a disciplined lyrical expression. Urbana is a major Christian student missions conference for five days at the end of December each year. It is sponsored by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, and has spawned many missionary careers. The very first conference in 1946 requested this hymn from Mrs. Clarkson, and that launched a long-standing relationship between Mrs. Clarkson and Urbana conferences.

Throughout her life Margaret Clarkson seemingly experienced every form of suffering one could experience; a broken home, financial strains, loneliness and isolation, and constant physical pain, however through it all she continued to place her faith and trust in her savior. During a life of trials she sensed God's grace and mercy and communicated that to others by providing the church with hymns testifying to his sovereignty, love, and power. At its 1992 national convention, The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada named Mrs. Clarkson a Fellow of the Society, for her contributions to hymnody. She died on March 17, 2008 in Toronto, Ontario.

This hymn belongs to a group of hymns stemming from the New Testament known as the Christ hymn. Its governing purpose is to extol the person and work of Christ. Additionally for this hymn, because the praise is directly addressed to Christ, it is also a prayer. Each stanza makes a specific contribution to the prayerful praise of Christ.

Stanza 1 praises Christ as creator and sustainer.

Stanza 2 praises Christ for His work in completing our substitutionary atonement who frees us from the condemnation of the law.

Stanza 3 praises Christ as the source of truth and wisdom and therefore as the answer to the human quest for answers.

Stanza 4 praises Christ as the source of life in multiple forms.

Stanza 5 has a change of direction, tying the youth and strength of the youth mission conference to serving Christ in missions or anywhere. Here is the only place in the hymn that there is rhyming of the lines.

This hymn is filled with New Testament declarations about Jesus.

One such place is Colossians 1:16-17, "*For by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*"

Let's sing all five verses of this hymn *We Come, O Christ, to You*.