

# Amazing Love Profile of the Hymn

by William MacDonald

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*The sermon explores the theme of amazing love and the mercy of salvation through the hymn 'Rock of Ages', highlighting the gospel presentation, the death of Christ, and the response to the gospel invitation.*

**Duration:** 34:20

**Scripture:** Genesis 1:3, Matthew 6:33, John 8:12, Acts 26:18, 2 Corinthians 4:6, Ephesians 5:14, 1 Peter 2:9

**Topics:** "Hymnology"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher reflects on the state of a soul without Jesus Christ, describing it as being imprisoned, in bondage, and in shame. He emphasizes that being unsaved is actually a form of slavery to sin, Satan, and self. The preacher then highlights the transformative power of the gospel, using the example of Charles Wesley's experience. Wesley's spiritual awakening is likened to a dungeon being flooded with light, and his chains of sin falling off, resulting in a heart set free to please God. The sermon concludes by emphasizing the importance of responding to the gospel invitation and following Jesus.

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## Transcript

One of our hymns is called Rock of Ages, and since that time, this hymn has been very much on my mind and I thought that we could just look at it today. It's such a clear presentation of the gospel, but it also is marvelous for those who are already saved, because it really gives you food for worship. Notice that it was written by Charles Wesley, who lived between 1707 and 1788.

Maybe we should dedicate this today to our Methodist friends in the Beulah home, because Charles and John Wesley were the founders of Methodism. And isn't that wonderful, we can read this hymn a couple of hundred years later and say that's just what I believe. At least I can say that, and I think you can too, if you know the Lord Jesus.

We really owe a debt of gratitude to these men, because they expressed what sometimes we feel, but could never express it as well as that. Isn't that true? These hymns express the language of our hearts, but we could never put it in words like this. Incidentally, that's why we had David read Psalm 40.

It speaks of being brought up out of a horrible pit, and that's what Charles Wesley was envisaging in his conversion. It was like being rescued from a dark, dank dungeon. He begins with a tremendous outburst of amazement and wonder.

Can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior's blood? What does that mean? Well, he's expressing, it's really a holy gasp, if I may say so. A holy gasp that a sinful, mortal man could ever share in the benefits of the Savior's blood. That's an interesting use of the word interest there, isn't it? When we think of interest, we think of the Federal Savings and Loan Association and what you get on your money, but this is a different use of it.

This means a share. This means participation. This means benefiting from.

And what he's really saying is, how can it ever be that I would ever have the privilege of participating in the value of the Savior's blood? It's wonderful, isn't it? Can you say that today? Is that the language of your heart? Well, it's mine, I'll tell you that. I didn't deserve it. An interest in the Savior's blood.

When he uses the word the Savior's blood here, of course it means the death of the Lord Jesus, doesn't it? It means his passion for us. It means what he underwent at Calvary to procure our redemption. And Wesley's mind was boggled by the thought that he would ever be so highly honored as to be able to participate in the value of that precious blood as of a lamb without spot and without blemish.

And it really is marvelous. I think it's good for us just on this Lord's Day morning to stop and meditate on it. The more you do, the more grateful you become.

He said, died he from me who caused his pain? As he hung there on the cross of Calvary, did he really die for me? Was it for me, for me alone, the Savior left his glorious throne, the dazzling splendors of the sky? Was it for me he came to die? Yes. It was for me, yes, all for me, oh love of God. So great, so free, oh wondrous love, I'll shout and sing, he died for me, my Lord and King.

But the marvelous thing is he died for me who caused his pain. We were reading about that in Psalm 22 at the worship meeting this morning. How both the Jews and the Gentiles leaned up to put him to death.

And when he says, died he from me who caused his pain, it makes us think of Isaiah 53, doesn't it? He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement of our peace was upon him.

And with his stripes we are healed. All we like, ye sheep, have gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way and the Lord has laid on him, Jehovah God laid on the Lord Jesus, the iniquity of us all.

That's really something, isn't it? That he died for the very ones who caused his pain. For me who him to death pursued. What a picture.

For me who him to death pursued. But it is true. In our unregenerate condition, we were enemies of God.

I think it would be good for us to turn at this point to Romans chapter 5. And just read it because it helps to drive these great truths home to our heart. Romans chapter 5 beginning with verse 6. For when we were yet without strength in due time, Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die, yet for adventure for a good man some would even dare to die.

But God commendeth his love toward us. In that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more than being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him.

Notice. For if when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his son, much more being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. If when we were enemies.

And you know it's really true. The human heart outside of Jesus Christ is at enmity against God. And Wesley was absolutely right when he wrote, For me who him to death pursued.

