

James George Deck

by John Bjorlie

James George Deck was a Christian minister who rebelled against God as a teenager but later converted and went on to write hymns and labor in the gospel in India, England, and New Zealand.

Scripture: Psalm 71:17, Proverbs 22:6, Matthew 16:24, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Philippians 3:8

Topics: "Redemption Story", "Faithfulness"

Description

James George Deck's life journey from rebellion to redemption is a powerful testimony of God's transformative grace. Despite his initial defiance and rejection of God, he was deeply impacted by his mother's prayers and teachings, eventually leading to his conversion and dedication to following Jesus. His decision to leave a promising military career for full-time ministry exemplifies his commitment to obeying God's will at any cost. Through trials, losses, and ministry challenges, Deck remained steadfast in his faith, leaving a legacy of hymns that continue to inspire worship and proclaim the hope of the Church.

Transcript

James George Deck (1807-1884) was born at Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk, England, where his father, John Deck, was postmaster. Their godly Huguenot heritage was carried forward in Mrs. Deck's piety. She "never punished her children without first praying with them." Every evening she set aside one hour alone with God to pray for her eight children, and her children's children, and she had the joy of seeing every one come to Christ.

When only a teenager, James went through officer's training in Paris under one of Napoleon's generals, and was then commissioned to India in 1824 as an officer in the East India Company, in the 14th Madras Native Infantry. Of this time he would write:

Alas! in mad rebellion,

I hoped there were no God:

I cared not for His favor,

Though trembling at His rod;

I wished His word a fable

That warned of wrath to come;
"No God," my heart would mutter,
"No future weal, or doom!"
And yet my mother taught me,
In tones so sweet and mild,
To know its holy pages
E'en when I was a child;
She read to me of Jesus,
Of all His grace and love;
And sought with tears my blessing--
His blessing from above.
Oh, why did I so madly
My mother's law forsake?
Oh, why did I so basely
God's righteous precepts break?
Oh, why did I so blindly
His warnings all despise,
And from the Friend of sinners
Avert my heart and eyes?

Under such conviction he tried to shed his burden by self-improvement. He took his moralism seriously enough, once even signing a page of resolutions with his blood. But Mount Sinai did not engender liberty. Stricken by cholera, he returned to England in 1826 as a sick and humbled young man. His ambition was to become a heroic soldier and to eventually represent his hometown in parliament. But the sickly nineteen-year-old on the stretcher did not look too gallant, or dynamic.

His sister Clara had recently been converted listening to an evangelical Anglican, and she brought James to hear him. There "he was brought under the power of the gospel" and was converted. Old things passed away, and all things became new, his life's ambition then being to follow Jesus and win souls for the kingdom. Three years later, he married a godly young lady named Alicia Field.

Returning to India, he made a bold stand, witnessing alongside other Christian officers, and several soldiers became believers through his work. There in 1833 he met Anthony Norris Groves who may have influenced him in a major life decision. Distressed by a conflict of interests he saw in the goals of the

military and the goal of the Christian, James took a stand for non-resistance and resigned his commission in the army. He returned to England in 1835 with his wife and two children, intending to become a clergyman like his father-in-law, Samuel Field.

While staying with his father-in-law at the vicarage of Hatherleigh in Devon, his second son, J. Field Deck was "christened." In conversation, Field complained to his son-in-law about those troublesome Baptists. This stirred James' curiosity to go to the Word of God to find what it said about baptismal regeneration and the sprinkling of infants. What he found, or should we say did not find, turned him against the errors in the Prayer Book. How could he ever be ordained as an Anglican priest? He could never consent "to all and everything contained in the Book of Common Prayer." He told Alicia, "I have left the army to become a clergyman, but now see that the Church of England is contrary to the Word of God; what shall we do?"

She replied, "Whatever you believe to be the will of God, do it at any cost."

Leaving the Anglican Church and a future in a salaried pastorate, James and Alicia were baptized by immersion as believers. Once outside the auspices of the state church, he began to preach Christ wherever possible, all the while trusting the Lord to supply the young family's material needs. His son would later testify that his parents enjoyed "a trust never disappointed." James preached in the villages of Colaton, Raleigh, and Kingston. It was in Devon county that he contacted simple gatherings of Christians, and acquired both lifelong friendships and settled convictions about what the church is. Moving to Somerset county, he labored in the gospel in the little villages around Taunton. This was a happy time of ingathering and upbuilding.

The rediscovery of the blessed hope so rejoiced the believers that in that part of England singing was a trademark of the awakening. During this period (1838-1844), brother Deck penned his hymns, Abba! Father! We Approach Thee; A Little While! Our Lord Shall Come; Lamb of God! Our Souls Adore Thee; and Jesus, We Remember Thee. The themes of worship, consecration, and our Lord's return are prominent. Hymns for the Use of the Church of Christ was published by Robert C. Chapman in 1837. In 1839, A Selection of Hymns by Sir Edward Denny appeared. Deck's hymns were published as Psalms and Hymns and Spiritual Songs in 1842. In 1838, George V. Wigram published a collection of hymns called Hymns for the Poor of the Flock. This hymnbook was the basis for A Few Hymns and some Spiritual Songs Selected for the Little Flock of 1856. The most common edition in use was edited by J. N. Darby in 1881. The Little Flock hymnbook has forty-four hymns by J. G. Deck and one by Deck's sister, Mary Jane Walker. Mary's husband, Edward Walker, was responsible for introducing Deck's hymns to the church at large by publishing The Psalms and Hymns for Public and Private Worship in 1855. This excellent hymnbook went into several editions. It contains the best of Darby, Denny, and Chapman's poetry.

