

Hymns & Sacred Poetry

by J.C. Philpot

Hymns are a blessed means of grace, providing comfort in times of trouble and reflecting the original beauty of man.

Scripture: Psalm 40:3, Psalm 119:105, Romans 10:17, Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16

Topics: "Worship Music", "Sacred Poetry"

Description

J.C. Philpot emphasizes the significance of hymns as a means of grace that God has specially blessed, noting their impact on individuals in times of trouble and sorrow. He delves into the beauty and blessedness of hymns, highlighting their condensed truth, responsiveness to the cries of the Spirit, and ability to minister grace to the hearers. Philpot also explores the original foundations of sacred poetry, connecting it to the remnants of man's original beauty and the sanctifying work of grace in redeeming and refining human faculties for God's service.

Transcript

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If the family of God were individually asked what means of grace had been most blessed to their souls, we think they would answer with one accord, and without hesitation, "The Scriptures." But what next! "The preached Gospel." And what next? "Hymns." That the blessing of God has rested in a special manner upon hymns is unquestionable. Scarcely is there a gracious deathbed recorded where the happy sufferer (how grace harmonizes two such discordant sounds as happiness and suffering!) does not either obtain help and comfort from some verse of a hymn, or does not give vent to his feelings of sorrow or joy in some well-known line. This, what we may almost call the secondary use of hymns, is distinct from, and independent of, their original and primary intention, that of being sung in the public worship of God. But it shows how the Lord honors and sanctions them. They are thus attended with a double blessing.

As sung in the assemblies of the saints, they are not only tributes of praise, and, if sung "with the spirit and with the understanding also," (1 Cor. 14:15), a spiritual sacrifice, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ, (1 Pet. 2:5); but, by being thus fixed in the mind and memory, they become, as it were, locked up in a storehouse, out of which the Blessed Spirit takes in times of trouble and sorrow such portions as he sees good to apply with a divine power to the heart. For this purpose they are eminently qualified for several

reasons.

1. They are, for the most part, truth condensed into a short compass--if we might venture upon such a figure, truth crystallized, and thus presented in a clear, transparent shape, purified from all that muddy mass of words with which we in our sermons and writings are so apt to overload and thus confuse it.

2. As being the utterances and breathings forth of the experience of the saints, they become responsive echoes to the cries of the Spirit in the heart of all the subjects of grace; and 3. When they are richly impregnated with the dew and savor of the Holy Spirit, they are, so to speak, vehicles of grace, performing that office which the Apostle speaks of as the fruit of godly conversation, "ministering grace unto the hearers." (Eph. 4:29.)

By way of testing the truth of this attempt to explain the peculiar beauty and blessedness of hymns, take down your hymn-book, and read through, say one of Hart's, as Hymn 154, Gadsby's Selection. "Much we talk of Jesus' blood," etc.

Now, if we are not much mistaken, you will find the three things we have mentioned brightly shining through that hymn. 1. Scriptural truth presented in a clear, transparent, condensed form. 2. The utterance of the soul, mourning under and hating sin, yet looking up in faith and love to the atoning blood which delivers and purifies from it. 3. A sweet savor and dew of the Blessed Spirit shed through the whole, impregnating it with life and feeling.

Forgive us, dear readers, if we seem to treat you as children, attempting to instruct you, many of whom are better qualified to instruct us; but we write in the simplicity of our heart, not in a spirit of dictation or assumption, but merely tracing with our pen the thoughts and feelings of our own mind; and if we can thus interpret the language of your heart, and put into visible shape what may have dimly laid there, you may read with increased sweetness and pleasure Hart's matchless compositions.

But shall we seem to sit too much in the teacher's chair, a position very foreign to our inclination, if we further attempt to trace a little more fully and deeply the original foundations on which sacred poetry rests?

As in a damaged picture, or broken statue, or ruined arch, there may flash forth sparks of beauty indicative of a master mind, and what it actually was when it issued forth from his creative hand, so amid the wreck and ruin of our fallen nature there are traces of that primeval beauty in which man came forth from the hand of his divine Craftsman on that day when the Creator of heaven and earth looked down with holy complacency on the works of his hands, and pronounced them all very good. Conscience, reason, imagination, memory, language, all the social affections of conjugal, parental, filial love, with every tender, benevolent, compassionate feeling that has ever prompted and sustained those self-denying actions and heart-thrilling words that ever and anon sound through this sin-stricken world as faint echoes of paradise--all are so many relics of the pristine beauty of man.

Shall we then err if, among these remains of original beauty, we place poetry and music? That these two relics of the Fall are deeply imbedded in the original constitution of man is evident from this circumstance, that there is scarcely a nation on the face of the earth, in either ancient or modern times, in which both have not had a conspicuous place. It is, indeed, sadly and fearfully true that sin and Satan have seized upon these two gifts of heaven, and depraved and perverted them from their original intention to their own abominable use. The poetry which should embody in the sweetest, loftiest strains the praises of God has sunk down into a deification of every base lust and passion of man; and the music which should respond

to the notes of the heavenly choir has been prostituted to the worship of brutal idols. Grace, then, which, besides its victories in redemption and regeneration, refines also and wins back to God the Redeemer those faculties of body and mind which originally belonged to God the Creator, comes to the rescue; and as she teaches the tongue that once used to blaspheme now to pray, and the foot that once tripped in the midnight dance to carry the body to the house of prayer, so she recovers the gifts of poetry and music, and baptizing them, as it were, in the streams of love and mercy, sanctifies them to the service of her once crucified but now risen and glorified Lord.

Shall we wander beyond the hallowed precincts of the gospel if we give a few moments' consideration to what poetry and music really are? as their being devoted to the service of the sanctuary does not alter their nature, but their use.

POETRY, then, consists mainly in two things:

1. Elevated, impassioned thoughts and language.
2. A metrical form which bounds and confines the impassioned language within certain prescribed limits.

The first is the soul of poetry, the second the body; the one is the flaming incense, the other the censer which contains it; the former is the bounding steed, dashing impetuously on; the latter, the thoughts which check and guide his course. Thus all elevated, impassioned language is not poetry any more than the soul is not the whole man; nor, on the other hand, are metre, rhyme, rhythm, poetry, without elevated, impassioned thought and language, any more than the body without the soul is the whole man. If this be true, then the more sublime the thoughts and impassioned the language, and the more that metre, rhyme, and rhythm approach perfection, the more beautiful the poetry will be, and more worthy of its name and nature.

The Scripture is full of poetry, and of poetry viewed under these two aspects--sublime thoughts and impassioned expression in a metrical, rhythmical form.

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