And as he thinks of it, all he can say is amazing love. How can it be that thou, my Lord, shouldst die for me? And this is a wonder of eternity. That Christ, the mighty son of God, the Lord of heaven and earth, should die for us.

You know, I think in a sense we should all be astronomers. Do you know why I say that? Because when you think about the universe in which we live, its vastness, its immensity, and you think how minuscule we are, you think of how tiny we are, may I use the word insignificant we are. We really are.

And then to think that the Lord should die for us. Amazing love. In fact, I think it's a concept that no human mind would have ever invented.

Man's pretty bold, but I don't think he's that bold, that he'd ever invent the idea that the Lord Jesus Christ would come down to take human form to die for people as insignificant as us. But although we're insignificant, he put a wonderful price tag on us. He bought us with his own precious blood.

Wesley goes on. He says, I tell you, my heart skips a beat when I read those marvelous words. What does it mean? Immortal means not subject to death.

A person who's immortal can't die. And yet the Lord Jesus is the immortal God, and he died on the cross of Calvary. Now how do you explain something? You can't explain it.

That's what Wesley said. It's just mistrial. I don't try to explain it.

I just bow and worship. God cannot die, and Jesus is God, but he came down here as a man, and he died as a man. And this causes Wesley to take out his harp and just play it in marvelous notes.

It's mistrial. The immortal dies. Who can explore his strange design? What does that mean? Who can explore his strange design? Who can ever explore the mind of God that he would ever plan this great way of salvation? If God had said, well, you can be saved by climbing twenty stairs on your knees, well, that wouldn't be too deep to explore, would it? Most minds could take that in.

To think of the immortal coming down to this earth and dying outside Jerusalem on a cross of wood in order to ransom sinners and make them heirs of God for all eternity. Who can explore his strange design? When it says strange, it doesn't mean odd or peculiar. It means unfathomable, and it really is.

Another poet said, how unlike the complex ways of man, God's easy, artless, unencumbered plan, that you can't explore it for all of that. You can know it, and you can believe it, but you can't get around it, and you can't get over it. It says, in vain the firstborn seraph tries to sound the depths of love divine.

What does that mean? In vain the firstborn seraph. It's generally believed that there's a hierarchy of angelic beings. Tradition says, this is not biblical, but tradition says it begins with angels, goes on to archangels, goes on to principalities, powers, virtues, dominions, cherubim, and way up at the top of all the angelic hosts, seraphim.

I don't know whether that's true or not. It doesn't make any difference here, but I think Wesley may have had that in mind, that a seraph is right at the top of the angelic hosts, and a firstborn seraph, well, firstborn, first of all, reminds us that there are created beings. Angels are created beings.

But the word firstborn not only means first in time, but it means highest honor. And here he has the highest of the angelic hosts, the greatest created seraph of all, and he's trying to, he's putting down a measuring device into the love of God to see how deep it is. And it's all in vain.

Can't do it. Can't plumb the love of God. It must be marvelous for the angels to be holding God's strange design with people like you and like me, and saying, why did God ever love them like that? Why did God ever love human beings like that? They don't have any plan of salvation the way we do.

As far as I know, fallen angels have no way to be saved. It was from men and women and boys and girls that God designed this great way of salvation. And so Wesley says, in vain.

The firstborn seraph tries to plumb the depths of love to time. He gives it up as a hopeless job. Isn't that lovely? Too big for him.

And yet he's the highest of the created beings. Just can't get to the bottom of the love of God. But listen to what Wesley says.

Tis mercy all. Just leave it at that. It's just God's wonderful mercy.

Tis mercy all. Let earth adore. Let angel minds inquire no more.

I like that. Just be satisfied to say, well, this is the way it is. It's just the mercy of God.

Everybody on earth, get down on your knees and adore the Lord for it. And angels just quit trying to plumb the depths of love divine. That's all.

Marvelous. He left his father's throne above so free, so infinite his grace. I don't think you and I can possibly understand what that meant for him to leave that scene of bliss and undisturbed repose and to come down here to Bethlehem and to Nazareth and Capernaum and Jerusalem.

We can't understand this. I like that illustration that Sam Hart used the other night. When he pictured refined, elegant ladies.

And he pictured those ladies somehow being transformed into Carolina hogs with snout and all. And he said that would be nothing compared to what it meant to the Lord Jesus to come down to this earth and be born as a baby in Bethlehem's manger. That's true.

I don't think we can ever understand it. He left his father's throne above so free, so infinite his grace. And his grace is free.

What a wonderful message to proclaim to men. And it's infinite. What does that mean? There's no limit to it.