The Decks moved on to Weymouth in Dorset county. Some time after 1846, he began to work closely with Henry Dyer, who had come over from Plymouth. For a time, young Henry lived with the Deck family, and helped run a school. Henry had a remarkable gift in personal evangelism, as he and James preached from street corners to audiences smothered beneath the pretensions of high church traditionalism. Souls were won for God and assemblies of saints spontaneously formed. This was strenuous, but more taxing still was the rift among assemblies that occurred at that time called "the Bethesda Question." A poem he had written in 1838 had been cited by B. W. Newton as teaching the same doctrine that had caused the rift. Deck immediately issued a public retraction of the questionable lines. Beside this embarrassment, many of Deck's close associates, such as William Dyer, Henry's older brother, had been too closely involved

with the controversy. It was deeply upsetting to see assemblies Deck had worked with, such as in Taunton, alienated from neighboring congregations.

Deck's physical health wore so thin he backed off entirely from public ministry and shut down his schoolwork. Medical advisers thought a sea voyage might be the needed catalyst for his recovery. Whether Deck's problem was physical or emotional, we are not told. What we do know is that Deck's solution was to emigrate with Alicia and their eight children to New Zealand in 1852. Years later, J. N. Darby suggested in a letter that the reason that Deck left for New Zealand was that he "had fallen under the influence of Bethesda." Darby freely acknowledged that Deck was blessed by God in his evangelistic efforts, and was "of gentle spirit and godly," but he immediately added, "he had not the courage to investigate the matter, and fled." Was it that Deck had less courage than Darby, or did he possess more discretion? That will all be manifest at the judgment seat of Christ. What does seem apparent is that Deck did not enjoy the smell of the arena.

Deck purchased land and settled with the family at Waiwerro, near the village of Motueka, in the Nelson province of the South Island. The climate seemed good, and it appeared that James might rebound when the family took another severe blow. Only three months into their new home, Alicia fell sick, and after a brief illness was ushered into the Lord's presence. Despite this shock, Deck's health was restored enough for him to resume his gospel labors.

In 1855, he remarried and his second wife bore him five children, but after the birth of their fifth child, both the baby and mother died when they contracted measles. This second shock occurred in the midst of fruitful gospel efforts. In the 1860s, he had begun to reach out to the Maoris near his home. Many of these Polynesians responded to the gospel and were baptized. Deck was a great impetus to the believers of European extraction to cross over cultural boundaries in order to preach the Lord of Heaven and Earth. Deck also promoted the distribution of literature and arranged for the translation of some of Charles Stanley's tracts into Maori.

In 1865, he moved his family to Wellington, and saw a happy, vigorous assembly raised up. The work spread out and several other meetings sprang up in the district. The hymn writer in Deck reappeared, too. He penned the baptismal hymn, *Around Thy Grave*, *Lord Jesus*, and the classic:

The veil is rent, lo! Jesus stands

Before the throne of grace;

And clouds of incense from His hands

Fill all the Holy Place.

This poem appeared in Deck's *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, published in 1876. It has one-hundred-and-one hymns and sixty-five poems. Deck's contribution to the hymns of the church is not in any poetic innovation. His style is not so different from Isaac Watts or Charles Wesley. It is the subject matter that has earned Deck a lasting place in our hymnbooks. His hymns are written as worshipful expressions directed to God. Deck would not approve of the way popular evangelistic lyrics put words into the lost sinner's mouth. He felt that the song of the redeemed should be sung by the redeemed, directed to God.

G. V. Wigram visited New Zealand in the 1870s and John Darby also made the voyage in 1875, spending at least seven months ministering to the assemblies. According to Darby, Deck returned to the fold of

exclusivism at the end of his life, although many of his descendants have not done so.

Paying a visit to his son, medical doctor J. Field Deck, in Invercargill, Deck found a dozen saints meeting in his home to break bread. The aged patriarch stayed on to help the fledgling assembly. Needing a rest from his exertions, he returned with his family to Motueka. But this time he was not going to recover. For the next two years he was a complete invalid. It was in August of 1884 that he entered by practical experience into what he had taught so many to sing:

Soon the bright glorious day,

The rest of God, shall come,

Sorrow and sin shall pass away,

And we shall reach our home.

Then of the promised joy possessed,

Our souls shall know eternal rest.

As Martin Luther taught the theme of the Reformation in hymns, and Charles Wesley taught the doctrines of primitive Methodism by song, so Deck gave popular expression to the hope of the Church and the heavenly citizenship of the Christian. David said, "Thy statutes have been my songs in the house of my pilgrimage." God's children not only believe the doctrines of God's Word, we sing them!

Material for this article taken from:

Louis F. Benson, *The English Hymn, Its Development and Use in Worship*, Hodder & Stoughton (1915)

Jack Strahan, *Hymns and Their Writers*, Gospel Tract Publ. C. Knapp, *Who Wrote Our Hymns*, Loizeaux Bros.

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