

Chapter Seven: Charles Wesley - "Rejoice, Again, I Say, Rejoice."

Living almost in his brother John's shadow, Charles Wesley left a legacy as strong and sweet to the Christian community as the preaching of his brother. One of Christianity's most prolific hymnists, his is the legacy far-better known to those of us outside Methodist circles.

Born on December 18th 1707, Charles was the third surviving son and eighteenth child of Samuel & Susanna Wesley. Samuel wanted his three surviving boys to become either clergy or scholars. While John was educated at Charterhouse, Charles and his older brother Samuel were sent to Westminster. Charles proved not only to be a good student but a champion defender against school bullies. In 1726 he entered Christ Church in Oxford, and John, by now ordained and a Fellow of Lincoln College, attempted to restrain the fun-loving ways of his younger brother, who replied - "Would you have me become a saint all at once?"

Equal to John in scholarship, Charles was not as calm and level as his brother, and he suffered far more emotional ups and downs. While at Oxford he became deeply concerned about spiritual matters and gathered around him others who shared the same budding feelings. Together they started what they named the 'Holy Club' ... and outsiders were soon to nickname it the 'Methodists'. John Wesley became the leader of the little group, although Charles started it - thus he was called the 'first Methodist'.

In 1732 George Whitefield of Pembroke College joined the group, and a close friendship developed between himself and the Wesleys. For the next six years all three struggled with their spirituality and beliefs, each becoming converted to Christ in their own time. In 1735, before his death, their father imparted a great store of knowledge in a single piece of advice: *"The inward witness, son, the inward witness, this is the proof, the strongest proof of Christianity."*

During this time of searching the two Wesleys journeyed to the colony of Georgia in the Americas - Charles came home after a year, disillusioned and broken in heart. Charles' mood and attitude had become so severe that one friend wrote that he had become so reserved as to not communicate with friends or family. His brother's return a year later brought him out of much of these negative feelings.

Charles marked May of 1738 as the time of his conversion, the last of the three to feel Christ's coming into his life. He wrote: "I now found myself at peace with God, and rejoiced in hope of a loving Christ ... I saw that by faith I stood ... by the continual support of faith I went to bed still sensible of my own weakness, yet confident of Christ's protection."

The following day his life as a hymnist began by writing the first of 6,000 hymns he would write throughout the rest of his life:

Where shall my wondering soul begin?
How shall I all to heaven aspire?
A slave redeemed from death and sin,
A brand plucked from eternal fire!
How shall I equal triumphs raise
Or sing my great Deliverer's praise?

Also on the following day the strength he'd lost through several years of illness literally began to return.

Exactly a year later he wrote the great hymn "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing", which he recommended for singing "on the anniversary of one's conversion."

John and Charles, along with their friend George Whitefield, began in earnest to preach, having become involved with the evangelical movement of the day. They felt greatly blessed through their work, and it was large crowds who came to hear them. Slowly their individual roles within their "Methodist" movement began to take shape - Whitefield was the orator, while John Wesley was the one blessed with organizational skills. Eventually Charles settled into the role of presiding over a local congregation - and writing hymns. The Christian world in general may not know Whitefield or John, but through his hymnal legacy we *all* know Charles, for his words continue to touch our souls.

Charles began to publish collections of his hymns in 1739, and they were instantly popular. Included in his collection of works include -

Hymns and Sacred Poems, 1739, 1740

Moral and Sacred Poems, 1744.

Hymns for the Nativity of our Lord, 1745

Hymns on the Lord's Supper, 1745

Hymns for our Lord's Resurrection, 1746

Hymns for Ascension-Day/Hymns for Whitsunday, 1746

Hymns on the Great Festivals, 1746

Hymns for Those That Seek, and Those That Have Redemption in the Blood of Jesus Christ, 1747

Hymns on the Trinity, 1767

Hymnals for "The People called Methodists" were published beginning in 1779 and contained many Wesley texts as well as texts from other hymnists.

Charles Wesley was a hymn writer literally to the end. On his deathbed he dictated -

"In age and feebleness extreme,
Who shall a helpless worm redeem?
Jesus, my only hope Thou art,
Strength of my failing flesh and heart,
O, could I catch a smile from Thee
And drop into eternity!"

Although he chose a place outside the limelight in which his brother lived and led "The People called Methodists", history has not left Charles Wesley in anyone's shadow. His 6,000-plus hymn legacy stands as tribute to his faith and rejoicing in his "hope in a loving Christ" that led him all his days after Christ entered his life. His texts included in the LDS hymnal are full of messages of joy and rejoicing - and isn't that what every heart needs? Let us follow Charles Wesley's admonition:

"Lift up your Heart, lift up your Voice,
Rejoice, again, I say, Rejoice."