To the grace of God. It says, emptied himself in matchless love. And of course, that reminds us of Philippians 2, doesn't it? Where we have the great emptying of the Lord Jesus.

And the marvelous thing about this emptying, he wasn't anything less when he came down here than he was then. He emptied himself by taking upon himself humanity. It sounds like a paradox, doesn't it? But that's what it says.

Philippians chapter 2. Just let me read it to you and see if that isn't what it says. When he emptied himself, if I emptied myself, I'm something less after I get through. But he wasn't something less.

He was something more. He was not only God now. He was man.

Philippians chapter 2. Verse 5. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who being in the form of God thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation. Literally it means but emptied himself. Took upon him, how? Took upon him the form of a servant and was made in the likeness of men.

And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even the death of the cross. Incidentally, I'm impressed by the way that Wesley, who wrote this hymn, he ranges all over scripture and he brings these portions of the word of God together and weaves them into one beautiful fabric. And when he says emptied himself, in matchless love, he's thinking of Philippians 2. Verses 5-11.

Emptied himself in matchless love and bled for Adam's sinful race. That's wonderful. When you think of who he is, when you think of what he became, and he became that so he could bleed for Adam's sinful race.

He could never have done it as long as he stayed in heaven, could he? He had to come. He had to be born of the Virgin. He had to be tested among men and then go to the cross of shame to die for us.

And bled for Adam's helpless race. Helpless, I like that. Left to ourselves.

We were helpless and hopeless. Nothing we could do to save ourselves. There was no way out.

And he intervened at just the right time. His mercy all, immense and free. When Wesley's mind couldn't expand anymore on the subject, he just collapsed on the mercy of God.

His mercy all, immense and free. For, oh my God, it found out me. And this is the language of every truly converted soul.

He can never fully take it in, but oh, he can rejoice and sing about it. In verse 4, Wesley goes back to his unconverted days. And what a vivid picture it is of a soul without Jesus Christ.

Long my imprisoned spirit lay. To be without Christ is to be in prison. It's to be in bondage.

It's to be in shame. People don't think so. People think when they're unsaved and living it up and moving along with the world that they're truly free spirits.

But actually, it's one of the worst forms of slavery. It's slavery to sin. And slavery to Satan.

And slavery to self. You don't fully realize it till after you get saved. What a terrible condition that was.

To be in long my imprisoned spirit lay. Fast bound in sin and nature's night. This was it.

We were sinners by nature. We were sinners by practice. We were sinners because we inherited Adam's nature.

But we jolly well like to do it, too. Can't put all the blame on Adam. I often think if Adam hadn't sinned, I would have.

There's a lot of truth to that. So here Wesley looks back on those unconverted days, and he says, Oh, I was just a poor prisoner there chained, shackled by the heavy burden of sin. Thought that everything was all right, but actually was an abject slave.

Fast bound in sin and nature's night. There he is in the darkness of the dungeon. And all of a sudden, light floods into that chamber.

He says, Thine eye diffused a quickening ray. What does that mean? Well, it means God looked down and saw him where he was. Thine eye diffused a quickening ray.

This makes me think of 2nd Corinthians, chapter 4, verse 6. And I'd like you to look at it for just a minute. 2nd Corinthians, chapter 4, verse 6. And I have no doubt that Charles Wesley thought of this verse when he wrote these words. Although I can't be sure.

I'll know in a few years when I talk to him. Verse 6. For God, this is 2nd Corinthians 4, 6. For God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness has shined in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. What does that verse say? Well, it says that the same God who in Genesis 1 said, Let there be light.

There was light. That God has shined in our hearts. Isn't that wonderful? The God of creation is also the God of salvation.

Originally, he commanded light to shine, but in salvation he himself shines, and that's much better. It's much more personal, isn't it? He shined in our hearts for the outshining of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. What it really says is that he shined in our hearts to illuminate our darkened spirits, and also that through us the light might flow out to others.

Well, Wesley said it very beautifully. Thine eye diffused a quickening ray. I was there.

Everything was black. Everything was dark. All of a sudden, light comes in.

I've often told of a young man who I was praying with. He wanted to be saved, and that's the very thing he said. He said, Lord, I've been in a blackout up until now, but now I see the light.

What happened? God's eye diffused a quickening ray. I woke. The dungeon flamed with light.

This is what happens when the gospel comes into a man's life. When he hears the gospel and receives the gospel. I woke.

A lot of people who are going on without Christ today think they're wide awake. Actually, they're asleep, aren't they? We had that in the Bible class this morning. They're asleep.

And when the gospel comes, they wake up. And the dungeon flames with light. It's really beautiful.

It flames with light in a lot of ways. First of all, this book is kind of a closed book to a person before he's saved. But then the light comes.

You put the keys in, and it all fits together. I often think of that with regard to the dear Jewish people. There's a veil over the minds of the Jewish people today.

It's a wonderful thing when a Jew comes and trusts Jesus Christ as Savior. He goes back to those Old Testament scriptures, and he sees these marvelous types and shadows of Christ. It's just like a great light going on in his life.

That's what we have in this. I woke. The dungeon flamed with light.

My chains fell off. My heart was free. What a wonderful thing.

The chains of sin falling off as the heart set free. Not set free to go and do what you please. Not set free to go and sin again.

But set free to please God. To obey His commandments. To love Him with a whole heart.

What happened? He responded to the gospel invitation. I rose, went forth, and followed Thee. He could say it, didn't he? Out of darkness into marvelous light.

I rose, went forth, and followed Thee. It makes me think of Amy Carmichael's little poem. I heard His call come follow.

That was all. My earthly gold grew dim. My soul went after Him.

I rose and followed. That was all. Who would not follow if they heard His call? How is it now, Charles Wesley? Ah, he says, no condemnation.

Now I dread. What was he thinking of when he wrote that? He was thinking of Romans 8-1, wasn't he? There is therefore now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus. What a wonderful thing to be saved under grace of God and to realize there will never be judgment for those sins.

Jesus bore the judgment. That's it there. Death and judgment are behind me.

Grace and glory lie before. All the billows rolled o'er Jesus. There they spent their utmost power.

There is no condemnation. There is no hell for me. The torments and the fire of my eyes will never cease.

For me there is no sentence. For me death has no sting. Because the Lord who loves me shall shield me with His wing.

No condemnation. Now I dread. People might say, oh, you're pretty proud, aren't you? You're boasting.

No, I'm not boasting. Jesus did it. I didn't do it.

Jesus procured my salvation on the cross of Calvary and my boast is in Him. That's what he goes on to say. Jesus and all in Him is mine.

A Christian really is a Christ-centered person. That's what he is. He gives all the glory to Christ, none to himself.

And he finds in the Lord Jesus all that he ever needs for time and for eternity. Jesus and all in Him is mine. Alive in Him my living head.

That means now that I'm saved I have a life I never had before. I have the life of Christ in me. It pulsates within me.

Alive in Him my living head. And what else? And clothed in righteousness divine. All the filthy rags are gone, aren't they? All the filthy rags of my own righteousness are gone.

And now I stand clothed in the righteousness of God. What do you think Wesley was... What verse of scripture was he thinking about when he wrote that? Well, I think he was thinking about 2 Corinthians 5, 21. It says, He, God, has made Him Christ to be sin for us.

He who knew no sin that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. And I'll tell you it's a wonderful thing to know that we stand before God clothed in all the righteousness of God. That's why another hymn writer said, Bold shall I stand in that great day for who ought to my charge can lay.

Bold shall I stand in that great day. Clothed in righteousness divine. There he says it.

Bold I approach the eternal throne. How can you? How can you ever? A worm, a creature of the dust. How can you ever be bold in approaching the eternal throne? Because you're in Christ and you're as near to God and as dear to God as Christ is.

You're in Him. Perfect love casts out fear. Fear has torment.

But God's perfect love displayed to me at the cross of Calvary. Cast out any fear of punishment because Jesus paid it all. All to Him I owe.

Sin had left a crimson stain. He washed it. White as snow.

Bold I approach the eternal throne. That's kind of a holy boldness if you'll let me say it. It's not kind of a rude boldness.

It's not brassiness as we think of it today. It's confidence. What right do you have to stand before God? The Lord Jesus is my right to stand before God.

I don't have any right of my own. But I claim Him as my only hope and title for heaven. Bold I approach the eternal throne and claim the crown through Christ my own.

Now when he says claim the crown, there are several crowns to be given out as rewards for faithful service. I don't think he's thinking about that here. I think he's thinking about the crown of righteousness that is given to every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

I think he's speaking of all that comes to us when we put our faith and trust in the Son of God. And we claim it on the basis of the Word of God. It's promised here in the Word of God and we can claim it.

Claim the crown. But notice, through Christ. Through Christ.

We have no right to heaven in ourselves at all. We have nothing to commend us for that wonderful place. Christ is our salvation.

And if you have Him, you can't improve from there. Now I have a feeling that you would all like to sing this hymn now that we've pondered it. So Don and Rich will come, I think, to the instruments.

And we're going to sing it. And I hope you'll sing it with a deeper appreciation than you've ever had before. If you're unsaved, I hope this will become the language of your heart.

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